POSITIVE SPACES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ASSESSMENT OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE
INTERNET ON LGBT IDENTITY

by

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ABSTRACT

POSITIVE SPACES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ASSESSMENT OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE INTERNET ON LGBT IDENTITY

Amanda Lynn Lawson Cullen

My research involved assessing the influence of the Internet on identity formation and expression for individuals who identify as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender), as well as identifying people, things, and places, virtual and actual, that LGBT individuals feel are necessary to promote well-being in their lives. The research focused on the results of a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in Pensacola, Florida, as well as interviews conducted online, with young LGBT residents of the Southeastern United States. In addition, I engaged in participant observation in a segment of the LGBT community on Tumblr.com, demonstrating how activities on Tumblr can be understood in terms of social capital. Through the testimonies of the interviewees, as well as the participant observation on Tumblr, I developed an awareness of how important the Internet can be for young LGBT people and the expression of their identities despite some of the difficulties that may exist in online environments.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has a reputation for being a safe haven or a refuge for individuals who are discriminated against or possess minority identities. The Internet offers young LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) individuals unprecedented amounts of contact with others who are having similar experiences in regard to identity formation and expression (Baams et al. 2011). Many LGBT communities on the Internet have established symbolic social spaces that members can access for support. Individuals accessing this space are provided with information and resources that can help them begin establishing or expanding their identities. My research involved assessing the influence and helpfulness of the Internet on identity formation and expression for young individuals who identify as LGBT. I wanted to reveal materials, qualities, people, and services that these young LGBT individuals feel are necessary to promote well-being in their lives. Using a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in Pensacola, Florida, as well as online, and in addition to research and participant observation in a segment of the LGBT community on Tumblr.com, I developed an awareness of how important the Internet can be for young LGBT people and the expression of their identities.

The Internet is enabling young LGBT individuals to reach out and connect with people of similar identities in a relatively safe and private environment. An abundance of research indicates that the Internet has generally become an important resource for individuals with stigmatized identities such as homosexuality (Durkin 2004; Fraser 2010; Mathis and Tremblay 2010; Downing 2013; Hillier, Mitchell, and Ybarra 2013). The website Tumblr in particular provides a space where young LGBT individuals can share their private lives and identities in
public without fear of repercussions in the actual world, although there may be repercussions in the virtual world.

My theoretical perspective and approach was influenced by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu described his own approach in regard to social science research as a “structuralist-constructivist” or “constructivist-structuralist” perspective (Dressler 2007). Structuralism, in Bourdieu’s work, refers to the existence of objective structures that are independent of the consciousness and the will of human beings and that are capable of guiding or constraining the practices and expressions of human beings. While structuralism clarifies the social reality beneath individual consciousness and intersubjective meanings, it does not allow for self-determining behaviors on the part of the individual (Seidman 2008:141). Constructivism refers to the creation in society of patterns of perception, thought, and action, or what Bourdieu referred to as **habitus**\(^1\) (Bourdieu 2005[1977]). Constructivism also refers to the active creation by society or individual agents of guiding or constraining structures, an example of which would be social classes. Bourdieu attempted to show in his work that the majority of social scientists array themselves along these two “seemingly incompatible points of view” (Bourdieu 1989:14), and that they could be considered as working together. Bourdieu was interested in portraying how culture is integral to social organizations of domination. Bourdieu presented culture as a sphere of social conflict between different groups struggling to legitimate their favored forms of cultural values, standards, and lifestyles (Seidman 2008:146). Furthermore, Bourdieu described the social world as a multi-dimensional space where individuals and groups are “defined by their relative positions within that space” (1985:723-724), and these relative positions are dictated by different

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\(^1\) To clarify, habitus is a loose set of rules that allow individuals to strategize, accommodate, and invent new practices, but habitus does not free individuals from social structure and is, in fact, a product of that social structure. Habitus works in conjunction with fields (settings in which individuals are located) and capital (assets), with different fields favoring different types of capital (Seidman 2008:142-143).
kinds of capital, such as social and intellectual capital. It is with this perspective in mind that I consider the Internet, Tumblr, and their LGBT users.

Anthropology is perhaps uniquely suited for sociocultural studies of online communication, which is a rapidly changing context. Anthropological methodologies provide the basis from which to conduct cross-cultural, multileveled, and multi-sited projects that merge constructions of individual and collective identity while also considering the culturally embedded nature of emerging communication and social practices (Wilson and Peterson 2002:450). What makes anthropology unique as a discipline in actual fieldwork situations also makes it ideal for virtual fieldwork: its tendency to borrow and utilize theories from other disciplines. In addition to anthropological method and theory, for this research I also considered and utilized methods and theory from sociology, communication studies, and information technology. However, anthropology is not the leader in virtual research that it could be. Although the American Anthropological Association (AAA) has begun to consider the ethical implications of virtual fieldwork in social media contexts (AAA 2013), there are no established protocols for conducting virtual research (Collins and Durington 2013). In order to ensure that my research was ethical, I followed the protocols established by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of UWF (Appendix A) and consulted an excellent guide, Virtual Ethnography (2000) by Christine Hine, which includes a consideration of virtual research ethics.

The virtual ethnography aspect of the project was easiest for me because I was already a member of the Tumblr community, if perhaps to an extent, and I have always preferred electronic and digital forms of communication for their ability to allow me to express myself more fully. While this shield of seeming anonymity allows some to become more aggressive (Brodesser-Akner 2010; Cooper and Blumenfeld 2012:158), as my participant Christiana
indicated, this shield also provides opportunities for deeper expression and emotional distance, which I considered to be beneficial for myself, my research, and the participants. I cannot fail to see the drawbacks in being unable to speak face-to-face with a participant and having the chance to gauge their expressions, body language, and emotions. However, I can attest that for myself and one participant, whom I interviewed in person, understanding was increased when corresponding electronically during follow-up, and it allowed us to express ourselves more explicitly.

One trend that has been identified in queer research and queer theory is the focus on literary or philosophical texts as primary data sources for providing the best information regarding LGBT experiences, rather than ethnographic accounts (Lewin and Leap 2009:6). As William Leap and Ellen Lewin state in their introduction to *Out in Public*, “Even recent work in language and desire assumes that people's accounts of their own experiences are of secondary importance to theory-building compared to the authorial claims of Freud and Lacan” (2009:6). It was my desire to add, even in the smallest way, to the available ethnographic literature concerning LGBT experiences online. I had also hoped to avoid another trend that Leap and Lewin identified in anthropology, and that is the limited relevance often displayed by anthropological research to the “complexities of [LGBT] experience” (2009:13). It is my intention in this research to reveal some of these complexities, but I know I cannot address them all. Leap and Lewin also stated that anthropologists often present an indifference to attempts at self-determination by participants as well as real-world conditions of diversity and inequality (2009:14). Again, it was my intention to allow the participants to describe themselves as much as possible. I had to use terms such as gender, sex, and sexual identity when asking them to describe themselves in order to have a frame of reference with which to create the conversation.
And while my initial focus had been on all of the positive aspects of the Internet and its utilization as a safe space for expression by young LGBT individuals, I found I could not ignore the negative aspects as well, and I have shown the diversity and even the inequality that exists online, even in so-called LGBT online safe havens. However, the complete or potential diversity of the LGBT community cannot be addressed by this research. The make-up of online communities can only ever consist of those who have access to the Internet (Wilson and Peterson 2002:460), and many LGBT individuals still do not have regular access to computers or mobile technology that can connect to the Internet.

Here is where I forge my own double-edged sword of self-representation by simultaneously admitting awareness of my privileged place in society while forcing my identity into a rigid structure. A question that I debated with myself and others concerned my right to conduct this research at all. I am a white, heterosexual woman. I am also an ally, and while I definitely support and defend the LGBT community and their various goals, I do not consider myself a part of the LGBT community. As I have experienced on Tumblr, allies are often viewed as intrusive and oblivious to the real truth and concerns of LGBT identity. Did I as an outsider have the right to conduct this research and formulate generalizations about LGBT experience? Some would probably say that I have no authority from which to speak about LGBT experiences. What I present in this research are the opinions and statements of my LGBT participants, interwoven into identifiable patterns that I discovered between their individual stories as well as between stories and trends previously presented by other researchers. I present the stories of young LGBT people who are on differential developmental trajectories (Savin-Williams 1997: xii), individuals at differing stages in their lives who represent a small segment of diversity. I
have tried to portray them as they portray themselves, both the problems and the promises of their lives.

After this introduction follows a literature review highlighting topics and information that I consider essential to an understanding of how the participants are at times similar and unlike other LGBT individuals. These topics include consideration of identity as a plural concept, differing forms of community, what identity and community mean to LGBT individuals both online and in the actual world, Tumblr as a unique place on the Internet, and the role that social capital plays on Tumblr. In the chapter following the literature review, I present an account of the methods I used to conduct my research. My methods for this research included a series of semi-structured interviews with eight participants as well as participant observation on Tumblr. In Chapter IV, I introduce the participants from the interview process as well as those who interacted with me exclusively on Tumblr. Chapter V provides a more detailed accounting of the participants and what they had to say in regard to forming their sexual identities, expressing their sexual identities online and in the actual world, and their sense of community in addition to other aspects of their lives relevant to their LGBT identities. The final chapter offers my conclusions based on consideration of the literature in light of the conversations I had with the participants, and also details how I have benefitted from this research and how others might as well.
It is useful to consider LGBT identity as a concept. What is LGBT identity, how is it defined, and who defines it? Conceptions of self and the politics of identity are considerations that figure importantly in the research of queer theorists and others interested in the processes of cultural production and representation for LGBT individuals (Wakeford 2000:408). One aspect of my research focused not only on the question of what LGBT identity is, but on defining what type of identity “LGBT identity” is. In the literature LGBT identity is connected to different conceptualizations of identity. LGBT identity is referred to simply as identity (Schulman 2013) as well as sexual identity (Savin-Williams 1997), homosexual identity (Epstein 1998:144), gay/lesbian identity (Halperin and Traub 2010), and in relation to sexual orientation (Junge 2002). In the ensuing discussion, I will examine these identity terms with the goal of teasing out LGBT identity and moving forward to consider LGBT online communities.

Identity

Identity and identity politics have been important considerations for LGBT individuals, perhaps as far back as the time immediately following World War II. Like other oppressed groups before them, LGBT individuals began to appeal to the idea that they shared a common identity and organized into an ethnic-type political community² (Seidman 2008:200). Although this model still exists, there is an increasing focus on highlighting how LGBT individuals have multiple unique or authentic identities. What is identity? As Steven Epstein (1998:144) points out in his article, “Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity”, general definitions of identity are problematic because they are used both widely and loosely without consistency. Identity can be treated as the

² For further discussion regarding the LGBT community and the ethnic/minority model please see Epstein 1998, Richardson 2000, and Piontek 2006.
inherent fixed and stable characteristics of a person or it can be considered as the internalization of socially imposed or constructed labels (Epstein 1998:144). Borrowing from Jurgen Habermas and Karl Marx, Epstein makes an argument that supports Pierre Bourdieu’s structuralist-constructivist approach. Identity, Epstein suggests, is created through the interaction of multiple identities such as occupation, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. For Epstein “it is important to recognize that such identities are, at the same time, both human self-creations and constraining structures” (1998:145). These structurally significant identities affect an individual’s perspectives on cultural institutions, which in turn determine their willingness to produce or accept cultural forms (Holland et al. 1998:25).

Identity is defined as “the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others” (Merriam-Webster 2014). Identity, while making an individual or group different from others, also has the effect of making that individual or group similar to others as well. Even though identities are unique to each individual, individuals can share similar identities, or qualities and beliefs, and this is the basis for groups and community. This definition of identity is simplistic and gives the impression of favoring the inherent characteristics model of identity, but it does yield two points for consideration in relation to my research. First, it is more useful to consider identity in terms of plurality, and second, it is important to discuss LGBT identity in terms of type or types of identity. LGBT identity is both a personal and a public identity in the sense that it is made up of both social and sexual aspects, the latter of which is often viewed as private or personal despite pressure from society to present a sexual identity (Epstein 1998:145). LGBT identity is itself a plural identity because it is created by multiple identities such as gender identity and sexual identity, as evidenced by the acronym LGBT itself. Gender identity has been treated as being a component of sexual identity in the past (Shively and
De Cecco 1977), but in contemporary literature gender identity and sexual identity are treated independently, marking the relatively recent separation of gender from biological terminologies. Gender identity, as I will use it, refers to an individual’s sense of being masculine, feminine, or other gendered (Green and Peterson 2004). Gender identity is a social identity because gender is expressed socially in many contexts through obvious displays of preference for masculine, feminine, or other gendered clothing and behaviors. Judith Butler famously illustrated in her work *Gender Trouble* how gender identity is the product of social performance (1990). Butler described gender as “the apparatus of production by which the sexes themselves are established” (1990:7). According to Butler (1990:7), cultural conceptions of gender are responsible for the notion of “a natural sex.” Butler stated that a discussion of gender identity must precede a discussion of identity, or personal identity, because it is through gender above all other attributes that individuals are made coherent in society (1990:16). Thomas Piontek further illustrated Butler’s point by showing how English rules of grammar reflect the importance of gender in relation to personhood: “[I]f we cannot identify someone as male or female, we must use the impersonal pronoun it, a designation that refers to things and thus denies humanness. Because without coherent gender we cannot think them human at all, when someone’s gender is in question, so is their personhood, their humanness” (2006:68-69). Butler also reasoned that normative ideals that influence conceptualization of “identity” are responsible for the governance of gender (1990:16). I did not precede my consideration of identity with gender identity as Butler suggested. While I do recognize that for many individuals gender may be the “internal feature” that personal identity is established on, I suggest that the cultural matrix has changed since *Gender Trouble* was published (1990:16). It is now possible for the existence of identities in

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3 This example applies specifically to the English language. It is worth noting however, that while there are very few gender neutral languages, there are attempts to create gender neutral language within gendered languages such as English (Donatone and Rachlin 2013:202; Hund and Reid 2013:195).
which “gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not follow from either sex or gender” (1990:17). Relating back to the Piontek grammar example, pronouns have been created for use in the English language to the benefit of transgendered and genderqueer individuals (Donatone and Rachlin 2013:202; Hund and Reid 2013:195). In February 2014 Facebook, the popular social media website, expanded the gender options for users and introduced a gender neutral pronoun on the site (Molloy 2014). As noted by David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, “[W]e are now in a period when difference is the order of the day” (2010:306).

Sex refers to how an individual identifies or is identified physically or biologically. This could be constituted as male, female, in between, neither, or beyond (Green and Peterson 2004). Sexual identity, for the purposes of this research, is the self-recognition of one’s sexual orientation, sexual behaviors, and the meanings one places on them (University College London 2014). Sexual orientation can be described in terms of either sexual activity or sexual desire (Green and Peterson 2004; APA 2008; UCL 2014). I prefer to view sexual orientation as relating to desire, and I perceive a distinction between sexual activity and sexual desire. It is certainly possible to have sexual desire without engaging in the corresponding sexual activity, and to engage in sexual activity without embracing the corresponding sexual desire. While I admit to preferring one conceptualization of sexual orientation, like others before me I cannot fail to realize the limitations of designating the gender of the object of choice as being the defining factor of sexual orientation, and by extension sexual identity (Sedgwick 1990; Piontek 2006:89; 4

Examples of gender neutral pronouns include zie (or ze, pronounced like the letter “Z”) and hir (pronounced like “here”), as well as xe, ne and ve.

5 Facebook users can now have up to 10 different identity options associated with their account and be referred to as they/their as opposed to she/her and he/his (Molloy 2014).
Sexual identity, sexual orientation, and even the gender of the object of choice can change and exist in a structure that is more fluid than society would suggest.

Sexual orientation is perhaps the term most associated with categories like heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual. Many individuals, however, dislike these categories and view them as limiting instead of descriptive. Benjamin Junge described them as working to “ultimately decontextualize sexuality” (2002:196) and expressed his agreement with Michael Clatts that they take “sexual activity and sexual identity out of time and place [which] makes it impossible to identify and map changes of concepts of self…or to locate an ever-emergent self within social, cultural, and economic institutions that are themselves dynamic in character” (Clatts 1995:246). Many of the theories that perhaps inadvertently contextualize sexual orientation are often associated with attempts to explain its origins (Wilkerson 2007:2). I will make no such attempt, because I am more concerned with illustrating sexual orientation as a process that influences identity.

Secondly, in consideration of the identity definition, its very obliqueness allows for the definition to embrace the notion that identity changes. Identity is a hard concept to pin down and this is complicated not only by its plurality but by its ephemeral nature. Identity is not self-identical, as Butler observed, and to expect the continuance of a person is not logical because people change, but it is an effect of our social institutions striving for normality and intelligibility. However, Butler also noted that many philosophical discussions of identity focus on discovering an “internal feature” that establishes continuity of self while ignoring the social context in which a person exists (1990:16-17). Butler’s focus was on gender identity and how gender creates social coherence, but others have considered sexual identity. Ritch C. Savin-Williams suggested that sexual identity “represents an enduring self-recognition of the meanings
that sexual feelings, attractions, and behaviors have for one's sense of self” while acknowledging that for some individuals “sexual identity remains fluid during the life course, probably not on a day-to-day basis, and is not necessarily consistent with sexual orientation, fantasies, or behavior” (1997:3). Steven Epstein echoed this point by asserting that most individuals who claim a non-heteronormative identity often “adopt some variety of relatively inconsistent positions regarding their identity over the course of time, often depending on the needs of the moment” (1998:134). This view of sexual identity is reasonable in the sense that sexuality becomes more stable as an individual experiences sexual desire and behavior and then internalizes, interprets, and expresses those experiences in relation to others and to cultural norms (Wilkerson 2007:4). Sexual identity, therefore, “represents an enduring self-recognition of the meanings that sexual feelings, attractions, and behaviors have for one's sense of self” (Savin-Williams 1997:3). However, individuals can change the way they present or express their sexual identity, and can also choose to engage in behavior and desire that are not consistent with their expressed sexual identity without changing their sexual identity. William S. Wilkerson aptly stated that “sexual identities are sites of an ambiguous process of subjection” (2007:11).

**LGBT Community**

It would be entirely too easy to present the topic of the LGBT community with no explanation of its constituents. Although LGBT individuals do not have full equality and rights, the presence of LGBT individuals and their interests have become quite prominent in the United States, as well as other places across the globe. Given that there are LGBT individuals in many other countries besides the U.S. who interact and support one another, this community stretches all around the globe, but can be discussed in terms of the U.S. in general, or a specific set of

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6 The coverage before and during the Sochi winter Olympics comes to mind as an example of LGBT individuals and their allies making their feelings known to the world.
individuals. In this study, I will be focusing on individuals that live in the same geographical area.

Although these individuals share similar interests and goals with others across the U.S., this particular community in focus in my research is not representative of all LGBT communities in the U.S. (Weston 1995:254). However, it might belong to what is conceptually presented as the LGBT subculture of the U.S., in the sense that LGBT individuals across the U.S. comprise groups of people with interests, goals, and/or practices that differ from the larger culture to which they belong (Herzog, Mitchell, and Soccio 1999). As one early sexuality researcher observed, “[LGBT] groups and individuals transmit, learn, share, create, and change the content of various forms (such as speech, dress, behaviors, artifacts) so as to establish and maintain what can be called a relatively distinct ‘culture’” (Sonenschein 1966:45). This is true in the same way that the South is part of the larger culture of the U.S., but the subculture in the South is different from what is present in New England or southern California. Subcultures are often considered in terms of specific shared qualities, but this consideration does not discuss membership in an active language of choice. What about individuals who may share those interests and practices but do not consider themselves members of an LGBT subculture or community?

The point I am endeavors to make illustrates how broad a concept community can be. It can refer to many or a few; those who choose to belong or those who are perceived as belonging. Maria Bakardjieva notes that community is a socially constructed term with “interpretive flexibility” that has had a variety of meanings, contexts, and goals throughout time (2007:237). Ellen Lewin and William Leap (2009:2) draw on the public sphere formation theory of Jurgen Habermas and suggest that an LGBT community might simply be the result of a process in which “private [same-sex identified] persons come together to form a public…[and to] deal with
matters of general interest without being subject to coercion” (Habermas 1989:231). It is reasonable to suggest that a community is a group of people with something in common, but often the term community is endowed with a sense of place. A community, such as a neighborhood or college campus, is based “on the ‘accident’ of geographical location” (Robins 2007:227). The concepts of place or space are most often associated with geographical or physical locations. I will discuss the conception of the Internet as a space or a place later. Setting aside the physical location definition of community, I focus on it as a group of individuals who have come together based on “interest and affinity” (Robins 2007:227) and who share common goals.

Given this conceptualization of community, it does not seem far-fetched to refer to an LGBT community. LGBT individuals seemingly have similar interests and goals, some of which may be different from American culture at large. While it is reasonable to assume that the majority of LGBT individuals in the U.S. are interested in having access to the same rights, privileges, and respect as their heterosexual counterparts, there are communities within the LGBT subculture that have their own specific interests and goals. These communities are based both geographically and purely by interest, as evidenced by the existence of LGBT organizations at the local, regional, and even national level as well as the significant number of LGBT groups online. The diversity within the LGBT subculture is perhaps best discussed in tandem with the common acronym LGBT.

The acronym LGBT, or GLBT, is often used to denote a significant population in the U.S. whose interests and practices do not align with heteronormative mainstream culture. This same population was often referred to by the term “queer” for a short period in the 1990s, before the LGBT acronym came into increased usage (Center for Mental Health in Schools n. d.),
although the term queer is still considered relevant in reference to LGBT specific research (Piontek 2006:96) and some LGBT individuals still prefer the term queer. I use LGBT because it acknowledges the largest groups represented in the aforementioned population. However, the acronym is often reconfigured to include or highlight other interest groups. Elizabeth Price commented that the acronym has an “extraordinary elasticity” while also noting that the acronym has “become a convenient, though arguably misused, tool for the demonstration of inclusivity” (Price 2011:7). Often, there is a binary opposition established between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals, with the former group being ill-defined beyond a vague notion of heterosexuality as relations between individuals who identify with the sex and gender assigned to them at birth, and the latter group as an overlarge category that is filled with myriad differing sexualities and interest groups. As Price (2011:7) further notes, some work has expanded the acronym for the latter group to something like LGBTTTQQI, which represents Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual/Two-spirited, Queer/Questioning, and Intersex individuals. Another version of this larger acronym is LGBTQIA, where the “T” and “Q” stand for the multiple identities highlighted by Price’s acronym while also including “A” for asexual. This broader, more inclusive acronym is also representative of what Michael Schulman found when he interviewed a number of young LGBT individuals for the New York Times. They stated their desire to go beyond the LGBT acronym and consider what is referred to as LGBT plus (LGBT+). Schulman describes these individuals as radical, more focused on who they are as opposed to who they love, “that is, identity as distinct from sexual orientation” (2013). Some research has indicated that the majority of LGBT youths accept the typical sexual identity labels and only a relatively small proportion reject these labels (Center for Mental Health in Schools n.d.). Regardless of whether LGBT individuals are accepting of typical labels or desirous of new
ones, Elizabeth Price (2011:7) is correct in her assessment that it is important for researchers interested in LGBT identity to acknowledge that the definitions, and here I would also say identities, that are used to describe people have a significant impact on the individual, as well as the research.

**LGBT Identity**

Identity consists of plural identities, including gender identities and sexual identities. The letters themselves in the common acronym LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans) refer to both gender identity and sexual identity, particularly sexual orientation. What perhaps needs to be expressed more explicitly is that an LGBT identity is also a sociocultural identity. Identity of any kind is constructed and changed through time in relation to other individuals and society. These social locations for identity are at once both enabling and restricting (Wilkerson 2007:11) in that experience allows for construction of and changes to identity, but in ways that are limited by social interactions and the norms in the social environment. However, this is not to say that identity is not a matter of choice and self-presentation, or agency. When presented with social interactions and norms in an environment, the individual, subculture, or community can choose, to varying degrees, to embrace, modify, or reject their options when expressing their identity. For the purposes of this research I am primarily concerned with how identity is being expressed. Although there are a number of theories concerning how identity originates or becomes internalized, I am more interested in how identity is being expressed in terms of a sociocultural LGBT identity online. This is especially prudent given that much of my research was conducted online and did not fully consider biology and its role in identity. LGBT identity as a sociocultural identity means LGBT as a subculture or subcultures, and this requires discussion of community.

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what this means in relation to LGBT identity, and how these two concepts become established together on the Internet.

**Benefits of Identity**

For the majority of individuals, identity is important for positive well-being and having a healthy sense of self. Allusions in mainstream culture to soul-searching or finding oneself suggests that having a clear identity, or identities, that one can both internalize and express to others is desirable and healthy. An individual who has an identity that is positively recognized or respected by others likely has a better sense of well-being. This is especially true in relation to an individual’s social identity, as being accepted by groups provides individuals with a sense of meaning and belonging that is positively associated with self-esteem and sense of worth (Eastin and LaRose 2005:977; Haslam et al. 2009:3). It is likely then that an identity that is not acknowledged or accepted, or that is represented inaccurately, would cause some degree of detriment to well-being. Individuals often experience cognitive dissonance when there are conflicting perceptions regarding their self-image or identities, diminishing their well-being and increasing distress (Suh 2012:247). Having a shared identity or belonging to a group, such as the LGBT subculture or a smaller LGBT community, can also provide a source of social and personal support where individuals who share a minority or disadvantaged identity can work together to alleviate the negative consequences associated with circumstances that may include discrimination, prejudice, and stigma (Haslam et al. 2009:12). The acronym LGBT, and the unifying term queer used by the preceding generation, is perhaps also meant to represent a source of support for those who need it based on commonality and shared concerns. However, I do not wish to indicate that this is the case for every individual, as sexual minority individuals are not “victimized, suicidal individuals with low self-esteem who struggle to cope with an unwieldy
modern universe that despises them and gives them little hope that a good life can come to them” (Savin-Williams 1997:xii).

By this point I have demonstrated that LGBT identity is made up of gender identity and sexual identity, and that it functions as a sociocultural identity in the sense that it is constructed and changed in relation to societal and cultural norms. This sociocultural identity also demonstrates an awareness of belonging to certain social groups based on emotional and value significance (Haslam et al. 2009:2) based on shared interests, practices, and goals. This also demonstrates how LGBT identity relates to a sense of community. By coming into contact in the public sphere of family, friends, work, recreational activities, and interest groups, individuals are able to perceive both social norms and social outliers and formulate an awareness of others. Individuals who express non-heteronormative or differing identities or interests might rely on a group of others similar to them as a support resource and to increase well-being. Finding other LGBT individuals or groups can be difficult, considering that the public sphere is often constructed as strictly heteronormative and LGBT relations and relationships have long been tolerated only in the private sphere (Richardson 2000:77). As a result LGBT communities have existed primarily in more private spaces such as bars, clubs, and residences. The Internet is one venue that allows for LGBT individuals to have community in a public sphere.

**Belonging**

A question that I raised but have not addressed is that of individuals who might be perceived as belonging to the LGBT community but who would not place themselves in this group when asked. Identity, even when constrained by and constructed in relation to social and cultural norms, still has an aspect of agency. By this I simply mean that an individual who chooses to identify as a member of the LGBT community should be considered as a member, but
that an individual who may have similarities with the LGBT community or even identify as an LGBT individual without claiming membership in the LGBT community should not necessarily be considered a member. I have highlighted considerations of subculture and community in relation to the idea of choice because of my interactions with the participants in this research. While an individual may share interests, goals, or practices with a community or even a subculture, I would not suggest that they be considered a member of either unless they indicate this membership through their own self-presentation or behaviors.

The question of belonging is also relevant when discussing individuals who occupy uncertain places in the LGBT community: allies and bisexuals. The latter case is particularly interesting because the “B” in LGBT is meant to represent bisexuals. When presenting the LGBTQIA acronym in his article, Michael Schulman made the statement that the “A” could also stand for “Ally” a “friend of the cause” (2013), and in her paper Emma Harsin Drager made the same presentation (2012:7). Inclusion of allies into the LGBT community seems problematic to me given my experiences on Tumblr. At least in that space, many members of the LGBT+ community are not particularly fond of so-called allies, primarily because they feel allies are useless, cause more harm than good, or are claiming authority or ownership over knowledge that they are not seen as having (Figure 1). For allies it may be best to follow the advice proffered by Kelly Rae Kraemer, Professor of Peace Studies at St. John’s University. Kraemer recommends that allies recognize that every individual has multiple identities, identities both privileged and oppressed. In situations where an individual possesses a privileged identity it is not enough to simply say that this identity does not matter or to claim membership in the oppressed group.

\[8\] I use LGBT+ here to stress that many individuals on Tumblr are youths who often reject the typical acronym, are not included in the acronym, or who claim identities that are more fluid and prefer LGBT+.

\[9\] This is not an uncommon occurrence. White allies during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s were not always welcome, and men who claim to support feminism are still met with derision by some feminists (Kraemer 2007:20).
“Good intentions matter,” Kraemer states, “but by themselves are not sufficient to determine whether or not a particular course of action is appropriate” (2007:33). Kraemer suggests that allies should acknowledge their own privilege, present themselves as supporters, and allow the oppressed group to self-determine who belongs as well as when and how they need support from allies.

Figure 1. A Tumblr user questions an anthropologist’s insertion of allies.

What is the place of individuals who want to participate in the goals of the LGBT community but who do not choose some of the identities, interests, or motivations that characterize members of the LGBT community? What is the place of those who are not always seen as belonging in the LGBT community? The common acronym LGBT has a “B” for bisexual, but there is still resistance to and rejection of bisexuality and bisexuals, even within the LGBT community (Monro and Richardson 2010:106). I also saw awareness and evidence of this prejudice towards bisexuals on Tumblr. These issues call attention to my earlier comments regarding the diversity of interest groups that are put together in the idea of an LGBT community. It is this notion that makes discussion of belonging to an LGBT community
especially tricky. Is it reasonable, then, to assume that diversity can be recognized while simultaneously calling attention to commonality? As Halperin and Traub have noted:

> [Q]ueer orthodoxy denies the search for, or assertion of, commonality now that the commonality posited by gay/lesbian identities has been exposed as never having existed (which is why queer theory will never be able to account for why so many women and men defy the odds to affirm identity again and again.) But a sense of mutual recognition, commonality, and- dare one say- identity endures despite the main fractures and assaults that try to undermine it. [2010:306]

Gayle Rubin, in her article “Studying Sexual Subcultures”, highlights the comments of an anthropological sex researcher from the 1960s (2002:45) who stated that “homosexuality emerges as being in reality a group phenomenon as well as an individual one” (Sonenschein 1966:76). I understand this to mean that despite the difficulties, it is possible and even necessary to recognize the existence of commonalities and groups while also acknowledging intragroup differences and individualism. This possibility will feature in my discussion of virtual community and will become relevant to my consideration of participant activity.

Gatekeeping as a theory originated in mass communication research in relation to newspapers (Michael 2013:11) and online it has largely been studied in relation to online journalism and professional representation in the news (Coddington and Holton 2014; Scopelliti 2014; Singer 2014), but this method of controlling information is also a prominent aspect of Tumblr. Gatekeepers are individuals who “regulate the flow of information, language, and knowledge” (Michael 2013:11). On sites like Wikipedia, Reddit, and Tumblr, individuals will take it upon themselves to decide when information is correct or relevant and who has the right to own that knowledge. In relation to another researcher’s statements regarding a self-identified lesbian website, Wakeford commented “the question might not be 'Are you lesbian?' but 'Are you lesbian enough?' to participate. Her comment is a reminder that the ability to enter many cyberqueer spaces involves conscious (re)construction of the self which may be learned over
time” (2000:413). Although the Internet supposedly allows for truer self expression, this expression may be intentionally or unintentionally altered to fit within certain group dynamics, a behavior that is often done in the actual world as well. On Tumblr, for example, there is pressure to be “authentic” and different from the mainstream culture. The implication in many contexts is that “LGB (but perhaps not yet transgendered) identities have become too bourgeois, too white, and too sold out” (Halperin and Traub 2010:304). Differentiation occurs and creates “hierarchies of participation, knowledge, and taste” (Herzog, Mitchell, and Soccio 1999) that are based on ideals and enforced norms of self-presentation. Wakeford also comments on this tendency by stating that “Much is made of how users can change the descriptions of themselves…or the fact that anonymity means that one starts with ‘no body’ and so is free to construct or reconstruct images” (2000:413). The body is important in Wakeford’s estimation because “ideas about bodies become the central gatekeeping mechanism for access to the cyberqueer space” (2000:412-13). The body is important on Tumblr for LGBT individuals, perhaps due in part to Tumblr’s largely visually oriented nature and the investment that many young LGBT individuals have in essentialism over constructionism, biology over choice (Wilkerson 2007), as evidenced by Figure 2.

Figure 2. A Tumblr user states an opinion regarding sexuality as an inherent trait.
Sexuality, or sexual identity, is not merely a social construction because it is very real, “but its reality is not that of the given, nor of the gene, nor of the social fact, nor finally the reality of the merely chosen” (Wilkerson 2007:11). The example of the Tumblr user is meant to show how individuals there often speak with finality on subjects where they claim authority.

**Virtual Community**

The benchmark for the study of virtual community is Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* (1993). Rheingold describes virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 1993:5). As Shawn P. Wilbur notes in his analysis of Rheingold’s work, “sufficient human feeling” is a very subjective measure (2000:46) that does not address what qualifies as human feeling and when exactly those feelings are considered sufficient. My descriptions of the participants on Tumblr and the content that they shared there will show that a variety of “human feelings” are expressed online, running the gamut among anger, sadness, and happiness.¹⁰ Given this initial definition of online communities by Rheingold, Maria Bakardjieva contends that user participation in these communities can be considered a cultural trend of “immobile socialization,” which she describes as the “socialization of private experience through the invention of new forms of intersubjectivity and social organization online” (2007:236). Examples of this concept, particularly in regard to the socialization of private experiences, are commonly seen on social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. Individuals share aspects of their private lives, whether daily events or significant occasions, in such a way that others may see, share, and

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¹⁰ It is worth noting that human emotion, including what is expressed on Tumblr, is not as simplistic as those categories would imply.
comment on these events while also sharing the details of their own lives. In a sense, these social media websites are almost entirely focused on sharing and even celebrating the mundane. On Instagram, individuals commonly share photos of their meals and on YouTube many individuals post multiple videos that highlight what they bought while shopping. Despite this trend, however, Bakardjieva (2007:236) notes that much of the research concerning virtual communities do not consider the daily life experiences of individuals in favor of revealing a group culture of online participants. Socialization of private experience can also refer to the way in which individuals socialize online, which is indicated by Bakardjieva’s term “immobile socialization.” Much of the socialization that occurs online takes place between users who are relatively isolated from others, both geographically and figuratively. Bakardjieva’s term was also meant to highlight the relatively immobile nature of desktop computers and even laptops, which further demonstrates that individuals are immobile, or alone, while they are socializing online and that this behavior was becoming increasingly common. In 2007 when her article was published, smartphones and applications for social media websites that make mobile socialization online possible were just becoming prominent in mainstream culture. Bakardjieva is still correct, however, that users participating online continue to create new methods of relating to and socializing with others. As Catherine M. Ridings has noted (2006:494), information in virtual communities is available and beneficial to everyone, making the information jointly owned. I would stress that information is jointly created in virtual communities as well.

**The Internet as Place/Space**

While Bakardjieva’s term immobile socialization refers to the situation of the user, it is also useful to consider the situation of the Internet. The term community is usually used in relation to a physical place and the Internet could be considered in terms of being a place or a
space of its own. “By insisting that the public sphere signifies a qualitative relation and not necessarily a distinct place or totality of venues, those disenfranchised from the venues that claim publicness can ask more insistently whether they actually embody this quality” (Clarke 2000:2). To further illustrate this point, I present another definition of virtual communities as “groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism” (Ridings 2006:494). In this sense, a common location is a technology enabler such as a chat room, an online forum, or even an email listserv. But it is important that Ridings chose to use the word location in her definition and presented the concept of a common location as important to virtual community. In his own work, Erik M. Champion has also indicated that the concepts of space and place are important when considering virtual communities: “Communities are often identified by where their activities take place, how they use spaces to construct meanings, and the traces left by their social interactions” (Champion 2006:556).

Kevin Robins, who in his article presents a position against embracing the notion of a positive entity known as virtual community, nevertheless also discusses the Internet and other relatively new technologies in terms of space/place by referring to “electronic windows” that look out into a place where everyone can “survey the world and its events” allowing the Internet to become a “world-wide time-zone” (2007:228). While the Internet does cause a certain dislocation in regard to time and space, this dislocation may allow individuals to see their own identities from different perspectives (Wilbur 2000:48). I argue that the Internet is better conceptualized in the plural as a world of “overlapping cyberspaces” as opposed to one singularly dense space (Wakeford 2000:404), just as the social space in the actual world is comprised of plural dimensions (Bourdieu 1985:724). Considering place in relation to the
Internet is a useful notion because it establishes identifying features in a virtual environment, provides individuals with the ability to identify with and reflect themselves and reflect on themselves in a virtual environment, and provides the “common location” for which both communal and individual activity can take place (Champion 2006:556).

While Robins’ argument is pessimistic in his rejection of the possibility of virtual communities becoming places that erase distance and differences, allowing for new and closer forms of intimacy (2007:227), he is not wrong to be skeptical that this can truly occur in every instance. This erasure of difference is not always occurring in the LGBT community on Tumblr, except perhaps in the sense that some differences are treated as though they do not exist or are not important. In fact, a lot of differences are being produced and celebrated online. My point here is that it is not useful to suggest that the LGBT community online in general or on Tumblr specifically should be conceived of as a unified group. This is particularly true considering the differing habits of the individuals who make up these communities. It might be more useful, in regard to this research, to consider the individual and how they conceptualize community involvement. Bakardjieva suggests that there are different forms of online involvement and that virtual community is not always the appropriate label for online social activities. However, as Bakardjieva further notes, the tendency for individuals to consume content online as opposed to any other activity does not deny the existence of collective life in cyberspace or suggest that the variations of virtual community are not worth studying (2007:237). Although Robins may be right about the naïve idealism of virtual community, he also oversimplifies some of the negative aspects of the Internet and virtual community. Robins presents the Internet as “a domain where the dangers and the challenges of the real world are negated- a domain purged of worrisome
shadows, masqued faces, and opaque stares” (2007:231). I consider this statement to be an oversimplification for two reasons.

First, the Internet is not without its own particular dangers and worries. The Internet is a dangerous place where predators of various sorts seek out victims (Fraser 2010:31). Young LGBT individuals often use the Internet to find and meet others in the actual world or to begin romantic relationships, behaviors that seem risky and dangerous to their heterosexual peers (Hillier, Mitchell, and Ybarra 2013:240). In addition, because of the ability to present a “masked face and opaque stare” the Internet is full of prejudiced opinions and behavior, and even bullying because the Internet provides a certain anonymity allowing individuals to engage in behavior they would not normally indulge in during face-to-face interactions (Brodesser-Akner 2010; Cooper and Blumenfeld 2012:158; Suh 2012:246). Bullying online, or cyberbullying, involves the use of information and communication technology such as the Internet or mobile phones to send hurtful, cruel, or intimidating messages (Cooper and Blumenfeld 2012:154). For LGBT youth, both bullying and cyberbullying are commonly experienced (Cooper and Blumenfeld 2012:157). For some young people, this means that bullying and cyberbullying are perpetrated by the same individuals. This is evidence of our mainstream culture, one in which the offline and the online environments tend to blend together. This leads me to my second criticism of Robins’ oversimplification, the separation of the “real” from the “virtual”.

Many individuals, including academics, make a distinction between what happens in physical locations and what happens online, as if one experience is more real than the other, and this sets up a false dichotomy (Bakardjieva 2007:237). This distinction is often made through contrasting vocabulary such as real/reality versus virtual/virtually (Bell 2013:32). Shawn P. Wilbur states that this tendency is set up by the very term “virtual community” which “reveals
something about our presuppositions about both (unmodified, presumably 'real') community and (primarily computer) technology” (2000:45). Virtual ethnography often calls for constant defining and redefining of the boundaries between the actual and the virtual (Harsin Drager 2012:9). I choose to present the two different spaces in terms of actual and virtual as opposed to real and virtual, a presentation I have borrowed from Boellstorff (2012). In this way, I am not denying that what happens in the realm of the virtual is as real or as meaningful as what happens in the actual world. However, I am also in no way suggesting that one can fully exist in the virtual as one can in the actual, nor that human beings soon will become disembodied and fragmented in a non-geographical world (Robins 2007:227). The lines between the actual and the virtual are not blurring in the sense that virtual space cannot collapse into actual space, but the lines do serve to establish meaningful indexical relationships between the actual and the virtual (Boellstorff 2012:56). There are instances when online communities overlap with actual communities, such as in the case of a Facebook group for an on campus club (Wilson and Peterson 2002). While it may be erroneous to assume that aspects of the virtual will always be indicative of the actual world (Wilbur 2000:54), I suggest that studying the ways in which the two connect in contemporary everyday life can be revealing. Computers and digital technology have influence over “physical wants and desires” (Wakeford 2000:413). I will also state that human existence has long been mediated by technology and that digital technologies, a new arrival on the cultural scene (Wilbur 2000:45), do allow for new types of human experience and social relationships.

**LGBT Internet**

To summarize briefly, there are groups of individuals on the Internet that can be conceived of as virtual communities, and LGBT individuals belong to many of these groups.
Virtual communities are situated in virtual locations where members and other interested individuals can come and participate or observe. Individuals who need questions answered or need to find social support can visit these virtual communities. Here I stress the importance of the Internet as a space for LGBT community, and I am not the first to do so:

A common theme in the studies of cyberqueer is the relationship between sexuality and space, where space is taken to be the arena accessible by computer-mediated interactions. Cyberqueer spaces are framed as new places within which lesbian, gay, transgender, or queer experiences can take place, with a particular focus on the advantages compared to 'real' physically-located space. Mainstream cyberspace has often been promoted as creating 'virtual communities' and cyberqueer spaces may compensate for the social or geographical isolation of sexual minorities by operating as a medium through which contacts can be more easily facilitated... [Wakeford 2000:410]

LGBT individuals have been using the Internet since it came into commercial usage in the early 1990s and are perhaps the most well-represented minority group in cyberspace (Gauntlett 1999:327; Harsin Drager 2012:20).

The Internet acts as a place where information on a wide variety of topics related to sexuality can be found and often provides information that parents or school curriculums do not (Fraser 2007:124; DeHaan et al. 2012:1; Hillier, Mitchell, and Ybarra 2013:241). For some LGBT youth, having exclusively online friends for social support and information exchange is a normal and integral part of their social life (DeHaan et al. 2012:2; Hillier, Mitchell, and Ybarra 2013:233). The Internet is particularly helpful for young LGBT individuals who are just beginning the coming out process and forming their sexual identity, and a narrative of using the Internet to discover what being LGBT means is becoming increasingly common (Baams et al. 2011:1821; Fraser 2007:125; Hillier, Mitchell, and Ybarra 2013:234). Many young LGBT individuals express the opinion that it is easier to be oneself and to be “out” online than it is in face-to-face interactions, due in part to the perceived anonymity the Internet provides (DeHaan et
al. 2012:2). The Internet is described by LGBT youth as a safe place to share (Hillier, Mitchell, and Ybarra 2013:235-237) and is often perceived as a kind of judgment free safe zone and as a space where “perceived heteronormativity is less salient” (Baams et al. 2011:1821; Fraser 2010:30). Occasionally, however, it is necessary for virtual locations to also act as “a ‘space of refuge’ from other lesbian, gay, transgender and queer worlds, some of which are themselves online” (Wakeford 2000:410). Vikki Fraser describes situations where LGBT individuals attempt to control LGBT identity for everyone as the construction of “closets that foreclose particular heterosexual and queer vocalizations in favor of specific, recognizable, set queer subjectivities that are both enabling and disabling” (2010:30). Certain ideas and knowledge related to LGBT issues are privileged over others, which has both positive and negative consequences.

However, the Internet is not only a place where LGBT individuals can find support, answers, and networking opportunities it is also a place where they can represent themselves and their interests in relation to mainstream culture. The Internet has long been studied as a site of cultural production and discourse for LGBT individuals (Harsin Drager 2012:7). Jonathan Alexander describes LGBT usage of the Internet as enabling them to “communicate, make contact with others, create community, and tell the stories of their lives” (2002:77). In relation to how LGBT individuals share details about themselves, it is important to consider that “cyberqueer spaces are necessarily embedded within both institutional and cultural practices” (Wakeford 2000:408). However, as Alexander states:

Queers from around the world have used the Internet to reveal and represent the diversity of their experience in ways that are challenging to static notions of both identity and identity politics. Such varieties suggest the need for alternative notions of both community and social agency, and these variations of representation - at both the local and global level - speak to us not just about the diversity of what it means to be queer, but also how individuals are attempting to connect with others to create a sense of community, perhaps even political purpose and social agency across those differences and through those varieties. (2002:81-82)
Recent research indicates that LGBT individuals are more likely to engage in social networking activities and spend more time online than their heterosexual counterparts, and this is particularly true of LGBT youth\textsuperscript{11} (Baams et al. 2011:1823; Fraser 2010:31; Gudelunas 2012:348). For many LGBT individuals, the Internet is “a valuable source of support, identity, and community” (Gauntlett 1999:330), and this is also especially true for LGBT youth (Baams et al. 2011:1820). Mary Gray demonstrated in her study of rural LGBT youth that they access images via the Internet to construct an understanding of “queer realness” (2009:124). The Internet is a social medium that allows individuals to make connections and extend their social networks in ways that were previously difficult or impossible, and it has a positive influence on well-being and sexual identity formation for LGBT youth (Eastin and Larose 2005:977; Baams et al. 2011:1820). Before the Internet, and perhaps as well during its early days, gay bars were incredibly important to LGBT social life. For many, the gay bar was the only place they felt safe enough to let down their defenses. The Internet, as well as mobile technology, has fundamentally changed the LGBT social scene, providing websites where LGBT individuals can socialize and even matchmaking apps (Thomas 2011). The decline of the gay bar is also due in part to the fact that individuals are beginning to explore and identify their sexuality at younger ages, thus making traditional LGBT spaces such as bars and clubs initially inaccessible, and because of the Internet, often unnecessary to many LGBT individuals (Fraser 2010:31).

The focus here is not only on how the Internet can act as a safety zone, but on the importance of the actions of the individual on the Internet, and how those actions relate back to the self and “everyday life.” It is essential to consider that “[t]he importance of a new space is viewed not as an end in itself, but rather as a contextual feature for the new creation of new

\textsuperscript{11} As many as 83\% of Internet users in the U.S. aged 18-29 use social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and Tumblr (Kuvin and Silvia 2013:335).
versions of the self” (Wakeford 2000:411), including selves that are in contradiction with other selves and the self in the actual world (Suh 2012:246). The Internet offers opportunities, and in some cases anonymity, for the creation or expression of new selves, or identities. The Internet has become a “significant social laboratory for experimenting with constructions and reconstructions of self” (Turkle 1996:180). While I suggest that individuals on the Internet have a measure of agency and control over their online identities (Turkle 1996:180), it is worth noting that the Internet as a socially constructed space influences the ways that identities are constructed in relation to it (Nakamura 2002:101-102). Because of the lack of real anonymity and the necessity to perform in a labyrinth of identity where authenticity is highly valued, the Internet has become a complex place, at times more complex for LGBT youth than the actual world (Fraser 2010:31). Bakardjieva states that there are multiple varieties of online involvement and that the opposite of virtual togetherness is not “real” community “but the isolated consumption of digitized goods and services within the realm of particularistic existence” (2007:238). The idea of multiple particularistic identities, their creation in relation to the Internet, and how these relate to isolated consumption and everyday life are what I consider to be the most interesting and relevant to my research and the online activities of the participants.

**Tumblr**

Although the Internet is largely considered to be a “text-based affair” (Wilbur 2000:46), it is increasingly becoming more visually oriented. Tumblr is a form of micro-blogging that relies primarily on visually based content such as drawings, photographs, videos and gifs, but also includes audio and textual elements. Tumblr has been increasing in popularity, especially with young adults, and has become one of the fastest growing social networking sites. In May

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12 The gif is perhaps one of the most important visual aspects of Tumblr, as it is used both in original content and in reblogged comments to communicate a variety of thoughts and emotions (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014:287).
2013 when it was purchased by Yahoo!, Tumblr contained 108.4 million blogs, with 75.8 million posts created every day (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014:285). In February 2014, almost a year later, Tumblr had 172 million registered blogs. In April 2014, that number increased to 180 million blogs with 82.3 billion posts created every day. Tumblr has unique attributes that distinguish it from traditional blogging formats, such as a tag system using key terms similar to the one used by Twitter, a jargon that is unique to the Tumblr environment (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014:287), templates that allow for the cultivation of a personal style (Fink and Miller 2013:2), and a decidedly different blogging format. In a traditional blog, an author writes a post and then adds a section for comments where the authors and readers might interact with each other. The post is the primary content and the comments are secondary, with the author acting as the sole voice of authority (Connell 2013:216). Tumblr, however, offers multiple authors and perspectives:

In contrast, posts on Tumblr are produced as blogs and reblogs—an original author posts a blog, but instead of commenting, other users reblog the original text and add their commentary. Often, this reblog is again reblogged, and so on, creating a multi-iterative, multiauthored text that proliferates in multiple directions at once. This format produces what I would argue is a more thoroughly democratic form of public participation; texts are hybrid, authors are multiple, and knowledge is generated collaboratively. [Connell 2013:216]

On Tumblr, the original content of the post presents in the center with the following comments dropping down beneath it. Above the post, the screennames of the original poster and additional posters stack (Figure 3).
Referring again to the public sphere formation of Jurgen Habermas, Tumblr presents as something close to a participatory democracy (Connell 2013:216). It is a democracy in the sense that any individual with a Tumblr can reblog any piece of content and add their commentary. On average, a Tumblr post gets reblogged nine times (Bell 2013:33). In addition, groups on Tumblr are generally conceived of as “fandoms,” groups of fans that share interest in particular movies, television shows, and novels, and an individual belongs to a fandom simply by claiming that identity (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014:287). Although not all Tumblr users choose to associate with any fandoms, the fandoms are a significant part of Tumblr culture. Individuals reblog content based on their fandom affiliations as well as interests in topics such as fashion, movies, music as well as topics related to academic theory, political protest, and publicity (Fink and Miller 2013:1-2). Like Fink and Miller, I am going to use a capital “T” in Tumblr to refer to the website as a whole, but use lowercase “tumblr” to describe types of blogs or individual blogs (2013:2). Some tumblrs are oriented towards certain fandoms or topics, while others are a conglomeration of topics that interest an individual. You can follow the tumblrs of those who

Figure 3. An example of a Tumblr thread.
share your interests, and their blogs and reblogs would appear on your dashboard, or home page. You can also track certain key terms (marked by a hashtag) that interest you, such as #LGBT or #queer, and view that content separate from your dashboard. Howard Rheingold described Tumblr as a “collage of found social objects that reflect [individual] vision or taste” (2012:140). Similarly, Lenore Bell had this to say regarding Tumblr: “If Facebook is the social network for online identification and authentication, and Twitter is for communication, Tumblr fulfills a different role: self-expression.” (2013:33). Twitter, which is focused on writing, is not as visually engaging as Tumblr. Facebook typically consists of social networks that are more grounded in the actual world, and therefore are more likely to be accessible by family or even potential employers, and as such Facebook profiles tend to become a heavily edited and regulated public face (Bell 2013:33). This tendency is particularly relevant for the profiles of LGBT individuals, who often feel they must hide their interests or even their very identity from family and potential employers. Even openly LGBT individuals may face an unspoken stigma against sharing LGBT content on Facebook. Tumblr becomes a haven for more candid material and specific interests tailored to the individual (Bell 2013:33). Or as Lenore Bell has stated: “Tumblr has become a unique platform for the expression of identities which do not openly express themselves in the physical world” (2013:34).

Tumblr also allows for the exploration of political identity and acts as “a means by which the lesbian/gay/transgendered/queer self can be read into the politics of representation and activism confronting homophobia” (Wakeford 2000:408). Although the typical Tumblr user would not be considered a political activist, (excepting the “social justice warrior”) it is not uncommon for LGBT individuals on Tumblr to use it not only as a medium to convey personal interests, but as a platform to express and share content related to LGBT specific issues. On
Tumblr, individuals and groups work to expose how prevalent heteronormativity is in everyday life, demonstrating a willingness to bring attention to sensitive issues (Lewin and Leap 2009:3). LGBT individuals, particularly in regard to Tumblr, also use the politics of representation online to confront other issues such as racial tension, sexual education, human trafficking, and governmental policies.

An unforeseen downside or negative aspect of Tumblr is revealed in how individuals work as gatekeepers to control the content and the commentary within Tumblr communities and fandoms. Once posted, and certainly once it is reblogged, a piece of content is hard to erase from the archives of Tumblr and the tumblrs of those who reblogged the content. What this means for the individual is that if they post an unpopular opinion, or make a claim that is proven to be false, this content is forever associated with that tumblr. Depending on the severity of the opinion or the content, users may be faced with hurtful comments attached to reblogs of their content or find anonymous hate mail, typically referred to as “anon hate” in their Tumblr inboxes. It is not uncommon for individuals in these circumstances to delete their tumblr, or to empty it of content and leave it abandoned. This type of cyberbullying behavior is not unknown even in the LGBT community on Tumblr.

Tumblr is often referred to as an LGBT social media space because LGBT members there are both numerous and prominent. The Internet in general and Tumblr in particular are often presented as a “queer oasis for the user away from an overbearing, hetero-normative world” (Bell 2013:31). Since its debut in 2007, Tumblr has been providing an image-oriented method for LGBT individuals to create intricate networks of digital self-representation (Fink and Miller 2013:1). Drew Daniel, an English professor at Johns Hopkins, observed that

The explosion of online Tumblr blogs, queer assemblages, and queer data collages that randomly pull together nonsequenced clusters of images, files, videos, and
screen grabs of found/unattributed textmessed conversations seems to me to model a 
dislocated futurepresent that is deliberately de-authorized, antihierarchal, and 
anonymous…. [2011:328]

I am not convinced that the collections/assemblages/data collages are necessarily de-authorized, 
as I have previously indicated with my discussion of gatekeeping, or that they are anonymous, 
because “despite the illusion of privacy, nothing one types is really truly private” (Tsang 
2000:432). But the work of many LGBT individuals on Tumblr is focused on stripping away the 
privileges and authority “out of a white, middle-class, cisgender,\(^{13}\) mass-consumption paradigm” 
and moving towards an “individually tailored, polyvocal, margin-based, and personalized form” 
(Fink and Miller 2013:2). LGBT individuals on Tumblr often go to great lengths to set up 
individually-tailored identities that contain contradictions. On Tumblr, presenting identities that 
appear to conflict acts as a badge of authenticity that shows a “deeply original and queer 
personality is at work” (Bell 2013:34). Bell presents the case of a Tumblr user who describes 
themselves as dyke, asexual, and femme. This badge of authenticity acts as an armor against 
potential accusations of insincerity or fraud (Bell 2013:35), which is perhaps the greatest sin in 
the LGBT Tumblr community. The creation of this badge is also a performance that promotes 
authenticity through the experiences or seeming expertise of the individual in order to induce 
trust (Hine 2000:142). The listing of privileged and underprivileged identities is a double-edged 
sword, according to Lenore Bell (2013:36), because the individual is demonstrating awareness of 
privileges they have in society while simultaneously attempting to rigidly quantify societal 
influences that are actually much more fluid. Conversely, many individuals who turn to the 
Internet and Tumblr as an anonymous safe-haven find themselves ridiculed online for being too 
honest about unique or conflicting identities. Communities of individuals such as the otherkin 

\(^{13}\) Cisgender is a term that refers to individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, 
their bodies, and their personal identity. Cis is the Latin prefix for “on the same side.” It is intended to compliment 
trans, the prefix for “across” or “over” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009:461).
and transethnic\textsuperscript{14} are often ridiculed by LGBT individuals who take offense at being compared to such groups (Bell 2013:34). These other groups are viewed as not existing within a structure of oppression and as potentially undermining the struggles for equality and acceptance that LGBT individuals engage in on a regular basis. In a sense, it is perhaps because these other groups only express their identity online and only face ridicule online that they are so strongly critiqued by LGBT individuals, many of whom cannot actually escape the “overbearing, hetero-normative world” (Bell 2013:31) or who find their online “queer oasis” violated by these seeming pretenders.

\textbf{Social Capital and Tumblr}

Activities on Tumblr can be understood in terms of social and intellectual capital. Social capital can be defined as the sum of actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from networks of relationships that belong to either an individual or a group (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998:243; Yoon and Wang 2011:106). These networks of relationships are considered a valuable resource for conducting social affairs (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998:243), with members of the network being provided with “the collectivity-owned capital, ‘a credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu 1986:249). Identity becomes social capital that promotes authenticity (Hine 2000:142). On Tumblr, social capital allows certain individuals to gain a measure of notoriety or respect for their actions and opinions, which others in their network emulate in order to gain social capital of their own. LGBT youth use resources on the Internet, including Tumblr, to construct a sense of “queer realness” and process identities and narratives that instruct them on how to appropriately perform LGBT identity (Gray 2009:125). However, as Nahapiet and Ghoshal have noted, social capital is

\textsuperscript{14} Otherkin are individuals who identify as other living beings, such as animals or mystical creatures. Transethnic individuals claim that they were born into the wrong ethnic group (Bell 2013:34).
not a universally beneficial resource because strong norms and mutual identification that may have a positive influence on actions can also limit openness of information and alternative ways of doing things that may have negative consequences (1998:245). A norm exists when the socially defined right to control an action is not held by the actor but by others (Coleman 1990). Although their professed intentions may be good, Lenore Bell demonstrates how some LGBT Tumblr bloggers are not helping to create a “queer oasis” but are instead creating “a complicated set of rules and mores that presents new complications” for LGBT Tumblr users (2013:31), as well as those who visit Tumblr in order to discover/learn about LGBT identity and the performance of LGBT identity. The creation of complicated identity rules occurs frequently in some aspects on Tumblr, as individuals with more social capital influence their networks in favor of certain actions and opinions while ignoring others. Bell astutely observed in regard to the queer social justice community on Tumblr that “despite [its] pride in being open and accepting, many of its practices are rigid, pedantic, and counterproductive” (2013:31).

Social capital relationship networks also constitute a valuable source of information, in the sense that who you know affects what you know and those with the most social capital are in control of the information channels and development of social norms (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998:252). And “where a norm exists and is effective, it constitutes a powerful though sometimes fragile form of social capital” (Coleman 1988:S104). Social capital is eroded by factors that make people less dependent on each other, such as other sources of support (Coleman 1990). Social capital in places like Tumblr is less significant to users who have alternative sources of support in other areas online or in the actual world. The Internet allows for the existence of massive networks of social capital, but these networks can also be very complex, and a larger number of individuals within the network reduce certain forms of social capital, such
as personal obligation or high status (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998:260). Given the preceding
discussion, a measure of trust is important in social relations. Many social relations, although
established for other purposes, are important channels of information that reduce the amount of
time and energy required for individuals to find and verify information on their own (Nahapiet
and Ghoshal 1998:252). This certainly includes information that they use in the actual world:
“People communicate and build social relationships with others in virtual communities and
obtain knowledge to satisfy their curiosity or resolve problems in the work place from virtual
communities” (Yoon and Wang 2011:106). Social capital resides in relationships, and
relationships are created through exchange (Bourdieu 1986).

Following the example of Nahapiet and Ghoshal, I use the term “intellectual capital” to
refer to the knowledge and knowing capability of a social collectivity (1998:245). Intellectual
capital is created through combination and exchange of existing intellectual resources, which
exists as explicit and tacit knowledge as well as capability of knowing (Nahapiet and
Ghoshal 1998:250). Intellectual capital is a social artifact whose knowledge and meaning are
always embedded in social contexts that are created and sustained by ongoing networks of
relationships (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998:253). These networks and individuals become trusted
sources of information for others, especially the Internet in general and Tumblr specifically, to
provide them with answers they may not have the ability to find in the actual world. Trust also
influences social and intellectual capital through the knowledge-sharing behavior of the
individual (Yoon and Wang 2011:107-108). An atmosphere of trust, including online
atmospheres, dictates how freely information will be exchanged between individuals who do not
want to worry about protecting themselves from the attacks or the opportunistic behaviors of
others. Many LGBT communities on Tumblr, not just the queer social justice community which
is the focus of Bell’s study (2013:32), believe that they are spaces “for truth and openness” but in actuality their spaces become platforms for their own opinions. This worry and desire for trust explains why there is such concern about authenticity (Hine 2000:142), and why individuals on Tumblr delete or abandon blogs when they are no longer seen as belonging to an atmosphere of trust. Receiving anon hate for an unfavorable opinion is a violation of trust. This violation of the atmosphere of trust and desire to be free of opportunistic behavior could also be why allies are often rejected by LGBT Tumblr users. Allies claiming membership or knowledge in ways that are not desirable to the LGBT community may be seen as a violation of trust. Although many allies may try to identify with LGBT individuals, they are not considered to have that identity by LGBT individuals. In regard to social and intellectual capital, identification is a resource that influences the motivation and degree of exchange between individuals. Individuals are more willing to share personal details and exchange knowledge when there is a sense of identification, or connectedness, with other members of a network (Yoon and Wang 2011:112).

This chapter explored the concept of identity as a plural construct, consisting of multiple identities, some of which are privileged and some are oppressed. Identities affect an individual’s perspectives and interactions with culture. Identity also has an influence on individual well-being, because having a clear and positive sense of identity means greater self-esteem and sense of worth. Having an identity within a community provides access to social opportunities and support. LGBT identity is also a plural identity, and it is both public and private in that all individuals are expected to perform their identity in public, but LGBT identities are often relegated or restricted to private locations in society. The LGBT community is also a plural community, with plenty of intragroup variety and even conflict, as evidenced particularly by the identity politics surrounding the inclusion of bisexuals. Virtual communities seemingly offer safe
places and spaces for LGBT individuals where they can escape the actual world to socialize with others and explore their identities. LGBT individuals have been using the Internet in this way almost from the very beginning of the commercial Internet. Tumblr has become a popular choice among young LGBT individuals as a place for free self-expression. Lately, however, many Internet users tend to use the Internet as a source for consuming information and less for socializing directly with others. Furthermore, conflict exists online in LGBT communities, taking place in the form of gatekeeping and the control of social and intellectual capital.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

Conceptually, I consider my research to be a qualitative accounting of how the Internet as a social space has influenced the identity, sense of community, and activities of eight LGBT individuals, all of whom reside in the southeastern United States, are relatively young, and/or are in college. I recruited the participants using a flyer that I designed and distributed in the Pensacola area and online. I used a semi-structured technique for both in person and online interviews that I recorded and later transcribed. I also engaged in participant observation on Tumblr.

My research population consisted of LGBT individuals met in person who live in and around the urban area of Pensacola, located on the far western side of the Florida Panhandle, as well as individuals met online who live in the Pensacola area. The participants also included one individual who was living in Little Rock, Arkansas, at the time of the research. The individuals sought out in person were located in various contexts within the confines of Escambia County, Florida, in consideration of convenience and travel expenses for me and the participants. The participants who participated in face-to-face interviews were individuals who volunteered to help me as a result of interacting with me after I delivered a presentation to a meeting of the University of West Florida (UWF) Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) or who responded to the flyers that I posted in various locations around Pensacola, namely the UWF and Pensacola State College (PSC) campuses.

Recruitment

I adapted my physical flyer (Appendix B) into an e-flyer and distributed it online through email contact and the social media websites Facebook and Tumblr. For gathering online
participants on Tumblr, I posted and periodically reblogged my participation e-flyer on the website. I know from personal experience that Tumblr has many LGBT members who post a variety of LGBT related content. Like Twitter, Tumblr uses the hashtag system to label and organize content. While not every Tumblr member uses these tags when posting or reposting content, many Tumblr users “track” or search for specific tags. In order to attract attention to my flyer I titled my Tumblr post “LGBT Identity and Wellness Study” and I used the following terms or tags: LGBT, GLBT, LGBTQ, LGBT Internet, LGBT Identity, LGBT Resources, UWF, University of West Florida, Pensacola, Florida, Well-being, LGBT Wellness, Anthropology. As a result, several individuals sent me a private message via Tumblr and I was able to set up interviews. Although the content is available to anyone looking at content labeled under those “tags,” my post gained the most attention through the UWF and University of West Florida labels. This does not surprise me, due to the nature of the Tumblr environment. Content tagged with a label becomes archived with similar content almost instantly and can be presented to a user in one of two ways. If the user is tracking the tag, they will see each piece of content individually presented in a vertical line of similar content that can be scrolled through continuously and seemingly forever. If the user is not tracking the tag, or does a search for it, the screen will be filled with layers of Tumblr blogs and content, as well as advertisements at times, relating to their search object. In both instances, content can be buried and hard to see. In the first instance, presentation of each piece of content one at a time can result in a piece getting lost in the vertical pile. In the second instance, the presentation of the content can seem overwhelming and create a situation where finding a particular piece of content is difficult. What this means for my research in regard to the labels I used for my Tumblr post is that a UWF or University of West Florida tag has less content, and therefore more accessibility, than LGBT or LGBTQ. This
could explain why the former tags garnered me more attention from potential participants than the latter. Also, it is likely that individuals who are more interested in UWF and research related to UWF may have been more interested in volunteering. I did have one self-identified heterosexual individual from UWF contact me via Tumblr about participating because they found the project interesting and potentially beneficial for LGBT students at UWF.

I also recruited interview participants through email contact and Facebook, although the Facebook recruitment was not a direct result of my own actions. I contacted a local LGBT interest group, known as the Gay Grassroots of Northwest Florida, through email, which included a copy of my e-flyer, and I also started following their Facebook page. After a couple weeks went by with no response, I was preparing to send a follow-up email when I noticed that they had posted a call for research participants from another individual on Facebook. I contacted the organization again through Facebook and that same day my flyer was posted on their Facebook page by the moderator and sent out through their listserv, bringing me to the attention of several individuals interested in learning more about my research.

The situation with Facebook and the participant from Little Rock were the only instances of what could be considered referential sampling that took place in my research, although my initial research design had proposed using such a model to recruit the majority of participants. I was concerned with ensuring participant confidentiality and comfort, so I did not ask any participants to give me the names or contact information of more potential participants. Instead, I asked the participants to share their experience with others who might be interested in participating in the research as well. Although a couple of the participants indicated a willingness to recruit their friends, no future participants mentioned being recruited in this way and largely indicated that they had come in to contact with a version of my flyer or the local LGBT interest
organization. The participant from Little Rock was referred to me by a mutual acquaintance, and not by another participant, who knew I was looking for LGBT individuals to speak with about the Internet and thought that the participant might enjoy speaking with me.

**Interview Structure**

The topics that I discussed with the participants included Internet access, the usage and variety of Internet resources, the Internet’s role in the coming out process or expression of sexual identity, and the possible ways the Internet has enabled connection with other LGBT individuals, as well as possible experiences in rural environments. I collected data focused on nominal variables gathered from dialogue initiated with participants about their demographic information and their experiences, forming an LGBT identity, and whether or not and to what extent the Internet had an influence on identity formation, as well as its use as a tool for social support. In addition to assessing the role of the Internet in sexual identity formation, I asked for opinions about what qualities, material goods, or services LGBT individuals feel are necessary in an environment to promote and maintain well-being in regard to their sexual identity.

All interviews conducted in-person, four in total, were in a one-on-one format in contexts that were agreeable and comfortable to participants. Due to the prominence and importance which the university has for many individuals in the area, all of my in-person interviews were conducted on the campus at the UWF Library with one exception, where an interview took place in a local Starbucks. The choice of the latter venue was a trifle surprising to me, in the sense that a Starbucks in the community seems less private than a room with a closed door in the campus library, but the participant chose the location and assured me that they had no problem discussing any of the topics that I had proposed. Although there were others present in the Starbucks at the time of the interview, the participant’s responses did not appear to be influenced by this in any
way. In the UWF Library, I conducted interviews in study rooms provided by the library that could be closed to create a seemingly sound-proofed room, which was very beneficial for my audio record of the conversation. Online participants, including a couple individuals who responded to the physical flyer, arranged to be interviewed online confidentially through email, Skype voice chat, and Google Docs. This accounted for four of my interviews. Like David Shaw (1997), I created an Internet screenname for the purposes of interacting with potential research subjects. While the populations reachable via the Internet are seemingly limitless, my initial focus was on reaching out to LGBT individuals in or from areas of the southern United States, with the hope that some of them would have experiences in rural areas. All participants were free to leave the research project at any point, and to request that their information be withheld from the results. Beyond the criteria I loosely established (LGBT identity and residency in the southeastern United States); all participants were over the age of 18, although their contributions may include anecdotal accounts from adolescence and childhood.

All participants contacted me online and indicated their willingness to participate or requested more information. At that point, either an in-person interview was scheduled at the convenience of the participant, or arrangements were made to conduct the interview electronically. In case of the latter, I emailed the informed consent form (Appendix C) and waited for them to be electronically signed and returned before making the arrangements for an electronic interview. In the event of in-person interviews, I presented each participant with the informed consent and media addendum forms before beginning the interview. If the participant neglected to read the documents before signing them, I reviewed the contents with them to ensure that they understood. At this point, I started to record the conversation. The interviews were semi-structured to ensure that each interview was guided and relatively consistent. I asked
the same basic questions of all participants, but the interviews were largely open-ended in that I allowed the conversation to drift or focus on a particular topic as needed. I began each interview by asking the participants for basic demographic information such as age, gender, sex, sexual orientation, and other identities claimed, as well as previous and current residential locations. Next, I asked each participant to describe for me in general anything they considered important about their experiences in regard to their sexual identity. Depending on the course the conversation followed, I would ask the questions sequentially from my guide, skip around, or even omit some questions. The remaining questions were as follows:

- Do you have access to the Internet? How do you access the Internet (computer, smartphone, other electronic device)? Where do you access the Internet?
- What do you currently use the Internet for? What websites do you visit? How often?
- When did you first start using the Internet? What did you use it for?
- Do you use the Internet as a way to express your LGBT identity? If yes, in what ways?
- Is there any difference in how you express your LGBT identity on the Internet and how you express it offline?
- Have you ever used the Internet to access LGBT support resources?
- Are LGBT support resources available in your community? Were LGBT support resources available in your previous communities?
- Do you, or have you ever, felt as if you belonged to a LGBT community either online or offline?
- Have you ever used the Internet to meet other LGBT individuals either online or offline?
- Do you talk about what you do online while offline?
I finished each interview by asking participants to identify items, people, services, and environments that they positively associated with LGBT identity.

The initial focus of my research project also included a quantitative element based on a study conducted by William Dressler and colleagues in Brazil (1998). This would have made my approach more of a mixed methods approach, touching on several aspects of rurality and mental health that I feel warrants more attention. In a multi-phase study, Dressler and a team of fellow researchers consisting of other anthropologists, health professionals, and psychologists interviewed and examined residents of a Brazilian city for their health histories, stress levels, and information regarding what made their lives healthy and happy (Dressler et al. 1998:428-429). Measuring for cultural consensus and cultural consonance, and in conjunction with their medical data, Dressler and his colleagues were able to determine that individuals belonging to the lowest socioeconomic status exhibited the highest range of stress, the worst health outcomes, and the lowest level of well-being. My intent had been to conduct a similar study with my LGBT participants with a particular focus on a rural versus urban comparison in order to determine if rural LGBT residents had a lower sense of well-being and less access to mental healthcare than their urban counterparts. However, of the eight individuals who participated in the interview portion of my research, none of them lived or had previously lived in a rural area. Ideal participants for my original research focus would have had some experience living in a rural location and would have used the Internet as a social support tool while living in rural areas that lack identifiable LGBT social groups or establishments.

**Data Collection and Coding**

The use of digital technology in anthropology, ethnography, or indeed any research is ubiquitous, as addressed by Boellstorff (2012:39). What made the use of technology particularly
valuable to my research is that not only did it provide me with practical tools for conducting both my interviews and my research efficiently, but it also gave me another space in which to interact with and observe the participants.

The in-person interviews were recorded using my Google Nexus 7 tablet through a voice recorder application. The program and the tablet together proved to be effective and provided a clear, intelligible record of each conversation. These records were held on the tablet in my personal possession until I removed them on my home computer. On my home computer I used the Wreally program Transcribe, which has to be used as an extension of the Google Chrome browser, to transcribe the audio records. I did not anticipate how time consuming transcription could be, but the Transcribe program made it easier. Transcribe allows you to play the recording, speed it up, slow it down, press pause, and even insert a timestamp using your keyboard. Transcribe also offers a dictation and voice recognition feature, but that requires you to listen to the recording and say what you hear at the same time. I found it easier to listen to the recording and type what I heard. For interviews conducted through email or Google Docs, the transcripts were created by the conversation and simply had to be copied and pasted. I used Google Docs as an interviewing tool after I read an article by a PhD candidate expounding on the beneficial, collaborative, and reflexive aspects of Google Docs as a platform for interviews (Robson 2012). Recording voice sessions on Skype required an extension program. I chose Evaer, which was reliable and provided a high quality recording. In order to protect participant confidentiality, the original audio records and finished transcripts were labeled with pseudonyms, stored as encrypted files on a secure, password protected USB flash drive, and stored in a locking file cabinet in my home.
My research also included an element of virtual ethnography, also referred to as netnography or cyber ethnography. Virtual ethnography allows the participant greater freedom to talk back to the researcher and to shape the direction of the research. In turn, virtual ethnography allows the researcher to feel closer to their participants (Harsin Drager 2012:9-10). In addition to using Tumblr to recruit potential participants, I also began to “follow” these individuals, as well as others, and their activities on Tumblr. The individuals whom I decided to follow were those who contacted me on Tumblr to be interviewed or who communicated interest in my research on my post asking for participants. Because these individuals had public blogs accessible to anyone with Internet access, I did not inform them that I was monitoring their activity. However, I will not be sharing their Tumblr usernames. I reblogged the LGBT related items blogged and reblogged by the participants to a private, password protected tumblr that I created with the account name “positivespacethesis.” All of the individuals I followed were in the 18-25 age range and the majority lived in Florida, with the exception of one individual who lived in California and another who lives in Colorado.

After several individuals contacted me via Tumblr or used Tumblr to indicate interest in my research, and a few individuals during in-person interviews mentioned how frequently they used the site, I began to follow these individuals and observe the content that they created and/or shared with others. I would casually observe these individuals on my Tumblr “Dashboard” on a daily basis, but regularly I would take time to go through each individual blog and make brief records of their posts for a given time period. I would choose a period of approximately 5-7 days and then go through each of my participant’s blogs and note the kind of content that they were creating or sharing with others, particularly noting content that was related to LGBT identity in any way. The prevalence of LGBT content, as well as LGBT users, on Tumblr has not gone
unnoticed by others and has been described as a collection of “queer assemblages” existing in a “de-authorized, antihierarchical, and anonymous” place (Daniel 2011:328). As I have previously discussed, these blogs are not entirely de-authorized or anonymous. Tumblr only has (as of February 18, 2014) 172 million blogs. I can say only because those blogs include multiple individuals who have multiple blogs, many blogs are abandoned, and the communities within Tumblr can be their own small worlds. As a personal example, I am a fan of the science fiction television show *Doctor Who*. On my personal Tumblr, I follow the Doctor Who tag, follow Doctor Who blogs (including the official Doctor Who Tumblr account), and reblog Doctor Who content. Through the Doctor Who “fandom” I encountered the personal Tumblr of an individual I shared two classes with as an undergraduate. Through my own interactions with the LGBT Tumblr community, LGBT content, and hearing the accounts of one of the participants, Christiana, I think it is safe to say that the LGBT community on Tumblr is similarly a "small world" where it may be unlikely but not impossible to come across someone you know. Or, at the very least, see the same individuals and their blogs repeatedly due to shared interests or participation in a community (Harsin Drager 2012:4). In addition, there are occasions on Tumblr in which users attempt (or succeed) to assert power to authoritatively claim knowledge and dictate who else is allowed to claim ownership of that knowledge.

One aspect of Tumblr that I noticed early on in my personal experience is the prevalence of what several of the participants referred to as “social justice posts.” That is, posts that are designed and/or shared with the explicit purpose of eliciting a response, support, or engineering some type of action in relation to a social justice issue. On Tumblr, most, if not all, of the major social issues affecting contemporary societies are being discussed. Topics include, but are certainly not limited to, racial tension, human trafficking, animal rights, government corruption,
sexual assault, and equality for LGBT individuals. This last social issue is particularly and
directly relevant to my research interests, given my work with LGBT participants. However, I
was also interested in the social justice issues supported by my LGBT participants. Many of the
participants actively support and share posts related to social justice issues on Tumblr. I was
given the distinct impression by one of the participants, Christiana, that while social justice posts
are an inextricable part of Tumblr, no one likes a “social justice warrior.” Social justice warrior
is a pejorative term for individuals who noticeably and argumentatively engage in social justice
discussions, and there is often the indication that these individuals are considered neither
reasonable nor truly interested in benefitting the issue they claim to support. There are several of
what I would call “fail blogs” on Tumblr (that number would increase dramatically when
including the entire Internet) devoted to pointing out seemingly inaccurate or outrageous
statements or posts from social justice blogs and bloggers (Orsini 2012). Christiana mentioned
that these social justice warriors also exist in relation to LGBT issues, described as individuals
who are too aggressive with their opinions, and often come from within the LGBT community.
CHAPTER IV
PARTICIPANTS

The participants whom I successfully interviewed were eight in number, between the ages of 18 and 29. Of those participants, only one identified his sex and gender as male while the remaining seven identified both their sex and their gender as female. I was not able to interview transsexual or transgender individuals. All of my interviews took place in Pensacola, Florida, or with individuals living in the Pensacola area, with the exception of the participant living in Little Rock, Arkansas. All of the participants have been given pseudonyms that I will use when I refer to them in this research. Scott, the participant from Little Rock, is interesting in that he is the only male participant in my research, the only one who does not and has not lived in Pensacola, and the only individual interviewed over Skype. His experiences offer interesting points of comparison and contrast in juxtaposition with the experiences of the Pensacola participants. In addition to conducting interviews with volunteer participants, I also conducted ethnographic activities on Tumblr. Three of the individuals I followed on Tumblr also participated in the interview process.

Miranda

Although I interviewed Miranda in person, she initially contacted me through a message on Tumblr, where she saw my flyer, after which we switched to email. An unfortunate aspect of Tumblr, from a researcher’s point of view, is that it does not keep a log for private conversations. Once you reply to a message on Tumblr, the original message disappears along with your answer until the other party sends their response back. For Tumblr, which is a microblogging platform, logging all conversations in a sent folder would diminish the relatively clean and streamlined functions of the website. For threaded conversations email is the better platform, and so I asked
all of the participants to correspond via email after initial contact. Miranda, as did all of the participants who found me on Tumblr, found the post by monitoring the #UWF tag on Tumblr. Because #UWF has less content associated with it than a tag like #LGBT this made it easier to find.

Miranda was 20 years of age at the time of the interview, and identified as female and a lesbian. When asked, Miranda was not able to provide any other identities that she associated within her life. Miranda moved to Pensacola from Jacksonville, Florida, in order to attend UWF and pursue a degree in the social sciences. In Jacksonville, Miranda identified as an ally and was the president of her high school Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), but she eventually realized that she had other feelings and came out when she came to college. Miranda has been with her girlfriend since her freshman year, and she mentioned that they are both active on Tumblr and monitor LGBT related content on the website. During the interview, Miranda referred to the six stages of sexuality outlined by Vivienne Cass’ identity model (1979)\textsuperscript{15} and said that she was “a huge Stage Five,” described by Cass as corresponding with “Identity Pride.” Social media and access to the Internet are important aspects of Miranda’s daily life, particularly Tumblr. It was Miranda’s interview that heightened my awareness of how important Tumblr can be in the lives of some LGBT individuals. Miranda also has Twitter and Facebook accounts, but she professed not to like the format of Twitter and considered Facebook to be a space where she was expected to present her professional face. Miranda admitted that she has the tendency to post pornographic images on her Tumblr page and so she tries to make it hard, although perhaps not impossible, to find her account. While recognizing the importance of professionalism and meeting certain standards, Miranda also wants to stay true to herself:

\textsuperscript{15} Vivienne Cass developed a model to describe the process of LGBT identity development that features six stages: Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride, and Identity Synthesis.
But it's not like I'm hiding anything, also. It's more of just wanting to portray myself as something, especially since I'm getting to that point where I'm going to need to start applying to grad school. Yeah, it's not a huge difference and I hate when people are like that which is probably why I'm not so different. I hate when people are one way on the Internet and different in person. It's very hypocritical. But I know that's where the Internet is that escape of where you can be yourself. But that's just the way I am, I think that everyone just needs to be upfront and outright but that's where society comes into play with how they can be looked at differently. Some people aren't okay with that.

While Miranda did state that she hated the hypocrisy of presenting a different face on the Internet than the one you present in the actual world, she also acknowledged that this is necessary for some individuals and that the Internet plays a very important role in their lives. Miranda stated firmly, “But that's why I think the Internet is such a great thing. People that are LGBT and maybe not out about it can hide behind this computer screen and look up stuff without their parents knowing it or stuff like that. So, the Internet is an escape in a good way.”

**Holly**

Holly also found me through the #UWF tag on Tumblr. Holly is 19 years old and identifies as female. Although she used to identify as bisexual, she describes her current sexuality as unsure because she has been learning to separate sexual attraction from romantic attraction. Holly came to Pensacola to attend UWF and pursue a degree in the performing arts, but her hometown is Miami, Florida. When asked about her personal sexual identity formation process, Holly described middle school as a time when she was “really fascinated and horrified that I could feel the same thing for dudes and women” and that she was unsure how to “tie it into myself and to my personality” because she had always been taught that was “not how it should be.” “But,” Holly continued, “as time went, I realized that it’s okay, it’s normal. I would go on forums online and then I would be like ‘Okay, other people do feel this, it's not just me. It's normal.’” Holly began using the Internet in middle school to research homosexuality, and now she uses the Internet, particularly Tumblr, to explore issues and lifestyles related to
transgendered individuals and asexuality. Although Holly described herself as supportive of all
types of sexuality, she admitted that she typically has difficulty expressing her own sexuality and
that she likes to have a good connection established in order to express her identity freely. For
Holly, Tumblr is a great place for open conversation and establishing connections. “If you just
put a little hashtag on a Tumblr post people are going to get drawn to it, you’re gonna talk to
people, send messages and you open up this line of communication and from then on you can
connect to other social media websites and actually create a friendship off of it.”

Scott

Scott has the distinction in this research of being the only participant who did not reside
in the Pensacola area, as well as being the only male. Scott lives in Little Rock, Arkansas, and
was told about my research by a mutual acquaintance. He contacted me through email, I sent him
a copy of my flyer, and we arranged to conduct the interview via voice chat on Skype. Scott also
has the distinction of being the only participant who interacted with me through Skype. Scott is a
24-year-old gay male who also describes himself as a Southerner, a student, and an educator.
Scott was raised in southern Missouri in a conservative and religious household. From a very
early age, Scott realized that he was not like his male contemporaries. While they wanted to
“play with action figures and play all sorts of sports,” Scott preferred to read books, draw and
color, or write stories. At the time, he considered the sorts of activities he enjoyed to be more
associated with girls. As a result, Scott often struggled with feelings of inadequacy. “When will I
be a real boy?” Scott remembers asking his mother when he was about seven years old.
Eventually, Scott began secretly reading books on LGBT topics and found himself visiting chat
rooms online. Although he initially felt guilty about visiting gay chat rooms, Scott felt compelled
to find others who could understand and relate to what he was going through. Scott recalled that
at that time in his life “chat rooms were really, really important” in his process of unpacking what it was that made him different and feel unsure about being a “real boy.”

**Christiana**

Christiana contacted me after I gave a presentation about my research to the UWF GSA. Christiana is female and 20 years of age, and she considers her sexual identity as “stuck somewhere in the badlands between bisexual and pansexual.” When asked to describe these badlands, Christiana described “a place where the pansexuals that are out and about are very judgmental” and where “there is something about [pansexuals] that twist a lot of people the wrong way.” Christiana also described herself during the interview as a Florida native and as “nerdy”. In reference to her sexual identity, Christiana mentioned that she portrays and discusses it differently around her friends as opposed to her family. She mentioned that although she is currently dating a man, she started dating girls in middle school, her “girl dating streak,” and that her “really traditional” family was generally unwilling to talk about Christiana’s girlfriends. Her friends were a different matter. Before transferring to UWF, Christiana attended college at a private Catholic school. There she was part of the “lesbi brigade” and had a group of friends who were very accepting of her dating girls and the occasional boy. Christiana has found a similar group of friends at UWF inside the GSA, with “friends who don’t care” whom she dates or desires. Although her lifestyle is not easy to discuss with her family, Christiana has never worried about not fitting into the heteronormative role; “It was like ‘Hey, guys are cool. And boobs are great.’ I was okay and didn't ask any questions.” While she was growing up, her family did not have regular access to the Internet, but these days Christiana describes her life as being on Tumblr. On Tumblr, she gets the same kind of support for her sexual identity that she

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16 Pansexuality refers to a sexual orientation that encompasses an attraction towards all, including non-transgender and transgender males and females, intersex individuals, and gender fluid individuals (Hale Gonel 2013:36-37).
receives from her group of friends in GSA: “On Tumblr it is what it is. I like the people that I like and everyone is like ‘Okay that's good enough’.”

**Rose**

Rose, an 18-year-old female, is also a Florida native who lived in Panama City before coming to Pensacola. Rose contacted me to provide an interview after seeing one of my research flyers on the UWF campus. She did not have the time to meet with me in person, so we collaborated in a Google Docs file to construct the interview. Rose typically does not worry about defining her sexual identity, but bisexual is perhaps the best identifier “based on personal experiences.” Rose has identified as heterosexual for the majority of her life, describing her sexual partners as mostly men, before admitting in her first semester at college that she was also interested in dating women.

I began considering the possibility of women as sexual interests when I found time and time again that I wasn’t getting what I wanted out of heterosexual relationships. I’ve found women attractive for as long as I can remember, but I didn’t have my first relationship with another woman until I came to university when I was 18. That was also a really confusing time.

Rose admits that she still finds both women and men attractive and has recently had emotionally fulfilling experiences with men. Rose is still exploring her sexuality and is “content without a definite answer.” Rose spends most of her time online with Tumblr, which is her go-to resource for entertainment, social contact, and news. She uses Tumblr to express her sexual identity by occasionally creating original text posts, but typically she reblogs the posts of others with an eye towards selecting posts that “promote a pro-tolerance, pro-LGBTQIA agenda” or to “signal boost important legislation that pertains to the civil rights of any group.” Rose stated her belief that Tumblr is a demonstration of the power that the Internet can have in spreading a message.
Emily

I conducted Emily’s interview through email, and she never mentioned what brought my research to her attention. Emily is a 29-year-old female who lives in the Pensacola area, but she has also lived in a variety of cities: San Diego, CA; Atlanta, GA; Provo, UT; Biloxi, MS. Emily described herself as a lesbian who was a “tom boy growing up,” but did not come out until she was 24. Emily attended the Mormon Church for 10 years before leaving so that she could live “openly gay.” Emily was one of the few participants who did not mention Tumblr, perhaps due to the age difference between her and the majority of the other participants, but did mention having Facebook and Instagram accounts. On Facebook, Emily openly supports organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the It Gets Better Project, and Give a Damn. Emily does try to “inform others of the progress that is constantly being made” and has suggested to her closest friends that they also support these organizations. This is the furthest extent to which Emily is willing to express her sexual identity online and in the actual world, however, because she is currently in the United States Air Force. It is her service in the military that has provided her the opportunity for extensive travel across the United States, but it is also because of her military career that she is unable to put “everything ‘out there’” in regard to her sexual identity. “Once I’m out of the military,” she stated, “I will be much more open and public.”

Tiffany

Tiffany met me for her interview in a Starbucks in Pensacola after receiving notice of my research from Gay Grassroots. Tiffany is a 26-year-old female, originally from Connecticut, who identifies herself as gay. Tiffany has always known that there was something that made her different from other girls her age: “You know, you think you like boys and you think you're supposed to like boys so you do, kind of,” but she went on to describe how she would get more
excited to see and be around certain girls. Tiffany came out when she was very young, but not before she went through a difficult time where she thought she was “regular, straight, but have these crushes on girls.” While the Internet did not have a huge influence on how Tiffany’s identity developed, it does play a part in her identity now and she could easily see how the Internet and the media can affect the identities of others: “I think [the Internet] is positive. I don’t use it enough. Because I would be a happier person if I embraced it more and looked up the many people who are around that are gay instead of trying to get along with other people who are not like me.”

Carrie

Carrie contacted me when she saw my flyer after it was distributed through Gay Grassroots. Carrie is a 24-year-old female currently residing in Pensacola, which is her hometown, although she has also lived in Denver, CO. Carrie identifies as pansexual and came out when she was 20 years old, which was a rough time for her.

I have had a lot of negative experiences relating to my sexual identity, especially since my coming out in 2010. Mostly with my family and with my church/religious affiliation. But since then, I feel like I've become more self-reliant and stronger. I've reached out to other people with similar lives and experiences as mine and made a new family and many good friends through lots of different resources.

Carrie also does not use Tumblr, but does use Facebook and the Internet in general to keep up with local LGBT news. On Facebook, Carrie belongs to pansexual support groups, groups for “FTM sweethearts,” and equality interest groups such as the It Gets Better Project. In the past, she has visited LGBT support chat rooms, which is where she met her best friend, as well as LGBT dating sites such as FTMRelationship.com, which is where she met her transman fiancé.
Of the six tumblrs I followed, three of them belonged to participants who were involved in the interview process (Miranda, Holly, and Christiana). The other three were individuals who expressed initial interest in my research or in being interviewed, but who did not follow through after my attempts to contact them. I will not be referring to these individuals by their Tumblr screennames. On Tumblr, the URLs to individual tumblrs are created by simply adding .tumblr.com to the screenname. For example, the tumblr HRCGear, which is the tumblr specifically for the HRC shop, can be visited at hrcgear.tumblr.com. Although I realize this may present a challenge because the reader cannot visit the source of the posts or the images I will be describing and sharing, this is no greater leap of faith than trusting that I have accurately and faithfully reported the transcripts of the interviews with the participants. I am more interested in confidentiality and maintaining Tumblr as a “queer oasis” for those individuals involved in my research who use Tumblr as such. I will refer to the tumblrs of my interview participants by the pseudonyms that I gave them earlier, and the others will be referred to by a pseudonym that is a derivative of their screenname. On the first week of each month starting from November 2013 to April 2014 I visited each participant’s tumblr and accounted for how many posts they were making each day and if this included LGBT related content.

On Tumblr, the presentation or theme of each tumblr can be customized. This includes the presentation of a profile picture, a biography or “About Me” section, and even the layout of the content. Most users on Tumblr prefer layouts that mimic the dashboard with a narrow vertical presentation of images that a user navigates by scrolling up or down. However, some prefer layouts that are horizontal or that completely fill the screen. The profile picture is seen on the dashboards of others regardless of whether it appears on your personal tumblr, as another way of
identifying and sorting the content that flows through the dashboard. Users can choose to embed additional images in the “About Me” section. The “About Me” portion of a Tumblr theme is optional, but this is where individuals have the chance to present themselves within or outside the context of the posts and reblogs.

In her “About Me” section, Miranda describes herself as 20, gay, taken, a UWF student, and a Ravenclaw. She also includes a notice, in bold font and all capitalized letters, that she posts pornography on her tumblr. This warning is perhaps appropriate, because Miranda frequently posts portraits of nude women or women together in intimate positions. Miranda also posts LGBT news, such as an image congratulating Illinois for passing marriage equality legislation, and LGBT supportive images and statements such as the rainbow Olympic banner that Google unveiled in its doodle in response to Russia’s anti-gay stance during the Sochi Winter Olympics. Occasionally, Miranda posts original content of her own such as a picture of her girlfriend that she tagged #girlfriend #gay, which was followed two days later by a text post that simply said “I miss my girlfriend.” Those posts occurred during UWF’s winter break. The winter break was also the point at which Miranda seemed to be reblogging the most content on Tumblr, which indicates that she was spending more time on Tumblr during the break when she was with her family and she was away from UWF and her girlfriend. In the first weeks of December and January, which roughly coincide with the UWF winter break, her daily average for posts were 16 and 12 respectively. In November her daily average had been 4 and in February it was 2. On average, Miranda posts and reblogs 6 pieces of content each day.

Holly also has an “About Me” section, where she lists her age and her affiliation with UWF. She also lists her love of the humanities, feminism, sex education, and a variety of other things. Holly is unique in that she posts a significant number of original and personal posts as
opposed to only reblogging. Many of these posts exhibit enthusiasm for her job on campus or frustration related to others and her sexuality. Holly also posts a large number of selfies, or self-portraits, on her tumblr. This is unusual in my experience, because while some individuals will use a personal picture for their profile picture, most Tumblr users use images related to their interests in their profiles. Very few will habitually post personal pictures like Holly, who posts 3 personal posts, including selfies, daily. On average Holly posts and reblogs 14 pieces of content, including her personal posts and selfies, each day.

Christiana does not include her age in her “About Me,” but does identify herself as a Taurus, a Starcraft player, and a student. She also suggests that other users initiate friendly conversation with her. Christiana averages 22 reblogs daily, suggesting that she was accurate when she described herself as living on Tumblr. Christiana is more typical of the Tumblr users I have encountered in my experience, who rarely or never creates original posts or share photos from their personal lives. Christiana reblogs a wide variety of items related to her personal interests and content related to LGBT identity, feminism, celebrities, politics, and support resources. These posts particularly focus on issues affecting bisexuals and pansexuals, both on and off Tumblr. Christiana also posts jokes, humorous images, and memes related to LGBT topics.

I followed and interacted with several individuals only on Tumblr, but the Tumblr users described here are those who contacted me about my research directly. Two of them expressed interest in participating in the interview process, but neither responded to follow-up messages. These two individuals both mentioned living in Florida; one in particular said that they lived in Pensacola. The other individual “liked” the Tumblr post I created about my research. This same individual also did not provide an interview, and they did not identify where they live.
Fan Girl had expressed an interest in participating in an interview, but did not respond to follow-up messages. On Tumblr, Fan Girl describes herself as a 20-year-old UWF student who is obsessed with a cartoon show but does not indicate what she might consider her sexual identity to be. During the observation weeks, Fan Girl posted one photo of herself, but the rest of her activities on Tumblr consisted of reblogging. In addition to reblogging content related to her personal interests, Fan Girl also reblogged images of LGBT characters from television shows, LGBT celebrities, LGBT affirmative statements, and photos of LGBT couples.

Homo Filly is another individual who expressed interest in my research and in being interviewed, but who did not respond to follow-up messages. On Tumblr, Homo Filly describes herself as female, 20 years old, asexual, and a Florida resident. Homo Filly follows these descriptors with a list of all the things she likes as well as a list of all the fandoms she belongs to. Homo Filly goes through periods of almost no activity on her tumblr to periods of significant daily activity on Tumblr. In November 2013 her daily average was 0 and in December 2013 her daily average for posts was 1 post per day. In January 2014, her daily average was 30 posts per day. Homo Filly posts photos of LGBT and LGBT supportive celebrities such as Lady Gaga, Carmen Carrera, and Laverne Cox. Homo Filly also posts asexual affirmative statements, LGBT resources, and LGBT jokes. Homo Filly referred to another tumblr account that she maintains that features images and gifs of LGBT couples in intimate positions without revealing the genitalia. Although having multiple tumblrs is a common occurrence, Homo Filly is the only participant on Tumblr to acknowledge having a secondary blog.\textsuperscript{17}

Fabulous World may be a secondary blog, because the only content that it reblogs is LGBT content. There are no personal posts or reblogs indicating other personal interests or any

\textsuperscript{17} A secondary blog is any blog created in addition to the original/primary blog. Secondary blogs offer different features than primary blogs (http://www.tumblr.com/docs/en/blog_management).
details about the owner of Fabulous World. The owner of Fabulous World does indicate that he is a male and describes himself as “So Homo.” Fabulous World shares LGBT news posts, affirmative images and text posts, posts about LGBT celebrities, LGBT support resources, statistics relevant to LGBT individuals, as well as photos of LGBT individuals and couples.

The next chapter highlights some of the unique comments, activities, and experiences of these five interviewees, three interviewee and Tumblr uses, and three Tumblr users as well as the commonalities and trends that I found while interacting with them. This discussion will rely on content introduced during the literature review, as well as new information as needed, in order to establish how the Internet in general and Tumblr in particular act as an important resource in the lives of these LGBT individuals.
CHAPTER V
BADLANDS AND POSITIVE SPACES

During the interview process, the participants all described a number of experiences, both positive and negative, in relation to their identities, social interactions, and use of the Internet. The sexual identity formation process is ongoing and fluid for many of the participants, as their own words attest. For many of these young LGBT individuals, the Internet has been a wonderful and important part of that process. A couple participants made statements describing their lives as being primarily online. These same participants, as well as others, particularly referred to Tumblr as a positive place online for safe LGBT expression. However, just as there has been conflict in the actual world due to their sexual identity, discord also exists online for LGBT individuals, occasionally stemming from within LGBT communities. First is an accounting of family and religion according to the participants, which offers a glimpse into their early lives. This is followed by discussion of identity, the Internet, identity online, community, community online, and ends with a consideration of well-being.

Family

Although I did not explicitly ask the participants to talk about their families in regard to their sexual identity, each of them had something to say about their families, positive and negative.

Scott lived with his mother until he was 14 and she condemned him for being gay. He then moved in with his father and stepmother. His father was not supportive, but tolerated Scott’s sexual identity. Scott’s stepmother on the other hand was “just like all about it.” Scott remembers, “She didn't necessarily understand what homosexuality was about but she went out and bought me eyeliner and stuff and when I came home I was like ‘Okay, I'll try this out’.”
Although this home environment was a vast improvement, Scott still encountered some difficulties with his sexual identity in his father’s community: “On my first date I was holding hands with a guy at the county fair and got punched in the face.” Scott moved on from that incident and, with the support of his stepmother, established himself in the local community and built a network of friends.

Tiffany reports an easier time coming out to her family because she had an aunt who was gay. Although she was scared to tell her family, she eventually told them when she was in high school, and they took it very well.

Miranda reported a similar experience. She had to warm up to the idea of her new identity and sharing it with her family, and when she told them they responded with “Alright, about time.” No one in her family was surprised, Miranda said. In fact, they claimed they had been “waiting for it.” The one family member who does not offer support to Miranda is her grandmother, but this does not bother Miranda, who attributes her grandmother’s feelings to “a generation type thing.” Initially Miranda’s sister was against accepting her new sexual identity, but Miranda eventually wore her down. Miranda thanks the Internet for helping her, actually, and the popularity of Macklemore’s song “One Love.” Now whenever her sister hears that song, Miranda says, she gets teary-eyed and says she’s proud of Miranda for being gay and true to herself.

Although Christiana came out to her family, and they tolerate her sexual identity, Christiana actively changes her conversation and her behaviors when she is around her family, which she described as being “really traditional.” Christiana added, “We don’t talk about any kind of sexual identity in my family and there is just no reason to. I don't talk about my girlfriends with my family; that would be weird. They'd probably think it's weird; I don't want to
talk to them about it. I find other things to talk about like books, and tattoos, and piercings.” Christiana relies on her friends as an outlet where she can talk about who she is dating and express her sexual identity.

Rose mentioned that her parents and close friends are “all incredibly open-minded, warm-hearted, and accepting of me in every respect.” Carrie, on the other hand, said that when she came out she had to deal with a lot of negative consequences in regard to how her family reacted. Holly simply said that telling her family about her non-heterosexual identity was “not easy.”

**Religion**

Holly was not the only participant to express concern for how religion impacted her sexual identity and expression of her identity. Sexual identity formation for Scott in particular was heavily impacted by religion. Scott describes his childhood as a “kind of quasi-Southern Baptist upbringing.” It was because of this upbringing, Scott stated, that initially there was not a lot of acceptance to his sexual identity, particularly from his mother. Scott recounts a conversation that he had with her:

I remember actually coming home from seeing Lord of the Rings and I had watched it with my mom. On the way home in the car ride she said "Sam and Frodo's relationship, that was really weird." I had read the books and I was just curious as to what she meant so I said, "Well Mom, what do you mean?" And she said "Well, it seemed like they were, you know, homosexual." And I said "Oh, well, in the books they weren't." She's like, "I know, but how they portrayed them it seemed like they were homosexual." And there was kind of an awkward pause and then she kind of kept staring forward and then she said, "Son, do you think you are like that at all?" And I was like twelve or thirteen at the time and I was starting to unpackage all of this; the fact that I was gay or am gay. And I said "No, no" I kind of just blew it off, and she said, "Well you know, that's one of the greatest sins that there is and ever will be." And I thought it was ridiculous at the time but I was also like, "Okay, well this means that I need to keep things a little under wraps."

Emily was a Mormon for 10 years. She eventually chose to leave the church because she wanted to be openly gay and she felt that the Mormon Church was unsupportive. Carrie also
reported having negative experiences with her religion after coming out, but declined to say what those experiences were or what her religious denomination was.

Miranda and Christiana had more positive, or simply less negative, experiences. Miranda was raised in a Christian household and was sent to a Christian middle school, and she still keeps in contact with teachers and students from that school, but she keeps them at a distance and does not discuss her sexual identity with them. Before coming to UWF, Christiana spent one year at a private Catholic college and reported that it had a wonderful, accepting atmosphere with its own LBT community that she referred to as the “lesbi brigade.” The college was an all-girl institution, and it was not uncommon for girls to date other girls while at college, even if they dated only men before and after college according to Christiana. She refers to this kind of girl, who she felt did not continue to be bisexual after college due to biphobia, as GUG (Gay until Graduation).

**Community**

The participants represent a variety of levels of involvement with their local communities, levels that have changed for each of them over time. Scott recounted how in high school and early in college being a member of the LGBT community was very important to him, but as he grew older that aspect of his life became less important. Scott still feels connected to his local LGBT community in Little Rock, but added that the loudness of the community is kind of petering out: “I guess we're just assimilating.” By assimilation, Scott likely means that LGBT individuals in Little Rock are simply living their lives alongside their heterosexual counterparts. When asked if this assimilation was a good thing, Scott replied “Personally I believe yes [it’s a good thing]. I think it's definitely controversial, but I think with the repeal of certain sections of
DOMA and Don't Ask/Don't Tell and gays on primetime television they're not just stereotypes. I think it's a very positive sign.”

Tiffany likes knowing that there is a gay social scene established at local Pensacola venues such as Emerald City and The Cabaret, but she does not go to those places often. Tiffany also spoke positively of some of the LGBT support resources in Pensacola such as HIVevolution, but expressed a desire for more social opportunities for the LGBT community:

It’s all good to have a community center that tests for AIDS and stuff because people need that. But I'm not going to hang out at a place I'd get tested for AIDS at. It's kind of like the community is kind of like for help, but it's not for, like, I don't know, it's either for partying or really not partying- like a doctor’s office. I don't see any middle ground.

Tiffany did acknowledge that the email newsletter from Gay Grassroots often advertises social opportunities, but that she does not avail herself of them. Carrie also acknowledged that she receives the Gay Grassroots newsletter and that she is aware that Pensacola has LGBT community resources, but she does not use them either. Emily also does not use Pensacola’s LGBT resources or really associate herself with the LGBT community in Pensacola, preferring the company of a handful of close LGBT friends.

Miranda does not participate in the LGBT community in Pensacola, although she is aware of it, and sticks to the LGBT community that is present on the UWF campus. Miranda described the UWF GSA as “so huge and everyone knows on campus that GSA is a thing and that they are always everywhere.” Christiana also belongs to the UWF GSA and listed it as the only example of LGBT community that she participates in, being largely unable to access the larger Pensacola LGBT community due to transportation issues. Although Holly is not a member, she only had positive things to say about the UWF GSA and its impact on campus and in the lives of individual LGBT students. In regard to the LGBT community in Pensacola as a whole, however, Holly had this to say:
I don't think in this area there is that much representation and support in the community. I know that we do have our GSA and that there are individual students who identify as being openly gay or openly transgendered or anything and that they always open themselves up as a support group. But to say that there are really large organizations with numerous amounts of people, I can't say that there are.

Other Pensacola participants acknowledged the existence, if not membership, of larger LGBT organizations and community in the Pensacola area. This could be due to their membership in the UWF GSA or residency off-campus. Holly was the one on-campus participant who did not associate with the GSA.

**Identity**

During the interviews, I asked each of the participants about their gender identity, sex identity, and sexual identity. Each of the participants identified themselves as having both a gender and a sex that were the same, masculine-male or feminine-female, with the exception of one participant, Tiffany, who professed to be unaware that there was a difference between gender and sex and simply described herself as female. In regard to sexual identity, three of the participants described themselves using the term gay: Scott, Miranda, and Tiffany. Miranda initially described herself as a lesbian, but then changed her mind: “I know the proper term is, like, lesbian, but I actually hate that word so I’d rather just, like, say ‘Hey, I’m gay’…sometimes I say like ‘queer’ or homo’.” Tiffany used the word gay to describe herself and any individual who was not heterosexual, and never once used another term such as lesbian or any other derivative of the acronym LGBT. Rose described herself as bisexual, but noted that she typically chooses not to claim a specific identity. Emily referred to herself as a lesbian. At the time of the interview, Holly stated that she found it hard to share and express her sexual identity and that currently she was unsure about what her sexual identity might be, but she was exploring the possibility of relationships with no connection between sexual attraction and romantic attraction.
Holly did say that she used to consider herself to be bisexual. Carrie described herself as a pansexual who used to be a lesbian. Christiana described herself as being in “the badlands between bisexual and pansexual” due to the fact that there is suspicion of bisexuals and pansexuals both outside and inside the LGBT community. “I do want to express my sexuality towards things out of the gender binary,” Christiana said, “but at the same time I come from a place where the word [pansexual] is very scarce.” Later in the interview Christiana expressed a desire for a time when there would not be a need for her to have to explain herself or her feelings:

Lots of people ask me my sexual identity, sometimes, and I'm like "Consenting adults are good, generally." Sometimes I just wish it weren't necessary. I wish everyone were just super okay. I understand that some people aren't and I try to look at the world through rose colored glasses, but at the same time sometimes I feel like there are so many specifications. And I'm like, what? A cisgendered, biromantic, pansexual- too many words! So many words it hurts my head, but at the same time I understand the need to express who you are and express who you are in a variety of ways because there is more to you than there is to you.

But despite any current difficulties she may have with her identity and expressing it, Christiana still declared “pansexuality, I think, is a great thing. You know, all sexual qualities are a great thing. Whatever, you like who you like.”

Not all of the participants were forthcoming about identities other than their sexual identity, perhaps in part because they wanted to focus on the point of my research. Only two of my interview participants described other identities that they associated with themselves. Christiana mentioned that she was a proud Florida native as well smart and a nerd. Scott simply described himself as a “Southerner, student, and educator.”

In regard to his sexual identity, however, Scott did stress that it has become “less salient in my personality and in my friend groups” as he has grown older. At one point during her interview, when discussing interconnectedness in the self and in the community, Christiana
stated, “I identify as several things. I am more than my sexuality, I am more than my gender, I am more than my sex, I am more than my family.” At times, according to Christiana, it seems that “the LGBT overwhelms other things,” which is usually good but sometimes it is distracting from real issues or preventing the formation of solid relationships: “If you find someone in the LGBT community that has nothing else in common with you then what are you really friends for? You know? I can talk to you about LGBT issues, but literally nothing else. I can't deal with that.” Later, while discussing LGBT community, Christiana said:

I was thinking actually that I feel kind of weird because I don't see myself as big in the LGBT community. Everything for me takes the same amount of effort needed. I've never really had to sit and think about my place in the LGBT community and my contributions because they are pretty much the same as my contributions for everything else. Maybe it's just because-- maybe my sexuality isn't as important to me. Well not as important to me, but isn't a big a thing as everything else.

Miranda and Tiffany both made similar comments alluding to the fact that they felt that there were more important aspects in their life other than their sexual identity, but neither provided any examples.

Internet

All of the participants had access to and frequently used the Internet, although the activities that they engaged in there were diverse.

Scott used the Internet mostly as a function of his student research, to check the news, and answer email. Although he had frequented chat rooms when he was younger, that aspect of his life became less important once he developed a supportive network of his friends and family in the actual world. During the interview Scott reported that lately he was not really connected to the LGBT Internet community because he had other support resources in place.
Tiffany accesses the Internet from her work computer, home computer, and from her smartphone. “I’m pretty much always on the Internet,” she said. Tiffany uses the Internet to research topics that interest her, follow the news, watch YouTube videos, check email, and play games. Participating in social media such as Facebook is part of her job, but she keeps two separate accounts: one for work and one for personal usage. Tiffany also uses Instagram and Twitter. Tiffany has been using the Internet since she was in middle school, but she does not believe that it influenced her sexual identity formation. However, Tiffany does admit that she understands how the media and the Internet could play a role in how individuals express their sexual identity. For instance, Tiffany mentions that she has an aunt who is gay and who did not come out until after Ellen DeGeneres did. Ellen, Tiffany says, gave her aunt the courage to admit her true identity.

Miranda describes herself as “on the go a lot,” and so she primarily accesses the Internet from her smartphone. When she does find herself at a computer, which typically occurs when she needs to do schoolwork, Miranda still finds herself accessing social media. Miranda claims she has to “get [social media] out of the way” before she can be productive. Her favorite social media sites are Facebook and Tumblr, but she does use others such as Instagram. “I’m not like, ‘When I get on I've gotta look at gay things’,” Miranda says, but she does admit that she often finds herself looking at LGBT content, particularly related to transgenderism. Although Miranda is not transgendered herself, she is “very fascinated” by the process and the individuality of transition. The #FTM tag on Tumblr is one that she visits frequently because she likes to read the stories and view the images of individuals going through the process. Miranda admits that she even follows “a bunch of gay boards” on Pinterest and has come to the realization that looking at LGBT content online is “a huge part” of her activities on the Internet. “Even if I’m not sitting
there talking about it,” she adds, “I’ll be reading about it.” But Miranda not only recognizes the importance and the impact that the Internet has in her own life, she acknowledges that for some the Internet is even more vital for learning about and expressing their sexual identity and interests: “I read some stuff that are people's outlets, like gay people who aren't out. The Internet is their outlet. They have that gay community online that they can be out and open with and themselves with. And then, in person, they have to be straight.”

Christiana was not influenced at a young age by the Internet because her family did not have Internet at home until after Christiana came to college. She had sporadic access in high school, but did not become a frequent user until after she came to college and was provided regular access to the Internet. Facebook and Tumblr are also her favorites, along with news sources like BBC and Al Jazeera. Christiana admits that she also likes to browse and read articles on JSTOR. When she first started exploring her sexual identity online, Christiana visited TrevorSpace, a social networking site for LGBT youth, which is “really good if you’re younger,” according to Christiana, but as you get older you “phase out of it.” And the LGBT community on Facebook is “hit or miss.” Describing Facebook, she says: “Either you’re talking, you’re really engaged, and you’re really in to it, or you’re having cat fights.” Christiana prefers Tumblr over all the other social media and networking sites because she can be herself and she feels very accepted.

Rose accesses the Internet through her computer and her smartphone. Her most visited site is Tumblr, which she reports she visits at least 10 times daily. Tumblr, for Rose, is an entertainment venue, social space, and news resource. Rose also uses the Internet to access her email, read articles on news and educational websites, and to play Internet games. For Rose,
exposure to the Internet began through online games such as online Texas hold ‘em and Runescape.

Emily uses the Internet as a research resource for her online classes, in addition to accessing her email and visiting social media websites. Of the latter, Emily prefers Facebook and Instagram. When she first started using the Internet in 1999, Emily remembers using AOL Instant Messenger and conducting research for school. Presently, Emily uses Facebook to support organizations such as HRC, It Gets Better, and Give a Damn. Although Emily does not use the support resources provided by these organizations, she likes to let others know that they exist.

Carrie has used support resources she discovered through the It Gets Better website. Carrie also uses the Internet to monitor her email, bank online, and access to LGBT websites such as the one for Gay Grassroots, and using Facebook. On Facebook, Carrie belongs to a number of Facebook groups for pansexuals, individuals in relationships with transmen, and groups that support marriage equality. Formerly, Carrie used to visit LGBT dating websites until she met her fiancé on FTMRelationship.com. In the past Carrie visited LGBT support chat rooms, where she met her best friend. She began using the Internet in high school for school research and accessing social media websites. Carrie likes the Internet because it allows her to be “much more open and free with my speech” and because “it is much easier to feel free of judgment or prejudices. I feel like I am among friends in these online communities and able to express myself more openly.”

Holly also began using the Internet in high school in order to visit LGBT forums and reassure herself about the confusing feelings she was having in regard to her sexual identity. Now Holly frequently accesses the Internet through her smartphone, but also uses her computer
to check her email, visit Tumblr, and visits the forums that she still frequents due to the uncertainty she is experiencing in regard to her sexuality. Holly often finds herself researching asexuality as well as transgender issues.

Recently I've really been interested by asexuality and seeing how- how asexual people can have normal, functioning relationships. Even though they are not completely sexual, they can have romantic relationships and I find that fascinating. So, it's mostly that. I love looking at that. Transgender issues are also really important to me, so I look at that.

Holly prefers to rely on the Internet when she has questions about anything, but particularly her sexual identity. Although she acknowledges the usefulness and prominence of the UWF GSA, Holly is reluctant to completely discard her anonymity and discuss her sexual identity with them. Holly feels a similar reluctance when she looks at the Pensacola LGBT community, partially due to its physical location in the conservative Florida Panhandle. “So I prefer to go back to the Internet just because in Pensacola it is The Bible Belt, you know? It's very much still a very hard issue to talk about without some people getting offended.”

Facebook as Façade

Except for Scott, Rose, and Holly, all other interview participants mentioned using or having a Facebook account. Of those who did mention Facebook, only Carrie and Emily spoke about Facebook as if it were their main social media account. Miranda, Christiana, and Tiffany all indicated a preference for having Facebook, but for maintaining it as a façade of professionalism. Tiffany admitted to having two Facebook accounts, one that she has to use in conjunction with her career, and another for more private use. On the work account, she is not as free to share or express her sexual identity. Miranda treated Facebook in a similar fashion. The purpose of Facebook for Miranda is to network with family, friends, coworkers, classmates, and potential employers. Miranda is concerned with presenting her professional self on Facebook, and as such she feels constrained by what she can do or say on Facebook in regard to her sexual
identity. Tumblr is her outlet for expressing her true interests, and Miranda admits she can be quite vulgar at times and so it is essential to her that the two groups she interacts with on Facebook and Tumblr respectively be treated differently. For Christiana, it is a simple matter of finding Facebook an inadequate LGBT community and so she keeps a Facebook account merely for the sake of maintaining relationships similar to those mentioned by Tiffany and Miranda. For Miranda, Christiana, and Tiffany, Facebook appears to be an empty, polite shell that you present to certain groups of people in your life.

Miranda and Scott’s comments suggest that their LGBT identity could conflict with a clean and professional image of themselves. Scott commented that his LGBT identity became less obvious and less salient in his relationships and choices when he became focused on advancing his career prospects and seeming professional. Miranda admitted that the interests associated with her sexual identity were too explicit to be shared where anyone could view them and consider her unprofessional or unemployable. Although Tiffany did not voice similar concerns, she did admit to keeping two different Facebook accounts: one for her professional life and one for her personal life. This type of behavior seems to suggest an acknowledgment on the part of these young LGBT individuals that LGBT lives and LGBT identities are only appropriate in the private sphere or forbidden from entering the public sphere. For individuals in the LGBT community, however, a split between the public sphere and the private sphere is not new.

**Biphobia and Pansexuality**

Considering Christiana’s statements regarding her sexual identity and how it relates to a larger trend in the LGBT community, there is most certainly a “badlands” between bisexuality and pansexuality. A couple of the participants have encountered this area and it comes up fairly frequently on Tumblr as an issue inside of the LGBT community that needs to be addressed.
Scott, when describing his efforts in middle school to connect to others online in chat rooms, initially introduced himself as bisexual because he was not completely sure that he was gay, so he chose to “ride the line and help people to know that I wanted to have that conversation without outwardly admitting to being gay.” Like Mary Gray suggested (2009:124), Scott was a young person who was relying on others online and the Internet as a resource to construct his own understanding of “queer realness.” Oftentimes, however, Scott did not have the conversation about sexual identity that he intended to have. “A lot of people like engaged me by questioning ‘What do you mean by bi? That doesn't really exist!’”

Christiana referred to Tumblr as a place where “biphobia is bad,” and frequently uses her personal tumblr to post bisexual supportive content. Christiana described one of the issues that others in the LGBT community have with bisexuals, “I have a preference for girls and guys so I could fall into a heterosexual lifestyle if I felt like it.” It is this type of “riding the line,” to use Scott’s phrase, that apparently seems to aggravate others in the LGBT community and make them feel as if bisexuality is not truly non-heterosexual. A.J. Walkley, a freelance writer and author, describes the relationship between biphobia and pansexuality in her 2012 Huffington Post article:

In some ways, the term “pansexual” came out of biphobia and a need to stipulate that one was not transphobic. If you take the binary view of “bisexual,” then a sexuality specific to an attraction to men and women could be seen as being noninclusive of transgender men and women. On the other hand, transgender men and women want to (and should) be seen as simply men and women, meaning that they would/should be included in that very binary; not including them tends to be much more phobic and noninclusive.

Pansexuality as a term does appear to be more inclusive and accepting of trans men and women, as well as individuals who claim gender fluid or queer identities, if you focus on the narrow or binary view of “bisexual” described by Walkely. Interestingly, Carrie, who used to describe herself as a lesbian, is now engaged to a transman and identifies herself as pansexual. Ayisigi
Hale Gonel (2013:37), in an article on pansexuality online, has suggested that both bisexuality and pansexuality are “anti-identities” that go against the “new-homonormativities” perpetrated and supported by some LGBT communities that are attempting to assimilate with the mainstream heterosexual culture. In some instances, this is almost certainly true. But in other cases where bisexuals and pansexuals are rejected, I think there may be an appearance of lack of authenticity or conviction on the part of the individuals claiming those identities. Claiming to be bisexual, loving both, or pansexual, loving all, gives the misunderstood impression that these individuals are “riding the line” or playing it safe when it comes to claiming a non-heterosexual identity. Bisexuals and pansexuals are refusing to be limited to one object of desire or one way of loving (Hale Gonel 2013:37). Christiana was not wrong when she suggested that biphobia was an issue on Tumblr, or when she mentioned that pansexuals on Tumblr can be “mean” due to an overzealous need to protect the validity of their sexual identities. While many individuals reportedly support individuality and free expression, at the same time these individuals on Tumblr are enforcing rules and qualifications for LGBT identity and expression.

These individuals who are not supportive of other LGBT individuals and their feelings and opinions on Tumblr can be a real problem, according to Christiana:

I feel like they're kind of like your usual Tumblr Nazis. I can't deal with that, my god. They're kind of scary. Not to say they're not nice people. I have a pansexual friend who is one of those people. It bothers me sometimes because we don't agree on everything but they're good people but sometimes they are super social justice and it's gotten, much like being a hipster where I come from, it's really bad. And it sucks because it's the ones that are really out and loud about it but it becomes like a negative term almost.

In the case just described by Christiana, an individual is so focused on protecting their cause or sexual identity that they will virtually bully other individuals who do not agree or who voice differing experiences instead of engaging in a healthy debate or sharing their knowledge. These individuals, according to Christiana, give everyone else in the Tumblr pansexual community a
bad reputation. But not only that, Christiana worries that this type of strife within smaller segments of the larger LGBT community will have negative consequences for everyone:

Oftentimes repercussions in our own community in the name of something good comes to something that people against us-people really against us-use to our disadvantage. And I think that it's something that's really important for us to take into consideration when we react to things because reactions are really taken in by everyone, especially if they're big and negative. I'm really worried about that a lot. I think it's important that sometimes we look at ourselves and ask ourselves ‘What are we projecting into our communities?’ as well as looking at our community as a collective and saying ‘What can we do to make ourselves better?’"

Christiana argues that all communities, the LGBT community and others, both on Tumblr and in the actual world, are interconnected and overlap at certain places. She stresses the importance of not only how actions can have negative repercussions, but how those points of overlap can provide learning experiences and insights into different experiences and ideas.

**Identity on Tumblr**

Although Miranda did not offer to describe other identities during the interview process, she does share a little bit more about her other identities on Tumblr. According to her “About Me” section on her personal tumblr, Miranda is a girlfriend, a student, and a Harry Potter fan. This type of description in an “About Me” on Tumblr is not unusual. Holly and Christiana also referred to themselves as students and identified themselves as belonging to particular fandoms. Identity is also expressed through personal posts, quite regularly in the case of Holly, as well as through the reblogging of secondary content. Although only Miranda described herself as gay in her “About Me” section, Miranda, Holly, and Christiana frequently post and reblog content that indicate their respective sexual identities. Miranda frequently posts portraits of nude women in intimate positions, and Christiana posts educational and awareness posts about bisexuals, pansexuals, and others. Holly, who described herself as unsure, still addresses her sexuality on
her Tumblr. Figure 4 shows Holly’s response to an anonymous question to her Tumblr inbox about her sexual orientation.

Figure 4. Holly responds to a question about her sexual orientation.

Rose uses Tumblr to express her identity by “creating text posts about my identity, but most often I reblog posts that promote a pro-tolerance, pro-LGBTQIA agenda and signal boost important legislation that pertains to the civil rights of any group.” In fact, Rose describes herself as very active about expressing her opinions on Tumblr, and she finds Tumblr to be a much easier and more appropriate way to share her opinions as opposed to other forms of communication, including conversation in the actual world. Rose stated “I may not be able to stand up in the middle of wherever I’m eating lunch and say, ‘Don’t support The Salvation Army because they have a documented anti-gay agenda’ (or something similar), but I can certainly plug it on my Tumblr, or reblog something that I see from another poster on the subject.” One personal post that Rose constructed has almost 20,000 notes (likes and reblogs). Rose describes the post as “by far my most popular original post, and, while it doesn’t pertain to any sort of LGBT or other civil rights issue, it does demonstrate the power of the internet in spreading a message.”
The Tumblr participants follow a similar pattern in their “About Me” sections as the interview participants who are also Tumblr users. Fan Girl and Homo Filly identify themselves as students and by the fandoms to which they belong. Fabulous World does not follow this format, which I believe further indicates Fabulous World’s context as a secondary blog devoted to LGBT content as opposed to a primary blog featuring personal content and personal interests. Fan Girl does not explicitly identify her sexual identity on Tumblr, but Fabulous World describes himself as homo, and Homo Filly states that she is asexual. Fabulous World posts only LGBT related content, featuring a variety of LGBT couples, comments, educational pieces, and supportive statements. Homo Filly posts photos of LGBT and LGBT supportive celebrities, as well as affirmative and supportive statements for asexuality as well as bisexuality and being LGBT in general (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Homo Filly shares an image indicating her support of LGBT equality and feminism.

Fan Girl does not identify her sexual identity, but she does post content indicating that she considers herself to be an LGBT individual (Figure 6).
LGBT Community and Tumblr

Christiana assured me that the negative individuals are few and far between on the Tumblr landscape. Unfortunately, they tend to be the “loudest.” Despite their presence, Christiana described most others on Tumblr as being supportive of her sexual identity and added that, “My life is on Tumblr.” The rest of the participants who mentioned Tumblr recounted only positive experiences. Tumblr is considered an important and influential resource for many young LGBT individuals on Tumblr. Tumblr could be the most popular social media platform for LGBT youth in terms of sharing personal information, forming social networks, and gathering information on specific LGBT topics. Miranda uses Tumblr every day and described Tumblr as “the main LGBT social media:”

Honestly I sometimes forget that there are people on Tumblr who are straight, because I follow so many gay people. Yeah, so, um, like the majority of the people I follow are gay, either gay men or gay women, so sometimes like it's weird "Oh wait, straight people, like, they exist" because sometimes, like, when I go on Tumblr it's like my little gay world and then I'm like "Oh wait, straight people exist here, too."
Miranda describes the LGBT Tumblr community as being small, especially the communities within the community. Miranda mentions that in the “gay Florida Tumblr community” there are certain blogs that everyone knows about. Miranda does not participate actively in the community, citing her desire to not be “known” or “Tumblr famous.” Miranda, it seems, is more interested in individual consumption of the Internet than using it as a social tool. But Miranda also mentioned that she has made a lot of friends online as a result of the LGBT Florida community on Tumblr, and the first LGBT person she ever met in Pensacola was someone she met on Tumblr first. Miranda now has a full group of LGBT individuals that she spends time with as a result of finding each other through Tumblr. There is definitely an LGBT UWF community on Tumblr, according to Miranda, who have found each other through the #UWF tag, similarly to how some of them found the research flyer. Although they spend time together or recognize each other on campus, for many of them, Miranda stated, communicating on Tumblr and the Internet is much more comfortable: “I would much rather talk to someone online first, and then in-person, depending on what the situation is.” Miranda also uses Tumblr as a support and information resource. When Miranda recently went through a time where she was considering the purchase of a chest binder she relied on the #FTM tag and FTM blogs on Tumblr to provide her with information. Although Miranda did not reach out to anyone for this particular situation, it is not uncommon for individuals to reach out to others in the LGBT Tumblr community for assistance, especially on the “popular blogs” where individuals have set themselves up as experts on a particular LGBT issue or topic. Miranda continues:

But yeah, it's very prominent, especially through Tumblr. It might not be open-a lot of ones I see are anonymous, so they want the answers but they don't want people to know they want the answers. But it is there. But I only really see that on Tumblr because I feel like Tumblr is the only place where you can be anonymous. You can't really be anonymous on Facebook or Twitter. Tumblr is like the go-to with LGBT stuff.
Miranda says this is especially true for LGBT individuals who are younger than her, individuals who are still minors and who are just beginning to come to terms with their sexual identities. Tumblr is a great resource for them, Miranda states, and she believes her own coming out process would have been different and easier if she had been provided access to something like Tumblr at an earlier age.

Holly also appreciates the potential that Tumblr provides to form new relationships, join or create a conversation about a specific topic, and to participate in communities. Holly said “I think with Tumblr you get to join these different ongoing conversations and communities that already exist and people are more open about it. If you join a Facebook group no one is going to talk to you, really, people are not going to respond.” Holly likes that an LGBT community is definitely present on Tumblr, and that the community and Tumblr as a whole appear to be more aware of social differences and social issues.

Miranda considers the huge presence of the LGBT community on Tumblr to be beneficial for heterosexual users, too. Straight users on Tumblr, Miranda believes, are afforded a unique opportunity to interact with and learn from LGBT individuals that they might not otherwise encounter and to learn about LGBT topics, such as the different types of identities, which will not be discussed in their schools or in their homes. Miranda addressed this: “I feel like the Internet is the way for people to learn. In a sense, it sucks that it's only on the Internet that we have that availability.”

I monitored the Tumblr participants for evidence of their participation in small or large LGBT Tumblr communities, but I never saw any of the participants favoring the posts of the same specific individuals or reblogging information regarding online communities that I thought would be representative of active participation in an online community. This indicates a couple
different things: these individuals were silent consumers of Tumblr content much like every other Tumblr user I have ever met, including myself. Admittedly, some Tumblr users will form relationships with individuals they meet on Tumblr, like in the case of Miranda who found friends in the actual world through Tumblr. It also seems likely that instead of actively participating in a given online community and creating their own posts or reblogged dialogue in response to or in support of these communities, the Tumblr participants were monitoring specific tagged interests, in addition to the content on their respective Dashboards from the users they were following, and simply reblogging content that looked interesting to them without comment or tags. The simple fact that the Tumblr participants were willing to reblog certain forms of content, such as LGBT supportive statements and news item, does indicate that while they were engaged in individual consumption they were also passively participating in small online communities.

Well-Being

I asked the participants to consider things in their lives that they positively associate with the formation or expression of their sexual identities. Not all of them were forthcoming, but the answers I did receive were very informative as to what young LGBT individuals consider essential to their well-being and happiness.

For Carrie, the most avid user of Facebook, Facebook support groups were the most positive influence on her sexual identity, in addition to local LGBT pride events and a close group of friends. Emily also included close friends in her consideration of positive elements, but added LGBT support organizations like HRC, family, and “pretty much anyone that isn’t a Bible thumping conservative person” to her list. Rose mentioned close friends as well, and also talked about the positive influence of yoga in her life. “When practicing yoga,” Rose stated, “I am in a
room full of people who preach acceptance of each other and of ourselves.” Rose expressed doubts that this acceptance is always carried outside of the yoga classroom, but she felt that the warmth present during the yoga session and that close connections made there were most important.

Holly’s consideration of positive influences on sexual identity was more focused on Internet resources. Holly stressed the importance of Tumblr, in her life and in the lives of others, due to its wealth of information. In addition, Holly suggested LGBT supportive YouTube channels, as well as the Trevor Project website.

Christiana was more considerate of emotional and self-supportive aspects of positive sexual identity. Making sure you have an external support structure in place is important, Christiana advised, but making sure you have good self-esteem is also essential: “When you don’t have support, sometimes the best support is yourself.” For individuals who are not lucky enough to live in an LGBT positive community, Christiana stressed access to LGBT services and support resources. She described these as “places where LGBT people can go to feel accepted.” Christiana finished her consideration of positive sexual identity by suggesting:

Mirrors. Emotional mirrors, physical mirrors, all the mirrors are good. You have to look at yourself sometimes. You have to really look at yourself sometimes. You definitely need an understanding of others. Not necessarily a tolerance. Not necessarily a liking of others. But an understanding that you can't change people and you can't change others.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSIONS

The Internet is a complex and diverse place full of multiple spaces where young LGBT individuals can express multiple identities and selves. The Internet also acts as a guide for those who need it to better identify their feelings. For the majority of participants, they had the idea that they were not “straight” or “regular,” but the Internet helped them understand what it was they were feeling and that there were others like them. Tiffany described the feeling she got when she discovered how to identify her feelings, “When I learned that word [gay] things changed. I was like ‘Whoa! Is that me?’” For many young LGBT individuals, the Internet has provided invaluable information, resources, and social experiences that have helped them to define their sexual identities. It has also provided them with a platform from which to develop that identity, to reconstruct identity, and to create entirely new identities. Some of the participants referred to the Internet as vital part of their youth and their coming out process, while other participants described the Internet has having great importance in their current lives.

Sexual identity formation for the majority of the participants in this research is a process that has been both complicated and fluid. Exploring and expressing their sexual identities have put many of them in conflict with family, religion, their communities, others in the LGBT community, and even themselves. The participants described some of those difficulties, as well as other experiences they have had online and in the actual world negotiating their sexual identities.

Identities are important online and in the actual world. They provide individuals with a sense of self and well-being, as well as providing them with the means to interact with others and the culture. LGBT identity is massive and contains a great deal of diversity. The diversity is
readily apparent on Tumblr, where all of the permutations of identity contained within the LGBT acronym have found representation and community. However, this identity is sometimes impinged upon by others, even from within the LGBT community. Several of the participants devoted time to reblogging posts asking others to be more supportive of bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and transgendered individuals as well as a number of other groups such as the genderqueer. These posts are made in reaction to other users who attempt to dictate who is authentically LGBT and how they qualify. These attempts are performances based on the identities of those who have gained the trust of other users and proven that they are authentically LGBT. Performance of identity lends support to the authenticity and expertise of individuals. This establishes a link between the offline and the online, an indexical relationship where identities and experiences in the actual world provide important reference points in the virtual world. Authentic identity and identity performance are also important aspects of the actual world, but in the virtual authenticity is harder, and therefore more important, to prove. This partially explains why many of the participants took such care to authenticate LGBT groups that face claims to discredit them online.

While some participants may focus their activities on helping others, when accessing the Internet the participants frequently engaged in situations of immobile socialization, conducting isolated consumption of the Internet. The socialization with others that occurs tends to be in small groups, such as Miranda’s network of gay Florida Tumblr users or Carrie’s FTM Sweethearts group on Facebook. Participating in virtual communities, however, was not regarded as particularly important by the majority of the participants. On the Internet many of the participants also practiced compartmentalization of their identities. Miranda used Facebook to present a clean, professional image and did not express her sexual identity there because she
anticipated negative consequences. She instead expressed her sexual identity and interests related to that identity on Tumblr. Compartmentalization also occurred on Tumblr, with two of the participants maintaining a separation between a primary, or personal, blog and a secondary blog.

Although activities on Tumblr in general can be understood in terms of social capital, gaining capital did not seem to be an important motivation behind the activities of any the participants of this research. Considerations of trends on Tumblr indicate that there is a continuum of social capital motivations. All Tumblr users have a vested interest in being authentic and trustworthy; it is hard to keep followers if no trust is established. Not all Tumblr users, however, are interested in using their identity to gain social capital. The participants in this research were mainly interested in consuming and sharing content on Tumblr, and gaining and keeping followers is simply a means to this end. For others, gaining followers is a goal and they devote their efforts to gaining more social capital through networks of exchange. It is not uncommon for these individuals to claim offers from the “Tumblr famous” to promote their blogs, and there are even entire blogs dedicated to helping others gain more followers. Typically on Tumblr, when you follow an individual they will follow you back, establishing a relationship of exchange where they may lead you to new followers and vice versa. The “Tumblr famous” are those individuals who do not need to devote energy to finding new followers, they let the followers come to them, and instead focus on maintaining their social capital by creating new content for others to like and reblog. These users are often the ones that dictate the social structures and norms within communities on Tumblr. The continuum of users on Tumblr includes those interested in consuming content, those interested in gaining followers, and those interested in creating celebrated content and maintaining their authority. This is not a definitive typology; there are also variations between those users and other motivations.
This research has the potential to be beneficial in a variety of ways. First, I offer some points of consideration for local LGBT organizations in the Pensacola area. Half of the interview participants were individuals between the ages of 18-20 years old, and these same individuals were all associated with UWF. Of those four, three mentioned awareness of or participation in the UWF GSA, but none of them mentioned participation in other LGBT organizations in the UWF area. In fact, one participant expressed skepticism that there were useful and significant LGBT organizations in Pensacola. One of the older participants described the Pensacola LGBT community as a place of two extremes: you can go and experience a doctor’s office atmosphere or you can party on the beach during Memorial Day weekend.

Local LGBT organizations in Pensacola should increase efforts to become more visible and accessible to young LGBT individuals at UWF. I am aware that local LGBT organizations have partnered with the UWF GSA for events in the past, such as the LGBT Film Festival that one of the participants mentioned. A couple of the participants, as well as many other students, live on the UWF campus without transportation or are reluctant to explore Pensacola on their own. Although UWF students may be in the Pensacola area for a short time, they bring a diversity of experiences and insights that Pensacola LGBT organizations would find beneficial. I also recommend that more LGBT organizations who are interested in helping youth become savvier when it comes to social media. Several LGBT organizations in Pensacola still use Facebook to spread information and recruit new members. The testimonies of the participants indicate that many LGBT young people are abandoning or ignoring Facebook in favor of other social media sites, such as Tumblr. National LGBT organizations like HRC already have a presence on Tumblr. Furthermore, a presence on Tumblr would be a place to recruit young LGBT people or keep them informed about local LGBT events because the participants have
demonstrated that they use Tumblr as a source for information regarding the local community. Additionally, Pensacola LGBT organizations may find that Tumblr can also offer information and resources that benefit their organizations.

Second, further research should be conducted to assess how the Internet acts as a resource for older individuals not represented in this research. The Internet may not have been as pervasive in their lives as it has been for the digital natives represented in this research in their late teens to late twenties, but I believe the Internet has still been an influential element in the lives of individuals 30 years or age or older. However, as suggested by the oldest participants in this research, it seems likely that older LGBT individuals would describe other information resources and systems of support as being more influential or more important to the development and expression of their LGBT identity. Further research could highlight interesting differences in generational identity resources.

Third, it is my hope that this research has indicated how interesting, diverse, and understudied Tumblr is as a website. My research does help to address a gap in the literature concerning the Internet, social media, and LGBT usage of social media, as well as research related to Tumblr. Interestingly, a significant portion of the research that I did discover focusing on Tumblr was also conducted in consideration of LGBT individuals and communities. During the course of this research and my experiences on Tumblr, I discovered a large number of potential topics and communities for observation and consideration. It is my hope that more social science researchers, particularly anthropologists, will now consider Tumblr a fertile ground for research concerning the Internet, identity expression, and communities, as well as the daily activities of individuals. Tumblr is an important website for many young individuals, and I

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18 Please see Harsin Drager 2012, Bell 2013, Fink and Miller 2013, and Thurston 2013 for other accounts of LGBT individuals and communities on Tumblr.
think further studies of their presence there could yield information that is interesting and relevant.

In order to conduct research on the Internet in general, and Tumblr specifically, researchers should ensure that they have acquired the “cultural competences within which it makes sense” (Hine 2000:152), just as an ethnographer would do for any other research context. Christine Hine refers to the Internet as having a great deal of interpretive flexibility, and she is right: “At least a part of people's use of the Internet occurs in relation to what they find online, and what is taken to be the sensible thing to do with the technology. What people find is different in the different social spaces they may enter” (2000:152). More attention should be given to the unique daily experiences on the Internet of individuals (Bakardjieva 2007:236). The Internet is commonly conceived as being one big place; many assume that experiencing the Internet is the same for every person. Websites such as Tumblr, where individual users control the content that appears on their Dashboard and create unique experiences, are an example of how the Internet is a unique and sometimes isolating experience occurring within a multitude of virtual spaces.

When I began the interview process for this research in late September 2013, I did not envision this outcome for my research. My initial intent had been to interview participants regarding their Internet activities and assess the influence and helpfulness of the Internet on identity formation and expression for LGBT individuals. For the most part, that aspect of my research did not change except for the realization after my first interview that “the Internet” was a large place and in order to improve the quality of my research I would need to narrow my focus. While I still asked my interview participants about the Internet in general, I found myself struck by how important and influential Tumblr was to my first three interview participants.
What changed the most during the course of the interview and write-up processes were my impressions of LGBT individuals, the LGBT community, and the positive role of the Internet in the lives of LGBT individuals. The participants helped me understand that sexual identity is not a fixed thing, or even a relatively fixed thing, but a continual and fluid process. Despite being lumped together inside an acronym, this process is drastically different for each individual, but there are still commonalities due to the heteronormativity these individuals face in our culture. The idea of an LGBT community does not, in fact, apply to every LGBT individual. Many LGBT individuals are content to live their lives with acknowledgment of their non-heterosexual identities without making it their primary identity or letting it control who they interact with and how. There is a great deal of diversity within the LGBT community, both acknowledged and unacknowledged, and this diversity is oftentimes overlooked in favor of emphasizing the commonalities or, as has been suggested by others, in the interest of homonormativity. In addition, the Internet is not always the “queer oasis” that I had considered it to be. LGBT individuals and communities online have to deal with many of the same issues that they deal with in the actual world such as prejudice, discrimination, and hostility. These issues occasionally stem from within their own communities. The Internet is not the vaunted escape from the actual world that many consider it to be, but it still offers a number of benefits for the well-being of young LGBT people in regard to identity formation and identity expression within actual and virtual communities and contexts.
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APPENDIXES
Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval
Dear Mrs. Cullen:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Research Participants Protection has completed its review of your proposal titled "IRB 2014-030 - Positive Spaces: An Ethnographic Assessment of the Influence of the Internet on LGBT Identity," as it relates to the protection of human participants used in research, and granted approval for you to proceed with your study on 09-30-2013. As a research investigator, please be aware of the following:

* You will immediately report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to human participants.

* You acknowledge and accept your responsibility for protecting the rights and welfare of human research participants and for complying with all parts of 45 CFR Part 46, the UWF IRB Policy and Procedures, and the decisions of the IRB. You may view these documents on the Research and Sponsored Programs web page at http://www.research.uwf.edu/internal. You acknowledge completion of the IRB ethical training requirements for researchers as attested in the IRB application.

* You will ensure that legally effective informed consent is obtained and documented. If written consent is required, the consent form must be signed by the participant or the participant's legally authorized representative. A copy is to be given to the person signing the form and a copy kept for your file.

* You will promptly report any proposed changes in previously approved human participant research activities to Research and Sponsored Programs. The proposed changes will not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the participants.

* You are responsible for reporting progress of approved research to Research and Sponsored Programs at the end of the project period 09-30-2013. If the data phase of your project continues beyond the approved end date, you must receive an extension approval from the IRB.

Good luck in your research endeavors. If you have any questions or need assistance, please contact Research and Sponsored Programs at 850-857-6378 or irb@uwf.edu.

Sincerely,

Dr. Richard S. Podemski, Associate Vice President for Research
And Dean of the Graduate School

Dr. Carla Thompson, Chair
IRB for the Protection of Human Research Participants

CC: Robert Philen
Appendix B

Research Flyer
Are you 18 years of age or older?

Do you use the Internet?

Are you interested in sharing your experiences as a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender individual?

If you answered yes to these questions I want to hear your story.

The purpose of my research is to explore the influence of the Internet on LGBT identity formation and expression. I am also interested in what LGBT individuals consider essential to their happiness and well-being. I hope that this study will reveal information that can be used to help LGBT individuals by increasing awareness of important resources both online and in our local community.

Only adults are eligible to participate in this research. This research is being conducted through the University of West Florida.

Please contact Amanda Lawson Cullen at 850-532-4376 or all16@students.uwf.edu for more information.
Appendix C

Informed Consent Forms
Title of Research: Positive Spaces: An Ethnographic Assessment of the Influence of the Internet on LGBT Identity and Well-Being

I. Federal and university regulations require us to obtain signed consent for participation in research involving human participants. After reading the statements in section II through IV below, please indicate your consent by signing and dating this form.

II. **Statement of Procedure:** Thank you for your interest in this research project being conducted by a student of The University of West Florida. By this time, the investigator should have described the procedures for you in detail. Basically, this stage of the research project involves careful interviewing to discover how the Internet influences the sexual identity of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) individuals. This stage of the research also involves list-making in order to identify items associated with LGBT happiness and well-being. You will find a summary of the major aspects of the study being described below, including the risks and benefits of participating. Carefully read the information provided below. If you wish to participate in this study, sign your name and write the date. Any information you provide will be kept in strict confidence. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project, please contact Amanda Lawson Cullen at The University of West Florida at (850) 532-4367 or by email at all16@students.uwf.edu.

I understand that:

1) I will be asked to disclose certain information about my personal life such as age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, educational level, and residential location.

2) I will be asked to disclose personal experiences related to my sexuality and how I express my sexual identity. I will be asked to provide a list of items that I consider necessary for well-being that I associate with my sexual identity.

3) I will be asked to disclose information about my access to and use of the Internet. I will be asked how the Internet has influenced my sexual identity.

4) During the interview process I will be seated across from the investigator in a private setting or a setting of my choice. I will be asked to discuss the topics outlined in 1), 2) and 3) and my responses will be recorded directly by the investigator. I may choose to ignore any question I do not want to answer.

5) I may discontinue participation in the research project at any time.
III. **Potential Risks of the Study:**

1) Participants may become uncomfortable with questions about their personal experiences related to their sexual identity.

2) Participants may become uncomfortable with questions about how they use the Internet.

IV. **Potential Benefits of the Study:**

1) Information obtained from this research project will offer a better understanding of the influence of the Internet on sexual identity formation and expression.

2) Identifying items associated with well-being and sexual identity could raise awareness of the importance of these items. Identifying these items makes it possible to stimulate their introduction and development in areas where they do not exist.

V. **Statement of Consent:** I certify that I have read and fully understand the Statement of Procedure given above and agree to participate in the research project described therein. Permission is given voluntarily and without coercion or undue influence. It is understood that I may discontinue participation at any time. I will be provided a copy of this consent form.

________________________________
Participant’s Name (Please Print)

________________________________
Participant’s Signature

________________________________
Date
Informed Consent Form

Title of Research: Positive Spaces: An Ethnographic Assessment of the Influence of the Internet on LGBT Identity and Well-Being

VI. Federal and university regulations require us to obtain signed consent for participation in research involving human participants. After reading the statements in section II through IV below, please indicate your consent by signing and dating this form.

VII. Statement of Procedure: Thank you for your interest in this research project being conducted by a student of The University of West Florida. By this time, the investigator should have described the procedures for you in detail. Basically, this stage of the research project involves careful interviewing to discover how the Internet influences the sexual identity of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) individuals. This stage of the research also involves list-making in order to identify items associated with LGBT happiness and well-being. You will find a summary of the major aspects of the study being described below, including the risks and benefits of participating. Carefully read the information provided below. If you wish to participate in this study, type your name and the date. Any information you provide will be kept in strict confidence. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project, please contact Amanda Lawson Cullen at The University of West Florida at (850) 532-4367 or by email at all16@students.uwf.edu.

I understand that:

6) I will be asked to disclose certain information about my personal life such as age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, educational level, and residential location.

7) I will be asked to disclose personal experiences related to my sexuality and how I express my sexual identity.

8) I will be asked to create a list of items that I consider necessary for well-being that I associate with my sexual identity.

9) I will be asked to disclose information about my access to and use of the Internet. I will be asked how the Internet has influenced my sexual identity.

10) During the interview process I will be asked to discuss the topics outlined in 1), 2), 3) and 4) and my responses will be recorded directly by the investigator.

11) I may choose to ignore any question I do not want to answer. I may choose to not have my responses recorded using audio recording devices. I may ask for the audio recording to be stopped at any time during the interview.
12) I may discontinue participation in the research project at any time. I may request that my records associated with the research be destroyed at any time.

VIII. **Potential Risks of the Study:**

3) Participants may become uncomfortable with questions about their personal experiences related to their sexual identity.

4) Participants may become uncomfortable with questions about how they use the Internet.

IX. **Potential Benefits of the Study:**

3) Information obtained from this research project will offer a better understanding of the influence of the Internet on sexual identity formation and expression.

4) Identifying items associated with well-being and sexual identity could raise awareness of the importance of these items. Identifying these items make it possible to stimulate their introduction and development in areas where they do not exist.

X. **Statement of Consent:** I certify that I have read and fully understand the Statement of Procedure given above and agree to participate in the research project described therein. Permission is given voluntarily and without coercion or undue influence. It is understood that I may discontinue participation at any time. I will be provided a copy of this consent form.

XI. **Consent to Electronic Signatures and Documents:** By completing and e-mailing this consent form to the investigator at the e-mail address specified above you are providing electronic consent to the use of electronic documents and signatures. Specifically, you are acknowledging receipt of this form and consenting to the use of electronic documents, e-mail delivery of documents, and electronic signatures in confidential research.

________________________________
Participant’s Name (Please Print)

________________________________
Participant’s Signature __________________________ Date