

**CREATING SUPPORTIVE LGBTQ SPACES:
FINDING NEW CONSTRUCTS OF FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES IN THE
VIRTUAL WORLD**

by

Melina McConatha

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human Development and Family Studies

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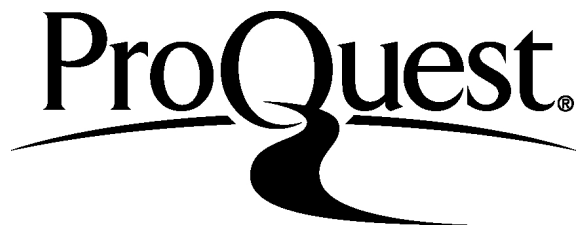
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Melina McConatha

Approved:

Rena Hallam, Ph.D.
Chair of the Human Development and Family Studies

Approved:

Lynn Okagaki, Ph.D.
Dean of the College of Education and Human Development

Approved:

James G. Richards, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed:

Bahira Sherif Trask, Ph.D.
Professor in charge of dissertation

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed:

Rob Palkovitz, Ph.D.
Member of dissertation committee

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed:

Barbara H. Settles, Ph.D.
Member of dissertation committee

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed:

Frauke Shnell, Ph.D.
Member of dissertation committee

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
ABSTRACT	xii

Chapter

1	INTRODUCTION	1
1.1	Purpose of Study	6
1.2	Guiding Theoretical Frameworks.....	7
1.2.1	Strengths-Based Perspective	7
1.2.2	Ecological Systems Theory	9
1.2.3	Feminist Framework.....	10
1.3	Research Questions	12
2	LITERATURE REVIEW	13
2.1	Feminist Family Studies	14
2.2	The LGBTQ Community	15
2.3	Prevalence of Bullying, Violence, and Abuse of LGBTQ People	17
2.4	Bullying, Abuse, Violence, and Discrimination Based on Sexual and Gender Identity.....	19
2.5	LGBTQ Identity Development Across the Lifespan.....	21
2.6	Changing Constructs of LGBTQ Community Advocacy	23
2.6.1	Chosen Virtual Families and Communities.....	24
2.7	Positive Online Development.....	25
3	RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGIES.....	26
3.1	Rationale.....	27
3.2	Inherent Assumptions in Qualitative Inquiry	28
3.3	Research Design Overview	28
3.3.1	Sampling.....	28
3.3.2	Participants	30

3.3.3	Interview Questions.....	31
3.3.4	Data Method and Procedures.....	32
3.4	Thematic Analysis.....	33
3.5	Ethical Considerations.....	35
3.6	Issue of Trustworthiness.....	36
4	RESULTS.....	41
4.1	Social Networks Reshape Concepts of Family, Kin Relations, and Community for People Identifying as LGBTQ.....	44
4.1.1	Time and Space Constructs in Family.....	45
4.1.2	Blurring Boundaries of Community.....	47
4.1.3	How the Media Shape Beliefs and Values.....	50
4.2	Representation in LGBTQ Equality.....	52
4.2.1	More Inclusive Conversations on LGBTQ Equality.....	52
4.2.2	Visibility of the LGBTQ Community.....	55
4.2.3	Accessibility.....	57
4.3	Social Networking as a Tool for Social Change.....	59
4.3.1	Safe Spaces for Voice.....	59
4.3.2	Storytelling as Advocacy.....	60
4.3.3	Swift Community Mobilization.....	63
4.4	Generational Differences and Social Network Advocacy Among the LGBTQ Community.....	65
4.4.1	Multitasking Advocacy.....	66
4.4.2	Online Organizing and Younger Generations.....	69
4.4.3	Gaps in Awareness of Social Justice Movements in History.....	70
5	DISCUSSION.....	74
5.1	Summary.....	74
5.2	Theoretical Considerations.....	76
5.2.1	Ecological Systems Theory.....	77
5.2.2	Cyberfeminism and Safe Spaces.....	83
5.3	Significance of Results.....	85
5.4	Research Questions.....	86

5.5	Limitations, Strengths, and Implications for Research	89
5.6	Implications for Policy and Practice	91
5.7	Contributions of this Study.....	94
REFERENCES		97
Appendix		
A	INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	112
B	ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THEME 1 AND SUBTHEMES	117
C	ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THEME 2 AND SUBTHEMES	122
D	ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THEME 3 AND SUBTHEMES	127
E	ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THEME 4 AND SUBTHEMES	132
F	INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPANTS.....	142
G	UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE IRB APPROVAL LETTER.....	145

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Participant Demographic Data	31
Table 2: Thematic Outline.....	35
Table 3: Reflexive Journal Framework	37

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Thematic Map	43
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the online experiences for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and queer (LGBTQ) community through examining their connections with other individuals and communities, and sharing of personal stories online. Seventeen face-to-face interviews were conducted with people who identify as LGBTQ. The data revealed the emergence of alternate constructs of families and communities online as a source of support in the face of abuse, violence, and bullying based on gender and sexual identity. Using a strengths-based perspective and a feminist lens, this study emphasizes the LGBTQ community's existing online resources in order to work towards equality, inclusivity, reflexivity, and advocacy. It reveals that, despite diverse and sometimes divided histories, the LGBTQ community has rallied together online to work towards social justice and equality. Social networks are a platform for a more inclusive and accessible dialogue on how to create social change in the LGBTQ community. These networks emerge as a useful tool to strengthen and support LGBTQ individuals' fluid and ever-changing concepts of identity, family, and community.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are social animals. People whose personal needs and identity are not consistent with accepted social norms, such as LGBTQ people, may be forced to hide significant aspects of their gender or sexual identity in order to be accepted and find the support necessary for positive human development.¹ Social networks provide a space for many LGBTQ people to connect and share experiences, supporting diverse and unique gender and sexual identities. Family scholars and theorists posit that contemporary research on families and human development has not fully explored and described the resiliency and support these online spaces provide (Theriault, 2014). It is important to explore the online exchanges in the context of a rapidly changing technological world. Identity, relationships, and social support are often tied to complex interactions and connections in overlapping physical and virtual worlds (Ward, 2006; Mehra & Braquet, 2011).

Researchers position families as a primary resource for identity development, relationship formation, and social support throughout the lifespan. For example,

¹ Gender-neutral or non-sexed language has been used in this study to address people without making gender assumptions, and for the protection of the participants' anonymity.

family scholars have suggested that children receiving high levels of social support maintain lower levels of anxiety and depression in later life (Goodyer, 1990; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989). In addition, young people who grow up with close and connected family relationships report higher levels of well-being throughout their lives (Wenk, Hardesty, Morgan, & Blair, 1994).

The dynamics of familial support have particular relevance to LGBTQ people. Support and connectedness are key elements in coping with ostracism, violence, abuse, discrimination, and bullying—social problems that are unfortunately part of many LGBTQ people’s everyday lives (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2003). Unfortunately, sources of support and connectedness are not always tied to families of origin. Many people in the LGBTQ community lose these connections and support from their families of origin during the coming out and transitioning process (Diamond et al., 2012; Ryan, 2010). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001) views community support, coping skills, and strong family connections as essential resources for LGBTQ young adults in vulnerable transitions such as these. These connections and supports have been shown to promote well-being and have even been suggested as a factor in suicide prevention. Therefore, when acceptance and continued support does not transpire, people in the LGBTQ community have to seek support beyond the traditional networks of home, family,

neighborhood, and community, and they may create alternative family structures to fill the void.

LGBTQ people have relied on alternative family structures for decades, and scholars have suggested that families have been constructed in various ways across cultures and time (Bengston, 2001; Coontz, 2000; Smart & Shipman, 2004). While alternative family constructs are by no means new, social media represents a new venue for fluid and less static structures of families. Newly “out” or transitioned people frequently use social media to connect with others in the same situation, and family members of LGBTQ individuals can also make such connections (Higa et al., 2014). The current study explores these social network connections and their effects, providing a contemporary, technologically sensitive context to the study of families and human development.

Social networks provide social scientists with a window into supportive exchanges and opportunities online, which can provide support similar to many constructs of family, advocacy, and community. By exploring the nature of these alternative constructs of families and communities online, this study seeks to illuminate how the LGBTQ community supports its members in dealing with bullying, abuse, and violence based on gender and sexual identity.

Historically, our understandings of families have carried symbolic meanings of love, partnerships, and support. Weston (1991) posits gay men and lesbians construct their own notions of these meanings through kinship with one another. Researchers

exploring the social worlds of LGBTQ people note they rely on ties constructed through community rather than biology (Lewin, 1993; Blumer & Murphy, 2011). LGBTQ communities reformulate existing symbols of family in creative and meaningful ways (Craig & McInroy, 2014). For more than two decades, researchers exploring family, kinship, and partnerships have broadened the discourse on family to be more inclusive of such adaptations and constructions (Lewin, 1993; Oswald, 2002). However, family scholars note a need for closer examinations of online constructions of families, supports, and resources (Jacobsen & Donatone, 2009).

The digital age has provided many outlets and means for families to communicate, support, and maintain connections. Contemporary research on military families, for example, reveal that many military families have daily interactions with deployed military partners and other military families on social media, and that these interactions create a high level of reported comfort and support (Marnocha, 2012). While research has at times suggested that Internet communications and social media present a danger to healthy interaction, many studies now suggest that technology is currently shaping family relationships in positive ways (see for example Jones & Lewis, 2001; Wright, 2002). Most families embrace technology, and many find it a source of emotional support.

Increasingly, and especially in technologically advanced societies, social media brings together individuals across boundaries of race, social class, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexuality. Texting, wall posting, and blogging provide a uniquely

accessible space for sharing experiences outside of physical locations, allowing individuals to provide and receive support from one another in real time, regardless of geography or physical boundaries (Boyd, 2007). Accessibility to other individuals and communities that share common interests, experiences, and identities can lead to the development of networks comprised of chosen virtual families and communities. Online messages of bullying, abuse, and violence based on gender and sexual identity have recently become rallying cries for such supportive connections in LGBTQ communities (Asakura & Craig, 2014).

By exploring these connections, this study seeks a better understanding of the unique and beneficial elements of virtual families and communities in relation to acts of bullying, abuse, and violence based on LGBTQ identity. While networks such as Facebook, Tumblr, and YouTube can perpetuate these problems, they likewise create new, safe, and supportive spaces to share stories or reach out for help. Online social networks are a haven for many who lack support and acceptance in schools, families, or physical communities (Brown & Thomas, 2014). Educators, researchers, policymakers, parents, and communities themselves have utilized virtual resources to tackle gender-based bullying, abuse, and harassment through virtual movements.

For example, the “It Gets Better” movement, launched in 2010 by Dan Savage and his husband Terry Miller to share personal narratives about LGBTQ experiences of improved circumstances in adults, seeks to inspire LGBTQ youth to prevent suicide and self-harm despite disproportionate reports of bullying, abuse, and violence (It Gets

Better Project, 2010). It focuses on the experiences of LGBTQ mentors and advocates, which include storytelling from powerful leaders such as President Obama. Internet access and virtual sharing provide a massive nationwide audience, which exemplifies the usefulness and power of communication through the virtual world. Digital storytelling has become increasingly popular among people in the LGBTQ community as a way to connect, cope, and give voice to their stories, regardless of social norms that may exist in their physical worlds. For example, the Trevor Project utilizes digital storytelling techniques as a form of advocacy (The Trevor Project, 1998). Moreover, the Trevor Project provides platforms, such as YouTube, to use as tools to share experiences, while simultaneously measuring connections through counters documenting “likes” and “views.”

The researcher in this investigation explored how people in the LGBTQ community access and share resources like the “It Gets Better” Project and the Trevor Project to support each other. While families of origin continue to be important in contemporary society, relationships and kinships outside of blood-ties have provided more supportive models of loyalty and resilience (Lewin, 1993) for many people in the LGBTQ community, especially when families of origin deny them support.

1.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the supportive and positive nature of online connections through constructs of family and community in the face of bullying, discrimination, abuse, and violence. This study centers on existing

underexplored resources, outlets, and connections that currently provide support and describe how people in the LGBTQ community use them to cope with bullying, abuse, and violence. Park and Burgess (1921), early family scholars, positioned technologies as a tool for rapid change in families. Later, Katz and Rice (2002) predicted that the Internet would more specifically free families from time and space constraints in relationship building and connections. The current study incorporates this groundwork in order to gain a better understanding of contemporary online experiences that now create opportunity for new forms of families and communities, free of time and space boundaries.

1.2 Guiding Theoretical Frameworks

1.2.1 Strengths-Based Perspective

A strengths-based perspective highlights existing strengths and tools in communities that can be utilized to alleviate or tackle social problems. By applying this perspective, this study seeks to identify and share the benefits of already accessible resources such as Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube—a space where LGBTQ communities share stories of abuse, violence, and bullying based on gender and sexual identity and connect survivors of these injustices with others to support and create change.

For example, the strengths-based approach recognizes the already-existing creative strengths that many young people in the LGBTQ community use to cope

outside the virtual world, which they often express in music, art, creative writing, and dance (Driver, 2007)—online and off. Educational settings have not always valued these creative outlets (Rawana, Brownlee, Whitley, Rawana, Franks, & Walker, 2009). Additionally, males and trans*² women may be bullied for expressing talents that do not adhere to gender norms, which can stifle their expression in physical spheres. Using virtual spaces, by for example blogging on Tumblr, posting music on social networks, or uploading videos of oneself dancing on YouTube, can offer alternate means of expression and validation (Davis, 2010). A strengths-based perspective allows researchers, educators, and communities to promote positive development and well-being based on the identification and support of existing valued resources (Jennings, 2003). This study examines such online relationships, networks, and tools as existing resources that people in the LGBTQ community use to maintain positive identities in the face of adversity (Mitra & Gajjala, 2008).

By embracing a strengths-based perspective, the current study declines to focus solely on the difficulties involved in experiences of bullying, abuse, and violence targeting LGBTQ individuals across all ages, which, as Wieck et al. (1989) describe, would be counterproductive. More specifically, this study explores the positive ways the LGBTQ community copes and fights against bullying, abuse, and violence, instead of focusing on the negative side effects of these injustices. Because of this, it avoids

² Trans* is an inclusive term that represents a wide and diverse variety of identities, including trans-identified women, trans-identified men, and transgender people.

comparison models that often ignore social contexts and power in social interactions (Bohan, 2002). While this study examines the meanings assigned to the valid struggles people in LGBTQ community face, it also explores the strengths and resources LGBTQ individuals utilize to cope, buffer, and support each other.

1.2.2 Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory highlights the roles of interacting systems of individuals, families, schools, and communities in shaping an individual's experiences. In contemporary society, these interactions frequently play out in social networks and online communities. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter, link young adults to family, school, and communities simultaneously, and as a result they can reveal how active the individual is in each realm. Therefore, Ecological Systems Theory provides a crucial frame of reference for the current study (Wolff, Allen, Himes, Fish, & Losardo, 2014).

Online resources used to support these individuals and communities link each system, integrating the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems through simple "likes" of pages or friendship links. For example, many younger people in the LGBTQ community are connected to their school's Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) through Facebook. If a school has a well "liked" GSA with many student supporters, its LGBTQ students may feel supported online and consider their school environment inclusive and aware of LGBTQ issues. This type of support for an individual occurs

through peers, communities, educational systems, and media, and documents the chronosystem through historical and cultural changes—all on one shared virtual page.

1.2.3 Feminist Framework

This study examines gender and sexual identity as social constructions shaped by culture, history, social expectations, and shared experiences. Applying feminist theory to the exploration of the constructed nature of gender and sexual binaries helps shape our understanding of the storytelling and sensemaking of human experiences. Feminist theory also furthers our understanding of the identities individuals are given, as well as those that society embraces and disregards to reinforce cisgendered or gender-conforming heteronormativity (Butler, 1990). A study of the nuanced experience of bullying, abuse, and violence based on gender and sexual identity requires a broad feminist framework to question, discuss, and explore shared experiences of people in the context of intersecting identities.

Feminist theory and research centers gender and sexual identity as a social, political, and historical construct; this construct directly contributes to how social scientists understand contemporary social problems. In addition to centering gender and sexual identity, it seeks to end social and political oppression by using scholarship as a catalyst for social change, an aim in which the current study participates. Translation of these academic findings into real-world solutions may mitigate the impact of bullying, abuse, and violence based on gender and sexual identity. By exploring the meanings the participants in this study give to the role of gender and

sexual identity in their online experiences, it creates an expanded discourse on online constructs of reinforcing and “doing gender” (Goffman, 1959).

“Doing gender” refers to the actions individuals demonstrate that fit neatly into certain culturally recognizable categories, such as masculine and feminine.

Researchers have shown that these categories create tension, isolation, and unrealistic expectations. However, history and tradition form their foundations, and institutions and systems are deeply rooted in their existence. As feminist theorists assert, the gender dichotomy can lead to a binary of stigmatized people and “normals” (Wyss, 2004), and with it an excuse for oppression, abuse, and even violence. This categorization is often the basis for bullying, abuse, and violence against LGBTQ people.

To conceptualize how gender dichotomies influence the virtual world, the current project will explore the online identities of individuals with LGBTQ identities in a socio-historical context. Thompson (1992) suggests that the socio-historical context of our ever-changing world incorporates structured systems and symbols that dictate our social interactions. These systems and symbols now extend to the virtual world, enforcing cultural messages of gender norms throughout online media. As in the physical world, anyone violating these norms is subject to bullying, abuse, and harassment by others in the virtual world (Muller, 2014).

1.3 Research Questions

This study explored the role of social networks for people in the LGBTQ community when coping with bullying, discrimination, abuse, and violence. More specifically, the research focused on how these networks provide support similar to traditional constructs of family and community (Gutterman, 2010) by examining participants' perceptions of both their online and offline connections. It explores the limits and potential of these online communities to provide mutual support through social networks and blogging, and also compares these connections to conceptualizations of family. Finally, it addresses the distinct experiences of these online connections across different age groups. The following are the primary research questions explored in this study:

- What online supports and communities are available for people who identify as LGBTQ?
- Have these supports provided a buffer to the bullying, discrimination, abuse, and violence experienced in the LGBTQ community?
- How do these online resources assist in forming kinships, partnerships, and bonds that can be conceptualized as alternative constructs of family and community?
- How do participants experience these online relationships, supports, and exchanges in different stages of life?

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in family studies scholarship typically explores basic human developmental and behavioral trends of individuals within the context of families. Over time, the definition of family has shifted and become more fluid (Allen, 2000; Thompson & Walker, 1995). Discussions of family now incorporate less traditional expectations of gender and sexuality (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). In addition, researchers have begun to recognize the role of technology in families' everyday lives, noting that the Internet is a resource for social support for families (Colvin, Chonoweth, Bold, & Harding, 2004; Lamanna & Riedmann, 2003; Francisco, 2015). Studies also indicate that external support systems enable families to support and advocate for each other (Hochschild, 1992; Bogenschneider, 2006). However, the gap that exists in understanding alternative family structures in a technological context warrants further investigation. This research incorporates literature from family studies with an interdisciplinary approach to explain the experiences of people who identify as LGBTQ—particularly of bullying, abuse, violence, and discrimination—and identifies the resources available for this diverse community.

2.1 Feminist Family Studies

Thompson and Walker (1995) place an importance on delineating what is and what is not feminist family research. In order to situate this study within feminist family research, this study integrates feminist and family scholarship by threading five themes identified by Osmond and Thorne (1993) that shape the field of feminist family studies. These themes are as follows:

- **Theme 1:** Explore gender as a social construction.
- **Theme 2:** Pay attention to the socio-historical constructs of gender.
- **Theme 3:** Incorporate a commitment to equality and social change.
- **Theme 4:** Centralize women's experiences.
- **Theme 5:** Question unitary notions of "families."

Feminist family scholars have suggested that the presence or absence of boundaries in definitions of family is a primary signifier of "inclusiveness" in the field. In an effort to maintain an inclusive and diversified family science, contemporary researchers have applied these fluid constructs to lesbian and gay families (Allen & Demo, 1995; Perlesz, Brown, Lindsay, McNair, deVaus, & Pitts, 2006). Oswald (2002) posits that compounding gender ideology, sexual ideology, and family ideology when exploring families is problematic when attempting to understand all families. More specifically, people, families, and communities have multiple intersecting identities (Collins, 2000; DeReus, Few, & Blume, 2005) that shape experiences, online and off.

Members of the LGBTQ community make connections to support others, challenge inequities, and create social change as an act of interdependent gender, sexuality, and family constructs coming from diverse standpoints (Collins, 2000). Feminist theory provides a framework for deconstructing gender and sexuality from different standpoints (Gamson & Moon, 2004). This work also explores human agency, connections, and activism as a central dynamic in less traditional constructs of families and communities.

2.2 The LGBTQ Community

While the LGBTQ community as a whole is the subject of the current study, the distinctions between lesbian, gay, trans*, and queer identities cannot be overlooked. Complicating the picture, these terms and identity “labels” shift with culture and over time, causing public confusion. A growing number of researchers have published studies and created “ally” trainings to educate the public on preferred language use and inclusivity issues existing in a world primarily grounded in the gender binary (Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). These trainings are typically educational workshops that address steps towards creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for the LGBTQ community. However, many people in queer and trans* communities feel that this salient area of study needs further development and is primarily focused on gay and lesbian identities. For the purpose of this study, and in an effort to use language and terms preferred and noted in a literature review of

LGBTQ terminology, this study directly references the National Center for Transgender Equality (2014) as a baseline meaning for the following terms:

- Transgender: A term for people whose gender identity, expression, or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth. Transgender is a broad term and is good for non-transgender people to use. “Trans*” is shorthand for “transgender.” (Note: Transgender is correctly used as an adjective, not a noun; thus, “transgender people” is appropriate but “transgenders” is often viewed as disrespectful.)
- Trans* Man: A term for a transgender individual who currently identifies as a man.
- Trans* Woman: A term for a trans* individual who currently identifies as a woman.
- Gender Identity: An individual’s internal sense of being male, female, or something else. Since gender identity is internal, one’s gender identity is not necessarily visible to others.
- Gender Expression: The representation or expression of one’s gender identity to others, often through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice, or body characteristics.
- Crossdresser: A term for people who dress in clothing traditionally or stereotypically worn by the other sex, but who generally have no intent to live full-time as the other gender. An older, more widely known term, “transvestite,” is considered derogatory by many in the United States.
- Queer: A term used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and, often, also transgender people. Some use queer as an alternative to “gay” in an effort to be more inclusive. Depending on the user, the term has either a derogatory or an affirming connotation, as many have sought to reclaim the term that was once widely used in a negative way.
- Genderqueer: A term used by some individuals who identify as neither entirely male nor entirely female.

- Gender Non-conforming: A term for individuals whose gender expression is different from societal expectations related to gender.

This paper does not use the term transsexual, which, as the National Center for Transgender Equality notes, has fallen out of favor because it is considered clinical, stigmatizing, and limiting.

2.3 Prevalence of Bullying, Violence, and Abuse of LGBTQ People

Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, and Frazer (2010) suggest that over half of LGBTQ students report bullying, abuse, and violence (Walls et al., 2010). Statistics suggest that bullying based on gender and sexual identity accounts for 80% of reported school bullying (Balick, 2004). Bullying, harassment, and violence based on LGBTQ identity have become methods of reinforcing heteronormativity and isolating people in the LGBTQ community (Kimmel, 2008). Findings that highlight the disproportionate rates of bullying, abuse, and violence against LGBTQ young adults and a growing body of research on the heightened suicide risk among people in the LGBTQ community (Morrison & L'Heureux, 2001)—some of which links lack of support from peers and family to suicide (Evans & Chapman, 2014)—underscore the importance of support of gender and sexual identity during young adulthood; indeed, they constitute a call for action. Research methods centralizing gender and sexual identity in relation to supports and coping mechanisms to alleviate this social problem remain under researched.

Educational policies are beginning to address bullying, abuse, and violence based on gender and sexual identity. Many school systems do not participate in any sort of gender discourse (Horowitz & Hansen, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2010). The Los Angeles Unified School District's Online Transgender Reference Guide (2005) presents an exception. This guide provides educators, families, and students with resources and tools for understanding terms such as trans*. The reference guide specifically describes gender non-conforming individuals and communities as "students that have a gender expression that does not conform to stereotypical expectations," such as "feminine boys," "masculine girls," students who are androgynous, boys who come to school in clothing that some might perceive as "girls' clothing," or girls who play games on the playground that might be perceived as "boys' games." The examples clearly illustrate the social constructs of gender in the schoolyard that are very real for many people in the LGBTQ community. This online resource provides a helpful framework for conversations relating to gender in the classroom and how to support people in the LGBTQ community who do not conform to traditional gender norms.

Judith Butler (1999) challenges ideals of natural versus subordinate gender expressions. However, the current socio-historical context sparingly supports freedom of gender expression in the physical and virtual worlds, categorizing identities challenging gender norms as "abnormal" and consequently treating them as subordinate. The subtle and overt enforcement and policing of these gender norms in

our society by schoolmates, teachers, administrators, and parents set the stage for bullying and abuse. Still, privacy settings and growing LGBTQ virtual communities and pages are providing opportunities for advocacy, inclusivity, and identity development in safer spaces free of gendered limits (Cao & Liu, 2014; Chaplin, 2014; Paradis, 2009; Mowlabocus, 2008; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Gorkemli, 2012; Bryson, 2004).

For advocates and communities calling for policy change and inclusion for gender non-conforming individuals, operationalizing terms relating to gender and/or sexual identity is challenging because, in effect, a fixed definition can detail and categorize the labels and binaries that many have worked hard to reject. Therefore, in alignment with feminist frameworks, this study uses the labels that participants give themselves without seeking to impose and generalize these meanings to other participants. For example, one participant may identify as a gay trans* man with a male partner and another trans* identified participant may identify as a heterosexual trans* man with a male partner. Diversity in gender identities and preferred pronouns create a new challenge, but also an exciting opportunity to reveal the unique meanings behind pronouns in a predominately cisgendered heterosexist culture.

2.4 Bullying, Abuse, Violence, and Discrimination Based on Sexual and Gender Identity

Heterosexual culture and cisgender culture pervade all aspects of life (Lott, 2010). Cisgender culture assumes gender identity always matches an individual's sex

and gender assigned at birth. Society supports and validates cisgender identities and heterosexual intimate and family relationships and identities, and marginalizes and ostracizes other sexual and gender identities. Although organized and supportive formal and informal LGBTQ communities have existed throughout history, systematic and institutional prejudice and discrimination persists. LGBTQ individuals experience bullying, abuse, violence, and discrimination in their homes (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995; Meyer, 2003), as well as in other places.

People in the LGBTQ community experience bullying, abuse, violence, and discrimination in the context of intersecting cultural, social, political, and economic identities (Lott, 2010). Although there is considerable diversity among LGBTQ individuals, shared experiences of oppression become the basis for communities and spaces that support and validate these LGBTQ identities. The Internet has made virtual communities and families possible, providing encouragement to individuals who lack support from their families of origin. Many participants in such communities report a sense of presenting a “truer” representation of themselves online, which leads to a sense of both belonging and connection (Ryan, Russel, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). In these online communities and families, LGBTQ individuals cope with isolation, prejudice, and discrimination while developing positive identities supported by a sense of belonging. Researchers have suggested that encouraging familial conversations regarding gender and sexual identity may be the first step in working towards a similar sense of belonging and encouraging more inclusive family

environments (Blume & Blume, 2003). Social networks are an opportunity for these conversations to begin through reaching out to others.

2.5 LGBTQ Identity Development Across the Lifespan

Age-specific needs through the lifespan for all people vary across time and cultures. This study encompassed the fact that strengths and needs vary according to age and generation by using a lifespan approach (Cass, 1999) throughout the research process. Vivienne Cass's early "Homosexual Identity Model" (1979) delineates six stages of LGBTQ lifespan development: identity awareness/confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. As described below, this framework is applicable to behavior on social networks.

- **Stage 1:** Identity awareness/confusion: Individuals recognize they are different from the norms and symbols represented online.
- **Stage 2:** Identity comparison: Individuals compare their feelings and emotions to those with whom they identify as a part of the hetero-normative gender conforming culture online and off.
- **Stage 3:** Identity tolerance: Individuals tolerate the fact that their identity does not conform to online gender and sexuality norms.
- **Stage 4:** Identity acceptance: The individuals accept their new identity and begin to become active in their community online.
- **Stage 5:** Identity pride: Individuals become proud of their identity and advocate for themselves.
- **Stage 6:** Identity synthesis: Individuals fully accept their identity and synthesize their former ideas of self with their new identity. Interactions online are no longer dictated necessarily by LGBTQ

identity; however, the individuals' standpoints reflect their LGBTQ identity in addition to other intersecting pieces of self.

As described above, individuals may explore each stage of Cass's identity development in a variety of social media, including blogging and profile development. This is one relatively new form of identity development and provides a space for narratives and identity sharing. Social networks provide a space where private and intimate content may be posted and updated continuously as one changes and develops (Hookway, 2008).

Research in this area has frequently focused on young adolescence and young adults. Similarly, many of the current study's participants fall into an age group often referred to as "transitional adulthood"—a period of life between childhood and adulthood, in which important developmental changes occur. Recent research has focused on physical, cognitive, social, and emotional changes individuals experience between the ages of 19 and 25. These socially and culturally constructed periods of life are associated with a search for identity, the development of relationships and career goals, and the awakening of sexuality. The move towards independence during adolescence and transitional adulthood occurs through a social and cultural push for separation and the development of autonomy in modern western constructs of development (Erikson, 1968). Many young adults adopt various identities as a form of exploration, seeking the sense that it fits (Marcis, 1980). Peer pressure and supports play an important role in self-acceptance and well-being during this period. These

developmental milestones involve considerable turbulence and anxiety for the majority of young adults who may not adhere to hetero-normative messages and expectations in this transitional life phase (Devos & Banaji, 2003).

Young adults are caught between the responsibilities of adulthood and the need to continue their education, as well as their inability to become economically and socially independent. They are physically mature, but not full adults. Continued economic dependence on their parents makes them vulnerable. In this context, accessible spaces that provide support from peers and communities with shared identities are essential to a positive developmental path. Researchers have credited online diaries or blogs and social networks with creating and exploring forms of identity and community (Blanchard, 2004). Diaries and journals have historically been used in qualitative research to conceptualize gender and sexuality (Coxon, 1994), which has lead contemporary researchers to incorporate online journaling or blogging as legitimate forms of qualitative data (Hookway, 2008).

2.6 Changing Constructs of LGBTQ Community Advocacy

Communities serve a variety of functions. Online connections develop quickly by reaching large numbers of individuals with speed and efficiency, making them ideal for the promotion of social justice. Historically, social justice movements have relied on much slower methods of communication. More than 50 years ago, Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1964) foreshadowed the enormous role the Internet

would play in mobilization and advocacy when he predicted “global villages,” based on relationships and culture unrestricted by physical space.

Recent work on cyberfeminism has focused on how the Internet provides the potential for activism on social networks. Cyberfeminism examines the costs and benefits of social media as a tool—or an obstacle—in empowering, liberating, and supporting identity development (Volkart, 2004). Social networks, the media, and online networks have played a pivotal role in reconstructing stereotypes. By providing a space for personal storytelling and advocacy, these spaces have helped reduce stereotypes and misrepresentations of LGBTQ people. By making use of online platforms, members of the LGBTQ community can challenge stereotypes and promote a clearer understanding of the diversity of the lived experiences of members.

2.6.1 Chosen Virtual Families and Communities

Weston (1991) asserts the importance of kinship through durability, resilience, and permanence for many gay- and lesbian-identified adults in her book, *Families We Choose*. Additionally, feminist family scholars have paved the way for a more inclusive understanding of family as it relates to gender, sexuality, and diversity (Osmand & Thorne, 1993; Oswald et al., 2005). Researchers exploring family ties to community have also suggested that community members perceive one another as kin, regardless of blood relation (Lannutti, 2005; 2007; Levine, 2008). However, limited models exist examining the construction of LGBTQ identities, partnerships, and families in the virtual world (for an exception, see Van Eeden-Moorefield & Proulx,

2009). Theoretical foundations laid by feminist and family scholars explore the nature of virtual chosen families as they relate specifically to supporting the LGBTQ community and to providing a buffer to the growing reports of bullying, abuse, and violence based on gender and sexual identity.

2.7 Positive Online Development

A growing body of research reveals that, in general, social network connections correlate positively with well-being and increased socialization offline (Hampton et al., 2011; Robinson & Martin, 2010; Williams, 2007; Boase et al., 2006; Katz & Rice, 2002; Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004). In fact, studies suggest that people who explore the Internet while alone report increased feelings of connectedness (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004; LaRose, Eastin, & Gregg, 2001; Nie & Hillygus, 2002; Mesch, 2005).

A review of the research would indicate that this area of study warrants further investigation. Questions addressing the specific nature of online support and the ways that such support relates to instrumental and social support offline are important questions that should be addressed. This study addresses these questions for the LGBTQ community. More specifically, this study utilizes a qualitative methodological approach in order to explore the unique nature of online connections for the LGTBQ community.

Chapter 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGIES

This study's starting points are three primary research questions: 1) What support and communities are available for people in the LGBTQ community in the virtual worlds? 2) Have these supports provided a buffer to the bullying, abuse, and violence for people in the LGBTQ community? and 3) How do these online resources form kinships, partnerships, and bonds that can be conceptualized as chosen families? The initial step was to refine the research questions for the project's proposal to the University of Delaware's Institutional Review Board. The refined research questions were: 1) What support and communities are available for the LGBTQ community in the virtual worlds? 2) Have these supports provided a buffer to the bullying, abuse, and violence for the LGBTQ community? 3) How do these online resources form kinships, partnerships, and bonds that can be conceptualized as chosen families? and 4) Are social network supports experienced differently based on age and generation in the LGBTQ community?

The researcher sought to capture the time-sensitive nature of the role of social networks in a rapidly changing technological world and incorporate an ethical process of making private experiences "publically understandable" (Daly, 2003). This chapter provides a detailed description of the methodology and its rationale. It describes the

sampling process, summarizes participant demographics and identities relevant to the research questions, and lays out the theories and methods employed to capture the diverse and complex meanings of the experiences shared by the participants. The methodology described herein was employed to collect and interpret data, recognize its significance as it relates to the research questions, and discover a broader meaning (Patton, 1990).

3.1 Rationale

Several factors contributed to the decision to choose a qualitative approach in this investigation. Researchers using qualitative research methodologies often gather data from multiple sources in order to gain a sense of a particular phenomenon across time and space (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998; 1999; 2003; 2005; 2007; 2010; Daly, 2003; Denison & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which was well-suited to the research questions since they involved virtual realms that are increasingly difficult to separate from physical realms (Ward, 1999). The rapidly changing and understudied field of online communities requires an exploration that lacks delineated variables or guided theory. In addition, incorporating the intersection of the LGBTQ community identities calls for an emphasis on voice and standpoint (Collins, 2000; Creswell, 1998), suggesting a qualitative analysis instead of a calculated measurement of variables.

3.2 Inherent Assumptions in Qualitative Inquiry

The current study investigates two areas with limited research: online community supports and LGBTQ online resources. This lack of extensive exploration poses a challenge to develop a set of assumptions. The guiding assumptions included the ideas that what one sees as real is socially constructed (ontology), the relationship between the researcher and participants is important (epistemology), as are the roles and values of the researcher and participants (axiology), and the process (methodology) that ultimately determines the shape of this study and its findings (Patton, 2002).

3.3 Research Design Overview

3.3.1 Sampling

The research used snowball sampling (Patton, 1990) to recruit the participants for this study. Social scientists' use of the Internet as a platform for sampling research is still in its early stages, but the reliability, diversity, and financial viability of such research has been steadily supported (Hookway, 2008), particularly among feminist researchers. Van Eeden-Moorefield and Proulx (2009) argue that Internet methodologies can provide researchers with greater access to ethnically and economically diverse participants than traditional methods.

Recruitment took place through the following organizations:

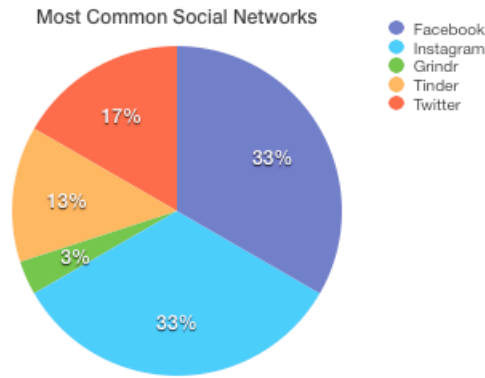
- The “It Gets Better” Project
- The Trevor Project
- The Mazzone Center, a Philadelphia organization that provides comprehensive health and wellness services in an LGBT-focused environment, while preserving the dignity and improving the quality of life of individuals. Its annual free trans* health conference offers three full days of workshops and activities focused on the health and well-being of trans* people, communities, and allies.
- The William Way Center, a Philadelphia community center that encourages, supports, and advocates for the well-being and acceptance of sexual and gender minorities through service and recreational, educational, and cultural programming.
- The Attic, a Philadelphia youth center that creates opportunities for LGBTQ youth to develop into healthy, independent, civic-minded adults within a safe and supportive community, and promotes the acceptance of LGBTQ youth in society.
- The Gay and Lesbian Latino Aids Education Initiative (GALAEI), a Philadelphia social organization dedicated to serving Latinidad by providing social services around HIV/AIDS and sexual health, organizing, networking, and referrals.
- The Equality Forum, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is to advance national and international LGBT civil rights through education. It produces innovative events in collaboration with learning institutions, professional associations, research centers, for-profit companies, and non-profit organizations.
- Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the largest civil rights organization working to achieve equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans, with 1.5 million members and supporters nationwide.
- ScrewSmart, a sex education collaborative formed to facilitate a collective community dialogue that supports sexual exploration and health.

The investigator made initial contact with each organization by email and followed each online through social media platforms. This approach provided an updated sense of the online community resources each organization offers. Contacts within these organizations facilitated participant recruitment. Some participants are members of more than one of the organizations.

3.3.2 Participants

This study included 17 participants who identified as part of the LGBTQ community. The small sample made it possible for the researcher to gain the data familiarity a qualitative approach requires through reading, re-reading, and interpretation. Three participants identified as trans* (T), two as bisexual (B), five as lesbian (L), three as gay (G), three as queer (Q), and one as straight and trans* (T). While the researcher recognizes the importance of the diverse and intersecting standpoints of each identity represented in this study, the opportunity for closely examining each identity was not within the scope of this process. All participants in the study were 22 years of age and older. Table 1 lists participants' ages, the social networks they used, their preferred pronouns, and other demographic information.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Data



	Any specific identity within the LGBTQ Community?	Other Identities Self-Reported And Preferred Pronouns	Age	Most common Social Networks Used
1	Queer	Woman/Latina PP-She	38	Facebook/ Instagram
2	Trans	Woman, Human PP-She	51	Facebook
3	Gay	Man PP-He	25	Facebook/ Instagram/Grindr
4	Lesbian	African American, Woman PP-She	24	Instagram/ Twitter/Tinder
5	Lesbian	Woman/Mother PP-She	40	Facebook
6	Lesbian	Woman/Mother/ Jewish PP-She	35	Facebook/ Blogger/ Instagram
7	Queer	Woman/Mother PP-She	35	Twitter/Instagram
8	Trans	Man PP-They	25	Tumblr/Twitter/ Instagram
9	Queer	Woman pp-She	39	Instagram/Tinder
10	Bisexual	Woman PP-she	30	Instagram/Twitter
11	Lesbian	Woman/Mother PP-She	40	Facebook
12	Lesbian	Women PP-She	65	Facebook
13	Gay	Man PP- He	55	Facebook
14	Lesbian	Woman PP-She	25	Facebook
15	Gay	Man PP-He	22	Tinder, Instagram
16	Bisexual	Man PP-He	29	Twitter, Tinder, Instagram
17	Straight	Man/Trans PP -They	32	Facebook

3.3.3 Interview Questions

Guiding the participant interviews required an informal and open-ended questionnaire. The questions were developed on the basis of a review of literature.

Questions were broad and written to elicit as much information as possible about the various sources of online and offline support available to participants, based on claimed intersecting sexual or gender identity. Questions also focused on sources of stress and stories of both past experiences and present realities, in the context of historical and technological changes. Appendix A provides a reference to the interview questions.

3.3.4 Data Method and Procedures

The primary mode of data collection was the use of semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions (see Appendix 1). Questions were developed to encourage openness and facilitate a better understanding of participants' demographics, community involvement, and social support, as well as the intersecting identities that participants claimed shape their experiences online, views of family, understanding of the history of the LGBTQ social movements, and LGBTQ advocacy online and off. As the study unfolded, some questions were modified to facilitate a better understanding of themes generated within some general domains. Each interview was taped and subsequently transcribed for coding purposes. The study included 17 face-to-face interviews. The average interview ran approximately an hour and a half and took place at each participant's preferred space. Ten interviews took place in participants' homes, three at local coffee shops, two at a queer music festival, and two at a LGBTQ community center in Philadelphia. All 17 participants agreed to participate in follow-up contact via email in an effort to clarify concepts and emerging

themes. In addition, participants were given private, anonymous access to the researcher's reflexive online journal (see 3.6, Issue of Trustworthiness). Ten participants noted accessing the reflexive journal in follow-up email communication. Flexible methods of thematic qualitative analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) guided this study. More specifically, feminist research methods were employed, including methods of thematic analysis and cyberfeminism.

3.4 Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clark (2006) posit that thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative method. They delineate six clear phases for researchers to follow in an effort to demark clear and active choices, while simultaneously leaving room for a flexible theorized analysis, which the researcher adopted:

- **Phase One: *Familiarize Self with Data.*** The researcher personally transcribed each interview, including punctuation, in order to participate in the interpretive act where meanings are created (Bird, 2005; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999) and capture participants' meanings accurately. Following this, repeated active reading of the data corpus preceded coding. Notes were taken in order to capture "keyness" of latent themes and emerging patterns in the data.
- **Phase Two: *Generating Codes.*** The researcher created initial codes to identify latent content that emerged from the interviews, websites, and reflexive journals. Organizing the data in meaningful groups (Boyatzis, 1998) provided an opportunity for the systematic identification of themes in phase three. The manual coding of the data was an essential part of assessing the data. The researcher gave equal attention to all pieces of the data, taking notes, highlighting extracts of the transcripts, and photocopying pieces of the webpages. All data was coded inclusively in an effort to capture its context.

- **Phase Three:** *Searching for Themes*. Following the coding and collation of the data, a broader look at potential themes began. This process of analysis began with the grouping of themes. Overarching themes and the subthemes within them began to emerge in this process. A thematic map was created to focus the analysis to a broader level of themes (see Table 2).
- **Phase Four:** *Reviewing Themes*. By taking a closer look at the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data, the researcher created a refinement grouping based on meaningful coherence with identifiable distinctions (Patton, 1990). Evaluating the patterns in collated extracts led to the identification of problematic themes that were discarded or moved to new themes. This refinement process led to the reevaluation of the thematic map and the meanings emerging from the dataset (Braun & Clark, 2006). The refinement process eventually ceased to contribute to a better understanding of the data, and the challenge of defining and naming themes began.
- **Phase Five:** *Defining and Naming Themes*. Each theme was defined and named in order to capture its respective meaning. A detailed analysis of each was written in essay form to capture the scope of the theme's story. In an effort to give structure to the complexities of broad themes, the subthemes also included a short essay.
- **Phase Six:** *Producing the Report*. This study was reported in order to illustrate a story told by its participants. Extracts were selected to present the story within and across themes.

Table 2 represents all six phases.

Table 2: Thematic Outline

Braun and Clark's (2006)					
Six Phases of Thematic Analysis					
<i>Phase One</i>	<i>Phase Two</i>	Phase Three	<i>Phase Four</i>	<i>Phase Five</i>	<i>Phase Six</i>
Familiarize Self with Data	Generating Codes	Searching for Themes	Reviewing Themes	Defining and Naming Themes	Producing the Report
Reading and re-reading of data. The data corpus included: transcriptions of interviews, photocopies of webpages, and reflexive journal entries.	Initial codes are created to identify semantic and latent content that emerged from the data.	Following the coding and collation of the data, a broader look at potential themes began. This process led to a grouping of themes and subthemes.	A refinement grouping based on meaningful coherence with identifiable distinctions (Patton, 1990) is undertaken.	Each theme is defined and named in order to capture meanings.	Data are reported, in order to illustrate meanings emerging from participants and exchanges between participants and investigator.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Measures to ensure the ethical integrity of this study and the participants in this project were submitted to the University of Delaware's Institutional Review Board for expedited, non-exempt review and approval. Data collection did not commence until permission was granted. Informed consent was secured from each participant (see Appendix G), and every effort was made to maintain the anonymity of respondents. When not being used by the researcher, all material was stored in a locked filing

cabinet in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Delaware. All technical support devices, computers, recorders, and webpages were locked with a privacy code.

In an effort to protect participants and prevent readers from distinguishing patterns in data relating to participant identity, the report employed terms such as “few,” “some,” “most,” and “almost all” to capture the number of participants included in specific data items. The report also used gender-neutral pronouns in relation to participants to minimize identifying details and the gendered constructs they might invoke.

3.6 Issue of Trustworthiness

The ethical integrity and accountability of the study was a central focus throughout this study, and three interrelated goals were carefully positioned as core ethical and accuracy considerations in the interactions between the investigator and the participants through the research process. As Porter (1999) describes, feminist researchers often employ these guidelines, which include, but are not limited to, personal experience, context, and nurturing relationships:

Dilemmas are shaped by social divisions of gender, class and ethnicity: experiences of these dilemmas generate different ethical perspectives...perspectives are not only obtained in particular contexts, but those contexts also alter and inform the ethical dilemmas that we face as researchers and the range and appropriate choices in resolving them. These dilemmas are not abstract but rooted in specific relationships that involve emotions, and which require nurturance and care for their ethical conduct. (p. 19)

A reflexive online journal on Tumblr, kept by the author, was only accessible to anonymous participants. An intentional framework provided in Edwards and Mauthner gave this journal structure through specific questions relating to researcher bias. Feminist family studies theorists emphasize the importance of investigators reflecting on their identity and privilege in an effort to monitor power and bias in research (Allen, 2000). Therefore, the researcher participated in a reflexive process following Edward and Mauthner's framework (2002) throughout the investigative process. All participants were provided with anonymous access to the ongoing reflexive journal. Throughout the research process, participants were contacted via email when posts were made to the journal and were provided a space for anonymous comments. The following questions were pulled from Edward and Mauthner's framework and answered on the researcher's online journal in order to identify and share bias specifically relating to the investigator and the data (see Appendix F for investigator's answers relating to Table 3):

Table 3: Reflexive Journal Framework (Edward & Mauthner, 2002)

- Who are the people involved in and affected by the ethical dilemma raised in the research?
- What is the context for the dilemma in terms of the specific topic of the research and the issues it raises personally and socially for those involved?
- What are the specific social and personal locations of the people involved in relation to each other?

- What are the needs of those involved and how are they interrelated?
- Who am I identifying with, who am I posing as, and why?
- What is the balance of personal and social power between those involved?
- How will those involved understand our actions, and are these in balance with our judgment about our own practice?
- How can we best communicate the ethical dilemmas to those involved, give them room to raise their views, and negotiate with and between them?
- How will our actions affect relationships between the people involved?

Feminist methodologies like reflexive journaling provide a discursive analysis to examine the impact of power inequalities in research. They provide a framework that enables researchers to recognize personal and public identities and power and utilize the unique intersections to shape and critique their own work. In an effort to make sense of the public identities people claim, it is essential to explore the physical and virtual spaces that these identities inhabit.

Market research has embraced the virtual world in order to target groups and gauge the consumer-oriented needs and interests of diverse communities. For example, *Business Week* (2006) notes the usefulness of online communities in this context, using virtual turfs as tools to gain insight into the special needs of various consumer groups. However, social scientists have failed to utilize similar tools to examine human nature, losing an opportunity to study and examine accessible connections of individuals, groups, and communities online (Lyons, Cude, Lawrence,

& Gutter, 2005). However, these cutting-edge research methodologies are gaining popularity among qualitative researchers. For example, Van Eeden-Moorefield and Proulx (2009) position the Internet as a useful and reflexive form of research methodologies. In fact, the term cyberfeminism (Van Eeden-Moorefield & Proulx, 2009) was coined in an effort to acknowledge this method of collecting data that adheres to feminist values of giving voice, empowerment, and centering conversations of gender and sexuality.

Katherine Allen (2000) discusses the importance of challenging traditional ways of understanding and researching marginalized families. Allen suggests that reflexivity in research provides feminist family scholars an opportunity to learn about families that have been historically ignored in the field and, in turn, create a more inclusive and diverse understanding of families:

If our goal is to study social structures and processes related to families, we need ways to include more realistic understandings of the diversity of people's lives in our investigations. These ways require us to explicitly name our assumptions, standpoints, and biases and to grapple with their inconsistencies, their ambiguities, and their effect on others.
(p. 8)

The researcher's online reflexive Tumblr journal, only viewable by participants anonymously, sought to address the more traditional pieces of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007) in terms of internal validity, external validity, transferability, and dependability. To allow participants to comment on the accuracy of the findings, the researcher provided the categories, descriptions, and themes that emerged in the

data collection, summarizing each theme and subtheme on the researcher's thematic map in essay form and posting it on the Tumblr page to encourage a recursive process of maintaining the true meanings of participants' shared experiences. This process, often conceptualized as triangulation in research (Creswell, 2007), encouraged the investigator to place methodologies under scrutiny. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, in order to acknowledge bias that may permeate the research process, participants connected with the investigator via email and phone on an ongoing basis. This communication provided feedback to refine themes, subthemes, and follow-up on the investigator's online journal reflections on bias and assumptions (McGraw, Zvonkovic, & Walker, 2000).

Few researchers have publicly shared bias and assumptions in the space in which they collect data. However, the investigator participates in the same social media outlets as participants in order to collect data in a manner consistent with feminist methodologies of reflexivity. By noting researcher participation while examining communities online in a reflexive journal and avoiding access to results, the process ensures the participants are active agents in the meaning-making process of their shared online experiences in order to provide more accurate and complete findings.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

Rigorous thematic analysis of participants' interviews, the continuous interactions of participants and the investigator on the reflexive journal's Tumblr site, and the field notes and webpages of local and national LGBTQ organizational websites followed over time, partnered with suggested feminist research practices, yield four primary themes and twelve subthemes in the data. The four primary themes are: (1) social networking reshapes concepts of family, kin relations, and community for people identifying as LGBTQ; (2) participation in social media gives participants access to a more inclusive discourse on LGBTQ equality; (3) social networking provides an important tool for social change; and (4) social network use and generational differences within the LGBTQ community. Data generally fell into these four themes, and further investigation more specifically revealed three subthemes stemming from each theme. The subthemes falling under social networking and the reshaping of concepts of family, kin relations, and the LGBTQ community include: 1) alternative constructs of time and space in families, 2) blurring boundaries of community, and 3) the media shaping beliefs and values. The subthemes falling under participation in social media and increased access and inclusivity include: 4) more inclusive conversations on LGBTQ equality, 5) growing visibility of the LGBTQ

community, and 6) increased accessibility to resources. The subthemes falling under social network use as a tool for social change include: 7) safe spaces for voices online, 8) storytelling as a form of advocacy, and 9) swift community mobilization. Finally, the subthemes falling under social networks use and generational differences within the LGBTQ community include: 10) multitasking advocacy, 11) online organization and younger generations, and 12) gaps in awareness of social justice movements in history. Figure 1 provides a more detailed account of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis process, illustrated as a thematic map in order to represent the contours of the data visually (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

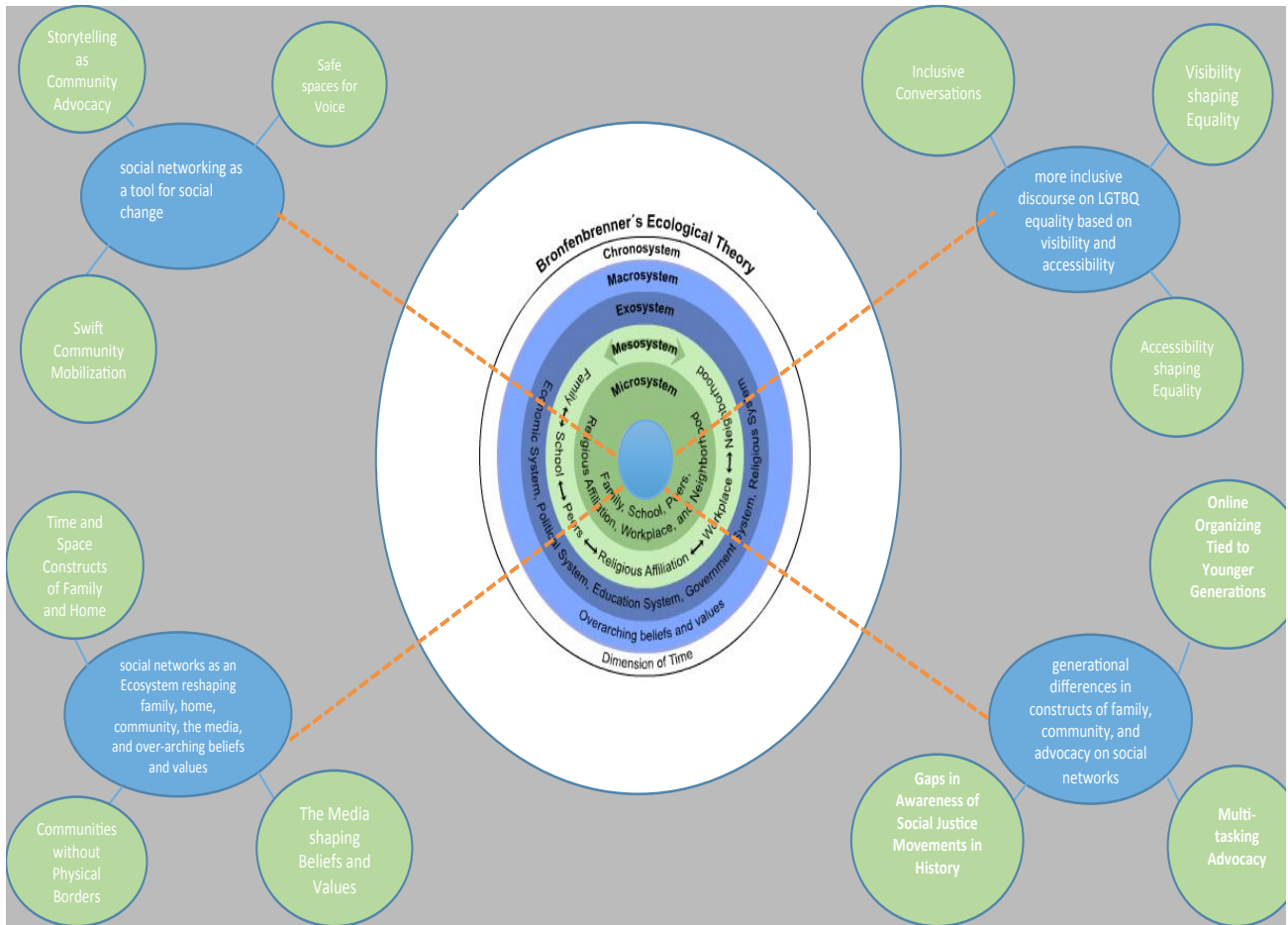


Figure 1: Thematic Map

In addition, by summarizing each theme and subtheme in an essay form and posting it on the reflexive journal's page, the researcher encouraged a recursive process in which participants could provide feedback in ongoing exchanges with the investigator and other participants on each theme.

4.1 Social Networks Reshape Concepts of Family, Kin Relations, and Community for People Identifying as LGBTQ

Several participants described their social networks as constructed spaces, different from their real-life worlds, in which people in their lives and culture shared their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Sue, like several other participants, notes the role social networks played in her community:

As more people stand up for us online and fight for us, we will have more movement towards being safe, being protected, and being represented. The people who stand up for me and alongside me are part of my community. When people post about being trans, I feel less alone in my own small world.

For Sue, experiences shared, followers made, and comments tagged are a form of community building. Respondents described carefully crafting posts and tying them to others' posts through tags and sharing. Through connections such as sharing posts, following, and liking, they experienced a larger and larger community of support.

Sue has every expectation that community building online will shape change in the physical world. As the full context of her quotation clarifies, Sue believes social network users who are not part of the LGBTQ community will observe the culture and supports available on social networks for the LGBTQ community through publically shared posts, tags, and comments, and that this will effect cultural change. She positions social networks as a tool for understanding how people connect and support their families, homes, and communities. As she describes, social networks reshape our

definitions of community, family, and home, based on new opportunities to connect and share online.

4.1.1 Time and Space Constructs in Family

Constructs of home vary across time and place; however, we have yet to extend the definition beyond physical spaces. Contemporary researchers have begun to discuss conceptualizations of home and how many people call more than one space home. Such conceptualizations were a subtheme in comments related to social networks reshaping concepts of family, kin relations, and community for respondents.

These conceptualizations naturally shift as individuals increasingly connect to their homes through smartphones, while roaming freely. Shannon's thoughts on smartphone use suggests the significance of this connection:

I find myself traveling more confidently now [that I have a smartphone]. I can look on different apps to connect with the gay community wherever I am. I can post questions about the safety of certain areas. I can make places far away from my original home a home as well because I know I can always connect and feel safe outside of whatever space I'm in. I moved out west to be a part of a more progressive gay community, but I am still very connected to my country roots. Now I even have my mom commenting on my pictures from San Francisco Pride online all the way from Indiana. I think a lot of that has to do with exposure and connection.

Shannon's comments illustrate how connecting with others in the LGBTQ community on social networks provides members vital informational resources. As she describes,

technology provides information relating to the inclusivity, openness, and even safety of certain physical and geographic areas through technology.

This information can have life and death consequences. AJ's comments also reflect the importance of such connections:

I won't go anywhere anymore without checking on Gay Travel or OutTravel[er]. You never know when you are going to end up in some town or city that is not welcoming of gays—let alone trans folk. I always connect with the trans community before I travel, so I know where to go, where to feel safe, and what places to avoid. It could be a life or death mistake if you end up in the wrong place.

Many participants shared that family and home could exist beyond time and stability.

Some related definitions of home and family to past experiences in the “coming out” or “transitional” process and the lack of support and stability during this process.

Many participants described searching outside of their own families and communities for support in coming out or transitioning, and most stated that they did so through online social networks. Dani describes coming out online and finding an authentic self both online and off:

When I transitioned, my parents, my friends, and my school looked at me like I had two heads. Yeah, it was cool to be a gay guy with tons of girl friends; at least there were TV shows and movies about that. But it wasn't cool to be a “guy” that was really a girl inside. That was something people hadn't seen and weren't about to start. So I went online. I found people. I talked about how sad I was that my family wasn't what I thought they were. I started to make a family of my own.

Like Dani, a number of participants described dynamic relationships in a continuous state of development and evolution, both online and in the physical world.

Historically, family scholars have focused on stability as a function of families.

However, contemporary notions of families are more fluid. Sue said:

I think it's unrealistic to see family as something that has to be stable or constant. I used to see it like that, but then my friends and family kind of split when I transitioned. Now we're good, and I am thankful for that, but why I really appreciate my definition [of family] is because, if you can't find it in your space, you know there's always somewhere else to get it.

For Sue, family was less a source of stability than social media, which provided backup when her family's support wavered.

The stability of families remains salient in contemporary family scholarship, and for this study's participants. But many respondents shared Shannon's experience that families may not offer stability and that stability is sometimes an obstacle in finding a support that one may want to equate to family.

4.1.2 Blurring Boundaries of Community

Another subtheme that emerged in participants' comments about social networks reshaping concepts such as community was more fluid boundaries of these concepts. Many participants' comments described alternative constructs of how one defines community. Sue discusses the importance of feeling part of a trans* community online:

Feeling so different, I never felt part of any community. As I got older, I realized I was just scared of being rejected based on my gender identity. I thought I was too different to be part of something, and it's

hard to recognize who is like you when your community is gender non-conforming. An important piece of your identity is to be stealth and pass, so I didn't even know who was part of my community and who was not. When I started going online, I finally found people that connected to groups and organizations for people that were gender non-conforming. Ah, it was such a relief! I just knew they were part of my community, even if we never spoke a word to each other.

Like family, the construct of community is dynamic for participants. However, Tommy's comments reflect the aspects of community that are stable and consistent:

I used to search for identifiable characteristics in people to know if they were part of my community. Do they look gay? Maybe bisexual? Are they in this with me? It was ironic because I was doing the same things to them that I didn't want people to do to me—labeling based on looks—just so I could figure out if they were part of my community. I do find it helpful now that we can all meet together online. We meet there intentionally based on the identities we want to claim. It doesn't matter if you are in the middle of nowhere or surrounded by gays in the neighborhood, we all can come together now.

The community that welcomed Tommy was based on a shared affirmation of identity. Regardless of how they understood and defined community, participants described the sense of community, of feeling connected with friends, family, and community through social networks, as critical to their well-being. Ty described social networks as creating an opportunity to maintain connections over time:

I have a group of folks I see in person, and those relationships are generally the closest. But I have to say that my community has grown, and I have been able to maintain those relationships because of Facebook and Instagram. I keep in touch with people more and have more of an opportunity to connect with people outside of my immediate place.

Ty found that social media made it possible to maintain close relationships across space. Like most other participants in this study, Ty's online connections reflected LGBTQ identity. Winn stated:

I post a lot of political stuff and news relating to queer equality. Yes, I'm out online and off, but I share a lot online about horrible injustices across the world—especially in the trans community. If people have a problem with that, then I don't think they are truly supporting who I really am. I feel less connected. If people like, comment, or share my posts, I feel connected in a way I don't think I would in the real world. Maybe we just don't have an opportunity in the real world to say, "I agree and want to share this with others."

Many participants shared similar feelings. Most stated that they would dissolve virtual connections with individuals who did not support their LGBTQ identity. Like Winn, they measured support through likes, shares, or comments on posts.

While participants typically experienced the creation of supportive LGBTQ families and communities online as positive, one participant, Dez, called attention to the fact that it's possible for organizations to abuse the fluid approach to defining "family":

Anytime an organization I have worked for used the word family or community, I found that they were anything but. It was like they were using those buzzwords to make everyone feel warm and fluffy, but paid us very little, never gave family leave, and were hoping we lived at work. I guess it made them money to make us think that they were our family.

As Dez's comments suggest, an employer can use the term family to symbolize a supportive organization, even if the company doesn't provide a supportive work environment. Just as Dez's employers used the term family to package their treatment of employees, advertisers can use terms like family and community, made more fluid by supportive online communities, for financial profits. Further, when a community grows more visible, industries tend to view it as a means to make a financial profit. Financial gain plays an important role in social media; online advertising, rather than user fees, supports social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

4.1.3 How the Media Shape Beliefs and Values

While the current cultural context is shaping social media and social networks, some participants suggested that social media and networks are also shaping our values and beliefs. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory situates the media in a nested system of overarching beliefs and values in a unit of analysis. However, many participants in this study discussed how media has grown more powerful than the beliefs and values that preceded them. For example, Si talks about social networks and social media's relationship to beliefs:

What we saw in the media, which used to be defined as TV, magazines, and movies, used to be a reflection of some more-powerful people's values. To some extent that is still true, but when you look at—let's

say, Facebook—as a form of media, it gets complicated because anyone can gain power, it’s not just some CEO of Disney, Fox, or NBC. You can become powerful on social networks no matter who you are, as long as you have a computer or smartphone. If you gain popularity online, you can also start to shape the world that’s watching. Now that’s power.

For Si, social networks can shape values and beliefs. Si’s comment suggests a relationship between the accessibility and visibility of social networks and an increased opportunity (or power) to create social change. Other participants in this study noted social change that occurred both online and off. Matty said:

When I first started going online, I was unsure if it was safe to be out, or if people would accept me. Now when I go online and share, I find so much support. And when I see people preaching hate or gay bashing, I see an outpouring of outrage in response. I think that has trickled into the real world. I guess you could say it’s a chicken or the egg question, but I would argue that Facebook paved the way for us to be ourselves, and [we] are now encouraging people to be more accepting of diversity.

Matty argues that Facebook has driven cultural change. Participants’ perceptions of a reciprocal relationship suggests the deep impact of their online experiences. Visibility, sharing, and connecting online on social networks have created an opportunity for inclusive conversations and, in turn, more inclusive discourse on equality for the LGBTQ community.

4.2 Representation in LGBTQ Equality

Social justice movements are typically led by a few key leaders in the community. For example, the women's and civil rights movements used leaders like Gloria Steinem, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X as symbolic representatives for significant social change. While we continue to have powerful leaders in various social movements, social media provides an opportunity for more faces of leadership. Specifically, social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, provide a space where almost anyone can gather followers while also facilitating social change. Moreover, social networks provide a space where larger numbers of people in the LGBTQ community can discuss equality and conceptualize what equality means to them, leading to increased visibility for the community and growing access to connections, resources, and advocates.

4.2.1 More Inclusive Conversations on LGBTQ Equality

Research has argued that social recognition is an important sign of equality (Renger & Simon, 2011). Although reaching a consensus on social action movements has not become easier, the participants in this study argued that the conversations regarding equality have become much more inclusive. AJ discusses trans* inclusivity in LGBTQ community advocacy:

The trans community is still very excluded from LGB groups. Most money and political support are for gay men. However, lately there has been a lot of buzz—conversations online—about including trans issues, and the LGB community is starting to respond. There is a growing

awareness on injustices for the trans community, and I am seeing a quicker change than ever before. For example, I'm seeing more gender-neutral bathrooms, more trans-inclusive policy proposals, [and] an awareness of inclusive language and pronoun use. Finally, the conversations on equality are including trans people, and I think a lot of that is thanks to the Internet.

AJ's statement reflects the importance of social recognition. While group leaders can be at the forefront, demanding change through social action, conversations focusing on the concerns, social problems, and possible solutions for the LGBTQ community have become borderless. In addition, how people perceive their place in a community and the power that comes with along with this place influences the "movements" that gain a community focus. Respondents like Sierra described how the borderless quality of social networks provide an opportunity to shift power structures to which they are subject:

The majority of my conversations about lesbian equality [before I found a community on social media] were in the classroom. They were led by white men who talked about history; but white, educated men wrote most of history. I don't discount what I learned, but I always felt a little weird talking about my experiences of discrimination, abuse, and inequities because I am a black woman, and a black, queer woman at that. I did talk about these things on my Tumblr page, though. I wrote essays and poems about my life and struggles as a queer black woman and connected with people with similar stories and experiences. It wasn't hard to find [them]. I feel like those conversation[s] were the ones that shaped my view on equality, or more so what I needed to change to find equality.

As Sierra experienced, social and political power complicates notions of discrimination and equality (Weston, 1991). As lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and queer people (and, like Sierra, in some cases, people of color), participants experience

social media as an opportunity to have conversations that are not dictated by people with heterosexual privilege.

A few participants stated that online conversations themselves served as important steps towards LGBTQ equality. Dez comments:

It's a smaller world. I see things on my newsfeed and on my profile pages that come from different perspectives, perspectives I don't agree with, but I see them, I hear them, and I take it in. Even when it pisses me off, I get to process it on my own terms. I don't think I would have that access or opportunity if it were not for Facebook. I know I would not be comfortable connecting with people with certain perspectives in person, but I'm usually glad I read them online so I know what's going on. I know what I'm up against when it comes to fighting for equality as a lesbian woman.

For Dez and others, Facebook gave access to opposing views in a non-threatening but illuminating format. This arguably offers something important to a movement for social change; conversation and dialogue involving opposing viewpoints produce a better understanding, resolve conflict, and are the first steps towards change.

Shannon addressed these benefits:

I think we are so afraid to piss each other off.... When I'm in class, no one wants to talk about race or trans issues. Everyone is scared of hurting each other's feelings. Online, everyone seems OK with pissing each other off. It's a space [where] that work can happen, and you can see it everywhere online.

As Shannon describes, social networks create an opportunity to have more comfortable and honest conversations on equality. Her experiences call attention to

the fact that the lack of face-to-face contact in social networks opens space for frank discussion. As an undergraduate student, Shannon's other opportunity for conversations about LGBTQ equality issues was typically the classroom, and she found that others treaded too lightly for productive discussion in that setting.

4.2.2 Visibility of the LGBTQ Community

Online resources have been tailored to meet different communities. Resources such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram provide a public expression of LGBTQ existence. Since many members of the LGBTQ community can pass as straight/cisgender, the visibility of such groups online plays an important role. For example, on many of these sites, hashtags such as “#itgetsbetter,” “#nohate,” and “#lovemakesafamily” are some of countless tags referencing LGBTQ visibility. Kai comments on hashtags' role in visibility:

Valentine's Day used to be tough. It was about straight love, and if I even wanted to pick up a simple card I had to go searching online. Last year, I started noticing the “#allkindsoflove” hashtag with pictures of gay and lesbian couples. I started searching the “#allkindsoflove” hashtag daily and just seeing the pictures cheered me up. I think it started to make people realize how [some] images of love weren't really being representative of everyone.

The visibility of social justice issues and people that have historically been left out of media outlets can shape social movements and advocacy. Social networks provide a platform for people to share experiences relating to daily inequities and injustices. Often, the general public lacks awareness of problems that the LGBTQ

community face. AJ described the benefit of seeing others post on a shared experience and daily struggle:

Going to the bathroom in college was so stressful for me. I felt weird in the girl's room and unsafe in the boy's bathrooms. I didn't know who to bring up my concerns with because it was so uncomfortable. Can you imagine talking bathrooms with school administrators? I started posting my thoughts about my anxiety around public bathrooms and sharing it with my friends. Surprisingly, a lot of people had things to say! Many of my trans friends were having the same problem. I started seeing a lot of posts about the need for Unisex bathrooms, and soon school administrators did have something to say about their bathrooms.

As the trans* community increases online, advocates have called for more trans* stories and experiences (Denny, 2004). In an effort to create inclusive and safe environments, activists share stories making the gender-conforming privilege and its effects on people in the trans* community more visible to the public.

Visibility continues to be a work in progress, however. Sue commented:

I think social networks have created more visibility for the gay community and people in general. However, my experiences are different. I'm combating different types of discrimination. A lot of resources don't really apply to me. Most aren't putting out supports I need that are part of who I am. Being trans, being a woman, and being black all affect the resources I have. Most of the stuff I see online and off are for gay white men with money.

Privilege and numbers continue to shape resources in the LGBTQ community. Social inequality affects online spaces as surely as it appears in all other aspects of American life. Nonetheless, most participants referenced the benefits of visibility.

4.2.3 Accessibility

Participants shared that social networks made their interactions more accessible and that they had been able to refine their interactions online in a way that made them feel consistently supported in their LGBTQ identity. Access to friends, family, and community outside of their immediate physical spaces offered opportunities for support and connection. Social networks also provided an opportunity to access and connect with far-flung LGBTQ organizations. Jay discussed the benefits of accessibility:

When I came out as bisexual, everyone thought I was doing it for attention. No one thought that some femme girl from the burbs could be truly bi, and it had to be an act to get attention. I felt so alone. I went online and found a lot of Tumblr pages with journals and poems and songs about being bi and about sexual fluidity. It really helped. I had access to all of these amazing people and found some great organizations that I actually shared with my GSA. I think that now people really recognize bisexuality as an identity. I do think it's part[ly] because of those people and organizations like the ones I found online.

Jay was able to use social media to become comfortable with her own sexuality and to improve her physical environment.

Participants noted that supportive spaces online made them feel less limited in terms of their access to new ideas, beliefs, supports, and connections outside of physical boundaries. They used social networks to gain increased access to family, friends, communities, and organizations. Lola noted:

Some people may think being on my phone detaches me from the world, but my phone keeps me connected to work, friends, and my family all at the same time. I don't think I would even have been comfortable leaving Colorado if I didn't know I could stay in touch with my family no matter where I am. I'm not limited to where I am standing.

At the same time, all seventeen participants spoke of social media access and support as a privilege. They acknowledged that those who need support and affirmation cannot always access technology. Kai's comment reveals a contrasting point of view about privilege and technology, however:

I used to think having a smartphone was a privilege. Now I see everyone has [one], and for me it feels more like a burden. I look at it all day long. The only people I see that aren't using it, which are often the same people I don't see online, seem to be upper middle class white educated women. It's like not needing endless access to your smartphone's now a privilege. It says you can make it without all of that, on your own. Like you don't need anyone.

Researchers have suggested growing access to technology in lower socio-economic groups (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Moreover, some Americans are now beginning to see technology as a necessity rather than a luxury. Kai's comments illustrate a shift. Eschewing constant connection may, in fact, be a privilege. In fact, if the disadvantages of LGBTQ identity ever dissipate, the accessibility of support for LGBTQ individuals will become less significant.

4.3 Social Networking as a Tool for Social Change

Social science researchers have only recently begun to explore the role of online social networks in creating socio-political change. For example, the Pew Research Internet Project (2014) explored political advocacy in the digital age. Their study positioned social networks as a lead change maker and increased participation in politics, specifically stating “there has been major growth in political activity on social networking sites since 2008, and discussions on social networking sites can lead to further engagement with political issues.” Social networks have made conversations regarding politics, policies, and inequities more accessible. Participants named a number of aspects of social media participation they viewed as social action. For example, many participants noted the significance in changing profile pictures on Facebook and posting and sharing personal stories online for “It Gets Better.”

4.3.1 Safe Spaces for Voice

Public participation on the Internet began in chat rooms, as a space where many could share and connect anonymously. Liz was an Internet user in these early days:

I was thankful for some of the first the chat rooms. It was one of the first times I played about with being the real me. Before I came out to my friends and family, that was all I had—the only place I could meet people like me. It made me feel like I wasn’t alone.

Liz was able to come out of the closet online first. Chat rooms were a space where she could connect with others, share struggles, and feel less alone. The growth of instant messaging and chat rooms allowed people from all different perspectives to participate in conversations about discrimination and equality.

Ali's experience of social networks resembled Liz's experience of chat rooms:

Social media has a ton to do with an opportunity to voice your feelings. I think that social voices that don't feel that they have a place to be heard now do have place to be heard. People may see a problematic community [of] whiners and screamers, but this needs to happen. I need to tell people the stuff I went through and am still going through. Some of us need to whine and scream to be heard. So many people respond to my posts on all sides of an argument, it snowballs, and everyone is all up in it, gathering information and perspectives that are changing the landscape of how help and change happens.

As Ali's comments indicate that social media has played a central role in giving voice and creating change, as well as supporting others. Social networks provide an opportunity for voice and sharing. Given more than 75 percent of the United States participates in social media (Raine, Smith, & Duggan, 2014), these opportunities make it increasingly difficult for others to turn the other way. The refusal to go into the closet gains a new dimension on social media.

4.3.2 Storytelling as Advocacy

As the Internet has grown, social networks have flourished. Virtual spaces have enabled people to cultivate and share identities in a relatively safe environment. In time, these exchanges became a part of most people's daily routine. People in the

LGBTQ community have utilized the Internet to share stories of their experiences, often experiences to which others could relate. Many of these stories described bullying, discrimination, and violence. Si describes the role of such stories in advocacy:

I used to get beat up pretty bad when I was a kid. Maybe because, at the time, I was seen as [a] boyish girl, and people thought it was OK. When I transitioned, I was safer in some ways, but people were emotionally abusing me because there was no trans-awareness. My friends and allies didn't even know how to respect my authentic self. More people in the trans community started to share their stories [and] talk about how ridiculous it was that people thought it was okay to ask about your genitalia. People started sharing stories about how painful it was when people used pronouns or names that were not aligned with your truth. These stories got around. These stories grew outside of our community and friends, allies, and even trans-phobic people got the message, and I think an awareness grew that never would've happened otherwise.

As a critical mass of stories like Si's have developed, people outside of the LGBTQ community become aware of violence against trans* people. Through sharing, social networks become the mechanism by which people hear stories like Si's without necessarily knowing the victim personally.

Historically, storytelling has been a tool for connecting people (Davis, 2011), community awareness (Lambert, 2007), and shaping social constructs (Hull & Katz, 2006). As digital stories provide opportunities for voice and visibility to communities historically silenced (Lambert, 2007; Field, 2008), online campaigns have arisen to capitalize on this potential. Tommy explained:

There is this upcoming campaign, Preach About No Hate. People in this campaign put up testimonials and stories—first-hand experiences with bullying, abuse, hate, whatever. These personal stories help. I think when we share our own stories, it gives people a good crutch. I used to think I was playing the gay card when I talked about the stuff I have been through in class or to others. I used to feel like I was complaining or not being strong enough. This campaign and others like it made me see that by sharing I am actually making others stronger. When I heard, watched, and read some of the stories online I started thinking, “OK, they did this, and I can, too.” [It] gives people hope that they get through just like I am getting through.

As Tommy’s comment illustrates, hearing people share their stories can serve as a source of encouragement and empowerment for others in a similar situation (Lambert, 2002). Tommy also stated that “hearing people’s stories” provided a form of comfort in and of itself. Most participants shared Tommy’s experience, that they shared their own stories because of their experience of hearing others’ stories. Storytelling lends to visibility, which, in turn, provides support.

AJ described the power of storytelling:

My parents used to think that they were the only family in town with a trans son. My mom didn’t think there was anyone to talk to because she thought no one around us would ever understand what she was going through. But then she saw some post that went viral about a mom around us that was supporting her trans son with dress codes at school. She was so relieved. I remember it was around that time when we first went clothes shopping together again after four years. After some time, she was even helping me fight against my school’s dress code policies.

Social media not only provided a safe space for AJ, it provided a safe space for AJ’s parents, which changed their family dynamics. Social networks not only allowed people in the LGBTQ community to post stories, but their families and friends to share

as well. This participant's story illustrates the importance of connections online through the support AJ's mother found when searching on social networks. AJ discussed how social networks were transformative in his family relationships as a result of reading stories from parents of trans-identified children.

Another participant, Lola, recognized the power of her own online storytelling:

Now that I think about it, the majority of my advocacy is online. I post when I am frustrated, outraged, or sad about inequities in the queer community. I want people to rally with me, comment, like, and share my posts.

Lola recognized her actions on social media as advocacy. She notes the importance of not only sharing her perspectives, but also having others "share" it in their own feeds. This type of sharing is an element in the transformation of personal stories into genuine and effective advocacy. By spreading a message or experience online, Lola and other participants could reach and mobilize communities.

4.3.3 Swift Community Mobilization

Lola describes community mobilization through social media in the wake of tragedy:

When a trans woman in our community was murdered last year, within seconds of the news everyone was tweeting and posting about it. We were all so horrified, sad, and angry, but we rallied. Within the day, we

coordinated a space for a vigil, a protest, and had received national attention.

Lola's community came together with social media as the initial means of connection. Speed and access makes social media an ideal means of network community mobilization. Many participants shared stories of rallies and community meetings that came together because of social media.

The U.S. Supreme Court's striking down of the Defense of Marriage Act in 2013 occurred during this research. During the Court's deliberations, Facebook users around the country adopted the Human Rights Campaign's equal sign as their profile picture. Shannon recalls this period:

I remember all my friends, family, and almost everyone I knew had changed their profile picture on Facebook to the HRC equal sign. It was so weird for me to see the numbers of people standing behind marriage equality. Yeah, it's just a profile picture, but it made a difference. The numbers made a difference. It was warming to see so many people supporting my community

Many participants commented on this landmark decision in relation to the research questions. Tommy positioned Facebook as one of the primary tools for community mobilization:

All of my friends and family, even the ones that weren't too excited when I came out, changed their [profile] pic [to the Human Rights Campaign's equal sign]. Anyone who spoke out against it online got a wave of resistance. It was interesting to see how in some circles it was beginning to be the norm to stand for equality, when for years it was the opposite. I do think Facebook and those profile pics had something to do with it. Everyone was on Facebook, everyone saw this symbol,

and most people wanted to be part of it. No matter what their true intentions were, which was quiet a debate in my circle of gay friends, it was still progress that we made together.

Tommy called the profile pictures “progress” but also noted that he’s fairly suspicious of this “support.” Furthermore, most participants expressed differences within their community when examining community mobilization and participation. The data revealed that age was one of the most influential factors in shaping the social network experience for people in the LGBTQ community. The following section discusses the age similarities and differences in supports, resources, and advocacy of social networks in the LGBTQ community.

4.4 Generational Differences and Social Network Advocacy Among the LGBTQ Community

Participants described social media as a space for people across ages to connect. However, generational differences on equality and social justice movements were noted in participant interviews. Lola states:

So many people think that things will change and being gay will be a “non-issue” as soon as the older generation dies off. There’s a disconnect between young and old about who made this movement. Maybe just because we don’t see the change that those before us made in history online, we don’t value it as much.

The role of generational tensions in LGBTQ social justice movements has yet to be explored. An analysis, such as the feminists’ articulation of the existence of “waves,” might accomplish this exploration. LGBTQ movements are diverse and changing, and

generational context shapes how many people in the LGBTQ community see the need for change.

Winn comments:

I find that certain movements are backed by specific generations. If something is tied to a public policy change that requires a drawn out process of advocacy, then the older generations seem to be on board, but the younger generations seem to focus on more spontaneous and immediate movements that can be shared online. Maybe I mean less commitment? For example, I noticed a lot of old people in the GLB community really rallying around [the defeat of] DOMA, but I saw a lot of people in the younger communities, specifically the queer and trans groups, posting about marriage being part of a historically oppressive system. They don't want to take part in that system, but I did not see any commitment to another form of advocacy. I suppose it was similar to the Occupy Movement—too many voices, too many positions, and too many obstacles to find or work towards a consensus.

Interestingly, participants' comments reveal a limitation of social media's ability to provide an effective space for advocacy on some level because it divides generations.

Winn's statement not only suggests generational differences in online advocacy, but also provides an avenue for future research investigation (see 5.5, Limitations and Implications for Research).

4.4.1 Multitasking Advocacy

Participants' age correlated with their views of advocacy. Younger participants (22–35) generally spoke of valuing being part of many movements for any period of time, while older participants valued longevity and identified with only one or two

“movements.” Lola, who is 38, for example, described her frustration with social media’s potential:

Some people are involved in so many things they will be tweeting about some public policy, while Facebooking about their school’s outreach programs, while watching some YouTube video. Smartphones made it easier to get involved, but I wonder about how involved people are in each cause that they fight for. I see less rallies, less grassroots organizing.

Shannon described her struggles in advocating for change online through a multitude of causes and groups at the same time:

I used to do the Speak Outs in college. We had a pretty active LGBTQ group on campus. We were always doing awesome outreach stuff like that. Our group grew, online, then off, and we had tons of students, but our meetings started to feel scattered. We had so many different causes in the community that we wanted to fight against—most of them coming from stuff we saw online. It was great, but limiting at the same time because sometimes we just ended our meetings exhausted from talking about so many different things and not feeling like we got anything done.

Shannon’s comments relate to the generational differences in technology suggested by researchers. For example, researchers have suggested that younger people describe multitasking as a “way of life” (Rosen, 2007). However, we have yet to explore how these multitasking techniques shape social advocacy. Further investigation may lead to a better understanding of the role of multitasking and time, in working towards social change. For instance, Kai valued advocacy on social networks because of limits on time:

I don't have time for doing long chunks of anything. Between being a single mom, an attachment parent to a young child, and working full-time, all I have time for is a quick jump in and out online.

Analysis of the data indicated generational differences in beliefs, values, and goals, and expectations about how these should be shared. Younger generations expressed the desire to address all injustices and work towards all goals simultaneously, while older participants stated that it was more effective to work towards one or two focused movements that were related to core values and beliefs. More specifically, participants in this study noted that older generations identifying as lesbian and gay were more committed to marriage equality movements, while younger people in the LGBTQ community focused on several movements simultaneously.

Sierra notes:

I'm on my phone following so many things. There are so many Twitter accounts fighting hate, fighting for safety, fighting for the right to just be yourself. You see a lot of kids on there. Some people think too much time and energy is spent on marriage equality. I think that's mostly the older generations though. I can see so many things we need to change—just look at my Twitter feed...you can see everything from trans rights, housing, racism. I think it's great, but I've had other black women, mostly older black women, say it's important to focus on one fight, saying that if we were divided in the civil rights movement we would've never made change. I just don't think that's how it's done anymore...you can fight for so much more now at the same time. Maybe that's because some of that work has already been done...I don't know.

Many participants noted a concern with the LGBTQ community solely focusing on marriage equality when many of them see stories of bullying, violence, and abuse in

their everyday lives and shared on social networks. In addition, as Sierra noted, social networks provide a platform to fight for various social causes simultaneously, but most participants suggested that older generations were rooted in “older” forms of advocacy—more specifically, community mobilization through grassroots rallying, marching, and protesting.

4.4.2 Online Organizing and Younger Generations

Some participants saw themselves as primarily online advocates, while others saw online organizations as subordinate to LGBTQ organizations in which they could have a physical presence. These groups correlated with age, with more young people being enthusiastic about online advocacy. Bri, who’s 40, observed:

It’s weird, but when I ask some younger people about different social causes they are involved in, the majority of them have never even been to a rally. When I was more active in fighting for lesbian rights, the meetings and rallies we had fueled my fight. I picked a cause—at that time, it was equality in the workforce, something I don’t think we have achieved yet—and we had weekly meetings, we made signs, we wrote letters, and we rallied together. That’s how a lot of my support system was formed. The people I worked next to in the fight became my support system in many ways. I guess the young people do that online, and it must work for them. I see them on their phones non-stop, but I wonder if the connections and the social changes are the same.

Bri was skeptical of online advocacy, but other participants shared that social networks provided an essential tool in community mobilization today.

Tommy stated that social networks allow him to gather people together quickly and, in turn, create a larger opportunity for being part of a community that transcends geography:

The NOH8 trend was such a big part of my coming out and dealing with assholes in my neighborhoods, in my family, and even in my circles of friends. When NOH8 started trending, I saw it everywhere and even people in country Mississippi started following and posting. It was so popular that people were getting called out for bullying and picking on people for being gay. I think it was mostly younger people because they were the ones following it online, but I think it trickled out. I got pretty involved in the posts and sharing. I never would've been a part of something like that otherwise. I did see a lot of older gays that weren't a part of it...maybe 'cause they weren't online as much, and I felt bad for them 'cause I felt like they weren't feeling the change yet.

Tommy's comments suggest that while social networks help people in his community mobilize against bullying. However, he noted older people in the community feeling "left out" or not experiencing the fight for equality the same way as younger generations. These generational observations provide diverse perceptions on how the LGBTQ community is working towards equality.

4.4.3 Gaps in Awareness of Social Justice Movements in History

Ten of the seventeen participants mentioned the idea that of a generational difference in attitudes towards LGBTQ rights. Ali's comments are typical:

I have heard people say that when the older generations die off we will have equality. I think that's pretty extreme, but I do see some truth in it. The younger generations seem to be more open. Maybe that's because we have more people involved.

However, this point of view seems to create a generational difference in awareness.

For instance, Bri's thoughts suggest a generational gap:

I don't think younger people in this community know how hard it was to get where we are today. It wasn't a Tweet or an online viral video that got us here—we rallied in the street for our lives. I don't know if that's being recorded in a way that makes them recognize its importance.

Like Bri, Lola ties younger people's understanding of the history of advocacy for

LGBTQ rights to the Internet:

I don't know if everyone understands the context of how changes took place. We see things online, we take them in, but I don't know if people fully understand the events and work that went around them over time. Who created the context for you to fight for job equality in the gay community? Who made it possible for lesbian women to even consider marriage? I think that we forget the work that created the opportunity to live—somewhat—safely as a lesbian woman and fight for the causes we fight for today.

How social justice movements and societal changes take place seem to be understood in different ways based on age. Winn (39) has a different perspective on the generational divide in advocacy:

They hire young people to do the grunt work. Their job is to get the word out there online. To Tweet about it, to run the websites, and to follow it, but it's the older generations that still are in the decision-making place. Young people may be posting about it, but they sure aren't voting on it.

Given the pleasure many participants took in social media participation, Winn's characterization of it as "grunt" work seems out of place. But the charge that older people make the decisions in many established LGBTQ rights organizations has some validity. Researchers have suggested that young people in the LGBTQ community vote on marriage equality in significantly higher rates than older groups (Maccio, Mateer DeRosa, Wilks, & Wright, 2014).

Sue, on the other hand, is another young person, but she acknowledges that social media activism may obscure history:

I think the only fight we see sometimes is online. We know there is a need for change, we know people are still being hurt or killed 'cause they're gay, queer, trans, lesbian, or something that may not fit any of those, but we don't see many of those rallies, we don't feel many of those public policy changes, we don't hear a lot of the voices of survivors unless we go online. I think this is a curse and a blessing. I appreciate the opportunity for all of these things that I get to be a part of online; change couldn't happen without them. But I would like to see more people recognizing those who came before us—[who] took to the streets—and learning from the ways they made change.

Sue's comments suggest that social networking provides an important tool for social change, but interestingly challenges social networks' ability to bridge generational differences within the LGBTQ community. More specifically, it positions social networks as a space to divide generations unless the advocacy that came before social networks is captured and shared online. If younger populations are primarily gathering information, connecting, advocating, and supporting each other online, it is important that the historical context of the social justice work that came before them is

represented in the same space. While it appears older generations are using the Internet at a growing pace, the different spaces that people in the LGBTQ community are connecting to online is an important area of future investigation.

Social networks provide family scholars with a window into a better understanding of how the LGBTQ community connect and create social change online and off. Participants described social networks as a space to share experiences, find support, advocate for social change, and identify people in their community. These more contemporary spaces for social connections call for reexamining our constructs of families, homes, and communities in in order to capture these unique exchanges online.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

5.1 Summary

The purpose of this study has been to explore social networks and their role in alternative constructs of family and community, and how those constructs provide a measure of aid to the LGBTQ community's confrontation with bullying, violence, abuse, and discrimination. The goal of this study has been to contribute to a heretofore limited body of knowledge on the relationships and interactions of the LGBTQ community on the Internet. A secondary goal has been to address the gaps in research and literature on these interactions, as well as their role in creating new opportunities for constructs of families, communities, and advocacy in the LGBTQ population. This study documents how social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram provide support, foster connections outside of physical spaces, and generate advocacy for a particular population.

The research involved (a) qualitative analysis of interviews with seventeen participants and (b) a reflexive journal composed while following public, online local and national LGBTQ community resources. Several important themes emerged from

the analysis of these data, which proved relevant to the original research questions about sources of support. Participants reported that utilization of Internet resources provided opportunities for connections, support, and community as it related to their LGBTQ identity.

The majority of the participants noted that social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, also allowed them to construct their own support systems. These consisted of people and organizations of their own choosing. Some participants stated that they could tailor these supports to specific needs that related to identity. For example, participants chose the friends and family they wanted to connect with online and which groups and organizations to follow that were directly relating to their lesbian, gay, trans*, bisexual, and queer identities. They also stated that participation in these support systems and online communities made it possible for them to participate in violence prevention and anti-discrimination advocacy.

Participants also gained a sense of validation and support by telling their personal stories on the inherently amplified platform of social media. They felt that this raised the visibility of and created an increased awareness of the social problems of the LGBTQ community, problems that mainstream society has all too often ignored. By providing a space for participants to tell their stories openly, social networks have become a tool for community advocacy, social support, and societal change.

Participants of every gender identity described the trans* identity as a cause of particular importance of social networks for resources, support, and education. This study lays groundwork for future investigations that will deepen our understanding of how people in the trans* community seek support and advocate for change. Comments from participants warrant further investigations of trans* identities independent of social media and research more inclusive of the unique diverse identities within the trans* umbrella.

Qualitative research allows participants to share their existential experiences with the researcher. It enables scholars to gain an increased understanding of the texture of human interactions and the need for connection. The exploratory nature of this study also provided an opportunity to apply theoretical contributions in the field of human development and family studies. Indeed, the results refine our comprehension of how a growing and changing technological world helps shape human development and family relationships.

5.2 Theoretical Considerations

The investigator in this study relied upon important points from several theories to illuminate the complex interactions and relationships among people, places, organizations, and time. Social science investigation places an importance on theory in each step of the investigative process, from methodology to the construction of new theoretical contributions (Goldhaber, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Richters, 1997; Winegar, 1997). In order to note the framework that shaped this project, this study

explicitly notes theoretical references, which include Ecological Systems Theory and Cyberfeminist theory.

5.2.1 Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory is an approach to the study of human development that consists of the “scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being, and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded” (Voydanoff, 2005). Many social scientists use Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory as a reference point to improve our understanding of the human experience across the lifespan. Bronfenbrenner focused on important aspects of human development in the context of complex, interacting systems; for this study, social media networks emerged as a visual representation of the context of these complex, interacting systems (for a more specific illustration, reference Appendices B, C, D, and E). Participants described their experiences of online social networks as spaces in which several ecological systems—micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono—are visible.

Each system in Bronfenbrenner’s theory continuously interacts, shaping human development and behavior. Bronfenbrenner stresses the importance of person–context interrelatedness (Tudge, Gray, & Hogan, 1997). In relation to Facebook, this plays out in the fact that Facebook profiles efficiently encapsulate people and their context,

empowering the subject to express unique representations and identities. On social networks, each system identified in Ecological Systems Theory that encompasses the individual is not only represented, but also powered by the individual.

The microsystem Bronfenbrenner describes—an individual’s direct social actions between family and friends—has grown, for social media users, to include online social actions such as mentions, photo tags, and hashtags. Participants in this study noted that they interacted on these platforms primarily with those they considered family, close friends, or otherwise members of their direct support system, including individuals they had met online that became a part of their social network (for a visual representation, reference Appendix B). Sue comments on this in her interview:

Yeah, I connect a lot with my mom and sister online—we are always tagging each other in pictures. But I would say the majority of my posts are tagged and shared with my trans family. We keep each other informed on what’s going on, what we need to be fighting for, and just share positive and inspirational quotes with each other to get through. I’ve been out of work for three years; the fact that you can get fired based on being trans is something that is so ludicrous and upsetting. My mom and my sister try to understand that, but they just can’t. My trans sisters really get it, and when I’m posting about how frustrated, poor, or discouraged I am, they’re the ones who I reach out to. They’re the ones who get it. So yeah, they are my people and who I connect with most. They help me and also inspire me when I see them connecting with each other.

Sue’s comment suggests the importance of shared experience in providing support for people who face prejudice. She had met many members of her trans* family online.

Sue’s reliance on this support illustrates the importance of the microsystem in identity

development. Her statement also references the significance of interactions in the mesosystem—a system consisting of the relationships between one’s microsystems, based on her trans* identity—when Sue mentions the difficulties in connecting with her sister and mother because of her trans* identity.

Social networks make the mesosystem quite visible. For example, one can view the interactions between family and friends on their feed, regardless of participation in the exchanges. Interestingly, tagging invites individuals to be involved in exchanges, regardless of participation. An individual can be tagged in a comment between one’s friends without being directly involved in the conversation. Thus, these platforms create links between an individual’s parents, friends, school, and other entities, providing new opportunities for researchers to explore how these individuals and entities connect with one another (for more a visual representation, reference Appendix C). For instance, participants in this study described their social media activity as changing their families of origin’s interest in LGBTQ advocacy. By exposing their kin to personalized expressions of LGBTQ identity, such as tagged photos of same-sex couples, firsthand accounts of bullying or discrimination, and information about participating in social justice movements, social media educated and acculturated families of origin. In addition, many participants shared how helpful it was “coming out” or discussing their LGBTQ identities after family members had already seen other people “come out” online.

As Bronfenbrenner argues, the interaction of two or more systems containing a developing person is directly related to their development. AJ illustrates this dynamic in a story about transitioning:

My dad wasn't a homophobe, but he was definitely one of those, "I don't want this happening to my daughter" people.... [So] I actually waited until after a few of my friends—people he was friends with online as well—came out. They posted stories of stuff they had been through for being gay and pictures of their girlfriends. I noticed one day that he "liked" a few pictures that my friend posted [of her and her girlfriend]. One time, I remember he reposted a news post that my friend had shared about a girl getting jumped just for walking down the street with her girlfriend. He even changed his profile pic to be the HRC sign during the marriage equality stuff. I guess after all of that I took it as a sign that either he knew or just cared about gay rights. Either way, it gave me the courage to finally have a conversation with him.

Facebook gave AJ the opportunity to observe expressions of tolerant behavior in a safe environment. The connections between AJ's father and friends represent the kind of linking Ecological Systems Theory describes and, as discussed earlier, emphasize interacting systems outside of a developing individual that still influence the person's life.

As illustrated in AJ's example, experiences outside of an individual's immediate context continue to shape one's life. Bronfenbrenner's exosystem centers the importance of systems that are not directly influencing development, but continue to shape experiences. For example, public policies or social unrest have an indirect, yet profound influence on a developing individual. Jay provides an example of how an exosystem can be better understood by simply reading a Twitter feed:

You getta idea for how most people are feelin' about an issue or injustice just by going online and watching. People you don't even know going back and forth. You can see movie stars tweeting, your boss tweeting, even politicians tweeting. You see what's going viral and it gives you a feel for what's up in the world.

As Jay's comment discusses, participants shared that social networks provide a useful tool for examining public opinion on policies or social justice movements and, in turn, provided a clearer picture of the elements in Bronfenbrenner's exosystem.

For participants, watching material related to LGBTQ rights trend on the Internet and observing reactions among family, friends, schools, and workplace had an important impact. While they might have no direct involvement in this material, these posts directly shape not only their own lives, but also how the people that surround them see and treat them. Viral posts on social media can have an important impact for participants. When much online community advocacy occurs in response to injustices, participants can change their feelings about their experiences because of what they observe of their connections' cultural beliefs and ideals.

Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem, which incorporates the cultural context of beliefs and ideals and its relationship to an individual, applies to social networks. Throughout history, social scientists have used visual representations or artifacts as investigative tools to understand cultures better. Social networks provide a collection of these artifacts, along with quantifiable data as to their viewers and reception (for more a visual representation, reference Appendix D). While social media may not synthesize the overall beliefs of a current cultural context, participants describe

trending stories and posts online as a crucial representation of how a culture chooses to spend its time and, in turn, can clue observers in to the interacting elements of an individual to the macrosystem.

The final aspect of Bronfenbrenner's theory is the chronosystem, which represents the context of passing time. While some scholars argue that the Internet is a temporal, inherently contemporary tool that is not designed to sustain artifacts beyond the present moment, a close reading of a typical profile page may prove otherwise. Individuals have become acquiring agents of their social networks, collecting stories and experiences across their lifetimes, predating the Internet and social networks (for more a visual representation, reference Appendix E). This positions a profile page as a personally constructed, curated representation of how an individual develops across time. Users note historical events and developmental tasks in many forms—primarily through photos, events, and narrative postings. In his work, Bronfenbrenner stressed the importance of examining an individual's development in the context of time:

The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person; of the environment, both immediate and more remote, in which the processes are taking place; the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration; and the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996)

Each individual develops differently depending on the history of social context and cohort experience.

The platform of an individual's representation on social media has a universal, standardized format that is largely public and easily viewed. People record their history on social media and publicly share and record more than ever before. Participants in this study recorded their interactions, connections, and developmental milestones on social media platforms with active agency. They recorded and enthusiastically shared events across time that were important to them.

5.2.2 Cyberfeminism and Safe Spaces

The Internet represents a tool for global feminist organizing and an opportunity to be protagonists in their own revolution. For still others, the Internet offers a "safe space" and a way to not just survive, but also resist, repressive sex/gender regimes. (Daniels, 2009, p. 120)

While constructs of "feminism" vary greatly, most definitions center on the importance of supporting an open discourse on gender and sexual identities. Social networks provide a platform for discourse, and those with access to a computer and the Internet can share their stories and their standpoint (Collins, 2000). Many early cyberfeminists positioned the Internet as an opportunity for shifts in norms through supporting diverse identity development (Haraway, 1991). Other scholars consider how online interactions reinforce gendered and racial structures of privilege (Daniels, 2009). Some cyberfeminist researchers also suggest that the Internet reinforces and polices white, heterosexual hierarchies (Kendall, 2002).

Participants in this study underscored the centrality of power and privilege in their own experiences. More specifically, participants like Ty described resources tailored for white, gay men:

The majority of stuff online in the community is for gay men. I'm not too surprised; I mean they are still men even if they are gay men. I suppose it goes along with what's available in my neighborhood. The gayborhood here in Philly mostly caters to gay men. I would say, though, that there is a growing number of people online rallying and calling it out. I just started getting involved in bi-awareness day. I know it's a day, but it started as far as I know online, and now some of the organizations—the ones that have mostly catered to gay men—are having programs and events for bi-awareness. So I think that no matter what, there will always be unequal distributions of power. But the point is that now there is an opportunity to change it.

Fernandez, Wilding, and Wright (2002) challenge cyberfeminist practices and suggest parallels with early feminist works that narrowed the experiences of women to those of white, upper middle class, educated women. However, participants in this study stated that the Internet and, more specifically, online social networks provided an opportunity to seek and find recourses, experiences, and voices that resonated with their identities. Their experiences did not align with white, heterosexual, gender-conforming intersections.

Interestingly, social networks provided a safe space similar to the spaces Patricia Hill Collins noted as essential in her book, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990). Hill Collins asserts the importance of supporting the identities and “safe spaces” of black women. Furthermore, Hill Collins suggests outlets such as music and writing

provide an opportunity for black women to share experiences relating to their unique identities in a safe and supportive environment. Social networks provide similar, less traditional safe spaces through more contemporary forms of collecting and sharing experiences. People in the LGBTQ community have a need for safe spaces to fight social inequities, just as Hill Collins asserts.

5.3 Significance of Results

The themes that emerged from this study related most directly to the role of LGBTQ identity visibility as a form of support. More specifically, participants conceptualized support as an individual's connection to shared experiences, shared LGBTQ identities, and shared interest in social justice movements. The emphasis on online visibility permeated every domain of this work.

These results suggest the overall importance of sharing LGBTQ identity online. Indeed, participants considered online visibility of this identity as central to their experience on social media and central to their interest in precipitating social change, online and off. Matty's comments suggest the importance of this presentation:

After hearing about all those suicides, I just wanted to just give up. I was so tired of being beaten down, ignored, going unnoticed, and it made me so sad to think about those kids going through the same thing.... Then those "It Gets Better" videos started going around. Some of the stories were similar to mine, but they also made me start thinking about how I could actually help kids that were like me.... I made a video and posted it on YouTube. I think I had about 600 views. It made me feel hopeful, and I hope it made at least one of those 600 people feel it, too.

Matty's comments about his experience of discrimination illustrate the importance of visibility of shared identities in the LGBTQ community online. Social networks provided participants with a space to validate each other's identities.

5.4 Research Questions

This research explored whether supports and communities are available for the LGBTQ community in the virtual worlds; whether these supports provided a buffer to the bullying, abuse, and violence for the LGBTQ community; how these online resources form kinships, partnerships, and bonds that can be conceptualized as chosen families; and differences based on age and generation in the LGBTQ community in the experience of these supports.

Participants stated that they utilized online supports and formed communities directly related to their LGBTQ identity. Some participants noted that prior to coming out in their families of origin or to in-person friends, social networks were their only form of support. For most, these resources facilitated their "coming out." While all the participants in this study had experienced bullying, discrimination, abuse, and/or violence based on their LGBTQ identity, only a few commented on the role of social networks when seeking help.

The results of this research mirror similar family scholarship relating to fluid and inclusive definitions of families. Participants' definitions of families and

communities were as diverse as the participants themselves, and they emphasized the importance of fluid definitions of “family” and “community.” All too often, social norms and constructs shape how we study families. Such norms and expectations have been used to validate discrimination, abuse, and violence perpetrated against the LGBTQ community. The participants in this study embraced other sources of legitimacy and families, and social networks provided opportunities to construct larger, more inclusive families and communities.

Kinship relations, partnerships, and bonds formed online by sharing experiences of LGBTQ identity became alternative constructs of families and communities. These alternative constructs were identified through the definitions participants shared in this investigation and the examples that were provided. All participants in this study reported that definitions of families and communities were not tied to blood or physical presence. Most attributed the need for alternative constructs to experiences relating to their gender or sexual identity. Furthermore, most participants claimed that their definitions of families and communities were not only less tied to families of origin, but incorporated exchanges and relationships online. Moreover, these constructs did not require the time or stability that functions of families and communities have historically maintained. Families have traditionally been associated with relationships that are maintained for extended periods of time, yet Dani provides an alternative look at family as it relates to stability and time:

If I defined family by time or stability, I wouldn't have one. The family I was born into didn't stick around, and my friends are changing as I change, so I have to make my definitions of family do the same.

As Dani noted, many people in the LGBTQ community have to create alternative constructs of families in order to have one. Dani's family of origin did not stick around after she transitioned. While she searched for and claimed new relationships she labeled as family, she simultaneously let go of expectations of longevity or stability. As discussed earlier, the idea of new formations of families is by no means new. However, today young people are developing in a growing, fast-paced, technological context, presenting new opportunities for connections. New opportunities for alternative constructs of families and communities are also developing simultaneously. For instance, Tommy provided an additional perspective on stability in communities and interchangeable relationships:

My relationships online come and go. I could be back and forth with someone about something I'm going through, [and] then never talk to them again. So maybe you could say that I can't count on anyone online, but I would argue that I know there's always going to be SOMEONE in my community online, no matter where I am in life, so THAT I know I can count on.

In the context of life cycle, the participants in this study shared online relationships, supports, and exchanges differently across their lives, as Tommy noted. More specifically, older participants in this study commented on the differences of quality of relationships and the richness of historical movements, while younger

participants commented on the efficiency of advocacy online and the ability to reach greater numbers in a growing technological world.

Contemporary research of the prevalence of bullying, discrimination, and violence that members of the LGBTQ community face emphasizes the importance of effective spaces of support. The complexity of studying how growing technological connections incorporate individual, community, and advocacy movements as they relate to LGBTQ identity underscores the need for continued investigation. It also provides a notable opportunity to build upon original research on chosen families, identity, community development, and social support.

5.5 Limitations, Strengths, and Implications for Research

Due to the qualitative nature of the work, this study was limited in size and scope; the LGBTQ community is a large, diverse group. The results, therefore, may not be generalizable to the dynamic LGBTQ community in general. The sample also had an overrepresentation, with five participants who identify as lesbians and only three identifying as gay. It is equally important to note that one participant identified as “straight,” while also identifying as trans*. Future studies utilizing methodologies capturing a larger, less bounded sample of the diverse and unique sexual and gender identities in the LGBTQ community may reveal more nuanced findings and more specific interactions and supports online for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or trans*.

In addition, while this study noted the self-reported social networking sites participants typically used, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, it did not fully examine the differences within each social network platform and the supports they provide. Future work might investigate, more specifically, the complex nature of sexual and gender identities in relation to social media participation and what specific elements on each platform are helpful and supportive. Further investigation, incorporating a quantitative analysis of each social network platform based on these qualitative findings, may provide a clearer understanding of the unique ways each network supports people in the LGBTQ community.

Participants in this study emphasized the importance of their smartphones when seeking and giving support on social networks. While smartphones may play an integral part in social networks' recoding of developmental milestones, historical artifacts, cultural trends, and social network connections, there is an overwhelming need to understand the role of the smartphone itself in these supports. Future research would benefit from investigating the smartphone more specifically. How does it relate to social connectedness, social supports, and the mobility of families and communities? What is its role in advocacy? How will it shape our future relationships?

This study was a first step in the exploration of the breadth of LGBTQ experience in social media. Future research might focus on how just one social network among Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram shapes the LGBTQ community's experiences in support, identity, and equality. While participants in this

study noted specific social networks and their role in support, the results of a study of this size and scope cannot provide a nuanced understanding of the specific strengths and weakness of each social network used. Further investigation would provide an opportunity to identify the supportive elements of each site and how they benefit the LGBTQ community online. Indeed, a more detailed understanding of the supports that help fight bullying, abuse, discrimination, and violence is vital, given incidence rates and attending risks.

5.6 Implications for Policy and Practice

This study provides a framework to understand the unique and accessible connections of people in the LGBTQ community. The participants in this study tell stories, not only through their interviews, but also in many shapes and forms online. The nature of these social networks increases the visibility of these stories. When individuals share and tag, they expand the audience of their rich and diverse stories. The opportunity to explore an individual's development, as told by the individual, across time and space provides opportunities for policymakers to ground programs in real experiences told by real people. Social networks can compel policymakers to "listen" to a larger community and hear more representative "voices." Policy development and evaluation can also be more inclusive when policymakers seek input online.

Participants in this study stressed that online storytelling created a more inclusive discourse on equality. This finding can be specifically applied to the

development of policies and program evaluation. For example, when the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) connected with the LGBTQ community on social networks in the midst of the marriage equality movement, all the participants in this study changed their profile picture to its logo. Most stated that the majority of their friends and families did so as well. All participants felt that such expressions of support would have a direct effect on local and federal policy reform. They also believed online action would expose policymakers to their voices and the overwhelming citizen support for marriage equality. Most participants credited speedy shifts in legalization of same sex marriage to the visibility of support online.

This study provides empirical support that people may construct and visibly represent the notion of families in many different ways, online and off. The fact that some participants stated that organizations can “misuse” the term family for profit suggests the need for further investigation of online organizations claiming and using the imagery of family for financial gain.

Policymakers and mental health practitioners will benefit from understanding how relationships develop in a growing technological world. The experiences this study investigates give a glimpse of the countless connections that shape our everyday lives. As Bronfenbrenner suggested, full understanding of human development requires an understanding of the interacting systems that support individuals as they grow. Social networks provide a window into these systems, through publicly shared profiles with endless online exchanges. The increasing amount of time people spend

online suggests the importance of the quantity and quality of these exchanges and how they shape our understanding of the familial and communal relationships we have historically valued most.

Future researchers will build on our current understanding of the utility of social network platforms on community development, providing a more inclusive evaluation of programs, policies, and resources that best serve specific communities. For example, while current government programs are slowly adapting to the demand for online interfaces, social networks could provide a space where these services and interfaces could be evaluated and assessed by the populations they serve. Looking specifically at the LGBTQ community, the trans* community in particular is calling for more support, allies, and education; this is a movement that has begun online and is growing. Smaller social network programs are beginning to branch off and develop supports specific to gender and sexual identity, such as online suicide prevention programs for the LGBTQ community that serve individuals around the world. For a community that can be isolated, bullied, and abused, the accessibility of these online resources is crucial.

For LGBTQ individuals, family of origin itself can be a place of isolation and danger. Social networks provide an alternative for people to reach outside their families to others who share their experiences and identities. Future studies may provide a clearer understanding of the value of these connections by comparing them to individuals' connections with their family of origin, physical friendships, local community, educational systems, and community resources.

Future research may also look specifically at how people in the LGBTQ community construct ideas of family, community, and advocacy online across social, cultural, political, and historical timeframes (Hareven, 2000). By incorporating a longitudinal qualitative model and using a life-course perspective, future studies may shed additional light on similarities and differences across ages and cohorts. An analysis of how these exchanges vary across time will allow future studies to explore on- and offline exchanges at the time of various life transitions, such as coming out, partnering, marrying, having children, losing one's parents, becoming middle-aged, and becoming senior. This qualitative work could strengthen quantitative methods that compare the frequency of social media exchanges on social networks, on smartphones, and in person to illuminate the tools used most in connections between family, friends, and community members.

Participants in this study noted the role social networks played in supporting their families of origin. Some participants said that their parents, in particular, went online when they were struggling with accepting a child's sexual and/or gender identity and that social networks provided important support and education. This is an under-researched area; further exploration would contribute to a better understanding of how LGBTQ people's families of origin find and use support.

5.7 Contributions of this Study

Larger society marginalizes the LGBTQ population, and research attention to it reflects this. This study and related studies reveal how the Internet provides support

and validation for a marginalized population. It reveals how that support and validation can be self-affirming and result in a sense of empowerment and advocacy for social change.

Social networks have provided a space where we find examples of families shifting in and out of public and private realms. Participants in this study noted that they had come out, or described their experiences of discrimination, or shared other private information related to their gender and/or sexual identity publicly on social networks in an effort to support others similar to them. This contemporary phenomenon provides an additional area of opportunity for family scholars to explore the private experiences of other families in a once inaccessible public sphere.

Family scholars (see, for example, Osmand, 1987) have described families as a network of personal relations. This study takes this understanding to its logical conclusion in relation to the growing and changing relationships that take place on social networks and how they contribute to symbols of families, communities, and human development. It provides groundwork for future investigations to expand the understanding of LGBTQ community exchanges and supports online. Too often, research has positioned social networks as a side effect of a growing technological world, without noting the space it provides people to share their voice. This process is salient to social science research. Moreover, the results of this study illuminate the need to understand what exchanges on social networks work to share and prevent the

disproportionate experiences of bullying, abuse, violence, and discrimination in the LGBTQ community.

Family scholars have examined social change in relation to many different groups. In many ways, the struggle for equality for the LGBTQ community parallels that of the civil rights movement, women's rights movement, and the debate regarding rigid definitions of family (Burn, 2005; Patterson, 2006). However, the swiftness of social changes relating to the LGBTQ community also parallel the fast pace of today's technological movement. The majority of participants in this study perceived and attributed swift social change in the LGBTQ community, and the wider world, to exchanges on social networks. Further investigation may provide family scholars with a better understanding of digital advocacy in general and how families can best advocate for their loved ones online.

In summation, this study is a collection of the stories and experiences of seventeen participants and one investigator. The number of exchanges incorporated in this work between people, families, friends, and communities were countless, as are the opportunities of support on social networks. These networks are powered by people. Therefore, by positioning these online exchanges as a window into a better understanding of families and communities, especially in times of need, this study not only contributes to the field of human development and family studies, but also helps empower the voices that social networks represent in both the physical and virtual worlds, regardless of sexual or gender identity.

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Appendix A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

IDENTITY

1. Do you identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, a person in gender transition, or queer?
2. Are you out/open about this/these identities online?
3. Are you out/open about this/these identities offline?
4. Do you think being out/open about this/these identities is any easier or more difficult online?
 - a. Please explain and give an example, if possible.
5. Are you more open about this/these identities on social networks?
6. Are you more open about this/these identities in your physical world?

INVOLVEMENT

7. Are you involved with people, places, organizations, or social movements specifically because of your LGBTQ identity online?
 - a. Please list the organizations you are involved with that you feel are directly related to your LGBTQ identity.

8. Would you describe your involvement with people, places, organizations, or social movements specific to this identity as primarily online, in person, or both?
9. How do you gauge your involvement? Through liking on a social network? By following? Adding comments to posts? By sharing posts? By sharing events on your page? By sharing blogs? By connecting through hashtags? Other?
10. Do you feel an increased level of involvement from others when they “like” your posts?
11. How would you gauge your involvement offline?

SUPPORT

12. Over the past five years, do you think supports and resources for people who identify as part of the LGBTQ community have changed?
13. Do you feel that the growth of social networks has played a role in this?
14. What part do you think technology and social networks have played in the lives of people specifically relating to their LGBTQ identity?
15. What part do you think technology and social networks have played in YOUR LIFE, specifically relating to your LGBTQ identity?
 - a. Is there a specific piece of technology or social networks that you think has had a stronger role than others?

16. How do you think social networks have provided support for people in the LGBTQ community when it comes to facing and combating discrimination?
17. How do you think social networks have provided support for people in the LGBTQ community when it comes to facing and combating violence?
18. How do you think social networks have provided support for people in the LGBTQ community when it comes to facing and combating bullying?
19. What specific social networks do you feel provide the most support or resources for people that identify as part of the LGBTQ community?
20. What makes these social network sites more useful than others for the LGBTQ community?

INTERSECTIONALITY

21. Are there specific parts of your identity that you feel directly affect your actions and relationships on social network pages? (i.e., Race? Class? Education? Gender? Age? Sexual Orientation? Abilities?)
22. Is there a specific identity or community—lesbian, gay, bisexual, person experiencing gender transition, or queer—that has more support online?
23. Is there an additional online community—lesbian, gay, bisexual, person experiencing gender transition, or queer—where you seek additional support?

FAMILY

24. How would you define family?
25. What functions does this idea of family serve?
26. How does your definition of family relate to your identity in the LGBTQ community?
27. How do the pictures you share online relate to your definition of family?
28. Do you consider people, groups, and/or organizations part of your family?
 - a. If so, what people, groups, and/or organizations online do you consider part of your family?
 - b. What specific functions do these people, groups, and/or organizations serve, and how do they relate to your idea of family?
29. How influential is your family of origin on your everyday activities and actions?
30. How informed are people, groups, and organizations in your everyday activities and actions due to your postings and sharing online?
31. Do you think relationships with your family of origin are more stable than online relationships?
 - a. What part of online sharing plays a role in this information?
32. What role does the idea of stability play in your definition of family?

HISTORICAL LOOK AT EQUALITY, ADVOCACY, AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

33. Has the LGBTQ community changed in regards to equality?
 - a. What role have social networks played in this?
34. How do you think we could provide more support online for LGBTQ individuals?
35. How do you think we could provide more support online for LGBTQ youths?
36. How do you think we could provide more support online for the aging population in the LGBTQ community?
37. How have social networks changed the experience of LGBTQ individuals in our country?
38. How have social networks changed the experience of LGBTQ individuals globally?

Appendix B

ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THEME 1 AND SUBTHEMES

Microsystems		
Theme 1	Social networks reshape concepts of family, kin relations, and community for people who identify as LGBTQ.	Families and friends use social networks to reach out for support, rally, share their experiences, and demand changes.
Subtheme 1A	Safe Spaces for Voice	Participants find a space to voice experiences of bullying, silence, and discrimination with a safe group of friends and family online.
Subtheme 1B	Storytelling as Advocacy	Family and friends become more accepting as they see stories shared by participants and other people in the LGBTQ community.
Subtheme 1C	Community Mobilization	Through social networks, friends, families, and communities are swiftly mobilized in the face of injustice.

Mesosystems		
Theme 1	Social networks reshape concepts of family, kin relations, and community for people who identify as LGBTQ.	Families, friends, and schools connect with each other to grow communities of support.
Subtheme 1A	Safe Spaces for Voice	Voices calling to fight bullying, discrimination, and abuse spread through participants and are exchanged between friends, families, and local communities.
Subtheme 1B	Storytelling as Advocacy	Family, friends, schools, and local communities share stories of LGBTQ inequalities between each other and become more active allies.
Subtheme 1C	Community Mobilization	A growing number of allies share posts and rally to support due to visibility.

Exosystems		
Theme 1	Social networks reshape concepts of family, kin relations, and community for people who identify as LGBTQ.	Educational, political, and religious systems shift as social justice movements for the LGBTQ community grow online.
Subtheme 1A	Safe Spaces for Voice	Educational, political, and religious systems take note of voices and begin to shift norms.
Subtheme 1B	Storytelling as Advocacy	Educational, political, and religious systems see more stories from posts and shares and begin to make change.
Subtheme 1C	Community Mobilization	Educational, political, and religious systems witness mobilized communities regardless of the LGBTQ community's physical presence.

Macrosystems		
Theme 1	Social networks reshape concepts of family, kin relations, and community for people who identify as LGBTQ.	Values and beliefs shift as more peoples and systems work towards equality online.
Subtheme 1A	Safe Spaces for Voice	Values and beliefs shift as a whole when interacting systems exchange growing voices, sharing experiences of injustices.
Subtheme 1B	Storytelling as Advocacy	Discriminatory values and beliefs are challenged by stories of hate, abuse, voice, bullying, and discrimination.
Subtheme 1C	Community Mobilization	Values and beliefs change as growing numbers of community members mobilize.

Chronosystems		
Theme 1	Social networks reshape concepts of family, kin relations, and community for people who identify as LGBTQ.	Time is documented, detailing these shifts in systems.
Subtheme 1A	Safe Spaces for Voice	Voices that once shared experiences of bullying, abuse, and discrimination begin to share voices of hope for younger generations.
Subtheme 1B	Storytelling as Advocacy	Stories are documented across time and used as historical and cultural markers of change.
Subtheme 1C	Community Mobilization	Community mobilization grows faster over time, but with more scattered participation (discussed on Theme 4).

Appendix C

ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THEME 2 AND SUBTHEMES

Microsystems		
Theme 2	An inclusive discourse on LGBTQ equality develops, based on visibility and accessibility.	Participants felt that they had an opportunity to voice their specific experiences of bullying, violence, and abuse to their selected friends and family.
Subtheme 2A	More Inclusive Conversations	Participants shared that social networks created an opportunity to have a stronger role in the conversations regarding policy changes and fighting against discrimination, abuse, and bullying.
Subtheme 2B	Visibility	Participants shared that identities more visible online created more of an impact on equality.
Subtheme 2C	Accessibility	Participants shared that social networks made their interactions more accessible, and they were able to refine interactions online to primarily safe in relation to their LGBTQ identity.

Mesosystems		
Theme 2	An inclusive discourse on LGBTQ equality develops, based on visibility and accessibility.	Allies share their own perspectives on equality and the fight for equality on social network pages.
Subtheme 2A	More Inclusive Conversations	Participants noted that social networks created more of an opportunity to see diverse perspectives in a safe space. Participants felt more educated on the people, groups, and organizations that were part of the “equality resistance.”
Subtheme 2B	Visibility	Family, friends, and participants’ communities interacted differently and advocated more visibly online when an identity and social justice movement was visible or “popular” online.
Subtheme 2C	Accessibility	Access to friends, family, and community outside of participants’ immediate physical spaces led them to feel less isolated and more supported.

Exosystems		
Theme 2	An inclusive discourse on LGBTQ equality develops, based on visibility and accessibility.	The media, educational, political, and religious systems began to incorporate the perspectives of people in the community when determining their own policies and structures.
Subtheme 2A	More Inclusive Conversations	Organizations and structures connected to individuals, families, and communities were exposed to perspectives as it related to their policies and actions (in relation to discrimination in the LGBTQ community).
Subtheme 2B	Visibility	The educational, political, and religious systems took note of what conversations were most visible online and slowly made policy changes in relation to “popular” movements online.
Subtheme 2C	Accessibility	Social networks provided an opportunity to access and connect with LGBTQ organizations that were not in participants’ physical locations.

Macrosystems		
Theme 2	An inclusive discourse on LGBTQ equality develops, based on visibility and accessibility.	Values and beliefs about equality were not defined by a select view, but an interacting system of people, communities, and organizations.
Subtheme 2A	More Inclusive Conversations	Social networks provided an opportunity for dialogue, incorporating a more representative sample of diverse beliefs and values.
Subtheme 2B	Visibility	The perception of participants' friends' and families' overarching beliefs and values began to shift in direct relation to what families and friends saw online.
Subtheme 2C	Accessibility	Participants noted feeling less limited to the ideas and beliefs in their immediate physical space by having access to other, more supportive spaces online.

Chronosystems		
Theme 2	An inclusive discourse on LGBTQ equality develops, based on visibility and accessibility.	Over time, these conversations began to slowly incorporate groups in the LGBTQ community, such as the trans* and queer communities, to create a more inclusive conversation on what changes need to be made.
Subtheme 2A	More Inclusive Conversations	Participants noted that beliefs and values represented online seemed to shift quicker with the creation of social media.
Subtheme 2B	Visibility	Participants noted that over time visibility builds upon itself. Social networks documented who is visible, which lent to opportunity for other groups to become more visible.
Subtheme 2C	Accessibility	Accessibility to social networks has changed significantly online. In addition, social networks have lead to increased access to participants' families, friends, communities, and organizations over time.

Appendix D

ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THEME 3 AND SUBTHEMES

Microsystems		
Theme 3	Social networking is a tool for social change.	Participants described social networks as a space to shape and explore their own identities and share them with their family, friends, and community.
Subtheme 3A	Time and Space Constructs of Family and Home	Participants noted that their family, friends, and community were not tied to physical location or time.
Subtheme 3B	Community	Participants noted that social networks provided a space where community members were easily identified and allowed for family and friends to recognize that participants were “not alone” in gender/sexual identity.
Subtheme 3C	Media Shaping Beliefs and Values	Social networks were positioned as influential in how participants felt about their relationships with friends, family, and community.

Mesosystems		
Theme 3	Social networking is a tool for social change.	As a result of work done by others, participants began to feel safe and more supportive in different spaces.
Subtheme 3A	Time and Space Constructs of Family and Home	Through the interaction between people in the LGBTQ community, safe spaces for people to go and be themselves were identified and shared online.
Subtheme 3B	Community	Some participants viewed increased exchanges between family and LGBTQ community resources online.
Subtheme 3C	Media Shaping Beliefs and Values	Social media shaped the interactions of participants' friends and families and, in turn, shaped how participants were treated.

Exosystems		
Theme 3	Social networking is a tool for social change.	Educational, political, and religious systems were more visible in daily life of participants online.
Subtheme 3A	Time and Space Constructs of Family and Home	Organizations and institutions were representations of family and community for some. Campaigns like the HRC allowed participants to be a part of something that was not in their physical location, but was significant to their definitions of family.
Subtheme 3B	Community	Participants noted the importance of educational and spiritual organizations linking with LGBTQ community advocacy online.
Subtheme 3C	Media Shaping Beliefs and Values	Some educational, political, and religious organizations refined missions and values based on collective voices shared on social networks.

Macrosystems		
Theme 3	Social networking is a tool for social change.	Participants shared that ideas and beliefs were being shaped by social network interactions.
Subtheme 3A	Time and Space Constructs of Family and Home	Beliefs and values of family and home changed. Through sharing online, many people redefined more traditional definitions of family to include LGBTQ partnerships. In addition, social networks changed the beliefs and values of home, in that it is possible to move and travel and still be connected to home.
Subtheme 3B	Community	Participants noted “trending” in social justice movements shaping LGBTQ community advocacy.
Subtheme 3C	Media Shaping Beliefs and Values	Social networks included written and visual representations of values and beliefs of people that participated in them. While values and beliefs are subject to interpretation, connections with friends, communities, and organizations online became a symbol for shared values and beliefs.

Chronosystems		
Theme 3	Social networking is a tool for social change.	Social networks were presenting documented accounts of changes in exchanges and norms online in families, friends, communities, organizations, and political systems as they relate to equality in the LGBTQ community.
Subtheme 3A	Time and Space Constructs of Family and Home	Participants noted an emphasis on immediate gratifications of family and home constructs. Participants wanted to immediately connect with family, friends, and community on social networks.
Subtheme 3B	Community	Over time, participants noted “trending” social justice movements mirror changing public policy.
Subtheme 3C	Media Shaping Beliefs and Values	Over time, social networks connected with more traditional definitions of “media,” such as TV, film, and advertising. Social networks also have linked and recoded forms of media in relation to people. For example, Netflix shared on Facebook or advertisements tailored to identities on your profile.

Appendix E

ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THEME 4 AND SUBTHEMES

Microsystems		
Theme 4	Social Networks and Generational Integration Among LGBTQ	Participants noted an increase in social network use in older generations' participation online in their families, friends, and communities.
Subtheme 4A	Multitasking Advocacy	Participants noted the ability to work on several different causes with families, friends, and communities online
Subtheme 4B	Online Organizing Tied to Younger Generations	Most participants shared the belief that while people across all ages participate on social networks, there is a separation of participation, meaning older people are on Facebook and younger people are on blogging sites such as Tumblr. This shaped how each generation participated in online advocacy.
Subtheme 4C	Gaps in Awareness of Social Justice Movements in History	Participants shared exchanges online between friends, families, and communities being a part of social justice movements. However, some participants shared a concern for the recognition of similar exchanges offline prior to social networks that laid the foundation for the work towards equality.

Mesosystems		
Theme 4	Social Networks and Generational Integration Among LGBTQ	Some participants shared a concern in not “hearing” conversations outside of the exchanges online in older generations between participants’ families, friends, and communities.
Subtheme 4A	Multitasking Advocacy	Participants’ friends, families, and communities participating in many social “movements” outside of the participants’ areas of interest. However, these movements became part of the participants’ work towards equality on social networks.
Subtheme 4B	Online Organizing Tied to Younger Generations	Participants in this study stated that the majority of interactions between families, friends, and communities online were grouped according to age. Therefore, older people in their families connected with older people on the social network and so on. Simply put, while social networks incorporated exchanges between all ages, participants stated that the majority of advocacy work was done in age groups with younger people being part of more online work and older people being tied to more administrative work.
Subtheme 4C	Gaps in Awareness of Social Justice Movements in History	Participants expressed a perspective positioning social networks as part of an egocentric culture in advocacy. People were only recognizing the work they were participating in or witnessed online. Exchanges outside of these interactions were seen as less important or valid.

Exosystems		
Theme 4	Social Networks and Generational Integration Among LGBTQ	Participants shared generational differences in working towards equality and advocacy in political, educational, and religious systems.
Subtheme 4A	Multitasking Advocacy	Educational, political, and religious organizations connected online to support each other's causes while simultaneously promoting and working towards their own. Participants noted that younger people were tied to these connections, while older people were tied to administration.
Subtheme 4B	Online Organizing Tied to Younger Generations	Participants identified as part of the "younger generations" labeled themselves as active online advocates in LGBTQ organizations and institutions.
Subtheme 4C	Gaps in Awareness of Social Justice Movements in History	Political, social, and educational systems working in present day conversations in equality have not recognized the complex and oppressive systems they represented in the past and, in turn, do not teach the younger generations about them.

Macrosystems		
Theme 4	Social Networks and Generational Integration Among LGBTQ	
Subtheme 4A	Multitasking Advocacy	Generational differences appeared in how beliefs and values were shared and worked towards. Younger generations believed in connecting all movements under beliefs and values, while older generations believed in working towards one or two movements that were part of a belief or value system.
Subtheme 4B	Online Organizing Tied to Younger Generations	Beliefs in values on the most effective tools of advocacy vary depending on age.
Subtheme 4C	Gaps in Awareness of Social Justice Movements in History	Ideas and beliefs regarding who is working for change is focused on visible present-day interactions and often exclude social justice work done by older generations in the LGBTQ community.

Chronosystems		
Theme 4	Social Networks and Generational Integration Among LGBTQ	Some participants shared that shifts in equality and public policy have been taken out of the historical context. A lack of acknowledgement to advocates across time has led to the opportunity for change in present day.
Subtheme 4A	Multitasking Advocacy	Participants looked at advocacy differently depending on age. Some younger participants shared that it is possible to be a part of many movements for any period of time, while older participants valued longevity and identified with only one or two “movements” or focus.
Subtheme 4B	Online Organizing Tied to Younger Generations	Over time, more people are involved in online organizing and advocacy across all ages, but the power of change seems to be allocated in different ways. For example, younger people are beginning the work on conversations, while older generations are the ones in the powerful decision-making process as it related to institutional change.
Subtheme 4C	Gaps in Awareness of Social Justice Movements in History	Political, social, and educational systems working in present day conversations in equality have not recognized the complex and oppressive systems they represented in the past and, in turn, do not teach the younger generations about them.

Appendix F

EXCERPT FROM THE REFLEXIVE JOURNAL TUMBLR PAGE

Framework Provided by Mauthner (2003)

- (a) Who are the people involved in and affected by the ethical dilemma raised in the research?

I want to learn more about the experiences of people that identify as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and trans* communities online. I am hoping to better understand if social networks, like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram, help people in the community connect when faced with bullying, abuse, violence, and discrimination. I want to emphasize the importance of my awareness of the significant distinctions and fluidity in each letter of the “umbrella” term LGBTQ. I am also aware of the many identities this letter group may not accurately represent. While understanding the distinctions and limitations is outside of the limits of this study, I hope to one day contribute to a better understanding of more specific intersectional identities in the LGBTQ community as it related to online supports.

- (b) What is the context for the dilemma in terms of the specific topic of the research and the issues it raises personally and socially for those involved?

I feel that my own gender and sexual identity is an integral part of my personal and social development and because of this, any act of bullying, discrimination, abuse, or violence against people that share a piece of my gender or sexual identity is also a threat to my own positive development. I also believe that it is my responsibility to better understand how other people in my community cope on interacting personal and social levels.

(c) What are the specific social and personal locations of the people involved in relation to each other?

As mentioned, LGBTQ is a limited umbrella term for diverse and fluid identities, and each identity holds a social location specific to gender, race, ethnicity, economic, educational “locations,” and privileges. Therefore, I cannot speculate on the unique standpoint of each; however, I hope to provide a space for participants to share their experiences based on these identities.

(d) What are the needs of those involved, and how are they interrelated?

I believe people in this study need what every other human needs as social animals: to be loved, supported, validated, connected, and accepted for who they truly are. This study looks specifically at how these needs are supported online.

(e) Who am I identifying with, who am I posing as, and why?

A complicated issue, as I mentioned earlier, is I believe gender and sexual identity is a fluid and ever-changing construct. However, I must recognize that my social location as a “white” woman in academia pursuing a Ph.D. positions me as an “expert” in some area of emphasis in this study. However, I want to emphasize that although I carry privilege based on my race and educational status, I by all means embrace the position of expert and incorporate a feminist position of collaborative non-hierarchical learning here. Simply put, I am learning from my participants and other online interactions and, in turn, I hope they can also learn from the information I collected.

In addition, I identify as part of the queer community, which is one of the reasons this area of study is important to me. However, I must recognize and share the privileges I carry that exist within the queer community itself, such as being cisgendered, ascribing to more traditional ideas of gender presentation, and my current partnership with a man. While these pieces of my identity and experiences do not solely make up my queer identity, I do feel it is important to recognize these privileges and locations, which in turn may influence the interpretations that emerge from the experiences you share in this study.

(f) What is the balance of personal and social power between those involved?

I am hoping that the Internet and social networks provide a unique opportunity for more equal and accessible personal and social interactions in the LGBTQ community; however, I will continue to explore power’s role in social network connections. I have

noted, through my own experiences on social networks, the emphasis on “gay” community resources in comparison to other identities. However, I hope to better understand what communities have more and less access to online resources, connections, and advocacy.

- (g) How will those involved understand our actions, and are these in balance with our judgment about our own practice?

My goal is for this reflexive journal to provide a platform for private, anonymous discussions between participants and myself, to balance my own perceptions and research practices in order to maintain the true meanings and experiences shared by participants.

- (h) How can we best communicate the ethical dilemmas to those involved, give them room to raise their views, and negotiate with and between them?

This reflective journal, in addition to the private messaging linked to this journal, creates an opportunity for communication and dialogue between participants and investigator.

- (i) How will our actions affect relationships between the people involved?

All participants in this study are anonymous; however, the nature of processing any actions, in an interview or by simply participating in a study, may change the process’ course. However, I hope that my observations in the end provide a better awareness of

how the relationships of the people involved in this study and in the LGBTQ community connect and support each other in an effort to fight against bullying, discrimination, violence, and abuse.

Appendix G

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPANTS

LGBTQ Social Network Families and Communities: An Exploratory Study of Online Support Systems

CONSENT FORM

You are asked to participate in a research study on a more inclusive definition of “family” among people who identify as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transitioning, bisexual, and queer community.

The Purpose of this Study is to:

Explore virtual support systems and online resources available for individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQ community in order to gain a more inclusive understanding of definitions and meanings of “family” through interviews and observations of approximately 20 people between the ages of 21 and older.

Your Participation in this Study will Involve:

Answering an online questionnaire about your identity as part of the LGBTQ community as it relates to relationships and supports online.

Being “friended” by the researcher for 30 days, therefore allowing your social network activities to be observed.

You will have access to an online “journal” that logs the researcher’s perspectives in these 30 days. This log will never consist of details of your name or online activities and all participants in this study, approximately 20 people, will have access to this blog/log.

What are the Possible Risks and Discomforts?

By participating in this study, you are identifying openly as part of the LGBTQ community and have access to a blog that will be shared with other LGBTQ participants,

In order to minimize any risks associated with sharing your participation in the project’s online journal, you will have the opportunity to choose a fictional name to maximize your confidentiality and comfort level.

The Potential Benefits of this Study Include:

Gaining a clear picture of online support systems in an attempt to strengthen existing resources and call for additional online supports for the LGBTQ community.

Provide a more diverse and inclusive perspective on the benefits and uses of new technologies and online communities.

Discover useful online tools and resources for people who may be at an increased risk of experiencing isolation, discrimination, violence, and rejection by traditional families and communities based on LGBTQ identities.

Create a more inclusive and accessible conversation about meanings and functions of “families.”

To Ensure Confidentiality:

Your name will be stored separately from your interview data and the researcher’s log.

Only the researcher and their advisor will be informed of your identity.

All of your information will be stored in a safe and confidential locked cabinet on campus at the University of Delaware, and the electronic data will be password protected. All data will be stored for three years following the completion of this project and destroyed through paper shredding and deletion of online material at the end of this time period.

Information gathered from you and other participants will be used in a written report, read by the researcher’s advisor and committee members, and published in a professional journal. Your name will not be used, and a fictitious name will be provided in any presentation or publication.

You have a right at any time to withdraw from this study. If you chose to withdraw at any time, all of your information will be destroyed. Please feel free to contact the researcher or any additional research team members at any point with questions or concerns regarding the nature of the study. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Institutional Review Board at University of Delaware Chair, Institutional Review Board, 210 Hullihen Hall, University of Delaware Newark, DE 19716, (302) 831-2137. Thank you again for your consideration and time.

By signing below, I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information. I am aware I can discontinue my participation in the study at any point.

Signature _____ Date _____

If you have any questions regarding the nature of this study, please contact:
Melina McConatha
Principal Investigator
Human Development and Family Studies

University of Delaware
Phone: 610.202.4290
melinamconatha@gmail.com

Advisor:
Dr. Bahira Sherif Trask
Professor, Associate Chair
Department of Human Development and Family Studies
216 Alison Hall West, Newark, DE 19716
Phone: 302.831.8187

Appendix H

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE IRB APPROVAL LETTER



RESEARCH OFFICE

210 Hullihen Hall
University of Delaware
Newark, Delaware 19716-1551
Ph: 302/831-2136
Fax: 302/831-2828

DATE: May 22, 2013

TO: Melina McConatha (Rosle), MSW
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: [440319-1] LGTBQ Social Network Families and Communities: An Exploratory Study of Online Support Systems

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: May 22, 2013
EXPIRATION DATE: May 21, 2014
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Please report all NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this study to this office.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years.

Based on the risks, this project requires Continuing Review by this office on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate renewal forms for this procedure.