

Changing Spaces: Exploring the Role of the Internet in Supporting Non- Heterosexual Youth aged 18-25 in Ireland

Kirsty Park BA, MSc

Thesis submitted for the Award of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Communications

Dublin City University

Supervisor: Dr. Debbie Ging

September 2018

DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of PhD is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: 

ID No.: 13210057

Date: 12/09/18

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Irish Research Council and to the School of Communications at Dublin City University for their financial support.

I am very grateful to the Creative Media department at Dundalk Institute of Technology for providing an undergraduate education which gave me a new perspective and inspired me. I would also like to thank Dr Caroline O’Sullivan for being a role model and going above and beyond the duties of a lecturer in her continued support and guidance.

Thank you to my supervisor, Dr Debbie Ging, for providing reassurance, trust and direction and for never doubting me even when I doubted myself. Thank you to Jean-Philippe Imbert for his input and supervision in the early stages. Additionally, thank you to Dr Christopher Pullen and Dr Eugenia Siapera for their time and constructive input during the viva.

I am particularly grateful to my research participants for giving up their time and for choosing to trust me as they shared their experiences. This work would not be possible without their contributions.

Many thanks and appreciation to my family and friends who helped me to keep my chin up and keep on going, and particularly to my parents for their constant support and for always believing in me.

Most of all, thank you to my wife Réaltín. I can’t imagine how I would have completed this without you by my side offering your seemingly endless amounts of patience, support, encouragement, and cups of tea. As always, you’re my favourite.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	v
List of Tables	viii
List of Figures	ix
List of Appendices	x
Abstract	xi
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 RESEARCH AIMS.....	3
1.2 DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS.....	4
1.3 EXCLUSION OF GENDER IDENTITY	4
1.4 METHODOLOGY	5
1.5 CHAPTER OUTLINES.....	6
2 IDENTITY, NARRATIVE AND MENTAL HEALTH.....	9
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	9
2.2 UNDERSTANDING ORIENTATION, BEHAVIOUR AND IDENTITY	10
2.3 ESSENTIALISM AND POPULAR CULTURE	13
2.4 STAGE BASED THEORIES OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT	16
2.5 SEXUAL IDENTITY AND ONLINE POSSIBILITIES	18
2.6 MENTAL HEALTH	21
2.7 INTERSECTIONALITY	28
2.8 IRISH CONTEXT	30
2.9 CONCLUSION.....	32
3 SPACE, PLACE AND THE INTERNET.....	34
3.1. INTRODUCTION.....	34
3.2 SPACE AND PLACE IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY – BEING HUMAN	35
3.3 THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL SPACE – IS CYBERSPACE A PLACE?.....	38
3.4 CONCLUSION.....	43
4 NON-HETEROSEXUAL INTERNET USAGE.....	45
4.1 INTRODUCTION.....	45
4.2 DYSTOPIAN AND UTOPIAN PERSPECTIVES.....	46
4.3 TYPES OF SUPPORT FOUND ONLINE	47
4.4 INTEGRATIONS OF OFFLINE AND ONLINE CONTEXT	51
4.5 KEY CONTRIBUTIONS	53
4.6 CONCLUSION.....	56
5 METHODOLOGY.....	58
5.1 INTRODUCTION.....	58
5.2 RESEARCH DESIGN.....	58
5.3 SEQUENTIAL QUALITATIVE DESIGN	62
5.4 CONSIDERATIONS AND DECISIONS	64
5.4.1 <i>Non-heterosexual: Determining the recruitment and description terms used for participants.....</i>	<i>64</i>
5.4.2 <i>Researcher Credibility</i>	<i>67</i>
5.4.3 <i>Criteria for participation.....</i>	<i>68</i>
5.4.4 <i>Ethical Considerations</i>	<i>69</i>
5.4.5 <i>Software.....</i>	<i>69</i>

5.4.6 Coding Decisions and Structure	70
5.5 STAGE ONE – QUESTIONNAIRE	71
5.5.1 Questionnaire Design	71
5.5.2 Quantitative analysis.....	73
5.5.3 Questionnaire sample.....	74
5.5.4 Qualitative analysis.....	81
5.6 STAGE TWO – INTERVIEWS	81
5.6.1 Interview Design.....	81
5.6.2 Data Collection	83
5.6.3 Analysis	84
5.7 LIMITATIONS.....	86
5.8 CONCLUSION.....	87
6 A NUANCED PERSPECTIVE ON MINORITY STRESS: ENRICHMENT, STIGMA AND SUPPORT.	88
6.1 INTRODUCTION	88
6.2 THE COMPLEXITY OF EXPERIENCE: NOT A POSITIVE/NEGATIVE DICHOTOMY ...	90
6.3 ENRICHMENT	92
6.3.1 Personal Enrichment: “Once I accepted it everything was fine”.....	93
6.3.2 Life Enrichment: Diverse Friendship and Community	99
6.3.3 Emancipation and False Dichotomies.....	102
6.4 STIGMA	104
6.4.1 Internalised Stigma	106
6.4.2 Externalised Stigma	113
6.5 SUPPORT NEEDS	115
6.5.1 Reasons for Not Needing Support.....	117
6.5.2 Support Services	119
6.6 CONCLUSION.....	120
7 AN ANALYSIS OF NON-HETEROSEXUAL INTERNET USAGE IN IRELAND	123
7.1 INTRODUCTION	123
7.2 INTERNET USAGE AND TRENDS	124
7.3 NARRATIVE ENGAGEMENT – THE NEED TO SEE “PEOPLE LIKE ME”	129
7.4 UNIQUE FORMS OF INFORMAL LEARNING.....	135
7.4.1 Finding coming out stories	135
7.4.2 Sexual Health and School as a Shrunk Space	137
7.4.3 Connecting with community.....	142
7.5 RESHAPING AND REDEFINING SPACES	145
7.6 NEGATIVITY AND ONLINE LIMITATIONS	149
7.7 CONCLUSION.....	151
8 CONTEXT AND THE ROLE OF PLACE.....	154
8.1 INTRODUCTION	154
8.2 MARK: INTERNET HAD LITTLE IMPACT DUE TO OFFLINE RESOURCES.....	157
8.3 FINN: SCHOOL CREATED SUPPORTIVE PLACE.....	161
8.4 ANTHONY: INTERNET ESSENTIAL FOR AUTHENTICATING PLACE.....	163
8.5 PAULA: INTERNET INADEQUATE DUE TO OFFLINE FACTORS.....	166
8.6 CHLOE: THE NEW GAY TEENAGER WITH SUPPORTIVE FRIENDS.....	171
8.7 AMY: INTERNET REPLACED SUPPORT SERVICE DUE TO IDENTITY CHANGES....	175
8.8 EMMA: INTERNET HELPED TO DEVELOP RESILIENCY	179
8.9 SHARED NARRATIVE FEATURES.....	183

8.9.1 “ <i>I Always Knew</i> ”	183
8.9.2 <i>Protective factors – Minimising Damage and Developing Resiliency</i>	184
8.9.3 <i>Redefining Normal – Authenticating Place</i>	185
8.10 CONCLUSION	187
9 CONCLUSION	190
9.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION	190
9.2 DISCUSSION	191
9.2.1 <i>Psychology and Sexuality Studies</i>	192
9.2.2 <i>Communications and Internet Studies</i>	195
9.2.3 <i>Human geography</i>	196
9.2.4 <i>Conclusion</i>	198
9.3 LIMITATIONS	199
9.4 RECOMMENDATIONS	200
10 REFERENCES.....	204
11 APPENDICES.....	219

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS	85
TABLE 2: CASE SPECIFIC MAIN TOPICS FOR INTERVIEWEES	157

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: OUTLINE OF STAGES AND CHAPTER BREAKDOWN.....	64
FIGURE 2: AGE RANGE OF PARTICIPANTS BY PERCENTAGE	75
FIGURE 3: SEXUAL ORIENTATION OF PARTICIPANTS	77
FIGURE 4: SEXUAL ORIENTATION BY PERCENTAGE	78
FIGURE 5: SEXUAL ORIENTATION FILTERED BY GENDER.....	78
FIGURE 6: CHOSEN SEXUAL IDENTITY LABELS BY PERCENTAGE	79
FIGURE 7: OVERVIEW OF YES AND NO ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMPACTS.	91
FIGURE 8: BREAKDOWN OF COMFORT WITH SEXUAL ORIENTATION	91
FIGURE 9: RANKING OF INTERNET ACTIVITIES BASED ON 'ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL'	125
FIGURE 10: RANKING OF INTERNET ACTIVITIES BY 'ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL' AND 'VERY IMPORTANT' COMBINED	126
FIGURE 11: RANKING OF INTERNET ACTIVITIES BASED ON UNIMPORTANT AND LITTLE IMPORTANCE	127
FIGURE 12: PERCEPTION OF SUPPORT FROM THE INTERNET	128

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: CODING SCHEME.....	220
APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE	224
APPENDIX C: PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT FOR INTERVIEWS	230
APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FOR INTERVIEWS.....	233

ABSTRACT

Kirsty Park

Changing Spaces: Exploring the Role of the Internet in Supporting Non-Heterosexual
Youth Aged 18 – 25 in Ireland

This study used a sequential qualitatively driven design to explore non-heterosexual internet usage among 18-25 year olds in Ireland. Within the last decade there has been a growing body of research focusing on supporting sexual minority youth in Ireland and understanding their experiences, yet little is known about how they use the internet for support. Non-heterosexual youth can use the internet to access narratives and communities which previously would have required physical presence in geographical places. Considering the role that narrative plays within identity formation, the change this spatial shift has brought about in social relations offers the opportunity for a radical reshaping of both the development of identity and the opportunities for new types of identity to occur in places which they would be unlikely to occur in the past. This study has addressed the gap in literature by positioning a phenomenological sense of place at the centre of the analysis. Using a questionnaire with 126 participants along with 8 in depth narrative based interviews, the study found that non-heterosexual youth perceive the internet as highly valued for its supportive role in identity formation as well the ability to redefine norms and authenticate place for those who experience an absence of offline support.

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, there has been an increased focus on research that addresses the support needs of non-heterosexual young people in Ireland (Cannon et al., 2013; Kelleher, 2009; Mannix-McNamara et al., 2013; Minton et al., 2008; Sarma and Psychol, 2007). Two large scale reports, Supporting LGBT Lives (Mayock et al., 2009) and LGBTIreland (Higgins et al., 2016a), have highlighted some of the particular issues that non-heterosexual youth are more likely to face and these reports have formed the basis of policy and developmental work addressing sexual minority needs within Ireland. This increased focus on supporting non-heterosexual youth is welcome, yet little is known about what role the internet plays in providing support, particularly for those who do not have access to physical support services or who do not find their friends and family supportive. One study of LGB youth in Ireland identified those most vulnerable as being those isolated from LGB support due to living in rural areas, those living in non-LGB friendly environments and those who are unsure of their sexual identity (Mannix-McNamara et al., 2013). As this study will show, those three characteristics are all impacted by internet usage, and yet, there is no Irish based research that explores this link and makes the findings applicable to those who work with non-heterosexual youth in Ireland. On the 11th of December 2016, the opening of the first LGBT resource centre on the entire west coast of Ireland made national news. Within the segment, news reporter Teresa Mannion states, “Amach LGBT Galway has a strong social media presence, and now there’s a physical safe space for people to drop by anytime” (RTÉ, 2016). As this statement highlights, online resources have been available to non-heterosexual youth in Ireland, even if offline resources have not been

available, yet little is known about what role these online resources play, particularly in that absence.

The lack of research on this topic has implications for how young non-heterosexuals are characterised and how their experiences are understood. For example, a resource developed by the National Youth Council of Ireland to provide guidance about working with LGBT young people describes a period of isolation identified between when a young person becomes aware of their sexual identity and when they come out. They describe that, “During this time, young people have reported feeling invisible, feeling terrified of being found out and being treated in a negative manner” (Barron and Stephens, 2012, p. 21). While these feelings are certainly accurate, realistically, the opportunity for youth to access coming out information online indicates that this period is not one *only* characterised by isolation unless a young person finds support in a youth service or comes out. Evidence would suggest that the internet forms a critical resource during this in-between period of knowing about one’s sexual identity and coming out, particularly when it comes to accessing digital media (Alexander and Losh, 2010; Bond et al., 2009; Craig and McInroy, 2014; Wuest, 2014), yet a perception of how and why that might occur is entirely absent from this youth work resource. While youth workers may not necessarily use the internet to support youth, understanding the role the internet plays for young non-heterosexuals is an essential part of understanding their experiences. While international research already provides insight into this topic, the existence of research situated in Ireland makes a much stronger case for incorporating this knowledge in to the Irish sector. The need for contextual research is obvious when considering the importance of the two main Irish-based research studies on LGBT lives in Ireland (Higgins et al., 2016a; Mayock et al., 2009) and how these reports have played an important role in developing policy and practical interventions within Ireland. This study makes a similar contribution around the area of non-heterosexual internet usage by providing an analysis based in Ireland. Mary L. Gray has approached this topic with a similar question:

What happens to kids who read these online resources in places that don’t have the capacity to organize and coordinate with youth services and the broader infrastructure of support (Gray, 2009a, p. xiii).

Gray’s approach is, as she states, much more political in nature. It focuses on queer identity work and a critique of the ways in which the LGBT movement has organised and positioned itself in respect to rural youth. While this study does address the role of LGBT organisations in supporting non-heterosexual youth, the focus here is less on

social movements and instead a larger focus is placed on understanding the process the internet itself plays in personal identity development and perceptions of online support. Additionally, the idea of a rural/urban divide is less prominent within this study, and instead, the focus is on the sense of place which characterises an individual's physical social world, irrespective of whether that occurs in an urban or rural setting. Others have pointed out the connection and importance of understanding offline context when examining non-heterosexual internet usage (Craig and McInroy, 2014; DeHaan et al., 2013; Downing, 2013; Gray, 2009a; Hillier and Harrison, 2007; Paradis, 2016), and the field of internet research more generally has encouraged an approach which acknowledges the importance of offline context (Baym, 2009; Jensen, 2011; Papacharissi, 2005; Slater, 2002). This study provides a useful original contribution to internet research about non-heterosexual youth through the extension of concepts about the interactivity between place, offline lives and internet usage as it applies to Ireland. Specifically, it addresses how non-heterosexual youth see their identity, what they find supportive online and how this information relates to their sense of place. It is also unique in that it focuses on a phenomenological concept of place as part of the analysis taken by exploring how a sense of place interacts with online support. The results themselves provide the first in-depth analysis of how the internet is used by non-heterosexual youth in Ireland as well as making an argument about how narrative engagement (Hammack and Cohler, 2009a) opportunities offered online can actually serve to authenticate place, the extension of a concept developed by Dodge and Kitchin (2003).

1.1 Research Aims

The research questions developed from an initial aim to understand more about how non-heterosexual youth use the internet for support in Ireland. Initially, physical geography was a key part of this as the intention was to examine differences based on geographical location, for example urban versus rural, or access to support services versus lack of access. However, during the literature review exploring the role of space and place, I encountered the field of human geography and the work that has been done on understanding how place functions on a social and personal level. This led to a change in focus as the goal became more about understanding the role the internet plays in supporting non-heterosexual youth as they deal with questions of identity, belonging and place, particularly for those who do not have access to the resources they need in the places where they live.

The key questions addressed in this work are:

1. What value do non-heterosexual youth in Ireland place on their internet usage?
2. How do non-heterosexual youth use the internet for support in Ireland?
3. How does the internet usage of non-heterosexual youth affect their sense of place?
4. How does place influence the importance of internet usage for non-heterosexual youth in Ireland?

Two additional sub-questions needed to be answered to address these research questions:

1. How do non-heterosexual youth perceive their own self-identity and identity development?
2. What support do non-heterosexual youth need?

1.2 Definitions of Key Terms

The term non-heterosexual is used here as a term to describe a general personal sense of identity as opposed to a specific identity label. There is no strict definition of this term, rather it depends on whether a participant considers themselves to be outside the norm of heterosexuality. The nuances of what this means and what assumptions it carries are further explored within Chapter 5.

When referencing specific pieces of work that address certain populations, for example a study involving gay and lesbian youth or only bisexual youth, the exact terms used within that study are the terms used to describe it. This also applies to descriptions of specific contexts, for instance, when discussing sexual identity models, the word homosexual is often used as that word applies to the context those models were addressing. However, when drawing larger conclusions or applying the findings of others to this research, the term non-heterosexual will be used.

1.3 Exclusion of Gender Identity

The decision was made not to include gender identity as a specific object of inquiry in this study. This means that while those who are not cisgender, such as those who identify as transgender or a non-binary gender identity, were welcome to participate in the study and some did so, ultimately, they still had to meet the criteria of identifying as non-heterosexual to participate. While there is much to investigate regarding gender identity and the internet, including gender identity minorities would introduce a number of different dynamics and experiences that could potentially create a proposal larger than this project has the capacity to cover. While there is much overlap between gender and

sexual identity, I would agree with Herek et al. (2007), who state the following of their own work:

Societal and individual reactions to transgender individuals warrant a separate treatment that fully explores the unique theoretical and empirical issues specific to stigma based on gender identity and gender-related behaviour (Herek et al., 2007, p. 174).

Additionally, I did not want to do a disservice to the needs of gender identity research by including transgender and non-cisgender identities for recruitment purposes, while prioritising sexual identity within the research itself.

1.4 Methodology

This study adopts a narrative based, phenomenological approach which considers the, "significance of cohort and context in the construction of identity" (Hammack and Cohler, 2009b, p. 12). It also utilises a qualitative sequential design in which two methods are used sequentially with the first stage of data collection and analysis directly informing the second stage (Morse, 2010, 2003). The first stage consisted of an online qualitatively focused questionnaire with both open ended and closed questions which had 126 valid responses. The second stage consisted of eight in-depth follow up interviews with participants from the questionnaire, designed to provide deeper context through analysing narrative. Typically, studies in this area which focus on mental health and support are based in psychology (Kelleher, 2009; Meyer, 1995; Savin-Williams, 2001) so scholars seek to find solid evidence to quantify the presence of mental health issues and support through the survey measurements and sampling methods used. While this leads to very clear and actionable research, it can risk missing the human element of the individual lives involved. The focus of this study from the beginning has been to give a voice to the experiences and perceptions of non-heterosexual youth themselves or a qualitative focus on, "elaborate description of the "meaning" of phenomena from the perspectives of the people or culture under examination" (Ridenour and Newman, 2008, p. 7). This study also takes a unique approach as it begins by developing an understanding of how non-heterosexual youth perceive their identity and what support needs they have, before applying an analysis of internet usage to those perceptions. The findings shed light on the ways in which non-heterosexual youth talk about their lives and how they see themselves. This approach is significant in three ways. Firstly, it allows for an exploration into whether non-heterosexual youth engage with particular narratives when discussing themselves.

Secondly, it lets the participants themselves shape what is typically defined for them. For example, instead of asking questions which define identity, mental health and support, the focus was continually on allowing the participants themselves to offer their perceptions of how they see their identity and wellbeing. Finally, the approach taken allows for an in-depth understanding of how the complexities of individual social environments shape the ways in which young people engage with online support.

1.5 Chapter Outlines

This research takes an interdisciplinary, largely qualitative approach and, as such, the literature review covers topics as diverse as identity development, narrative, mental health, human geography, conceptualisations of online and offline space, and empirical studies of non-heterosexual internet usage. This section provides an overview of each chapter.

Chapter Two partly addresses methodological questions, but it also establishes a clear idea of how sexual identity and mental health are conceptualised and approached within this study. This chapter outlines a social constructionist view of sexual identity which prioritizes the importance of language and culture in defining what society typically understands as sexuality. The chapter explores the role that an essentialist view of sexual identity plays in popular culture. This leads into a discussion of sexual identity development models, the way in which language shapes modern non-heterosexual identities and how online content changes the opportunities available for young people to explore their sexual identity. Finally, the chapter discusses controversy around current LGBT or non-heterosexual mental health research, drawing again upon the importance of language and narrative in shaping sexual identity.

Chapter Three addresses the idea of space and how the internet transforms typical understandings of what space is. The first part of the chapter uses literature from the field of human geography to develop an understanding of space and place based on social relations. The second part takes this social definition of space and place and applies it to the internet and computer mediated communication. The chapter considers debates around whether that which occurs online is real and ties this into a discussion of online and offline identity. Finally, the chapter considers the idea of embodiment and establishes the importance of an approach which prioritises a sense of place and context when examining that which occurs online.

Chapter Four outlines current research on the topic of non-heterosexual internet usage as it applies to this study. It begins by addressing perceptions towards young

people's internet usage and why they matter. It then looks at some of the types of support which have been found by others examining non-heterosexual internet usage and highlights research which has incorporated a combination of both online and offline concepts in their analysis. Finally, the chapter discusses some of the key contributions from others which have a direct impact on the study.

Chapter Five outlines the chosen methodology and theoretical approach as well as the rationale and structure behind these decisions. It highlights some general considerations made before specifying the design, data collection and analysis steps taken for both the online questionnaire and the interviews.

Chapter Six explores concepts around minority stress and support. An analysis of questionnaire data is presented which outlines the ways in which non-heterosexual youth conceptualise their sexual identity in both positive ways, classified as enrichment, and in negative ways, classified as stigma. This serves to both address debates around negative framing of mental health issues affecting non-heterosexual youth and to highlight the needs and opportunities which exist for non-heterosexual youth. The chapter then explores support needs and concludes that access to narratives and representation are particularly important resources along with social support. The conclusions are discussed considering their potential to shape the analysis of internet usage taken in the next chapter.

Chapter Seven addresses how non-heterosexual youth use the internet using data from both stages of the study. It begins by discussing general trends highlighted within the questionnaire, emphasising the importance of categories of usage based in representations and informal learning. The central argument within this chapter is that through the process of narrative engagement and informal learning, the internet offers non-heterosexual youth the opportunity to challenge and redefine the limitations experienced in offline spaces. It focuses on some specific usages types which were considered important and discusses the ways in which the participants characterised and redefined online spaces.

Chapter Eight explores the interaction between space, place and internet usage through the analysis and context found in the individual stories of seven research participants. Each participant's story highlights a different aspect of how internet usage is influenced by material realities and a sense of place. The chapter identifies common narrative features found within each story, particularly each participant's identification of protective factors and redefining norms. Finally, it argues that the

internet can assist in authenticating place, particularly for those who perceive an absence of offline protective factors.

2 IDENTITY, NARRATIVE AND MENTAL HEALTH

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the conceptualisation of identity and non-heterosexual identity which form a central part of this study. Giddens (2003) described his focus on identity as being less about psychology and more about understanding the new mechanisms of self-identity. In a similar way, while this chapter may touch on concepts of identity or mental health which are based in psychology, the overall focus is understanding how non-heterosexual self-identity is created and maintained through the communication of popular narratives and identity possibilities. As explored within this chapter, the narratives and possibilities for identity offered to non-heterosexuals has implications for community, identity labelling and mental health. Determining how sexual identity is understood within this study also has methodological implications.

This chapter will explore what terms such as sexual identity or sexual orientation mean in contemporary discourse. Beyond that, it will examine the role that narrative, culture and space have in the construction of sexual identity and how these factors interact with mental health issues that have been identified among sexual minority youth.

Before engaging with the specifics of non-heterosexual identity, it is worth reviewing some of the core concepts of identity which provide the background for this literature review. Goffman (1956) explored the ways in which identity is performed or situationally defined according to social expectations, while symbolic interactionism highlighted the importance of language and communication with others in constructing the self (Blumer, 1969). These early contributions helped to define an idea of identity which is firmly intertwined with the social. Giddens addresses self-identity within the backdrop of modernity, suggesting that identity is increasingly reflexively organised. He describes the self as needing “to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change.” (2003, p. 33) This process is one which involves constantly reassessing information and personal biographical narratives. His concept of self-identity is particularly relevant within this study as he describes how our sense of “the world” is radically transformed by the transformation

of place, leading to a situation where, “self and ‘identity’ are interrelated in a global milieu” (Giddens, 2003, p. 32). The combination of narrative reflexivity and the interplay between local and global social worlds creates the potential for diverse identity possibilities. Conversely, when addressing diverse identities, such as within this study, Giddens work highlights the importance of addressing narrative potential and the role of space and place.

2.2 Understanding orientation, behaviour and identity

In the mid nineteenth century the term sexuality evolved to mean, “the personalized sexual feelings that distinguished one person from another (my sexuality)” (Weeks, 2009, p. 22). Culturally, this extends to the idea that one’s sexuality is one’s identity, creating a construct in which sexual identity forms a central and inescapable part of the self. Swiftly changing social landscapes have led to the emergence of the “sexual citizen”, or a new form of citizenship that takes previously private forms of sexuality and makes them a matter of importance and belonging, particularly to those previously marginalized due to their sexual practices (Weeks, 1998). Additionally, sex has evolved in importance as the concept of sexuality represents not only sexual preferences or behaviours but a fundamental truth about who we are (Foucault, 1978), what many consider to be a natural and core part of the self. As Savin-Williams (2006, p. 50) has observed, it is a recent phenomenon in which young people who experience same-sex attractions have “incorporated these attractions into their sense of self, publicly announced their attractions to friends and relatives, and formed a personal identity based on their attractions”. Additionally, Weeks (2009, p. 102) describes the development and adoption of the term ‘gay’ in Western cultures in the 1970s as “a new stage in the public expression of a positive personal identity”.

Foucault (1978) transformed the study of sexuality by challenging the ‘production of sexuality’ and introducing the idea that sexuality is socially constructed. He argued that while the past may appear to be characterised by sexual repression, in fact, what developed was discourses around sexuality that exalted its importance. While sexuality may appear to be natural or pre-defined, Foucault believed that it is instead a product of these historical sexual discourses. For homosexuality in particular, Foucault (1978, p. 105) recognised the emergence of deviant sexualities as being the “psychiatrization of perverse pleasure”, a process within which certain sexual acts became attributed to abnormal deviant sexualities. So rather than simply being a sodomite who engages in sodomy, one is instead classified as a homosexual who engages in such acts due to his deviant sexuality. The multitude of sexual expressions and identities seen within

ancient cultures point to the validity of Foucault's analyses as they highlight the fact that sexuality can and has changed depending on context (Halperin, 1990). As others have pointed out, the social construction of sexuality thesis leads to the conclusion that heterosexuality is a modern construct that privileges heterosexuality as normal, while setting up homosexuality as the abnormal other (Katz, 1995; Weeks, 1986).

There is also evidence of culture rooted in homosexual practices found in the past such as the use of Molly houses in Renaissance England (Bray, 1982) or the thriving gay culture documented in New York before the 1940's (Chauncey, 1994). However, as Chauncey himself has documented, while there was a gay culture, there did not exist the same perception of a binary difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality, as the difference was more focused on masculinity and femininity. Language defines sexuality because it defines the sexual. Acts and thoughts become infused with sexual meanings through language and, consequently, humans learn these sexual scripts and learn what their culture considers to be sexual (Gagnon and Simon, 2005). Echoing Foucault's work, Jeffrey Weeks goes as far as calling sexuality a "fictional unity" that "at some point in the future will not exist again" (Weeks, 2009, p. 24). This destabilising of the language used to describe sexuality and particularly homosexuality is still relevant in the present day as scholars attempt to understand sexuality in a variety of contexts. For example, as Lancaster (1988) points out, using terms like homophobia or homosexual to describe the same-sex activity he observed in Nicaragua is inappropriate and not applicable to that cultural context. Essentially, in a case such as Lancaster's research, employing his own popular cultural understanding of sexuality would have the potential to cloud the research with an unfounded bias. As the remainder of this chapter will show, the issue of how we define and use words such as sexuality, sexual identity or sexual orientation has a dramatic impact on research findings and their implications.

Not all who have a same-sex orientation end up either reflexively constructing a sexual identity label which reflects that, while others may indicate that they do not have the same sexual orientation throughout their life-course. In many ways, this differs from the mainstream cultural narrative about sexuality which delivers a message that people who experience same-sex attractions are either gay or bisexual and if they do not identify as such then they must be 'in the closet'. This cultural myth can make it harder to deliver definitive conclusions surrounding sexual minority health research. For example, as Savin-Williams (2001) points out, in many studies, sexual minority young people are classified by their sexual identity i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, rather

than their sexual attractions or behaviours. While this is not an unacceptable way to categorise people, it does refer to a “culturally defined sexual minority label” (Savin-Williams, 2001, p. 5), and as such, it only represents a certain amount and type of sexual-minority youth. There is no ‘right’ way to determine who should participate in a study or what counts as ‘gay’, but there are important considerations involved in those decisions. Confusing identity with behaviour or orientation can have serious implications for research on topics like mental health, sexually transmitted infections or population counts, due to sampling errors, incorrect assumptions or solutions targeting the wrong groups.

One issue is the changing nature of sexual orientation. Rather than being a static, essentialist state, variations in sexual orientation over time have been recorded in both gay men and women (Diamond, 2000; Kinnish et al., 2005). A study of people in Ireland has found similar patterns of variance with same sex experiences occurring at a higher level than same-sex attraction, which in turn occurs more frequently than same-sex identity (Layte et al., 2006). Although the constraints given to identity within that study could be considered methodologically flawed as the definition given was limited to the labels of homosexual or bisexual, it still supports the idea that sexual identity, attractions and behaviours should not be grouped together in one homogenous category. Another issue is that an orientation towards love and sex do not always match. There are both men and women who may desire homosexual sex but heterosexual relationships. These combinations of alternating desires can lead to different identity labels, such as bisexual or queer, but they can also lead to no identity labelling or an assumption of heterosexuality (Adam, 2000; Diamond, 2003; Hewitt, 1998). This may not be problematic if the focus of a study is simply behaviour or orientation, for example the self-esteem of men who have sex with men. However, if the study is focused on more sociological or cultural issues, then this quickly becomes problematic. For example, if someone identifies as straight yet experiences occasional same-sex attractions do they belong in a study of LGBT mental health? If a researcher does choose to use a particular characteristic as their cut off point for defining homosexuality, then the question arises of, at what point does same-sex attractions or behaviour make someone gay? (Sell et al., 1995). To attribute a label of sexual identity to someone based on this is essentially allowing the researcher to determine what level of frequency of attraction or behaviour is enough to change someone from being classified as heterosexual to being classified as a specific identity label. It also causes difficulties when comparing research as what one study classifies as gay may be different from another.

Sexual identities also come with “social baggage”, for example expectations about how a lesbian dresses or what their cultural interests are. Refusing sexual identity labels can be a way of asserting freedom from this social baggage (Esterberg, 1997). It is possible for a person to be exposed to the idea of refusing to embrace a sexual identity and perhaps even to form some sense of community with others who are united in their lack of a labelled identity. This is an important distinction because it can describe very different states of being. Some may not label their sexual identity because they have not yet begun to explore or examine it, while others may choose not to label it because the process of exploring their identity has led to the conclusion that they do not require a label. Additionally, someone may define themselves as queer to describe their philosophical or political beliefs, or alternatively, someone may choose to not label themselves at all while being in a same-sex relationship. These types of nuances problematize using sexual identity labels as a form of research recruitment as well as characterising same-sex sexual activity or attraction as being a signpost for a specific sexual identity.

One suggestion given to overcome these methodological issues is to abandon a general idea of sexual orientation and instead focus on the specific aspects which are necessary to the research question under consideration (Savin-Williams and Ream, 2007). It may be that there is no definitive answer to the question of how to create and measure a category of gay or non-heterosexual, yet understanding why there is no definitive answer to that question enables the creation of research methods which respond to the complexity of the issue and which are appropriate for the specifics of the study involved. The difference between sexual orientation, behaviour and identity is important to define, particularly as identity itself involves a specific set of constructs which are not present within orientation or behaviour.

2.3 Essentialism and Popular Culture

So far, this literature review has centred on a social constructionist perspective of sexuality and sexual identity. However, it would be wrong to assume that social constructionism is the dominant perspective within popular culture or the LGBTQA community. DeLamater and Hyde (1998, p. 11) define the three key assumptions underpinning essentialism as the beliefs that there are, “underlying true forms or essences”, “a discontinuity between different forms rather than continuous variation” and “the absence of change over time”. In the case of homosexuality, this would mean that there are distinct categories of homosexuality, bisexuality and heterosexuality, that these categories cannot blend together and that they exist constantly across time.

Attempts to isolate the cause of homosexuality to genetics is largely based in essentialism as it requires distinct states caused by biology. While an essentialist view of sexual orientation need not refer to sexual identity, this can be complicated by the fact that many who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual may not necessarily see their sexual identity as existing separately to their sexual orientation.

The essentialist point of view came to prominence in the early 90's with the discovery of a link between the Xq28 genetic marker and homosexuality, dubbed the 'gay gene' within popular media (Hamer et al., 1993), although it was not found to be associated with homosexuality in females (Hu et al., 1995). Research around genetics address questions about the biological basis of sexual orientation, yet the rhetoric of essentialism has also been applied to sexual identity in a discourse prevalent within political activism and popular culture. Popular songs like 'Same Love' (Macklemore and Lewis, 2012), which features the lyrics, "I can't change, even if I tried, even if I wanted to", or 'Born this Way' (Lady Gaga, 2011) have become anthems for both LGBT sexual identities as well as activist equality movements. While the social constructionist perspective has become dominant within academia, the essentialist perspective has grown among western gay communities, presumably because of the political necessity of asserting essentialism (Brookey, 2002; Epstein, 1998; Tygart, 2000).

Interestingly, both essentialist and social-constructionist beliefs about homosexuality can be used both to justify anti-gay attitudes as well as to lobby for tolerance and increased rights. For example, those who advocate reparative therapies that aim to cure or change one's homosexual orientation often do so by claiming that a homosexual orientation is due to psychological or emotional damage. Alternatively, for queer theorists the perceived fluidity of gender and sexuality is used to argue for a non-heteronormative view of sexuality and gender in which sexual activity and identity are dynamic and endlessly open. The idea of choice, however, has become a battleground, with gay activists increasingly using essentialism to battle against anti-gay activists who delegitimise civil rights claims by relegating homosexual orientations to a mere lifestyle choice (Epstein, 1998; Whisman, 1996). Denying this choice legitimizes homosexuality, yet it can also reinforce negativity surrounding homosexuality by suggesting that it is both inevitable and undesirable (Whisman, 1996). Thus, while affirming essentialism may work as a political strategy (Tygart, 2000), it can also cause a political argument to default to the idea that rights and protections should only be afforded to gay people because they are stuck that way.

While Brookey (2002) has identified the political motivation behind the embrace of essentialism, he also suggests, quite significantly, that essentialism represents a fundamental belief that many sexual minority people believe about themselves; that they did not choose their sexual orientation, therefore, it must be a natural part of themselves. The essentialist perspective assumes that sexual orientation is determined at a young age and that coming out is a process of accepting the identity which you already have (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1995) and this is something which may resonate with the personal narratives of many non-heterosexual people. Recalling arguments about the social construction of categories such as homosexual and heterosexual (Foucault, 1978; Halperin, 1990; Katz, 2003; Weeks, 1986) challenges the assumed truth of this dichotomy. While it is certainly possible that people are born with a predisposition towards a certain sexual orientation, it is highly unlikely that their identity and behaviours have not consequently been shaped by sociocultural factors. As Ortiz (1993) points out, if gay identity was simply the result of a sexual preference for the same-sex, then surely we would see its existence across both cultures and history. If anything, it could be argued that categories of sexuality and gender are becoming increasingly fluid.

Halperin (1990) writes that early conceptualisations of deviant sexuality blurred the lines between gender roles and sex. When homosexuality was first introduced as a term it brought distinction between sex and gender and brought easy classification to sexual behaviour as either same-sex or “normal”. That has evolved further to bring about a variety of sexual and gender identities which further stress fluidity such as queer, genderqueer and pansexual. This is also evident in Ireland with the increasing profile and support of the transgender community as well as a wider acknowledgment of sexual identities outside of LGB. The Irish LGBT magazine GCN is one example, as they adopted the acronym of their original title, Gay Community News. In 2013, GCN published an opinion piece called “#LGBTSoup” which attacked the practice of adding letters to the LGBT acronym for additional identities (McGrattan, 2013). The article suggested instead that the term ‘gay’ should return as a catch all phrase. The backlash to this article was widespread and prompted the magazine to publish a reaction article from the Transgender Equality Network Ireland in their next issue (Giambrone, 2013). While the article highlights the desire by some for simplicity in the face of so many labels, the backlash highlights how LGBT culture itself in Ireland has embraced a wider sense of diversity. It may be the case that most people have not analysed their identity in a way which acknowledges the contradictions between essentialism and social constructionism. This idea of fluidity acts in opposition to essentialism as it

denies the need for both constancy and discontinuity which characterises essentialist beliefs (DeLamater and Hyde, 1998). While it may seem like a contradiction to some, a cultural movement now exists within pop culture regarding sexual identity which values both the essentialist, or 'true self', perspective on sexuality along with a fluid sense of labelling and identity that claims a person can be whoever they want to be.

The discussion surrounding the conflation of sexual identity with behaviour and orientation eventually leads to the question, should homosexuality or other sexual identities centred on same-sex orientations be studied and recognised as distinct identities? As D'Emilio (1998, p. 248) points out distinct sexual identities, "have become less of a sexual category and more of a human identity". This widens the opportunities for studying sexual identity as an analysis could take a political, cultural, psychological or behavioural approach. Within the scope of social science it creates opportunities to examine how people assign meanings to their own sexual desires within the wider societal context of their lived experiences (Hammack and Cohler, 2009b).

2.4 Stage Based Theories of Identity Development

Erik Erikson (1968) pioneered ideas around psychosocial identity which have had a significant impact on the trajectory of identity development research. His work posited that identity development occurs over multiple stages throughout the lifespan and the adolescent stage was key to the formation of a healthy identity. Failure to develop a healthy identity resulted in an identity crisis or the adoption of a negative identity, which he associated with poor decisions and consequences. As well as popularising the importance of personal identity to a healthy life, Erikson's work has resonated due to its ability to explain the anecdotal perspectives many have on youth development. Erikson's ideas were further enhanced by the work of James Marcia (1966) who argued that rather than Erikson's linear staged process, identity development among adolescents and young adults instead consists of non-linear states based on levels of commitment and exploration towards a chosen identity. Together these two theories provided the starting point for how adolescent identity has been understood and conceptualised within psychology.

The work of Erickson and Marcia is relevant because it helps in understanding the development of theories of identity formation for non-heterosexuals. Early stage based models that examined homosexual identities such as those of Cass (1979), Coleman (1982), and Troiden (1989) were influential in establishing an expected trajectory for gay people. These models focused on specific stages that a gay person was likely to pass

through on the journey from self-realisation and coming out and to self-acceptance. While each author acknowledged some aspect of variation, influential social factors and non-linearity, on the whole their models give license to use linear, stage based models in dealing with gay youth (Eliason and Schope, 2007). Initial models applied to 'homosexuals' which commonly referred to gay male identity, but since then other models have focused on specific sexual identities such as bisexual identity (Fox, 2003) or lesbian identity (Ponse, 1978). Opposition to stage based models has criticised both their linear nature and essentialist presuppositions as they are based on the idea that a person's sexual orientation is a fixed state that will inevitably lead to a correlating fixed identity (Eliason, 1996; Horowitz and Newcomb, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2006). Another issue is empirical validation as ten out of 18 stage based theories analysed by Eliason and Schope (2007) were found to use no empirical validation. As Savin-Williams (2006) has pointed out, when the majority of the youth he has studied show little indication of following stage based models, then what is their value or accuracy? However, developmental theories are important because they allow those who provide support to those going through a process of establishing their sexual identity the opportunity to anticipate and understand issues that may arise during identity formation. Consequently, these stage based theories of sexual identity have been created and used primarily in the context of human services as they provide psychologists, social workers or public health workers with the tools they need to provide relevant interventions (Eliason and Schope, 2007). While these types of theories may not be as important in sociological discussions of sexual identity as they once were, the fact that they are a key part of approaches that involve mental health interventions make them relevant to this study.

Two public health researchers, Eliason and Schope (2007) have compared the various sexual identity and linear based models of sexual identity formation to find common themes. They also considered the main critiques levelled at such models, such as the use of rigid labels, the social and cultural construct of various sexual identities and the fluidity evident within some people's experience of sexual identity. By incorporating these critiques but acknowledging the common themes, they presented a non-prescriptive guideline for those seeking to provide interventions for LGBT youth, in other words, a thematic way to provide intervention rather than one which assumes certain developmental stages should or will occur. Their analysis is based on a conclusion which also forms the basis of the approach taken within this study that, "Identity formation is a lifelong process, rather than some discrete event with a clear beginning, middle, and endpoint." (Eliason and Schope, 2007, p. 22) Key themes they

identified include exploration, described as “methods of identity comparison”, cultural immersion, disclosure, and authenticity, or the need to create a reality that feels aligned with one’s true self.

Considering these four points and the questions that arise from them there is a strong case to be made that the internet is not just a new tool that non-heterosexuals can use during the process of identity formation but rather that it radically alters the potential experiences of non-heterosexuals by offering new spaces within which identity formation can occur. Exploration, cultural immersion, disclosure and authenticity can all potentially occur online, offline or through a combination of both. Increasingly, as networked online spaces become more intertwined with offline spaces, decisions must be made as how to navigate these themes when they affect and hold consequences within both domains as well as how intervention and support can take place within those spaces.

2.5 Sexual Identity and Online Possibilities

What occurs online further complicates what is meant by sexual identity. Particularly in the context of this study, why would the internet even make any difference to sexual identity? As this section will show, the internet radically alters the opportunities for exploration of sexual identity, but perhaps more importantly, it also offers a greater ability to connect with narratives of sexual identity that can be applied to one’s own life. Central to a concept of personal sexual identity is narrative and the power of discourse to shape both identity development and social movements based on those identities. Giddens (2003, p. 54) has said, “A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going”. Similarly, Ken Plummer (1995) has written about the mainstream emergence of sexual stories in modern society. From talk shows to magazines to internet forums, what once was private or at least shared in limited settings, is now part of public discourse found across all types of media and audiences. One such type of sexual story is that of the coming out story. Coming out is now commonly understood as a rite of passage for gay people, even if all people do not feel the need to come out. Plummer (1995) describes the coming out story as taking on the significance of a metamorphosis. Initially, it starts off with the suffering characterised by the “frustrated, thwarted and stigmatised desire” of same-sex attractions. It then leads to a self-interrogation of the past, looking for causes and memories, and reinterpreting one’s own narrative. The process of coming out provides a “a crisis, a turning point, an epiphany” that eventually results in the emergence of a new self and

a new identity which has been forged from the initial “discovering of a truth” about oneself (Plummer, 1995, p. 52). The coming out story is particularly relevant because it is so recent. For most of the 1900’s while there was a growing homophile movement, it was still quite rare to find self-identified homosexuals and rarer still to hear their coming out stories (Plummer, 1995). By the end of the 1900’s the LGBTQ movement and its self-identified sexuality was firmly established as existing within both society and the media, although it may not always have been accepted, and with it, the coming out story has become known as an essential part of having an LGBT identity. In examining the significance of this, Plummer (1995) points to a relationship in which a coming-out narrative allows a person to engage with a community, but it also helps to define that community. As the LGBTQ movement grew, the coming out story provided an opportunity to be part of that movement, to reconfigure what may have felt like quite a stigmatised life into a new identity within a new community. This process of forming a new identity does not occur independently of the surrounding culture, but instead is fuelled by stories and narratives. The coming out story serves as one example of how culture and identity are developed in tandem, particularly when it comes to sexual identity (Hammack and Cohler, 2009b). Meeker goes as far as crediting a communications technology revolution as a catalyst for “identity formation, community building, geography making, and social movement organizing” which led towards “a homosexual identity forming into a collective sense of itself” (Meeker, 2006, p. 9). He argues that technology is so important because the process of connecting with others is more central to the process of identity development than coming out. This does not mean that culture created the concept of a homosexual identity, but rather that a culture and community emerged from the collective organising of those who experienced same-sex attractions. A key part of establishing this culture is found in the language used to describe the culture itself. An example of this can be seen in how Giddens describes the use of the word gay to signal self-description as, “An example of that reflexive process whereby a social phenomenon can be appropriated and transformed through collective engagement” (Giddens, 1992a, p. 14). However, language does not just describe, it also offers tools for the construction of meaning. The language used to describe sex offers possibilities by allowing a vision of identities, lives and cultures against which a person can compare themselves (Weeks, 2009). The concept of convergence is significant here as media producers and consumers are participants in an emerging culture which represents “a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). For example, an LGBT online message board, YouTube

channel or online movie each offer exposure to discourses of sex and sexual identity. This allows those who consume such content the opportunity to either incorporate or not incorporate such language into their own sense of identity, even if they have yet to encounter such language in their day to day life. Communities do not necessarily have to depend on physical or even virtual proximity. Benedict Anderson (2006) coined the term 'imagined community' as an explanation for nationalism. He argues that an imagined community occurs when people imagine a collective or community of people who share a set of similar beliefs as well as comradeship, essentially with people that they have never met. He also suggests that the power of the imagined community has evolved using print media and capitalism as newspapers and other publications further allowed people to buy into the idea of shared national experiences as they can read and discuss topics which are being read and discussed by others within the nation. Pullen (2007) has taken the concept of imagined communities and applied it to sexuality as he describes the imagined gay community as one bound by a mutual sense of shared experiences and values. Media and the new forms of storytelling it offers, provide the necessary tools for the imagined gay community to exist even among those who do not have access to their own physical gay community. Similarly, Mary L. Gray (2009b, 2009a) describes her own experience of finding a physical community of queers within which she found her own sense of self. She alternates this experience with that of a research participant who says she “found [her] true identity online” by accessing content describing bisexual experiences, or as she put it discovering “what words even made sense”(Gray, 2009b, p. 1164). Borrowing from Halberstam’s (2005) definition of realness, Gray uses the term “queer realness” to describe the search for authentic representations of identity among rural queer youth who do not find such representations in their communities, daily lives or mass media representations. Describing a variety of online spaces and websites, Gray (2009a, p. 127) characterises those which form a genre of queer realness as having “moments of storytelling that transform how rural youth think and talk about their identities”. The concepts of queer realness and imagined gay communities touch on the transforming importance of narrative and culture for sexual identity formation. Narrative and culture essentially create the potential for sexual identities which become accessible options of self-identity to those who access those cultures or narratives. While narrative and culture have always been a key part of this process, the Internet expands the possibilities of how and where this can occur, particularly when it comes to the boundaries of physical space and anonymously accessing non-heterosexual themed content.

2.6 Mental Health

The area of LGBT mental health has evolved from one of pathologising LGBT identity to understanding why mental health issues appear to occur at higher rates among LGBT people. An early contribution to this thinking came from Marmor who wrote:

In a society like ours where homosexuals are uniformly treated with disparagement or contempt—to say nothing about outright hostility—it would be surprising indeed if substantial numbers of them did not suffer from an impaired self-image and some degree of unhappiness with their stigmatized status. ... It is manifestly unwarranted and inaccurate, however, to attribute such neuroticism, when it exists, to intrinsic aspects of homosexuality itself. (Marmor, 1980, p. 400 as cited in Meyer (2003))

Similarly, Grossman (1997) used Goffman's work on stigma (1986) to argue that the negative experiences of LGB youth can be attributed to the difficulties of living with a 'spoiled identity'. Meyer (1995) drew from much of the research surrounding minority identities, discrimination, stress models and mental health issues and introduced the minority stress model as a way of explaining the higher prevalence of mental illness among LGBT people. Meyer suggested that additional stress from being a sexual minority formed minority stressors such as internalized homophobia, stigma and experiences of violence or discrimination. He suggested that this minority stress causes higher incidences of distress and consequently higher incidences of mental health issues.

The minority stress hypothesis has been widely accepted within Ireland appearing as a central concept in a number of Irish based LGBT mental health research writings (Higgins et al., 2011; Kelleher, 2009; Mannix-McNamara et al., 2013; Mayock et al., 2009) While being gay or lesbian may be arguably more acceptable in Irish society than it used to be, that does not necessarily mean that there are no longer stressors attached to being a sexual minority. The concept of microaggressions has been used to characterise the negative experiences that sexual minorities may still encounter in a more tolerant, yet still subtly homophobic society. Initially used within the context of racism (Pierce et al., 1977) and more recently popularised by Sue (2010), the concept of microaggressions describes "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups" (Nadal, 2008, p. 23). A study of microaggressions specific to LGB youth found that such microaggressions included use of heterosexist terminology,

discomfort/disapproval of LGBT experience and denial of the reality of heterosexism (Nadal et al., 2011). While these microaggressions are not overt or malicious, they do serve to reinforce prejudice and cause minorities to feel othered.

The LGBTIreland (Higgins et al., 2016a) report found that 75% of those surveyed experienced verbal abuse, while 21% had experienced physical violence, down from 80% and 25% respectively in the 2009 results (Mayock et al., 2009). Additionally, 48% had experienced homophobic bullying at school and 67% had witnessed homophobic bullying towards other students (Higgins et al., 2016a). LGBT young people in Ireland have previously been found to use drugs at a higher rate than other young people (Sarma and Psychol, 2007) and the LGBT Lives report found that depression, self-harm and problem drinking were commonly associated with minority stress in the lives of LGBT people in Ireland (Mayock et al., 2009).

As well as being a prominent feature in discourse around LGBT youth internationally, suicide has also been recognised as a serious risk for LGBT youth in Ireland. An Oireachtas report on suicide in Ireland from 2006 used a statistic taken from a study from New Zealand (Fergusson et al., 1999) to state that those with a same-sex sexual orientation were 6 times more likely to engage in suicidal behaviour (Joint Committee on Health and Children, 2006). The National Office for suicide prevention has recognised this higher risk of suicide among LGBT people and has supported the work of the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network since 2009, followed by the work of *Belong To* shortly after (National Office for Suicide Prevention, 2012). Primary research within Ireland has also found that a third of LGBT youth aged 25 or under in Ireland had thought about suicide within the previous year (Mayock et al., 2009) and 69% of those aged 14 – 18 had seriously thought about ending their own lives with 15 being the most common reported age for this occurrence (Higgins et al., 2016a).

However, the assumption that sexual minority youth face higher levels of mental health issues and suicide has not gone unquestioned. Savin-Williams (2005) has levelled some of the strongest critiques toward traditional mental health analyses in his research surrounding sexual minority youth. He particularly critiques the first waves of studies relating to gay adolescence for setting a precedent of using poor sampling techniques and a biased expectation of mental health issues. In particular he criticises the first study into gay adolescence for using a sample comprising of vulnerable males, some of whom were prostitutes (Roesler and Deisher, 1972). He contends that the results of this study became the starting point for a focus on mental health issues among the second study of gay youth (Remafedi, 1987) which in turn led to the development of support

services for vulnerable gay youth. He further argues that the development of these support services provided an easier sampling source for those seeking to study gay youth, which led to studies using a sampling bias of gay youth who felt the need to seek support in order to study the level of support required by gay youth.

Savin-Williams' belief is that this has led to a tendency to focus on negative experiences and mental health issues as opposed to positive experiences of developing resiliency. He further argues that this creates an assumptive stereotype of vulnerability, or a "suffering suicidal script" which is not representative of sexual minority youth (Savin-Williams and Ream, 2003). Similarly, Talburt (2004) has described a "narrative of victimization" which paints LGBT youth as either martyrs, victims or targets. Echoing the embrace of essentialism discussed earlier in this chapter, Talbert believes that this narrative makes people feel that acknowledging their own agency in their sexuality means they must have chosen the pain or suffering they have experienced. He also expresses concern that young people may see themselves as victims or avoid coming out if they do not see themselves that way or do not want to see themselves that way. They believe this has created a narrative of suffering in which LGBT youth in Ireland are framed "in terms of their vulnerability to bullying, their experiences of homophobic or transphobic violence, and their 'atriskness' for depression, self-harm and suicidality" (Bryan and Mayock, 2016, p. 67). The LGBT Lives report has been widely cited and promoted in national media, government debates and in resources for schools and support services (Bryan and Mayock, 2016, 2012). Both journal articles from Bryan and Mayock highlight the dangers of mischaracterising their findings in the LGBT Lives report and promoting a narrative of vulnerability, but neither of these contributions have become part of the public policy discourse around sexual minority health in Ireland.

While this study is not a psychology or mental health based study, this discussion has important ramifications when considered within the context of narrative and the social construction of sexual identity. Narratives which emphasize vulnerability and negativity are potentially dangerous as young people who are exploring identity options may potentially see vulnerability as an inevitable conclusion for them (Russell and Bohan, 2000). Cover (2016, 2013) also emphasises this when he suggests that the It Gets Better campaign may promote a culturally produced "resigned expectation" that suicide is normal and even expected, despite the improvements in queer representation and rights over the last few decades. Additionally, he is concerned that such narratives create the impression of a current "unliveable" life which will only get better or

“liveable” in the future. When explaining the importance of sexual stories, Plummer (1995) retells the story of a young man who talks about the negative impacts that his sexual identity has had on his life. The man questioned afterwards why he spoke about and framed his experiences so negatively considering that he felt his experiences were predominantly positive. The man concluded that when speaking about his sexuality, he had naturally drawn from the public language that he had learned from resources which pathologised gay sexuality and framed it as something which carries negative consequences (Originally Bergman, 1991; retold by Plummer, 1995). This story highlights the issues around narrative availability and the impact it can have upon mental health. It is also possible that exposure to negative narratives and minority stress may overlap. For example, men with higher levels of internalized homophobia tend to have more fatalistic attitudes towards their chances of becoming HIV positive, which in turn increases their HIV risk (Yi et al., 2010). Given this, it is feasible that a similar situation could arise with a sexual minority young person who experiences high levels of minority stressors and is exposed to a narrative that projects suicide and suffering.

The second part of Savin-Williams critique relates to sampling. Savin-Williams believes that when taken as part of a larger group that incorporate sexual attractions and behaviour regardless of identity, sexual minority youth are not at a higher risk of mental illness or suicide (Savin-Williams, 2006, 2001). He has also critiqued a tendency for studies to use small-scale, non-representative samples of self-identified youth (Savin-Williams, 2006, 2001). However, there is considerable disagreement within the literature on this issue. With regards to labelling, a study comparing suicide risk that used both sexual identity and sexual behaviour as definitions for identity found that while there were differences based on the definition used, overall, sexual minority youth still exhibited higher suicide risks than heterosexual youth (Stone et al., 2014). In his review of suicide and sexual-minority youth, Russell (2003) also counters Savin-Williams’ critiques by pointing out that numerous studies have been conducted that use a variety of sampling methods and methodologies, the findings of which show that sexual minority youth do experience a higher risk of suicide. He also claims that Savin-Williams has attempted to “trivialize suicidal ideation and the mental health needs of sexual minority youth (particularly those who identify as gay or lesbian)” (Russell, 2003, p. 1247). An Irish study that utilised a representative, population based sample of youth aged 19 -24 in North Dublin City found that those who had a minority sexual orientation were at higher risk of mental ill-health than those that did not (Cannon et al., 2013). The report also found that sexual minority youth were 4 times more likely to

have a diagnosable mental disorder, 7 times more likely “to have experienced suicidal ideation, have engaged in suicidal acts or experienced a mood disorder” and 10 times more likely to have deliberately self-harmed (Cannon et al., 2013, p. 33).

Savin-Williams’ work is controversial as it often contradicts the generally accepted viewpoint on LGBT mental health. For example, he has criticised the acceptance of the minority stress model as an explanation for differences in mental health among heterosexual and non-heterosexual men (Savin-Williams et al., 2010). This criticism provoked a reaction from Meyer (2010) who perceived the rejection to be based on a false assumption that the minority stress hypothesis pathologises gay youth. However, I would suggest that the opposing perspectives offered by Savin-Williams and Meyers can be found within the theoretical model for examining health promotion proposed by Margaret Barry (2001). Her model draws a distinction between the work of prevention, which focuses on preventing specific mental health issues by identifying and combating risk factors, and health promotion, which focuses on fostering strong mental health through building qualities such as resiliency. These opposing perspectives, defined by a positive or negative focus, are present within the conflict between Savin-Williams and Meyers and it is possible that both perspectives are necessary, combating and drawing attention to issues which lead to negative health outcomes while simultaneously promoting resiliency and fostering strong mental health.

The modern approach to understanding mental health and sexual orientation has moved away from viewing sexual orientation itself as a risk factor and focused on the individual factors that put non-heterosexual youth at a greater risk of suffering from mental health issues. Russell (2003) further encourages researchers to move beyond risk and instead address protective factors which he describes as, “examining not simply the opposite of risk factors but characteristics that promote health and well-being” (ibid, 2003, p. 1249). Using a “resiliency perspective”, Mustanski et al. (2011b) found that social support acts as a protective factor against psychological distress, with peer support showing higher levels of protection than family support. Similarly, Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) state that if protective factors, such as family connectedness, adult caring and school safety, were increased for LGB youth it is possible that their suicide rates would be similar to those of non-LGB youth. Comparing sexual minority youth who do experience suicidal ideation or attempts with those who do not reveals differences in risk factors such as childhood gender-atypical behaviour (D’Augelli et al., 2005), more feminine gender roles for men (Remafedi et al., 1998) and higher levels of both generic life stressors like low self-esteem and gay-related stressors

(Savin-Williams and Ream, 2003) Other factors identified as being mental health determiners among sexual minority youth are self-esteem (Grossman and Kerner, 1998), familial acceptance or rejection (Ryan et al., 2009a), school victimisation (Bontempo and D'Augelli, 2002) and the absence of supportive social environments (Hatzenbuehler, 2011) Experiencing a prejudiced-related stressful life event has even been associated with poorer physical health in LGB populations (Frost et al., 2013). Rather than pathologising non-heterosexual youth, the minority stress model, combined with a focus on resilience, might provide both an assessment of risk that aids in prevention as well as a the identification and promotion of protective factors to foster positive mental health.

In the Irish context, the LGBT Lives study (Mayock et al., 2009) does reveal examples of resilience discourse as interviewees spoke about moving on and developing new ways of thinking about themselves and their experiences. In addition, it found that support from sources such as friends, family, LGBT support services and positive environments such as school or workplace helped to foster resilience (Bryan and Mayock, 2012; Mayock et al., 2009). Conversely, a HSE report identified a number of health issues affecting LGBT people in Ireland such as isolation experienced by LGBT youth as well as a lack of services across the country with many rural areas having no local LGBT support services (HSE LGBT Health sub-committee, 2009). In addition, a study in the mid-west of Ireland among 13-25 year olds who are LGB found that those most vulnerable to negative health consequences are those in rural areas who are isolated from LGB support, those living or working in non-LGB friendly environments and those who are not yet sure what their sexual identity is (Mannix-McNamara et al., 2013) The most common age that an LGBT person becomes aware of their sexual orientation in Ireland is 12 and the most common age to tell someone is 16 (Higgins et al., 2016a). Interventions relating to mental health and support are vital for young people and overcoming issues such as isolation and lack of rural services has become an important issue for LGBT organisations. Based on the national youth organisation Belong To's website (Belong To, 2018), out of 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland, 17 have LGBT youth groups running and out of those 17 only 3, Dublin, Wexford and Wicklow have groups running in multiple locations within the county. There is also a large absence of groups in the midlands. Even small distances can make a big difference when it comes to accessing services. For example, the absence of night buses from Dundalk to Drogheda prevents those without access to a car from attending the Dundalk Outcomers drop in service for 18-25 year olds despite being in the same county and only living a 30 minutes' drive away. This example continues among other locations the

Outcomers has a remit for such as the towns of Monaghan or Ardee as well as many smaller villages and rural areas. For those who live in areas which they do not perceive as supportive, access to support services can form a critical part of developing resiliency.

In terms of this research project, the overall aim is to discover whether, to what extent and how the internet contributes towards supporting mental health of young non-heterosexual people, but the focus is not specifically on avoidable risks or prevention and so the health promotion perspective will be more useful within this context. Additionally, considering Savin-Williams critique of creating a stereotype of vulnerability, it is important that negative mental health perspectives are not projected onto research participants during the research. While it may indeed be the case that participants have suffered negative mental health effects because of their sexual orientation or identity, the questions need to be presented in a way that acknowledges that this is not expected of participants. A study (Meyer et al., 2011) that asked LGB participants what their life would be like without homophobia, racism and sexism is particularly revealing as their answers formed one of three types of narratives. The first two narratives, 'lost possibilities' and 'safety and acceptance', point to ways in which participants felt prejudice hinders both their past and present. The third narrative was called positive marginality and it can be seen in those who felt that "the self that resulted from confronting homophobia, racism, and sexism over a lifetime is the self they cherish" (Meyer et al., 2011, p. 210). Participants exhibiting the third narrative described ways in which their experiences have made them better, more compassionate people. The study highlights the complexity that comes with studying sexual minority identities as a tendency to overemphasise either the positive or negative may misrepresent the reality of individual people's lives and experiences. The critiques of Savin-Williams do highlight the need to focus on sexual minority youth who may not identify as LGBT. They also highlight the dangers, from a researcher's perspective, of focusing on minority stress to such an extent that positive aspects of resiliency are overshadowed by negative experiences and assumptions of vulnerability. In addition, Cohler and Hammack (2007), have identified the two major narratives which young people embrace as either a "struggle and success" narrative or an "emancipation" narrative. A struggle to success narrative sees those with a minority identity as victims to homophobia and prejudice which they can then overcome through engaging with a larger community and identity to achieve a happier, more successful future, or a "a triumphant model of resilience in a heterosexist world" (Cohler and Hammack, 2007, p. 49). The other is an emancipation narrative based on the critiques

of those such as Savin-Williams (2006, 2001) who claim that a post-gay culture and increasingly fluid ideas of sexual identity have led to a generation of young people for whom it would be inaccurate to characterise as struggling or suffering as a result of their identity. An emancipation narrative reflects the idea that someone can emancipate themselves from the constraints and struggles of automatically adopting an LGBT identity to survive, for example, by seeing their sexual identity as inconsequential as most heterosexuals do. Cohler and Hammack (2007) attributed the fact that different researchers have found either an emancipation or a struggle and success narrative to the importance of context and the changing “master narrative” of identity which will differ according to context such as geography, peer environment or the political and social culture of where people live. This perspective suggests that rather than there being one right way to characterise non-heterosexual youth, there is a need to acknowledge the specific context of the youth being discussed. Within this study, this specifies a need to understand the context that accompanies being non-heterosexual in Ireland. It also suggests being open minded when evaluating the role of narrative, as a lack of previous Irish research on the topic means there is not yet a clear answer about how non-heterosexual youth in Ireland characterise themselves and what master narratives this draws from.

2.7 Intersectionality

It is worth acknowledging the fact that non-heterosexuality is negotiated within a different social and cultural reality for each individual, and this is inevitably tied with other aspects of their identity or communities. The theory of intersectionality was first used to discuss how feminism could not be understood separately from race as one’s race inevitably intersects with their experience of being a woman (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality has grown to provide a useful construct for understanding how factors such as class, gender, race or sexuality are overlapping rather than distinct or, “the embodiment in theory of the real-world fact that systems of inequality, from the experiential to the structural, are interdependent” (Warner and Shields, 2013, p. 804). An example of this can be found in a study of mental health and suicidality among adolescents in the United States. They found that sexual minority youth were at a higher risk of suicide than heterosexuals, yet the levels of risk varied based on both sex and race/ethnicity (Bostwick et al., 2014). The nuances within this study again highlight the specificity of intersectional experiences as they found that while female sexual minority youth fared worse than males on many outcomes, black sexual minority

females fared better than white sexual minority males and females, while black sexual minority males fared worse than all the aforementioned. The authors note that intersectionality isn't simply additive, but that it introduces complexity as the resulting interaction of various identities and backgrounds could introduce additional protective factors as well as risk factors, along with a specific set of cultural expectations that add their own dynamic. An example of this within the Irish context can be seen within the travelling community, a recognised ethnic group within Ireland. Irish travellers face significant discrimination within Ireland and show extremely high unemployment rates, lower education rates and wide health disparities such as suicide compared with the general population (Watson et al., 2016). Additionally, the travelling community is typically characterised by a culture which the LGBT Pavee support group describes as an “emphasis on ‘traditional’ gender roles, and the ‘nuclear family,’ procreation and conservative religious values” (LGBT Pavee, n.d.). A representative from LGBT Pavee, a traveller support group, described the interplay of issues faced by LGBT travellers.

LGBT Travellers are a minority within a minority. There's complicated cultural expectations on both sides. There is the duality between being a traditional Catholic Traveller and also being aware of your LGBT side. But then on the other hand, many of the services for Irish LGBT people have never thought about the needs of Traveller LGBT people. (Oein De Bhairdúin in GCN, 2016)

To sufficiently understand the experience of a non-heterosexual traveller would require not just an understanding of non-heterosexuality and mental health, but also how their ethnic background shapes their experience of non-heterosexuality. A protective or risk factor may also change through the lens of intersectionality, for example a study of familial acceptance, which is a protective factor, found that specific types of families, namely Latino, immigrant, religious or those with low-socioeconomic status, were less likely to be accepting (Ryan et al., 2010). The researchers point out that this is not a reflection of the identities of the non-heterosexual family members but rather a reflection of the family type and the associating traits it carries, such as religious families operating from a specific religious cultural understanding of sexuality. While this PhD research is more phenomenological in nature, and so is not looking to categorise participants based on identifying factors such as ethnicity or socioeconomic status, it is important to be cognisant of the fact that the process of identity development does occur within an individual context, but that this context may indeed

be shaped by other cultural or personal identities which add additional complexity and sometimes additional difficulty.

2.8 Irish Context

The final section of this chapter will address the Irish context regarding LGBT rights, the LGBT community and non-heterosexuality. The Republic of Ireland has seen a dramatic transformation in both legislation and public attitudes towards homosexuality and LGBT rights in the last few decades. One explanation for this is that Ireland's involvement with the European Union has led to an openness of border and laws, along with an increase in wealth that has allowed LGBT rights to flourish (Conrad, 2001). The transformation in LGBT rights is often interpreted in the light of wider transformation away from religion and social conservatism in Irish politics and society (Elkink et al., 2017).

Like many other Western countries, Ireland began to develop an identity based gay and lesbian movement in the years following the Stonewall Riots in the United States. The early 70's saw numerous small groups formed to start advocating for gay rights in Ireland, such as the Sexual Liberation Movement, the Irish Gay Rights Movement, and the Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform. David Norris, a university lecturer who was involved with each of these groups, spearheaded a campaign against Ireland's laws against homosexuality. He argued that Ireland's law against buggery, which was carried over from English law after Ireland achieved independence, should be discounted as it was inconsistent with Ireland's Constitution. He initially lost this campaign in 1983, with the Supreme Court citing the "Christian nature of our State and on the grounds that the deliberate practice of homosexuality is morally wrong" (Norris v. A.G. [1983] IESC 3; [1984] IR 36, 1983). It took another ten years and a judgement from the European Court of Human Rights for Ireland to decriminalise homosexuality in 1993. In comparison with the United Kingdom, who decriminalised homosexuality in 1967, Ireland was very delayed in making this change, which again should be considered in light of religious and conservative norms. For example, Ireland did not permit the sale of contraception until 1980, and it required a prescription until 1985, while divorce was not permitted until 1996, following an extremely tight referendum the year before, with a previous referendum on the issue having been defeated in 1986.

In the years prior to decriminalisation there was an active LGBT movement with gay pride, resource centres and magazines all developing, although it was initially much

more focused around gay males and later lesbian women. In 1979, the Hirschfield Centre in Dublin city was the first lesbian and gay venue in Ireland and prominent Irish activist Tonie Walsh describes how the centre served as a safe space.

“The original imperative was to address the non-provision of services for the gay community. We created our own rule book. Those spaces enabled us to have conversations to empower ourselves. The value is one of bars and clubs being safe spaces. Once you create those safe spaces, you can dissuade yourself from the prejudices.” (Tonie Walsh quoted in Mackin, 2016)

This type of community driven safe space in an urban environment is a typical example of the function that cities have traditionally served in gay communities, a role that has been significantly challenged in more recent years (Brown, 2008).

Similar to Stonewall, Ireland also had a key moment which served to galvanise activism and push for greater societal acceptance. In 1982, Declan Flynn, a gay man, was murdered in Fairview Park, a known meeting spot for gay men. A gang of young men had been regularly targeting and beating gay men in the park before the murder and 5 of them, aged 14 – 19, were charged for the murder. Despite admitting to the murder and previous instances of violence against gay men all 5 were given suspended sentences. The leniency of the sentencing gave rise to public and political debate culminating in a march against homophobic violence in Dublin city. The 80s and 90s were characterised by various moments and tensions of both prejudice and tolerance, while post-decriminalisation it was easier for politicians to show their support of the LGBT community in Ireland (Ferriter, 2009). Throughout the 2000’s NGO’s such as TENI (Transgender Equality Network Ireland) and GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) received funding from the Atlantic Philanthropies Fund while national youth organisation Belong To initially started due to funding from the Department of Education. Diarmaid Ferriter (2009) highlights the extent of the change over a few decades by describing how Tonie Walsh asked an 18 year old when he had come out only to receive the answer, “Darling, I was never in” (Ferriter, 2009, p. 511).

From a legislative level, throughout the late 80’s and 90’s Ireland introduced legislation against hate crimes based on sexual orientation and included sexual orientation in employment equality and anti-discrimination laws. In 2011, same-sex civil partnerships were legalised in Ireland. While this acted as a placatory measure to provide some protections similar to other European countries who were introducing same-sex marriage or civil partnerships, ultimately there was still a drive towards marriage equality from LGBT activist groups. Due to the wording of the Irish

Constitution, a referendum was required initially before legislation could be passed legalising same-sex marriage. A referendum date was set on the 19th of February 2015 with the final vote occurring on the 22nd of May, 2015. The referendum process involved intense debate and campaigning both for and against same-sex marriage and those advocating against used rhetoric around traditional family values and children (Elkink et al., 2017). While the legislation that made same-sex marriage legal was not passed until October, 2015, the referendum result itself highlighted an acceptance of same-sex relationships in Irish culture with 62% voting in favour of the amendment and Ireland becoming the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage by a public vote. Shortly after this the Irish government also passed the Gender Recognition Act of 2015 allowing a person to self-determine their own legal gender without medical assessment, one of the most progressive transgender rights policies worldwide. The marriage equality referendum is significant and attracted attention partly because of Ireland's reputation as being a more conservative and religious country. As researchers analysing the referendum wrote, "The long standing image of Ireland as a conservative, Catholic country has been shattered" (Elkink et al., 2017, p. 15). To compare with England again, there were 47 years between decriminalising homosexuality and legalising same-sex marriage in comparison to 22 years for the same change in Ireland, and the rate of change from more conservative to liberal norms is particularly significant. This change in the values and culture of Ireland indicates a sense of place in which being non-heterosexual has meant a vastly changing set of opportunities across the last few decades, particularly considering Hammack and Cohler's (2009a) argument for the importance of considering cohort and context in the construction of identity. Additionally, like in many other countries, the internet and the understanding that non-heterosexuality expands beyond just gay and lesbian changes the ways in which non-heterosexual spaces are constructed and their importance (Brown, 2008).

2.9 Conclusion

This section of the literature review contributes two main pieces to the methodology used throughout this study. Firstly, that sexual minority youth are not a homogenous group when it comes to either sexual identity or mental health. Secondly, while narrative is an important part of sexual identity formation, the types of narrative to which same-sex attracted youth are exposed can influence their mental health as well as the potential sexual identities they see as available to themselves. This research is attempting to ask individuals about their own perceptions of how the internet impacted upon their mental health and sexual identity and so it is important that there is a solid

understanding of what is meant by those terms and how that interacts with the literature. Another factor which has a strong influence on both narrative and support is limitation and features of space. Many of the opportunities present to non-heterosexual youth, most of which were not available to previous generations, also occur within a different type of space than that which was available to previous generations. Support received from an online chat may be as effective as that received in an LGBT support centre, but the dynamics of that space and what it means to discuss changing spaces in that context are explored within the next chapter.

3 SPACE, PLACE AND THE INTERNET

3.1. Introduction

Spatial metaphors are frequently used when describing the internet. For instance, people talk about visiting websites or going online. In the early days of mainstream internet usage, spatial metaphors also abounded with terms such as cyberspace, the cyberworld, the information highway and virtual worlds used to describe this new technology in decidedly spatial terms. Most commonplace perhaps is the tendency to use the terms online and offline to describe the state of using or not using the internet. As acknowledged in the phrasing of 'going online' or 'going offline', these states might easily be interpreted as separate spaces. These metaphors serve as aids that help people to navigate and understand a complicated technological phenomenon that has changed our perception of space. However, there is also a risk that spatial metaphors can mask real discussions about the relationships between technologies, spaces and society, essentially ignoring the very real and important matter of how material spaces and places fit into theorisation surrounding the internet (Graham, 1998). The term cyberspace represents the application of a spatial metaphor at its most extreme. Do we really enter into a virtual world or an entirely new type of space when browsing online? Moreover, it is important to ask whether a network really creates a whole new space and whether cyberspace can be called a place.

Importantly, space and place have also been key features of the LGBT movement, both internationally and within Ireland. Within a primarily heterosexual, and oftentimes homophobic society, places such as bars, support centres and gay neighbourhoods all serve as centres of community, storytelling, civic participation and culture for sexual minorities. Additionally, the idea of 'safe space' has become a key feature of initiatives directed at LGBT young people, particularly in schools and other public arenas. Because of this, the concept of both spaces and places provides a useful conceptual framework for examining the internet and how it relates to non-heterosexual youth. To properly discuss space and place, however, it is important to understand how both terms are defined and treated within the field of human geography.

3.2 Space and Place in Human Geography – Being Human

The definition of space has been contested as far back as the early 1700's when Gottfried Leibniz and Issac Newton debated over whether space was absolute, as Newton believed, or relational, as Leibniz believed. This is relevant because in many ways the legacy of Newton's position has set the tone for the commonplace idea that space is just the container within which we live. As Lefebvre (1991, p. 15) notes, his own ideas about producing space seem strange at first due to the commonplace notion that "empty space is prior to whatever ends up filling it." Foucault (1986, p. 23) touched on similar ground within his famous lecture on space, stating that we "live inside a set of relations that delineates sites" rather than living "within a void". A key guiding principle within human geography appears to be that space is an 'outcome' rather than a simply being a 'background' (Thrift, 2003), elevating it's importance as something that is both produced and changeable.

Lefebvre's (1991, p. 12) theory of the production of space has been particularly important within developing theories of space that are shaped around the cultural, summed up within the phrase, "(Social) space is a (social) product." Acknowledging that space is socially produced is relevant because it consequently means that space can change based on social changes, laying the foundation for a theory of space built upon a system of social relations. Buttimer (1976) also pushed for those studying people to embrace a spatial analysis, particularly an understanding of social space, as she considered this essential to understanding the lived experiences of people. This application of human geography to the study of people can be applied within various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and psychology, and it can be combined with more traditional approaches as it effectively only asks that the dimension of physical space and spatial relations are considered as part of a holistic research approach. While his earlier works revealed a different philosophy on space, Castells (1983) reinforced this idea when he eventually came to the conclusion that space does not simply reflect society, but it actually is society.

As well as developing a concept of space that makes it central to societal analysis, human geography can also be credited with developing a broader definition of place. There is no singular definition of place as it remains a complex term, not widely agreed upon within and even among certain disciplines (Withers, 2009). However, the work of human geographers has developed an understanding of place that examines its cultural and social significance beyond its most obvious physical definition. Both Edward Relph (1976) and Yi Fu Tuan (1997) have used a phenomenological approach to explore place.

Relph sees place as being tied with identity. He uses the term “existential insiderness” to refer to the sense in which a person can feel at home or intimately tied to a place and “existential outsiderness” to describe the sense in which a person may feel like they do not belong or are a stranger within a place (Relph, 1976). Building upon this idea of place evoking feeling, Yi Fu Tuan (1997) has had one of the biggest impacts upon theorisations about place with his work on space and place. His position is that space transforms into place when someone begins to find value within it. Both Relph and Tuan’s ideas tie place into ideas of home, belonging, emotion and identity. They construct a theory of place which reaches far beyond its initial connotations, yet also speaks to a value of place which appears obvious after it has been pointed out.

While Doreen Massey (1994) takes a less phenomenological approach, her conceptions of place situate the ideas of Relph and Tuan within the context of the networked society and arguments such as those made by Castells. She contends that places can be understood as, “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (Massey, 1994, p. 154) rather than simply physically bounded spaces. She also writes that the “spatial reorganization of social relations” is essentially what is changing our understanding of place as it is those spatial relations and the power and meaning they contain, which creates our definitions of place (Massey, 1994, p. 121). These definitions of place based on experience and meaning have led to questions surrounding the erosion of place. Augé (1995) theorised that supermodernity, consumerism and individualism have led to rise of non-places, or places that no longer have the meaningful qualities of place. So, while the airport is a place in that it has a physical location, Augé would classify it as a non-place. The airport is a transitory space as it does not have the connotations of place like identity, community or belonging, making it a non-place. Augé’s theory represents a broader trend towards theories of placelessness or the view that place, in its emotional and cultural sense, is disappearing. Castells (1989) popularised similar ideas when he described globalisation and the power of the network as introducing a space of flows which is in opposition with a space of places. Meyrowitz (1985, p. 308) links technology to this attitude to place within his writings on electronic media observing that, “Many Americans may no longer seem to ‘know their place’ because the traditionally interlocking components of ‘place’ have been split apart by electronic media”.

It must be noted that there is an overlap between these definitions of space and place. The realm of social space and the cultural notions of place both prioritise the spatial within an understanding of human relations and identity. However, the important

contribution of human geography to the topic of internet communications does not reside in the specific terminology of space and place, but rather in the way in which it continually brings discussions of space and changes in space back to social relations and the meanings that individuals see within the spaces and places they find themselves. McLuhan took spatiality beyond the metaphor with his declaration that electronic media is, “abolishing both space and time”. His work has been widely applied to the internet, with blogs, social networking sites and instant communication all appearing to be hallmarks of the global village which he envisioned (McLuhan, 1964). However, McLuhan’s writing is characterised by grand statements and proclamations and it is worth asking whether his statements about space are hyperbolic. A much more nuanced position is articulated by Meyrowitz (1985) when he suggests that space and time have been “demoted” as opposed to being “abolished”. Writing about this question of time-space compression when applied to cyberspace, Massey (2005, p. 91) believes that the true question to ask is, “what kinds of multiplicities (patterns of uniqueness) and relations will be co-constructed with these new kinds of spatial configurations ?”

Writing about the influence of Tuan’s work on space and place, Tim Cresswell (Cresswell, 2008, p. 76) has said, “Tuan forced geographers to stop taking these words for granted and to consider what they might mean for being human.” In a similar way, the discipline of communications needs to consider what spatial changes resulting from communication technologies might mean for being human. This draws the focus away from trying to understand the impact of technologies, and transfers it instead to understanding the way in which social relations are both altering and being altered by spatial changes enabled using technology, an approach which is less technologically determinist.

Our understanding of community is an area which highlights the significance of altered social relations and spatial changes. Traditionally, community itself was structured according to physical and spatial boundaries, for example the neighbourhood community exists because of the physical boundaries and proximity of neighbours in a place. Technological affordances such as wider bandwidth, ‘always-on’ connectivity, personalization and wireless portability lead to changed social affordances through the ability to foster a personal community which meets an individual’s specific needs around outcomes such as a sense of belonging or social identity (Wellman et al., 2006). In effect, technological changes, along with longer term trends observed through globalisation and industrialisation, have led to communities which have evolved from being densely knit to sparsely knit, or those based on proximity to those which are not

limited by the constraints of physical space (Wellman, 2002). Wellman (2001) uses the logic of the network to describe this restructuring of community as he claims that computer networks are now social networks and this can fundamentally change the role of the individual in the structure of community. The social affordances of technology allow the development of social ties which are not centred around physical place or where, “it is the individual, and not the household or the group, that is the primary unit of connectivity” (Wellman, 2001, p. 8), a phenomenon he calls networked individualism. Wellman describes that within this idea of networked individualism ascriptive characteristics, or those you are born with, may be less important than achieved, or chosen, characteristics as an individual can build a social network around interests or shared norms. Of course, this does not negate the significance of ascriptive characteristics, particularly as how one even chooses to utilise technology and how they view their individual identity will likely be shaped by their immediate surroundings and culture. However, this does mean that ascriptive characteristics may be less important than in the past, as an individual has many more tools at their disposal to both understand and reshape the self, according to their own motivations and interests, even if this is at odds with their immediate physical social world. Accordingly, Rainie and Wellman describe this social operating system as one which offers more freedom for individuals as they have “more room to manoeuvre and more capacity to act on their own” (2012, p. 9). To place this in the context of sexual identity, the more traditional idea of moving to a city and finding an LGBT community is behaviour which represents networked individualism, yet still in a very place centred way. However, the now nearly ubiquitous nature of smartphones and the plethora of social networking and information based apps available means that networked individualism can facilitate identity development at a younger age, as moving is less of a necessity and engagement can occur between different social groups independent of space e.g. having a network of friends or acquaintances at school and a simultaneous, specifically non-heterosexual friends network online.

3.3 The Internet and Social Space – Is Cyberspace a Place?

Initial discussions about social space online often focused on the use of the term cyberspace. Considering its immediate spatial connotations, coupled with the grand cyber-utopian visions of commentators such as Howard Rheingold (1994) and Nicholas Negroponte (1996), cyberspace can be a controversial term. The very concept of cyberspace as it was first introduced implied that it is a new location or frontier from which to discover and create new life. Early critiques of the cyberspace-as-place

metaphor took a legal perspective, questioning the inevitable rise of property rights and other consequences that occur when the internet is treated like a physical location (Hunter, 2003; Olson, 2005). However, another critique of the cyberspace as place metaphor is that it allows the opportunity for cyberspace to be considered as a different reality or a space so separate from real life that it allows virtual life to prosper. A more contemporary manifestation of this is can be seen in the current debate regarding digital dualism. Nathan Jurgenson (2012) coined the term digital dualism to describe what he sees as the fallacy of believing the physical world is real while the virtual world is not. While initially this may seem to focus on reality, it has roots in the spatial. As Jurgenson (2012, p. 85) writes, “These digital dualists conceptualize the Web similar to the film *The Matrix* (1999) where the on and offline are separate spaces.” Ultimately, Jurgenson associates the spatial split encountered when online and offline are considered as separate spaces with a virtual versus real dichotomy.

It can be argued that virtual reality no longer refers to something that is inferior but rather something which is either an equivalent or better reality (Shields, 1996). However, the idea of the virtual establishes a set of assumptions which may not necessarily be true. For example, Cowan (2005) argues that virtual shopping essentially just involves accessing an electronic catalogue. When compared to the actual experience of shopping offline, online shopping is vastly different, particularly when it comes to social interaction, yet the term invokes the idea of an experience of shopping that is only differentiated by its location. This type of assumption is exactly that which leads to mischaracterisations of online activities, confusing “virtual reality” and “that which simply comes and goes online” (Cowan, 2005, p. 200). What Cowan describes is a digital dualism built upon the assumption that what occurs online must be a virtual copy of what occurs offline and because it is a copy and not the same, it must then be fundamentally different. The way that internet usage has evolved makes it more like a coming and going online in many respects, for instance, a conversation with friends over a social networking app continuing in person when those friends meet up, as opposed to a strict separation between talking to friends in real life and an inferior state of talking to friends online.

Digital dualism is a useful concept in discussions concerning the association between a real/virtual dichotomy and an online/offline dichotomy, but the concept itself is not new. Researchers in computer mediated communications have repeatedly found that, for many people, what they do online is intimately intertwined with their offline lives (Baym, 2009; Papacharissi, 2005; Slater, 2002). Don Slater (2002) specifically called for

a move from conceptualising online and offline as different spaces, and Jensen (2011) puts it well when he said the following:

While the early emphasis on a divide between offline and online practices and worlds - cyberspaces and virtual realities - may have been a necessary step for theory development of the 1990s, it has become increasingly counter-productive in methodological terms. (Jensen, 2011, p. 43)

Despite having moved on from a utopian vision of cyberspace, the issue of seeing online space as 'not real' is still contentious. Phrases such as 'the real world' and 'the virtual world' are found both in new media research and in references to the Internet in popular culture, along with the concept of IRL or "In real life" used to denote physical, offline spaces. Jurgenson believes that inherent in this phrasing is a belief that the Internet represents a lesser version of reality, or a version of reality that lacks the quality of being real or authentic (Jurgenson, 2012, 2011). Additionally, he takes issue with terminology that acknowledges spatial differentiations, such as the terms online and offline.

It could be argued that Jurgenson is inaccurately conflating the idea of a second reality with a belief in multiple spaces. For example, one of his core arguments is that digital dualism often puts too much emphasis on presentation and anonymity by implying that people experience a different reality and identity online. Sherry Turkle (1995), who has been one of Jurgenson's main targets for criticism, has written extensively about the web serving as a place where you can experiment with your identity in an online world which offers a parallel life experience. Thus, an example of digital dualism in practice would be framing the situation of a closeted young gay male as one in which he is not out in the real world but becomes a different person online, essentially living two separate realities, one his "real" self and the other a version of himself that he can create online. However, it is entirely possible that people experience parallel identities or parallel lives through a deliberate process of identity presentation, just as they do in various offline spaces. Rather than separate selves, the process that is happening here is arguably one of multiple presentations of a single identity, rather than a case of multiple identities or online and offline identities. Erving Goffman (1956) laid the foundation for work surrounding identity presentation when he wrote about "impression management", or the process by which an individual consciously or subconsciously performs a certain identity in order to manage the impressions that others may have of them. Multiple identity presentations can be seen in many aspects of a person's life, such as when someone acts differently at work than they do at home

or when they present a different aspect of their personality to strangers than they would among friends. This is also central within sexual identity, as the idea of coming out implies that prior to coming out a person selectively chose to present a different identity than the one they felt truly reflected themselves.

Identity presentations can also exist within digital dualist perspectives. For example, Sherry Turkle (1995) encourages young people to evaluate the performances of their online identities in light of their 'true' or 'real' self, with the added emphasis that who you are online is not really who you are. However, identity presentation occurs through choosing different presentations of identity for different online and offline spaces, yet both are equally tied to the embodied self and can be an authentic or true representation of the self. It is possible that the concept of online and offline spaces can be studied without the need to revert to digital dualist framing. In many ways, theorists like Jurgenson are reacting to the traditional way in which online identity was conceptualized in the development of cyberculture theory. The context in which Jurgenson discusses digital dualism is that of movements like the Occupy movement or the Arab Spring uprisings. These events involved situations in which tools such as Twitter and Facebook became a key part of organising movement and disseminating information. In a way, these situations are not directly comparable to something like an anonymous chat room discussion online, with the main difference being the level of personal anonymity and selective identity presentation attached. Rejection of digital dualist perspectives need not involve rejection of the concept of online spaces. On the contrary, as is the case offline, individuals can choose the level of involvement that they want an online interaction to have on their offline presentations of identity. In the case of situations like a genuine Facebook profile that is connected to friends and shares personal photos, the decision has clearly been made to extend involvement into an online space, but the opposite can also be true, whereby that person might choose to share online with strangers more authentically than they do with friends or they might choose not to share any personal information online. The main point is that the state of being online or offline does not change whether something is 'real', or perhaps more importantly, whether it is experienced as being real.

Being cognisant of digital dualism and alert to the implications false dichotomies bring to research surrounding identity and online activity has a direct impact on the aims and methods employed in internet research. A review of new media research surrounding the internet and online activities found that a major issue within interpreting the results of such research lies in separating online and offline behaviour

and online and offline realities (Papacharissi, 2005). It goes on to suggest that instead of employing an online/offline dichotomy, research should focus on “the individual as the hub of online interaction, aptly incorporating social, economic, and psychosocial concepts that further clarify the motivation and consequence of online activity” (Papacharissi, 2005, p. 232). This is important as the biggest challenge to understanding spatiality resides within the experiences and assumptions carried by researchers themselves. For many adolescents, the internet has shaped their spatial experiences since early childhood (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007), yet there is still debate among academics surrounding the existence and validity of identifying and opposing digital dualism. Additionally, while young people may have grown up with this new experience of spatiality, many adults likely have not.

A complementary theory to Papacharissi’s point around an individual’s motivation and consequence is polymedia. Polymedia was developed by Madianou and Miller (2013) to explain the significance of choosing different media platforms or applications from a social perspective. Once basic conditions are met, such as access, affordability and media literacy, a person with a smartphone has a variety of different media within which to communicate, for example through SMS, email, a phone call, Facetime or within a specific social networking application like Snapchat. As the authors stress, deciding which media to use occurs relationally in respect to the available choices.

Users switch between these [different media] to achieve their purposes: what cannot be achieved by email, can be accomplished by webcam, or instant messaging or a phone call. Email is not simply email; it is defined relationally as also not a letter, not a text message and not a conversation via webcam; which, in turn, is not a phone call. (Madianou and Miller, 2013, p. 175)

Deciding which format fits a specific interaction becomes less about technological affordances or costs, as the options are wide and varied, and instead becomes more of a social act, which has its own emotional and social implications and consequences. Within their own article, Madianou and Miller give an example in their research of gay male participants from the Philippines who used multiple profiles on either the same or alternative social media sites in order to achieve a separation between their gay friends and their family. Again, this choice is arguably driven by a social need to manage two separate and potentially hostile set of relationships, which presumably are not at risk of crossing over in physical space, much more than by the specific features of differing platforms. From this viewpoint, the simple act of choosing which media

suits a specific interaction is one which is deeply embedded in an individual's sense of social identity and relationships, and consequently their self-presentation.

This is particularly important in the context of this study as the meaning behind young people's Internet usage and the spatial realities that it produces can only be extracted by understanding the meaning assigned to those spaces by the users themselves as well as the factors which influence their usage on an individual basis. There are many different motivations which could apply to the lives of non-heterosexual youth regarding internet use. Factors such as whether a young person perceives their social environment as accepting, whether they are out or closeted, and whether they are questioning their sexuality or fully embracing a labelled identity all imply different motivations and outcomes for online behaviour, as well as differing levels of crossover between presentations of identity in online and offline spaces. The reality of identity online being enmeshed with identity offline is a key part of the need to understand the relationship between online and offline support. Real, in this sense, refers to what an individual considers to be a real manifestation of their self rather than a judgement about the quality of the space in which that manifestation occurs.

The key to overcoming digital dualism, while still retaining a concept of alternate spaces, is embraced by Nancy Baym (2009) in the following quote:

Even behaviours that only appear online are put there by embodied people acting in geographic locations embedded in face-to-face social relationships and multimedia environments that shape the meaning and consequences of those online practices. (Baym, 2009, p. 721)

Everything a person does online is tied into their embodied self, although the presentations of that self may be altered in drastically different ways. Ultimately, "We cannot be online without being offline" (Cowan, 2005, p. 282). Central to any discussion of what is occurring online is the embodied reality of the internet users themselves. This means that an understanding of physical space as being one of many types of space leads to the conclusion that there can never be a dual reality or dual embodiment, only one reality that is shaped and mediated through the introduction of a technology, the influence of social relations and the spaces they produce.

3.4 Conclusion

As this discussion has shown, theory of space and place is not an abstract concept but it has applications within any study of lived experiences and social groups. Furthermore, the influence of the Internet and mass media technology has altered the

nature of space and place in a way that cannot and should not be ignored. This again echoes Lefebvre's (1991) production of space as his theory perceived three main factors as constituting space; spatial practice, representations of space and spaces of representation, or more simply, the perceived, conceived and lived dimensions of space. Within this construct Lefebvre creates a concept of space that reaches beyond dualism and acknowledges the role of the physical, imagined and experiential. Together these three factors create social space, a space that is real and based in the physical, yet also created and changed by itself.

Within the context of this study, a major challenge is to keep discussion of the social situated within the spatial. It could be argued that non-heterosexual youth who use the Internet for support or to 'hang out' are not just experiencing an online version of what might have previously occurred offline, but that their lived experience consists of a completely different spatial reality than previous generations. Considering the role that narrative plays within identity formation, the change this spatial shift has brought about in social relations offers the opportunity for a radical reshaping of both the development of identity and the opportunities for new types of identity to occur in places which they would be unlikely to occur in the past.

These dynamics not only affect an individual's identity development, but also the environment within which that individual resides. Thrift (2003) has identified embodiment as being one of the aspects of place which most theorists can agree upon. Based on this, it could be argued that cyberspace cannot function as a place because of its lack of embodiment, making it blatantly obvious that there can be no place in cyberspace. However, this ultimately refers to a very bounded definition of place. To consider cyberspace and a phenomenological definition of place requires questioning not just the experience of being physically present but also what it means to feel present within a place. For example, what does it really mean for a young person to chat with gay peers online while sitting in their family home where no one knows about their sexual orientation? Could that same young person experience a sense of place online while feeling out of place in the physical place where they are sitting? This hypothetical example highlights the importance of understanding the experiences of support that non-heterosexual youth perceive online because, as this chapter has shown, those feelings and experiences of support may be found online but they are experienced by real people and therefore arguably hold as much significance as support offered elsewhere.

4 NON-HETEROSEXUAL INTERNET USAGE

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will review some of the current literature documenting non-heterosexual internet usage. The first two literature review chapters have been largely theoretical and conceptual, exploring concepts of sexual identity, mental health, and place. This chapter will take a more practical approach by assessing and evaluating relevant literature which specifically addresses non-heterosexual internet usage. There has been an increase in research which addresses non-heterosexual internet usage (Berry et al., 2003; O’Riordan and Phillips, 2007; Pullen, 2014a; Pullen and Cooper, 2010). The topic of internet research is one that is constantly and rapidly changing and Borzekowski (2006) points out how research can quickly become outdated due to the rate of change associated with internet usage. This is evident within her own article in which she discusses how only 2% of American youth have access to wireless internet, something which contrasts greatly with the ubiquitous online mobile youth culture that characterises life just over a decade later. Not only do these changes affect the nature of internet usage but they also affect the culture within which the research itself is situated. Whether its cyberbullying or privacy management online, there are a range of new challenges that continue to provoke new research that must be reactive and flexible. Much of the research cited within this section was published after the start date of this study, leading to the need to constantly reassess literature and determine how new findings would shape the scope and analysis taken. These challenges do not only apply to academics and researchers but also to those who work with youth. The need for youthwork to integrate online methods into its approach has been identified as being important internationally and also within Ireland (Gibson et al., 2010) and this is an area in which the knowledge gained from this study can be practically useful. The Chapter will begin by describing perceptions of young people’s internet usage and why these perceptions matter. Then it will look at types of support which have been found by others examining non-heterosexual internet usage such as information seeking and narrative engagement. Finally, it will address how current research has

incorporated the concept of an interplay between offline and online spaces before exploring some of the key contributions from others which have impacted on the conclusions drawn from this literature review.

4.2 Dystopian and Utopian Perspectives

As Gartner's Hype Cycle has shown, new technologies typically go through a period of hype or the "peak of inflated expectations" (Fenn, 1999). This typically involves an imagining of what that technology will become which far exceeds the eventual practical performance of the technology. The communicative potential of the web has been no exception to this despite the vast changes that the internet has brought about. In the early days of theorising around online communication utopianism existed in the heralding of the Internet as a portal to a better world (Negroponte, 1996; Rheingold, 1994). Margaret Wertheim went as far as calling the digital world, "an attempt to construct a technological substitute for the Christian space of Heaven" (Wertheim, 1999, p. 16). A more nuanced belief is that that people tend to project utopian social or technological imaginaries on to new media and, in this case, that new media happened to be the Internet and computer mediated communication (Robins, 1996). This utopianism appears in opposition to notions of the inferiority of virtual worlds and online identities and forms part of what seems to be a zero-sum approach to the value of the internet when it comes to communication or identity. It is much more plausible that the very qualities that make some parts of the Internet a safe or freeing space can also lead to the development of unsafe or dangerous spaces.

When it comes to providing support, these beliefs around the internet can shape the way that the internet is perceived within youth work and supportive circles. For example, in early consultations about this study with Belong To, then youth director, David Carroll, expressed he and his team often felt that the internet held strong negative connotations within youth work, which directly contrasted with their own anecdotal experience of how it benefited some of the non-heterosexual youth they worked with. It may also explain why the internet has not been addressed in any in depth way in Irish based LGBT research about supporting young people, despite the evidence that would suggest the Internet plays an important role. The LGBTIreland report (Higgins et al., 2016a) did identify the internet as a source of support and it mentioned the internet/media as being a resource for identity exploration and information. However, the section discussing this only occupies one paragraph within the final report and it is absent from the key findings (Higgins et al., 2016b). While the

study does indicate that the internet is being used in the ways it might be expected, it does not address the questions of how and why.

In her work examining the online life of American teenagers, Danah Boyd describes social media sites as providing alternative “cool spaces” to socialise. While young people may still choose to meet at shopping centres or in town, they also have the option “to create a cool space without physically transporting themselves anywhere” (boyd, 2014, p. 5). For non-heterosexual youth, there is the possibility of creating not just cool spaces, but supportive, non-heterosexual or safe spaces. As Pascoe has pointed out, while many adults worry about online victimization of young people online, there is often little focus on the “mundane and pervasive way in which offline harassment around issues of gender and sexuality replicate themselves online”, particularly among peers (Pascoe, 2011, p. 13). Additionally, Bryan Wuest (2014) warns against overstating the positive impacts of coming out YouTube videos. As he points out, coming out videos were already in existence before the series of suicides which inspired the It Gets Better Project and one young person who filmed an It Gets Better video, 14 year old Jamie Rodemeyer, went on to take his own life. If anything, this warning from Wuest when coupled with the lessons learned from utopian/dystopian views of technology serve as a reminder that wider life context is essential to understanding the role that any technology plays. Understanding the offline lives of non-heterosexual youth and how they intertwine with their online experiences will provide a nuanced account of how the internet is really functioning within the lives of non-heterosexual youth in Ireland. Rather than a utopian or dystopian vision, the reality is that affordances such as anonymity or freedom of expression without consequence have the potential to create positive situations, such as a non-heterosexual young person feeling they can be themselves, or negative situations such as homophobic cyberbullying. The internet creates a myriad of opportunities for non-heterosexual youth by introducing a new environment and new spaces which are firmly rooted in their embodied selves but offer new methods of exploring and forming identity. These online spaces must be navigated with the same awareness of identity presentation and with the understanding that online spaces can bring positive or negative experiences depending upon the choices that are made and the level to which integration with offline spaces has occurred.

4.3 Types of support found online

Savin-Williams (1998, p. 122) has attributed the lowering age at which young people both realise and reveal their LGBT identity to media coverage of homosexuality, the emergence of gay and lesbian culture and the “presence of homosexuality in their

immediate social world”. In the foreword of *Queer Online*, Larry Gross (2007) notes that this immediate social world, for many young people, now involves the internet. The internet also changes the potential reach and access that young people have to media coverage and gay and lesbian culture as they can seek out non-heterosexual information and media instead of waiting for such content to appear in mainstream media.

There are early examples of non-heterosexual internet usage which utilised the internet to connect with others and create non-heterosexual social spaces. In 1992, the stigma around identifying as gay was strong enough that the term MOTSS or “Members of the same-sex” was used to describe the LGBT category on the alt.sex newsgroup, one of the earliest instances of gay people creating specific spaces for themselves online (Regan Shade, 1996). While certain online spaces are designed to function as LGBT specific spaces, there is also the opportunity for non-heterosexual youth to reconfigure spaces as they see fit. For example, in her work Fraiberg (1995) found that discussion boards for the Indigo Girls and Melissa Etheridge served as spaces for performative queer identity. These discussion boards, centred around popular culture, were more appropriate for some queer women than the clearly structured, identity labels which characterised specifically designed gay spaces.

Research based in the United States indicate that LGBT youth do have different online experiences and practices than their non-LGBT peers. For example, LGBT youth on average use the internet around 45 minutes more per day than non-LGBT youth and they are also much more likely to search for information relating to sexuality, health, and HIV/AIDS and other STIs (GLSEN et al., 2013). LGBT youth also tend to have more online friends and they are more likely to describe their online friends as supportive. The report also found that LGBT youth varied in their internet usage according to specific characteristics. For example, rural youth were more likely to have come out online and they generally spend more time online than non-rural youth. Similarly, male and transgender youth were more likely to search for information and connect with other LGBT youth online. In their recommendations, the authors of the report highlighted the intersections between multiple identities and locations and suggested that future research should, “examine how specific characteristics operate in different spaces and how they encourage or discourage some activities online” (GLSEN et al., 2013, p. 29).

A literature review of sexual minority youth health information accessing practices across 20 years identified the internet as a major source for obtaining health related

information (Rose and Friedman, 2013). There is a marked difference between heterosexual youth in this regard with 78% of non-heterosexual youth (13-18) in the US looking for sexual health information online compared to 19% of heterosexual youth, with non-heterosexual youth more likely to use the internet for sexual health information because they have no one else to ask (Mitchell et al., 2014). Another study found that 62% of LGBT youth in the US searched online for information relating to sexuality or sexual attractions compared to 12% of non-LGBT youth and 81% searched for medical or health information compared to 46% of non-LGBT youth. (GLSEN et al., 2013) These differences highlight that there are clearly different motivations and needs for internet usage for non-heterosexual youth compared to their heterosexual peers.

As described above, sexual health has been identified as one area in which non-heterosexual youth find the internet useful with a number of other studies emphasising this (Magee et al., 2012; Mustanski et al., 2011a). However, support can also function in less obvious forms such as through representation and narrative. The potential benefits of the internet for sexual storytelling and identity work was mentioned in chapter 2 through concepts like queer realness (Gray, 2009b) or the imagined gay community (Pullen, 2007). There are also concrete examples of what this can look like. For instance the coming out video has become its own recognisable genre on YouTube, incorporating the aspects of the coming out narrative that Plummer (1995) described into videos which can be accessed worldwide (Alexander and Losh, 2010). This has a clear impact on the potential opportunities for young non-heterosexuals to engage with content and narratives which would previously have required accessing physical spaces outside of one's own social community. Similarly, Bond et al. (2009) asked LGB individuals about what they found to be the most useful source of information, without suggesting that the study was about media usage. Despite this they found that the internet was the primary source of information.

The concepts of queer realness or the imagined gay community also function as a form of informal learning. A study of LGBTQ social media use found three types of informal learning; traditional information seeking such as to understand labels or sexual health information, social learning such as observing others through stories or media, and experiential learning such as coming out online or using dating sites (Fox and Ralston, 2016). Each of these forms of learning are enabled by a social world available online, which functions to provide opportunities, or spaces, for informal learning to occur. The informal learning which occurs online allows for individuals to address gaps in their knowledge (DeHaan et al., 2013). Informal learning can also occur through media

representation, which offers the opportunity to view role models and inspiration which has been found to have a positive impact on LGB identity development (Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011) and resiliency (Craig et al., 2015a). While media representations offline can tend to be stereotypical and limited, online media representations are found to be much more diverse and useful for LGBTQ youth (McInroy and Craig, 2017). Many popular shows like *House of Cards* or *Orange is the New Black* are available only through online streaming as companies such as Amazon or Netflix have started producing streaming only original content. While there has been a clear increase in mainstream representation of leading LGBT characters and themes on shows like *Orange is the New Black* or *Transparent*, a closer look at the methods of distribution for this content highlights the importance of the internet. A report from GLAAD (2015) found that there were more LGBT series regular characters found across 23 series developed by streaming broadcasters such as Netflix or Amazon than there were across 118 series on American Primetime TV. The types of shows covered in this report are the same shows which young people in Ireland can access through online means, irrespective of what shows are available on Irish television.

Cohler and Hammack (2007) have described the internet as aiding social change through opportunities such as reading the stories of other non-heterosexual youth who have overcome challenges or minority stress in their lives. They believe that opportunities such as these can change the way in which young people narrate their self-identity because they offer access to new potential narratives of identity. This is significant as the process of narrative engagement involves a process of framing one's own person sexual identity narrative against larger master narratives (Hammack and Cohler, 2009a) in order to achieve a sense of identity configuration (Hammack et al., 2009), or a match between personal narrative and cultural narrative. An example of this can be seen when Bryan Wuest (2014) studied coming out videos on YouTube and found that they serve as a point of visibility and representation for LGBT youth. He gives examples of tags such as 'Out in West Texas' or 'coming out as a gay mormon', which allow young people to access very specific forms of representation which accurately reflect their own situations. Wuest (2014) makes the connection between this and resiliency as he argues that the affirmation and sense of shared identity found in these videos provide a way to resist negativity. Bond et. al (2009, p. 44) characterise differences between older and younger cohorts in his study as being that the older participants' community access was limited by geography whereas the younger participants had "the ability to pick and choose what media fulfilled particular needs". They also suggest that future research should explore in greater detail the

information that youth are finding online stating, "Future research on the content of mediated communication most used by adolescents could help families better understand the utility of the Internet for adolescent development and calm justifications for parental gatekeeping" (ibid, p. 47). Additionally, Craig et al. (2015b) noted the experience of fear that can surround offline spaces in contrast with the positivity that some sexual minority youth find online. They suggest that information and communication technologies should be seen as taking a supportive role within social work, which was the field their study was situated within. Rather than information for parents or clinicians, this study is focusing on practical implications for youthwork and policy development through developing a better understanding of this process of information seeking, what support needs it meets, and the relationship between online and offline support. One of the key aspects of this study is that it is based around how participants view themselves and their own support needs. This offers the opportunity to understand which needs participants feel are important as well as how online support can serve to meet those needs.

4.4 Integrations of offline and online context

There is a growing case to be made that exploring and understanding the online interactions and behaviour of non-heterosexual youth is essential to fully understand and responding to needs in their lives. For example, a study from the United States (DeHaan et al., 2013) focused on understanding how much online activities from LGBT youth impact upon offline activities and experiences in relation to sexual health. The researchers found that LGBT youth often use online information and resources to fill gaps that occur in their lives offline such as access to sexual health information or forming relationships with LGBT peers, leading to the conclusion that the Internet can be utilised by those promoting healthy sexual development, particularly among youth who perceive offline resources and relationships to be inadequate for meeting these needs. Another US based study found that 62% of LGBT youth connected with other LGBT youth online and 52% of that 62% were not out (GLSEN et al., 2013). The internet was particularly significant for those who have a lack of LGBT-specific spaces offline indicating a link between limited offline opportunity and internet usage which involves connecting with others. Additionally, 85% of same-sex attracted youth in an Australian study (Hillier et al., 2001) said the internet helped in connecting with other LGBT youth and 70% said the internet helped them feel less isolated. They also found that same-sex attracted youth who were already out and comfortable with their identity offline found the prospect of life without the internet less worrying than those who were

not out and comfortable, suggesting that support offered online is particularly relevant to those who are still in the process of navigating their sexual identity offline. These pieces of research are important because they not only identify what occurs online, but also link that with what occurs offline, which is useful knowledge for those who work with young people.

In their categorisation of common features found in sexual identity models, Eliason and Schope (2007) classify “surfing the web” as being a potential way that exploration may occur during sexual identity development. It could be argued though that the Internet, rather than being a method for exploration, is a new location for many of the traditional methods to occur. Experiences such as dating, learning about LGBT identity, or meeting others who share your sexual identity are all experiences, or methods of exploration, that can occur both online and offline with the different dynamics of both environments affecting how the exploration is experienced. A space-based, identity work approach is taken by Hillier and Harrison (2007) who describe the same-sex attracted youth in their Australian study as being ‘space deprived’ due to their same-sex attraction, which leads to limited opportunities to live out and develop their identity. They consequently take the approach that internet acts as a space for same sex attracted youth to practice identity, friendship, coming out, intimate relationship, sex and community. Instead of acting as a replacement to offline spaces for same-sex attracted youth, the authors say the internet “allows them to gain confidence online in a space which they argue is easier to negotiate when they are exploring their sexual feelings” (Hillier and Harrison, 2007, p. 95). While I would caution against characterising non-heterosexual people in general as being space deprived, as that may be an unfounded assumption, it seems likely that the internet can act as a safer space for those who do feel space deprived. In a Canadian based study of LGBTQ youth, Craig and McInroy (2014) reach a similar conclusion as they see the internet acting as a rehearsal space for identity development which can then occur offline. They found that accessing resources, exploring identity, finding likeness and coming out digitally are all identity development tasks which their participants could rehearse online before bringing their identity offline, although they provide little insight into how this process of integration might occur. Bond et al (2009) further extend real world ramifications when they suggested that media acts as a relational proxy and that the internet potentially displaces relationships between LGB youth and their families, with a strong distinction placed between real and virtual realities. There is still a need to provide an understanding of how and why non-heterosexual youth use the internet in a way which grounds this usage in their sense of place and their geographic realities.

Rather than developing an online identity which they will eventually make real, it is possible that there is a much more embedded and discursive social interplay between an individual's embodied sense of identity and an individual's sense of place and belonging in both online and offline spaces.

4.5 Key Contributions

While a number of a studies described above focus on specific aspects of support or internet usage as a point of analysis, the work of Gray, Downing, Pullen and Paradis incorporate aspects which are particularly applicable to this research.

Mary L Gray's ethnographic study (2009b, 2009a, 2010), while not primarily about the internet, looks at the role of digital media in the lives of queer youth who are either unable or unwilling to leave the rural areas in which they live. This inevitably involves an examination of place as Gray challenges the assumption that rural queer lives involve isolation and invisibility. In addition, she writes,

We cannot examine the social relations of power that produce the meaning of LGBT identities without a careful consideration of how locations, rural locales and their engagement with new media in this case matter to those social relations (Gray, 2010, p. 291).

The concept of queer realness, or narratives of authenticity, arose when Gray observed rural youth using online representations as tools to craft their own sense of identity. She also describes how the young people in her study used material found online to, "confirm the existence of queerness beyond their locales and to strategize about how to bring that queerness home to roost" (Gray, 2009a, p. 127). This concept involves an interplay between online and offline as the implication is that these online tools actively shape how young people see themselves in their surroundings, rather than simply functioning as a testing ground for identity.

While Gray's research shows similarities to this study, it does put much greater emphasis on the experience of being from a rural area as well as taking a queer analysis which examines the political ramifications of community organising and identity politics. The US has a much more fragmented record than Ireland when it comes to LGBT rights, as rather than a straight line of progress, their state based governance has led to a vast difference between states. Ireland still experiences a rural/urban divide, particularly when it comes to Dublin and the rest of the country, but each legal step made has applied to everyone irrespective of location, which arguably leads to a less fragmented sense of political activism than that which Gray describes. Also, while Gray

does focus on space, she also puts a much greater focus on public space, as adapted from Habermas' (1989) work on the public sphere, and how community identity is negotiated in public spaces, for instance when she examines the performance of drag by a group of young people at Wal-Mart. I would argue that while she does examine the process of identity, she places much more focus on politics and the construction of a generalised sense of 'rural queer-youth identities' as opposed to examining an individualised process of identity and what that means for individual belonging.

Gary Downing (2013) has taken a similar approach when he examined the experiences of non-heterosexual youth in the UK and specifically addressed the complexity and relationship between online and offline experiences. He takes a specifically spatial approach, noting that "the ways in which internet technologies are used to facilitate specific socio-sexual relations in virtual and material realities remain under-researched" (Downing, 2013, p. 45). In particular, he challenges the "uni-directional" relationship between online and offline that has previously characterised research about non-heterosexual internet usage. Downing's study found that the internet was widely used for support in exploring identity, information seeking and connecting with peers. Like Gray, Downing also puts a stronger focus on immediate material realities, performativity and 'the significance of the body', for example, examining how use of webcams or profile pictures represent an embodied performance which is presented online. He also highlights the blurring of online and offline realities as young people described connecting with people online who they had met offline and vice versa. Downing put a strong focus on LGBT social networking sites, examining the ways in which they were used for connecting with others in a safe, anonymous environment, while simultaneously the structures and restrictions around those sites, such as membership rules, were often resisted. Downing suggests that future research could further examine, "How non-heterosexual young people construct positive identities and new socio-sexual trajectories from this virtual support in rural and urban areas" (Downing, 2013, p. 55). This study addresses that call by focusing on the construction of positive identities and the effect it has on how non-heterosexual youth find support and define themselves in the areas where they live.

Pullen (2009, 2007) has explored narrative potential through the concept of imagined gay communities and the idea of new storytelling. He sees new storytelling as offering "narratives of transition, confidence, and authority, involving the rejection of oppressive mythologies, and the construction of new enlightened frames" (Pullen, 2009, p. 14). Focusing on young non-heterosexuals who are often constrained by

heteronormativity and stigma, Pullen argues that new storytelling offers opportunity for “reconstructing frames of social possibility normally only open to heterosexuals” (Pullen, 2009, p. 167). This storytelling creates opportunities for community which he describes as “philosophical” rather than “physical”. However, the question arises of what potential there is for new storytelling to affect the physical? How do young people incorporate the narratives and storytelling that they encounter online into their physical worlds or their sense of place? While Pullen’s work offers a macro theory of how identity is shaped online through storytelling, this study addresses the concept at a micro level by asking what this process looks like for individuals.

Finally, Paradis (2016) describes how previous research on this topic typically takes either a qualitative or quantitative approach while she uses mixed method research. Similar to Hillier and Harrison’s (2007) idea of being space deprived, she uses the idea of “shrunken spaces” to explain how LGBT youth turn to the internet to encounter opportunities which may be unavailable to them offline. She found that socializing was the biggest reason given for using LGBT online environments followed by gaining information about LGBTQ lives, feeling a sense of belonging and to cope with a difficult life. Her study did focus explicitly on LGBT online environments, which may exclude certain types of internet usage. For example, would a young person watching coming out videos on YouTube constitute that as being use of an LGBT online environment? While she does offer insight into the reasons for usage, this may not reflect what young people find supportive, particularly if no restrictions are given for the characteristics of the online spaces where they find that support. Paradis draws attention to the need to establish a stronger connection between the “presence or absence of offline LGBTQ communities and friends” with internet usage and she calls for future research to examine, “the factors that influence online behaviour and sense of community” (ibid, p. 98). Both aims have been incorporated into the current study. Paradis also puts a focus on de-pathologising perceptions of LGBT internet usage as she describes stereotypes of usage for sex or because of a lack of social skills, two stereotypes that she found no basis for in her research. She defines this as a new research agenda which “is less pathologizing, which focuses more on issues of relatedness, identity and belonging.”(ibid, p. 98). While the current study does not deal with the same issues of pathologizing which Paradis does, it does continue this research agenda by taking a critical look at narratives of vulnerability, as well putting a focus on issues of relatedness, identity and belonging in the examination of place.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the relevant research surrounding non-heterosexual internet usage and the interaction between that usage, support, and place. Understanding how young non-heterosexuals in Ireland use the internet is something which can offer greater insight and opportunity to those who work with these young people in developing policy and providing services. The research discussed in this chapter points to the influence the Internet can play in identity development and positive mental health. When you consider the fact that non-heterosexual adolescence is typically associated with high levels of online activity plus the potential absence of peer / parental support or local support services for those who inhabit shrunken spaces (Paradis, 2016), it becomes even more important to understand the role that the Internet plays for non-heterosexual youth, particularly in early stages of identity development and acceptance.

There are a variety of options for non-heterosexual youth to access online. Whether it is Tumblr or YouTube, chatting or watching, creating or observing, non-heterosexual youth can access spaces which offer opportunity that may be absent in their daily lives. What we do not know much about is why young people choose certain options over others. Is it random or are there factors which lead towards certain types of content or usage? Does one's life context play a role in the type and level of support they find online? As described in Chapter 2, Cohler and Hammack believe that differences in how non-heterosexual youth are conceptualised are attributable to:

...a failure to fully acknowledge the salience of context—including cohort, geographic location, and the larger socio-historical context of development—in understanding the relationship between identity and lived experience (Cohler and Hammack, 2007, p. 48).

All the research described in this chapter has been based in the United States or other areas outside of Ireland. While this certainly does not invalidate the applicability of those findings, there is a need to establish how the internet functions in Ireland, which means acknowledging a different cohort, geographical location and socio-historical context than has been examined previously on this topic. While it is possible to theorise around these questions and their answers, ultimately, it is young people themselves who can offer the greatest insight into their motivations and actions. This study attempts to examine the internet usage of non-heterosexual youth in Ireland by focusing on a wider life context which considers offline lived experience as well as the

meanings and importance that the young people themselves attribute to their use of online spaces.

5 METHODOLOGY

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide a comprehensive overview of the methodology and research design chosen and implemented within this study. Crotty (1998) observes that research terminology is often used interchangeably and without structure. He determined that there are four main elements of research design; epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods, and that each of these elements represents a level of interrelated and hierarchal decision making on behalf of the researcher. This chapter will discuss the research design addressing each of Crotty's four elements, before discussing the practical considerations and decisions made across both stages of the research.

5.2 Research Design

Ridenour and Newman (2008) argue that research design decisions should be driven by the research purpose and the research question. They also argue that validity is achieved when there is consistency between the research purpose, research questions and research methods. Considering this, it is worth restating that the purpose of this study is to explore how non-heterosexual youth in Ireland use the internet for support and in the context of place, with a focus on their perceptions and the meaning they assign to their experiences.

The research questions are:

1. What value do non-heterosexual youth in Ireland place on their internet usage?
2. How do non-heterosexual youth use the internet for support in Ireland?
3. How does the internet usage of non-heterosexual youth affect their sense of place?
4. How does place influence the importance of internet usage for non-heterosexual youth in Ireland?

Additional sub-questions which need to be answered are:

1. How do non-heterosexual youth perceive their own self-identity and identity development?
2. What support do non-heterosexual youth need?

Epistemology involves assumptions about the nature of knowledge or “how we know what we know” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest epistemology is the relationship between one who wants to know and what can be known. While ontology, or assumptions about the nature of reality form the basis for epistemology, as both Crotty (1998) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) note, both are interdependent and cannot contradict, hence Crotty uses epistemology as a standalone element in his four research design elements.

A constructivist epistemology is based on the idea that reality is, “subjective, consisting of narratives or meanings constructed/ co-constructed by individuals and others within a specific social context” (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015, p. 3). As discussed in the literature review, the process of developing and accepting a sexual identity is a deeply personal one. While many youth may follow a similar trajectory as to how their identity develops, each person will have their own unique story complete with their own moments that stand out as being important to their personal narrative (Eliason and Schope, 2007; Hammack and Cohler, 2009a). The challenge within this research is to explore internet use within the context of an individual’s story. For example, the first research question asks, “What value do non-heterosexual youth in Ireland place on their internet usage?” This question is not just about understanding the online practices of non-heterosexual youth, but rather understanding which practices were meaningful from the perspective of various young people. This meaning itself is also influenced by a wider range of contextual factors, for example, what type of an environment the person lives in, the support or acceptance they perceive from family/friends, the resources available to them, or how they perceive their own sexual identity. A constructivist epistemology sees knowledge as contained in individual constructions of reality and the researcher’s role is to attempt to both understand those constructions and also to identify elements of consensus between them (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Considering this background, the study employs a constructivist approach which acknowledges the social constructionist nature of identity and positions the researcher as one seeking to understand the reality of the participants, rather than one objective, knowable reality.

One’s approach to knowledge generally leads towards a particular type of research approach such as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods (Creswell, 2013).

As the aim in qualitative research is to study phenomena based on the meanings that others assign to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Ridenour and Newman, 2008), qualitative design was chosen to best fit the needs of the research aims and the epistemological background identified. While it is possible to combine qualitative and

quantitative by using mixed-methods research, there can be an issue if the theoretical drive used is inconsistent or contradictory, for example taking a positivist approach and then switching to a constructivist approach (Morse, 2003), which makes it important that the main theoretical approach used is identified and consistent throughout the research design. Even if elements of quantitative methods are present, such as in a mixed method design, it is still possible to prioritize a qualitative lens, through taking a qualitatively driven approach based on a “common core assumption that social reality is constructed and that subjective meaning is a critical component of knowledge-building” (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015, p. 4). To summarize, the theoretical framework in this study utilizes a constructivist epistemology in which an interpretative, qualitatively driven approach is used.

Methodology choices are based on the question of how an inquirer can go about finding what it is they want to know (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Considering the lack of Irish based research into non-heterosexual internet usage as well as the issues identified around minority stress within Irish LGBT research, there is an exploratory element present within this study. As such, the methodology needed to have a deep focus on individual lived experience, while also providing enough flexibility to address some of the wider sub research questions such as “How do non-heterosexual youth perceive their own self-identity and identity development?” and “What support do non-heterosexual youth require?”.

In the early stages of the study, hermeneutic phenomenology had been considered as a methodological approach as it studies a phenomenon in a way which places focus upon "people's perceptions of the world in which they live in and what it means to them; a focus on people's lived experience" (Langdrige, 2007, p. 4). While this is relevant to the purpose of the study, adopting a phenomenological methodology has certain expectations and restrictions surrounding the methods themselves such as sample size, interviewing and analysis techniques (Groenewald, 2008). These restrictions were considered too limiting considering the research questions as they would impair the possibility of conducting more exploratory research in addition to in-depth interviews. However, the guiding idea behind phenomenology, understanding a phenomenon through the meaning given to it by those who experience it, remains a core concept within this study and a motivating factor in making methodological decisions. Additionally, Guba and Lincoln (1994) highlight that hermeneutic based methodologies are most appropriate to constructivist research.

Inherent in narrative research is the idea that cultural and historical context are essential to understanding lived experience. A narrative analysis asks questions about the stories people tell, such as why they chose to tell a story a particular way or what cultural discourses they used in their telling (Riessman and Speedy, 2007). Considering the importance given to space within this study, analysing the full context of how someone places their own story is something which will make the analysis richer and containing a stronger phenomenological focus. As narrative approaches have become more popular, Riessman (2013, p. 256) cautions against the overuse of the word narrative as it can become divorced from the concept of narrative, instead becoming, 'a mere metaphor'. The danger she outlines in this is that such clumsy uses of narrative separate it from one of its essential parts, "Particularity - lives located in specific times and places". The importance of capturing particularity has been one of the highest priorities within this study from the beginning and this has been a key consideration in choosing a methodology rooted in narrative. In addition, as Schiff (2012) has argued, the most important aspect of narrative is not, "the arrangement of speech elements into a particular order but the kinds of actions that can be accomplished with narratives" (Schiff, 2012, p. 1), or in other words, "How do persons, in time and space, make sense of life experience?" (Schiff, 2012, p. 45). Another primary goal when using narrative research is to find patterns which are similar while also acknowledging lived experiences which make an individual's story different (Josselson, 2006). The focus on lived experience and the role of place and context which narrative research provides makes it a particularly useful methodological tool within this study. There is precedent for taking a narrative approach with sexual minority research. For example, Hammack and Cohler edited a collection of narrative perspectives on sexual identity stating that the narrative approach, "restores a focus on the voices of sexual subjects and hence provides access to the meaning-making process as it is actively lived and embodied in word, thought, and action" (Hammack and Cohler, 2009c, p. xvi). In addition, Kuper and Mustanski (2014) used a narrative analysis in their study of the internet's influence on the sexual identity development of same-sex attracted youth. They interviewed 32 participants, creating narrative summaries for each one, before presenting four specific cases. These four narratives were picked and highlighted to "(a) depict variations in the frequency and impact of Internet use, and (b) explore how these variations interact with the content, tone, and form of identity development narratives" (Kuper and Mustanski, 2014, p. 504). Harper et al (2009) took what they termed a 'phenomenological and narrative framework' in their study of gay and bisexual male internet usage as they had a dual purpose of seeking to understand

individual stories but also wider sociocultural shared narratives. Essentially, they used this framework as a methodological lens through which they conducted survey and interview research which presented segments of stories clustered into categories of narratives. Similarly, this study uses a narrative approach with a basis in phenomenology which prioritises the collection and analysis of both stories and narratives in order to study the meaning which participants ascribe to their internet usage.

5.3 Sequential Qualitative Design

The decision was made to use a sequential design which allows for an initial, exploratory understanding of the experiences of non-heterosexual youth and contextualises current Irish research on the topic, followed by a second stage which focuses much more on the lived experience of individuals. Within mixed-method research the use of multiple stages, also known as components, can induce complexity as it is important to ensure that the theoretical drive behind the research is not conflicting between the two stages (Morse et al., 2006). However, the theoretical drive has been clearly defined as operating in a qualitative, constructivist approach and that has been maintained between both stages of the research. The specific methods used in this design are an initial questionnaire which uses both open ended and closed questions, followed by in-depth narrative based interviews use to illustrate context. Morse offers the following justification for when multiple qualitative methods should be considered mixed method:

When qualitative data types, levels of analysis, or participant perspectives are different enough that it is necessary for the two methods to be handled differently and to be kept apart, we have the rationale for using mixed method design. When one of the components is complete and forms the theoretical base and the other component supplements the core component, we have a qualitative mixed method design. (Morse, 2010, p. 491)

This study uses two distinct stages in which stage two is supplementary to stage one and in which both components are handled separately. The data collection was split into two stages, with stage one consisting of an online questionnaire featuring both qualitative and quantitative questions, while maintaining a qualitative focus, and stage two consisting of in-depth narrative based follow up interviews with eight of the questionnaire participants. In this approach, the first stage of the research answers

questions which drive the analysis and creates a framework which is then addressed within the second stage. While it does not consist of a separate quantitative and qualitative stage, it follows the same rationale as a Sequential Mixed Design as Stage Two of the study is directly informed and resulting from Stage One. (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). The aim behind using this type of approach is not to cross validate the results, but rather to provide a better context within which to understand each part of the study.

Stage one allows for a much more exploratory piece which develops a conceptual understanding based on a larger sample, while stage two builds upon these concepts by providing an individualised look at context. Patton (1999) offers an example of complementary use of data as he describes quantitative indicators, such as a teenage pregnancy rate, which is then illuminated by case studies providing the story behind specific teenage pregnancies, highlighting differences across factors like age. This study takes a similar approach as the questionnaire offers big pictures trends of usage and importance which are then illustrated in the specific stories of various individuals whose life stories differ in significant ways. The results obtained from stage two provide a deeper understanding of the experience of finding support online, which combined with the results from stage one, offer a much more detailed analysis of what is currently known on the topic in Ireland.

Initially, the plan was to structure findings chapters in a sequential manner with one chapter outlining questionnaire results and the remaining chapters assessing interview data. However, in practice this did not flow correctly and due to the extensive qualitative data gained from the questionnaire, it led to chapter sizes which were too large and sections which were disjointed. Instead the decision was made to structure the chapters in a way which sequentially answered the questions of the research, moving from the larger Irish context to a specific analysis of internet usage within that context and then, finally, looking at how the internet operates within the context of an individual's life through an analysis of their own story. In practice, this means that the first findings chapter is exclusively based on questionnaire data, the second uses a combination of interview and questionnaire data and the final one focuses only on interview data. Figure 1 shows how the findings chapters incorporate data from both stages with Chapter Six using only data from stage one, Chapter Seven using a combination of data from stage one and two, and Chapter Eight using only data from stage two.

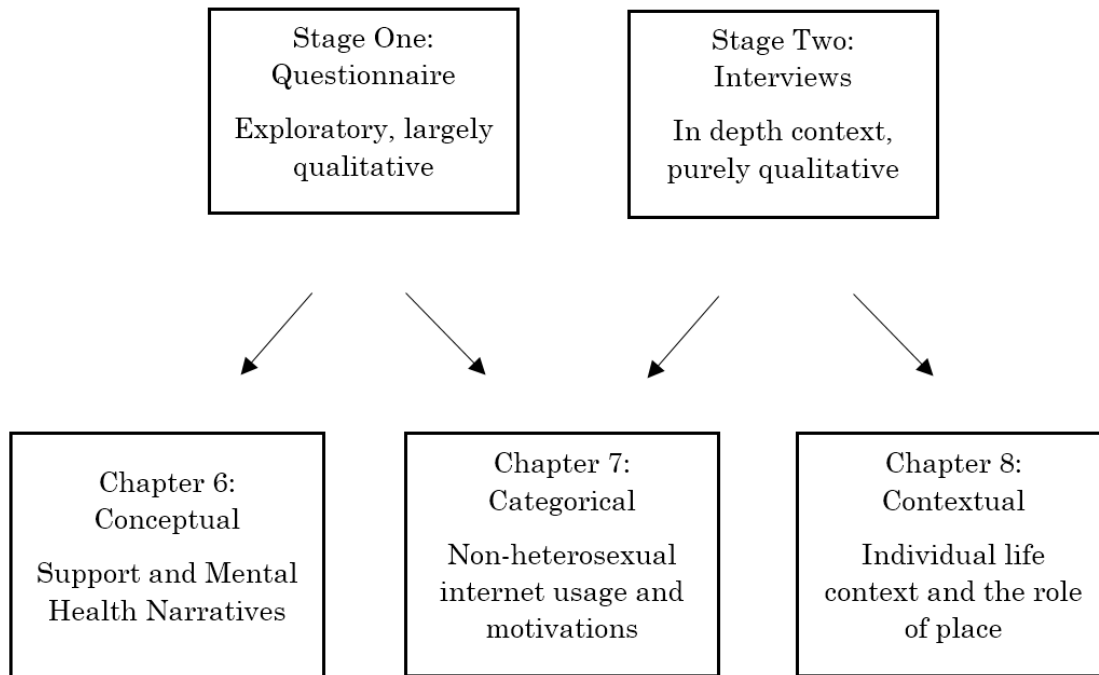


Figure 1: Outline of stages and chapter breakdown

Structuring the findings this way allows a logical progression from a large concept, macro approach to a highly contextualised, individual micro approach, with the macro informing the micro. Additionally, the presentation of the findings follow a progression from conceptual to categorical to contextual. Chapter Six addresses a larger conceptual understanding of identity development, mental health and support. Drawing from the concepts developed in Chapter Six, Chapter Seven addresses categories of internet usage and the ways in which they can function practically. Finally, Chapter Eight builds upon this by situating internet use in a life context and looking at the specific role which the internet plays in relation to place.

5.4 Considerations and Decisions

This section will discuss some of the general considerations and decisions made across both stages of the research.

5.4.1 Non-heterosexual: Determining the recruitment and description terms used for participants

As discussed in Chapter 1, sexual identity labels are loaded terms which carry with them certain assumptions and expectations. For this reason, the use of identity specific language for recruitment and description of participants in this study carries its own set of limitations, assumptions and possibilities. Two questions which highly influenced

the eventual choice of terminology were who will be discouraged from participation and how will participants be characterised as a whole? The question of who will be discouraged from participation arises when considering umbrella terms for recruitment such as LGB or queer. Considering the potential of a post-gay attitude among young people in Ireland, would umbrella terms such as these exclude those who identify outside of that term, for instance those who are pansexual? As this research is engaging with the potential of an emancipation narrative or young people being exposed to alternative identity options online, there was an increased need to ensure that the recruitment term used would appear inclusive, rather than exclusive of those who identify beyond more traditional identity labels. Same-sex attracted is one term which was considered. However, considering the discussion from the literature review in Chapter 2, I took the advice of Savin-Williams and Ream (2007) who suggest focusing on the specific characteristics necessary for the study rather than a general concept of sexual orientation. For this study, the concept of identity is the most significant characteristic and it is possible for someone to experience same-sex attraction and yet continue to identify and see themselves as heterosexual, which made the term same-sex attracted a poor choice.

The question of how participants will be characterised is one which deserves careful consideration, particularly when it comes to the word queer. Mary L. Gray (2009a) explains that while many of the young people she studied were more likely to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender than queer, she considers their identity work and the disruption it causes to their heteronormative surroundings to be queer. She describes her usage of the word queer as representing a concept which is “less intentionally claimed by individuals than unpredictably carried out through their interactions” (Gray, 2009a, p. 27). While queer can be used as an umbrella term for sexual identity which challenges heteronormativity, the word does have further connotations. Savin-Williams writes that queer “describes sexuality less than it suggests one's philosophical, political agenda or lifestyle” (Savin-Williams, 2006, p. 8), which is problematic if queer is being used a term of recruitment or as a descriptor of participants who may not actively consider themselves to be queer. Hammack and Cohler (2009a) describe a heated argument at a research seminar on sexual identity between a young man who comfortably identified as gay and another young man who took a deconstructionist, queer approach to identity. As the authors note, this emotional argument was not simply about labels, but rather it was a highly personal issue which particularly threatened the narrative of identity for the man who identified as gay. From my own anecdotal experience, I recall a very heated conversation between

community organisers of a Pride event over which identity label to use in marketing the event. While LGBT, LGBTQ and gay were the main contenders, there were some members of the group who took strong objection to the word queer, citing their experience of homophobic abuse which featured the word queer. These two highly charged instances indicate the potential issue that would arise if participants are recruited without using the word queer as an umbrella term, only for them to be labelled as such in this research without their permission. The decision not to use the word queer is partly based in my own experience, but ultimately, I simply did not feel comfortable with using the word queer to describe participants unless they expressed acceptance with this, which was not a practical option here.

Based on the above factors, the decision was made to use the term non-heterosexual as a recruitment term. The term non-heterosexual gives the clearest definition of who is and is not included under the label and it carries much lower level of connotations compared to queer. Targeting the study to those who consider themselves to be non-heterosexual allows for participation among those who may not identify as LGBTQ and it also ensures that participants are aware of how their sexuality will be characterised within this study. I do acknowledge that the term non-heterosexual is not without issue. It presupposes and reinforces a binary opposition that is clearly based in the structuralist notions which queer theory challenges and it prioritises a view that heterosexuality is normal and anything outside that is othered (Katz, 1995). However, the term does not presuppose certain identity expectations which was critical for this study. Conducting Irish based research which explores how non-heterosexual people identify without using LGBT as a recruitment term offers an original contribution towards an area which needs further research. The word non-heterosexual, when taken as a descriptor, allows participation for those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer or for those who use another identity label or do not attribute any identity label to their sexuality. In their study of non-heterosexual relationships, Weeks et al (2001) use the term non-heterosexuality to describe those under the LGBTQ banner as well as those, “others historically consigned to the margins of our culture” (2001, p. 109). They also mention the normative assumptions and gendered behaviour patterns which characterises heterosexual relationships as fundamentally different than the reality experienced in most non-heterosexual relationships, thereby justifying a non-heterosexual category as worthy of investigation. The one factor that different labels have in common is that they all represent people who are outside of a heterosexual norm and yet still must live in a largely heteronormative society. From a research point of view, that is the key characteristic of the participants required for this research.

Ultimately, the decision to use the term non-heterosexual is admittedly problematic, but having considered the options available, it was determined that this decision best serves the research aims and objectives while respecting the participants and their self-identification.

5.4.2 Researcher Credibility

Patton encourages researchers, “to report any personal and professional information that may have affected data collection, analysis, and interpretation either negatively or positively in the minds of users of the findings” (Patton, 1999, p. 1198). This acts as a method of self-reflexivity for the researcher and it also allows readers to have a full picture when drawing their conclusions on the credibility of the researcher. I identify as gay and grew up in a conservative religious environment which offered only negative impressions of LGBT sexuality and lives. The internet played a very important role in my own journey of sexual identity formation and acceptance because it introduced me to positive representations of LGBT sexuality and caused me to change my own narrative and the possibilities I saw for my life. I also attended an LGBT support service and found a community of friends which acted as a huge source of support. This study initially arose out of that personal experience as I wondered whether my experience was an unusual occurrence or one which would be shared by others. As I began to explore research relating to LGBT youth while studying for my Msc in Equality Studies, I also noticed that an appreciation or acknowledgement of the internet’s role in supporting young people was almost entirely absent from the literature in Ireland. Early anecdotal evidence from friends paired with a preliminary review of international literature on the topic led me to strongly suspect that the internet does play an important role, at least to some non-heterosexual youth. This belief has inevitably influenced the study, but with the caution that I am careful not to assume that all or most young people share my experience or validate my assumptions. If anything, I was motivated by the desire to understand why experiences varied. Why, for example, was the internet so important to me, while it may have played a minor role for a friend? One method I used to combat bias was to deconstruct my own assumptions and attitudes to concepts. The first two literature chapters involve questioning assumptions behind concepts such as sexual identity or space and the internet, while the findings construct concepts of support and minority stress based on the research participants own perspectives in an attempt to limit any bias that my own previous expectations and understanding may have on the elements that make up the research.

5.4.3 Criteria for participation

Participation in the study was dependent upon meeting two conditions. Participants had to be aged between 18 and 25 and they also had to consider themselves to be non-heterosexual. Initially, I had considered including those under 18, however, after considering the complications this would pose to obtaining ethical approval and ensuring confidentiality, the decision was made to restrict participation to those over the age of 18.

Savin-Williams (2006) has highlighted issues with basing youth research on recollections from adults as the passage of time can vastly change perceptions of the past. Additionally both Savin-Williams and Pullen (2014b) have expressed issue with recollections as there is a difference between the immediate experience of living life and the distance and process of remembering it. The age range selected for this research is biased towards recollection based research. The most common age that an LGBT person becomes aware of their sexual orientation in Ireland is 12 and the most common age to tell someone is 16 (Higgins et al., 2016a), while the age range for participation in this study is 18 to 25. In practice, the participants displayed various levels of recollection or immediate experience and that varied even among ages. There was an 18-year-old who spoke about his struggles with a strong past tense, describing how things were before he moved on and adjusted, just as there was a 25-year-old who expressed deep pain at the repercussions from the coming out process she was still enduring. Some talked strongly about how much things have changed and how different they were now when discussing events that occurred in the previous year. Additionally, the fact that the age range is still based in a period of young adulthood ensures that the period of time elapsed between immediate experience and recollection is not too large. There are also potential benefits to focusing on recollections. For instance Savin-Williams (1998) himself asked questions of gay men across their life course in order to capture the context and narrative of their lives and see the variance between their stories, while others have researched non-heterosexual internet use from a life course narrative perspective which relies upon the ability to retell a narrative story (Harper et al., 2009; Kuper and Mustanski, 2014). Considering the research aims in this study, the ability to develop context and the opportunity to consider how individuals reflexively construct their narratives of identity justify the target age range and the consequent use of recollections.

There were no limitations made with regards to gender identity so participants who identify as transgender or outside the traditional gender binary were welcome to participate if they met the entry conditions.

Probability sampling of non-heterosexual populations face a number of challenges which make it a less common option for conducting research, such as the relatively small size of the target population and prohibitive cost (Institute of Medicine (U.S.), 2011). Instead of attempting to overcome these difficulties, a purposive sample was chosen as the goal was to generate a sample which would address the research questions (Robson, 2002).

5.4.4 Ethical Considerations

The DCU Research Ethics Committee granted the study ethical approval on the 21st of October 2013. As written previously, the decision was made to restrict the study to those aged over 18 as this simplifies the process of ethical approval and ensures no issues about confidentiality between participants and their parents. The questionnaire used implied informed consent and included a plain language statement on the first page. The questionnaire and interview were treated separately when it came to informed consent even though the interview participants were sourced from the questionnaire. All interviewees were given a new plain language statement and an informed consent form for the interview. The plain language statement was also sent to interview participants by email in advance of their interview so that they knew exactly what this stage of the study would involve beforehand.

5.4.5 Software

The quantitative data from the questionnaire was examined in both SPSS and Microsoft Excel. While a high level of competency was not required in these programs due to the need for descriptive rather than inferential analysis, I did complete a module in quantitative research analysis to understand the possibilities and options for completing quantitative analysis using statistical analysis software.

The software package MAXQDA was used to assist in qualitative analysis of both the questionnaire data and the interview transcripts. The process of coding and recoding can involve rearrangement and reclassifying of categories as the coding is refined through multiple stages (Saldaña, 2009). This software was used as it provides a useful interface for rearranging and naming codes and categories which aids in organisation, particularly considering the use of two qualitative data sets.

5.4.6 Coding Decisions and Structure

In his coding handbook, Saldaña (2009) describes how the choice of different types or 'filters' of codes will vary depending on the methodological approach favoured by the researcher and ideally by the research questions themselves. While the approach taken varied slightly for each stage, some constant filters were used. Simultaneous coding was used, in which passages can have more than one code. This was necessary as some quotes and responses covered ground across chapters. For example, the following quote describes a need to identify an orientation which covers concepts of support needs in the first findings chapter, but it simultaneously describes a form of informal learning facilitated by the internet which is relevant within the second findings chapter.

Without online resources, I would have had no way of even identifying my orientation, let alone working through what it means for me and my relationships.

Repeated cycles of structural coding were used to develop an overview of the data using both a priori and emergent pattern codes. Structural coding utilises content based or conceptual phrases to assess the concepts behind the topics, words and discourses which participants used within their answers (Saldaña, 2009). Structural coding is recommended for interviews and it is also acknowledged as being useful for open ended survey questions. This was followed by deeper theoretical, development of themes and subthemes using pattern coding which was also repeated as necessary.

While it may appear that general data was used across sections, there was a clear methodological separation between how the analysis was conducted and managed in relation to the three findings chapters to ensure that data was not mixed and matched independently of analysis. While a grounded theory methodology was not specifically employed, the approach taken is similar to a grounded theory approach in that theory was inductively generated from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In a sense Chapter 6 was used to set the parameters for analysis, ensuring that this is based on participant contribution rather than researcher assumption, and Chapters 6 and 7 were both built upon this analysis with the theory emerging from the data. For full clarity and transparency, I will outline the way in which data was structured and used within each findings chapter.

Chapter 6 used closed questions about level of comfort with sexual orientation and positive or negative impact to provide an overview of general trends within the sample. The open-ended questionnaire answers which addressed concepts of minority stress or mental health, identity and support were presented within this chapter. Overall the

chapter does not focus on the internet or concepts of internet usage. It should also be noted that interview data was not used in Chapter 6 as this analysis was already completed before the interviews. While interview participants did address the concepts in Chapter 6, often in powerful ways, considering the sequential nature of the research, it was important to maintain the integrity and clarity of the concepts developed in stage one as an independent piece of research.

Chapter 7 begins by presenting the quantitative answers given in the questionnaire surrounding internet use, particularly the categories of use highlighted by participants as being important. The chapter uses data from both the questionnaire and the interviews to illustrate various types of internet usage and address how the internet was used to meet various needs identified in Chapter 6.

Chapter 8 focuses entirely on the interview data. While chapter 7 covers questions addressing how and why non-heterosexual youth use the internet, the interviews provide a deep context for how this relates to concepts of place by presenting cases structured as narratives.

The coding scheme for Chapters 6 and 7 as well as a sample of how the narrative biographies were coded in Chapter 8, can be viewed within Appendix A.

5.5 Stage One – Questionnaire

5.5.1 Questionnaire Design¹

The literature review has addressed topics such as sexual identities including those who identify outside the labelling of LGBTQ, the disadvantages of the minority stress model and stage based sexual identity models, and non-heterosexual internet use. However, Irish based research on each of these topics is highly underdeveloped and so the first stage of the study was designed to provide an overview of the cultural and contextual differences found between the expected and actual results when applied to Ireland. While the second stage of the study focuses on those who find the internet supportive, it is useful to situate that within a wider context of non-heterosexual youth practices online in Ireland e.g. do most youth surveyed find the internet supportive or does phase two of the study investigate a phenomenon which is relatively uncommon among non-heterosexual youth in Ireland? Questionnaires are considered useful when

¹ The questionnaire can be viewed in Appendix A.

there is a need to, “make contact with and gather responses from a relatively large number of people in scattered and possibly remote locations“ (Rowley, 2014, p. 2). This was useful to the study as it answers exploratory questions while also providing a homogenous and purposive sample for the second stage.

The questionnaire itself involves 36 questions, consisting of open ended and closed questions which cover a variety of topics designed to provide an overview of demographic information, perceptions of sexual identity and support, and importance and categories of internet usage. The survey required no identifying information, but participants had the option to leave their email address at the end if they were willing to be interviewed. The questionnaire can be viewed in Appendix B.

Rather than incorporating questions that would act as markers for minority stress and mental health, the questionnaire instead used a closed question about overall level of comfort with one’s sexual orientation followed by open ended questions asking whether participants felt their sexual orientation has had a positive and/or a negative impact on their lives. This provided space for participants to offer a reflection of their sexuality which they feel accurately represents themselves. For instance, if given the choice, would participants acknowledge negative past experience due to their sexuality even if they were now comfortable with it? Would they put more emphasis on the positive? Asking about positive and negative impacts does not presume that positivity or negativity will be present, but the decision of which way to frame previous negative experience itself gives insight into how non-heterosexual youth see themselves and puts the focus upon their own perception rather than an outsider’s reading of their circumstances and past. Participants were asked if they felt like they needed support, whether they had accessed support services and, if so, which services they had accessed. Participants were also asked if there is any support, online or offline, which they wish had been available to them. The questions surrounding internet usage addressed some of the types of usage which has been identified in other studies such as coming out stories (Alexander and Losh, 2010; Chirrey, 2011), sexual health information (Magee et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2014), and dating and sex (McKie et al., 2015). Participants were also asked, “How important or unimportant have the following internet activities been to you in relation to your sexual orientation?” The scale used for this was not designed for quantitative analysis, but rather to find out which categories of usage participants would prioritise. For this reason, it uses highly subjective terms such as “absolutely essential”. This was a deliberate choice as choosing to rank a category as absolutely essential represents a value based assessment that a particular activity was

not just ranked 5 on a scale or even ranked as very important, but instead was highly valued, which met the purpose of prioritising usage according to how widely it was valued.

Conducting a pilot study with the target population is recommended for testing the questions and questionnaire before distribution (Baker and Foy, 2008). An initial pilot study of the questionnaire was conducted to evaluate how the questions would be both understood and answered. Six attendees from the Dundalk Outcomers service who consider themselves non-heterosexual but were slightly older than the target age group volunteered to take the questionnaire and provided feedback. This feedback mainly related to clarity of wording and any issues they identified were altered for the final questionnaire. Their questionnaire responses were discarded after their feedback was received.

The questionnaire was conducted using Jotform, an online survey tool. While the questionnaire used implied consent, the first page of the survey gave an overview of the research project, expected involvement from participants, benefits to the participant, confidentiality, data protection, and right to withdraw. The second page consisted of two eligibility questions which ask each participant to indicate if they consider themselves to be heterosexual or not and to write their age.

The link and recruitment message for the questionnaire was distributed to college LGBT societies, youth groups, and support services like the LGBT helpline. *BelongTo* also agreed to promote the questionnaire among their national network of youth groups. Participants were encouraged to pass along the link to others they know who fit the selection criteria which functioned as an informal method of snowball sampling.

The questionnaire was open from the 16th of January 2015 to the 28th of May 2015 and 132 people completed the survey. 6 of the participants did not meet the qualifying criteria and their entries were removed from the dataset, leaving 126 valid responses. 55 of the participants chose to leave their emails and receive contact about further interviews.

5.5.2 Quantitative analysis

The descriptive numbers derived from the questionnaire do shed some light on the wider context of non-heterosexual youth in Ireland, but the purposive sampling, sourcing of participants and sample size are all factors which mean the questionnaire

is not suitable for generalisation. Additionally, the intention was to provide an overview of the sample using descriptive analysis.

While both stages of the research were structured in a sequential way, there were some instances in which the interviews themselves challenged aspects of the questionnaire and this insight had a bearing on the quantitative analysis. For example, the interviews challenged the divisions between rural/countryside/village, town and city which were location options present within the questionnaire. However, during the interviews I found the information provided in the questionnaire on this topic to be very unreliable as participants described the areas they were from in ways which did not necessarily make such clear distinctions between rural and urban environments. For example, here is an excerpt from one of the interviews in which the classification of being from a particular town, which is actually a larger town within Ireland, did not represent the participant's actual experience.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit about where you grew up?

Participant: Well I'm from [town name]. It's a small town. I've always lived here.

Interviewer: Do you live in the centre of the town?

Participant: No I never actually lived in the town, when I was growing up we lived outside so more country.

Interviewer: Did it feel like you were living in the town or the country?

Participant: More rural, more country.

This was also an issue among participants who lived within suburbs of a city yet classified themselves as living in a town or a village, which while technically correct, does not accurately represent a more urban environment. Consequently, the questions surrounding area type does not form a part of the analysis.

5.5.3 Questionnaire sample

This section will describe the descriptive, demographic statistics of the questionnaire sample in areas such as age, gender, sexual orientation and sexual identity labels.

5.5.3.1 Age

The questionnaire was open to participants aged between 18 and 25. The age range of participants was skewed towards younger ages, with a mean of 21, with 19 being the most common age. Figure 2 shows a distribution of age range by percentage.

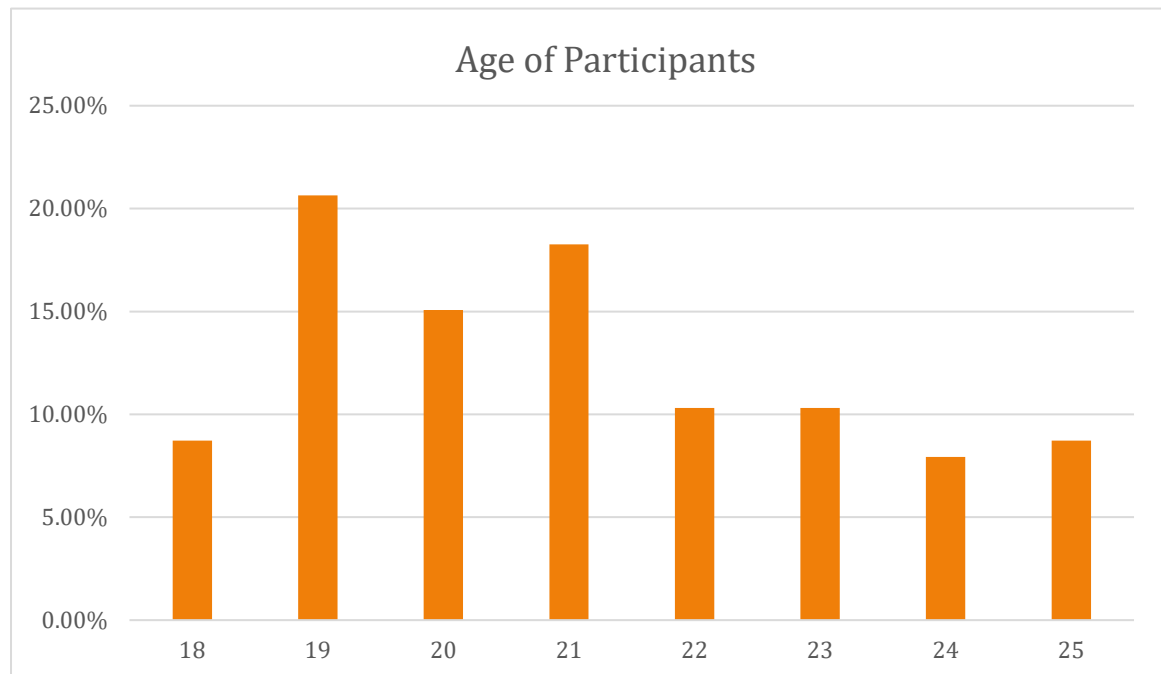


Figure 2: Age range of participants by percentage

5.5.3.2 Gender

18.2%² more females than males took the questionnaire with the breakdown consisting of 49 males (38.9%), 72 females (57.1%) and 5 participants (4%) who identified outside the gender binary with gender identities such as genderqueer, gender fluid or non-binary. While 5% non-binary is not a large amount, it does point to the value of constructing research in a way which does not limit gender. Additionally, while participants were not specifically asked about being transgender, they were asked whether their gender reflected the gender they were assigned at birth. 7 participants (5.5%) indicated that their chosen gender was not the gender they were assigned at birth indicating that they are not cisgender.

² All percentages have been rounded to the first decimal place.

5.5.3.3 Location

There was a typo initially in the question asking, “which county do you currently live in” as the word written was “country” rather than “county”. Unfortunately, this was not identified during the pilot study and it was changed when noticed once the questionnaire was open. Most of the participants who encountered the typo read the word as county according to their answers, but some answered country and others chose “I would prefer not to answer this question”.

Overall, 107 (84.9%) participants did disclose their county. 54 participants currently lived in Dublin and 53 currently lived outside Dublin. Additionally, 26 of those from Dublin indicated that they had previously lived in another county before the age of 18, meaning that overall 79 (62.9%) participants had some experience growing up outside of Dublin. This may also suggest that some moved to Dublin for work or college as an adult or older teen, which would not be atypical.

5.5.3.4 Sexual attraction

Participants were asked separate questions about sexual attraction and sexual identity to establish both how their attractions fit into typical identity labels as well as how they chose to self-identify. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of which descriptions participants chose. These descriptions are not filtered by gender so, for example, ‘Mostly attracted to males’, could be chosen by males or females. As well as the 5 categories which were pre-filled, an additional three were created during analysis to describe the additional descriptions which participants entered themselves. These are ‘Asexual or elements of predominantly asexuality’, ‘Attraction to males and females with an additional non-binary element’, and ‘Other’.

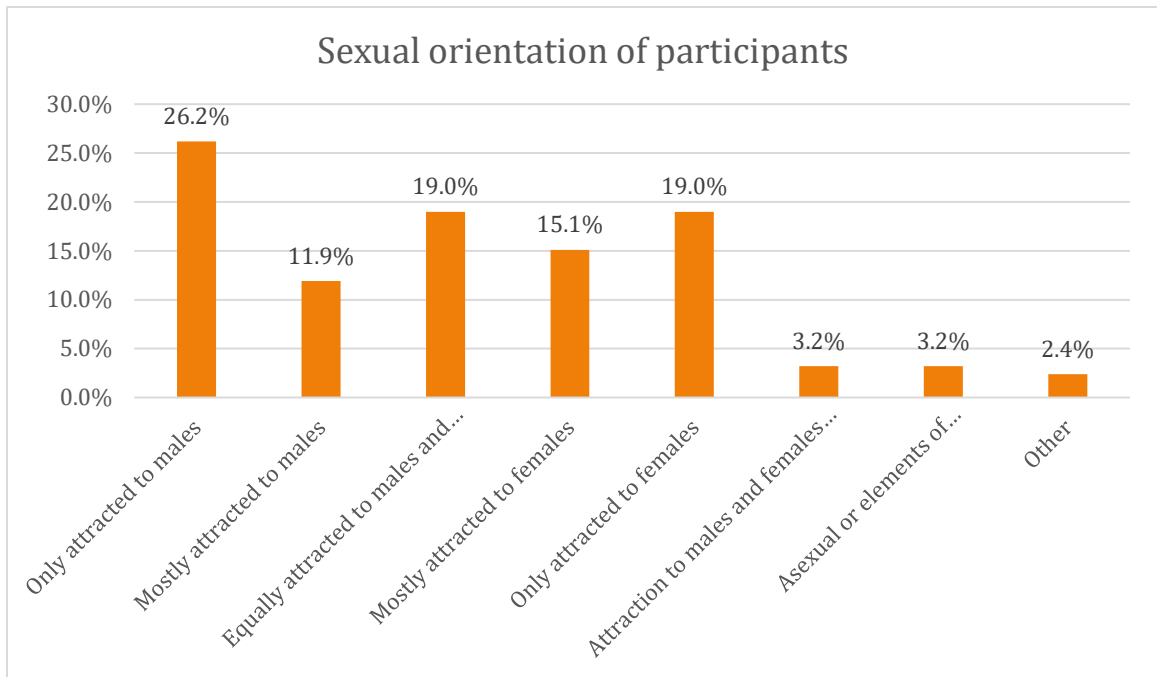


Figure 3: Sexual orientation of participants

91.3% of participants selected from the given sexual orientation description options. Four participants (3.2%), indicated attraction to both males and females but they also specified an additional non-binary element.

“Equally attracted to males, females, and those who identify outside of the gender binary” – 19-year-old, non-binary.

“I'm just attracted to humans” – 21-year-old female.

An additional 4 participants (3.2%) used descriptions which indicated some level of asexuality.

“Only attracted to males, but quite rarely attracted at all” – 21-year-old male.

“Romantically attracted to multiple genders, sexually attracted to no one” – 24-year-old non-binary.

Three participants used descriptions which did not fit into the above descriptions, with two saying they were, “Not sure”.

When filtered by gender, 45.2% of participants are exclusively attracted to the same sex, 19.8% are mostly attracted to the same sex and 19% reported equal attraction to both males and females. Figure 4 shows this breakdown.

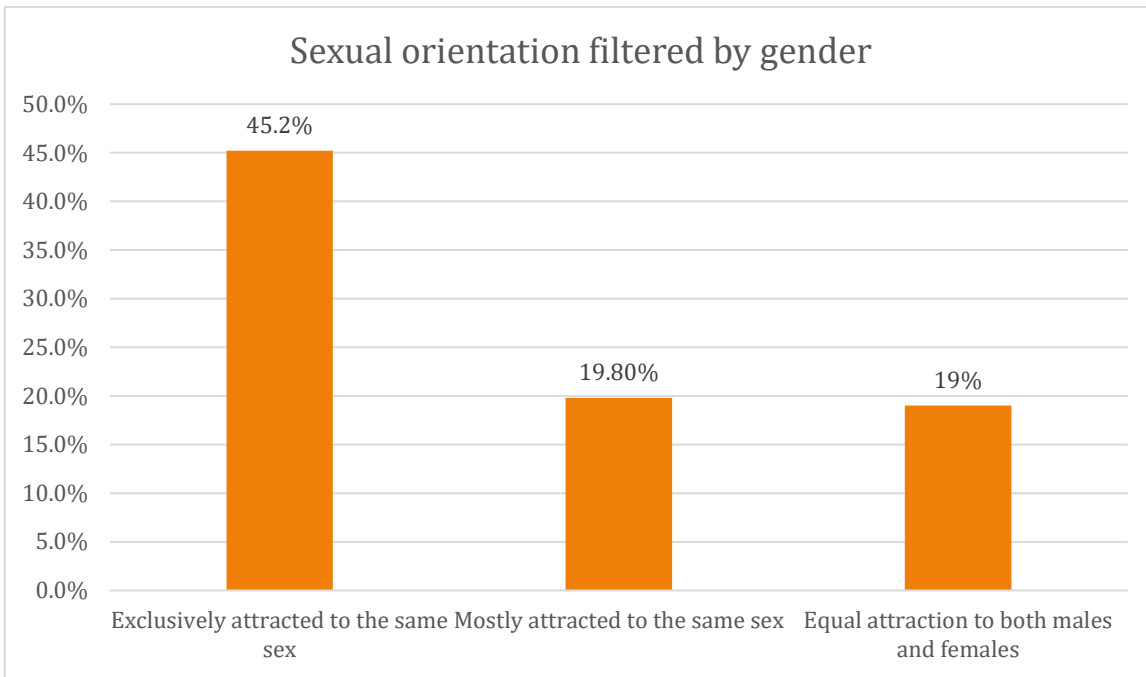


Figure 4: Sexual Orientation by Percentage

Male and female participants showed different trends with regards to sexual orientation as seen in Figure 5. 65.3% of males indicated they are exclusively attracted to the same sex, compared to 33.3% of females, while only 8.2% of males indicated they are equally attracted to both sexes compared to 27.8% of females. This indicates that within this sample, females are more likely to have an orientation that indicates elements of bisexuality compared to males.

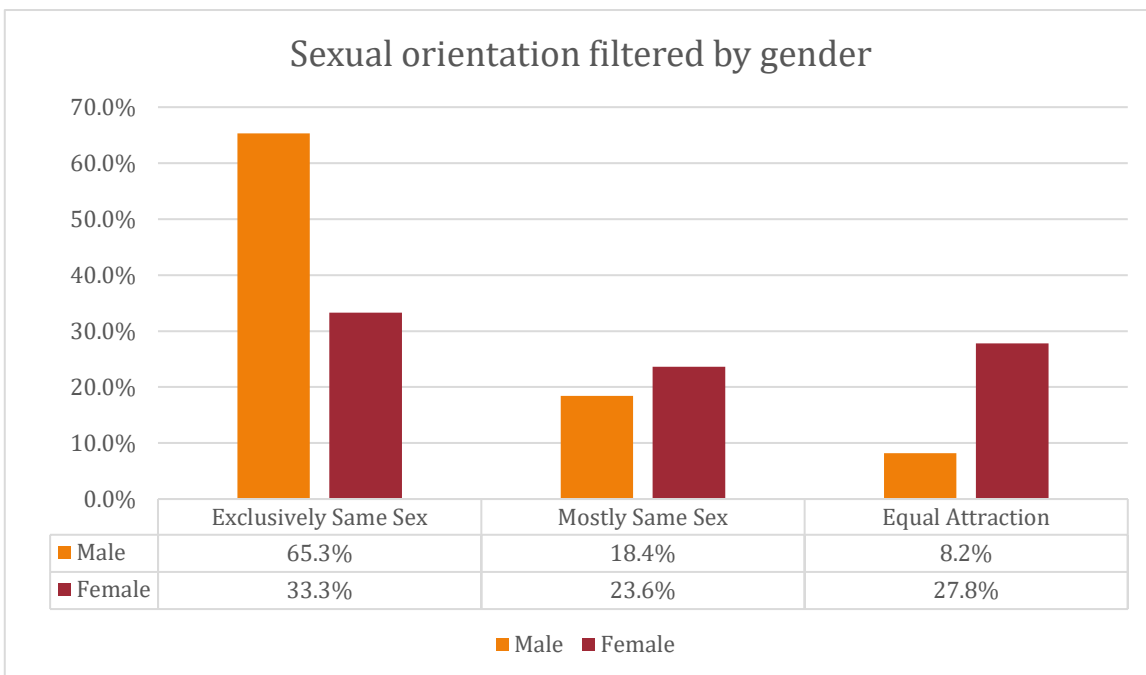


Figure 5: Sexual orientation filtered by gender

5.5.3.5 Sexual identity

Participants were asked, “How would you describe your sexual identity?” Seven options were offered as well as an ‘Other’ box. Figure 6 shows a breakdown of identity labels chosen. 31% of participants identified as gay, 19% as lesbian and 19% as bisexual. This means that while 69% of participants did identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, 31% did not. This remaining 31% is diverse with 6.3% identifying as queer, 8.7% as pansexual and 7.1% stating that they prefer not to label their sexual identity. Participants also provided alternative sexual identities such as demihomosexual, androsexual and biromantic asexual.

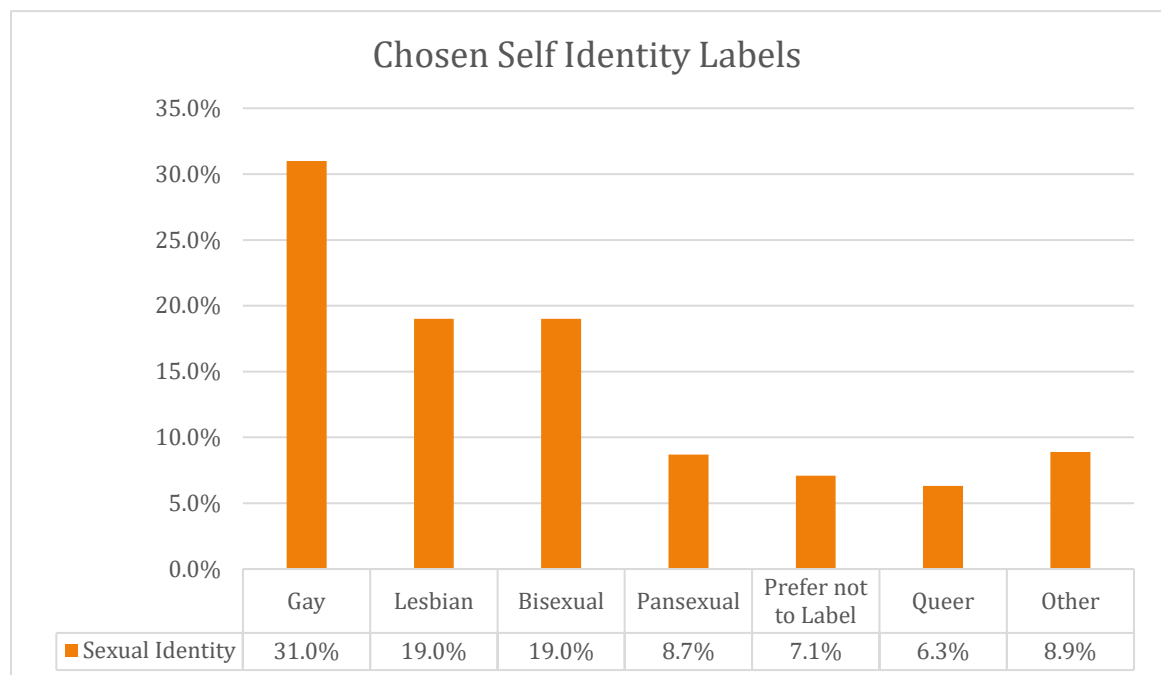


Figure 6: Chosen Sexual Identity Labels By Percentage

Part of the rationale for using the term non-heterosexual as a condition for participation was to allow for the possibility that lesbian, gay and bisexual represent a limited part of the wider community. Notably, both pansexual and preference for no labels were represented higher than queer even though LGBTQ is often used a catch all phrase. The presence of high levels of pansexuality and preference for no labelling represent a move away from traditional identity labels. This could reflect the age profile of participants or the use of term non-heterosexual. In the context of assessing internet usage it brings up the question of which narratives and identity opportunities young people access online and does accessing online resources lead to changes in self-identity?

Additionally, all four of the female participants in the interviews gave either a changed or more complex impression of their sexual identity than the labels they had selected in the questionnaire. Chloe had indicated that she preferred not to label her sexual identity, yet in the interview she described herself as pansexual, even though she did not indicate a strong identification with labelling. Amy chose lesbian as a descriptor in the questionnaire, yet described her recent journey of coming out as bisexual in the interview. Emma indicated that there was a level of performance inherent in her sexual identity labelling as she told how she would describe herself in certain contexts as being a lesbian even though she personally dislikes the word and considers herself gay. Both the changing nature of identity and the performance of identity are particularly evident in the following excerpts from Paula's interview.

Interviewer: And in the survey when there was a question of how would you describe your sexual identity and you said that you're not sure, is that still how you feel?

Paula: I'm not really sure whether I'd be considered bisexual or pansexual but I do know that I find both men and women attractive and at the time of taking the survey as far as I remember I hadn't been with a female but I have since and I know that I like women and men.

Interviewer: And so would you personally call yourself bisexual or pansexual or are you still not sure?

Paula: Within the support group and with people who have the knowledge I would consider myself pansexual but to the general public if anyone's asking for whatever nousey reason I would say that I'm bisexual because it's just so much more widely known. Whereas if you say pansexual, people are like 'what do you mean, kitchen pans?' (laughs) But bisexuality is slightly easier for people to understand if they aren't in the clique.

Interviewer: So there's a level at which you present to other people?

Paula: Yep.

A similar dynamic was present in all 4 of the female interviews, as the participants appeared to have a level at which they publicly presented an understood identity as well a level at which they have their own private sense of that identity, acting as a form of impression management (Goffman, 1956). The changes and nuances in these accounts highlight that even the act of asking participants about sexual identity labels may lead to their own assumptions that a certain type of answer is expected or

desirable. It also highlights that identity is a lifelong process which can be subject to change (Eliason and Schope, 2007).

5.5.4 Qualitative analysis

The open-ended questions from the questionnaire were imported into MAXQDA, a software tool for qualitative data analysis. Saldaña's (2009) Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers was a particularly useful resource during this stage of analysis as it provided a comprehensive guide to coding methods across both the initial stages of structural coding as well as the more in depth process of pattern coding, or as Saldaña calls it the first and the second cycle. I also took the advice of Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) who suggest that a copy of the research concerns and theoretical framework are used as a reference point throughout the coding process. This was particularly important within this study due to the ways in which chapters and data are structured across the various research questions. Additionally, Patton states the following to emphasise that a strong qualitative analysis involves a commitment to reflecting the essence of a phenomena or the participants, or what Saldaña (2009) describes as being rigorously ethical as well as a level of analysis which goes beyond that which can be clearly procedurally defined.

A qualitative analyst returns to the data over and over again to see if the constructs, categories, explanations, and interpretations make sense, if they really reflect the nature of the phenomena. Creativity, intellectual rigor, perseverance, insight-these are the intangibles that go beyond the routine application of scientific procedures (Patton, 1999, p. 1205).

5.6 Stage Two – Interviews

5.6.1 Interview Design

Qualitative interviews offer the opportunity to gain a greater insight into how young people themselves would present the narrative of their own lives and how they would contextualise their internet usage. Heath et. al (2009) describe qualitative interviewing as a youth friendly research method as it allows young people, whose voices are typically marginalised, to give their own accounts of their lives rather than having their lives analysed and interpreted by adults. The voices of non-heterosexual youth are certainly more likely than heterosexual youth to have experienced marginalisation

while there is a simultaneous risk that their lives are subject to outsider interpretation as evident in the critique of a suicidal script (Savin-Williams and Ream, 2003).

Eight interviews were conducted in total. Practical considerations are necessary in determining sample size (Marshall et al., 2013). Considering the timeframe of the research and the time taken for stage one, it was not considered feasible to have a high number of interviews. Additionally, considering the interviews form a supplementary stage rather than a complete method, there are lower thresholds of saturation required than if the study was entirely based on the interviews (Morse, 2010).

While the participants in this study are over 18, their recollections and interpretations of their experiences growing up represent a process of self-perception as participants construct their own sense of story and attribute meaning to it. My intention with these interviews was to document the individual stories which exemplify the trends revealed through the questionnaire. Considering the choice of sequential design, semi-structured interviews had an advantage as they allowed for a certain amount of structure around the identified themes from the questionnaire, ensuring that the interviews did explore the findings from the first stage. The first section of the interview only dealt with life context asking participants to describe their own life story and journey of sexual identity, while the second section specifically addressed their experiences with the internet. This is similar to the approach Hammack et al (2009) used when researching sexual identity as they first asked only about identity before introducing questions about sexual identity. This approach meant that the participants were not discussing their life through the lens of the internet, unless they specifically brought it up, but instead they discussed their life in general before addressing how the internet fits into the wider story of their life.

Additionally, the decision made was to use an adapted form of the problem-centred interview (PCI) (Witzel, 2000), a common method used in Germany (Scheibelhofer, 2006), as a basis for the design and partial analysis used. The PCI combines both narrative and semi-structured interviewing by using questions which prompt either comprehension or narrative accounts. In effect, the PCI combines a deductive perspective which utilises prior knowledge with an inductive perspective which gives importance to subjective perspectives. Practically, this means the prior knowledge gained through stage one of this research is incorporated into the interview from the researcher while the opportunity to share their own subjective practical knowledge is incorporated from the participant, leading to a 'discursive-dialogical reconstruction of a problem' (Witzel, 2000). One suggestion when using PCI is that a questionnaire is

used before the interview to provide demographic and social information which avoids the need for an initial question/answer style approach at the beginning of the interview and offers material to initiate conversations (Witzel, 2000). In effect, this is achieved through stage one of the study as each interview participant had already completed the questionnaire before being invited for an interview.

5.6.2 Data Collection

All interview participants were initially sourced through the questionnaire, meaning that those selected for interview had to have taken the questionnaire first. The participants initially contacted for interviews were chosen strategically so that the interview sample would meet the needs of the research aims, as is standard for purposive sampling (Robson, 2002). Key categories for representation were gender, age, sexual identity, geographical area type (rural, town or city)³, and whether or not they had accessed support. If a participant did not respond to the initial email or stopped replying after having done so initially, they were sent one follow up email asking if they would still like to participate in the study. If there was no reply to this email then they were considered non-responsive and excluded from the potential interview sample.

Thirty participants received an interview request email. Of these, sixteen responded indicating interest in being interviewed, although some later became non-responsive. Reasons for becoming unresponsive are unknown as some who appeared to be very enthusiastic initially stopped replying to emails. Two participants had interviews scheduled which they cancelled beforehand and did not wish to reschedule.

Arranging interviews was more problematic than anticipated. I found there was little way to challenge this as I had to be respectful of the fact that the participants were volunteering time and insight for a potentially very sensitive topic and that they should not feel any pressure to participate. One factor that may have contributed to non-responsiveness is the difficulty of identifying and arranging a suitable and confidential interview space, a discussion that requires asking for specifics of location and availability. I found I had to rely on a participant's knowledge and help in identifying interview spaces in geographical areas which were unfamiliar to me. If repeating this study, I would consider interviewing online through Skype or other means as this may

³ As discussed previously, geographical area type did not form part of the analysis due to inconsistencies found during the interviews.

have simplified the process of arranging an interview time and location. Non-responsiveness did affect the interview sample chosen. Some participants who were initially included in contact emails and who initially responded include someone who identified as transgender, someone who identified as asexual and someone who said they found the internet of little support due to the support they had from family. Cases such as these would have offered a more diverse selection of participants and insight.

The target time for each interview was 1 hour. The shortest interview was 35 minutes long while the longest was 1 hour and 8 minutes. The interviewees were contacted through email and arrangements were made at a time or location which suited them. Interviewees were supplied with the plain language statement through email and asked to read it in advance of the interview. They were required to reread a hard copy of it and complete an informed consent form before the interview commenced. Interviews took place at the premises of two support services, Dublin City University, and three private venues. All interviews took place face to face and the audio was recorded. In both the initial emails and on the day of the interviews, I emphasised to the participants that the purpose of the interview was to gain their perspective and so there were no right, wrong or expected answers. They were also encouraged to correct any answers given from the questionnaire if they no longer felt that they were accurate or represented them.

5.6.3 Analysis

I transcribed the interviews and cleaned the transcripts by removing any identifiable information. Each participant has been given a pseudonym to preserve their anonymity and privacy. In addition, any identifying details about their location such as place names or the names of specific support services were removed. Table 1 outlines details about the interview participants according to their questionnaire answers.

Table 1: Overview of Interview Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Identity Label	Accessed support services
Mark	Male	23	Gay	Yes
Amy	Female	24	Lesbian	Yes
Paula	Female	25	I'm not sure	Yes
Chloe	Female	20	I prefer not to label it	No
Thomas	Male	18	Gay	No
Finn	Male	18	Gay	No
Emma	Female	21	Lesbian	No
Anthony	Male	25	Gay	Yes

Of the 8 participants chosen, there is equal gender balance and an equal split between those who had and had not accessed support services. All participants expressed that they were comfortable with their sexual orientation, that they felt like they had needed support and that they found the internet either very supportive or absolutely essential. I would stress that the narratives presented within the interviews bore little relevance to the demographic categories given as the differences observed between cases were entirely based on a level of life context which is not represented in the table above.

In keeping with the suggestions made for analysing the PCI, an initial coding based on themes and key topics from the data was generated, following the same approach as used with the questionnaire data from Chapter 7. Another aspect of the analysis involved the development of a case description which outlines the biographical process as told by each participant, upon which the concepts coded for each participant can then be situated within their story (Witzel, 2000). Witzel also encourages the use of “case specific main topics”, which are incorporated into Chapter Eight through the structure which identifies the main topic from each individual story.

A condensed version of the biographical case descriptions created are presented as narrative cases in Chapter Eight. These biographies are not simply presentations of interview data as participants often jumped across their own timeline, circling back to concepts or at times speaking in contradictory terms. The challenge was to present a

coherent narrative in the analysis which identifies the elements of their story relevant to the research questions while making sure to tell it from their perspective rather than my own, thus ensuring the integrity of their story. The presentation of case stories is similar to the approach taken by Hammack et al (2009) as they presented chronological analyses complete with interpretation in their narrative based analysis of sexual identity.

One of the participants, Thomas, was not included in the presentation of case stories in Chapter 8. While his interview was useful and certain sections are included in the previous chapter, I felt that his story and the key concepts within were very similar to Finn's story and there would be little value in repeating the same main topic. The decision was made to present Finn's story rather than Thomas' story because Finn's answers were generally more in depth.

5.7 Limitations

Patton (1999, p. 1197) states that qualitative research is "highly context and case dependent" and he cautions against "over-generalizing the results." It is important to be transparent in emphasising that the sample and methods employed within this study are not representative and cannot be used to draw general inferences about the population studied.

Another limitation is that the respondents were primarily contacted through groups and organisations. Invitations to participate in and distribute the questionnaire were sent to LGBT youth groups, college societies and to organisations who work with LGBT people. As Savin-Williams has pointed out, the type of young people who feel the need to associate with labels or groups are not necessarily representative of sexual minority youth. Ideally, it would be useful to conduct a large-scale survey that targets any youth in Ireland irrespective of sexual identity. The data could then be used for a comparative study and it would also improve the sampling of sexual minorities. However, this type of research has not been conducted in Ireland previously, and while it would be useful and constructive to the current study, it would have been too large an undertaking to complete within the timescale and resources available. As the questionnaire was sent to organisations rather than individuals, it was not possible to assess uptake rate. Consequently, it is possible that those surveyed represent a small proportion of those presented with the opportunity to take the questionnaire. It is also possible that those who did participate did so because they were particularly motivated or interested in the topic. Despite the limitations discussed, the questionnaire was useful in providing

some primary research which directly addresses some of the hypotheses arising from the literature review.

Additionally, the interviews consist of a purposive sample with a deliberate bias towards illuminating cases. Again, this emphasises that the findings should not be considered representative, but rather they represent individual experiences which can act as case studies and examples of how the phenomenon works.

5.8 Conclusion

To summarise, the study adopts a narrative based, phenomenological approach comprising of a qualitatively focused sequential design in which the first stage of data collection and analysis inform the second stage. The first stage comprises of a questionnaire with 126 responses and the second stage uses in-depth follow up interviews based on an adapted form of the problem centred interview technique. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, research design must be driven by the research purpose and research question with a consistency between the purpose, questions and research methods employed (Ridenour and Newman, 2008). This chapter has outlined a clear rationale behind the methodology employed within this study. The development of a sequential qualitative design, the methods used for the interviews and the structure of the findings chapters are relatively atypical, however, they were chosen with a careful focus on what would best meet the research needs.

6 A NUANCED PERSPECTIVE ON MINORITY STRESS: ENRICHMENT, STIGMA AND SUPPORT.

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores participants' perceptions of how their sexual orientation has impacted their lives in order to address the two sub-questions required to answer the primary research questions:

1. How do non-heterosexual youth perceive their own self-identity and identity development?
2. What support do non-heterosexual youth need?

As this study uses a sequential design, this chapter will present the findings from the questionnaire which specifically address the gaps identified in chapter 2 around minority stress, identity and support, with the subsequent chapters building upon these findings. The analysis is based on the questionnaire questions which asked participants about their perceptions of positive and negative impacts and their support needs. It also became clear during analysis that many of the same elements which participants identified they needed support with were the same as the negative impacts they had reported, for example coming to terms with one's sexual identity. The two main concepts identified in the data were enrichment and stigma and the following discussion about these concepts reveal how they not only describe experience, but also provide a framework for understanding support. The analysis offers an original contribution which addresses how young non-heterosexuals in Ireland view their sexual identity, mental health and support needs, while considering debates around minority stress and narratives of victimisation. The chapter will conclude by evaluating how the findings directly contribute towards the analysis of internet usage as presented in chapter 7. Understanding these experiences allows for an analysis of internet use which prioritises what the research participants value as supportive. For example, addressing

how the internet may help in the process of concepts developed within this chapter, such as personal enrichment or what helped in dealing with externalised stigma.

Irish based LGBT research has incorporated Meyer's (1995) concept of minority stress as a key factor in explaining mental health issues among the LGBT population in Ireland (Higgins et al., 2011; Kelleher, 2009; Mannix-McNamara et al., 2013; Mayock et al., 2009). While the concept of minority stress mirrors other concepts which seek to explain the difficulties of being a sexual minority such as microgressions (Nadal et al., 2011; Sue, 2010) or stigma (Grossman, 1997; Herek, 2007), the characterisation of LGBT youth specifically as being at risk or prone to mental health issues has been criticised by some for promoting an expectation or narrative of difficulty (Cohler and Hammack, 2007; Savin-Williams and Ream, 2003; Talburt, 2004). Some of the authors of the LGBT Lives report criticised the way their research has been mischaracterised to give an overly negative impression of sexual minority youth in Ireland (Bryan and Mayock, 2016, 2012), which further reinforces the need to explore difficulties or issues faced without making an assumption that difficulties or issues are automatically present. Bryan and Mayock also criticised the way in which both researchers and organisations have created an image "of an isolated, victimised, and largely powerless young person who is 'at risk' of self-harm and suicide" (2012, p. 12). For this reason, it was important to assess how the participants in this study would position themselves within narratives of positivity or negativity.

Previous Irish studies have followed an international lead in taking a psychology based approach, for example measuring suicide risk or mental wellbeing and providing a statistical and largely quantitative overview of LGBT populations in Ireland (Higgins et al., 2016a; Mayock et al., 2009). Irish studies which have focused on mental health or minority stress have been situated with nursing, health or psychology (Cannon et al., 2013; Kelleher, 2009; Mannix-McNamara et al., 2013; McCann and Sharek, 2014; Sarma and Psychol, 2007). As this study derives from a communications / media studies framework, it does not seek to determine the causes behind depression or suicidal ideation. Instead participants were asked if they felt their sexual orientation has had a positive impact on their life as well as if their sexual orientation has had a negative impact, along with the opportunity to explain their answers. This allowed participants to give their own perspective on and perception of how their sexual orientation has impacted their life, offering the ability to highlight both positive and negative narrative features, similar to that which Meyer (2011) did when asking his participants how their lives would be different without homophobia, racism and sexism. The answers given in

by participants in this study and the consequent themes identified are not based on a comprehensive analysis of factors which impact on non-heterosexual youth. Instead, they are based on what the youth themselves prioritise as being important from their perspective. This also offers the opportunity to analyse how the participants chose to describe themselves and their experiences.

Questions around mental health and minority stress can and have been framed in terms overarching narratives and the impact they have on young people (Bryan and Mayock, 2012; Cohler and Hammack, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2001). Narrative scripts often feature in self-reflection about minority sexual identity, typically consisting of either an emancipation narrative or a struggle and success narrative (Cohler and Hammack, 2007). As Cohler and Hammack argue, the reality is that these narratives are not exclusive options but rather can coexist in influencing young people with the major factors determining their influence being cohort and geography, essentially time and place. Arguments around minority stress centre on the experiences of youth, essentially whether they reflect an emancipation or a struggle and success narrative (Meyer, 2010; Savin-Williams and Ream, 2003). While the participants themselves are likely not aware of these competing narratives, they have been identified and noted throughout the analysis. Including a focus on these narratives within this research is a unique feature which adds to the current knowledge of non-heterosexual youth experience within Ireland and provides an overview of minority stress and identity narratives within the context of the time and place specific to Ireland. Additionally, experiences considered to be supportive or conducive of support could also be those which encourage positive mental wellbeing.

6.2 The Complexity of Experience: Not a positive/negative dichotomy

As indicated in Figure 7, When asked “Do you believe your sexual orientation has had a positive impact on your life?”, 79.4% of participants said yes while 20.6% said no. In comparison, when asked, “Do you believe your sexual orientation has had a negative impact on your life?”, 48.4% of participants said yes compared to 51.6% who said no. It is clear from these numbers alone that, for many, the relationship between positive and negative with regards to their sexual orientation is not clear cut and the perception of both positive and negative aspects can coexist.

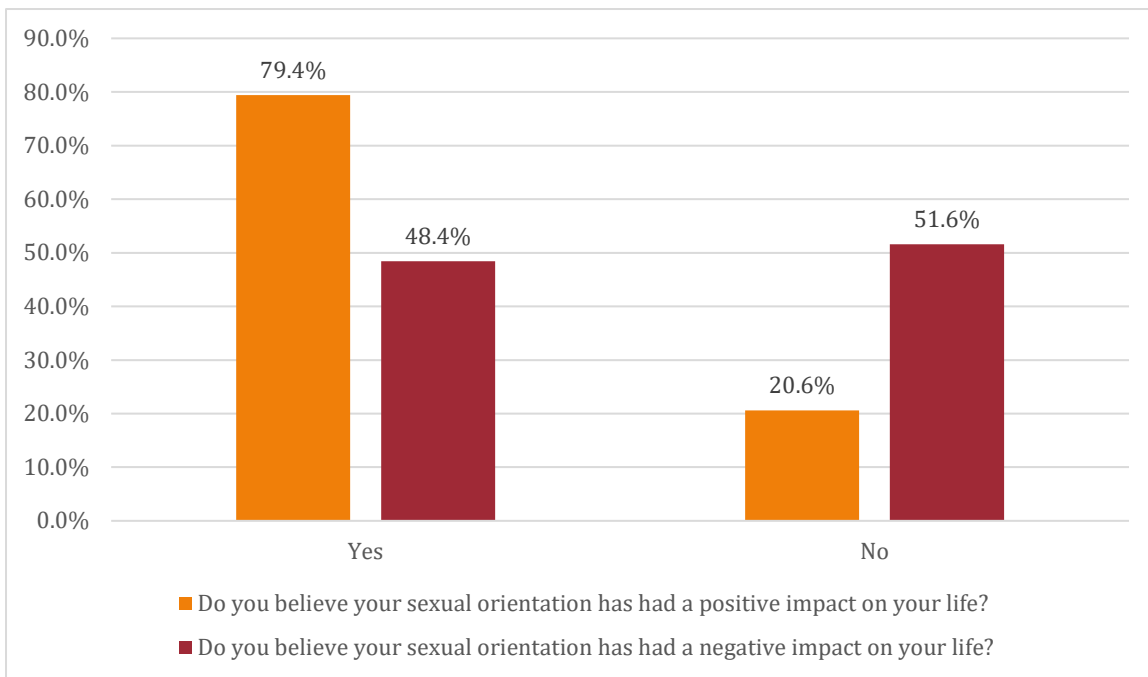


Figure 7: Overview of yes and no answers to questions on positive and negative impacts.

Additionally, as seen in Figure 8, participants were asked, “Are you comfortable with your sexual orientation?” to which 77.8% said yes, 21.4% said sometimes and 1% (essentially one participant) said no.

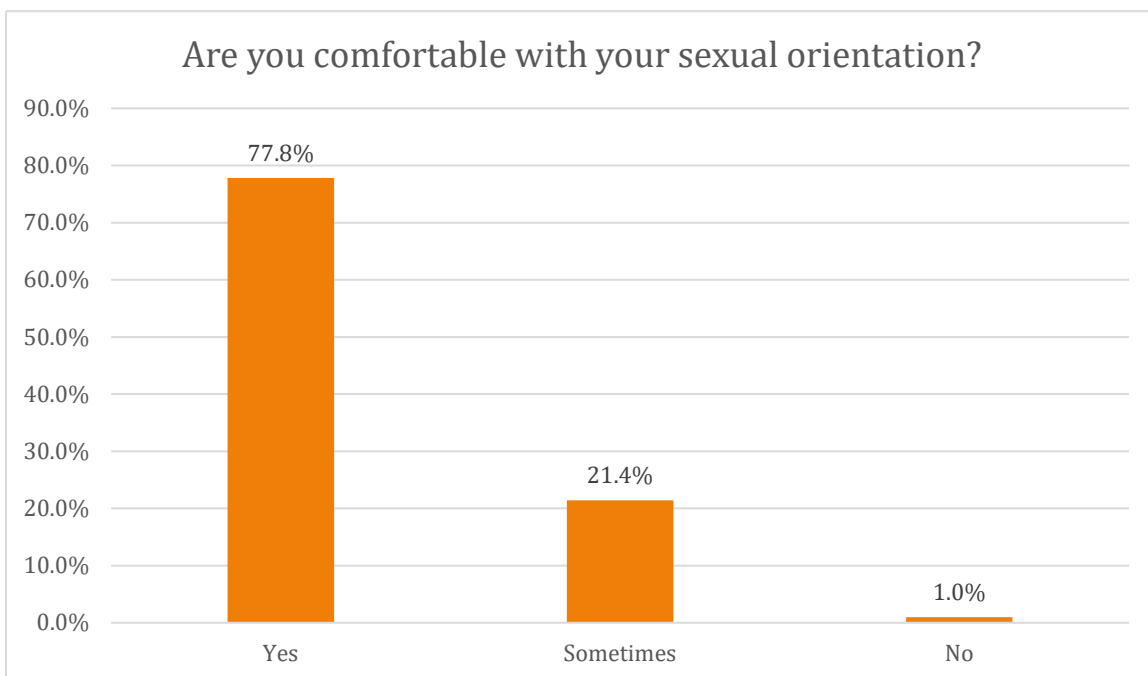


Figure 8: Breakdown of comfort with sexual orientation

While the experience of the one participant who said they are not at all comfortable with their sexual orientation should not be discounted, as their experience is obviously

very real, it is an outlier within this study. The majority of the sample display at least some level of self acceptance as they indicate that they are either fully or sometimes comfortable with their sexual orientation. These three questions about positive impact, negative impact and comfort with sexual orientation all indicate complexity as there is no clear pattern which emerges from the answers given. Creating a dichotomy between concepts such as vulnerability or being at-risk with others such as emancipated or post-gay does not offer room to understand the complexity of experience. As Cover (2013) points out, it is entirely possible for a queer young person to be both vulnerable and resilient at the same time. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to exploring this complex tension between the positive and negative experiences of being non-heterosexual as it has been described by participants. From the data analysis two main themes emerged, namely enrichment and stigma. Each of these themes is explored in the following analysis, followed by a discussion of the support needs which have been identified.

6.3 Enrichment

In the analysis of written comments 67% (n=85) of participants described ways in which their sexual identity has had a positive impact on their lives. While positive aspects of being non-heterosexual have been explored in the Irish literature (Higgins et al., 2016a; Mayock et al., 2009), these experiences have been largely minimised in public representations of this research, in favour of highlighting the risk and negativity that can form part of the non-heterosexual experience (Bryan and Mayock, 2012). Additionally, in light of critiques levelled against narratives of suffering or vulnerability which are sometimes used to characterise non-heterosexual youth (Bryan and Mayock, 2012; Cohler and Hammack, 2007; Plummer, 1995; Savin-Williams, 2001) it is arguably just as important to explore how young people give their own voice towards narratives that emphasise resilience and positive experience as it is to explore risk and difficulty.

During analysis, it became clear that positive impacts described by participants did not simply represent positivity or good things happening, but rather reflected ways in which they considered their sexual identity to have improved their lives, a concept I am describing as enrichment. The theme of enrichment is significant because it describes what participants themselves recognise and appreciate about their sexuality, providing a sense of balance when later discussing negative impacts and support needs. Enrichment was described by participants as occurring in two conceptual forms which I have classified as “personal enrichment” and “life enrichment”. Personal enrichment

involves personal growth experienced through the acceptance of sexual identity and the process of identity development while life enrichment describes how the cultural identity associated with a sexual identity extends the opportunity for enriching life experiences.

6.3.1 Personal Enrichment: “Once I accepted it everything was fine”

6.3.1.1 Authenticity and Acceptance

37% (n=46) of participants provided answers which described concepts of personal enrichment. The concept of personal enrichment describes a process where accepting one’s sexual orientation leads to deep personal growth and satisfaction. Some participants identified self-acceptance as being a vehicle for experiences of happiness and comfort which they attribute to their sexual orientation. The following participant draws a direct link between acceptance of their sexuality and experiences of comfort and positivity within themselves.

Becoming aware of my sexuality has had a very positive impact on my life,
I now feel completely comfortable with who I am and at ease with myself.

25, Female, Not Sure ⁴

Her words imply that the process of self-acceptance, through “becoming aware” has been a key part of finding comfort in her identity beyond sexuality. This idea of enrichment through acceptance echoes an essentialist belief about sexuality, particularly the idea that if you did not choose your sexual orientation then it must be a fundamental part of the self (Brookey, 2002) or representing a deep truth about the self (Foucault, 1978). The next participant also draws from essentialism as she describes how accepting her sexuality has been necessary in accepting herself overall, again describing a dual process of sexual identity acceptance existing with a wider sense of self-acceptance.

It is a natural part of who I am and accepting part of myself for me helped
me accept every part of me, even the bits I don't necessarily like all the time

⁴ Each quote is listed with the participants age, chosen gender identity and chosen sexual identity label. All quotes are provided verbatim with spelling or grammar mistakes left intact unless it impedes meaning.

19, Female, Bisexual

The participant here is not simply describing self-acceptance of a sexual category, but of a wider human identity with which she associated her sexual identity (D'Emilio, 1998). Eliason and Schope (2007) identified authenticity as being a common theme among various stage based identity models. They define this as a process of identity formation which involves, “moving from a position of hiding, secrecy, and denying to being able to fully accept and express oneself” (ibid, 2007, p. 22). The repeated use of words like acceptance and comfort found from those who expressed personal enrichment indicates that they are drawing from similar narrative of authenticity to describe their understanding of the positive impacts their sexual orientation has had on their life, such as when the following participant described becoming comfortable with his “entire self”.

It has helped me become a lot more comfortable with my entire self and has helped me in coming to love myself more.

20, Male, Gay

It could be argued that authenticity is what enables personal enrichment to occur. Authenticity is not just a personal act, but it involves feeling able to be authentic with others. In early sexual identity models the process of developing identity involves defining and accepting identity, but also finding support from others (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989). For some, the acceptance of others played an important role in the process of personal enrichment.

Having it known and accepted by friends and family makes me feel more comfortable

19, Male, Gay

It is worth noting that wellbeing and outcomes for coming out are largely dependent upon social context. Those with supportive coming out environments report increased wellbeing after coming out, while those in less supportive and more controlling environments can experience a decrease in wellbeing (Legate et al., 2012). This means that while the participants in this section are describing positive experiences of self-acceptance, the wider acceptance of friends and family could have been an important part of that process, even if not mentioned as such. The participant below articulates how the dual process of self-acceptance and acceptance from others becomes personally enriching through the freedom it creates, ultimately leading to a richer sense of self as well as enriched relationships with others.

Accepting myself for who I am and having others accept me for who I am in the process of coming out has made me feel more supported and less like I am living a lie. Accepting myself and my sexuality has helped me open up to friends and have more meaningful relationships with my siblings, parents, etc.

21, Female, Lesbian

Critically, the participant above indicates that acceptance itself is what led to her feeling supported, implying that the support that she was looking for from others essentially involved authenticity, or being seen and accepted instead of “living a lie”.

6.3.1.2 Confidence and Struggle

Authenticity leads to comfort with oneself and this can be used to empower personal growth in other areas, particularly confidence. This was evident in statements like “I feel like I'm complete in myself, more confident in who I am” or “It made me more confident and open to a lot more things”. This confidence is rooted in self-acceptance and it indicates again that integrating sexual identity into one's sense of self has an effect beyond just the scope of sexuality, as the participants are describing these positive attributes as occurring because of their sexuality. This extension of confidence was described by others who made the link between confidence in their sexuality and confidence that has extended throughout their lives, again referencing the concept of sexuality being a fundamental part of the self.

The journey I took to become more confident about my sexuality has helped my confidence in other aspects of my life

19, Female, Bisexual

The participants above attribute their increased confidence to the process of sexual identity development. This also links with the coming out story which offers the metamorphosis from struggle to a new and improved self (Plummer, 1995). Savin-Williams (2006) has suggested that if young people have healthy self-esteem then they are likely to feel good about their sexual identity. He uses this to question whether it is even healthy for an adolescent to find identity within their sexuality. However, the participant statements above would suggest that it may be possible that the process of sexual identity development itself can lead to increased well-being or self-esteem, or at least that is the perception of some participants. While the above participants did not directly describe their journey or experience as being difficult, others expressly used a

struggle to success narrative as they described an initial struggle with acceptance which preceded positivity.

Growing up I struggled to accept my sexuality, but once I accepted it everything was fine. I would not change my sexuality now even if it was possible.

23, Male, Gay

As well as using a very essentialist framing, the participant above describes a period of struggle which was overcome through acceptance. However, others utilise a much stronger focus on struggle as they describe the process of overcoming struggle itself as being the catalyst for increased confidence. The following participant describes growing a thick skin, which presumes a need to have increased strength and resiliency as a response to struggle.

In the long term, being gay has helped me grow a thick skin, which in turn has increased my confidence. This has aided me both in my personal and professional life.

23, Male, Gay

Those utilising a struggle and success narrative can essentially reframe their negative experiences as something which ultimately led to success in the form of personal enrichment. As well as confidence, the idea of strength was alluded to as being a consequence of dealing with struggle.

The most substantial is that I've encountered significant obstacles and challenges as a result of my sexual orientation (homosexual) and that, by conquering/facing these I feel I have grown substantially as an individual.

19, Male, Gay

I found accepting myself and my sexuality difficult for a long time, but from that struggle I feel like I have become a much stronger and confident person.

21, Female, Lesbian

It is obvious that the participants above consider their sense of self and the enrichment they experience now as something which emerged from the struggle they previously experienced. Interestingly, it is the presence of struggle which leads to the framing of non-heterosexual youth in Ireland as being at-risk or vulnerable (Bryan and Mayock, 2016), yet the participants here have been able to reframe that struggle as something enriching and positive. Of course, the difference between living through and

recollections is relevant here, as the participants above appear to be describing former struggle which no longer applies (Pullen, 2014b; Savin-Williams, 2006), however, it is still significant that the participants view the outcome of that struggle as having a positive impact on their lives. The participant below gets specific in naming his struggle as being characteristic of what is experienced by being gay in Ireland.

The difficulties with being gay in Ireland has made me a stronger person and I'm proud to be a part of the community.

22, Male, Gay

This growth is clearly connected to a struggle which he associates with a wider sense of place. This raises the question of, is developing strength a necessary attribute for those who do perceive their sexual identity as attracting difficulty where they live? Throughout the theme of personal enrichment there is a transformative element present as participants engaged in narrative reframing. Adopting Luthar et al's definition of resiliency as a "process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity." (2000, p. 453), it could be argued that this narrative reframing is a process of developing resiliency which occurs when a young person takes negative experiences and reframes them as defining moments of personal enrichment. The participant below acknowledges his past as a 'gay kid' being characterised by negativity and struggle, a stage of life which he has left behind but also grown from as an adult.

Overall, the major negative aspects of being gay in my life are well over. Being a gay kid was much more confusing and put a lot of stress on me. Now that I've overcome that, I've come out of it stronger.

20, Male, Gay

Again, responses like these allude to resiliency as participants describe the process of overcoming negative experiences and feelings as being a tool which has promoted personal growth, particularly strength and confidence. Considering that identity and culture are co-constituted (Hammack and Cohler, 2009b), the existence of a struggle and success narrative within sexual minority culture offers a precedent and a language for reframing negative experiences during identity development, something which offers personal enrichment. This is evident for the next participant as the act of coming out is one in which initial feelings of fear and pressure to please others has been reframed so that the vulnerability of coming out is seen as an act of strength.

The act of coming out pushed me to put myself first and do what was right for me even though it was scary. I didn't want the people I love to be angry / hurt / not want me. Previously I would do what I felt my parents wanted of me. Being true to myself was hard for them at the start but ultimately allowed my family and I to be even closer. There is a strength in allowing yourself to be vulnerable.

25, Female, Lesbian

In some ways the reframing of negative experiences as being positive coincides with traditional stage based models of identity (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Eliason and Schope, 2007; Troiden, 1988). Traditional stage based models suggest a linear path which starts with struggle and moves through stages of identity integration and eventual acceptance. This is particularly evident for participants who explicitly described a past of struggle which no longer applies to their lives. However, not all people move through identity development in a stage-based linear path (Eliason and Schope, 2007; Horowitz and Newcomb, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2006), such as the following participant.

My parents suspect that I am homosexual, and almost disowned me because of it, yet this experience ultimately led to me gaining a new perspective on who I am, made me proud to be the person that I am, and has shaped me into an individual with a better perspective on life than I feel I would have had were I to be heterosexual.

19, Male, Gay

In this answer and in his other questionnaire responses, the participant describes a situation in which he has not come out to his parents and in which he sees them as hostile to his identity, yet he describes a high level of self-acceptance and pride despite remaining closeted to his family. This challenges the idea that the concept of authenticity or even identity development necessarily requires coming out, even though it may typically include coming out for a lot of people.

The idea that life enrichment is a distinct feature of minority sexual identity development is present within some of the answers. In the following quote, the participant describes a self-reflexive process in which the process of dealing with her sexuality led to a greater ability to analyse and understand the self.

I've learned to handle intense emotions without causing too much drama, I've learned to stand up for my own sense of self, and I've been forced to

examine my life closely. In doing so, I think I know my own wants and needs much more intimately than most people.

19, Female, Prefers not to label it

Significantly, the participant here describes how these aspects of personal enrichment are not a universal experience as she describes knowing her “own wants and needs much more intimately than most people”, suggesting that perhaps she sees her sexual identity as offering a path to personal enrichment that is not present in the same way for those who are heterosexual. This relates back to narrative of positive marginality which allows LGB young people to “create the self they cherish” through the process of overcoming homophobia (Meyer et al., 2011, p. 210). Three of the participants specifically mentioned that self-awareness around their sexual orientation had a positive impact as it enabled them to take a more diverse approach to gender and typical gender roles.

As a cisgendered Male, you become aware that if I was born a heterosexual; and this also applies, but to a lesser extent Homosexual males, there is an obsession with masculinity, one that as a non-straight male, I had the privilege to not let that impulse control me.

24, Male, Prefers not to label it

The participant here attributes a form of personal enrichment to a specifically non-heterosexual experience. The three participants who made these links between gender roles and society suggest that their non-heterosexual identities form a challenge towards traditional gender norms, with the implication that heterosexuality does not provide the same level of challenge. Giddens (1992b, p. 15) describes sexuality as, “a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms”, and it makes sense that the process of sexual identity development has implications for personal growth and for how young people see themselves in relation to others.

6.3.2 Life Enrichment: Diverse Friendship and Community

While personal enrichment focused on personal growth and development, the other concept of enrichment identified within the data was life enrichment with 39% (n=49) of participants mentioning elements identified within this concept. Rather than focusing on the personal, life enrichment reflects respondents’ views about how their life experiences have been positively impacted by their sexual orientation. By far, the concept identified the most within life enrichment is that of friends and community,

with 21% (n=29) of participants expressing thankfulness for the community they found and the friends they had made because of their sexual orientation. These are often recognised as distinct sets of friends and communities which are found through shared difference. For instance, the next participant identifies an LGBT society as the source for these new friendships.

If I was not queer I probably would not have joined the LGBT society at my university, where I made amazing friends and have had many happy experiences and memories made.

20, Female, Bisexual

The diversity within the LGBTQ+ community is something participants identified as being unique. For example, the following participant appreciates the fact that he likely would have friends even if he was straight, but he also recognises that being gay has exposed him to more diverse friends, something which he perceives as adding value and richness to his life.

While I probably would have made other friends, the close connections that I have met with many in the LGBTQ+ community is something that I would not want to do without. We are all bonded by a significant detail (our sexual orientation), and we may have faced many of the same challenges, yet it is not the only thing that defines us, and as such, my body of friends is now much more diverse than it would have been had I been heterosexual and simply pursued friendship with individuals with extremely similar tastes in hobbies, political views, etc.

19, Male, Gay

This answer implies that he does not think that being heterosexual provides the same opportunities for forming diverse friendships compared to what he has found through his sexual identity. This is significant as it indicates that the diversity he values he also sees as being a distinct characteristic of the LGBTQ+ community, assumedly as a contrast to a more mainstream, heterosexual community. This characterisation of community is also evident from the quotes below.

I've found a lot of friends and solidarity within the lgbt community and I wouldn't be straight for the world.

22, Female, Bisexual and Gray Asexual

I am part of a community that is very vibrant and welcoming of difference and individuality.

25, Female, Not Sure

Again, the implication within these answers is that there is something about being non-heterosexual and being part of a sexual identity based community, which offers a valuing of diversity that participants appear to see as distinct from heterosexual identity and community. This may also tie in with the idea of an imagined gay community (Pullen, 2007) as while some participants are clearly referencing physical friends and communities, there is also an appeal to a wider shared sense of non-heterosexual diversity and values which does not necessarily seem tied to place. Opportunities for friendship, community and new experiences all offer an aspect of enrichment to those who are non-heterosexual, but this can also be related back to personal growth by becoming aware of others who are different. Several participants described this as making them more open minded and understanding towards others, such as highlighted in the quote below.

Being a queer person opened me up to a community of people that I may have not been introduced to if I were straight, it also made me more compassionate, I believe, for people outside the norm.

19, Female, Queer

Becoming more open-minded or aware of others and their issues is a process which involves the type of self-reflexivity highlighted in the personal enrichment section, but that process is only engaged in because of identification and participation with a sexual identity and community. This is particularly highlighted in the response below in which the participant draws an implicit contrast between opposing values of open-mindedness vs. closed-mindedness, and as a result, heterosexual vs. non-heterosexual.

It has given me access to a subculture and an education in open-mindedness which I likely would have missed out on otherwise.

25, Male, Gay

Other positive, life enriching impacts which were mentioned by a smaller number of participants include romantic partners who would not be in their lives were their orientation different, being unique, new experiences and improved relationships with others.

6.3.3 Emancipation and False Dichotomies

There was limited evidence of an emancipation narrative which takes a post-identity view of sexual orientation (Cohler and Hammack, 2007). Some participants showed elements of an emancipation narrative. For instance, the participant in the following quote draws upon an essentialist perspective on sexual identity in questioning why positivity would be a question rather than a given. While the presence of sexual fluidity is not evident within her essentialist perspective, she does reflect an emancipation narrative through an assumption of normality that does not see any need for analysing the impact of her sexual orientation or linking it to a wider identity process which many of the other participants did.

I don't see why it wouldn't have a positive impact. It's not a choice to be gay just like it is not a choice to be straight. I was born gay and I'm happy exactly how I am

21, Female, Lesbian

A small number of participants echoed this sentiment by describing their sexuality as something which they view neutrally, rather than something which forms an essential and defining part of their identity. This is also evident in the following quote which constructs sexuality as inconsequential.

I believe that it has had no impact on my life, as I choose not to let it. I feel sexuality is an issue which should not impact your life as it is as relevant as your hair colour, eye colour, skin colour or height.

19, Male, Gay

The LGBTIreland report (Higgins et al., 2016a) did not classify narratives according to struggle and success or emancipation, however, the responses there did appear to show a similar breakdown as the responses here, with most participants echoing a struggle to success narrative and a smaller number representing elements of an emancipation narrative. The ability to access emancipation narratives and see them as possibilities is defined by cultural and social context (Cohler and Hammack, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2006). The comment below indicates that the participant's ability to take a neutral stance on sexuality is something which occurred in the absence of negativity, negating the need to construct a success in opposition to a struggle (Cohler and Hammack, 2007).

While it has not been positive it has not been negative either. I have never struggled with my sexuality and am very open about it.

21, Male, Gay

There was also an indication that for some, there was positive despite what they still experience as negative.

Sometimes it has had a negative impact but I feel mostly positive now as I am comfortable identifying as lesbian to most people.

24, Female, Lesbian

In the quote above, the participant indicates that her experience is 'mostly positive' and mentions comfort around 'most people' which indicates that she does still experience some level of negativity which has an impact on her outlook. Additionally, not all who declared a positive impact did so without hesitation.

Hmm, I'm answering yes here but I'm really undecided. My sexual orientation is a part of me, and as I grow older I'm gradually becoming more accepting of it, but I believe that it has made me a stronger person. It has forced me to carve my own space and identity in a heteronormative society and find a place to be me which I would argue has had a positive impact on my personality.

22, Male, Gay

In the above quote, the respondent clearly does believe his sexual orientation has had a positive impact in some ways, yet he is undecided on classifying it as such. He describes personal enrichment in becoming a stronger person yet says he is "becoming more accepting" which indicates this is an ongoing process for him. The previous two quotes are a reminder that the dichotomy of positive versus negative or even of past struggle versus present success are not representative of those who find themselves in between. It is also a reminder that identity development is a constantly developing reflexive process rather than a onetime linear act (Eliason and Schope, 2007), and that process may be easier in some places and around some people than it is in others.

Additionally, while positive aspects are present this does not negate negative experiences. The participant below uses a struggle to success narrative to highlight the personal enrichment he found from his experience, yet in an ideal world he should not have had those experiences.

I have faced a substantial amount of homophobia from family members suggesting that I would be disowned while they suspected me of being gay, to peers in secondary school making homophobic comments (e.g. "faggot",

"queer", "puff", saying "gay" as an adjective with negative connotations 'that's so gay' etc) and gestures, at times it made me lose self-esteem and made me unable to accept who I was. While these challenges have helped build me as a character, they were not particularly nice experiences in and of themselves.

19, Male, Gay

Ultimately, the positive aspects identified by participants highlight the potential for young people to not just survive through struggle, but to thrive in either the presence or absence of struggle. Many participants in this study perceive that their sexual orientation and sexual identity is an enriching, positive, and welcome aspect of their self. While this certainly does not take away from the negative experiences that can often characterise the lives of non-heterosexual youth, it does indicate that to characterise non-heterosexual youth as suffering is to overlook the many ways in which they also thrive. Some of the authors of the LGBT Lives report have already critiqued how their work was used to highlight negativity while positive aspects were largely overlooked (Bryan and Mayock, 2012). The follow up to LGBT Lives, the LGBTIreland report (Higgins et al., 2016a), did address positive reflections from their respondents by asking, "What about being LGBTI makes you happy or proud?". However, these responses were not present in the report's key findings publication (Higgins et al., 2016b), and there was no attempt to incorporate critiques of a suffering or victimised narrative into the dissemination of their findings, despite scholarship within Ireland addressing this issue (Bryan and Mayock, 2016). The analysis presented here would suggest that enrichment is a common narrative feature among non-heterosexual youth in Ireland as the concept represents the way that many have incorporated positive reframing and an embracing of the success in a struggle to success narrative into their own sense of identity. Additionally, the analysis of the internet presented in the next chapter will consider the ways in which the internet can facilitate or aid in experiencing personal enrichment or life enrichment.

6.4 Stigma

60% (n=76) of participants described negative impacts which their sexual identity had on their lives. There were many types of impact mentioned, but when analysing the data, it became clear throughout the coding process that negative impacts came from two sources, the self or others. Those caused by the self, concern the formation and acceptance of self-identity, while those caused by others concern negative impacts

which participants directly attributed to others or to a culture of heterosexism, such as rejection, harassment or perceived judgement from others. Herek (2007, pp. 906–907) identifies sexual stigma as, "The negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to any nonheterosexual behaviour, identity, relationship, or community". Goffman's (1986) concept of a spoiled identity has also been used to describe how stigma can cause identity struggles for sexual minorities (Grossman, 1997). When assessing negative impacts the concept of stigma is useful because it reflects a conscious decision to acknowledge that the root cause of all difficulties experienced by non-heterosexuals are essentially caused by others, as the stigma experienced is societal and cultural in nature (Herek, 2004). This distinction ensures that discussions around the cause of negativity in the lives of non-heterosexuals does not pathologise non-heterosexual orientations or identities themselves. The effects of stigma can manifest in negative impacts such self-esteem issues (Grossman and Kerner, 1998), familial rejection (Ryan et al., 2009a), school victimisation (Bontempo and D'Augelli, 2002) and the absence of supportive social environments (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). Additionally, Kelleher's (2009) study of LGBTQ youth in Ireland found that sexual identity distress, stigma consciousness, and heterosexist experiences all act as minority stressors which increase risks of psychological distress. Elements of these stressors are evident within the findings and the oppressive social environments she describes are what I would characterise as operating under stigma.

Herek (2007) identifies 3 forms of stigma. Enacted stigma refers to the actions of others, felt stigma describes the ways in which a person may struggle because they expect discrimination or perceive that others may have difficulty with them, and internalised stigma describes personal difficulties individuals have with accepting their own identity. Based on this, and the two sources of difficulties identified during data analysis, the two concepts of negative impacts identified and used within this study are internalised stigma, which deals with personal acceptance difficulties, and externalised stigma. I have created the term externalised stigma to describe experiences of felt or enacted stigma as both are concepts which involve issues with external factors rather than with the self. 23% (n=29) of all participants described concepts of internalised stigma and 45% (n=57) of all participants described concepts of externalised stigma.

6.4.1 Internalised Stigma

Internalised stigma involves concepts of self-acceptance or mental health which 23% (n=29) of participants mentioned. The idea that there can be difficulties in accepting a non-heterosexual identity is a common feature in sexual identity models (Cass, 1979; Eliason and Schope, 2007; Troiden, 1989). In their analysis of 18 stage based identity models Eliason and Schope (2007) found that a common feature among models is that they represent a journey from feelings of difference to identity synthesis where there is no conflict between sexual/gender identity and one's wider sense of self. While externalised stigma and minority stress addresses the wider sociocultural stigma that influences wellbeing, this theme addresses the personal journey required to feel comfortable and content with one's own identity. As this theme indicates, for some, the difficulties found in the process of self-acceptance is perceived as having a negative impact on their lives. Just as self-acceptance played an important part in personal enrichment, a lack of self-acceptance was a key concept within this theme. For some, they simply have not yet come to a place of acceptance in which their sexuality is perceived as positive. For example, the following was given as an explanation for why the participant felt their sexual orientation has had a negative impact on their life.

coming to terms with it and overcoming negative social norms has been difficult and continues to be difficult. I am not fully comfortable with my sexuality as of yet.

21, Female, Gay

Some participants described mental health issues which they directly linked with struggles of acceptance and the need to understand one's own sexuality. The participant below identifies depression as being linked to her perception of her difference as equalling something negative or bad.

It was very difficult growing up as I always felt there was something wrong with me and suffered with depression as a result.

21, Female, Lesbian

This automatic perception of non-heterosexuality as being abnormal or wrong is exactly the type of sexual stigma which Herek (2004) highlights as being an issue. While having a negative perception of your sexual orientation makes self-acceptance difficult, an issue that some participants emphasised is that a lack of acceptance involved confusion as they did not feel they had adequately determined their own sexual identity.

When I was younger, I struggled with my sexuality as I felt like I was lying to everyone around me. My girlfriend did not wish to come out, and would not let me come out, which made me feel worse. I also struggled to figure out my sexual identity for many years. I couldn't tell if I was a lesbian or bisexual and it drove me nuts.

20, Female, Bisexual

The participant above describes that part of her struggle involved understanding the specifics of her identity. This is not presented as a choice that she had to choose between, but rather a need to figure out what she was i.e. how her sexual orientation matched the sexual identity narratives which were available to her. Identity comparison has been identified as feature of sexual identity development models as an individual may look to others to find which labels, stories and people they can see themselves in (Cass, 1979; Eliason and Schope, 2007). Additionally, the participant above indicates how this comparison was rooted in a need to define the self against a cultural sexual minority label (Savin-Williams, 2001) while simultaneously matching that definition with the truth of who she really is (Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 2009), a goal which Hammack et al (2009) describe as identity configuration. While the need to categorize and label sexuality in this way can be subject to criticism, Weeks (2009) has also pointed out that identity work that culminates in a firm identity can lead to a sense of security and belonging. Similarly, the participant below indicates that self-acceptance for her is sometimes limited by her own sense of needing to “work out who I am”, while she simultaneously expresses the desire not to be limited or defined by sexual identity.

As it is something I do not fully understand about myself, I am constantly questioning and second guessing myself. Sometimes I feel 100% ok with who I am but it is very easy to become preoccupied with trying to work out who I am, who I am attracted to, if I am attracted to anyone at all. I don't want a label or an orientation to be my defining feature or for it to overshadow or invalidate other aspects of my personality.

20, Female, Prefers not to label it

A study of LGB youth in the mid-west of Ireland identified those who are not sure what their sexual identity is as one of the most vulnerable to negative health issues (Mannix-McNamara et al., 2013). This may be linked with the role that social identity plays in supporting self-esteem and personal identity (Deaux, 1993; Tajfel, 1978). Difficulties

with the initial understanding and acceptance of sexual orientation and identity is particularly highlighted among those whose sexual orientation does not easily fit into the categories of gay and lesbian. In the example below the participant, who identifies as a pansexual female, draws a parallel with being both straight and gay, as both represent sexual orientations which she believes would have been easier to deal with, compared to the struggle she had with both understanding and accepting her sexuality.

Although I wouldn't be the person I am today without my sexuality, I think life would have been easier had I been straight. My life would probably have been easier if I'd been gay though too. My problem was growing up I thought you could only be straight or gay, that everyone was born one or the other. I had no idea that you could fall anywhere along the spectrum of sexuality. I spent most of puberty confused. I felt, and still feel on occasion, that I am weird or wrong for not being straight or gay. I struggled with identity for years. I had mental health problems and did go through a period of time where I contemplated suicide. Time and time again the source of my problems was my attitude towards sexuality, and what I thought was a defect in my personality.

18, Female, Pansexual

This response highlights that rather than seeing the world as heterosexual and non-heterosexual, the participant here saw what I am calling valid identities, which are known and understood sexual identities and non-valid identities, which typically lie outside a homosexual/heterosexual binary. With the participant above, her struggle was based in the need to achieve identity configuration (Hammack et al., 2009) while having no valid identities with which to achieve the stage of identity comparison (Eliason and Schope, 2007). She describes being confused and seeing her own sense of identity as weird, wrong and a defect in personality and she directly attributes her mental health issues to her own attitude towards sexuality, one which saw limited potential for valid identities that aligned with her own sense of her sexuality, essentially a struggle to match a personal identity with a cultural identity. Sexual stigma can arguably vary depending upon the perception of valid or non-valid identities. So for example, Cover (2016) has argued that gay representation has not been an issue since the 90's, however, the participant above saw her non-normative identity as being stigmatised due to the lack of understanding and recognition she saw it having in society, which to use Cover's own term, gave her the perception that she had an unliveable life. Even if there is an awareness about what other sexual identities

are valid identities, there can be a struggle when a person feels that they do not really match with any of those identities.

As I have said, no one ever helped me figure out what it meant to be bisexual. So even though I knew I was not heterosexual it caused me a lot of anxiety because I didn't think I could be a "real" bisexual, because I ended up in more relationships with the opposite sex than I did with the same sex, when really this was a matter of coincidence than anything else.

20, Female, Bisexual

This essentially involves narratives of identity and the need to find a sexual identity that fits one's sense of self through a process of narrative engagement (Hammack and Cohler, 2009a). Her experiences of being in relationships with men threatened her sense of what a bisexual identity is until she felt able to explain how it could co-exist with her identity as bisexual, something that presumably came from learning more about what bisexuality can look like. Similarly, the participant below recognised that they were different and that they were not straight but they struggled as they had no clear label and explanation for what their orientation is. They also mention an initial belief that they were a 'broken bisexual person', showing that they had attempted to draw on known identity labels, yet knew the narrative of bisexuality did not really fit.

Being asexual has been difficult, especially because I did not have a name for it for many years, even though I was fairly sure I was not straight. I struggled a lot with feelings of inadequacy because I could tell there was some sort of disconnect between my attractions and the way most people behaved. My feelings have been much more positive since I discovered asexuality, and that I was not just a "broken" bisexual person.

24, Non-binary, Biromantic Asexual

The turning point above is the point when they "discovered asexuality", which led to more positive feelings, essentially narrative engagement which allowed them to integrate their sense of self with a valid identity. This is an example of how important narrative can be in terms of sexual identity. Realistically, the participant above had a lived experience of what we commonly call asexuality, but they needed to discover a narrative of asexuality that provided an understanding of where they fit in a wider cultural context and how their asexuality was experienced by others like them to achieve identity configuration (Hammack et al., 2009). Before discovering this narrative, they struggled with accepting the self and their sexuality. The link between

self-acceptance and the need for a clear self-identity is one which other participants directly linked to their own mental health issues.

For the most part, it has been positive. The most negative thing about it has been the inner conflict that came when attempting to put a label on my sexuality- nothing seemed to fit quite right with me as I didnt realise until very recently that sexuality isn't something completely clear cut. I wasnt comfortable in my sexuality until I realised that it was okay to identify as bisexual even if you didnt have a completely equal attraction to both genders, which had been something that caused me much inner conflict.

20, Female, Bisexual

In the example above, feeling unsure or not understanding how to identify your own sexuality is something perceived as a deep internal struggle which can have very negative effects. The importance of narrative is key here as it links back to the idea of a inter-reliant relationship between identity and culture (Cohler and Hammack, 2007) as well as the ways in which language and stories of sexuality offer a method of comparison to those who are exploring their own sexual identity (Gray, 2009a; Pullen, 2009; Weeks, 2009). While this will almost certainly not apply to everyone, it does indicate that for a significant number of people, the need to find a concept of identity which they can integrate into their personal narrative (Hammack et al., 2009) is a key part of self-acceptance and avoiding mental health struggles around identity. While the idea of needing such a label may be subject to critique, it does seem to be a necessity for some people. Additionally, seven participants specifically mentioned the impact of family issues and rejection and these were described as having an extreme negative impact on internalised stigma.

I wouldn't choose to be gay because in my experience it has caused a lot of problems for me, mainly family orientated. It resulted in me becoming depressed, and wishing I wasnt gay and ultimately giving up on life for some time

21, Female, Lesbian

Lack of family support has been identified as a risk factor for mental health issues among non-heterosexual youth (Ryan et al., 2009b, 2010) and the responses dealing with family rejection represent some of the harshest descriptions about internalised stigma. Lack of family support and acceptance can have a highly negative impact on self-acceptance and mental health as well as coming out outcomes (Legate et al., 2012).

This is not surprising considering that the perception of family and home is that they act as places of acceptance and belonging. Some also indicated that their sexual orientation had a negative impact on their personal and social development.

I think that my sexual orientation has also had a negative impact on my personality. As a whole, I have become quite shy, reserved and timid in most social circles as I continually hide my true personality or self in order to protect myself from hurt and ridicule for being than the heteronormative, societal "norm".

22, Male, Gay

Answers describing negative personal development are a sharp contrast to the personal enrichment reported earlier in this chapter. Just as authenticity was considered important to personal enrichment, here a lack of authenticity contributes to internalised stigma. Additionally, while some reported coming out had made them more confident, in this instance being closeted or feeling the need to fear or hide is associated with a negative impact on confidence and general social comfort. Similarly, some respondents indicated difficulties with being themselves around others.

Unable to be completely honest/out with my family

18, Female, Pansexual

I cannot be myself all the time. (ie) at home.

18, Male, Queer

These responses have a spatial aspect as the assumption is that certain spaces are hostile towards being non-heterosexual i.e. "with my family" or "at home", indicating a sense of existential outsidership when someone feels they do not belong in a place (Relph, 1976). The participant below specifically mentions the idea of space as he feels that unwelcoming spaces have led to a struggle to be himself.

It has left me wondering how to be myself, how to be me in a space that has taken so long to recognise us as equals.

21, Male, Queer

Again, this highlights the relationship between personal identity and society (Giddens, 2003) as well as stigma, as this participant is questioning where his personal sexual identity fits within a society that he does not perceive as accepting of him. Similarly, the participant below evokes a wider sense of existential outsidership when he describes Ireland as being hostile followed by the pronouncement that he feels unwelcome "here"

with “here” representing the social space generated by society itself. He makes a clear link between his own ability to act authentically and the feeling of not being welcome or not belonging that he senses within Ireland as a place.

Being gay is difficult in Ireland. I can be uncomfortable with certain types of people, and conscious of how I act and who I'm with in public. It is difficult to show affection to a partner in public. I believe society tells LGBT that they are less through its attitudes and laws. I feel unwelcome here.

22, Male, Gay

While geographical space was not necessarily referenced here, the idea of social space or safe space was evident as some participants mentioned feelings of isolation. Isolation itself has been identified as a feature of stigma among sexual minorities with isolation being either cognitive (lack of information), emotional (negative social environment) or social (fear of revealing sexuality) (Martin and Hetrick, 1988).

It had me in a very dark place for a good 10 years of my life, i was alone, weak, afraid and did i mention alone

23, GenderQueer, Androsexual

In this example, being alone is presumably not a reference to an absence of people, but rather describes not being around people who could or would understand, a function of both emotional and social isolation. The absence of perceived welcoming or non-heterosexual spaces is something observed from the following two participants. They also reinforce the idea that sexual identity is often understood and embraced in a social or cultural way, as the assumption is that isolation is caused by not having those positive relationships with others who share a similar experience of sexual identity.

as a teenager I often felt isolated because of my sexual orientation because i did not really know any LGBT people.

24, Female, Lesbian

It is hard to assume anyone is gay so it sometimes feels like its a very isolated thing

23, Female, Lesbian

The negative experiences listed here are a direct contrast to the positive experiences listed in the previous section with parallels such as confidence or lack of confidence, self-acceptance or lack of acceptance, being yourself or hiding. Bringing back the concept of authenticity, it appears that many of the negative personal difficulties

participants described here are directly linked with the ability to accept and be yourself. As authenticity was identified as a common theme in stage based models (Eliason and Schope, 2007), the implication here is that these difficulties do not represent the end stage, but rather that they can be worked through and that efforts should be made to support young people who are struggling with understanding and accepting themselves.

6.4.2 Externalised Stigma

While some participants described internal difficulties with self-acceptance and mental health struggles, there were also negative impacts mentioned which were directly associated with the actions and attitudes of others. Externalised Stigma involves difficulties associated with growing up and living in a heteronormative society, with homophobia/discrimination being an outcome of that. The theme of externalised stigma occurred over twice as frequently as internalised stigma, 50% (n=63) vs 25% (n=31). Many participants mentioned specific actions against them such as bullying or being left out.

I was susceptible when I was younger and desperately wanted to fit in. I was bullied because I was different and this led me into a very lonely and isolated mind space in the years I was in primary school.

23, Female, Gay

The instances of bullying mentioned here are related to mental health issues for the participant, but she specifically made the link between these actions which are caused by others and the consequent problems that these actions caused. Half of school goers in the LGBT Lives study stated that homophobic bullying existed in their school (Mayock et al., 2009) and school victimisation among LGB pupils has been linked to an increase in suicidality and health risk behaviours compared to heterosexuals who experience school victimisation (Bontempo and D'Augelli, 2002). Participants also described a link between being non-heterosexual and being judged negatively.

because of the society we live in, it is seen as sort of shameful and can lead to depression

18, Female, Lesbian

It has caused a lot of confusion and anxiety in my life. Fear of being judged and disowned.

19, Female, Lesbian

For these participants, this judgement did not need to be actualised but simply perceived, occurring as felt stigma. The following quote particularly highlights how sexual stigma impacts on the life of someone who is not heterosexual.

The overwhelming nature of a predominantly heterosexual society has had an impact on me particularly with regard to the separation felt. Mostly my expression of sexuality is seen as a statement or is viewed as though it should be behind closed doors. There is an underlying homophobia felt beyond the outright intensely visible type of homophobia we sometimes read about. It feels as though that is present everywhere. Even in myself.

23, Female, Lesbian

This participant's experience highlights how stigma functions as what she calls a "separation" between herself and others. This stigma does not just serve to affect her relationships with others and her sense of existential outsidership, but it also causes her to internalise this stigma within herself. Many of the responses regarding judgement and homophobia are rooted in this same element of a felt difference. While overt discrimination or prejudice was mentioned by a minority of respondents, the issue of a felt difference, or a felt separation as the respondent above described it, was evident throughout the theme of externalised stigma. One significant element of this separation is that many do recognise it as being a problem with others rather than with themselves as highlighted by the following two participants.

The only negative things about my sexual orientation come from others' inability to accept me for who I am.

21, Male, Bisexual

What had a negative impact was feeling like it was weird/wrong to be queer, especially going to an all girl, slightly homophobic school. My being gay wasn't the problem; people thinking being gay was wrong was the problem.

22, Female, Queer

To link back to strength and resilience, these responses above suggest that while felt stigma can have dramatic negative effects, there is a resiliency found in reframing this stigma as a problem with others rather than with the self. Significantly, some participants perceived judgement and difficulties from other non-heterosexual people.

I do have to deal with homophobia from both heterosexuals, and homosexual individuals.

24, Male, Prefer not to label it

There is a lot of biphobia, even within the gay community. Being told something you identify as and have struggled with isn't "real" or is just "attention seeking" is very damaging.

21, Female, Bisexual

While non-heterosexual has been useful as a general term for describing the participants in this study, the above quotes highlight the fact that there can still be issues around acceptance and understanding even among others who are non-heterosexual. It also indicates that the concept of valid identities introduced above, is one which does not involve a heterosexual vs. non-heterosexual divide, but rather it involves what all people see as potentially viable and valid identities.

6.5 Support Needs

In a closed ended question within the questionnaire, 42% (n=54) of participants indicated that they had accessed support services, such as the LGBT helpline, LGBT groups or counselling. Additionally, 30% (n=38) of participants stated that they did not feel like they needed support, while 70% (n=88) stated that they did. There was a large overlap between the reasons participant said they needed support and the concepts around stigma identified already. For example, not all participants expanded upon this question, but 62 of those who identified that they needed support expanded upon their answers. Within these answers the most common reason for needing support was during initial periods of realisation, which 30 participants mentioned. This involves the need to overcome internalised stigma and arrive at a stage of personal enrichment and was evident in statements such as, "I needed support when I was younger and first coming to terms with my sexuality" or "I found it difficult to accept who I was at first". Other main reasons for needing support were feelings of isolation, to talk to someone, for reassurance and to gain an understanding of one's own sexuality.

To offer some examples, the participant below describes struggling with her sense of place as she describes her negative perceptions about gay people followed by the idea that there were no non-heterosexual people to counter those perceptions in the place where she lived.

I felt like I was the only gay person and that there was nobody else like me. I had uneducated stereotypes in my head that encourage my denial of my sexual orientation. There were no LGBT role models that I could relate to where I lived.

23, Female, Gay

While others may not have made such a clear link between the process of acceptance and representation, they did indicate through similar answers that they needed support while countering their own negative feelings around their sexual identity. Just as identity does not form in isolation, those looking for support with negative feelings about themselves suggested that support in that context can come from others like them. The participant below found support in talking to someone with the same orientation, suggesting that she validated her sense of identity through identification with another.

It's very easy not to feel normal, given I belong to a minority. For me personally it helped greatly to talk to people of the same orientation just to figure out there wasn't something wrong with me.

19, Female, Lesbian

A key part of acknowledging and accepting sexual identity, for many, involves coming out and some participants described needing support in doing this, for example wishing for, "Advice on coming out and self-acceptance". The following participant describes how self-acceptance and coming out were intertwined for her, and she describes it as a time which she particularly wished for support.

There was a time when I was first coming to terms with my not being straight and starting to test the waters on coming out to people when I was outed to a bunch of people. This was one of the most terrifying times of my life and I believe that if I had support I would have dealt and reacted to this a bit better.

19, Female, Queer

In the LGBTIreland report, questions around support were framed exclusively in terms of coming out i.e. 'what helped you come out' (Higgins et al., 2016a). While there is a large focus on coming out in terms of providing services for young people, a lot of the ground work in terms of sexual identity occurs during the process of accepting the self and challenging stigma, although this may also occur during the coming out process. This would suggest that the work of supporting and building resiliency is one which

can and should occur during initial questioning stages of identity development and not just from the perspective of coming out. Isolation was also mentioned in response to questions about support.

Well when you feel alone and you think you are the only one going threw
(sic) something you feel like you need support

23, GenderQueer, Androsexual

Notably, this is not phrased in a way that indicates information is needed, but rather that access or relationships to people with similar experiences is needed. The participant below phrases this in relation to social support as she describes drawing on the support of others who had been in a similar situation to overcome the fear that social support from family and friends would be absent.

It's a very scary thing to be faced with, having to out yourself to family and friends without being assured of any sort of support. Without having spoken to people who felt as afraid as me once, and who could recall that fear, who survived coming out and managed their transition well, I don't think I'd ever have left my closet.

19, Female, Prefer not to label it

In this example, external support acts as a mediating factor which develops resiliency before coming out has occurred. Overall, the ideas of representation and relationship with others who share a similar experience form the basis of a lot of the support needs mentioned here. The participant below succinctly describes how this functions to offer a positive narrative about the possibilities an individual sees for themselves as he describes how seeing “people just like me” leads to affirmation.

Only insofar as I needed affirmation that there were other people just like me and that they were leading healthy and normal lives.

20, Male, Gay

Again, this points to the idea of liveable lives (Cover, 2016) and potential paths of normalcy which can offer young people the opportunity to relate and identify with others.

6.5.1 Reasons for Not Needing Support

Some participants expressed how their sexual identity had simply not been problematic or something which they needed support with, highlighted in statements like “It has

simply never been a problem” Or “I've always been very comfortable with it.” Others recognised that they did not need support because of the influence of family, friends or positive role models, which acts as a contrast or a buffer to the reasons for needing support. The following participant answered no to feeling like he ever needed support but qualifies his answer by explaining that he did have support available to him.

My family were very accepting and understanding. They found the Belongto group for me. Things went from there. I never had to ask for support. It was just there for me.

23, Male, Gay

Additionally, the following participant described how these positive early experiences serve to develop resiliency as he describes how positivity growing up gave him the ability to handle negativity directed at him because of his sexuality. Essentially, he credits his positive upbringing with giving him the understanding to recognise stigma as an issue with others.

There was never any issue growing up. I learned about what it meant to be attracted to the same sex at a very young age, and I had very positive influences regarding sexuality at a very young age, so when dealing with derogatory terms like 'gay' 'fag', when I was a teenager, I was already prepared how to understand what was meant.

24, Male, Prefer not to label it

Only a small number of participants mentioned barriers to support. As this discussion has already shown, for many there is a particularly strong need for support when first realising that one's sexuality is not heterosexual as well as in coming out. However, when accessing support specific to non-heterosexual people, there is a need to acknowledge one's sexual identity as well as the potential need to come out to the person offering support. The following respondent describes his perception of this for himself and others.

When your struggling to understand and accept your sexual orientation it can be a lonely, stressful, emotional and painful time and I would have loved to have had the courage to get help. The problem I think is that to seek out help is to acknowledge your "difference"/sexuality but for many people (myself included) they are too afraid, fearful and anxious to do this

22, Male, Gay

This participant has identified a dichotomy in that while findings others like you is an important form of support, it also requires an acceptance of being different and a willingness to acknowledge that to others, at a point where someone may be feeling unable to do so. Others also referenced feeling the desire for support but not being able to follow through on that due to personal fears or issues like a lack of courage or shyness. A second barrier which was mentioned was that of geographical barriers in terms of accessing offline support services.

I would have loved to go to a LGBT group but there was none in my area.

25, Female, Lesbian

Two participants specifically referenced a lack of services available outside of Dublin and in rural areas. They began their answers by naming the region they were from, “Coming from a small town in the Irish midlands” and “I grew up in the west of Ireland”, before mentioning how there were no offline services available. Again, this would suggest that they saw the places they were from as being characterised by a lack of representation and support.

6.5.2 Support Services

Participants were asked if there were any form of support which they wish had been available to them. The answers in this section varied greatly and included online counselling services, social groups, online information and improved access to support services. One notable inclusion was that of better support services in schools, which was the most mentioned answer, by 16 participants. Support in schools was seen as needed largely because of the role it could play in helping young people work through feelings of difference due to sexuality and offering them a reassurance that what they experience is normal.

I think there should be more support in schools, workshops run on gender and sexuality so kids know if they start to feel a little different its totally fine and so that they are educated about different types of identities and how people with these identities live the same lives as everyone else.

20, Female, Prefer not to label it

More visibility of services in school which would have perhaps made the idea of being LGBT ok and more accepted

22, Male, Gay

The above responses are only a small selection of those who expressed similar ideas about the role that schools can take in promoting positive representations of non-heterosexual identities and lives. Additionally, some participants, particularly those who identify outside LGB, saw the process of education around sexual identity as one which should occur beyond schools and into society at large.

I wish the general population were taught about sexual identity and how different people experience theirs at a young age, say approximately 10 years old, as this is the age at which people are often discovering their sexual identity and need the support of both their teachers/guardians and also their friends.

20, Female, Pansexual

While support could be characterised in many ways, the participants' responses indicated a strong resonance with narrative and representation being a significant form of support. While support services like LGBT youth groups were mentioned as being commonly accessed, much of the discussion around what support is and why it was needed centred on communicating with others who share a similar orientation and finding reassurance and commonality in the stories and experiences of others, something which arguably could be found online or offline.

6.6 Conclusion

The findings from this chapter provide a solid grounding for how support is defined and understood in this study and by participants. An understanding of what support means during identity development offers a foundation for understanding online perceptions of support. While the LGBTIreland (Higgins et al., 2016a) report found the internet was a source of support, it did phrase questions around support by asking about what helped with coming out, which as addressed previously, misses the strong need for support at earlier stages in the identity formation process. The importance of accessing narratives of identity and seeing positive representations came through strongly in this chapter. Additionally, the process of self-acceptance and the role others, particularly family and friends, play in facilitating self-acceptance was evident in these findings. Exploring the internet sections of the questionnaire as well as more detailed narrative accounts that factor in context will address how the internet is used for developing self-acceptance and whether the perceived absence of support alters the need for young people to use the internet this way. Knowing what leads to positive impacts for non-heterosexual youth, such as personal or life enrichment, or what leads to negative

impacts, such as stigma, offers guiding categories for evaluating how the internet supports non-heterosexuals in both enriching their lives and overcoming difficulties from stigma.

The potential for resiliency was also present within the discussions of enrichment and stigma. The themes identified with these topics shared a strong resemblance with the minority stress model as most of the negative effects were a result of the actions and attitudes of others combined to a lesser extent with a lack of self-acceptance. However, these negative impacts must be considered within the wider context of the positive impacts. This chapter provides evidence to support the idea that the experiences of non-heterosexual youth are varied and complex and should not be characterised to describe a sexual minority youth as an “isolated, victimised, and largely powerless young person” (Bryan and Mayock, 2012, p. 12) There is empowerment in the idea of enrichment and the types of support that facilitate enrichment are as essential as those which combat stigma. Rather than being classified as a vulnerable or struggling group, the sample within this study also showed a high level of resiliency. Additionally, while it would be easy to use terms like acceptance, this perhaps understates the extent to which young people experience enrichment in their personal and social lives because of their sexual identity. This has not been a key feature in the public discourse around non-heterosexuality in Ireland, despite the importance of positive messaging and narratives for those who are questioning what their sexual orientation might mean for their lives.

The term enrichment itself could also be problematic. Is it really enrichment to experience something which may be considered standard when it comes to heterosexuals and their sexuality e.g. self-acceptance or having friends who share your orientation and understand you? While the answer is likely no, there are some reasons why this could be classified as enrichment. Firstly, participants spoke of it as a positive impact, or something which had made their life better and so from that perspective alone it does represent something perceived as enrichment. Some participants also utilized a struggle to success narrative (Cohler and Hammack, 2007) which implied that their experiences occurred because there was a struggle and through that process they gained something valuable. The term enrichment also represents a wider countercultural value found in non-heterosexual communities as some participants specifically spoke of diversity in a way which implied that non-heterosexual communities are more compassionate and diverse than heterosexual communities. Meanwhile, from an emancipation perspective, enrichment is less relevant as the

question of sexual identity having an impact is one which would not make sense to ask (Cohler and Hammack, 2007). In this way enrichment is something which may have less relevance if young people are moving towards an emancipation viewpoint as Savin-Williams (2006) has argued. This changing role of enrichment would reflect Weeks' (2009) viewpoint that sexuality is a 'fictional unity' which may not have a role in the future.

The analysis presented within this chapter acts as a base upon which to interpret the later stages of the findings. However, it is worth acknowledging that these findings are from a small, non-representative and self-selecting sample and so further research would be required to determine if the results presented here can be extrapolated across a wider population. The structure of the questionnaire itself also favoured a particular type of response. For example, while the decision to make space for questions about positive impacts was specifically made to address the over focus on negativity and vulnerability, arguably this may also cause someone to be self-reflective about positives in a way which may not have been present otherwise.

7 AN ANALYSIS OF NON-HETEROSEXUAL INTERNET USAGE IN IRELAND

7.1 Introduction

The analysis in this chapter addresses the following research questions:

1. What value do non-heterosexual youth in Ireland place on their internet usage?
2. How do non-heterosexual youth use the internet for support in Ireland?

Gray (2009a, p. 127) describes how what she calls an “in situ” meaning “in place” approach situates media use within a “larger mosaic of collective identity work” which emphasises the context of this usage. The previous chapter provides a strong basis for understanding this collective identity work as it applies in Ireland and this chapter will address some of the specific ways and instances which questionnaire and interview participants use the internet and the reasons behind that usage. The chapter is structured according to the uses of internet which were prioritised as being most valued within the questionnaire data. Interview participants were asked about each of the categories which they rated as being important and in some cases they described types of usage in the other portions of their interviews. While all questionnaire participants rated their internet usage types, there were no open-ended questions which specifically asked about sexual orientation related internet usage, as the focus was on perceptions of identity and support. However, some did choose to mention the internet within their answers and some of those answers are combined with the interview data within this chapter. As stated in the methodology, this chapter is intended to offer a categorical sense of which forms of usage were prioritised as being important and how these usage types are used for support.

The quantitative section from the questionnaire revealed that the types of usage considered most important by participants involved accessing representations of identity, while finding support services or finding others for a purpose like dating or sex were largely seen as less important. As chapter 5 highlighted, accessing narratives

of identity and representation acts as a large form of support for non-heterosexual youth who are still in the early stages of identity formation as it allows them to engage in identity comparison (Eliason and Schope, 2007). Previous research has addressed the role that the internet plays in providing access to narratives of identity (Cohler and Hammack, 2007; Gray, 2009a), which broaden the master narratives that young people can access as they engage in a process of identity configuration through narrative engagement (Hammack et al., 2009). Additionally, Fox and Ralston (2016) have described how social media serves as a form of informal learning for LGBTQ people in the early stages of identity development as they seek out information to aid them. Two forms of informal learning they identified which were particularly salient in the findings of this chapter are social learning, which involves looking at the behaviours and experiences of others, and traditional learning, which involves information seeking about issues relating to sexual identity. The central argument within this chapter is that through the process of narrative engagement and informal learning, the internet offers non-heterosexual youth the opportunity to challenge and redefine the limitations experienced in offline spaces. This argument extends the ideas about online and offline interaction discussed in Chapter 4 and offers the first qualitative examination of non-heterosexual internet usage in Ireland.

7.2 Internet usage and trends

All participants within the survey used the internet at least once a day, with the clear majority 86.5% (n=109) reporting that they use it many times a day. Participants were asked, “What do you spend most time doing online?”. While some answered with one singular activity, many wrote multiple activities, such as in the answer below.

Social networking, listening to music and watching tv shows

The most frequently cited activity by far was social media and social networking (83.3%, n=105) with participants referencing specific platforms such as Facebook or Tumblr as well as through descriptions such as “checking social media” or “chatting to friends”. Online video was the next most mentioned category (34.9%, n=44) with platforms such as Netflix or YouTube referenced as well as through descriptions such as, “watching movies/TV shows online”. Other activities which were mentioned less frequently included news, hobbies, college work, games and shopping.

Participants were also asked about their favourite website or online space. The most commonly mentioned favourite website was Tumblr (30%, n=38), followed by Facebook (21.4%, n=27). Although research on the topic is scarce, the popularity of Tumblr in this

study does not appear to be typical of young people in Ireland and it would appear to indicate that the sample in this study are much more likely to use Tumblr than the general population. Tumblr was not included in the list of social media sites used by young people in Ireland in a report from a digital agency (Thinkhouse, 2015), although it is unclear whether it was not included by the researchers or not reported by participants. Additionally, surveys from Ipsos MRBI (2016, 2015) with adults aged 16 and over show that the percentage who reported to have Facebook accounts is between 59% - 63% while those reporting to have Tumblr accounts are between 2% - 4%. Considering that 12.6% of the Irish population are aged between 15 – 24 (Ireland and Central Statistics Office, 2012) and the Ipsos MRBI conducts representative surveys of 1,000 people, this would indicate a trend towards low Tumblr usage among Irish youth. Tumblr was mentioned in the LGBTIreland study as being a website which was described by numerous participants as a useful resource in terms of their sexuality (Higgins et al., 2016a). It appears reasonable to conclude that non-heterosexual youth in Ireland are more likely to use Tumblr, or at least find more importance in it, than their heterosexual peers.

Participants were asked, “How important or unimportant have the following internet activities been to you in relation to your sexual orientation?”. As discussed in the methodology, the purpose with this question and the scale used is to prioritise usage according to how widely it was valued. Figure 9 shows the percentage of respondents who indicated that each usage type was absolutely essential.

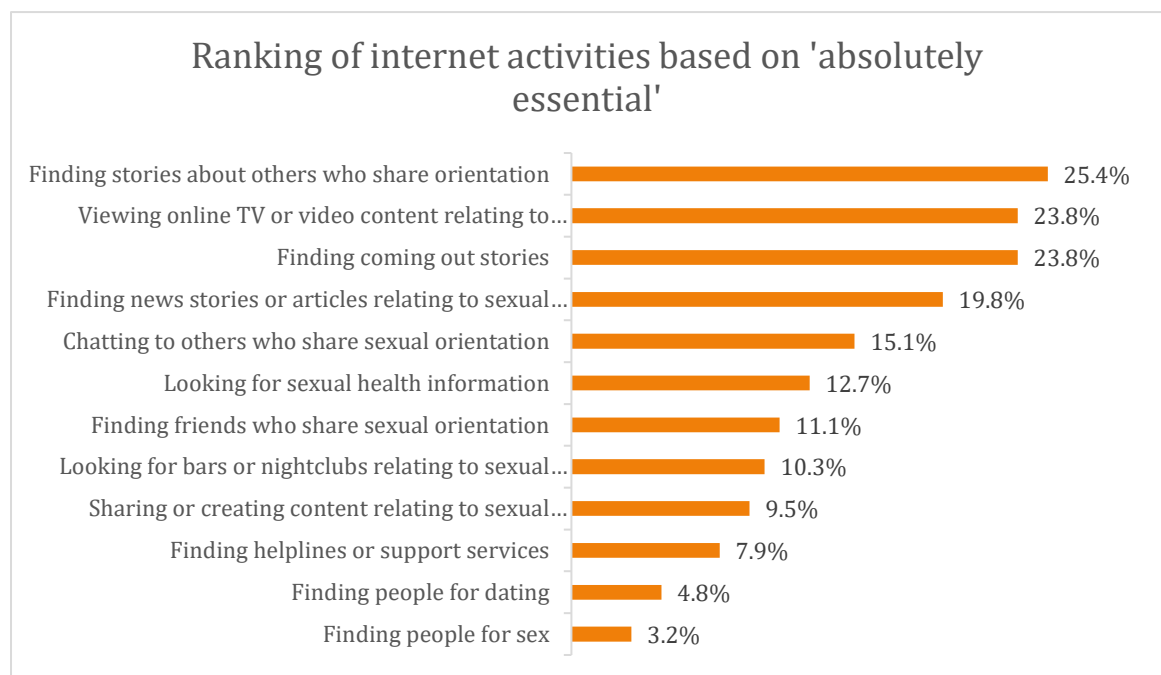


Figure 9: Ranking of Internet Activities Based on 'Absolutely Essential'

The top 4 usage types rated as absolutely essential are all based in accessing representations and narratives of identity. Finding stories about others who share one's orientation, watching TV and video content relating to sexual orientation, finding coming out stories and finding news stories or articles relating to sexual orientation are all different forms of what is essentially sexual storytelling (Plummer, 1995; Pullen, 2009). Other categories given are more firmly rooted in geographical need such as finding friends or dating and sex needs, which collectively ranked last. The importance of narrative is emphasised further in Figure 10 which shows combined internet activity rankings based on selection of absolutely essential or very important.

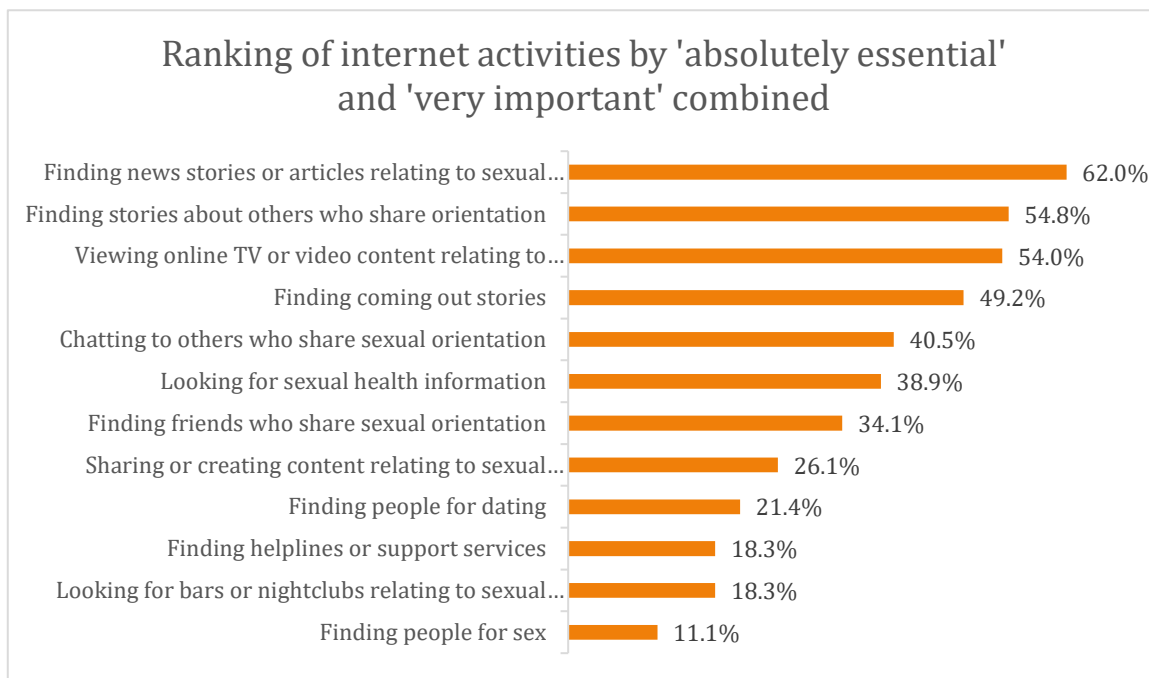


Figure 10: Ranking of Internet Activities by 'Absolutely Essential' and 'Very Important' Combined

While the positions changed slightly, the top four ranking categories are again all based in representation with over half of all participants ranking news, stories, TV or video content and coming out stories relating to their sexual orientation as being either very important or absolutely essential. Chatting to others who share the same sexual orientation (40.5%, n=51) and finding friends (34.1%, n=43) both indicate a desire to connect with others beyond just accessing their narratives and while it is not narrative or connection based, looking for sexual health information was also rated quite highly (38.9%, n=49).

Additionally, understanding what ranks as unimportant or of little importance also offers another perspective as shown in Figure 11.

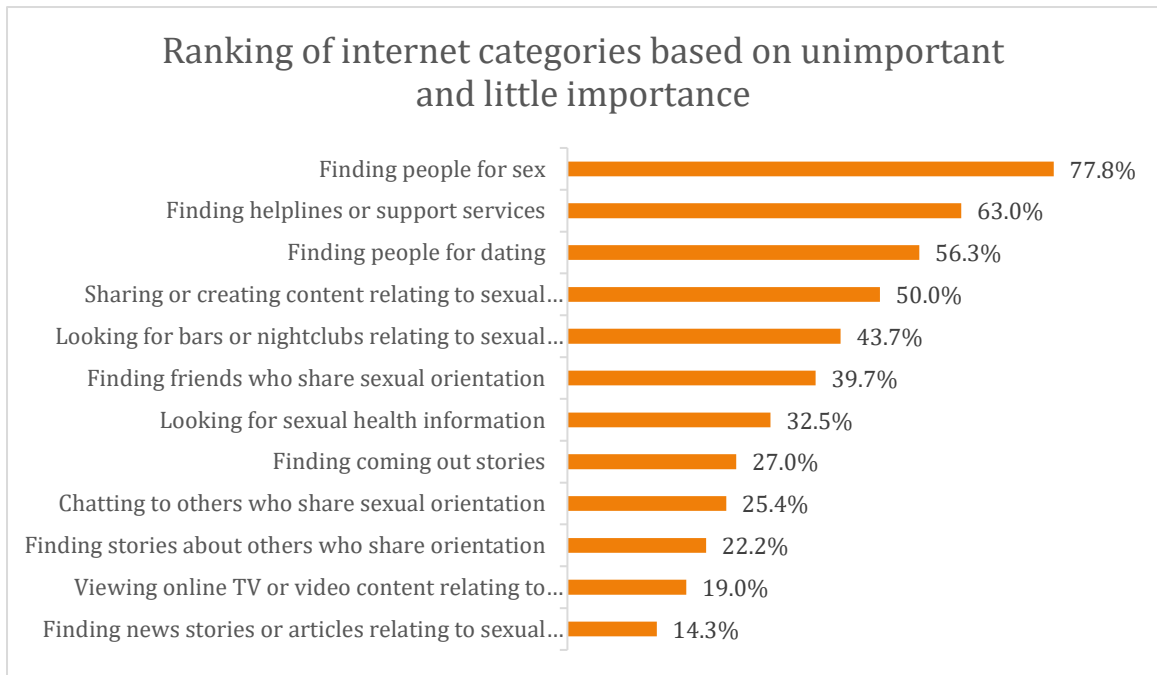


Figure 11: Ranking of internet activities based on unimportant and little importance

The majority of participants classified categories like finding people for sex, finding helplines or support services or finding people for dating as unimportant or of little importance, while others such as looking for bars or nightclubs or finding friends who share sexual orientation featured as lower priority. These categories all represent more traditional, geographical based categories, although finding friends could also occur online. For example, before the internet, if a young person in a heterosexual, non-welcoming community wanted to chat to others like them, share stories or engage with non-heterosexual related content they would need to first find those who share their sexual orientation. Instead of being geographically restricted, young people can use the internet to selectively access a sense of community online (Bond et al., 2009) which may indicate less of a need to use the internet for seeking out traditional markers of LGBT culture. The results from the questionnaire would suggest that while the internet may be used to find others, the primary importance placed on the internet for non-heterosexual youth is to access media representations and stories. The relatively low importance placed on the use of the internet for dating and sex needs may be surprising, but it corresponds with the findings from Paradis (2016) who highlighted that while young LGBTQ people meet partners online, they tend to place more emphasis on the value of socialising with those they meet online as opposed to simply valuing the internet as an important tool for dating or sex. The findings in this chapter support that idea, particularly the use of dating sites by two interview participants as described

later in this chapter. Participants were specifically asked about their perception of the level of support they received from the internet. To ensure a similar understanding of support was present the following statement was provided along with the question:

One definition of the word supportive is “providing encouragement or emotional help”. Based on this definition how supportive do you think the internet has been for you in relation to your sexual orientation?

As seen in Figure 12, 20.6% (n=26) of participants found the internet to be absolutely essential and the majority (52.4 n=66) found it very supportive. Two participants said that they did not find the internet supportive, with one of them stating they found the support they need from family, while nine others described it as a little supportive.

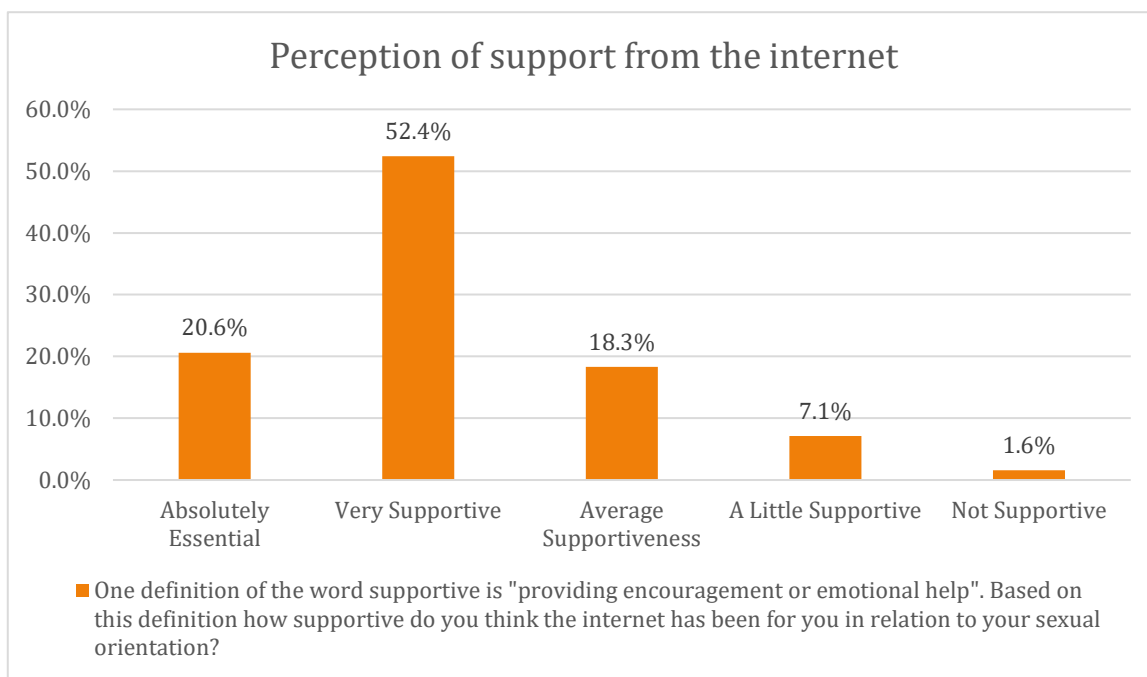


Figure 12: Perception of support from the internet

There was also some contradiction present on the questionnaire as some participants who said they did not feel like they needed support also rated the internet as being either absolutely essential or very supportive. One explanation for this is that while there was a definition of support given as part of the internet question, the question about whether participants felt like they had needed support did not have this definition. It is also possible that when asked directly about whether they needed support some participants based their idea of support on traditional support services or on concepts which do not match the definition given as part of the internet based question.

Overall, the closed questionnaire data indicated that a large proportion of the participants did find the internet supportive and accessing narratives and stories forms a major part of this support. Ensuring that a perception of online support was widespread is significant as this may have been a concern if the analysis was only based on qualitative data. The findings from this section led to an analysis which focuses heavily on the ways in which young people use the internet to access forms of representation, narrative and storytelling. It also considers the unique forms of informal learning which can be quite specific to non-heterosexual youth, found within categories such as sexual health information or finding news and articles. Additionally, a concept of characterising and redefining online spaces was present within the data, along with indications that the internet is limited in what it can offer. The remainder of the chapter will highlight these types of usage in more detail and provide examples of how they function in the lives of non-heterosexual youth in Ireland.

7.3 Narrative Engagement – The need to see “People like me”

The concept of identity configuration involves aligning a personal narrative with master narratives available from one’s surrounding culture through narrative engagement (Hammack et al., 2009; Hammack and Cohler, 2009a), essentially finding a reflection of the self in others. The internet has broadened access and conceptions of culture as young people have the opportunity to engage with narratives online which were not as readily accessible to previous generations (Cohler and Hammack, 2007). Fox and Ralston (2016) describe how LGBTQ people can use social media as a tool for social learning, allowing them to identify, connect with and ultimately learn from others who are like them as well as engaging in traditional learning by learning about the identities of others or terms such as pansexual. As sexual storytelling has become a commonplace occurrence (Plummer, 1995), the social learning that occurs through accessing the stories of others offers an opportunity to engage with narratives of identity and experience. A large part of the process of narrative engagement involves storytelling as participants engage in what Pullen describes as, “placing the self within the frame” (Pullen, 2009). As one questionnaire participant put it, “reading other peoples stories and experiences is relatable”, with the implication that this participant acts as an active audience who reads themselves into the stories which they access.

The internet was mentioned by some participants when discussing the initial stage of trying to understand what their sexual identity was and how it fit in with the experiences of others, a process of narrative engagement (Hammack and Cohler, 2009a). This is unsurprising considering that accepting and understanding the self was

both a self-enrichment need and a way to counter internalising stigma. The following participant credits the internet with teaching her about alternative sexualities.

I spent years thinking I was a horrible person for not just choosing one sexuality. Without the internet I wouldn't even know other sexualities existed, therefore I wouldn't have been able to see the full spectrum of sexuality. Without the internet's support, and the support of friends, I would still be beating myself up about my sexuality.

18, Female, Pansexual

Here she describes how her internalised stigma was challenged by opportunities to learn about the spectrum of sexuality online. While she states that she had the support of friends, clearly an important source of social support (Mustanski et al., 2011b), she also suggests that the internet offers her access to information which is not present within her social circle allowing her to bridge gaps in her knowledge by going online (DeHaan et al., 2013).

Just as the importance of visibility and representation was highlighted as being supportive during formative stages in Chapter Six, the internet can be a form of support by simply existing as a site for exploration. As well as learning about the existence of certain sexual identities, the internet offers the ability to see the experiences of others which gives the potential to draw from the narrative of others and incorporate that into the process of developing self-identity.

When I first became aware I was not heterosexual, seeing videos/blogs from lgbt people helped me to understand my sexual orientation

19, Female, Bisexual

Here the participant is engaging in a form of social learning in which viewing the stories of others (Fox and Ralston, 2016) gives her a method of identity comparison (Eliason and Schope, 2007). The diverse forms of media she can access online offer her role models and inspiration and this in turn offers her a language and culture of sexuality which she can learn from (Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011). Similarly, the participant below found that the internet offered her a 'people like me' opportunity to find those who also had a more fluid and non-labelled sense of their sexual identity due to what she characterises as a heterosexual social environment.

I feel my sexuality is middle of the spectrum but also very fluid, when first coming to terms with not being a straight person I wanted a label, a definitive spot to land on that Kinsey scale, to feel like I had a definitive

identity that was easily understood, but now I realise that's not who I am and it took awhile to come to terms with that there isn't any common label that fits right and that's okay. My friends and family are almost exclusively heterosexual with minimal interaction with anything lgbt before me, so no one could help me figure it out or understand it but online I saw lots of people feel this way and its totally fine, which absolutely helped me now be comfortable in myself.

20, Female, Prefers not to label it

As this participant highlights, the absence of “anything lgbt” within her social environment led to a situation where the tools to understand and validate her identity through comparison with others were only perceived as being available online. Hillier and Harrison (2007) have described how space deprived same sex attracted youth can go online and find safe space for practicing identity. Yet, for those who have a more fluid or less binary identity, it may be that the internet is not providing a safe space for practice as much as it is providing access to alternative cultures in which to discover valid identities and new possibilities (Cohler and Hammack, 2007). While this could easily be perceived as being simply about information, it also involves validation from peers, which makes sense given that a large way we learn and perceive our social and cultural identities is through relationships with others (Giddens, 2003, p. 200). For example, the participant below finds support online not simply in seeing her identity reflected in others, but through accessing a community of people who would validate her identity and help her deal with challenges to her sense of identity, something she perceives as forming support.

Being asexual, there tends to be a worry that you'll never have substantial relationships - you're too strange, you don't have enough to offer. Support and understanding from other asexuals is overwhelmingly important in dealing with this. Similarly, when I had my first crush on a girl, I was kind of scared, and having an online community of people who thought it was normal and fine helped me get through that initial panic. I don't need that support so much these days, but it's helped me in the past.

19, Female, asexual, panromantic

As in chapter 6, the need to access a sense of valid identity can be particularly pronounced for those who fall outside a heterosexual/homosexual binary, or those who may identify outside of the LGBT umbrella. The internet was seen as vitally important

by those who saw no reflection of themselves in their immediate social environment as it provided a space in which they can perform essential developmental tasks which are not available in their offline world (Craig and McInroy, 2014). Accessing alternative social spaces can also serve to lessen isolation.

Its scary at the start when you are young and feel like the only gay person in the world! :P To me it seemed like such a foreign concept so I needed to arm myself with information before really admitting it to myself. YouTube channels like the beaver bunch when I was a teenager really helped me to feel less alone and less scared. They also gave good level headed advice about coming out which is important.

25, Female, Lesbian

The participant here talks about a journey of self-acceptance and finding coming out advice in a way which suggests that the internet did act as a space to conduct formative identity work before coming out and introducing that identity to others offline (DeHaan et al., 2013). Her loneliness was not found in the absence of people around her but rather in the absence of people like her. What is critical to note about the information found in the non-heterosexual content accessed by many is that those who described finding it useful often did so in a way which suggests this information was not available to them offline. Particularly in the case of coming out stories which does not have a heterosexual equivalent, the internet becomes an essential method of accessing these resources in the absence of non-heterosexual support services or visibility. The following participant specifically describes going online to find the support she needed throughout the process of self-acceptance because she “didn’t know many LGBT people”, suggesting that the presence of LGBT people was something she needed in order to find acceptance.

Before I came out I didn't know many LGBT people and so I had no one to talk to about what I was feeling. I went online to find support and I know I would not have accepted myself like I did without that.

21, Female, Lesbian

Later in the questionnaire she describes the internet as “the only support I had access to”, highlighting forums, chatrooms and YouTube as online activities which she classified as supportive. By classifying online spaces as her only access to support, the implication is that she classified her offline spaces and thereby her offline social world as not being conducive to support. This is something which links into the idea of place

and a sense of existential insiderness or outsiderness that an individual may experience (Relph, 1976).

Because my family is very anti-homosexuality, I felt very much alone and unable to talk about my own sexuality for a long time. Reading about other people with similar experiences online helped me to cope and made me feel less alone.

19, Female, Bisexual

In the example above the participant makes a link between the negative attitudes of her family and her feelings of isolation. Presumably, this reflects the inability to be herself within her family because while family should evoke a sense of place which involves belonging and acceptance, their negativity prevented that. She then mentions people with similar experiences and how that helped her. Again, the argument I would make is that accessing a 'people like me' narrative is not just important for understanding similarities in sexual identity, but also similarities in life circumstances. So the participant in the above example found an increased ability to cope with her family's homophobic attitudes, or to deal with her offline sense of belonging, by connecting with those who had a similar experience and using that to lessen the negative sense of place which she felt among family. Bryan Wuest (2014) found a similar concept in the range of life circumstances represented in coming out videos on YouTube which consequently allows for very specific forms of representation and access to representation which may serve to lessen isolation. This process of active participation in accessing non-heterosexual storytelling is a major way in which people can find opportunities for narrative engagement, as the following participant highlights.

Learning other people's stories regarding their sexual orientation and coming out process has been very important support-wise for me to know there are others going through the same situations as myself.

20, Female, Lesbian

Similarly, Finn describes in more detail how narrative engagement (Hammack and Cohler, 2009a), for him, occurred through reading about how others like him felt and thought about their sexuality.

Finn: I was trying to figure my sexuality and myself out. Especially tumblr came into play with that a lot....there was the odd blog I would come across on my dash that someone else had blogged ...I'd go back and read their

personal kind of diary I guess you could say, because they were putting up diary entry kind of things. But it wasn't just their interests and their lives, they were expressing their feelings towards their sexuality and trying to figure out at the same time I was. And they were making more progress than I was so it was kind of like, I read what they did and said, and I agreed with it. So I kind of figured things out from that.

Within this answer Finn mentions how others, “were making more progress than I was”, indicating that he had a perception of how a narrative of sexual identity should progress and that he was engaging in identity comparison to situate himself within a wider sense of what it means to be gay (Eliason and Schope, 2007). The opportunity to view the journey of others helped him to figure out his own sense of identity, indicating that narrative engagement occurred through informal social learning (Fox and Ralston, 2016). It also suggests while stories can offer possibility, they may also constrain possibility if a person feels that they are supposed to follow a certain line of progress. The more dangerous or negative aspects of narrative constraining lead to the ideas of suicide or vulnerability being an inevitable or expected outcome as others have critiqued (Bryan and Mayock, 2016, 2012; Cover, 2016; Savin-Williams and Ream, 2003). Chloe similarly addresses ideas of progress when answering why she listed the internet as very supportive.

Chloe: The people I was looking up online were already out and were already living their lives ‘out’ and like it was no big deal. But they were talking, like they were saying like ‘I had to get to this point’ like ‘it was a bit iffy for a while’ you know, ‘like things were confusing but I’m here now and it’s grand’. So that was helpful to be like ‘it’s going to be grand like’. ‘This is only a big deal now but like, I’m going to figure it out like and it’s not going to be a big deal at all’.

By contextualising her experience with the stories of others who had been in the same situation as her, Chloe was able to gain perspective and have hope that in the future things would be easier, drawing upon a similar narrative to that presented by the It Gets Better campaign (Tropiano, 2014). The data from the questionnaire highlighted how ways of accessing narrative were prioritised as being particularly important to the participants. This section has described some of the ways in which non-heterosexuals can use the internet for narrative engagement to achieve identity configuration and comparing with others (Hammack et al., 2009; Hammack and Cohler, 2009a) in order to experience personal enrichment.

7.4 Unique forms of informal learning

7.4.1 Finding coming out stories

One area which came up repeatedly in the questionnaire is that of accessing coming out stories. While some of the other forms of internet usage categorised in the survey are essentially the same as heterosexual usage only with a focus on sexual orientation, such as reading news stories or finding friends with the same sexual orientation, the category of coming out stories is one for which there is not a heterosexual equivalent. As Plummer (1995) has written, the coming out story has become a narrative with its own distinct features that offer a template for sexual minorities to construct their personal identity narrative. The concept of coming out still forms a master narrative in society and it makes sense that those engaging in the process of narrative engagement would use the internet to access narratives of coming out (Cohler and Hammack, 2007). The development of a genre of coming out videos attests to the popularity of accessing coming out narratives online (Alexander and Losh, 2010). Additionally, The LGBTIreland report (Higgins et al., 2016a) identified the internet as being useful through responses given to a question about what helped their participants with coming out. The authors write that:

“The internet also provided people with advice about approaches to coming out which they could then utilise in their own lives. People were also able to access others’ experiences of identifying as LGBTI and coming out through YouTube videos and ‘It Gets Better’ project videos, and to draw hope, inspiration and advice from these shared experiences”. (Higgins et al., 2016a, p. 68)

23.8% of participants in this study described accessing coming out stories online as being absolutely essential for them, while 25.4% described it as being very important, collectively, almost half of all participants. Coming out stories served as a genre for informal learning as participants described gaining advice which they could incorporate into their own lives.

Even though I felt confused, from watching people's coming out stories, I knew it was alright for me to take my time and figure myself out. There's no clock ticking away, no rush to tell everyone who I am.

19, genderfluid, Lesbian

Wuest has argued that coming out videos serve as a form of acculturation as non-heterosexual youth, ”receive information about a shared culture” which aids them in in

a community aspect but also to "survive in mainstream culture" (Wuest, 2014, p. 21). Coming out stories served as a form of preparation for what coming out would entail, which highlights how non-heterosexual youth have to consider the implications and consequences of coming out and its potential to transform their sense of space.

Throughout my teens I knew I was gay but sort of denied it as well.

Watching coming out videos really prepared me for my own coming out.

23, Male, Gay

Three of the interview participants offer their insight into why coming out videos were useful for them. Firstly, Anthony describes a process of preparation where he learned about different coming out experiences from others and took lessons from them which he could apply to his own coming out.

Anthony: Yeah, I would've looked at a lot of them. Even just like, you see negative stuff. So it was kinda, this, it kinda scares you but then its, they're always like gives a silver lining at the end of it, so you're not going in expecting it to be all lollipops and rainbows. You have to, that's why, you have to go in a bit cautious. And I suppose it is educational, cause some people just go in and just blurt it out and expect the best when actually it's, no you should've approached it a little bit differently.

Interviewer: Okay, so do you think it almost prepared you a bit of 'what if' in different scenarios?

Anthony: Yeah exactly, cause I think some people go into it expecting, be like you've to accept it straight away. The stories are kinda like no they needed their time, and I have to respect that cause they have to respect that I'm gay and this is my life. I've to respect that it's new news to them and that it's going to take a while.

This contextualising process of examining positive and negative repercussions was also identified by Finn who engaged in an act of comparison by estimating where his own coming out might fit across the spectrum of the experiences of others, stating, "this is the worst it could be and this is the most fantastic it can be" so that he could gauge where his own coming out story might fit. Similar to Anthony above, Emma essentially learned what to expect from herself and others through accessing coming out stories. Just as Ken Plummer (1995) describes coming out as a sexual story with a specific template and cultural understanding, Emma describes how through coming out stories

online she learned, “what a coming out is”, even while she acknowledges that everyone’s story is different.

Emma: And I think reading those coming out stories just helped me realise that there is no one kind of coming out and there's no one kind of reaction and you can get anything and it's not about you it's about the people around you. So I think that they are very helpful and I think that if it comes back to wanting people like you, or knowing people like you. If you have to come out and you don't even know what a coming out is, it's very difficult. But if you can read those stories, it's a lot easier.

An analysis of coming out advice found online determined that coming out advice serves to normalise the act of coming out by presenting it as something which is both routine and rational (Chirrey, 2011). The findings presented here show that from the perspective of the young people accessing coming out stories, these stories act as educational tools which offer advice, but also the potential to prepare for and contextualise one’s own coming out.

7.4.2 Sexual Health and School as a Shrunken Space

One of the clearest examples of both traditional learning and online resources being used because of inadequate offline resources found within this study was in sexual health. This is not surprising as the internet has been found to be a useful source of sexual health information for non-heterosexuals (Magee et al., 2012; Mustanski et al., 2011a) particularly in the absence of resources available offline (DeHaan et al., 2013). This matches with the results found in this study as there was strong evidence that sexual health information online was useful, largely because of weaknesses in the sexual health information offered to non-heterosexual youth in school and other offline spaces. As well as the information offered in schools, there is also the question of whether school operates as a shrunken space (Paradis, 2016) for non-heterosexual youth in Ireland. Both of the large scale Irish studies indicated that non-heterosexual youth face high levels of bullying and high numbers feel themselves to be outsiders within their school environment (Higgins et al., 2016a; Mayoock et al., 2009). Thomas, who is still in school, describes why looking up sexual health information online was important for him.

Thomas: Like they did have sex Ed in school and stuff but it was aimed at straight people, like they didn’t explain anything like with sex with gay people or anything else. So I wanna know that I was safe there.

Not only did the sex education that Thomas received fail to provide him with relevant information about his sexual orientation, but it also provided incorrect information. He goes on to tell a story about how his school sex education addressed anal sex, but in the context of heterosexuality.

Thomas: But like they did talk, which I don't think they meant to, like they were talking about straight people, they were talking about anal sex and they were saying like that you'd eventually have to wear like a diaper and stuff.

Interviewer: Oh wow.

Thomas: Yeah and I was just like that's if you're straight and you don't know what you're doing. (laughs)

Interviewer: (laughs) Yeah, yeah.

Thomas: Like there's a thing called lube, taking it slow. (laughs)

While Thomas retold this story as a humorous incident it does indicate a serious problem with level and type of discourse provided to him about sex in school. He was able to counter this misinformation with other information that he had found online, but it is an issue that non-heterosexual young people need to find their own sexual health information instead of being able to rely on the information given in school, the same way that heterosexual students might. Thomas appears to recognise this when he describes his reaction to the above incident.

Interviewer: Yeah and did you know at the time when you heard that, that it was bad information?

Thomas: Yeah I, cause I like looked it up and then I knew and like they were saying it and I was just like, this is wrong. Cause like you are saying it like straight people having anal sex but like there's a gay person in the class, that's the only way they really can.

Thomas perceived this information as particularly bad because while it was just another option for sex in terms of heterosexuality, to him it represented the only way that gay men really can have sex. The incorrect information he heard in a sex education class effectively told him that he could not safely have sex, an incredibly dangerous misconception that he was only able to challenge through information he had found himself online. From the very beginning of telling this story he describes how this information was, "aimed at straight people" and so it ignored the fact that "there's a

gay person in the class”. Thomas retold this story in direct response to the question of why he rated looking up sexual health information as being important to him. His answer indicates that he saw school sex education as inadequate and not inclusive of his sexual orientation, leaving him with a need to find adequate sexual health information elsewhere. Similarly, when Mark was asked if there was anywhere else he could have found sexual health information he replied, “Well I suppose you could find out in your doctor’s surgery but anywhere I had to look up anything it was generally online”.

The ability to find information about sexual health online appears to be something which participants valued as it offered them the opportunity to make healthy decisions, however this even extends to more basic knowledge such as what non-heterosexual sex involves. In the following quote Anthony describes how searching online about what gay sex involved helped him to avoid making poor decisions out of ignorance as his offline life had not offered opportunities to gain this knowledge.

Anthony: Google like, even like sex stuff. Silly stuff like that where you’d be kinda like, cause I never watched porn or anything like that until the internet, so I wouldn’t have had a clue about like what actually happens. So like that was very good cause it was like you’re just going to get yourself into a situation where you could do something really stupid just from not knowing.

Despite having attended a very inclusive and LGBT friendly school, Finn described the internet as very important for finding sexual health information because of the limitations he still saw in the school’s sexual health information, stating that a support service was not allowed to come in and provide an LGBT sexual health class because people were under 18. While this section has described the positive opportunity that non-heterosexual youth access sexual health information online, it also highlights that the need to do so is driven by the absence of resources which should be offered to them in school. This serves as an example of an online resource functioning as a replacement for an offline absence. However, while it is good that non-heterosexual youth can find this information online, this brings up the question of why should they have to do so? The LGBT Lives report found that only 5% of their overall sample and 8% of students currently in school could remember LGBT content in their school curriculum (Mayock et al., 2009) Additionally, a US based study found that LGBTQ youth were much more likely to seek out sexual health information online than their heterosexual peers and they considered a lack of offline supports to be a major factor in

this difference. One of the conclusions they draw from this is that more should be done to ensure that students of all orientations receive relevant sexual health education in school. (Mitchell et al., 2014) While there is no corresponding data that allows for comparisons between heterosexual and non-heterosexual youth in Ireland, this section of the findings indicate that lack of offline supports, particularly inadequate sexual health information in schools, appears to be a major motivation for why non-heterosexual youth in Ireland use the internet to find sexual health information and for why they find that to be an important source of support. While there is provision of HSE funding for awareness campaigns and safe sex information directed at young people within the LGBT community, there is still a need to provide sexual health education to young people in schools which gives them formal learning opportunities needed for safe sexual practice irrespective of their sexual orientation. As one questionnaire participant stated, “Something as basic as having homosexuality explained in sex education would change lives”.

While this discussion has so far centred on sexual health education, a key part of sexual literacy also involves identity. In the excerpt below, Emma brings up sexual health education when answering a question about sexual identity in school.

Interviewer: And did you learn about sexual identity in school at all?

Emma: Nope. And I remember we did sex ed every single year in school up until 5th year so there was a lot of opportunities but we didn't. And I even had one teacher who was very, who was quite young and she was very, answered questions about everything and anything to the point where it was nearly inappropriate but it was very informative for teenagers who just want to know the answers but there was not a single thing said about same sex relationships or anything.

Emma's answer is a reminder that education around sexuality in schools is not just about sex, but it also serves to define norms and offer visibility of what life can look like. For example, showing the existence of a same-sex relationship. Later in the interview she comes back to this point.

Emma: In sex ed, discussing sexual orientation is [should be] a massive thing and I don't know why they don't do it, it doesn't make any sense. And I think teachers should be briefed on that, and should be trained.... Dialogue is all it really is, just making it something that you're able to talk about. Because when I was in school if you even said anything to do with being gay

you were labelled and you would probably be bullied and there was no coming back.

Emma associates the lack of dialogue on sexual orientation in school and in sex education classes with the distinction of school being a shrunken space (Paradis, 2016). Emma did turn to the internet when it came to sexual health information, something she listed as absolutely essential on the questionnaire.

When asked about support they wish had been available to them some participants mentioned how schools could do more to support non-heterosexual youth. In fact, increased school support was the most commonly mentioned answer to the questionnaire question of, "Is there anything (either online or offline) which you would like to be available or which you wish had been available to support you in relation to your sexual orientation?".

I wish there had been more support from my school. LGBT issues were never mentioned in my school due to its catholic ethos, but I feel like including us in talks of sexual health, or even casual mentions about historical/literary figures would have helped in normalising LGBT people.

20, Female, Bisexual

One participant offered a comprehensive answer of what this should look like and when it should begin.

I wish there had been far greater support in my secondary school for LGBTQ+ issues. I wish it had promoted LGBTQ+ social groups within the area (and perhaps established one in the school), provided far more information on coming out and homophobia, and 'humanised' LGBTQ+ individuals to the student body by getting LGBTQ+ speakers to comment on their own experiences and the difficulties they may/may not have faced. It is important that many of these begin from a young age (e.g. first year in secondary school) rather than solely targeting older individuals (Transition Year or later) as it is in those earlier years where people may need it most as they begin to learn who they are and need to be equipped with knowledge.

19, Male, Gay

The authors of LGBTireland have drawn attention to a number of initiatives that been launched to provide more inclusive school environments within the last few years such as anti-bullying procedures issued to schools from the Department of Education as well as the Department's co-operation with Belong To and their Stand Up awareness

campaign in schools (Higgins et al., 2016a). Their respondents offered suggestions about how to improve schools for LGBTI people with the authors identifying 3 major themes which are safe space, affirming LGBTI identity and formal education on LGBTI issues. The theme of formal education included suggestions to include all genders and sexual orientations as part of education of sexual health and identity and also for schools not to presume heterosexuality in the delivery of material. The findings in this section highlight that in the absence of formal education opportunities, non-heterosexual youth can and do turn to the internet to meet their information seeking needs. While it is good that they can meet those needs, I would argue that more also needs to be done to ensure that non-heterosexual young people are receiving relevant sexual health information in schools and that schools are creating healthy social environments which are inclusive of non-heterosexual students.

7.4.3 Connecting with community

The previous sections show how online content relating to non-heterosexuality can be used as part of the process of narrative engagement as users find connections between their own selves, their identity and the stories of others. However, beyond a personal sense of identity, there was an indication that internet usage was useful for helping some participants connect with a wider sense of community. This type of usage is less about connecting with other individuals and more about using knowledge to create a sense of imagined gay community which has implications for one's sense of collective identity as well as potentials for activism (Pullen, 2007). Thomas describes how "I mainly learned most about the LGBT community online". He also watches all of his TV content online and counts programmes such as Project Runway or Ru Paul's Drag Race as shows which he particularly enjoys for their connection with LGBT culture. This is not surprising considering that the internet offers much more diverse media when it comes to LGBT identities (Glaad, 2015; McInroy and Craig, 2017). Chloe described how her life has not changed outwardly much since she came out, but that her internet usage for LGBT related content has increased.

Chloe:...I'm more involved in like, read like things like LGBT articles, like follow LGBT pages and I'm more like, I follow all the LGBT community on Facebook and things... Cause all my friends are really straight like we won't all sit down like and go like 'what did you read on Afterellen this week?'

As described later in Chapter 8, Chloe has a great relationship with her friends and finds them very supportive, yet she describes a need to engage with shared experiences

that she does not find among her straight friends, or to connect with a wider sense of community, something she does not find opportunities for in her current social circle. She also saw a difference between the type of community reflected in the media and her own life.

Chloe: I watched the L word, all six seasons and I was like, 'where's my gang of lesbians', 'what's going on here, like where do you find them?'. Like just for that really, mix with other people.

As highlighted previously in this chapter, 62% of participants rated reading news stories or articles relating to their sexual orientation as either absolutely essential or very important and further exploration of this indicates that there is a connection between news stories and a sense of imagined gay community. Anthony described his purpose in reading news stories or articles online as, "just to educate yourself and to know... what community you're growing up in". Pullen has described how the imagined gay community functions as a philosophical community (2007), and here Anthony draws upon the concept in a way which links with the material reality of his life. As covered in Chapter 8, Anthony was aware of his identity for a long time before engaging with an LGBT community, something he desired to do but had no opportunity for. This indicates that he saw himself as part of a philosophical community before he had any kind of physical presence within that community. In describing why she finds news stories important Chloe makes a distinction between what she sees as the gay or LGBT world and the rest of the world.

Chloe: Sometimes it feels like the LGBT community in terms of the world is like separate,...you know, where you go to these places and you go to these websites, d'ya know. And like everybody there is into it but like the world never talks about it...Yeah so I'd go on to the websites and things and just read about things that are happening in the gay world.

It is clear that Chloe sees herself as being part of this gay world, yet she does not find opportunities to actively participate in the gay world common among her group of friends, making the internet the place she can both find and participate in a collective sense of community. Emma's excitement at seeing gay related stories in LGBT media also highlights how the construction of LGBT community online can also be seen as a reaction to the lack of representation and inclusion in mainstream society or 'the rest of the world' as Chloe put it.

Emma: I would get so excited whenever there would be a story coming up, something in mainstream media and it was about gay people, that wasn't kind of defamatory or whatever, like it wasn't negative.

Chloe found a similar excitement in mainstream news inclusion and described that it made her feel, "like the world is more on your level". Emma also draws upon the idea of the imagined gay community (Pullen, 2007) when she describes how the range of internet use types that she engages with helps her to situate her sense of identity, individually and collectively.

Emma: I think all of those different categories [of internet usage] are important to get a range of, kind of support, or just knowledge about what it's like to be gay in this world.

The potential does exist for civic activism to exist through non-heterosexual news and media in extending the imagined gay community to be a globalised and diverse community, not just one in which someone can self-identify culturally. In answering why he found news stories important, Finn brings the conversation to identity and LGBT rights and activism.

Finn: Like especially from like fifth year on, I became like a lot more involved in like LGBT rights and that kind of stuff. I got in all the [Local LGBT organisation] stuff and started doing stuff with them....And also a personal sense, like these are the rights I have, these are the rights I don't have. If I go to this country I can be jailed, I can be murdered, like it's such a personal thing. Because I always wanted to travel the world. And then also like believing that everyone should have the same rights. Like that kind of stuff.

Here Finn makes a connection between his personal identity and others who share that identity as he seeks out knowledge about the rights and experiences of people like him around the world, drawing to mind Giddens (2003) assertion that a transformation of place links self and identity in a global environment. Emma makes a similar connection between her own personal story and the wider sense of equality and community that she sees herself as belonging to because of her sexual identity.

Emma: I remember this picture went viral of Ugandan activists having their first pride parade where being gay is punishable by death in their country. That for me was a huge source of inspiration, while I'm sitting over coffee with one of my good friends being nervous about telling her I'm gay..... It

doesn't necessarily help you come to terms with how you feel because it can be hard for you to see those things...But it keeps me in touch with other parts of the world that if we didn't have the internet you would never hear about.

The type of engagement Emma describes here is not one which involves a personal sense of narrative engagement, such as seen in coming out stories. Instead, Emma links her personal story into the wider context of the community she sees herself as being part of. As she states, the primary purpose in this is not feeling better about herself, although she finds inspiration in it, but rather it offers her a sense of connection with a people like me narrative around the world, essentially creating the feeling that she is part of a global imagined gay community (Pullen, 2007), even with those who are not part of a westernised gay culture.

7.5 Reshaping and redefining spaces

Within the discussion of sexual health above, an image emerges of spaces which are characterised as heterosexual versus non-heterosexual. For example, when discussing his sex education classes in school, Thomas described how it was “aimed at straight people” and so it ignored the fact that “there’s a gay person in the class”. This use of language indicates a space perceived by Thomas as being largely heterosexual with information targeted for heterosexuals despite his presence there. Writing about both indirect and direct forms of regulation, such as homophobic jokes or assumptions about normative sexuality, Browne et al (2007) state the following:

These everyday contexts, discussions and practices not only create an ‘Other’ to heterosexuality, they also constitute spaces as heterosexual and, indeed, constitute heterosexuality itself (2007, p. 3).

To draw upon the idea of place, this brings up questions of belonging. If you are in a space perceived as heterosexual which utilises language and content which you perceive as ignoring you, what are the implications of this for how you see yourself belonging in that space? The following quote encapsulates this concept perfectly.

Communities are about being on the inside, which means they are also ultimately about being on the outside. They are about belonging, which means they are also ultimately about being excluded. (Johnston and Longhurst, 2009, p. 61)

It also raises questions about the possibility of finding belonging in spaces which are free from these types of regulation. A characterisation of spaces was evident in the way

some participants described online spaces such as Tumblr which were useful to them. Thomas speaks about Tumblr as being an educational and activist place.

Thomas: I just really like it cause like you can share funny stuff and everything, but then people talk about issues and stuff. Sometimes a bit too much and they don't really know what they're talking about, but they just go too heavy but em, yeah they do talk about issues and stuff and kind of include everyone.

In this excerpt Thomas describes a space which has a particular reputation in terms of activism and diversity. He describes how Tumblr helped him with, "learning what I am, what other people are and how to like, be respectful". After discussing how he does not use Facebook to share things, despite posting a lot on Tumblr, he later describes Facebook as being a site where he encounters ignorance and homophobia.

Interviewer: Do you ever kind of encounter homophobic content online?

Thomas: Yeah sometimes, but it's not like aimed like at me, but like its mainly Facebook. Facebook people are so ignorant.

Not only does he characterise the website as being a site for homophobia, but he describes 'Facebook people' as ignorant. Inherent within this wording is the idea that Thomas sees Facebook as being a place that represents a more traditional, heterosexist audience, whereas Tumblr is an LGBT friendly space which represents a more progressive view on sex and gender which more closely aligns with his own attitudes and beliefs.

Using Fraser's (1990) concept of counterpublics and Madianou and Miller's (2013) concept of polymedia, Renninger (2015) identifies a number of affordances which have made Tumblr a popular online space among the asexual community. Amongst these are the private follower system in use as opposed to a public friends list, the widespread use of likes and reblogs which links back to an original creator as opposed to a more open sharing and commenting system, and the use of hashtags. Perhaps the most significant, however, is the profile system which does not encourage a list of personal information such as name, age, location etc.. such as found on Facebook profiles, but instead encourages and allows users to construct their own forms of identity and even use pseudonyms or blog names as their username. Renninger argues that these affordances have allowed Tumblr to become a counterpublic space which "allows those that lie outside of sanctioned publics to map their own ideologies, thoughts, and subjectivities among people, mostly strangers, that share an awareness of similar

countercultural referents” (2015, p. 1526) and it would appear that Thomas has identified this difference in his own experience of using Tumblr and using Facebook. Finn describes a similar experience with Tumblr as he describes how the people on Tumblr are like him in terms of views and experiences, but also because he can shape the space itself.

Finn: Tumblr is just like I can select what comes up on my dash, kind of thing, so it's only like what I want to see and it's only like things I'm interested in and things that are topical towards what I'm interested in. It's kind of a safe place, because I can choose what I see and where I see it, kind of thing. If that makes sense? And the majority of people that would be on it that I would interact with would have the same views as me. Like I've talked to people and we've had similar experiences, and we support that way with each other.

Not only does it contain people with similar experiences to him, but Finn describes Tumblr as being a safe place because ‘I can choose what I see and where I see it’. This links back to Renninger’s (2015) identification of affordances such as the follower system and hashtagging which allow users to actively shape their experience of the site. This also acts as a contrast to typical offline spaces which do not offer the same opportunity to shape who and what is encountered. It evokes an idea of empowerment as presumably the type of content Finn chooses to see creates a space where he is not othered and where heteronormativity is not reinforced. Like Thomas, when asked about why he thinks Tumblr has come up so much within the questionnaire, Finn characterises the space as LGBT friendly.

Finn: Like now it would be because it has this community of people that are accepting of the entire LGBT community so it made sense for the next generation to just continue on with Tumblr. I have no idea how it started though.

Interviewer: But you think that's what the attraction is, that there is.

Finn: [Interrupts] Because there's a massive LGBT community on Tumblr.

Unlike Facebook, which typically will represent offline life more accurately as you connect with presumably mostly heterosexual friends and family, the LGBT community on Tumblr is large and accessible as a non-heteronormative space even without coming out. Emma describes how Tumblr makes it easy to connect with similar people.

Emma: Yeah well I think Tumblr is nice because it offers something for everyone no matter what you're into you can find a groups of people who are also like that. Which is also why I first gravitated towards the internet in general because that's what you can do but Tumblr makes it very easy.

Given that the context of this discussion and of her gravitation towards the internet is based on sexual identity, Emma's suggestion that "Tumblr makes it very easy", fits in with the idea Thomas also expressed, which is that Facebook is characterised as a heterosexual space where as Tumblr largely manifests the idea of 'people like me' and offers a feature set which makes finding these people much easier. Additionally, Emma mentions the idea of finding "people who are also like that...no matter what you're into". This highlights the idea of networked individualism (Wellman, 2001) and finding alternative spaces online within which can be found friends, attitudes and beliefs which reflect one's own, particularly if access to that is not available offline or through typical social media channels which reflect one's offline life, something reflected in the work of others (Bond et al., 2009; Wuest, 2014). There appeared to be a collective awareness across the interviews and questionnaire that Tumblr acts as an alternative to heteronormative spaces due to the high level of diverse and heteronormative-challenging content found on the site, but also due to the affordances of Tumblr which allow users to more actively curate the type of content and users they encounter, as opposed to Facebook which more closely replicates a friends structure encountered offline. From a polymedia perspective, the social act of choosing to engage with non-heterosexual content in a largely heterosexual space like Facebook is one which may have unpleasant consequences, and it appears that some participants actively chose to use Tumblr for exploration because they perceived that it offered a safer and more diverse environment in which to do so.

In her study Paradis (2016) focuses on online LGBT environments, however, as mentioned in Chapter 5, this may end up excluding spaces which are not explicitly LGBT, yet are used for sexual identity related purposes. While a website like Tumblr has gained a reputation for being LGBT or non-heterosexual friendly, there was also indications that participants found ways to use websites differently than they were intended to meet specific support needs, essentially reconfiguring (Fraiberg, 1995) or reshaping these spaces. Amy describes using dating sites like Gaydar Girls and then later Tinder, which is not specifically an LGBT service. However, she did not define her primary use for these sites as being dating.

Amy: Like these are specifically for dating but I'd use them to talk to people as well. I wasn't actually looking for anyone or meeting up with anyone. It was more just having someone to talk to that was the same.

Interviewer: And did you find the opportunity to do that on those sites?

Amy: Yeah, it was a lot of people the same, just looking to talk, not looking for anything.

Interviewer: Okay so they were, because I never actually realised that, so there were other people there as well for the same reason.

Amy: Yeah just looking for support, just to talk to people. It wasn't about looking for relationships.

Amy attributes intention in each of her statements here as she repeatedly states that the people she encountered were not looking for something sexual or romantic, but rather that they used the sites ability to share identity labels and its chat function primarily for conversation. She also draws on a people like me narrative when emphasising that they were the same as her and “just looking to talk”, meeting the need of socializing which Paradis found highly important to LGBTQ youth (Paradis, 2016).

7.6 Negativity and Online Limitations

While this chapter has highlighted the positive potential of the internet, there is, of course, the potential for exposure to negativity online, although perceptions of what this means may vary. In the following excerpt, Amy acknowledges that while she has seen negativity online, she does not perceive that as formulating a negative experience online.

Interviewer: And have you had any negative experience online in relation to your sexual orientation?

Amy: No I wouldn't say so. Like I'd see negative things online in relation to it...but those kind of things don't bother me because most of the things I actually see are supportive.

It appears that while Amy sees negativity online, she still characterises the internet as a supportive space and this acts as a buffer towards the negativity. She goes on to describe how, “all my friends on Facebook are really supportive”, particularly when it came to the marriage referendum. The fact that she saw so much positivity among

friends also helped her to contextualise the negativity as being wrong and in the minority.

Amy: I just saw a few negative things and they didn't really bother me because the majority of things were positive. I felt like the ones that were negative things were wrong, like they're the minority.

Similar to Amy's attitude of minimising the importance of negativity seen online, Emma speaks about those who promote hate online as having issues which cause them to act that way, implying that their behaviour is not normal or expected.

Emma: Any hate I've seen it's usually from people who are super religious or seem to be very closeted. Now that's me making assumptions about them, I don't know, but it seems to be so irrelevant to their life that there must be a reason why they are so obsessed with gay people.

Anthony also makes a distinction between trolling and homophobic beliefs which seem to be genuinely held.

Anthony: I think most of that's just like trolls that are, that's all they really can think of that's like you're a fag or a homo or stuff, but when it's like a serious person that's coming out and it's actually like no that's actually what they believe and it's not something they're hiding behind and it's their actual beliefs and they wanna do harm to gay people and they wanna give gay people less rights, that kinda stuff.

Interviewer: Yeah okay, so would it bother you more if it's more legitimate than just somebody calling names and that kinda thing?

Anthony: Yeah. Yeah exactly.

He indicates that the intent behind homophobic comments online matter more to him than the comments themselves. While this offers the ability to ignore trolling, it also highlights that there is a vulnerability present if faced with genuine homophobic intent. One questionnaire participant mentions this as part of her answer about how her sexual orientation has had a negative impact on her life when she writes, "...seeing homophobia online or in real life feels like a personal attack". While young people may employ strategies to lessen the impact of negativity found online, there was some evidence that not all experience the internet as empowering. This was limited, although it should be noted that this study did emphasise positive experiences over negative ones. One of the two participants in the questionnaire who stated that they found the

internet unsupportive also highlighted how she perceives the internet as an unsafe space.

I dislike the things I view online about being gay. I find the majority of it is negative about something bad happening to someone gay. It generally just makes me upset. The only thing I have found useful was when I had to google gaybar in NY.

22, Female, Lesbian

Another respondent indicates that his initial experience of informal education online was based on dangerous misconceptions, highlighting the danger of assuming the information found online will always be safe or useful.

It is impossible to handle alone. When I was growing up I believed it was a disease and I used the internet to find cures for it. Education is so important. LGBT youth need support and reassurance to understand that being gay is OK.

22, Male, Gay

Another participant, who previously indicated that he found the internet 'very supportive', also mentioned that he saw its limitations.

The internet only does so much to provide support, however I did not have the courage to engage with LGBT help services due to my own struggles.

21, Male, Queer

The idea of the internet being an empowering opportunity for non-heterosexual young people is one which contradicts risk based fears associated with young people and internet usage. However, that does not mitigate the idea of risk, and it could be argued that this study over-represents the opportunity available as the focus was on support rather than risk.

7.7 Conclusion

While it is excellent that young people can empower themselves through online tools and knowledge, this chapter also highlights the failures present when young people have to search out themselves for knowledge which is readily available for their heterosexual peers. This is particularly evident in the Irish school system which generally does little to help non-heterosexual youth in processing their sexual identity and does even less when it comes to giving them the knowledge about safe sex.

Fox and Ralston (2016) identified 3 major forms of informal learning for LGBTQ people: social learning, traditional learning and experiential learning. Social learning was particularly valued within the findings as it corresponds to the idea of narrative engagement through observing others and their stories. Traditional learning was particularly evident when it came to finding sexual health information. Similar to how Hillier and Harrison (2007) describe practicing an identity online, the experiential learning Fox and Ralston found involved actively experience online such as coming out online as a bridge to coming out offline, as well as the use of dating sites. While there was some evidence of this, the participants put a much greater focus on the process of narrative engagement and observation through social learning, for example when Amy used Tindr because she wanted to talk to people who were like her. Additionally, experiential learning in the form of utilising the internet to engage in dating or for sex did not appear to be majorly important to the young people in this study, something Paradis (2016) observed in her work. This does not necessarily mean that non-heterosexual youth in Ireland do not find dating online useful, for example, Thomas did describe how dating sites are a necessity for him due to safety concerns.

Thomas: let's say if I go up to someone on the street and I think they look nice or something or if it was in a club or something, like if it turns out they're not gay, they could have a violent reaction against me for assuming. So it's not like oh I can just go up and ask someone out cause like first I'd have to know that they are gay, or at least bisexual. Em, and then like, I have to be safe myself cause they could act violent. So you know?

However, as this study put a focus on perceptions rather than frequency, it appears that, overall, the young people in this study did not find experiential learning, particularly in the form of engaging in dating or sex, to be as important to them as they did with other forms of traditional or social learning. It should be made clear that no form of usage was considered completely unimportant as even those which were lower rated, such as finding people for sex or finding bars or nightclubs, were considered valuable to a small number of participants. The analysis within this chapter attempted to prioritise the types of usage which were most salient and valued among the participants overall. Considering this approach and the non-representative sample used, the findings should not be construed as equating usage or absolute measures of value, but rather they present an indication of what was considered most important and why within the current sample.

This chapter also indicates that for those searching for support due to a lack of visibility or perceived support at home, the internet does not just serve as the extension of offline life which it serves typically for young people. Instead the internet is used to find the language, knowledge and understanding which some non-heterosexual youth will then use to construct their sense of identity and belonging in their offline lives (Cohler and Hammack, 2007; Gray, 2009b). While the Internet clearly offers opportunities for narrative engagement (Hammack and Cohler, 2009a) and support through a 'People like me' experience as well as opportunities for informal learning (Fox and Ralston, 2016), there is also potential for redefining offline spaces within non-heterosexual internet usage. Opportunities for self-education and finding safe spaces acts as a tool of empowerment which offers agency for those who find it lacking in their offline lives. While the analysis so far has largely focused on the support that many participants received, online support also functions as a way to both react and adapt to offline lives. It appears that this is one need for which the internet can provide a strong form of support as it offers access to resources which may not be available offline. The ability to be comfortable or authentic with identity online has potential implications for place by offering the potential to shape a sense of belonging offline through interacting online. The following chapter will explore these complexities in more detail by prioritising the concept of place and the internet as it acts in individual lives.

8 CONTEXT AND THE ROLE OF PLACE

8.1 Introduction

Just as the previous chapter examined the ways in which the internet can be used to empower non-heterosexual youth in challenging and changing limited realities, it is worth exploring in-depth how the need to use the internet in this way is tied with the material realities of a young person's offline life. In his work examining power and sexuality online, Brickell writes that, "We produce and reproduce ourselves in particular ways on the internet, in a forum that, while relatively new, is nevertheless anchored in the broader flow of social processes, inequalities and modes of regulation." (Brickell, 2012, p. 11). This chapter attempts to analyse the ways in which young non-heterosexuals used the internet while accounting for this broader flow which is, inevitably, intertwined with an individual's sense of place and the wider context of their offline life.

In approaching issues of cyberspace and geography, Batty writes how there is a macro level at which we see the physical or material issues of geography and spaces and there is a micro level where, "we can define how real and imagined place/space is influencing individual and collective human behaviour". (Batty, 1997, p. 340) While Ireland has become highly globalised, place still plays a significant role in how many people see their own identity (Inglis and Donnelly, 2011). It makes sense that family and friends are identified as an important source of support in this study and others (Mayock et al., 2009), because our own identities and our sense of belonging in a place is shaped by those around us, particularly those we care about. Moving beyond simple discussions of online or offline, this section addresses the idea of place and the concept of belonging as being a key part of identity development and positive mental health. In their work on place and cyberspace, Dodge and Kitchin (2003) offer the following warning about overemphasising the importance of online places.

"Although an online place may provide a sense of belonging, the user may reside in an inauthentic place offline. The consequence of this could be that a gay man living in an area where there is homophobia or where homosexual

practice is illegal may 'belong' online but not offline. The creation of an authentic place online, in this case, is only a partial antidote to offline placelessness - there is still a need to authenticate place for this person offline." (Dodge and Kitchin, 2003, p. 17)

In this quote, authenticating place describes a process of integrating a sense of belonging into a place. In their example, a gay man who feels a sense of belonging online has found an authentic place to be himself, but he still needs to authenticate place offline, by finding his sense of belonging and authenticity. I will be using the term authenticating place to describe this process of finding a way to feel belonging so that you can be authentic in a specific place. Online opportunities can also provide a sense of belonging and narrative engagement which an individual can potentially use to authenticate place offline. Gray describes a process of authenticating place when she writes the following:

[Rural youth] use these media engagements with genres of queer realness to bring their performances home, anchor them locally, and transform them into experiences of self/senses of identity that can and do happen to youth "just like them". (Gray, 2009a, p. 130)

The findings presented here explore this in further detail by asking how a sense of place, as opposed to a geographical classification such as rural, affects the need for the internet to shape place. The central argument of this chapter builds upon the findings of the previous two chapters to suggest that the internet's role in place making, rather than just offering virtual or online spaces to practice identity, offers narratives which both challenge and assist in the process of integrating one's self-identity into places of importance. Additionally, the use of narrative stories highlight the process of how this occurs and examines why some youth will have a much higher need to authenticate place than others. Psychology employs the concept of protective factors which are characteristics central to fostering resilience and wellbeing in sexual minority youth (Eisenberg and Resnick, 2006; Mustanski et al., 2011a; Russell, 2003). However, in this chapter I identify the presence of protective factors acting as a narrative construct as participants retold their stories, a concept which will be explored at the end of the chapter. These protective factors and the way in which young people relate to them directly tie in with the value which they perceived from the internet and protective factors are tied into place and limitations of spaces.

Writing about narrative research, Connelly and Clandinin describe place as, "where the action occurs, where characters are formed and live out their stories and where cultural

and social context play constraining and enabling roles.“ (ibid, 1990, p. 8). By choosing to focus on the lives of individuals and how they tell their own story, the role of place becomes present. This is particularly true for a phenomenological understanding of place. Telling stories of identity, growing up and coming out inevitably involves stories of belonging, familial relationships and culture and society.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the decision was made to structure this chapter according to each person’s story, presenting it as a narrative case, rather than breaking up the data thematically. This facilitates an analysis which looks at the full context of an individual’s life. The final section of the chapter will address some of the similarities and points of interest between each case. This chapter is also highly qualitative. It is important to note that each story represents an individual’s journey and so the idea is not to create generalizable theories or conclusions. Instead this provides an in-depth analysis of how different factors can contribute to an individual’s sense of place, their internet usage and their self-acceptance, with the opportunity to also compare and contrast experiences. While the previous chapter primarily addressed the first two research questions:

1. What value do non-heterosexual youth in Ireland place on their internet usage?
2. How do non-heterosexual youth use the internet for support in Ireland?

This chapter focuses on the second set of questions:

3. How does the internet usage of non-heterosexual youth affect their sense of place?
4. How does place influence the importance of internet usage for non-heterosexual youth in Ireland?

The concepts and ideas highlighted within each individual’s life story are essentially the same as those discovered within the previous two chapters around support and the internet. However, this chapter will extend understanding of the concepts developed in the previous two chapters by examining individual cases of internet usage contextualised within the wider context of an individual’s personal narrative. How a person structures their own story or narrative is telling as it involves decisions over which moments or experiences to emphasise. For example, two people might have had negative experiences of bullying at school, but one might mention it in passing where as another gives in-depth detail about the impact it had on them. Rather than making assumptions about the role of the internet, this chapter allows the young people

interviewed to present their own accounts of their lives, sexual identities and the importance of their internet usage. Additionally, while place is an important aspect of life, the concept itself is not one which people typically discuss. For that reason, analysing the importance of place in the relationship between participants and their internet usage requires an analysis which interprets the ways that participants describe concepts such as belonging or acceptance as aspects of place.

As discussed in chapter 5, Thomas' story has not been presented within this chapter. After coding the transcripts and creating each biography, it was clear that Thomas' story was very similar to Finn's. His school was highly LGBT friendly and offered a positive space and he also perceived home as being accepting but awkward compared to school. While he did engage with LGBT culture online, he did not indicate that the internet was particularly important to developing his sense of self. Each one of the 7 stories presented highlight a different core concept and ultimately, I felt that including Thomas' story would repeat the same core concept, although elements of his story are present in Chapter 7. Table 2 provides a summary of the case specific main topic (Witzel, 2000) illustrated by each one of the seven participant's stories.

Table 2: Case Specific Main Topics for Interviewees

Participant Name	Core Concept
Mark	Internet had little impact due to offline resources
Finn	School created supportive place
Anthony	Internet essential for authenticating place
Paula	Internet inadequate due to offline factors
Chloe	Profile of 'new gay teenager', partly due to the internet
Amy	Internet replaced support service due to bisexuality
Emma	Internet developed resiliency and authenticated place

8.2 Mark: Internet had little impact due to offline resources

Mark grew up in a town with his mother and still lives with her. He saw other gay people in the area within which he grew up which let him know "I'm not the only gay in the village", but he also describes it as a, "place where you wouldn't want to scream

about it”, suggesting that it is a space where it may not necessarily be safe or acceptable to be fully open about gay sexuality. Mark was never comfortable in his secondary school and he describes it as having a specifically masculine environment where, “unless you were into traditional boys things like playing football and gaelic you were labelled the likes of queer, faggot”. He did not fit in with this and so he found himself with a sense of existential outsidership (Relph, 1976) towards his school community. Mark saw negative perceptions of his sexuality in both school and within his community. However, he did recall one story with his mother which challenged this negative perception. He witnessed a gay man around 10 years older than him who was regularly taunted on the street, setting the scene for this story as being situated within his community, as he later remarked about this incident that, “It’s not nice to see that around where you grow up”. While others had lamented the lack of role models or even people with a similar identity whose life trajectory they could see, here Mark is describing seeing someone like himself but older who is receiving ill treatment because of his identity.

Mark: One of my earliest memories is my mam saying, I can remember saying why are people calling him these names. She said they’re just idiots, they’re calling him these names because he’s gay and she said, y’know no-one should be called those names. So I kind of realised my mam, kind of, she was normal I suppose. She wasn’t homophobic, she wasn’t backward or anything like that.

As Mark describes this incident he uses value laden words which express the fact that his mother’s reaction to this incident reinforced for him that homophobia is not “normal” and to be homophobic is to be “backwards”. This choice of words represents a specific way of conceptualising stigma and those who enact stigma which is learned and offers potential for resiliency. Mark speaks about this incident in way that suggests it was a formative lesson for him in perceiving sexual stigma to be morally wrong rather than deserved.

Mark: I always remember her speaking positively about that guy and saying like no-one should be made fun of just because they’re gay. I think she even said it’s like being horrible to someone just because they’re black. It’s wrong, y’know.

While this seems like a simple or obvious message, many other participants in this research described a struggle to change their negative perceptions about how their sexual identity is wrong or abnormal due to the messages they received growing up.

Yet here we see Mark, in what he describes as one of his earliest memories, seeing stigma associated with his identity, but also learning from his mother that it was the stigma that was wrong and not the identity of the young man subject to the stigma. He was bullied in school and this was something he told his mother about and she contacted the school about it. Mark describes his mother's support as being significant to him and this family support acts as a protective factor in a more hostile local community (Mustanski et al., 2011a). Mark did feel lonely during secondary school because of his difference and he largely attributes the sense of pride and acceptance he has now to the local support service which he accessed once he started college.

Mark: So I kind of felt like an outcast. As clichéd as that sounds, I kind of felt like, it felt lonely, kind of until I came to [support service], that's when I met other people that were gay or lesbian and I kind of realised it's not a bad thing.

Mark: Believe it or not it was calling here that really kind of really made me accept myself a lot more. And kind of learned to be proud of who I am.

While Mark did not indicate that he had trouble arriving at an identity label and he had already come out to his mother before he accessed the support service, he clearly did feel the need to access a wider community, or at least to communicate with others who had similar experiences to him. Through the support service he accessed, Mark found a place where he could make friends and be comfortable offering him a sense of existential insideness (Relph, 1976) as well as increased self-esteem from group identification (Tajfel, 1978). He did not indicate a high level of reliance on the internet during the process of self-acceptance and the greatest value he said he found in the internet is that it helped him to connect with the support service because he found out about it online. Mark did not show any interest in some of the activities which others found very important such as chatting to others like him online or making friends online. I asked Mark why he thought this might be. Initially, he attributed this to a preference for face to face contact over internet based interactions. However, when asked about how the support service filled that role he acknowledged that this may be a reason why.

Interviewer: And do you think having access to [support service] sort of met that need of chatting and making friends.

Mark: Definitely. If this place hadn't have been here, yeah, I probably would have used online a lot more to make LGBT friends. Because I'm quite lucky

that this place is within walking distance of my home. So as I say, if the experience for me had have been different, yeah I would see that as quite different. I would have seen it as very important.

Interviewer: But you had that space to kind of make friends?

Mark: Yeah so I didn't really feel like I needed the online aspect because I had here.

There is a spatial aspect to this as he is essentially saying that he thinks the geographical availability of the support service made the internet less important for meeting his need of making friends. Just as shrunken spaces or being space deprived increase the importance of the internet for non-heterosexual youth (Hillier and Harrison, 2007; Paradis, 2016), here Mark indicates that the internet was less useful because he did have positive spaces for exploration. He reiterates this point when he describes how having his needs met at the support centre made him less likely to search for support elsewhere.

Mark: Once I came here I found I kind of became comfortable in myself that I didn't kind of feel the need to seek the support elsewhere.

This statement does not simply extend to the internet, but rather any form of support as he describes the process of becoming comfortable negating the need to seek support. This echoes the idea of acceptance leading to confidence and life enrichment from Chapter 6, suggesting that the support centre acted as a space which effectively met his needs. When he was asked if there are any places where he felt particularly safe or accepted, he draws a connection with this sense of self-acceptance and comfort.

Mark: Generally, I would feel accepted wherever I go. As I say, I think that comes with probably being comfortable with yourself.

To link this back to the idea of authenticating place (Dodge and Kitchin, 2003), Mark has told his own story in a way which indicates that through a combination of support from his mother and an LGBT support service, he learned to feel comfortable in himself, or find his place, in the area where he lives. This process of authenticating place did not occur through online means in any way, but essentially he found his place at home and at the support centre, and the corresponding sense of comfort and acceptance that brought has led to a situation where he now feels accepted wherever he goes. He had rated the internet as very supportive, particularly for sexual health information, viewing tv or video content and reading news stories and articles online. However, while he enjoys accessing positive LGBT content online such as documentaries or news

stories which allow him access to a wider sense of imagined gay community (Pullen, 2007), he stated that the internet had little impact on his life offline.

8.3 Finn: School created supportive place

Finn grew up in the suburb of a city, although he describes the area itself as a village. Finn attended non-Catholic schools for both his primary and secondary schooling and describes both schools as being “quite non-religious and open”. He expressed deep satisfaction with his secondary school, describing how it has a reputation as “home of the gays”, something cultivated by a rainbow week as well as a support group and workshops run by LGBT organisations. He also stated that there were multiple LGBT people in each year and that it “was quite an open thing to talk about” within school, indicating that he perceives it as an open place for identity exploration. An openly gay friend was instrumental in helping him to realise and understand his sexual identity because he “explained feelings” and gave him a reference point for comparison, meeting the need for identity comparison present in sexual identity models (Cass, 1979; Eliason and Schope, 2007). Finn stated he had, “so much confidence”, about coming out to his friends and he had a positive reaction from them. Despite the positive school experience, Finn did describe worry when realising he was gay.

Interviewer: Can you remember what your thoughts were around the time?

Finn: Uh, it’s just a phase [laughs]. Um, that kinda stuff and then like, uh I dunno, cause at the time I thought mam and dad were quite homophobic so I was like terrified about that.

When I asked Finn about why he thought his parents were homophobic he mentioned instances of racism and xenophobia as well as instances when he would hear his Dad “make a joke out of some gay guy that was on tv”. He had also witnessed one of his friends from school being kicked out by their parents after coming out, something which, “was always in the back of my mind whenever I thought of telling them.” Eventually he came out to his parents by text message and while they did not react badly, the fact that his mother now appears to behave differently has bothered Finn.

Finn: My Mam tried really hard to like, yknow when like you can tell someone’s trying hard to like, I dunno be normal...my Mam is still kind of weird about it. And em, its kind of a topic that we both kinda tip toe around? ... but like at least we’re getting somewhere with it instead of like me still trying to hide it.

By speaking in terms of openness, Finn creates a contrast between school, which had open conversation about sexuality, and home, in which the topic was not hidden, but also not discussed, characterising both school and home as places which derive their value from the lack or presence of facilitating his authenticity. During that time, he describes how he would call his two best friends to talk about it with them as well as talking about things with friends in school, meeting his need to talk about what he was feeling, something he describes as, “a conversation I had that I had never experienced at home”. When Finn was asked about specific instances where the internet was helpful for him in dealing with his sexuality, he struggled to recall specifics, and then brings up the more important role his friends played.

Finn: Figuring it out, like I read a lot of forums, I don't remember anything about it but I remember like looking up 'Am I gay?' kind of thing. That kind of stuff. I don't know, it might have helped me....I don't think it helped that much. My friends, and me trying to figure things out myself kind of helped a lot more than the internet itself actually.

While at different points in the interview Finn did recall finding resources like YouTube videos useful for self-education and he found use in relating to others on Tumblr, overall he does not appear to put a strong emphasis on the impact of the online support he received, such as when asked, do you think that any of what you did online impacted your life offline?

Finn: Em no. I don't think so. I can't even elaborate on that, because I'm trying to think of a time when I did something online that did kind of directly or indirectly affected my life offline. And I can't.

Finn's story indicates that while he spoke about the internet being important to him, when it came to his sense of place, friends played a much more important role, as facilitated by an extremely supportive school environment. The school here essentially worked towards creating a school environment that was LGBT friendly and inclusive, leading to a supportive social environment and friends which met most of Finn's needs. While support services can play a critically important role in helping young people who are struggling, Finn's story highlights that a more proactive approach may be to foster supportive social environments through a conscious effort to provide open and safe places in schools.

8.4 Anthony: Internet essential for authenticating place

Anthony grew up in a town which he describes as having a strong community feel. He was bullied in both primary and secondary school, something which caused him to lose the few close friends he had.

Anthony: I would have been the more feminine one of the group. So anytime they were bullied it was kinda blamed on me. It was like, oh they're only really making fun of us because of [Anthony].

Anthony: And when we went into secondary school... then the bullying kind of got worse to where it was like, it's actually affecting us making more friends in secondary school being close to you. So then, we kind of stopped being friends.

These early school experiences essentially brought the message that the gay or feminine aspects of Anthony's identity is something that would cause him to lose friends and make him a target. Later Anthony brought up more feminine or camp expressions as something he was simultaneously drawn to, but also afraid of due to negative reactions.

Anthony: ...when they [LGBT people] would be seen on tv it would be like drag queens and then it would be like really camp guys and people would be making fun of them so it was always kinda like, I'm drawn to it, but then I'm kinda scared to be associated with it because people were making fun of them.

When Anthony was asked about what his impression was of gay people when he was younger, he constantly brought it back to negative representations.

Anthony: I remember there was always big shocks of like oh this person's gay and this is really going to affect their career and it was always such a negative thing.

Anthony: [Discussing school] There was nothing educational, it was always like oh this person was messed up because they struggled with their sexuality.

Not only did he have negative impressions of gay people, but he also faced a lack of visibility as he cannot remember seeing or knowing any people who were gay in his area. Considering the lack of visibility and isolation in school, Anthony would be considered space deprived or operating in a shrunken space (Hillier and Harrison, 2007; Paradis, 2016), something which from the literature would suggest an increased

likelihood to rely on online resources. Anthony found Gaydar extremely useful because he could see and talk to people in his area. He also searched for gay young people on social media simply to observe their profiles and see, “people my age that were out and gay”, using social learning from the internet as a tool to model his own identity on (Fox and Ralston, 2016; Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011). Anthony describes how his online life had an important impact on his life offline.

Anthony: At first it was like I’m super gay online and then it was like I’m gay offline. And then I think they started to merge because I started being more comfortable with the person that I was online. Like putting up pictures and all this kinda stuff. I was getting good feedback and I was being like, I guess, more me online, and that I was getting the good feedback that I was kinda like it’s okay to kinda bring this into my real life because it’s fine, everyone seems to accept it.

This relates to the idea of practicing sexuality online and gaining confidence from that or using the internet as a rehearsal space for identity (Craig and McInroy, 2014; Hillier and Harrison, 2007). He initially came out and was “super gay online” in the absence of opportunities to do that offline, yet he makes a connection between the “good feedback” he received, which equates to acceptance and understanding online, and becoming more comfortable with himself offline. Essentially Anthony describes a process of authenticating place as he merged what he saw as his online and offline identities, using the internet to help him find a sense of place within his own, offline community. While that initially meant feeling less alone, it eventually translated into “being more comfortable with the person I was online”, which was an out gay man with more feminine traits.

Anthony: I think before I came out I would have tried to, I wasn’t doing a good job, but I tried to like lower it [his femininity] a little bit.

Interviewer: Okay yeah.

Anthony: But then after that I started to embrace and be more like this is who I am, people find me funny, and I attract more people because of it so I don’t really care anymore.

Anthony’s authentic, and more feminine self, is something which he only saw associated with shame or difficulty when he was younger, leading him to actively try and present a less feminine image, a form of identity management (Goffman, 1956). The internet allowed him to find other people like himself and to receive positive reinforcement about

his identity and the potential to live a happy life, but more importantly, seeing the existence of others like him helped him in the process of becoming more like his authentic self, or as Mary L Gray (2009a, p. 127) puts it, “bring that queerness home to roost.”. This helped him to come out and become comfortable offline, to the point where he now describes himself as being “obviously gay” to those who meet him, indicating a big change in his presentation of self in his locality. Anthony attended college in another large town which had an LGBT support group, marking his first opportunity to engage with an LGBT space. He first attended this group while at college after he had come out to his mother and friends and received a largely positive reaction from them.

Anthony: I don't think I was looking for support because...once I had my Mam didn't throw me out, I had a good group of friends that didn't have issue with me being gay, and I'm pretty well put together that I didn't need support. But the fact that I made gay friends in there that I could talk to about relationships and I could talk to about certain aspects of like going out, all that kinda stuff to them, supported me. It wasn't necessarily like serious stuff that I needed help with.

While he characterises gaining gay friends as supportive, he makes a separation between the level of life enrichment he received through this and the need for support that he had when he was younger.

Anthony: I'd say younger, had I like been more aware of the situation that I was in, I would have, I would have loved to have a support system like that. I would have loved to, somebody to be like this is gunna get better, this isn't the situation that you're gunna be in forever, there are people out there that are just like you out there. There wasn't really anything like that and I would've actually liked that little pat on the back, back then.

While the role of the LGBT support group was certainly supportive in helping Anthony develop friendships with others who are like him, ideally, he would have had access to physical support at a much younger age. While he did access a support group, it seems this occurred at a point in his life where he had largely gone through some of the harder aspects of dealing with his sexual identity. Hillier et al (2001) found that online support can be particularly relevant to those still navigating their identity. Anthony used the internet to meet his needs during the more difficult stages of identity development when he was younger, something he described as absolutely essential, but he still believes that a more robust support service would have been beneficial to him then. While Anthony's words above echo an it gets better message, crucially, he is describing

this in the context of an offline support system as he is referencing something he did not have but perceived from the support group. Due to the bullying and lack of visibility, Anthony saw himself as living an unliveable life (Cover, 2013). While he did access his own representations and opportunities online which helped him to construct a perception of a liveable life, ideally, he would have liked others to provide him with that, “little pat on the back.” The internet played a key role in authenticating place (Dodge and Kitchin, 2003) for Anthony, but the support group he attended also provided a life enriching experience, which arguably, has a positive impact on mental health. Rather than an either/or dichotomy, Anthony’s story highlights how support may be necessary at different parts of an individual’s journey for different reasons, but also how the internet can meet needs in the absence of offline support, particularly for those who are space deprived (Paradis, 2016).

8.5 Paula: Internet inadequate due to offline factors

Pullen has described the difference between recollections about experiences and the reality of living through experiences as being that, with recollections, “a safe distance is achieved, and the immediacy is lost” (Pullen, 2014b, p. 70). It was clear throughout this interview that Paula was still very much living through the pain associated with her sexual identity and there were multiple points during the interview where she was visibly upset when discussing difficulties she was facing. Paula moved house a lot growing up and as such she does not characterise herself as being from one particular area. She described how moving a lot impacted on her ability to socialise with friends from school on weekends and she still describes herself as ‘very isolated’ when it comes to her friends currently. During the survey she described herself as having anxiety, depression and claustrophobia and she also attempted suicide which she attributes to negative experiences after coming out to her mother. Paula identifies as bisexual to some people, but personally she considers herself to be pansexual. When asked if she saw reflections of pansexuality or bisexuality growing up, Paula makes the link between visibility and role models, indicating that she sees media representation as the opportunity to look to the example of others.

Interviewer: With pansexuality or bisexuality, did you see any of that growing up, like on the TV? Was there anything in your life which reflected that back to you at all?

Paula: No, there were no bisexuals or pansexuals, well definitely not pansexuals, still not pansexual visibility. There were no kind of role models on TV, in the media, stories, any of that growing up.

Like others who saw both heterosexuality and homosexuality as the only two valid options, Paula sees her own sexual identity as being outside of that binary, something which she associates with greater struggle. For example, she describes how she has no friends who are neither “non-hetero or non-homosexual”, meaning she has no friends who she sees as “like myself”. Paula came out to a friend when she was a teenager and received a positive reaction. She was subsequently in a long-term relationship with a man and so she did not come out to her family until she was in her twenties and this relationship had ended. She has had a difficult time with coming out as an adult because her mother struggled to understand and accept her sexual identity, something her earlier experience of coming out had not prepared her for.

Paula: My best friend was so accepting of it ...so then I suppose it was in my mind that 'why would it be a problem, why would my mum see it as a phase?' Whereas if my friend had been like 'oh my god gross, you're gay' or 'that's wrong' then I probably would have hidden it, especially in those young formative years.

Paula described earlier instances with her mother which gave her an expectation that her mother would be welcoming and accepting when she came out, such as her mother hypothetically responding that she would not care if one of her children came out as gay. Paula still feels confused as to why her mother struggles with accepting her identity describing her mother as “extremely liberal” and “so welcoming”. The fact that she had expected positivity and instead experienced negativity has clearly left Paula feeling confused and hurt. From the following answer, it appears that Paula did not feel like she needed support in the more formative stages of identifying and accepting her sexual identity. Instead it was the loss of the expected support from her mother, or the loss of a key protective factor (Mustanski et al., 2011b), which caused her to feel like she needed help.

Interviewer: And at what point, if you remember, did you start looking for support or thinking that you wanted support?

Paula: It would have around that time my mum was giving me that 'oh it's just a phase' nonsense. Because you think in times like that you can go to

your family and my mum was like 'oh you can come to me with anything' and she was the very one person that wasn't understanding it.

Places are defined by value (Tuan, 1997) and within this answer Paula brings in the spatial by addressing where you can go and who you can come to during difficult times, indicating that the negative experience of coming out redefined her family home as a place which no longer held the value of being a safe haven during difficulties. Paula started attending an LGBT support centre after her long-term relationship ended and part of the support she finds there is based in a people like me opportunity for narrative engagement among those “who are going through the same things” and who “understand bisexuality”. While this contrasts with what she experiences from family she also makes the same distinction between her friends.

Paula: Like my long term female friends are like 'so you like women and men, I don't understand'. I'm like 'why is that so hard to understand, you've known me for years, this doesn't change who I am to you. Just next time see me at your wedding or whatever, I might bring a female date'. They're like 'I don't get it, I don't understand'. So it's nice to have people you can talk to about this, where they get it.

Paula has described a situation where she feels misunderstood by both family and friends, leading to a sense of existential outsidership (Relph, 1976) in contrast to the support service “where they get it”. Due to the distance and travel complications from where she lives, she no longer attends the service frequently and she describes how not being able to attend for a few months has left her, “really struggling”. What Paula describes here is a present-day struggle with coping without the physical access to the support she needs but previously had. Her need to continue accessing support is evident from the following question.

Interviewer: Are there any places that you feel particularly safe or accepted?

Paula: At the support group in [location]. Other than that, no.

She continues with this answer by expanding upon all the people she no longer feels she can be herself around, which again, is in the context of a question about place.

Paula: Around my family again I'm still, I still have issues with my mother.....And my friends, no, because they don't get it and they have kids and husbands and things that I don't. So no, [support service] would be the only kind of safe haven.

In answering this question about places of safety or acceptance, Paula makes the link between the important relationships in her life and her sense of place or safety. The lack of understanding she perceives from the people she cares about leads to feeling unsafe and unaccepted around these people, with the only safe place being the place where she does feel acceptance and belonging from others. While Paula feels a positive sense of place at the support centre, she has not yet been able to authenticate this sense of place to her extended life, which consequently has left her in a very vulnerable position since she has been unable to attend the service as much. Paula did describe the internet as absolutely essential because it offered emotional support, which she again links to the absence of support from friends.

Interviewer: Are there any specific occasions where the internet was particularly important to you in dealing with things?

Paula: I suppose the two youtubers that were like 'I'm really sorry, hang in there because you're so positive'. Because I was going through a horrible time when my mother wasn't accepting that I attempted to take my own life. And my real world friends, they would try and understand. And they would come over for a cup of tea for one day. And they'd say 'oh we'll do this more regularly' but then the same as always, their kids or their husbands always get in the way. There's always people online in forums or help groups that you can be talking to.

Paula also described how she uses the internet to connect with people “all over the world” who have “gone through the same things”, describing how her mother and friends do not understand her yet there could be someone “in Timbuktu” with the same experience. She also uses an app where you can share your secrets to anonymously interact with people who have shared similar secrets.

Paula: So it does create a little sense of community. It is a bit weird having such a personal relationship with an app on your phone but there are human beings on the other side of it that have the same life experiences and advice and things to give.

She is describing a sense of imagined community (Anderson, 2006; Pullen, 2007) because she can connect with others who feel alone and isolated from all around the world, challenging the notion that “no one understands me”. However, she does not appear to be finding transformative narratives within that internet use, possibly because she is connecting with those who are currently in the same situation as her

rather than those who have lived through it. Unlike others who clearly looked for potential narratives of possibility, the immediacy of Paula's life circumstances has led to the internet serving as an emotional support in which her primary goal is to reduce her immediate feelings of isolation. She also makes a strong distinction between the availability of online friends and offline friends, who she characterises as real-world people.

Paula: On my down days I would talk to my online friends and be able to tell them about it. I would try obviously the real-world people first but people don't answer their phones or they're busy with work or life, and I hate to be a burden to people so then I'll see which one of my friends is available to talk online

Here she describes how real world support would be her preferred methods but in the absence of support from friends which has created a shrunken space, the internet addresses a direct need (Paradis, 2016). Paula's story shows the dangers in assuming that the internet can serve as a full replacement for support. She does show a heightened need for support, particularly considering her previous suicide attempt and her current outlook on the level of acceptance from friends and family. While the internet does offer some help and positivity in dealing with her issues, she clearly identifies that this is not enough for her. Additionally, Paula repeatedly emphasised how she felt misunderstood and not fully accepted among friends and family. The absence of these protective factors effectively means that Paula finds no social support (Mustanski et al., 2011b) outside of the support service. If applying the concept of authenticating place (Dodge and Kitchin, 2003), the internet in this instance is insufficient and the level of support that she finds from an official support service with dedicated youth workers is what she expresses that she really needs. While others who attended support services and were interviewed have not expressed as strong a need for these services as Paula, her story does bring to mind the argument from Savin-Williams (2006) that the segment of sexual minority youth who attend support services may be those who are more vulnerable and susceptible to mental health difficulties. While he intended this to be warning against recruiting research participants exclusively from support services, it also highlights the need for services which can provide support to young people who cannot find the level of support they need in either their offline environment or through online resources. There is also the element of living through which may play a key factor here. While Paula does appear to show more

vulnerability, for instance having previously attempted suicide, she is also currently living through a process which others spoke about as being more of a reconstruction.

8.6 Chloe: The new gay teenager with supportive friends

Chloe grew up in a town that is a suburb of a large city, but agreed with a characterisation of the place she lives as ‘city life’. She has had the same close knit group of friends throughout primary and secondary school and she has a good relationship with her family. Chloe described how she was not worried about coming out to her friends because she “knew they were going to be cool with it” and while she anticipated her mother may be a bit “dismissive”, she knew she would not reject her. She characterises her life growing up as a “straight bubble”, something which led her to access new narratives of identity online (Cohler and Hammack, 2007).

Chloe: I lived in such a straight bubble, like all my family, all my friends and then it was only when I started to question myself that I went online and stuff, then I knew it was a whole array and different types.

While she talks about growing up in a straight bubble, it also appears that she was not alone in questioning her sexuality, as throughout adolescence in her all-girls secondary school and among friends there was a lot of discussion about sexuality and numerous girls who were ‘out’ as lesbian. She does speak in contradictory terms at times, sometimes describing others who were gay in her immediate world while later describing no visibility during the same time periods. In the latter parts of the interview she described having some struggles with fears of coming out and during the early stages of identity development describing how she went through it, “totally on my own”, particularly when asking questions such as, “how am I going to deal with this in the future”. It is important to note that Chloe never overstates these struggles as having a major impact on her life. She described herself as never feeling like she needed support, although she did consider attending a support service for the purpose of community and making friends. In the following excerpt about when she realised she was not straight, Chloe downplays the difficulties she described later on and epitomises the idea of the new gay teenager (Savin-Williams, 2006) as she takes a very care free attitude to her sexual identity.

Chloe: Em, yeah I was pretty easy going about it like, I didn’t really know, like, I didn’t really know anybody else who was gay or anything like y’know like a few, few of my friends y’know, distant friends like not really like my

close friends em, were, gay or a bit queer anyway and em, I dunno, yeah I wasn't really stressed about it.

This attitude appears to have extended to her friends as she describes their reaction to her coming out as, "that's grand, yeah...no big deal", and when asked about the level of acceptance she experienced in school she said, "I didn't really make a song and dance about it". Chloe shows a reluctance to label her sexual identity because as she said, "it's fluid" and "I feel like it could change", rather than it representing a fixed aspect of her identity. Chloe came out as bisexual initially, because it appeared to be a reasonable description considering that she is attracted to both men and women, however, the internet played a role in introducing her to the idea of pansexuality.

Chloe: But then I started like looking on the internet and things and I started looking on, like I watch videos like and when all the stuff about Caitlyn Jenner and stuff came out, before that like I watched *Orange is the New Black* and eh, what's her name, the trans hairdresser in *Orange is the New Black*....And I just started looking into trans people and I was like, like I could be pan like.

While it did not act as a life changing sense of identity, Chloe's engagement with diverse media representations (McInroy and Craig, 2017) and later her information seeking based on that made her consider an alternative identity label. In contrast to others who had a clear sense of their identity, Chloe's identity appears to be constantly evolving as she encounters material which challenges her or makes her think.

Chloe: I feel like the more information I get, the more it changes and the more, yeah I dunno. I suppose though that's as far as you can go, that's as open as you can get though isn't it, pan, so I suppose, that's what I am now.

In the above statement Chloe does not seem to see the labelling of her identity as something essential to her sense of self identity, eventually arriving at quite a nonchalant conclusion of "I suppose that's what I am now". This is a marked contrast to others who emphasised the importance of needing to understand what they are and saw doubts around knowing 'what I am' as something confusing and de-stabilising. She describes how labels reflect her values because she accepts the label of pansexual as it aligns with her willingness to date someone who is transgender, yet it does not appear that she puts a large value on the label itself, using it as a general descriptor rather than a statement of identity. She represents the type of young person who Savin-Williams (2001, p. 5) claims is excluded when researchers focus on a "culturally defined

sexual minority label". In fact, Chloe describes how her only real motivation for coming out as bisexual initially was, "you have to say you're something, y'know like you can't just say I'm y'know." When asked if there were any places where she does not feel safe or accepted Chloe stated that "I don't really care if anyone disapproves of me anymore", linking the concept of space with social relations (Massey, 1994). When asked what led to this attitude she attributes it mostly to her friends.

Chloe: I think what it was, yeah, it was myself and then it was the fact that I have such a solid little group who don't care what I do or who I am. Em, so like if everyone else in the world hates me it doesn't matter.

Chloe's group authenticated place for her, leading her to feel like she can be herself wherever she goes. When asked about any negative experiences, Chloe mentioned some instances where she felt disrespected, particularly by men, but she characterised these experiences as more of a minor annoyance than anything major. When asked if these instances ever bothered her she brought things back to her general sense of acceptance with herself and her friends and stating that if someone has an issue with her she sees it as their problem and not hers. Chloe repeatedly emphasised that her close friends were always there for her and she mentioned how she felt they would be there if she had faced any major issues in dealing with her sexuality. The ways she describes her reactions to negative experiences indicate that the support of her friends and her own sense of self-acceptance offer her resiliency. Although her friends were and are a source of support, she also describes a desire to connect with others about "things that my friends don't get".

Chloe: That's kind of the world I'm in where people, they're nice, but they just don't quite get it y'know. So yeah, more people around me who are gay would have made my life easier cause they're would have gotten the little things

Here Chloe characterises her world as a place in which she can be herself because she is accepted, yet there are sometimes elements of a non-heterosexual experience which she wants to be both understood and shared with others. This is not existential outsidership (Relph, 1976) as Chloe does emphasise that she belongs, but it indicates a dissatisfaction that addresses a need to connect to people like her and feel like part of a like-minded community.

Chloe: Just because there's nobody pulling the head off me it doesn't mean I wasn't nervous coming out. It doesn't mean that I don't want to see more representation, you know?

It may also indicate the presence of microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2011) as Chloe understands these experiences of difference are not malicious, yet they seem to frustrate her. Throughout the interview Chloe alluded to the idea that despite the support of her friends, these little things would have been easier if she had more visibility of non-heterosexual women and their lives beyond that available from peers.

Chloe: I definitely think it would have helped if I had known any gay adults. Like especially gay women...I wouldn't have had any negativity about it at all. I'd be just like 'yeah, this is totally fine'. And I would have talked to them a bit y'know.

When Chloe did have worries about her sexuality she turned to the internet for reassurance, stating that her expectations from the internet is that when people "go to question things....generally they come back going 'lots of people are feeling this way. It's fine'". On the questionnaire Chloe had listed the internet as being very supportive, but the only categories she listed as being very important were watching tv or video content and reading news stories or articles. Her experiences of finding community online is partly described in Chapter 7, but essentially she describes how she connects with an imagined gay community through accessing media representations (Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011; Pullen, 2007). However, even though she still perceives a lack of LGBT community in the form of close friends, she has not really used the internet to socialise with others or to actively create this community online. Chloe described how Tumblr became less important to her once she came out because the needs she had changed and so did the opportunity to meet those needs.

Chloe: Tumblr was just more about expressing myself like you know, my gay bit of me. So it was just more about getting that out of my system. So now I just do it in real life...I was just on it to be in a similar, to be able to express myself and see other people expressing themselves the same way...It wasn't really to develop long lasting friendships or anything. So I just in real life express myself now. And like if I want to be in a place, like a situation where there's loads of gay people around me, I just go there.

Chloe has a clearly defined sense of place. She essentially describes how Tumblr acted as a space for her to practice her identity, similar to how Hillier and Harrison (2007)

and Craig and McInroy (2014) describe. Yet it was only a transient space which allowed her to express herself, or engage in identity management (Goffman, 1956) until she achieved a sense of personal enrichment, indicating that its primary purpose was providing a space while she was in the midst of developing a sense of identity (Hillier et al., 2001). Consequently, the internet played a helpful role in offering her further opportunities for self-expression, information and community, but she did not indicate that this was particularly major for her in terms of self-acceptance or mental health, just as she did not see her sexual identity as posing any major issues in terms of self-acceptance or mental health.

8.7 Amy: Internet replaced support service due to identity changes

Amy grew up in what she describes as a rural area near a large town. Her primary school was in this rural area, while her secondary school was in the town. While she described being an outsider at school, she also had close friends who shared that status. For instance, she described her friends at school as “weird like me” and the “ones that didn’t fit in”, suggesting that she experienced existential insideness within her group of friends despite their status as outsiders in school (Relph, 1976). Amy gradually became aware of her sexual orientation throughout her adolescence. She described herself as being close to her family although there were times when her fears about rejection and actual rejection affected her closeness to them. When asked more about why she had negative expectations of her family, Amy makes a connection between what she saw as normal and the impressions her family had given her.

Amy: I just felt like I wasn't normal or whatever and I did kind of overhear things that family would say. I remember when we were going on holidays when I was younger there was like, there was this couple, two women that were sitting in front of us on the plane and they were like kissing or whatever, and I remember my mam saying that that was, you know, bad and stuff. You know, just little things you pick up on.

This story is almost the opposite of Mark’s experience when his mother highlighted homophobia was wrong. Amy says she “felt like I wasn’t normal” and then directly follows that up with an example where she remembers her mother equating same-sex kissing as being bad. This connects back with idea of norms and what appears to be acceptable identity options as her mother reinforced the idea that being a lesbian was not normal or acceptable. When Amy did come out to her mother she had an extremely

negative experience of rejection which she immediately follows up with the affirmation that she did have support from friends, identifying them as a protective factor.

Amy: I told my mam before school one day and she rang the school and said like she didn't want me coming home and the vice principal came and told me this. But my friends were supportive. I stayed with a friend and her family were supportive.

She went through a period of staying with various friends and extended family while still attending school. Her school guidance counsellor told her about a local support service which she started attending and has continued to gain support from. Her school eventually brought her mother in to talk with her and Amy “went back in the closet just to like go home”. While she did not have any kind of gay visibility in her life, Amy describes the support of her friends as helping her to reframe her mother’s reaction as she felt her mother “was in the wrong”. To relate this back to the incident on the airplane, Amy goes through a process from seeing her mother’s homophobia in a formative way which caused her to see herself as wrong or not normal, to seeing the acceptance of her friends which caused her to see her mother’s behaviour as wrong or not normal. This brings up the same concept of norms and acceptability which Mark learned through his mother’s condemnation of homophobia, showing two examples of how social support can help to develop resiliency (Mustanski et al., 2011b). Eventually Amy was able to come out to her mother again and after a period of time things got better. In a typical stage based model of sexual identity, this would represent the journey from realisation to acceptance, or the end of the story (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988). However, Amy goes on to describe a new change in her life, which she had to navigate in much the same way.

Amy: I actually recently came out as bisexual which I didn't realise before. Because I always kind of thought you're one or the other. Because I had such a hard time coming out the first time, it was kind of hard for me to come out as bi.

Interviewer: Okay. Hard because you knew how tough it was the first time?

Amy: And I was actually afraid of coming out to friends who are gay or lesbian as well.

Interviewer: Do you think there is that kind of stereotype?

Amy: Yeah I was thinking they wouldn't be supportive. There is people who are gay and are a bit biphobic and think you're one or the other as well I think.

In this exchange Amy expresses how she did not realise she was bisexual as it did not appear to be a valid identity option. Critically, this is not simply a belief she learned from a heterosexual society, as she follows up with the idea that she was afraid to come out to her gay and lesbian friends and she assumed they would think the same. Amy said bisexuality “wasn't something I considered” and describes how “having more friends who are bi” made her think that, “yeah, sexuality can be fluid”. This new knowledge learned from others provided a new sexual script (Gagnon and Simon, 2005) for Amy and became something which she incorporated into her sense of self-identity, acting as a repeating cycle of a stage based identity model (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988), or an example of identity formation as a constant process (Eliason and Schope, 2007). Amy went on to speak about how the internet was much more useful to her when she came out as bisexual because she experienced a greater deal of isolation due to a fear of revealing her sexuality to some within the LGBT community.

Amy: Why I volunteered to do this interview, why I thought it would be interesting was because like for the bisexuality thing definitely I did use the internet a lot because I didn't want to tell people, even gay friends, like I didn't want to talk to them. So that's kind of where I found information.

This highlights the fact that what was necessary for Amy was not a non-heterosexual space itself, as she had access to an LGBT support service, but rather she needed a sense of place which is safe and accepting accompanying that space (Tuan, 1997), a value she no longer attributed to the support centre. She used the internet to talk to men online and she joined a bisexual support group on Facebook. She discusses how this compared to her experience in the support service.

Interviewer: You're part of the LGBT support service here in [location], was that kind of less useful with it [bisexual support]?

Amy: Yeah it was kind of weird because I came here when I came out as a lesbian. I was afraid to tell people here. I didn't even tell [support worker]....when I went to pride, I brought a guy I'm seeing to pride. And I was afraid to do that, that was something I had stressed about for weeks and it's kind of weird going to a pride event when you're afraid to go. The irony of it. But yeah that was something I was worried about because I found

here such a great support and stuff I was afraid that people would think that I wasn't really.

Amy's comments reveal that the issue here is not one of how a space is characterised but rather how a place feels, or the value associated with a place (Tuan, 1997). She points out the irony she saw when the support centre, which she had found supportive, and pride, which focuses on acceptance, both became places where she felt fear and stress in revealing her bisexuality and her relationship with a man. This does not necessarily mean that the LGBT service is not accepting of bisexual people, but at a point when Amy was exploring this aspect of her identity, the internet felt like a safer option for pursuing this, or as she describes, "a safer place for me". This also acts as a clear example of using the internet as a practice or rehearsal space for an emerging identity (Craig and McInroy, 2014; Hillier and Harrison, 2007).

In many ways, Amy appeared to have the intervention she needed. She had a strong group of friends and her school helped her to access an LGBT support service which became a great help for her when she faced family difficulties after coming out. The support service offered a supportive place which assisted her in eventually coming out and having a good relationship with her family. However, the concept of fluidity and a journey which does not correspond to a traditional model eventually led this situation to reverse to the point where Amy felt fear and stress at the idea of coming out to her friends and support workers at the LGBT service. This leads to the question of whether the internet could continue to play an important role for those who have a fluid or less traditional identity journey, irrespective of physical support services. As Chapter 5 highlighted, there does appear to be a higher burden on those who identify outside of the traditional homosexual vs. heterosexual binary because while there has been a huge advance in representation and understanding of gay and lesbian issues in the mainstream media and Irish society, there can still be a lot of misunderstanding and negativity around concepts such as bisexuality, asexuality or other sexual identities, even within the LGBT community. For Amy, the internet did not hold great importance when she came out as a lesbian, but when exploring and understanding her bisexuality, the internet became a safe place after the places which had previously been safe to her felt less so, indicating that the value of a place can change depending on a person's feelings towards it, independent of the space itself changing (Tuan, 1997).

8.8 Emma: Internet helped to develop resiliency

Emma grew up in a small town within what she describes as a traditional family. Emma described herself as having a happy, middle class childhood with lots of friends throughout school. Unlike some of the other participants, Emma did not really start processing her sexual identity until she went to college, describing herself as in “very deep denial” before then. Emma identified as lesbian on the questionnaire. Much like has been expressed by Chloe and Paula, there is an impression management process in which she understands the needs to present labels to others (Goffman, 1956), but that is not necessarily the label she would personally identify as.

Emma: I definitely still identify as gay if people ask me. If somebody says are you a lesbian? I say yes by definition but I don't identify as it because it's still, even still there's so many negative connotations with the word lesbian.

Emma does appear to resist the word lesbian on a personal level due to the social baggage the term carries for her (Esterberg, 1997). For this reason, the word gay will be used to describe Emma's identity throughout this section of the analysis. While she did have positive visibility about gay men through her involvement with the arts, she did not have a positive perception of anything beyond gay male identity stating that the word lesbian was usually followed by something “negative” which she did not “want to associate” with. She also saw representation of a same-sex relationship in her school, but this did not have positive connotations for her as “everybody was talking about them” something which, “reinforced my...internalised homophobia”. Her early impressions of LGBT people were also something that she could not relate to herself indicating that she saw non-heterosexual identities as invalid identities.

Emma: They [LGBT people] were always different, like especially say those two girls didn't conform necessarily to gender roles. One of them had short hair and one of them had a mullet....And a lot of emo kids as well, who I knew would also be in like LGBT groups and stuff. And there was nobody I knew that did all the stuff that I did, like kind of sports and stuff like that, and also just happened to be gay, like it wasn't a big deal.

Her struggle here is not with a total lack of visibility, such as we saw with Anthony, but rather that she had difficulties seeing people like herself within that visibility. She also had a negative impression of gay people from her parents as while they were not what she would classify as homophobic they used language that was not “accepting” and again made being gay seem like a “big deal”. While she mentioned the availability

of peer visibility, Emma discussed how there were no adults in her life who were openly gay, something which she believes made it harder for her stating that, “If there had have been just one person, I would have found it so much easier to come to terms”. When asked what she wishes had been available she reiterates this point stating that the biggest one is that there were more “role models” or “adults in my life who were people and also gay”.

Emma finally accepted and realised she was a lesbian after a close friendship at college turned into an intimate relationship. Her girlfriend’s mother knew about their relationship and also knew Emma’s mother, which prompted her to come out which as she reflects was perhaps before she was ready to come out. Much like Paula, she expected that the news would be well received saying she “was really excited” to tell her mother. Instead she describes that “it didn’t go well” with her father or mother. She describes the closeness of her family at that time as making her parents opinions very important to her and she “took it really hard” when they did not respond well, indicating a similar loss of social support as Paula indicated. In contrast to Paula, Emma saw life outside of her family life as very different stating that, “outside of that little bubble everything was very easy” and she was accepted, yet the issues with her parents “definitely took a blow”. Because Emma was living at home during this time it had an impact on her sense of place.

Emma: I remember just wishing that I had one friend who was gay....who was the same as me....I just remember wishing that I had someone or kind of a space or anything to get away from that situation, because I was living at home so there was nowhere I could really go.

In this passage Emma describes feeling out of place in her home but unable to escape it. She also links place and social relations (Massey, 1994) by simultaneously describing “someone” or a “kind of space” that would have given her the ability to find relief from that situation, indicating that it was a lack of social connection or belonging that was the issue. Emma considered going to a support service but said, “when I needed them most I was too nervous to go.” Emma describes how a large part of the struggle between her and her parents was based on their idea of normality i.e. that you cannot have a great life and be gay.

Emma: When I first told my parents, as I said it, was pretty bad for about a year and then not as bad for the next year. But the first month was really tough. It was constant crying on everyone's behalf. The classic 'we're so disappointed in you, we thought you were going to have a great life'. Things

that sound funny to me now but at the time it burned. It was so hard to hear those things. But they were all the clichés.

As stated previously her parent's opinions were important to her and they were expressing what Emma describes as clichés, which are presumably negative stereotypes about the life that gay people can have. Essentially, she experienced hurt due to her parent's utilisation of a negative narrative frame or an unliveable life (Cover, 2016). When asked what helped her to move forward from that negative experience she brings up the internet, saying that it may have been the biggest help to her. Emma describes how the internet offered her representations of gay identity which she could relate to (Cohler and Hammack, 2007).

Emma: I didn't really know anyone that was gay or anyone who was like me and gay and so when I went on the internet I suddenly found people writing articles about things and on the side the people in them related to being gay and that just really struck a chord with me.

Finding people like her online helped her to reconceptualise her sexual identity as being "just another part of life" or something that would not negatively define her life in the way that her parents had assumed. Emma actively discusses the narrative reframing and rejection of oppressive myths that she found within YouTube videos.

Emma: And probably the most influential site on the internet for me with my sexuality was YouTube because there's a lot of, I don't even know how I found them but I stumbled on a lot of these channels where it was basically couples just making videos about their lives and just living their lives. And seeing two people in a relationship, be confident and be happy was probably the biggest thing, just go about their lives and be totally comfortable gave me so much hope and, just made me feel like it wasn't a big deal. And not only was it not a big deal but it was actually something to kind of celebrate, it was a good thing.

She describes how she watched YouTube videos and consequently thought, "do you know what, you can definitely be happy and be gay", an example of the internet offering the ability to discover more positive identity narratives which can be applied to the self (Cohler and Hammack, 2007; Downing, 2013; Wuest, 2014). In the above quote, Emma also repeatedly uses the term big deal to describe how the things she saw online changed her perception that being gay was a big deal.

Emma: ...just made me feel like it wasn't a big deal....And not only was it not a big deal but it was actually something to kind of celebrate...when you see it, it's not a big deal.

Emma had previously used the term big deal when describing how her parents would talk about sexual identity as well as how the gay people she heard of or saw growing up made it seem like a big deal. She continues with her answer to the question above by going on to describe how her internet directly allowed her to counter their negativity.

Emma: When no-ones talking about it but it still exists, it becomes a big deal. And it's hard to say to other people then, like especially say for my parents when they were saying to me 'we're so disappointed in you, we thought you were going to have a great life', well in the back of my head when I started watching these videos I was going 'well I can have a great life' because loads of other people do. So I think that was probably the biggest influence the internet had on me was just seeing other people. Not necessarily even connecting with anyone. Just seeing them.

While at first this seems to describe visibility and the importance Emma found in accessing a someone like me narrative, it also describes a process of “reconstructing frames of social possibility” (Pullen, 2009, p. 167) . Emma describes how the content she accessed online, or more specifically the role models, helped her to reframe her perception that being gay was a big deal into the idea that it was something normal and good, thereby developing resiliency (Craig et al., 2015b). She directly relates this back to the lack of visibility where she lives stating that what she was “really searching for was just anyone who was like me” and that the internet “gave it to me in abundance”. She has made a direct correlation which matches the concept of those from shrunken spaces finding extra value in coping and finding a sense of belonging online (Paradis, 2016). When asked about spaces in which she feels safe or accepted, Emma described how she feels that way with her friends and her girlfriend as they are “people who didn’t have to come around to me just being myself”, while with her family she is, “thinking before I speak and censoring myself a little bit”, associating space with a sense of belonging (Relph, 1976). Later on in the interview Emma came back to this question herself and related it to the internet.

Emma: Actually your previous question, are there any safe spaces, and I was saying my friends and whatever, the internet is actually one of them. More so in the past....that was just a space for me to do whatever I wanted,

look up whatever I wanted, watch what I wanted. I think it was, I genuinely do think it was absolutely essential.

While others described their internet usage as essential in other ways such as finding information or connecting to others, crucially, Emma directly believes it was essential in its role as a safe space, providing an alternative to what felt as an unsafe or unaffirming offline space (Paradis, 2016). While she describes this use as essential, her usage has changed as her needs changed as she states she “relied less and less on the internet” as she “moved through the stages of coming out” and becoming more comfortable. Emma’s description of her journey and how the role of the internet changed throughout it echo Hillier and Harrison’s (2007) argument that same-sex attracted youth practice identity online because it acts as an easier space to negotiate identity. Once Emma ‘moved through the stages’ of identity development and reached a level of self-acceptance and identity integration with her life offline, the internet became much less important to her, indicating it was most relevant in the early stages (Hillier et al., 2001). Emma’s story also involves an authentication of place (Dodge and Kitchin, 2003) as the narrative reframing she engaged with through new storytelling offered her the ability to redefine and shape how she saw herself, particularly when it came to countering negativity from her family (Cohler and Hammack, 2007; Pullen, 2009).

8.9 Shared Narrative Features

While analysing the interviews there were certain narrative patterns which appeared across participants. This section will highlight some of these narrative features.

8.9.1 “I Always Knew”

While the participants all realised that they were non-heterosexual at different points, all of them, expressed some form of “I always knew” or a felt difference (Herek, 2007) from a very young age before continuing on to when they realised that what that difference meant. For example, Mark describes how he always knew, yet describes a process of discovery and acceptance throughout his teens.

Mark: You don’t really realise it at the time. But when I think back I kind of always knew y’know...I kind of discovered it more when I was a teenager....It wasn’t until I was about 17-18 that I kind of started to kind of accept it and say to myself I am gay.

There is a contradiction in this idea, such as when Amy says, “I didn't actually realise I was even though I did at the same time”. Plummer (1995) has identified this reinterpretation of self-narrative as a stage in the coming out story when an individual begins to seek out and reinterpret memories which stem from the truth of the self. It could be argued that this also feeds into an essentialist view of sexual identity because if sexuality is a fundamental part or truth about the self (Brookey, 2002; Foucault, 1978), then it makes sense that an individual would see themselves as always knowing who they are even if they did not have the language or concepts yet to understand it.

8.9.2 Protective factors – Minimising Damage and Developing Resiliency

All participants attributed support to protective factors that they perceived as playing a role in minimising damage and aiding in resiliency. For example, when talking about personal enrichment and resiliency Chloe repeatedly referred to her strong group of friends, Mark identified his mother and the support service and Amy credited the internet as the most important factor. Inversely, Paula identified the support service as her primary protective factor and saw herself as being particularly at-risk due to the absence of access to the support service. These are self-identified protective factors which did not always reflect what I as a researcher would have classified. For example, Finn repeatedly classified his school as an incredibly supportive and open place which he contrasted with home because of his mother’s awkwardness. He described his mother’s attitude as having a negative impact on his life, despite acknowledging that the issue is she was “trying too hard” to show her support. While Finn appeared dissatisfied with his family’s reactions and even attributes it as negative, from an outsider perspective his family accepted his coming out and made an effort to be supportive, thereby forming what I would have considered social support (Mustanski et al., 2011b). There was nothing in the interview which I would have classified as being unsupportive, yet he attributes his protective factors entirely to school and friends.

It is worth asking whether the identification of protective factors act as a narrative tool in the construction of identity narratives, similar to how Plummer (1995) identified features in the coming out story. For example, the reality is that in analysing Chloe’s story she gained support from her family, friends, school and the internet, yet in constructing her own narrative she prioritises her friends as being a transformative supporting character in her story while other sources were useful but not central. All recollections are essentially retellings and in choosing to retell a story there are choices to make about which moments to prioritise and I would argue that within the sexual

identity story young people construct a story about their own protective factors which highlight the unique way they have chosen to conceptualise support.

8.9.3 Redefining Normal – Authenticating Place

One of the key tasks that all the participants dealt with to some extent was redefining what they consider to be normal. This redefinition was based on preconceptions that they had about what was normal for either themselves, non-heterosexuals in general or identity, and draws from sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon, 2005), sexual stigma (Herek, 2007) and master narratives of identity (Cohler and Hammack, 2007). They had to challenge and reconceptualise these preconceptions as they compared themselves with others and tried to understand what their identity meant for their lives. Some involve expectations of life, for instance when Mark said “as a child you’re taught that you grow up, you meet a girl, you get married”, requiring a need to challenge what is possible for heterosexuals versus others (Pullen, 2009). Others involved stereotypes or social baggage (Esterberg, 1997), like when Amy described how she believed that a lot of people in the LGBT community, including herself initially, believed that bisexuals were looking for “attention” or that it was a “phase”. Similarly, Emma associated being a lesbian with a specific aesthetic such as shorter hair or being more “emo”. Preconceptions also form part of early identity configurations (Hammack et al., 2009), like when Amy came out as lesbian initially because she “thought you were one or the other” or when Chloe said she initially described herself as bisexual because “I liked girls and boys”, yet this later evolved into pansexual once she became aware of the term. These preconceptions all serve to define what young people perceive as their own sense of normal. Comparison is a key part of sexual identity development (Cass, 1979; Eliason and Schope, 2007) and so it is during comparison stages that an individual has to challenge their preconceptions and arrive at conclusions which allow them to both stay true to their sense of self while simultaneously relating themselves to a specific identity and constructing a positive narrative based on that identity (Hammack et al., 2009; Hammack and Cohler, 2009a).

For some, who had strong protective factors and positive visibility, redefining normal was a relatively simple process of narrative engagement, such as when Chloe or Finn described how they engaged with specific representations of shared identity for affirmation on YouTube (Wuest, 2014). For example, Chloe described the importance of finding stories from LGBT adults because, “they’ve come out the other end of it and they’re leading totally normal lives”, something that helped her to redefine normal as being an option for her. Finn described how, “the normal life is you grow up, you marry

a girl, you have kids and that's what your life is going to be". For Finn, the internet offered him stories, such as that of a gay couple who adopted which he watched on YouTube, and this challenged the exclusivity of these heterosexual narratives by revealing wider possibilities (Pullen, 2009). He did not need this in all areas, for example, he describes how a lot of the LGBT people he saw, "were my friends so I got a good impression of them", but the internet helped in areas which he could not simply challenge offline.

For others, such as Anthony and Emma, redefining normal was a much more intensive task which required reconfiguring not just *who* they could be but *where* they could be, redefining not just identity but local identity. For example, Anthony described that there was nobody he "would aspire to in the community", no sense of a "group that I will hang out with" and he saw his femininity as being targeted and shamed on a local level. Stemming from this he described using Gaydar to chat to and view others as being transformative to his sense of place.

Anthony: And then with Gaydar it was good because it was more of a local thing where I was anonymous and I could see the people my age that were out and gay, and it kinda, cause like I said before I didn't know anyone that was gay, I didn't see anyone to aspire to in my town, so it was like that is the group. It became a bit more visible to me and it wasn't such a, 'I'm the only gay in the village kinda thing'.

To contrast this, Mark used the exact same phrase, "only gay in the village", at the beginning of his story when asked to describe where he lives. He spoke about how there were other gay people he saw growing up, and while they did not necessarily have easy lives, he knew his mother saw them as normal and that they were present in his area. He did not struggle with the question of *where* he could be, which is a subtle but important distinction in analysing how and why the internet is important to individuals.

It is worth noting too that the word normal itself, which is used as a concept here but has also been mentioned throughout both the questionnaires and interviews, is not without issue. As Warner (2000) has argued, shame and stigma persists around sexuality which is not considered normal, and appeals to respectability often found within the gay and lesbian movement can heighten rather than challenge this shame. While the appropriateness of redefining normal may be questionable, it was clearly a process which each interview participant felt a need to engage in. Arguably, as some of the earlier struggles in internalised stigma from Chapter 6 indicate, this need to

redefine normal has come quite naturally from being othered in a heterosexual world as opposed to being a learned response from a wider LGBT movement. Within this context of feeling othered, redefining normal may mean anything from desiring same-sex marriage and parenting to adopting a queer philosophy and challenging the need for binary, defined identities. In this sense, redefining normal can be understood as redefining what is normal for one's own life rather than redefining the self against what is understood as normal. In fact, for each participant in the interviews, redefining normal involved some aspect of comparison with others who share a similar sexual orientation, but ultimately it involved redefining what normal means for themselves in the context of their own community and sense of place. In this respect, redefining normal is really about authenticating place as to be normal, even if you are different from those around you, ultimately ties into seeing how you can belong and be authentic in a place. It could also be argued that normalcy is only in opposition to non-heterosexuality in a world where heterosexuality is privileged. As Savin-Williams (2006) has suggested, while we typically discuss sexual minority youth in terms of resiliency or vulnerability, ultimately for those who are growing up within an emancipation narrative, normalcy may be a better term. If you perceive your sexuality as being as relevant as your eye colour, then stages of development are not characterised by anything out of the ordinary. This is not the definition of normalcy that was present within the interviews, but it does suggest that the contentiousness of the term normal may also be rooted in a fear of losing the positive parts that came from combating heteronormativity. What was redefining normal within this interview sample, may in the future or for some others in the present simply be normal all along.

8.10 Conclusion

The majority of the 126 questionnaire participants found the internet very supportive or absolutely essential and this chapter concludes that the specifics of why young non-heterosexuals engage with the internet, how they use it, and what impact it has on their lives is largely based on the context of their offline lives, echoing ideas about embodied self and online activity (Baym, 2009). If anything, these stories indicate that making generalizable pronouncements about how and why young people use the internet would greatly underestimate the multifaceted and nuanced factors that influence their usage.

This chapter is highly qualitative and focuses on a very small sample. While that reveals a much more nuanced account of the interaction between place, identity and internet usage, it does mean that the results are limited in terms of generalisability.

While the general idea of redefining normal was present within each of the interviews to some extent, the argument has been made that Emma and Anthony found the internet so essential to authenticating place due to the extent of their offline limitations compared to some of the other participants. While this is sound within the data and corresponds with expected results from the literature, it is ultimately based on a small number of cases and so further research utilising case study or biographical approaches would be useful to examine the extent to which this is borne out among others. Additionally, Paula described the internet as ultimately being inadequate in the face of a perceived complete lack of offline support and mental health difficulties. Little is known about this gap between the internet being more essential if you have less support, but at the same time less useful if you have no support. It could be worth focusing future studies on those with an extreme lack of support or those who may be considered more vulnerable to understand what the process is and whether there are patterns which might indicate when the internet may move from being absolutely essential for authenticating place to simply not enough.

While all the interview participants considered the internet to be important, not all used it as their primary method of authenticating place (Dodge and Kitchin, 2003). Both Anthony and Emma described the internet in a way which made it essential to their process of self-acceptance and identity development, giving them the ability to authenticate place in the absence of offline visibility and resources. Amy describes it as essential after she came out as bisexual but not as important before then due to the role of offline support. It formed a useful role for Mark, Finn, Thomas and Chloe who all found aspects supportive, however, the wider context of support and visibility which they found offline, largely made the internet a complementary aspect of support rather than one of their primary protective factors. Finally, Paula's needs and the lack of support she finds offline, led the internet to be useful but overall insufficient for meeting her support needs.

In his advice to educators and advocates, Stephen Tropiano writes the following about LGBTQ social media usage:

“...social media serve[s] a dual purpose for space-deprived LGBTQ Millennials. The internet can be a haven from the isolation, loneliness and rejection by their family and/or peers that they may experience on a daily basis at home and/or in school. At the same time, an Ethernet or Wi-Fi connection can be a pathway toward the understanding, acceptance and

sense of community that young LGBTQ people seek as they discover, explore and negotiate their sexual identities. (Tropiano, 2014, p. 57)

Evidence of the internet as a haven and the internet as a pathway varied among participants and depended largely on context. Additionally, I would argue that the internet can also offer the additional ability to authenticate place (Dodge and Kitchin, 2003). The concept of the internet authenticating place, as used in this chapter, is not entirely new, after all it echoes the idea of queer realness and the role transformative narratives can play in reconfiguring a potential future or a liveable life (Cohler and Hammack, 2007; Cover, 2016; Downing, 2013; Gray, 2009b; Pullen, 2009). Paradis (2016) also identified the role shrunken space plays in particular internet usage while Hillier and Harrison (2007) observed how space deprived youth can practice their identity online as preparation for offline integration. However, by using a story based analysis, this chapter contributes to literature by adding an understanding of how and why authenticating place for non-heterosexuals may occur through the internet. The narrative feature of protective factors as well as the characterisation of places which each participant engaged in highlighted how it is not as simple as breaking youth into categories of need support versus do not need support or protective factors versus no protective factors. The stories here indicate that the perception of support is one which cannot be completely independently observed as what may appear to be a supportive family or an oppressive school may be interpreted as having much or little importance depending on the individual's perception of it. As this chapter shows, the internet showed the greatest importance for authenticating place when it was identified as the primary protective factor, when it occurred to those who were space deprived in some way, and when there was a particularly strong need to redefine normalcy. It is also important to note that not all young people need the internet to authenticate place. I would argue that ideally, the internet should not be the primary protective factor for a young person, but it does provide an option which is not limited by geography and which previous generations did not have access to (Bond et al., 2009).

9 CONCLUSION

This PhD study sought to understand how non-heterosexual youth in Ireland use the internet for support and how that relates to their sense of place. The study utilised a narrative based, phenomenological approach comprising of a qualitatively focused sequential design in which the first stage of data collection and analysis informed the second stage. The first stage comprised of a questionnaire with 126 responses and the second stage used in-depth follow up interviews based on an adapted form of the problem centred interview technique. The phenomenological approach taken stressed the importance of each participant's perceptions and the meanings that they assign to their experiences. Within this chapter I am going to briefly highlight how each research question was addressed within the findings chapters while highlighting the original contributions made followed by a discussion of the key findings with a focus on the relevance to previous research. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion of the limitations within the research and recommendations for future research.

9.1 Research Questions and Original Contribution

Chapter Six addressed the following research questions:

1. How do non-heterosexual youth perceive their own self-identity and identity development?
2. What support do non-heterosexual youth need?

Chapter Six provided an original contribution which addresses how young non-heterosexuals in Ireland view their sexual identity, mental health and support needs, while considering debates around minority stress and narratives of victimisation flagged by Bryan and Mayock (2016, 2012). It identified the heightened need for support among those who are in the process of identity formation and highlighted the additional difficulties experienced for those who have less binary orientations which do not easily correspond to recognised labels as they may struggle in finding a valid identity with which to achieve identity configuration (Hammack et al., 2009). The analysis challenged the characterization of an at-risk vulnerable narrative of non-heterosexual youth in

Ireland by emphasising the high level of resiliency shown and the ways in which many of the participants found great enrichment in their sexual identity.

Chapter Seven addressed the following research questions:

1. What value do non-heterosexual youth in Ireland place on their internet usage?
2. How do non-heterosexual youth use the internet for support in Ireland?

Chapter Seven presented an analysis of non-heterosexual internet usage and support which provided the first in-depth insight into non-heterosexual internet use in Ireland. It identified that non-heterosexual youth find particular value in narrative engagement which occurs through access to representations and stories. It also highlighted the value found in unique forms of informal learning around coming out, sexual health and connecting with a wider sense of imagined community (Pullen, 2007).

Chapter Eight addressed the following research questions:

1. How does the internet usage of non-heterosexual youth affect their sense of place?
2. How does place influence the importance of internet usage for non-heterosexual youth in Ireland?

Chapter Eight explored context and the role of place in internet usage, providing an in-depth look at how individuals negotiate online support within the backdrop of their own personal narrative. It identified the narrative feature of protective factors which individuals attribute significance to within their own narratives as well as the opportunity for the internet to aid in authenticating place offline by offering opportunities to redefine normal and thereby redefine potential for belonging.

This study provides a useful original contribution to internet research about non-heterosexual youth through the extension of concepts about the interactivity between place, offline lives and internet usage. It is also unique in that it introduces a phenomenological concept of place as being central when discussing the relationship between online and offline factors.

9.2 Discussion

The goal within this study has been to explore the role that the internet plays in supporting non-heterosexual youth aged 18-25 in Ireland. Part of the challenge within this research has been constructing a study which addresses the intersection of a number of fields, namely sexuality studies, psychology, communications and human

geography. This section will discuss the key findings in light of the reviewed literature from these fields

9.2.1 Psychology and Sexuality Studies

This study started out by examining what is really meant by sexuality or sexual identity labels and in the process outlined a social constructionist thesis of sexual identity development. The concept of sexuality has evolved to represent a personal identity that represents a truth about the self (Foucault, 1978; Savin-Williams, 2006; Weeks, 2009). This introduces a narrative angle to studying sexuality as individuals engage with culture and language through sexual scripts or sexual stories in order to understand what is sexual and, ultimately, who they are within that construct of sexuality (Gagnon and Simon, 2005; Giddens, 2003; Plummer, 1995). The social constructionist perspective of sexuality is countered by an essentialist view which sees sexuality as being defined by differing biological states i.e. “I was born this way”, and this rhetoric can be observed in the LGBTQ community, often due to a political necessity of asserting essentialism (Brookey, 2002; Epstein, 1998; Tygart, 2000).

Additionally, discussing support inevitably involves understanding why support is needed and much of the key research on this topic has been based in psychology. The previous Irish-based research on this topic has utilised the minority stress model and largely taken an approach which has highlighted vulnerability and risk (Bryan and Mayock, 2016, 2012). Within the literature there has been contention between those who see minority stress and suicidality as being a key area in which sexual minority youth are at higher risk (Meyer, 2003; Russell, 2003) and those who see focusing on the dangers of minority stress and suicide as posing a danger in itself due to narratives of vulnerability (Cover, 2013; Savin-Williams and Ream, 2003). In taking more of a narrative approach, Cohler and Hammack (2007) have identified two types of narratives used by sexual minority youth, a “struggle and success” narrative which involves overcoming prejudice in a heterosexist world and an “emancipation” narrative in which a post-gay culture of fluidity results in little need to adopt an LGBT identity or overcome any struggle.

There was not much evidence of an emancipation narrative with the findings of the present study, but it should be emphasised that this may be due to the self-selecting nature of the questionnaire, as a person who sees their sexuality as being largely insignificant to their life may not be interested in a study which is framed as being about non-heterosexual internet usage and support. While measuring suicidality or

mental health was also not part of the scope of the present study, the literature did influence a framing of questions around support in a way which would not presume risk or vulnerability. The findings revealed a complexity in how young people view their own sexual identity, which provides empirical recognition of Cover's (2016) point that a queer young person can be both resilient and vulnerable as opposed to a dichotomy between the two.

The concept of enrichment and its level of significance in the study is one which resulted from a deliberate focus on allowing room for narratives of resilience and positivity, particularly as a response to critiques regarding an over focus on vulnerability and at-riskness. In many ways, the subtheme of personal enrichment is deeply tied in with the idea of achieving identity synthesis or authenticity which is found within psychological sexual identity development models (Cass, 1979; Eliason and Schope, 2007; Troiden, 1989) It can also be understood within essentialist framings that see one's sexuality as a fundamental part of the self and self-identity (Brookey, 2002; D'Emilio, 1998; Foucault, 1978), as the implication was that by discovering the self, personal enrichment occurred. Life enrichment focused on the ways in which life experiences had been positively impacted by sexual identity which draws upon a wider sense of an imagined community (Pullen, 2007). This analysis challenged the characterization of an at-risk vulnerable narrative of non-heterosexual youth in Ireland by emphasising the high level of resiliency shown and the ways in which many of the participants found great enrichment in their sexual identity.

Additionally, a significant finding within the theme of stigma is that for some people the major struggle is to understand what they are in terms of a label, and this struggle can be heightened for those who fall outside of a heterosexual/homosexual binary. I created the term valid identities to refer to the need to achieve identity configuration (Hammack et al., 2009) which is complicated if there exists no visible similar identities with which to compare oneself (Eliason and Schope, 2007; Hammack and Cohler, 2009a). This finding really links back to the idea of an inter-reliant relationship between identity and culture (Cohler and Hammack, 2007) as well as the ways in which language and stories of sexuality offer a method of comparison to those who are exploring their own sexual identity (Gray, 2009a; Pullen, 2009; Weeks, 2009). It could be argued that this ultimately links back to a wider struggle between a social constructionist perspective which allows for a choosing of labels among a set of identities which are largely defined by culture along with an essentialist perspective which requires uncovering the truth of the self. These perspectives may be

contradictory, yet also coexisting in the ways in which some non-heterosexual youth are perceiving themselves.

For those who needed support, the most common reason was difficulties during initial stages of realisation and self-acceptance. When considered in the wider context of Ireland being a country that voted in marriage equality, issues brought up around realisation and self-acceptance raise the question of whether gay and lesbian sexuality may be experienced differently than less well understood minority sexual identities. There was some evidence of a division between those who quickly understood their sexuality and had a sense of how their identity could be lived out, in comparison to those who struggled to understand what they are and how they could fit into Irish society, potentially leading to a struggle with perceiving an unliveable life (Cover, 2016). This was particularly vivid within the interviews as Paula specifically described the difficulties of being neither homosexual nor heterosexual and Amy described how coming out as bisexual was much more confusing than when she had come out as lesbian. This was not a clear-cut division as there were those who were gay or lesbian and yet struggled with seeing what their life could be, such as Anthony and Emma, and overall these conclusions are admittedly drawn from a small sample size. However, both Savin-Williams (1998) and Cover (2016) have pointed to the prevalence of gay and lesbian media and cultural representation as a factor which may cause less difficulties with accepting one's sexual identity, and it is worth examining how far that effect extends. The findings here suggest that seeing gay identity as acceptable or valid does not necessarily make life easier for someone who sees themselves as neither straight nor gay.

Another key finding which has relevance in this subject area is the idea of protective factors. The concept of protective factors is used within psychology research about sexual minority youth as a way to discuss resiliency in the face of risk (Eisenberg and Resnick, 2006; Mustanski et al., 2011a; Russell, 2003). However, each interview participant attributed resiliency to specific factors which indicated that they utilised the concept of protective factors as a narrative feature in the retelling of their own identity story, much in the same way that the coming out story (Plummer, 1995) is a narrative feature when an individual constructs their own identity narrative (Giddens, 2003; Hammack and Cohler, 2009a). This provides another understanding of protective factors as there were points during analysis where what I, as a researcher, identified as a protective factor in an individual's story was not what they spoke of as being significant. While an analysis that independently identifies and categorises by

protective factors is useful, it could also be useful to take a phenomenological approach in exploring perceived protective factors and to see what impact this has on studies exploring experiences of support, mental health or identity work.

9.2.2 Communications and Internet Studies

A major strand of focus within this study has been the role of communications technology throughout support, community and identity work. The internet provides a unique intersection between mental health, identity development and human geography due to the opportunity to access narratives outside of limitations of place. Communications technologies and sexual storytelling have together enabled the creation of an LGBT community with both a collective and individual sense of narrative (Meeker, 2006; Plummer, 1995; Pullen, 2009). The uses of the internet which were identified with this chapter are largely what would be expected according to the literature with motivations for use including specific types of informal learning such as to find coming out stories (Alexander and Losh, 2010; Gray, 2009b), to gain information on sexual health (Mitchell et al., 2014; Rose and Friedman, 2013) and to engage with a wider sense of imagined community (Paradis, 2016; Pullen, 2009). Additionally, 73% of participants described the internet as being either absolutely essential or very supportive and the most popular site mentioned was Tumblr, which is not typical within Ireland and aligns with the perception of Tumblr being a counter-public space (Renninger, 2015).

Using a phenomenological approach meant that the analysis of internet use was not based on frequency, but rather stressed perceived importance. Accordingly, when types of usage were ranked, by far the most substantial value was found in usage which involve accessing narratives of others. This is significant as usage which characterised practicing identity (Hillier and Harrison, 2007) or experiential learning (Fox and Ralston, 2016) online was mentioned at points, but overall they were not particularly salient from the participants' perspectives. Narrative uses of the internet, such as viewing tv and video content or finding coming out stories fulfil a need for accessing sexual storytelling (Pullen, 2009) and also provide a method of identity comparison (Eliason and Schope, 2007), and it appears that this type of usage is what the majority of participants found the most valuable. Inversely, traditional, geographical based categories of usage such as finding people for sex or finding details of support services were rated as largely unimportant. One concept which did come up repeatedly is the idea of a people like me narrative, or the need to find representations in which to see the self. People like me can go beyond a simple label such as gay and extend into very

specific types of representation which address other significant identity characteristics such as masculinity/femininity or location, or as one participant described, seeking representations of lesbians with diabetes. This type of narrative engagement is similar to that which Wuest (2014) identified in YouTube videos, and I would agree with his assertion that engaging in shared narratives of representation helps young people to develop resiliency and resist negativity. It is also worth asking what drives this type of narrative engagement. One factor may be that it represents a wider move towards networked individualism and the ability to follow a very personalised and individual path in developing self-identity and connections with others (Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 2002). Another possibility may be that, just like in the previous section, the relative familiarity of sexual storytelling and coming out around being gay and lesbian (Plummer, 1995; Pullen, 2009; Weeks, 1998) has opened the door to much more variety and nuance in the types of stories and experiences being shared. The combination of this sexual storytelling and networked individualism may allow for highly personalised and self-directed identity work to occur, which offers the next generation increased opportunities and life possibilities encountered at a younger age than ever before.

9.2.3 Human geography

Another key feature within this study was taking a more nuanced approach to place. Taking a phenomenological view of place is one which really explores what it means to feel like you belong or to feel like a place belongs to you (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1997), something which is much more personal than a more generalised yet measurable category such as rural vs urban. Additionally, spaces and places are defined socially and relationally (Massey, 1994) which means that how someone sees themselves with others is linked into how they see a place. This was particularly evident within the interviews when participants were asked about places in which they felt safe or unsafe and answers varied from broader places like 'the internet', 'at home' or 'everywhere' to specific relationships such as with friends or with family. A central hypothesis within the research approach was that internet use can never be fully understood separate from offline realities, a concept that is perfectly outlined within this Nancy Baym quote.

Even behaviours that only appear online are put there by embodied people acting in geographic locations embedded in face-to-face social relationships and multimedia environments that shape the meaning and consequences of those online practices. (Baym, 2009, p. 721)

While the first two findings chapters indicate this relationship more loosely, for example, highlighting the value of finding sexual health information online because of limitations in sex education in school, the third findings chapter explored this in much greater detail by evaluating internet use within a participant defined biography. The idea of shrunken spaces (Paradis, 2016) or being space deprived (Hillier and Harrison, 2007) has been used to explain why the internet may become useful to non-heterosexual youth. There was certainly an element of that present within this study as some participants specifically spoke of having no offline representations, information or support and this drove them towards online use, such as Anthony or Emma. However, for others the internet was not necessarily an alternative to a hostile offline world, but just a slightly safer and easier way to begin an identity journey, such as Chloe's use of the internet to explore identity even though she had no concerns about acceptance in her immediate physical social world. The variety of motivations and their interplay with offline factors highlights that non-heterosexual internet use can never be understood as a simple cause and effect situation, but rather that the same act, such as viewing a coming out video, will have varying levels of importance and significance depending on wider life context.

While others have addressed the role the internet can play in allowing room to practice or rehearse a new identity (Hillier and Harrison, 2007; McInroy and Craig, 2017), the analysis presented within this study has focused more on the next step, or how what is encountered online can be used to redefine the self, particularly offline. This process is understood through the concept of narrative engagement used to authenticate place which results from linking Dodge and Kitchin's concept of authenticating place, or finding a way to feel belonging so that you can be authentic in a place, with Gray's descriptions of queer youth interacting with queer realness which they incorporate into their home and locality. By addressing this intersection of online engagement and learning with offline belonging, the present study addressed Downing's call for future research to examine a bi-directional relationship between online support and offline realities and it specifically outlined a process of, "how non-heterosexual young people construct positive identities and new socio-sexual trajectories from this virtual support" (Downing, 2013, p. 55). While they are limited in number and only represent a specific sample, the interviews provided an in-depth account of how this process can occur and what factors may influence how much the internet is used or needed to authenticate place.

9.2.4 Conclusion

My central thesis within this study is that the internet does not provide a one size fits all role but that its role is hugely individual and interacts with the presence or absence of perceived protective factors as well as the opportunities to utilise narrative engagement through visibility and support offline. The first findings chapter provided an understanding of support and identity from participants' perspectives, the second findings chapter outlined some of the specific ways in which internet use was valued by participants and addressed instances where this was directly tied to offline realities. The final findings chapter looked at how internet use was contextualised within the lives of 7 interview participants and it examined how and why the internet was used for authenticating place.

The title for this research is "Changing Spaces: Exploring the role of the internet in supporting non-heterosexual youth aged 18-25 in Ireland" and I would like to end by addressing the idea of changing spaces. Firstly, changing spaces addresses the changing role of space for non-heterosexual youth. Acts such as observing the life of others, finding information about sexual health or feeling part of a non-heterosexual community are all available online and this represents a massive change in the opportunities that were available in the past. In his study of the gay and lesbian community between 1940 and 1970, Meeker (2006) describes communication technology as a central thread in queer history as it allowed social groups and community to develop. In the last 20 years we have seen a drastic change in communication technology that has had a transformative effect on self-identity, narrative engagement opportunities and community. It is a reasonable suggestion that the internet, along with a progressive human rights movement, will be the central thread when assessing the non-heterosexuality and queer history of the present era. The evidence would suggest that one of the biggest changes this will highlight is spatial. It could be argued that changes such as the closures of gay bars or even the commercialisation of LGBT Pride reflect a changing social landscape in which gay and lesbian acceptance is largely becoming more normalised in physical public spaces. Simultaneously, there are those who do not see this acceptance in public or private, as well as those who feel their specific identity is still not understood by either the mainstream or the LGBT community. For these people it is likely that their engagement into narratives of possibility and various forms of informal learning will start with the internet, which introduces a major change for where this identity and acceptance work would have taken place even 25 years ago. There is an irony too in the fact that a more public acceptance may work in conjunction with a more private self-

acceptance, although this could be reflective of an overall move to a more individualised and networked society (Wellman, 2002).

A second aspect of changing spaces is reflected in the idea that the ability to access places of belonging and opportunities for narrative engagement online may ultimately lead to a greater capacity for young people to change the spaces in which they belong through changing their understanding of what life can look like in the places that matter to them. This is an idea echoed in the work of Gray (2009a, 2010) and her concept of applying queer realness. However, while Gray puts a greater emphasis on the structural realities of rural life, my intention within this study has been to assess what young people perceive as their own life and surroundings. While that is of course, situated in a larger sociocultural reality, I found that the participants had a tendency to speak much more relationally about space, drawing on relationships with friends, family and others to construct their sense of belonging in a place. When redefining normal, some participants were able to draw from these relationships, for example, describing how support of friends helped them realise things would be okay, while others determined a more negative reality from the relationships around them and this led to a struggle concerning being authentic or belonging. It is in these situations where accessing narrative possibilities online has the potential to help a young person understand and even plot a journey towards authenticity as they encounter tools which allow them to challenge and reconstruct social possibilities (Pullen, 2009, p. 167) for themselves and their lives.

9.3 Limitations

This study utilised a qualitatively focused sequential design with a strong phenomenological framing. This methodology allowed for a much deeper analysis of internet usage which put a strong focus on individual perceptions of support, place and identity, particularly the use of a case study style, biographical approach within the interviews. Qualitative research designs often face sampling issues due to the limitations of how many cases can be observed and the selectivity found in purposive sampling (Patton, 1999). This study contains those same limitations as a representative sample was not used and the sample size is not large, particularly for the interviews. I have drawn conclusions about authenticating place, partly through questionnaire data, but primarily from the interviews. This is justifiable when considering the scope of the PhD and the additional data and analysis obtained from the questionnaire. However, it does mean that there is the potential for questions around validity to hold greater weight than if more interviews had been conducted. Ultimately, this is a largely

qualitative study and the findings are not suitable for generalisation, but rather the conclusions reached may act as a pointer for future research to further validate and explore.

While this research has incorporated some quantitative elements, such as the ranking of internet uses according to importance, it is ultimately largely qualitative and qualitatively focused. As such, it does sacrifice the ability to draw larger inferences, for example, through comparing participants and their internet usage across various characteristics. While this would uncover useful insights, ultimately it did not fit in with the motivation to uncover the meaning participants ascribed to their own usage based on their own perception of their selves and communities.

This study used a self-selected sample and it is possible that the type of people who chose to participate are those who were particularly motivated in a certain way, for instance those who found great support from the internet. This study has chosen to focus on the phenomenon of those who found support online and there were very few participants who had a different experience. However, this does not necessarily mean that most non-heterosexual youth find the internet important for support and while the findings provide useful insight into how non-heterosexual youth use the internet in Ireland, they cannot assess the frequency or importance of this use in quantitative terms. Additionally, while there is evidence in the literature to suggest that sexual minority youth do find greater use in the internet than their heterosexual peers (GLSEN et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2014), this study cannot draw conclusions about whether this is the case in Ireland as it is not a comparative study.

9.4 Recommendations

It would be useful for future research to provide a comparative Irish based study which uses a representative sample of young people of all orientations while addressing information seeking practices online, particularly in the area of sexual health information. This would provide useful insight into heterosexual internet practices which has its own youth work implications, but it would also allow for comparisons to be made between heterosexual and non-heterosexual internet usage.

This study has not assessed key characteristics such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity or education level, and while this was in favour of utilising a more phenomenological analysis, it would be highly useful and significant for future research to assess internet usage and importance in a more generalisable and quantifiable way.

In addition, while this study did not offer conclusions about whether there is a rising post-gay sentiment in Ireland, it did highlight the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which young non-heterosexuals in Ireland construct and perform their identity. As highlighted in the more nuanced accounts of identity offered by the four females who participated in the interviews, simple identity labels options such as those typically used in survey research may not offer a real opportunity to understand how young people see themselves or how self-identity may change over time. It would be useful for future research to thoroughly explore the trends of sexual minority identity in Ireland as a comprehensive understanding of the topic would inform further Irish based research and offer new insight in assessing claims about identity changes such as those posited by Savin-Williams (2006).

Throughout this research there was evidence of the ways in which those who identify outside of a homosexual vs heterosexual norm had extra difficulty in accepting themselves and finding others like them. This was evident from questionnaire participants who described not knowing who they were or feeling like they did not see representation of themselves which offered an authentic identity. It was particularly salient when Amy described how she no longer felt as comfortable or welcome in the support service she attended when she came out as bisexual, having previously been known as lesbian. As the internet provides more options and understanding of identities beyond gay and lesbian, or beyond LGBT, there is a greater need for research which specifically addresses the needs of those who identify outside a heterosexual vs. homosexual binary. It is necessary for those who work with or support young people to ensure that they are aware of the variety of identity narratives available and that the resources are in place to offer support which is inclusive of all orientations and identities, an objective which requires more focused research. Additionally, it would be useful for further research to examine whether the support needs of sexual minority youth in Ireland are changing in a way which might mean that those who are seeing higher levels of societal support and media representation may require less support than those who are experiencing the opposite, and this may mean a shifting focus from the lesbian and gay community specifically towards more underrepresented parts of the LGBTQ+ community.

As well as research recommendations, there are also practical possibilities for how the findings in this research could be applied. One such application is the potential to collect Irish based narratives from non-heterosexuals in Ireland and make them accessible online. While it is not customary to present new material in the conclusion,

two of the participants did talk about the possibilities in providing Irish based content. Although it was not relevant to present within the findings, I am including their comments here as it is relevant to this discussion of practical recommendations.

Interviewer: And I'm guessing too that a lot of the content, like the videos and things like that would have been from places other than Ireland, would that be right?

Emma: Absolutely yeah. Mostly the states, maybe England... It's very unusual I think to see stuff coming out of Ireland. And I know that people are out there making stuff but it kind of doesn't seem to get on the internet. And I think maybe if there were a couple who make good youtube videos who happen to be from Ireland and happen to be gay that would be helpful because you recognise places they were. Like sometimes with the States it can feel very far away and like a magical land where everything's fine when here isn't. But I certainly, I know now that there are people from Ireland, but I didn't back then when I first started watching stuff.

Chloe also made the following observation in response to the same question:

Chloe: ... watching people in videos in like San Francisco and things, I'm like 'it's grand there' you know. It's not like they're walking around [her town]....I think if there had been people talking about their lives, or people writing news articles, you know, blogs and things I think I would have read them, watched them, and felt like they were legit because they were backed up, because it was official.

The idea of a 'people like me' narrative emerged repeatedly throughout this research. While official online resources such as information about coming out, identity acceptance or sexual health are important to provide, youth work organisations should consider the potential of providing a website or video series which would present stories from non-heterosexuals at different stages in life and living in various parts of the country. A resource such as this would seek to provide an Irish based, positive representation of non-heterosexuality which offers a people like me narrative. While the It Gets Better campaign functions in a similar way, it has been criticised for adopting a view of resiliency and hopefulness which is based on escaping from school and adolescent social environments though adulthood as well as showing futures which are decidedly privileged and limited in their diversity of experience (Cover, 2013). Rather than replicating a campaign like It Gets Better, I would like to see a collection

of Irish based life stories told from various perspectives and different stages of life. These stories would be media representations of real lives which offer non-heterosexual youth the opportunity to both access and potentially see themselves in the narrative possibilities offered, essentially helping young people to define their own normal rather than showing them what is normative.

This research also has practical implications for those who work with young people, both in LGBT settings and otherwise. I would echo the encouragement that Paradis (2016) issues to educators and youth workers, which is to feel comfortable in directing non-heterosexual youth towards the internet and to ensure that young people have access to online resources in places like schools or libraries without encountering restrictions due to content filters. Additionally, it may be useful for those who work with young people to create their own collection of online resources, such as Tumblr pages, coming out videos or other forms of narrative work, which they can then offer as a starting point to those who may be in the early stages of their identity development.

10 REFERENCES

- Adam, B.D., 2000. Love and Sex in Constructing Identity Among Men Who Have Sex with Men. *Int. J. Sex. Gend. Stud.* 5, 325–339. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010176031080>
- Alexander, J., Losh, E., 2010. A YouTube of one's own? Coming out videos as rhetorical action, in: Pullen, C., Cooper, M. (Eds.), *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*. Routledge, New York, pp. 37–50.
- Anderson, B.R.O., 2006. *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso, London; New York.
- Auerbach, C., Silverstein, L.B., 2003. *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis*. NYU Press, New York.
- Augé, M., 1995. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso, London ; New York.
- Baker, M.J., Foy, A., 2008. *Business and management research: how to complete your research project successfully*, 2. ed. ed. Westburn, Helensburgh.
- Barron, M., Stephens, A., 2012. Section Three - Working with LGBT young people, in: NYCI, Youthnet (Eds.), *Access All Areas - A Diversity Toolkit for the Youth Work Sector*.
- Barry, M.M., 2001. Promoting positive mental health: theoretical frameworks for practice. *Int. J. Ment. Health Promot.* 3, 25–34.
- Batty, M., 1997. Virtual geography. *Futures* 29, 337–352. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287\(97\)00018-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287(97)00018-9)
- Baym, N.K., 2009. A Call for Grounding in the Face of Blurred Boundaries. *J. Comput.-Mediat. Commun.* 14, 720–723. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01461.x>
- Belong To, 2018. *Groups - BeLonGTo Youth Services [WWW Document]*. URL <http://www.belongto.org/groups.aspx> (accessed 1.2.18).
- Bergman, D., 1991. *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature*. University of Wisconsin Press, London.
- Berry, C., Martin, F., Yue, A., 2003. *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*. Duke University Press.
- Blumer, H., 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Prentice-Hall, Inc., New Jersey.
- Bond, B.J., Hefner, V., Drogos, K.L., 2009. Information-Seeking Practices during the Sexual Development of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals: The Influence and Effects of Coming Out in a Mediated Environment. *Sex. Cult.* 13, 32–50. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-008-9041-y>
- Bontempo, D.E., D'Augelli, A.R., 2002. Effects of at-school victimization and sexual orientation on lesbian, gay, or bisexual youths' health risk behavior. *J. Adolesc. Health* 30, 364–374.

- Borzekowski, D.L.G., 2006. Adolescents' use of the Internet: a controversial, coming-of-age resource. *Adolesc. Med. Clin.* 17, 205–216. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.admecli.2005.10.006>
- Bostwick, W.B., Meyer, I., Aranda, F., Russell, S., Hughes, T., Birkett, M., Mustanski, B., 2014. Mental Health and Suicidality Among Racially/Ethnically Diverse Sexual Minority Youths. *Am. J. Public Health* 104, 1129–1136. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301749>
- boyd, danah, 2014. *It's complicated: the social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Bray, A., 1982. *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*. Gay Men's Press, London.
- Brickell, C., 2012. Sexuality, power and the sociology of the internet. *Curr. Sociol.* 60, 28–44.
- Brookey, R.A., 2002. *Reinventing the male homosexual: The rhetoric and power of the gay gene*. Indiana University Press.
- Brown, G., 2008. Urban (Homo)Sexualities: Ordinary Cities and Ordinary Sexualities. *Geogr. Compass* 2, 1215–1231. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2008.00127.x>
- Brown, G., Browne, K., Lim, J., 2007. Introduction, or Why Have a Book on Geographies of Sexualities?, in: Browne, K., Lim, J., Brown, G. (Eds.), *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices, and Politics*. Ashgate, Aldershot, Hampshire; Burlington, VT.
- Bryan, A., Mayock, P., 2016. Supporting LGBT Lives? Complicating the suicide consensus in LGBT mental health research. *Sexualities* 20, 65–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716648099>
- Bryan, A., Mayock, P., 2012. Speaking Back to Dominant Constructions of LGBT Lives: Complexifying “at riskness” for Self-harm and Suicidality among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth. *Ir. J. Anthropol.* 15, 8–15.
- Buttimer, A., 1976. Grasping the Dynamism of Lifeworld. *Ann. Assoc. Am. Geogr.* 66, 277–292. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1976.tb01090.x>
- Cannon, M., Coughlan, H., Clarke, M., Harley, M., Kelleher, I., 2013. *The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland: A report of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research across the Lifespan (PERL) Group*. Royal College of Surgeons Ireland, Dublin.
- Cass, V.C., 1979. Homosexuality Identity Formation: *J. Homosex.* 4, 219–235. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v04n03_01
- Castells, M., 1989. *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring and the Urban-Regional Process*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Castells, M., 1983. *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Chauncey, G., 1994. *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the making of the gay male world, 1890-1940*. Basic Books.
- Chirrey, D.A., 2011. Formulating dispositions in coming out advice. *Discourse Stud.* 13, 283–298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445611400672>
- Cohler, B.J., Hammack, P.L., 2007. The Psychological World of the Gay Teenager: Social Change, Narrative, and “Normality.” *J. Youth Adolesc.* 36, 47–59.
- Coleman, E., 1982. Developmental Stages of the Coming Out Process. *J. Homosex.* 7, 31–43. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v07n02_06

- Connelly, F.M., Clandinin, D., Jean, 1990. Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educ. Res.* 19, 2–14.
- Conrad, K., 2001. Queer Treasons: Homosexuality and Irish National Identity. *Cult. Stud.* 15, 124–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380010012630>
- Cover, R., 2016. *Queer youth suicide, culture and identity: unliveable lives?* Routledge, London; New York.
- Cover, R., 2013. Queer Youth Resilience: Critiquing the Discourse of Hope and Hopelessness in LGBT Suicide Representation. *MC J.* 16.
- Cowan, D.E., 2005. Online U-Topia: Cyberspace and the Mythology of Placelessness. *J. Sci. Study Relig.* 44, 257–264. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2005.00284.x>
- Craig, S.L., McInroy, L., 2014. You Can Form a Part of Yourself Online: The Influence of New Media on Identity Development and Coming Out for LGBTQ Youth. *J. Gay Lesbian Ment. Health* 18, 95–109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2013.777007>
- Craig, S.L., McInroy, L., McCready, L.T., Alaggia, R., 2015a. Media: A Catalyst for Resilience in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth. *J. LGBT Youth* 12, 254–275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2015.1040193>
- Craig, S.L., McInroy, L.B., McCready, L.T., Cesare, D.M.D., Pettaway, L.D., 2015b. Connecting Without Fear: Clinical Implications of the Consumption of Information and Communication Technologies by Sexual Minority Youth and Young Adults. *Clin. Soc. Work J.* 43, 159–168. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-014-0505-2>
- Crenshaw, K., 1989. Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *Univ. Chic. Leg. Forum* 1989, 8.
- Cresswell, T., 2008. *Key texts in human geography.* SAGE, Los Angeles.
- Creswell, J.W., 2013. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*, 3rd ed. ed. SAGE Publications, Los Angeles.
- Crotty, M., 1998. *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process.* Sage.
- D’Augelli, A.R., Grossman, A.H., Salter, N.P., Vasey, J.J., Starks, M.T., Sinclair, K.O., 2005. Predicting the Suicide Attempts of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth. *Suicide Life Threat. Behav.* 35, 646–660. <https://doi.org/10.1521/suli.2005.35.6.646>
- Deaux, K., 1993. Reconstructing Social Identity. *Pers. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 19, 4–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167293191001>
- DeHaan, S., Kuper, L.E., Magee, J.C., Bigelow, L., Mustanski, B.S., 2013. The Interplay between Online and Offline Explorations of Identity, Relationships, and Sex: A Mixed-Methods Study with LGBT Youth. *J. Sex Res.* 50, 421–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2012.661489>
- DeLamater, J.D., Hyde, J.S., 1998. Essentialism vs. social constructionism in the study of human sexuality. *J. Sex Res.* 35, 10–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499809551913>
- D’Emilio, J., 1998. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: Second Edition.* University of Chicago Press.

- Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S., 2005. The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research, in: Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.
- Diamond, L.M., 2003. What does sexual orientation orient? A biobehavioral model distinguishing romantic love and sexual desire. *Psychol. Rev.* 110, 173–192. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.110.1.173>
- Diamond, L.M., 2000. Sexual identity, attractions, and behavior among young sexual-minority women over a 2-year period. *Dev. Psychol.* 36, 241–250. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.36.2.241>
- Dodge, M., Kitchin, R., 2003. *Mapping cyberspace*. Routledge, London; New York.
- Downing, G., 2013. Virtual youth: non-heterosexual young people's use of the internet to negotiate their identities and socio-sexual relations. *Child. Geogr.* 11, 44–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2013.743280>
- Eisenberg, M.E., Resnick, M.D., 2006. Suicidality among Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth: The Role of Protective Factors. *J. Adolesc. Health* 39, 662–668. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2006.04.024>
- Eliason, M.J., 1996. Identity Formation for Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Persons: *J. Homosex.* 30, 31–58. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v30n03_03
- Eliason, M.J., Schope, R., 2007. Shifting Sands or Solid Foundation? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Identity Formation, in: Meyer, I.H., MPH, M.E.N. (Eds.), *The Health of Sexual Minorities*. Springer US, pp. 3–26.
- Elkink, J.A., Farrell, D.M., Reidy, T., Suiter, J., 2017. Understanding the 2015 marriage referendum in Ireland: context, campaign, and conservative Ireland. *Ir. Polit. Stud.* 32, 361–381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2016.1197209>
- Epstein, S., 1998. Gay politics, ethnic identity: The limits of social constructionism. *Soc. Perspect. Lesbian Gay Stud. Read.* 134–159.
- Erikson, E.H., 1968. *Identity: Youth and crisis*. WW Norton & Company.
- Esterberg, K., 1997. *Lesbian & Bisexual Identities*. Temple University Press.
- Fenn, J., 1999. *When to Leap on the Hype Cycle*. Gartner Group.
- Fergusson, D.M., Horwood, L.J., Beautrais, A.L., 1999. Is sexual orientation related to mental health problems and suicidality in young people? *Arch. Gen. Psychiatry* 56, 876–880.
- Ferriter, D., 2009. *Occasions of sin: sex and society in modern Ireland*. Profile Books, London.
- Foucault, M., 1986. Of Other Spaces. *Diacritics* 16, 22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>
- Foucault, M., 1978. *The history of sexuality*. N. Y. Pantheon.
- Fox, J., Ralston, R., 2016. Queer identity online: Informal learning and teaching experiences of LGBTQ individuals on social media. *Comput. Hum. Behav.* 65, 635–642. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.06.009>
- Fox, R.C., 2003. Bisexual Identities, in: Garnets, L., Kimmel, D. (Eds.), *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Experiences*. Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 86–129.
- Fraiberg, A., 1995. Electronic fans, interpretive flames: Performative sexualities and the Internet. *Works Days* 196–207.

- Fraser, N., 1990. Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. *Soc. Text* 56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>
- Frost, D.M., Lehavot, K., Meyer, I.H., 2013. Minority stress and physical health among sexual minority individuals. *J. Behav. Med.* 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-013-9523-8>
- Gagnon, J.H., Simon, W., 2005. *Sexual conduct: the social sources of human sexuality*, 2nd ed. ed. AldineTransaction, New Brunswick [N.J.].
- GCN, 2016. LGBT Pavee And BeLonG To Youth Services Joined Forces To Help LGBT Travellers [WWW Document]. GCN. URL <https://gcn.ie/lgbt-pavee-belong-youth-services-joined-forces-help-lgbt-travellers/> (accessed 6.2.18).
- Giambrone, B., 2013. #TransInclusion. GCN 22.
- Gibson, G., McCusker, P., Taylor-Smith, E., 2010. Online tools and their Impact on young people. Presented at the ECEG 2010 10th European Conference on eGovernment, University of Limerick, Ireland.
- Giddens, A., 2003. *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*, Reprint. ed. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Giddens, A., 1992a. *The transformation of intimacy: sexuality, love, and eroticism in modern societies*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif.
- Giddens, A., 1992b. *The transformation of intimacy: sexuality, love, and eroticism in modern societies*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California.
- Glaad, 2015. 2015 Where We Are on TV.
- Glaser, B.G., Strauss, A.L., 1967. *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine, Chicago.
- GLSEN, CiPHR, CCRC, 2013. *Out online: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth on the Internet*.
- Goffman, E., 1986. *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Goffman, E., 1956. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre, Edinburgh.
- Gomillion, S.C., Giuliano, T.A., 2011. The influence of media role models on gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity. *J. Homosex.* 58, 330–354.
- Graham, S., 1998. The end of geography or the explosion of place? Conceptualizing space, place and information technology. *Prog. Hum. Geogr.* 22, 165–185. <https://doi.org/10.1191/030913298671334137>
- Gray, M.L., 2010. From Websites to Wal-Mart: Youth, Identity Work, and the Queering of Boundary Publics in Small Town, USA, in: Pullen, C., Cooper, M. (Eds.), *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*. Routledge, New York.
- Gray, M.L., 2009a. Out in the country: youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America, *Intersections: transdisciplinary perspectives on genders and sexualities*. New York University Press, New York.
- Gray, M.L., 2009b. Negotiating Identities/Queering Desires: Coming Out Online and the Remediation of the Coming-Out Story. *J. Comput.-Mediat. Commun.* 14, 1162–1189. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01485.x>
- Groenewald, T., 2008. A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated. *Int. J. Qual. Methods* 3, 42–55.

- Gross, L., 2007. Foreword, in: *Queer Online: Media Technology & Sexuality, Digital Formations*. Peter Lang, New York.
- Grossman, A.H., 1997. Growing Up with a “Spoiled Identity.” *J. Gay Lesbian Soc. Serv.* 6, 45–56. https://doi.org/10.1300/J041v06n03_03
- Grossman, A.H., Kerner, M.S., 1998. Self-Esteem and Supportiveness as Predictors of Emotional Distress in Gay Male and Lesbian Youth. *J. Homosex.* 35, 25–39. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v35n02_02
- Guba, E.G., Lincoln, Y.S., 1994. Competing paradigms in qualitative research, in: Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 105–117.
- Habermas, J., 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. MIT Press, Cambridge.
- Halberstam, J., 2005. *In a queer time and place: Transgender bodies, subcultural lives*. NYU Press.
- Halperin, D.M., 1990. *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love*. Psychology Press.
- Hamer, D.H., Hu, S., Magnuson, V.L., Hu, N., Pattatucci, A.M., 1993. A linkage between DNA markers on the X chromosome and male sexual orientation. *Science* 261, 321–327. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.8332896>
- Hammack, P.L., Cohler, B.J., 2009a. Narrative Engagement and Stories of Sexual Identity: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Study of Sexual Lives, in: Cohler, B.J., Hammack, P.L. (Eds.), *The Story of Sexual Identity: Narrative Perspectives on the Gay and Lesbian Life Course*. Oxford University Press, Oxford ; New York, pp. 3–22.
- Hammack, P.L., Cohler, B.J., 2009b. *The story of sexual identity: narrative perspectives on the gay and lesbian life course*. Oxford University Press, Oxford ; New York.
- Hammack, P.L., Cohler, B.J., 2009c. Preface, in: Cohler, B.J., Hammack, P.L. (Eds.), *The Story of Sexual Identity: Narrative Perspectives on the Gay and Lesbian Life Course*. Oxford University Press, Oxford ; New York.
- Hammack, P.L., Thompson, E.M., Pilecki, A., 2009. Configurations of identity among sexual minority youth: Context, desire, and narrative. *J. Youth Adolesc.* 38, 867–883.
- Harper, G.W., Bruce, D., Serrano, P., Jamil, O.B., 2009. The role of the Internet in the sexual identity development of gay and bisexual male adolescents, in: Hammack, P.L., Cohler, B.J. (Eds.), *The Story of Sexual Identity: Narrative Perspectives on the Gay and Lesbian Life Course*. pp. 297–326.
- Hatzenbuehler, M.L., 2011. The Social Environment and Suicide Attempts in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth. *PEDIATRICS* 127, 896–903. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2010-3020>
- Heath, S., Brooks, R., Cleaver, E., Ireland, E., 2009. *Researching young people’s lives*. Sage.
- Herek, G.M., 2007. Confronting Sexual Stigma and Prejudice: Theory and Practice. *J. Soc. Issues* 63, 905–925. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2007.00544.x>
- Herek, G.M., 2004. Beyond “homophobia”: Thinking about sexual prejudice and stigma in the twenty-first century. *Sex. Res. Soc. Policy* 1, 6–24.

- Herek, G.M., Chopp, R., Strohl, D., 2007. Sexual stigma: Putting sexual minority health issues in context, in: *The Health of Sexual Minorities*. Springer, pp. 171–208.
- Hesse-Biber, S.N., Rodriguez, D., Frost, N.A., 2015. A Qualitatively Driven Approach to Multimethod and Mixed Methods Research, in: Hesse-Biber, S.N., Johnson, B. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Multimethod and Mixed Methods Research Inquiry*, Oxford Library of Psychology. Oxford University Press, Oxford ; New York.
- Hewitt, C., 1998. Homosexual demography: Implications for the spread of AIDS. *J. Sex Res.* 35, 390–396. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499809551957>
- Higgins, A., Doyle, L., Downes, C., Murphy, R., Sharek, D., DeVries, J., Begley, T., McCann, E., Sheeran, F., Smyth, S., 2016a. *The LGBTIreland Report: national study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland*. GLEN and BeLonG To, Dublin.
- Higgins, A., Doyle, L., Downes, C., Murphy, R., Sharek, D., DeVries, J., Begley, T., McCann, E., Sheeran, F., Smyth, S., 2016b. *Key Findings - The LGBTIreland Report: national study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland*. GLEN and BeLonG To, Dublin.
- Higgins, A., Sharek, D., McCann, E., Sheeran, F., Glacken, M., Breen, M., McCarron, M., 2011. *Visible lives: Identifying the experiences and needs of older lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender people in Ireland*.
- Hillier, L., Harrison, L., 2007. Building Realities Less Limited Than Their Own: Young People Practising Same-Sex Attraction on the Internet. *Sexualities* 10, 82–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460707072956>
- Hillier, L., Horsley, P., Kurdas, C., Australia, Department of Health and Aged Care, Australian Research Centre in Sex, H.& S., 2001. “It’s just easier”: the internet as a safety-net for same sex attracted young people. Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society, Melbourne.
- Horowitz, J.L., Newcomb, M.D., 2002. A Multidimensional Approach to Homosexual Identity. *J. Homosex.* 42, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v42n02_01
- HSE LGBT Health sub-committee, 2009. *LGBT HEALTH: Towards meeting the health care needs of lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender people*.
- Hu, S., Pattatucci, A.M.L., Patterson, C., Li, L., Fulker, D.W., Cherny, S.S., Kruglyak, L., Hamer, D.H., 1995. Linkage between sexual orientation and chromosome Xq28 in males but not in females. *Nat. Genet.* 11, 248–256. <https://doi.org/10.1038/ng1195-248>
- Hunter, D., 2003. Cyberspace as Place and the Tragedy of the Digital Anticommons. *Calif. Law Rev.* 91, 439. <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38PF0V>
- Inglis, T., Donnelly, S., 2011. Local and national belonging in a globalised world: the case of contemporary Ireland. *Ir. J. Sociol.* 19, 127–143.
- Institute of Medicine (U.S.) (Ed.), 2011. *The health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people: building a foundation for better understanding*. National Academies Press, Washington, DC.
- Ipsos MRBI, 2016. *Social Networking Tracker - January 2016*.
- Ipsos MRBI, 2015. *Social Networking Quarterly - August 2015*.

- Ireland, Central Statistics Office, 2012. Profile 2: older and younger. Stationary Office, Dublin.
- Jenkins, H., 2006. *Convergence culture: where old and new media collide*. New York University Press, New York.
- Jensen, K.B., 2011. New Media, Old Methods - Internet Methodologies and the Online/Offline Divide, in: Consalvo, M., Ess, C. (Eds.), *The Handbook of Internet Studies*, Handbooks in Communication and Media. Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA.
- Johnston, L., Longhurst, R., 2009. *Space, Place, and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Joint Committee on Health and Children, H. of the O., 2006. *The High Level of Suicide in Irish Suicide (No. Seventh Report)*.
- Josselson, R., 2006. Narrative research and the challenge of accumulating knowledge. *Narrat. Inq.* 16, 3–10.
- Jurgenson, N., 2012. When Atoms Meet Bits: Social Media, the Mobile Web and Augmented Revolution. *Future Internet* 4, 83–91. <https://doi.org/10.3390/fi4010083>
- Jurgenson, N., 2011. Digital Dualism versus Augmented Reality [WWW Document]. *Cyborgology*. URL <http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/02/24/digital-dualism-versus-augmented-reality/> (accessed 11.4.13).
- Katz, J., 1995. *The invention of heterosexuality*. Dutton, New York.
- Katz, J.N., 2003. *The invention of heterosexuality*, in: *Privilege: A Reader*. Basic Books.
- Kelleher, C., 2009. Minority stress and health: Implications for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) young people. *Couns. Psychol. Q.* 22, 373–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070903334995>
- Kinnish, K.K., Strassberg, D.S., Turner, C.W., 2005. Sex differences in the flexibility of sexual orientation: A multidimensional retrospective assessment. *Arch. Sex. Behav.* 34, 173–183.
- Kitzinger, C., Wilkinson, S., 1995. Transitions from heterosexuality to lesbianism: The discursive production of lesbian identities. *Dev. Psychol.* 31, 95–104. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.31.1.95>
- Knobel, M., Lankshear, C., 2007. *A new literacies sampler*. P. Lang, New York.
- Kuper, L.E., Mustanski, B.S., 2014. Using Narrative Analysis to Identify Patterns of Internet Influence on the Identity Development of Same-Sex Attracted Youth. *J. Adolesc. Res.* 29, 499–532. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558414528975>
- Lady Gaga, 2011. *Born This Way, Born This Way*. Interscope Records.
- Lancaster, R.N., 1988. Subject Honor and Object Shame: The Construction of Male Homosexuality and Stigma in Nicaragua. *Ethnology* 27, 111–125. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3773623>
- Langdridge, D., 2007. *Phenomenological psychology: theory, research and method*. Pearson, Prentice Hall, Harlow, England.
- Layte, R.D., McGee, H.P., Quail, A., Rundle, K., Cousins, G., Donnelly, C.D., Mulcahy, F.P., Conroy, R.D., 2006. *The Irish study of sexual health and relationships health among young people In Ireland main report*. Crisis Pregnancy Agency and the Department of Health and Children (DOHC).

- Lefebvre, H., 1991. *The production of space*. Blackwell, Malden, Mass. [u.a.]
- Legate, N., Ryan, R.M., Weinstein, N., 2012. Is Coming Out Always a “Good Thing”? Exploring the Relations of Autonomy Support, Outness, and Wellness for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals. *Soc. Psychol. Personal. Sci.* 3, 145–152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550611411929>
- LGBT Pavee, n.d. *Gay Travellers* [WWW Document]. URL <http://lgbtpavee.yolasite.com/> (accessed 6.2.18).
- Luthar, S.S., Cicchetti, D., Becker, B., 2000. The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Dev.* 71, 543–562.
- Mackin, L., 2016. ‘An alternative community center’: the role of nightclubs in the LGBT community [WWW Document]. *Ir. Times*. URL <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/an-alternative-community-center-the-role-of-nightclubs-in-the-lgbt-community-1.2689116> (accessed 5.26.18).
- Macklemore, Lewis, R., 2012. *Same Love, The Heist*.
- Madianou, M., Miller, D., 2013. Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication. *Int. J. Cult. Stud.* 16, 169–187. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877912452486>
- Magee, J.C., Bigelow, L., DeHaan, S., Mustanski, B.S., 2012. Sexual Health Information Seeking Online A Mixed-Methods Study Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Young People. *Health Educ. Behav.* 39, 276–289.
- Mannix-McNamara, P., O’Grady, E., Devaney, E., Jourdan, D., 2013. Tackling social and health inequalities: vulnerability among the young lesbian, gay and bisexual population in Ireland. *Psychol. Sex.* 4, 268–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2012.662694>
- Marcia, J.E., 1966. Development and validation of ego-identity status. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 3, 551.
- Marmor, J., 1980. Epilogue: Homosexuality and the issue of mental illness, in: Marmor, J. (Ed.), *Homosexual Behaviour: A Modern Reappraisal*. Basic Books, New York, pp. 391–401.
- Marshall, B., Cardon, P., Poddar, A., Fontenot, R., 2013. Does sample size matter in qualitative research?: A review of qualitative interviews in IS research. *J. Comput. Inf. Syst.* 54, 11–22.
- Martin, A.D., Hetrick, E.S., 1988. The stigmatization of the gay and lesbian adolescent. *J. Homosex.* 15, 163–183.
- Massey, D., 2005. *For Space*. Sage, London.
- Massey, D.B., 1994. *Space, place, and gender*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Mayock, P., Bryan, A., Carr, N., Kitching, K., 2009. *Supporting LGBT lives: a study of the mental health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people*. Dublin GLEN.
- McCann, E., Sharek, D., 2014. Survey of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people’s experiences of mental health services in Ireland. *Int. J. Ment. Health Nurs.* 23, 118–127.
- McGrattan, C., 2013. #LGBTSoup. *GCN* 25.

- McInroy, L.B., Craig, S.L., 2017. Perspectives of LGBTQ emerging adults on the depiction and impact of LGBTQ media representation. *J. Youth Stud.* 20, 32–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1184243>
- McKie, R.M., Lachowsky, N.J., Milhausen, R.R., 2015. The Positive Impact of Technology on Young Gay Men’s Dating and Sexual Relationships in Canada: Results From a Focus Group Study. *J. LGBT Youth* 12, 19–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2014.935552>
- McLuhan, M., 1964. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Meeker, M., 2006. *Contacts desired: gay and lesbian communications and community, 1940s-1970s*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Meyer, I.H., 2010. The Right Comparisons in Testing the Minority Stress Hypothesis: Comment on Savin-Williams, Cohen, Joyner, and Rieger (2010). *Arch. Sex. Behav.* 39, 1217–1219. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-010-9670-8>
- Meyer, I.H., 2003. Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: Conceptual Issues and Research Evidence. *Psychol. Bull.* 129, 674–697. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674>
- Meyer, I.H., 1995. Minority Stress and Mental Health in Gay Men. *J. Health Soc. Behav.* 36, 38. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2137286>
- Meyer, I.H., Ouellette, S.C., Haile, R., McFarlane, T.A., 2011. “We’d Be Free”: Narratives of Life Without Homophobia, Racism, or Sexism. *Sex. Res. Soc. Policy* 8, 204–214. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-011-0063-0>
- Meyrowitz, J., 1985. *No sense of place: the impact of electronic media on social behavior*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Minton, S.J., Dahl, T., O’Moore, A.M., Tuck, D., 2008. An exploratory survey of the experiences of homophobic bullying among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered young people in Ireland. *Ir. Educ. Stud.* 27, 177–191.
- Mitchell, K.J., Ybarra, M.L., Korchmaros, J.D., Kosciw, J.G., 2014. Accessing sexual health information online: use, motivations and consequences for youth with different sexual orientations. *Health Educ. Res.* 29, 147–157. <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyt071>
- Morse, J.M., 2010. Simultaneous and Sequential Qualitative Mixed Method Designs. *Qual. Inq.* 16, 483–491. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410364741>
- Morse, J.M., 2003. Principles of mixed methods and multimethod research design. *Handb. Mix. Methods Soc. Behav. Res.* 1, 189–208.
- Morse, J.M., Niehaus, L., Wolfe, R.R., Wilkins, S., 2006. The role of the theoretical drive in maintaining validity in mixed-method research. *Qual. Res. Psychol.* 3, 279–291. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478088706070837>
- Mustanski, B., Lyons, T., Garcia, S.C., 2011a. Internet Use and Sexual Health of Young Men Who Have Sex with Men: A Mixed-Methods Study. *Arch. Sex. Behav.* 40, 289–300. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-009-9596-1>
- Mustanski, B., Newcomb, M.E., Garofalo, R., 2011b. Mental Health of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths: A Developmental Resiliency Perspective. *J. Gay Lesbian Soc. Serv.* 23, 204–225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2011.561474>

- Nadal, K.L., 2008. Preventing racial, ethnic, gender, sexual minority, disability, and religious microaggressions: Recommendations for promoting positive mental health. *Prev. Couns. Psychol. Theory Res. Pract. Train.* 2, 22–27.
- Nadal, K.L., Issa, M.-A., Leon, J., Meterko, V., Wideman, M., Wong, Y., 2011. Sexual orientation microaggressions: “Death by a thousand cuts” for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. *J. LGBT Youth* 8, 234–259.
- National Office for Suicide Prevention, 2012. National Office for Suicide Prevention Annual Report 2012.
- Negroponte, N., 1996. *Being Digital*. Vintage Books, New York.
- Norris v. A.G. [1983] IESC 3; [1984] IR 36, 1983.
- Olson, K.K., 2005. Cyberspace as Place and the Limits of Metaphor. *Converg. Int. J. Res. New Media Technol.* 11, 10–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135485650501100102>
- O’Riordan, K., Phillips, D.J., 2007. *Queer online: media technology & sexuality, Digital formations*. Peter Lang, New York.
- Ortiz, D.R., 1993. Creating Controversy: Essentialism and Constructivism and the Politics of Gay Identity. *Va. Law Rev.* 79, 1833. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1073388>
- Papacharissi, Z., 2005. The real-virtual dichotomy in online interaction: New media uses and consequences revisited, in: Pamela J, K. (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, N.J., pp. 215–237.
- Paradis, E., 2016. Searching for self and society: Sexual and gender minority youth online, in: Bloomfield, V.E., Fisher, M. (Eds.), *Voices of LGBTQ Students and Teachers: Changing the Culture of Schooling*.
- Pascoe, C.J., 2011. Resource and Risk: Youth Sexuality and New Media Use. *Sex. Res. Soc. Policy* 8, 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-011-0042-5>
- Patton, M.Q., 1999. Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Serv. Res.* 34, 1189–1208.
- Pierce, C.M., Carew, J.V., Pierce-Gonzalez, D., Wills, D., 1977. An Experiment in Racism TV Commercials. *Educ. Urban Soc.* 10, 61–87.
- Plummer, K., 1995. *Telling sexual stories: Power, change, and social worlds*. Psychology Press.
- Ponse, B., 1978. *Identities in the lesbian world: The social construction of self*. Greenwood Press Westport, CT.
- Pullen, C. (Ed.), 2014a. *Queer youth and media cultures*. Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York.
- Pullen, C., 2014b. Media Responses to Queer Youth Suicide, in: Pullen, C. (Ed.), *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*. Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York.
- Pullen, C., 2009. *Gay identity, new storytelling and the media*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Pullen, C., 2007. *Documenting gay men: Identity and performance in reality television and documentary film*. McFarland Publishing, Jefferson; NC.
- Pullen, C., Cooper, M., 2010. *LGBT identity and online new media*. Routledge, New York.

- Rainie, H., Wellman, B., 2012. *Networked: the new social operating system*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Regan Shade, L., 1996. *Censorship in the Global Information Infastructure*, in: Shields, R. (Ed.), *Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*. Sage Publications, London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif.
- Reissman, C.K., 2013. *Concluding Comments*, in: Andrews, M., Squire, C., Tamboukou, M. (Eds.), *Doing Narrative Research*. Sage, pp. 255–260.
- Relph, E., 1976. *Place and Placelessness*. Pion, London.
- Remafedi, G., 1987. *Adolescents Homosexuality: Psychosocial and Medical Implications*. *Pediatrics* 79, 331.
- Remafedi, G., French, S., Story, M., Resnick, M.D., Blum, R., 1998. *The relationship between suicide risk and sexual orientation: results of a population-based study*. *Am. J. Public Health* 88, 57–60. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.88.1.57>
- Renninger, B.J., 2015. “Where I can be myself ... where I can speak my mind”: *Networked counterpublics in a polymedia environment*. *New Media Soc.* 17, 1513–1529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814530095>
- Rheingold, H., 1994. *The virtual community: finding connection in a computerized world*. Secker & Warburg, London.
- Ridenour, C.S., Newman, I., 2008. *Mixed methods research: exploring the interactive continuum*. Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale.
- Riessman, C.K., Speedy, J., 2007. *Narrative inquiry in the psychotherapy professions: A critical review*, in: Clandinin, D. Jean (Ed.), *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, Calif, pp. 426–456.
- Robins, K., 1996. *Into the Image: Culture and politics in the field of vision*. Routledge, London.
- Robson, C., 2002. *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Roesler, T., Deisher, R., 1972. *Youthful male homosexuality: Homosexual experience and the process of developing homosexual identity in males aged 16 to 22 years*. *JAMA* 219, 1018–1023. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.1972.03190340030006>
- Rose, I.D., Friedman, D.B., 2013. *We need health information too: A systematic review of studies examining the health information seeking and communication practices of sexual minority youth*. *Health Educ. J.* 72, 417–430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0017896912446739>
- Rowley, J., 2014. *Designing and using research questionnaires*. *Manag. Res. Rev.* 37, 308–330. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MRR-02-2013-0027>
- RTÉ, 2016. *First LGBT resource centre opens in West of Ireland [WWW Document]*. RTE.ie. URL [/news/video/2016/1211/838132-lgbt-resource-centre/](http://news/video/2016/1211/838132-lgbt-resource-centre/) (accessed 12.12.16).
- Russell, G., Bohan, L.D., 2000. *Queer youth: Old stories, new stories.*, in: Jones, S. (Ed.), *A Sea of Stories: The Shaping Power of Narrative in Gay and Lesbian Cultures*. Haworth, New York, pp. 62–69.
- Russell, S.T., 2003. *Sexual Minority Youth and Suicide Risk*. *Am. Behav. Sci.* 46, 1241–1257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764202250667>

- Ryan, C., Huebner, D., Diaz, R.M., Sanchez, J., 2009a. Family rejection as a predictor of negative health outcomes in white and Latino lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults. *Pediatrics* 123, 346–352.
- Ryan, C., Huebner, D., Diaz, R.M., Sanchez, J., 2009b. Family rejection as a predictor of negative health outcomes in white and Latino lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults. *Pediatrics* 123, 346–352.
- Ryan, C., Russell, S.T., Huebner, D., Diaz, R., Sanchez, J., 2010. Family acceptance in adolescence and the health of LGBT young adults. *J. Child Adolesc. Psychiatr. Nurs.* 23, 205–213.
- Saldaña, J., 2009. *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage, Los Angeles, Calif.
- Sarma, K., Psychol, C., 2007. Drug use amongst lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender young adults in Ireland. *J. Prev. Med.* 21, 142–149.
- Savin-Williams, R., 1998. *...And Then I Became Gay*. Routledge, New York.
- Savin-Williams, R.C., 2006. *The new gay teenager*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.; London.
- Savin-Williams, R.C., 2001. A critique of research on sexual-minority youths. *J. Adolesc.* 24, 5–13. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.2000.0369>
- Savin-Williams, R.C., Cohen, K.M., Joyner, K., Rieger, G., 2010. Depressive Symptoms Among Same-Sex Oriented Young Men: Importance of Reference Group. *Arch. Sex. Behav.* 39, 1213–1215. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-010-9658-4>
- Savin-Williams, R.C., Ream, G.L., 2007. Prevalence and Stability of Sexual Orientation Components During Adolescence and Young Adulthood. *Arch. Sex. Behav.* 36, 385–394. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-006-9088-5>
- Savin-Williams, R.C., Ream, G.L., 2003. Suicide Attempts Among Sexual-Minority Male Youth. *J. Clin. Child Amp Adolesc. Psychol.* 32, 509–522. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15374424JCCP3204_3
- Scheibelhofer, E., 2006. A reflection upon interpretive research techniques: the problem-centred interview as a method for biographic research, in: Kelly, N., Horrocks, C., Milnes, K., Roberts, B., Robinson, D. (Eds.), *Narrative, Memory & Everyday Life*. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 19–32.
- Schiff, B., 2012. The function of narrative: Toward a narrative psychology of meaning. *Narrat. Works* 2.
- Sell, R.L., Wells, J.A., Wypij, D., 1995. The prevalence of homosexual behavior and attraction in the United States, the United Kingdom and France: results of national population-based samples. *Arch. Sex. Behav.* 24, 235–248.
- Shields, R., 1996. *Cultures of Internet: virtual spaces, real histories, living bodies*. Sage Publications, London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif.
- Slater, D., 2002. *Social relationships and identity online and offline*. Sage Publications.
- Stone, D.M., Luo, F., Ouyang, L., Lippy, C., Hertz, M.F., Crosby, A.E., 2014. Sexual Orientation and Suicide Ideation, Plans, Attempts, and Medically Serious Attempts: Evidence From Local Youth Risk Behavior Surveys, 2001–2009. *Am. J. Public Health* 104, 262–271. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301383>
- Sue, D.W., 2010. *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Tajfel, H., 1978. *Differentiation between social groups*. London: Academic Press.

- Talbut, S., 2004. *Intelligibility and Narrating Queer Youth*, in: Rasmussen, M.L., Rofes, E. (Eds.), *Youth and Sexualities: Pleasure, Subversion, and Insubordination In and Out of Schools*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Tashakkori, A., Teddlie, C., 2003. *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research*. SAGE, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Thinkhouse, 2015. *Youth Culture Report Q2*.
- Thrift, N., 2003. *Space: The Fundamental Stuff of Human Geography*, in: Holloway, S.L., Rice, S.P., Valentine, G. (Eds.), *Key Concepts in Geography*. SAGE, London, pp. 95–107. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446261965>
- Troiden, D.R.R., 1989. *The Formation of Homosexual Identities*. *J. Homosex.* 17, 43–74. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v17n01_02
- Troiden, R.R., 1988. *Homosexual identity development*. *J. Adolesc. Health Care Off. Publ. Soc. Adolesc. Med.* 9, 105–113.
- Tropiano, S., 2014. *LGBTQ Youth and Social Media*, in: Pullen, C. (Ed.), *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*. Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, pp. 46–62.
- Tuan, Y.F., 1997. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Turkle, S., 1995. *Life on the screen: identity in the age of the Internet*. Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Tygart, C.E., 2000. *Genetic Causation Attribution and Public Support of Gay Rights*. *Int. J. Public Opin. Res.* 12, 259–275. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/12.3.259>
- Warner, L.R., Shields, S.A., 2013. *The Intersections of Sexuality, Gender, and Race: Identity Research at the Crossroads*. *Sex Roles* 68, 803–810. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-013-0281-4>
- Warner, M., 2000. *The trouble with normal: sex, politics, and the ethics of queer life*, 1. Harvard Univ. Press paperback ed. ed. Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Watson, D., Kenny, O., McGinnity, F., Economic and Social Research Institute, 2016. *A social portrait of travellers in Ireland*.
- Weeks, J., 2009. *Sexuality*, 3 edition. ed. Routledge.
- Weeks, J., 1998. *The Sexual Citizen*. *Theory Cult. Soc.* 15, 35–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276498015003003>
- Weeks, J., 1986. *Sexuality and its discontents meanings, myths, & modern sexualities*. Routledge & K. Paul, London; New York.
- Weeks, J., Heaphy, B., Donovan, C., 2001. *Same sex intimacies: families of choice and other life experiments*. Routledge, New York.
- Wellman, B., 2002. *Little Boxes, Glocalization, and Networked Individualism*, in: Tanabe, M., van den Besselaar, P., Ishida, T. (Eds.), *Digital Cities II: Computational and Sociological Approaches*. Springer Berlin Heidelberg, Berlin, Heidelberg, pp. 10–25. https://doi.org/10.1007/3-540-45636-8_2
- Wellman, B., 2001. *Physical Place and Cyberplace: The Rise of Personalized Networking*. *Int. J. Urban Reg. Res.* 25, 227–252. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00309>
- Wellman, B., Quan-Haase, A., Boase, J., Chen, W., Hampton, K., Díaz, I., Miyata, K., 2006. *The Social Affordances of the Internet for Networked Individualism*. *J.*

Comput.-Mediat. Commun. 8, 0–0. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2003.tb00216.x>

- Wertheim, M., 1999. *The pearly gates of cyberspace: a history of space from Dante to the Internet*, 1st ed. ed. W.W. Norton, New York.
- Whisman, V., 1996. *Queer by Choice: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Politics of Identity*. Psychology Press.
- Withers, C.W.J., 2009. Place and the “Spatial Turn” in Geography and in History. *J. Hist. Ideas* 70, 637–658. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.0.0054>
- Witzel, A., 2000. The Problem-centered Interview. *Forum Qual. Sozialforschung Forum Qual. Soc. Res.* 1.
- Wuest, B., 2014. Stories like Mine: Coming Out Videos and Queer Identities on YouTube, in: Pullen, C. (Ed.), *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*. Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, pp. 19–33.
- Yi, H., M, G., Shidlo, A., 2010. Effects of disengagement coping with HIV risk on unprotected sex among HIV-negative gay men in New York City. *Health Psychol.* 29, 205–214. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017786>

11 APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: CODING SCHEME AND SAMPLE

Coding Scheme for Questionnaire only – Chapter 6		
Subtheme	Code	Definition
Enrichment		
A sense of overall improvement or enhancement which is attributed to sexual orientation or identity		
Personal Enrichment		Enrichment which describes a sense of personal growth or satisfaction in the self
	Strength	Stronger person for going through it
	Self-Improvement	Made a better person or led to growth as a person
	Happiness	Being happier than before
	Confidence	Made a more confident person
	Open-mindedness	More open minded towards others
	Comfort	More comfortable in self and/or around others
	Acceptance	Accepting of sexual identity
Life Enrichment		Enrichment which describes improvement or enhancement of life experiences
	Friends and Community	Making new friends or becoming part of a new community
	Diversity	Exposure to diverse people and worldviews
	Gender Diversity	Exposure to diverse gender norms and understandings of gender
	Partner	Met current partner

	Experience	Exposure to new experiences
Stigma		
Personal and societal difficulties resulting from living in a heteronormative society		
Internalised Stigma		Difficulties involving self-acceptance or mental health
	Social Discomfort	A sense of feeling uncomfortable in the self when around others
	Isolation	Feeling isolated/alone
	Lack of confidence	Lack of confidence in behaviour in certain situations
	Internal Shame	Feeling ashamed of the self
	Lack of self-acceptance	Unable to accept the self or self-identity
	Mental Health	Descriptions of mental health problems or symptoms
Externalised Stigma		Difficulties which are attributed to the actions or attitudes of others
	Experiences of Prejudice	Experiences of homophobia or similar (e.g. biphobia) from others
	Judgement	Feeling that others are judgemental or unaccepting
	Non-binary Stigma	Sense of unacceptance towards non-hetero/homosexuals within straight/LGBT communities
	Bullying	Experiences of bullying
	Societal Shame	A sense of unacceptance or shaming attitudes attributed towards society itself
	Relationship Difficulties	Friends or family behaving differently
	Physically Unsafe	Fear of attack or being in physical danger from others
	Family Struggles	Experiences of unacceptance or difficulty specifically from family
	Rights	Lack of legal recognition

Theme	Code	Definition
Characterisation of Space		Description of a space which characterises it as having specific attributes.
	Online Space	Online space characterised a particular way e.g. Tumblr is diverse
	Offline Space	Offline space characterised a particular way e.g. Home feels unsafe
Motivation for internet use		Motivations / perceived value that participants use to describe their internet usage
	Self-acceptance	To aid in accepting the self as in personal enrichment
	Confusion over sexuality	Unclear over labelling or what sexual identity fits
	Redefining normal	Using role models or narrative engagement to change perception of what is normal
	'People like me'	Using role models or narrative engagement to find relatable representations
	Communicating with others	To talk to others who are similar/relatable
	Coming out preparation	Preparing for coming out through learning from others
	Lack of offline understanding/visibility	Usage is attributed to a lack of offline resources e.g. Because I had no gay friends
	Reassurance	To feel like things will be okay / to see that things have been okay for other people
	Community Engagement	To feel part of a sexual minority community e.g. LGBT and/or to learn about what defines the culture of the community
	Sexual Health Information	To access information around sexual health
	Dating	To meet others for dating purposes
Informal Learning		Instances of the internet fulfilling a social, traditional or experiential

		form of learning as according to Fox and Ralston (2016)
Narrative Engagement		Instances of framing one's own narrative against that of another person

Sample of coding for biographical case description from interview data – Chapter 8	
Interview Excerpt	Biographical narrative notes
<p>Participant: I have a close enough relationship with my mam so and she's pretty open minded when it comes to me myself being gay. I think she always knew to be honest. And with regards to my extended family, my grandparents, aunts, uncles, they all are fine with it as well, fine with it. They seem grand anyway.</p> <p>Interviewer: So overall you've had a pretty positive experience?</p> <p>Participant: I have had a positive experience with family but as I say, kind of negative with school, secondary school. So I kind of have seen both sides of it really. So luckily, I've been positive with family.</p>	<p>Mother open minded, close relationship</p> <p>Extended family fine with it</p> <p>Family – positive, Secondary school – negative</p> <p>Seen both sides – values positivity from family</p>

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE

Changing Spaces: Exploring the role that the internet plays in sexual identity among LGB and non-heterosexual youth aged 18 - 25 in Ireland

The research project

The title for this research project is Changing Spaces: Exploring the role that the internet plays in sexual identity among non-heterosexual youth aged 18 - 25 in Ireland. Participants will be asked about their own personal perceptions and experiences of their internet usage and sexual orientation.

The project is funded by the Irish Research Council. The research will be carried out by Kirsty Park, a PhD student in the School of Communications in DCU. You can contact Kirsty at kirsty.park3@mail.dcu.ie.

If any participants or non-participants are interested in viewing the results of the research they are welcome to contact the researcher.

Expected involvement from participants

Involvement in this study will require participants to complete a short, anonymous online questionnaire which will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes. Participants will be invited to put themselves forward for an interview as part of stage 2 of the study but this is completely voluntary and there is no obligation for participants to do so.

It is anticipated that there will be no risk to participants in this study.

Benefits to the participant

It is expected that findings from this study will be used to improve online mental health supports for lesbian, gay and bisexual youth which could potentially indirectly benefit participants.

Confidentiality

Participation in this study is fully anonymous and confidential and does not require the participant to reveal their name or any identifying details.

Participants can choose to provide a contact email if they would like to take part in stage 2 of the research, in which case the information will only be used by the researcher to contact the participant.

The questionnaire data will be cleaned of any identifying information and fake names will be used if quotes are taken from the transcripts. Confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.

Data protection

The questionnaire data, which will be clear of any identifiable personal information, may be kept only for the purpose of future research projects. Any names or contact details collected will be deleted after a period of 3 years or when the research project ends, depending upon which occurs first.

Right to withdraw

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

Eligibility Questions

This questionnaire is designed for people aged 18-25 who do not identify as heterosexual.

We know people prefer different terms to describe their sexual identity and later on in the survey we will ask you for the terms you prefer.

However, in order to see if this survey is for you can you please tell us whether or not you consider yourself to be heterosexual (straight).

- I do not consider myself to be heterosexual (I am not straight)
- I consider myself to be heterosexual (I am straight)

Age

Demographic questions

Gender

- Male
- Female

Is this the gender you were assigned at birth?

- Yes
- No

How long have you lived in Ireland?

- Between 1-5 years
- Between 6 - 10 years
- 11 years or more
- All my life

What type of area do you currently live in?

- Rural village / countryside
- Town
- City

What type of area(s) did you live in before the age of 18? Click all that apply.

- Rural village / countryside
- Town
- City

What county do you currently live in?

- I would prefer not to answer this question

What counties did you live in before the age of 18?

- I would prefer not to answer this question

Please explain your answer

Do you believe your sexual orientation has had a negative impact on your life?

Yes
 No

Please explain your answer

Have you ever accessed support services in relation to your sexual orientation? (Examples: counselling, LGBT groups, the LGBT helpline)

Yes
 No

If you answered yes, what types of services did you access?

Internet Usage

How often do you use the internet?

Many times a day
 A few times a day
 Once a day
 A few times a week
 Once or twice a week

What do you spend most time doing online?

What is your favourite website / online space?

- Which best describes your sexual orientation? Are you:**
- Only attracted to females
 - Mostly attracted to females
 - Equally attracted to females and males
 - Mostly attracted to males
 - Only attracted to males
 - Not sure

- How would you describe your sexual identity?**
- Lesbian
 - Gay
 - Bisexual
 - Pansexual
 - Queer
 - I'm not sure
 - I prefer not to label it

Sexual Orientation and coming out

Approximately what age were you when you first became aware of your sexual orientation? _____

Approximately what age were you when you began coming out? This does not apply to me _____

How out are you to the following groups?

	All	Most	Some	None	Not Applicable
Immediate family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Extended family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Close friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other friends and acquaintances	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Workmates	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Classmates	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Overall, are you comfortable with your sexual orientation?

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No

Do you believe your sexual orientation has had a positive impact on your life?

- Yes
- No

How important or unimportant have the following internet activities been to you in relation to your sexual orientation?

	Unimportant	Little importance	Average importance	Very important	Absolutely Essential
Looking up sexual health information online	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chatting to others online who share my sexual orientation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finding friends online who share my sexual orientation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finding people online for dating	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finding people online for sexual activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finding coming out stories online from those who share my sexual orientation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finding stories online about others who share my sexual orientation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sharing or creating content relating to my sexual orientation on social media or blogs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Viewing online TV or video content relating to my sexual orientation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading news stories or articles online relating to my sexual orientation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Looking up bars or nightclubs online that cater to my sexual orientation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finding helplines or support services/groups in relation to my sexual orientation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

One definition of the word supportive is “providing encouragement or emotional help”. Based on this definition how supportive do you think the internet has been for you in relation to your sexual orientation?

Not supportive	A little supportive	Average supportiveness	Very supportive	Absolutely Essential
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you feel like you need / ever needed support when dealing with your sexual orientation and identity?

Yes

No

Please explain your answer

Is there anything (either online or offline) which you would like to be available or which you wish had been available to support you in relation to your sexual orientation?

Final Step

Press submit to finish the questionnaire.

If you are interested in being interviewed in the next stage of this research then please enter your email below. Your email will only be used to contact you.

**Email address - if you
would like to take part in
interviews as part of this
research (optional)**

APPENDIX C: PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT FOR INTERVIEWS

The research project

The title for this research project is Changing Spaces: Exploring the role that the internet plays in supporting mental health among non-heterosexual youth aged 18 - 25 in Ireland. Participants will be asked about their own personal perceptions and experiences of their internet usage and sexual orientation.

The project is funded by the Irish Research Council. The research will be carried out by Kirsty Park, a PhD student in the School of Communications in DCU. You can contact Kirsty at kirsty.park3@mail.dcu.ie.

If any participants are interested in viewing the results of the research after they have been analysed they are asked to inform the researcher.

Expected involvement from participants

Participants completing stage two of this study will take part in a one-on-one interview in order to follow up on their questionnaire answers from stage one. The participant will be asked questions about their sexual orientation. The interviews will be audio recorded in order to aid transcription and should last no longer than one hour.

Risk to participants

There is a minor risk of distress if participants find answering any of the questions upsetting. Participants may take breaks during the interview and they are asked to refuse to answer any questions they do not feel comfortable with. The researcher will also counteract any distress by changing the nature of the questions and the conversation if any discomfort is recognized or highlighted by the participant.

There will also be a list with nationwide LGBT support services and resources given to the participant at the end of the interview, in the event that they would like further support.

Benefits to the participant

It is expected that findings from this study will be used to improve online mental health supports for lesbian, gay, bisexual and non-heterosexual youth which could potentially indirectly benefit participants.

Confidentiality

Participation in this study is fully anonymous and confidential. Transcripts will be cleaned of all names and identifying information and fake names will be used if quotes are taken from the transcripts. Confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.

Data Protection

Audio recordings of the interviews will be deleted after a period of 5 years from the date of recording. Audio recordings and transcripts will be securely kept and accessed only by the principal researcher. The transcripts, which will be clear of any identifiable personal information, may be kept only for the purpose of future research projects.

Right to withdraw

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FOR INTERVIEWS

Participant Informed Consent Form

The research project

The title for this research project is Changing Spaces: Exploring the role that the internet plays in supporting mental health among Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) and non-heterosexual youth aged 18 - 25 in Ireland.

The project is funded by the Irish Research Council. The research will be carried out by Kirsty Park, a PhD student in the School of Communications in DCU. You can contact Kirsty at kirsty.park3@mail.dcu.ie.

Expectations of participations

Participants in this research are asked to participate in a face-to-face interview which will be audio recorded by the researcher.

Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

Have you read or had read to you the Plain Language Statement Yes/No

Do you understand the information provided? Yes/No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? Yes/No

Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? Yes/No

Do you agree to have your interview audio taped? Yes/No

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Confidentiality

Participation in this study is fully anonymous and confidential. Transcripts will be cleaned of all names and identifying information and fake names will be used if quotes are taken from the transcripts.

Data Protection

Audio recordings of the interviews will be deleted after a period of 5 years from the date of recording. Audio recordings and transcripts will be securely kept and accessed only by the principal researcher. The transcripts, which will be clear of any identifiable personal information, may be kept only for the purpose of future research projects.

Signature

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participant's signature _____

Name in block capitals _____

Date _____