


Fall 2016

Queer Connections: Social Media as a Versatile Tool of the Marginalized Moroccan LGBT

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Queer Connections: Social Media as a Versatile Tool of the Marginalized Moroccan LGBT

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for MOR, SIT Abroad, Fall 2016

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of social media in the Moroccan LGBT sphere. It draws on personal narratives from LGBT men and women as well as activists in order to establish the various ways that social media is employed in the interests of the individual, the community, and the activist. While social media has been a tool to expand the LGBT community around the world, it is specifically and unusually useful in Morocco where there is considerable censorship of incoming and outgoing media. Additionally, many public displays of resistance are considered to be counter productive to the pro-LGBT movement because they are often construed as disrespectful to the cultural norms (which discourage all public displays of romantic affection) and hurt the efforts to find a unique Moroccan solution to the problem of LGBT discrimination. This work will attempt to add qualitative, first-hand accounts of how the progress of the LGBT movement in Morocco must be treated differently than the progress of similar Western movements and to highlight how access to information and privacy of the individual through the use of social media are essential to LGBT development. Finally, the intent of this paper is rooted in finding practical methods in which the mental and emotional health of LGBT individuals has already been and could further be improved by access to LGBT supporting social media.

Public and Social Welfare
Gender Studies
Mass Communications

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank each of the courageous persons who spoke to me on the subject of LGBT life in Morocco, and shared their personal, sometimes controversial, opinions in the belief that sharing information is the only way to improve the status of LGBT individuals in Morocco. I would also like to thank my advisor Driss Ksikes for his initial guidance on the project; Taieb Belghazi, for treating every idea I brought him as though it were full of merit and potential and showing more investment in his students than I have ever seen; Anna Jardine for constantly indulging my writing process and antagonizing my pasta boycott; and to each of the intelligent, empathetic, and outspoken women with whom I had the joy to spend this semester.

Introduction

Morocco, like the majority of the Arab World, criminalizes homosexual acts or more specifically what it labels “Lewd or unnatural acts with the same sex” (Moroccan Government, 1962, p. 136). Implied in this statement is not only the illegality of the act, but also explicit intention to shame and “other” the phenomenon of same-sex attraction. This implication is important because much of Moroccan law is rooted in the principle that what is not visible is not legally enforceable. Thus the government itself has little power to punish people for what they partake in when in the privacy of their own home. However, by presenting it in the language that paints homosexual attraction as an immoral behavior it enables the Moroccan population to persecute people who partake in homosexual behavior without the direct involvement of the state.

This civil autonomy has enabled what has been an alarming year of violent and highly publicized incidents of outings, violence, and subsequent prosecution of many Moroccan LGBT individuals. While this sort of altercation is not uncommon in countries where homosexuality is punishable (especially by violent punishment which is not uncommon in the Arab World), what is unusual is how much national and international publicity the incidents have received as a result of the abnormally high presence of social media access in Morocco (Chong, Zhang, Mak, & Pang, 2015). What has resulted is a case study on the power of social media as a tool for liberating and unifying a repressed LGBT population.

This paper will first examine reality of current Moroccan LGBT life including the two most recent and public LGBT trials in Morocco: the case of the two men in Beni Mellal as well as the two young women in Marrakech. It will examine how these events were publicized, who supported the individuals on trial, and the subsequent outcomes as well as how these outcomes may be considered a sign of progress for the LGBT population. The research will also highlight the narrative of the LGBT woman that has been largely erased from the Moroccan viewpoint as well as the surrounding academic and activist literature. As the most recent trial has shown, women are not exempt from the persecution of anti-homosexual legislature and experience violence in different but similarly damaging ways. This is to highlight the need for LGBT women to be heard and represented in the organization and mobilization of Moroccan LGBT interests.

Due to the illegality of homosexual activity in Morocco, there exists minimal research on the mental, physical, and social health of this population. LGBT populations face unique health risks including increased risk of sexual violence, physical violence,

sexually transmitted diseases, gender dysphoria, internalized homophobia and the complete suite of mental and physiological side effects that present as a result of prolonged stress such as high blood pressure, exhaustion, and increased risk of depression, anxiety, and suicide. I will thus call upon the models of Minority Stress Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory in order to highlight how the issues faced by the Moroccan LGBT population are not only social problems, but constitute the grounds for significant physical and psychological health problems that pose a risk to the population as well as placing a financial burden on the health resources of Morocco.

Finally, this paper will postulate on the current and potential worth of social media as a resource for the LGBT population in Morocco. To gain this perspective I will draw on the testimony of four individuals involved in the Moroccan LGBT population and movement. The research will emphasize the variety of utility and unique empowering features presented by social media, but will also reflect on potential negative effects and draw backs of using social media as a primary tool of the LGBT movement.

What follows is a combined analysis of the existing academic literature and the personal narratives of four Moroccan individuals:

Lina – a 19-year-old bisexual Moroccan woman in Rabat. Lina realized her bisexual identity in her early teens and currently studies political science.

Hicham – a 27-year-old gay Moroccan man living abroad in Paris. Hicham has written as a blogger and now an author and has publicly addressed the state of Morocco's relationship with its LGBT population.

Zahra – a 20-year-old bisexual Moroccan woman in Marrakech. Zahra became involved in the LGBT community within the last year and currently studies physics.

Soufyane – a 25-year-old heterosexual man in Rabat. Soufyane has been involved with the Moroccan human rights organization MALI and has been involved in public and online demonstrations for the protection of LGBT rights in Morocco.

I will interweave their accounts of personal experiences and the scope of the Moroccan pro-LGBT movements into the review of existing literature regarding the subjects of this paper in order to support the qualitative analysis and conclusions that will be drawn regarding my research question:

To what ends can social media be an aide or a solution to the challenges that plague the Moroccan LGBT population?

Key Terms

LGBT – This acronym stems from the common umbrella grouping of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans* (which is in itself an umbrella term for the various iterations of a person's gender lining up only in part or not at all with the biological sex assigned at birth). In most cases and in this paper it is also intended to include individuals who are intersex, agender, asexual, or in anyway do not consider themselves to be heterosexual and cisgender (the term used to individuals who do feel that their gender aligns with their biological sex assigned at birth). This term is rooted in western conceptions of the boundaries and dichotomies that exist when discussing sex, gender, and sexuality. It is

important to acknowledge that these same boundaries and dichotomies are not universal and less harsh lines of identity are drawn throughout time and across cultures including in the culture of this study. Therefore the term LGBT itself is an imposition of Western standards and represents a bias in this study. However, because it is still a widely recognized and used term, and because it was used in the wording of the interviews performed as a part of this study, it will be included in the results and analysis.

Social Media – Socially cultivated and maintained medias are a constantly growing and changing field. Every year new forms of media are created which allow for different forms and levels of communication and therefore it is difficult to create a complete sphere of focus when studying their use and effects. For the purpose of this research, social media was left without a firm boundary, but examples given to the participants and drawn from the review of existing literature included: YouTube videos, blogs, online forums, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tinder, and OkCupid. Each of these platforms is recognized as a place for personal expression with various levels of public access. Each of these medias is unique from traditional media in that:

- A. Everyone who has access to the platform has the ability to publish either their own works or their personal insights and feelings via comment threads.
- B. Censorship of these medias is drastically decreased from the amount experienced by traditional media. Morocco has at various times imposed stronger censorship on social medias such as YouTube and blocked them from being accessible within the country, but methods to circumvent this (such as VPN changing apps and browsing extensions) have allowed any reasonably

tech-savvy person to reach a limitless scope of internationally available material.

Methods

Contact

I used Facebook as a means to contact my 2 activists. Hicham was interviewed via a questionnaire; Soufyane was given questions in advance and then interviewed partially over the phone and partially via written response. I used Tinder to contact my female LGBT informants. I approved all women aged 19-35 within a 3 mile radius who had at least one picture of themselves. I did not approve women who had only pictures that did not contain them (cartoons, pictures of scenery, pictures where no face was visible or the picture was obviously pulled from the internet), appeared to be soliciting pornography or prostitution, and all men who appeared (this occasionally happens on the app due to how gender is reported from outside websites).

I included in my biography (in English) that I was an American, a bisexual woman, that I was in a relationship (which I relied on to convey that all contact would not be in the interest of finding a romantic partner), and instructed any women who were interested in being interviewed on the LGBT community in exchange for a coffee or tea to approve me and send a direct message. Initially, I did not send any messages first. Had I sent messages to all matches I believe I would have received more participants, however I knew I would be relying on my contacts to speak English and so rather than dedicate the time to contacting every match, exchanging pleasantries, and asking about their English abilities I waited for their contact. After 6 days in Marrakech with limited responses, I decided to change this methodology and did send some initial messages to women who

had any English phrases on their bio in the assumption that they would have some English communication abilities. I sent 3 messages with this new methodology but did not end up interviewing any of these women as I was contacted by my second female correspondent and decided to interview her in line with the original methodology.

Reasoning

I picked this age range because I did not want to speak to any women who were still attending high school because of concerns of status as a minor. I ended the age range at 35 because I was hoping to speak to some older and possibly more experienced LGBT women who had been able to see changes occur over time in the community but came to realize that there were very few respondents at this age presumably due to several possibilities: age based familiarity with technology, lack of single women at this age, and/or women of this age being less likely to have picked up English as an (often) fourth language. After my first interview I changed the age range to 24-35. This was again, to try and increase the odds of speaking to an older woman but resulted in significantly fewer matching options on the app, eventually I readjusted the age range to 19-35 which was how I eventually found my second participant.

Interviews

I responded to each of the greetings by the women by asking if they had read my biography on my profile. They responded that they had and I began the process of setting up in person interviews with them. With both interviews we switched from Tinder to WhatsApp when we began to coordinate plans. We also added one another on Facebook after the interviews. Both interviewees were compensated with a drink of their choice.

My first correspondent I met at a tram station and we walked to a restaurant/bar together where we got to know a little about each other before beginning the interview. I conducted a semi-structured interview by asking her variations of 15 open ended questions. I asked her follow up questions and clarifications during the interview as well. Her English was very strong, but there were certain instances where I would have to phrase an idea and have her agree or disagree to it, which resulted in my bias shaping some of her responses. Additionally because we were sitting in a bar we restricted some of our speech to phrases such as “this community” rather than specifying the LGBT community and I did not question her in depth about her relationships because we were in public. Halfway through the interview, two white men sat next to us and this increased our caution, as I did not want her to feel she had to say anything incriminating as they sat next to us quietly and possibly able to understand. Additionally, a couple friends of hers walked in during the last 15 minutes of the interview. She informed me that she was out to both of them and so this was not a concern of outing herself in their presence however it could have had some effect on how she conducted herself in the interview with close friends within visual distance.

My second correspondent and I met at a café in the evening. This correspondent had less English speaking ability. In this case there were less pleasantries exchanged before diving in to the interview and this interview was significantly less structured. While I asked questions about the same basic themes (including what social media’s she used, who she was out to, and how things should change in Morocco to make life better for LGBT people) they were worded much more casually and with a more personal, less political framing. Because my correspondent and I could not communicate well in the

same language, we heavily relied on the application Google Translate in order to help both ask and answer questions. Sometimes a question was asked in English, French, or both, and sometimes it was answered in English, but the application was used to conduct much of the interview. This resulted in the reshaping of many questions into terms that translate easily between the two languages and was subject to many grammatical and vocabulary confusions because the app is not a perfect translator. This led to my interpretation of the interview being largely based on paraphrase, general sentiments, and a handful of directly translated quotes in which both of us felt confident of the translation.

The two activists were given similar, but not identical copies of a questionnaire. Both of the questionnaires included some suggestions on a guided response but left the interpretation and answer still largely open to the respondent. My first correspondent responded by filling out the questionnaire and returning it by Facebook messenger. The second correspondent opted to receive the questions in advance and then conduct the interview over the phone. After significant difficulty maintaining contact over the phone, he chose to fill out the questionnaire and return it by Facebook as well.

Results

Legality

According to Article 489 of the Moroccan penal code “Lewd or unnatural acts with the same-sex” are punishable offenses by means of monetary fee and possible time in prison of up to three years (Moroccan Government, 1962, p. 136). This type of law is common in the Arab world, as same-sex relations are only permitted in 6 of the 22 countries that make up this region of the world. This law is typically justified in one of

two ways: either as a command given in Islam (either by the story of Lot in Sodom and Gomorrah or one of many Hadith), or as a protector over the Arab ideals of family and procreation (Needham, 2012). However, Article 489, like much of the Moroccan penal code that governs behavior, is only applicable in instances where the crime takes place in public. This is comparable to Article 490 which forbids sexual activity outside of marriage (Moroccan Government, 1962). According to Lina,

Homosexuality is banned if you are seen publicly doing it, if you are caught. Because you can do whatever you want to do at home but not publicly. Same thing for straight relationships: you can't do it publicly, you can't kiss publicly, you can't be seen doing anything publicly.

While theoretically this leaves some personal freedom to engage in sex with whomever one chooses, the actuality has seen a greater tendency towards homophobia and invasion into the personal lives of LGBT individuals. This can be attributed to the condemning language used to describe homosexuality in the Moroccan law and also in general conversation which has only recently begun to shift from treating all LGBT persons as perverts and deviants. On March 9, 2016, two men engaging in sexual activity in the privacy of a home were dragged into the street and subsequently prosecuted by the government. The sentences of the men were eventually changed, likely in relation to an enormous online international outcry that will be further discussed in a later section of this paper (“Morocco Court Releases 2 Men Convicted of Homosexuality”, 2016). Despite the eventual overturn, the instance provided a prime example of how Morocco's homophobia enables individuals to expose their LGBT neighbors even when they attempt to maintain privacy and respect for cultural norms in their practices.

Later this same year, two under age girls were arrested (one of them was additionally beaten by her family before being arrested) for being caught kissing on a rooftop in Marrakech (“Morocco: Drop Homosexuality Charges Against Teenage Girls”, 2016). Yet again, what was intended as a private act was dragged into the public sphere and therefore subject to the harsh and homophobic judgment of the Moroccan legal system. The case of the girls brought several new issues into the light as well: firstly, most prominent cases of LGBT individuals being persecuted has been male focused, and perhaps relatedly, the majority of the literature on the subject of LGBT norms in the Arab world is centered on men exclusively. The girl’s arrest showed definitively that women are not exceptions to this law and LGBT women are also at risk for endangerment and are also not permitted to engage in the relationships of their choice. Further, during the girl’s trial proceedings they were unexpectedly released early from jail to return home before their final hearing (Benslimane, 2016). This release happened in tandem with the international climate change conference, COP 22, being hosted in Marrakech at the same time. Morocco notoriously boasts a “Moroccan exception” to the negative stereotypes of North Africa as well as Arab countries. By moving the high-profile case from the public eye, Morocco highlighted its understanding that the trial does conform to the internationally recognized standards of LGBT rights as human rights. Whether this move was merely an attempt to hide the proceedings until less attention was on Morocco, or whether this may have made an actual difference on how Morocco views it’s treatment of LGBT individuals is still yet to be seen.

Publicity

There has been a recent rise in publicity achieved by Morocco's LGBT legal cases. Morocco's treatment of LGBT individuals is often described as intentional if not aggressive ignoring of the community. Therefore direct and inflammatory publicity is forcing Morocco to confront an issue they typically label as taboo and unfit for conversation. When asked how she believes Morocco treats the community as a whole, Lina snapped in response, "Very poorly! Like they don't even acknowledge their existence, they say that they don't even exist." (Lina, Personal Interaction, 2016). When asked what Morocco could do to improve its treatment, once again the first request was simply one of acknowledgement,

I wish that Morocco evolves and becomes more tolerant to us . . . and more accepting and just recognize our existence. They say it's just a phase or something. And they will tell you to go pray or go see a doctor because it's a disease and it's not.

This refusal to acknowledge the LGBT population is evident in the press coverage, or lack thereof, in Moroccan news when issues occur. The majority of reputable news sources covering the issues are international organization, human rights organizations, and France or Spanish based news. Virtually all of the information is published in French versus in Fus'ha or Moroccan Arabic making it inaccessible to many Moroccans. Lina explained, "they don't put that on the news . . . not on television because they think about families and they think it's taboo" (Lina, Personal Interaction, 2016). Morocco's fear of damaging its reputation or bringing LGBT issues into the homes of families is so severe that even in instances of gross abuse of human rights such

as the public beating of the men in Beni Mellal, the news stations stay silent. While keeping much of the nation in the dark, this also makes it impossible for LGBT individuals to receive credible news about their community through any forum besides online sources.

Despite the best attempts of Morocco to silence or ignore the violence towards LGBT individuals, there has been an increase in publicity even beyond the social media sphere. After the arrest of the girls in Marrakech, over 20 Moroccan NGO's publicly spoke out against Article 489 calling for it's repeal and the freedom of the girls (Benslimane, 2016). While the individuals voices calling for change may not be enough to disrupt the radio silence on LGBT injustices, organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Moroccan Association for Human Rights have international sway which may put pressure on Morocco to change it's policies in the near future by exposing the lack of protection afforded to LGBT people. Morocco has maintained the same stance as many other countries that have yet to afford freedom to LGBT people: that granting LGBT equality is not an essential Human Rights practice. However, the continued violence against LGBT individuals indicates how maintaining the law allows for the demonization and abuse of LGBT individuals at the hands of fellow citizens in the name of the law.

Increased publicity has proven to be an effective method of putting pressure on the Moroccan government regarding LGBT rights as seen by the overturn of the men's punishment in Beni Mellal and the reduced pressure on the girls in Marrakech. However, there have been various publicity stunts and displays that have also been considered damaging to the interests of LGBT individuals and organizations. Most notable was the

Femen display in Rabat. Two women of Femen, a French LGBT organization, protested the jailing of three Moroccan homosexual men by kissing shirtless in front of the Hassan II mosque. The city reacted in outrage. Not only were two Moroccan men arrested while imitating the gesture, but additionally huge protests ensued in Rabat with people disgusted by the disrespect shown to Morocco in this display (El-Kahlaoui, 2015). The Femen protestors also associated themselves with multiple Moroccan LGBT NGO's which led to serious backlash on these organizations including undoing some progress which the local NGO's had been able to make (Hirsch, Unpublished ISP, 2016). This stands as a primary example of how "big brother"/neocolonial activism can be deeply damaging. The subsequent article detailing the protest on Femen's website is similarly disrespectful and filled with scorn towards the Moroccan government without a hint of acknowledgement of the lack of context they had protesting on Moroccan soil or the previous work that had been done by Moroccan based organizations and individuals ("The Answer to AntiFEMEN Protest in Morocco – Fuck Your Morals", 2015). While this paper reflects on the benefits of international access to information, support, and organizations, the Femen display illustrates the importance of placing the power contained by international aid into the hands of Moroccan establishments who best understand how to operate in the context of their own culture and legal system.

Life

Despite legal barriers, life continues on for LGBT individuals in Morocco. Three of my four Moroccan informants identify as LGBT and exemplify that life as an LGBT individual is a complex mix of internal acceptance, outward rejection, closeted activism, and aspirations of a home that is not so homophobic. In the narratives of the two women I

interviewed, the main concern is disappointment of the family even over personal safety (Lina, Personal Interaction, 2016; Zahra, Personal Interaction, 2016).

When discussing the potential of increasing her presence in activism Lina cites her family as a primary reason she does not involve herself beyond the online presence, “I could [be more involved] but not in this country. Because the whole society/family thing it gets weird. I don’t want to spoil my personal relationships with family and stuff even if it matters to me” (Lina, Personal Interaction, 2016). Zahra’s sentiments echoed these beliefs. While she herself is not worried about being caught engaging in a same-sex relationship, she worries about how her parents would react to the news citing their religious beliefs as the main reason they would not accept this part of their daughter’s life (Zahra, Personal Interaction, 2016).

Religiosity was cited as the primary reason for three of my four informants as well. Soufyane referenced the Moroccan King, Mohammed VI, directly as well as the parliament, “We have an Islamist government with a head of government homophobe and they hate queer community and they do their best to [break] any initiative” (Soufyane, Personal Interaction 2016). Lina’s statement on the subject of religion was more personal, “In society it’s not tolerated. My family is religious so I can’t exactly tell them, they won’t accept it.” Additionally on why the government has banned homosexuality she explained, “It’s a religious fact. Totally religious. Because Morocco, they don’t separate religion and state.” (Lina, Personal Interaction, 2016). For Lina and Zahra this has prompted part of their personal struggle with Islam as a religion; this is a conflict to the structures that make up their everyday life as Islam is practiced by 98% of Moroccans and heavily influences every part of life. Zahra’s confusion has arisen from

the fact that most of the large monotheistic religions, including Islam, have condemned homosexuality. She cites this as a reason for her difficulty with Islam as well as part of how she has begun to accept herself as an LGBT person because, “if I were born elsewhere it wouldn’t matter, but for these religions it does.” (Zahra, Personal Interaction, 2016). For Lina, she simply sees the fixation on homosexuality as a capital sin as unreasonable, “Even if this whole thing is a sin, there are a hundred more sins you can do. Why not choose a sin over something else. I think as long as you’re not harming yourself or anyone else that’s good.” (Lina, Personal Interaction, 2016).

Despite the increasingly public threat to LGBT lives and well-being, neither of the girls reported feeling more cautious or concerned about partaking in LGBT relationships. According to Lina, it’s easy enough to follow the Moroccan norms of behavior and avoid suspicion, “In Moroccan society they are like touchy and stuff so it’s kind of normal. You can hold hands, hug, everything you want . . . if you want to do something [intimate] you do it in private.” (Lina, Personal Interaction, 2016). Zahra, despite living in the same city as the girls who were recently arrested and still living with her religious family, says of getting caught, “How would they know?” (Zahra, Personal Interaction, 2016). Young relationships, specifically sexual encounters, are already common and hidden enough from the public view that despite the major threats if outed, the girls do not feel that their daily life as an LGBT person is threatening to their personal safety. However, while daily life may not be a subject of concern, there are still the long term health threats that come with existing as a repressed group that will be discussed in the following section.

Health Threats of Population Repression

Morocco's choice to separate LGBT rights and human rights has minor validity in the fact that there is no openly condoned violence towards LGBT individuals written into the penal code (such as stoning, lashings, or another corporeal punishment). However, the very lack of the legal right to exist openly as an LGBT person prevents accurate collection of data on health impacts. The lack of knowledge or care for this entire population demonstrates the systematic violence and negative health impacts inflicted on the community. Therefore, in order to postulate on the health impacts for LGBT persons it is essential to look at similarly repressed communities and models that can make general assumptions at how the population's restrictions can have significant, long-term impacts.

Two terms are useful in discussing the damage done by Morocco's erasure of its LGBT population: symbolic violence, and even more specifically symbolic annihilation. Symbolic violence can be a variety of actions including only negative representation (such as only representing the LGBT population during times when they are being publicly exposed and humiliated), or by passive violence such as the incriminating and condescending way in which the law against homosexuality is phrased. Under this umbrella of symbolic violence also exists symbolic annihilation (Venzo & Hess, 2013). As coined by George Gerbner, symbolic annihilation explains that "representation in the fictional world signifies social existence, absence means symbolic annihilation" (Gerber, 1972, p. 43). Morocco's lack of acknowledgement of the LGBT population symbolizes intent to not recognize LGBT persons as complete humans or Moroccan citizens warranting peace, privacy, and respect. The effect is complete, and as mentioned by Lila

and Zahra, feelings of frustration, loneliness, and utter confusion were common at the beginning of their coming out process. This treatment assures non-LGBT Moroccans that the government does not look favorably on their LGBT neighbors. According to Zahra, “It is rare to find in Morocco a person who respects LGBT rights . . . some people are okay [with it] but most I think are against.” (Zahra, Personal Interaction, 2016). Lina’s reflection on the stress from living in Morocco as an LGBT person focuses on the internal emotions and stress felt before finding a support community,

Now I have a lot of people to talk to about it, because when I didn’t I was like frustrated and a bit sad . . . because if you don’t talk about it you think of yourself like guilty like you’re doing something wrong (Lina, Personal Interaction, 2016).

Hicham, as well mentioned his adolescence in Morocco as a young gay man. He highlighted the courage it takes to simply exist in a country that disapproves of your existence, as well as the need to find an outlet when one is unable to publicly express their experience of injustice,

Our activism was by being the young . . . and proud LGBT people with great ambitions. Having drinks and talking about the news in the country, expressing our rage in the forum, our creativity, our daily lives and our problems. We couldn’t do more (Hicham, Personal Interaction, 2016).

Minority Stress Theory

The feelings that Zahra, Lina, and Hicham describe are identical to those predicted by Minority Stress Theory (Meyer & Northridge, 2007). This sociological model explains physical, mental, and emotional health effects of living as a minority or marginalized group within a larger population. These effects come after prolonged exposure to social stigma, interpersonal prejudice, and targeted discrimination all of

which are at play when considering the place of LGBT persons in Morocco. The resulting health effects range from the mental and emotional in higher rates of depression, anxiety, and rates of suicide as well as physical conditions including high blood pressure, elevated levels of epinephrine and cortisol (commonly called the stress hormones) which can lead to altered digestion and reproduction systems and cause people prone to diabetes to experience earlier onset because of the effects on the liver's production of sugar. ("Stress Effects on the Body", 2016). These detrimental health effects indicate the invisible, long term suffering for which the Moroccan LGBT population is at risk. These effects don't even begin to detail other negative impacts to livelihood commonly seen in repressed LGBT communities including gender dysphoria, low self-esteem, increased infidelity in marriage (in cases where a person is inclined to marry a person not within their range of sexual desire), and often as a result increased presence of STDs (Chong, Zhang, Mak, & Pang, 2015). Each of these effects come with their own slew of detrimental health effects such as decreased immune system, risk of prosecution or abuse, and decreased mental health. Most importantly to note is that the victims of symbolic and non-physical violence experience very real, physical effects on their health and well-being. While the action and oppression may be indirect, they do not shield the population from long term effects of living a life closeted to a significant part of their identity or facing criminal charges for engaging in the life are naturally inclined towards.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

On the subject of health, another common theme in each of my informant's narratives was the emphasis on community and platonic friendship building in their community before actively searching for a partner in the LGBT community. To better understand this phenomenon, it is useful to look at the psychological model of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 1. "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Theory, Needs, Pyramid"). This model recognizes the ranked needs in order for human beings to survive and subsequently thrive. According to the theory of hierarchical needs each level must be met in order for a person to pursue the subsequent levels of need and fulfillment. The needs progress from the Physiological (air, food, water), to Safety (ranging from assault and abuse to job and housing security), to Love and Belonging (sexual and non-sexual, with individuals and community), and onward to Esteem. Beyond this point lies Self-actualization and Self-transcendence as which Maslow postulated that a person can move beyond their own needs to effectively contribute back to society and actively take part in meeting the needs of other parties (Maslow, Frager, & Cox, 1970). In a state of repression, many LGBT persons are halted somewhere between safety and esteem without the community and possibility to reach a state of self-actualization and

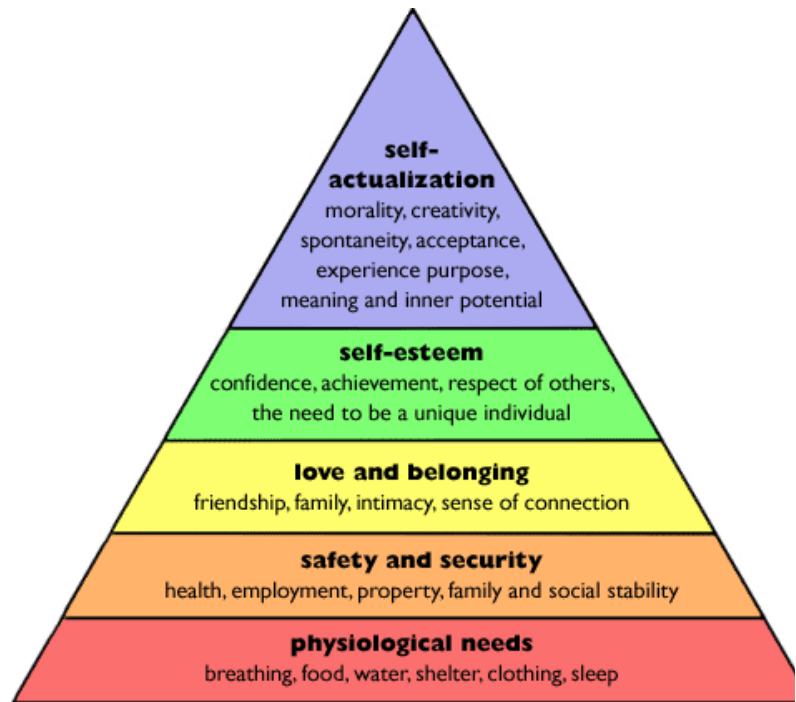


Figure 1. Model of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

transcendence. As a result, LGBT individuals are actively prohibited from reaching the same level of fulfillment as their fellow non-LGBT citizens. Additionally, Maslow postulated that anyone held up within what he called the Base levels of need (Physiological-Esteem) are likely to become susceptible to loneliness, social anxiety and clinical depression, and to experience general feelings of tension and anxiety about and within their life (Maslow, Frager, & Cox, 2015). These effects have the ability to induce the same physical symptoms listed as a result of experiencing Minority Stress and constitute yet another form of symbolic violence inflicted on the LGBT community by actively inhibiting the psychological development and well-being.

Social Media as an LGBT Community Tool

While the social climate for Moroccan LGBT individuals is unfavorable, it is not without hope. If the Internet solidified global connections, social media solidified global conversations. Never before in history have so many people had not only access to international forums, but also their own voice with which to directly interact on these hubs of connection and discussion. With the massive expansion of discussion forums, blogs, Reddit, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, limitless dating websites, and the public comment section of nearly every online publication, it has never been easier to see the similarities and differences of the global population. While social media is far from universal, with the global average of online presence not quite breaking 60%, it is becoming ubiquitous in many countries including Morocco. In fact the African average is only 30% and the neighboring country Algeria has only 20% of the population connected

to internet, yet Morocco reports between 50-60% of the population as having regular internet connection placing it in line with most of Western Europe and North America. (“Morocco Internet Statistics”, 2016). This translates to the majority of young, urban Moroccan’s especially being very well connected to each other as well as large global, and often Western influences. The power of connectedness and shared agenda has already been well demonstrated in the Arab world during the Arab Spring, but as social media becomes even more present in daily life, it has become both a tool for revolution and way to establish familiar connections.

Personal Use

Each of my informants was located by using social media. The girls were searching for other LGBT women via Tinder, and the men had been the creators of subjects of pro-LGBT online publications exemplifying the ease of finding LGBT support networks online even for an outsider with minimal command of the local languages. Each of them has used the power of social media in different means and to different ends, but agreed that social media opened a whole new world to the Moroccan LGBT community.

Lina

Lina’s experience with LGBT life began with global media. Upon watching the film *I Can’t Think Straight* online, she began a discussion with a lesbian cousin who helped her understand the film and also what it meant to be LGBT. Since this time social media has been a space for sharing life and love with other women.

Tinder makes [meeting people] easy. I have met like two girls on social media. One that was introduced by my cousin and then became a friend and she is gay. And then there is a girl I followed by accident on Instagram. She is Moroccan and lives in the Netherlands and she is bi . . . we were talking about *Pretty Little Liars* and talking about the gay couple and then I was like, she doesn't know my family, my friends, so I came out to her and then she came out too . . . it was just nice friend stuff, we talked a lot about [being gay] and a part of the community and how it affects our daily lives and how we deal with it and details about romantic relationships. . . I met a girl [on OkCupid] who's been a very good friend of mine, nothing romantic at all. She lives in Casa, and I met a girl who I started something romantic with . . . There was a group on Facebook that I used to be in, it was for the LGBT community in Morocco . . . I left the group because I didn't like the content. They didn't talk about the things related to the community, it was just like random stuff . . . I don't really keep up with any of [the Moroccan LGBT medias: KifKif, Mali, Aswat, etc.], but I know the love is not a crime thing. Every time there's like an arrest like the two girls in Marrakech they talk about it and there are like people trying to protest . . . like there was a protest on the street like last year, but it's mainly on social media because it's illegal here. Of course it could be better if it's in person because social media is not taken *that* seriously here, but then it's not very possible to do it in the streets here (Lina, Personal Interaction, 2016).

Lina's experience indicates several key uses of social media: access to pro-LGBT media helping to understand her own identity, the ability to establish fellow LGBT friendships and creating a sense belonging even before eventually pursuing romantic relationships. Finally, the security offered by social media created a space where she could learn about the community, see its presence in her own country, and could safely come out without fear of exposure to her family.

Hicham

Hicham was located through one of his many publications titled "My Morocco, Why Are You so Homophobic?" which published in response to the attack and arrest in Beni Mellal (Tahir, 2016). His use of social media has had roles in his personal life as a

member of the LGBT community and also in communication and support of the LGBT community after emigrating from Morocco.

Coming from a small city and quite traditional (Kenitra) I first started meeting LGBT people at the age of 15. It first was thanks to Internet. As a blogger at that time (gay-maroc.skyrock.com, it got censored after reaching a respectable amount of daily visitors), I had the opportunity to meet some people from Casablanca and Rabat. Things evolved to a forum (it was called LGBTmaroc if I'm not wrong), we had our community of more than 20 youth who met every month. . The only weapon I know how to use, in a certain level, is writing. . Social media gives people more freedom to express themselves. I witnessed in the recent years a big amount of people coming out of the closet. People get easier access to information. It helped me to get in touch with so many interesting people, with so many stories. 2 years ago, the only trans person I knew in Morocco was Noor. Now, I had the chance to get to know much of them. I know that in this struggle I'm not the only one and I see that others share the same ideas, ideology. . A couple of years ago I thought we were 4 or 5 to be gay in the neighborhood. I left the city and when I came back, with Grindr, I had the opportunity to notice a lot of them. More than a dozen live in less than a half mile . . . It's the new generation talking louder than the sun and at these times, we need all the help we get. . But as long as we talk about LGBT issues, I'm all up for it (Hicham, Personal Interaction, 2016).

Hicham has continued to write and support Morocco from a distance, but is an example of one of the many Moroccan LGBT persons emigrate if given the opportunity in order to live in a country where they are not persecuted for who they love. While Hicham still engages with the community from time to time he also mentioned that he feels like there are other people to take on the fight who are still in the country and have the drive, the access, and the growing online network to make change for Morocco. Despite moving beyond the sphere of most Moroccan LGBT social media, Hicham's narrative is invaluable in understanding how the LGBT community has grown numerically and in strength and voice as the connective power of the Internet and social media has become a stronger presence. Additionally he demonstrates a positive foil to the international outreach from Femen, in that his narrative is understanding of the history

and culture of Morocco but still challenges the government to reach beyond this borders to advance the well-being of LGBT individuals.

Zahra

Zahra is the newest and least familiar with the LGBT community of my informants as she has only begun to use social media with purpose as an LGBT woman in the last couple of months. However, already she has had significant use of the resources the Internet and social media can provide. Upon her first inclination that she may have romantic feelings for women in addition to men, she took to Google as a primary source of information where she searched for “the biological reasons and international health causes” for experiencing homosexual attraction (Zahra, Personal Interaction, 2016). Additionally she has taken to Tinder to find other LGBT female friends, and has met people through the Facebook page of the pro-LGBT organization KifKif. This is also where she learned about the arrest of the two girls in Marrakech. Zahra explained that she has felt comfortable sharing information about the arrests on her Facebook and publicly stating that she supports freeing the girls, but manages to do all of this without outing herself as a part of the community. When asked how Morocco should improve its treatment of the LGBT community, Zahra responded, “It needs to be globalist” (Zahra, Personal Interaction, 2016). This comment was the only one of it’s kind from my informants. While most of them believed that a solution for Morocco will look different than solutions to LGBT oppression in other countries, Zahra directly cited the need to look at international examples in order to improve how people are treated in her home country. International standards for LGBT rights are easily available as a part of the large

collection international information available on the Internet. Since Western evaluations of LGBT freedom generally revolve around visibility, often bordering on flamboyancy, there is a strong emphasis on visible freedom of expression being the golden standard for LGBT freedom. While the realistic solution for Moroccan LGBT progress may not conform to these same standards, it is important to note that many people, even those within the community, may see this as a necessary step for what constitutes LGBT freedom. However in a drastically different context, LGBT freedom may very likely be achieved through different means and may result in a less public performance of LGBT acceptance.

Soufyane

Soufyane works in tandem with MALI, a Moroccan NGO that focuses on human rights as a whole, and has actively included LGBT rights in their platform since 2012. MALI is one of the most internationally connected of the Moroccan LGBT NGO's and also considered to use some of the most aggressive tactics in their publicity strategies (Hirsch, Unpublished ISP, 2016; Hicham, Personal Interaction, 2016).

We did our first action in 2013, we made a video on YouTube, we mobilized activists and other individual people who were interested . . . everyone took a picture with a sign which says that we are against [Article 489]. . We created the buzz in the social network and newspaper . . . for the first time the queer community showed up for their revindications . . . Social media has a big role in our activism because it's the only way to act with some freedom otherwise you can't do action or talk freely about it. . Social media changed life for LGBT community, I've seen this from the beginning, after our first action we've been contacted by lot of people gay and lesbian who wanted to support us, to meet us and think together how to deal with the issue. People start to talk more about LGBT right, start to know what is it and what's the meaning behind. We started to see the creation of some groups of LGBT community, some debate and discussion.

Soufyane, who identifies as an ally rather than an LGBT individual, does not use social media for personal use, but he has extensive oversight as to how the community has built up around social media throughout the last 3-4 years. As he testifies, social media has become a place for LGBT individuals to find community, empower their representatives through various forms of support, and to learn more about themselves from pro-LGBT literature and political activism.

Hashtag Activism

The study of “Hashtag Activism” has shown the very real power of harnessing people with both common interests and counter interests behind a common phrase. This activity can then be traced through an entire thread of discussion over time. Moroccan LGBT activism and social media cannot be discussed without bringing up the hashtags #LoveIsNotACrime and #FreeTheGirls. Both of these hashtags were created by the Moroccan pro-LGBT NGO Aswat who works almost entirely online publishing LGBT material and vehemently maintains a Morocco-only presence under the platform that only Morocco can best solve Morocco’s problems (Hirsch, Unpublished ISP, 2016). These hashtags were created and distributed with information about first the Beni Mellal arrests, and later the Marrakech arrests. Most recently the #FreeTheGirls movement has prompted over 80,000 signatures on a petition to free the girls from Marrakech with no punishment and created international stir which saw information about the case circulating the globe in Arabic, French, and English (Benslimane, 2016). Similarly, #LoveIsNotACrime earlier this year prompted international reactions and continued to pop up as an easy reference point for showing support for LGBT rights for months and



were used as key phrases to reference the trials and surrounding discussions (Figure 2, Author's Photo; Lina, Personal Interaction, 2016).

Privacy

Conspicuously lacking from the narratives of my two female informants is the usual concern and paranoia that comes with sharing one's personal and sexual life on social media. As mentioned above, when asked about if they would change their dating practices after the arrest of the girls in Marrakech, both women responded with blasé or confusion, and didn't believe their current online presence could result in an accidental or

Figure 2. Graffiti in Rabat (August 2016) featuring the phrase Love is not a Crime in Arabic and English as well as the Transgender vector icon.

malicious outing (Lina, Personal Interaction 2016; Zahra, Personal Interaction, 2016).

The men expressed significantly more cynicism towards the absolute security of an online LGBT presence. Hicham expressed concern for the safety of young LGBT

individuals specifically, “[Social media] also has its negative aspect, since people have access to them you can easily be outed. And it can cause problems for youth LGBT (especially they gays) since they live in a modest, poor neighborhood.” (Hicham, Personal Interaction, 2016). He was also skeptical of the safety from government purview; “Anonymity helps you with common people, not with the government, as they’ve proven to be very effective when they want to shut somebody. So LGBT people can be free on the internet as long as they don’t speak that loud.” (Hicham, Personal Interaction, 2016). Hicham’s concern is echoed and amplified in Soufyane’s beliefs about government supervision, “You have the negative side from the homophobes who [have] mobilized to make oppression . . . It has a risk, the progress that I see now is that with internet there is more freedom for the LGBT community but the government can use also his ways to spy [on] people and try to arrest them” (Soufyane, Personal Interaction, 2016).

The fears expressed by the men is not without founding. As recently as April 2015 the Ministry of Justice presented new proposed amendments to the current penal code. (Mekouar, 2016). These amendments would keep in the style of the existing code, which is unenforceable on a large scale, but allows for further prosecution of individuals who have already been caught. Included in the new proposal was a ban on sexually themed texts and pictures (Mekouar, 2016). This proposal represents an enormous reach into the private lives of Moroccans: to monitor and enforce the behavior and content of an individuals phone and theoretically their social media outlets. The concerning reality for Moroccans and much of the world is that expanded access via the internet is not only accessible to individuals, but passes through many channels of the government as well

including, for Morocco, the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Communication. While LGBT Moroccans may not be at risk for every text or picture they send, it is not unreasonable to believe that their government may have real intentions to monitor or enforce their private lives more closely than they already do and violate the small amount of privacy which currently allows LGBT Moroccans to carry on their lives in private.

Conclusion

Social connectivity is an essential component to human function. Especially in repressed communities where there are barriers to normal social navigation, it is crucial to find ways to belong and people with whom one shares a sense of belonging. LGBT persons are present everywhere, but in Morocco their presence is ignored in the best cases, and persecuted in the worst. Additionally, the importance placed on family in Moroccan society makes it a near impossible choice between whether to disappoint and shame one's own family by choosing to take part in open LGBT existence, or alternatively to leave one's family behind in search of a place where there is greater acceptance of LGBT individuals. What remains in the midst of this is a group of marginalized people who are under constant, damaging stress for simply existing in the world the way they were born. The threat to the LGBT population represents not only a potential financial and healthcare burden on Morocco, but should also invalidate the Moroccan ideology that one can recognize Human Rights without recognizing LGBT rights.

Social media has provided an accessible solution to many of the LGBT community's problems. It has created space for belonging and acceptance, for circulating

information, mobilizing for demonstrations, and even finding romantic partners.

However, social media is only a band-aid solution to a much larger problem requiring a grander solution. Social media may be a means to finding this solution, but it has also demonstrated the danger of applying existing and largely Western standards of protest and outness to a Moroccan context. For many Moroccan organizations, substantial progress would, at it's most simple, consist of decriminalizing homosexuality (repealing Article 489) and staying out of the private lives of LGBT individuals. This combined with the intent to gradually normalize LGBT presence through media and representation would be enormous for LGBT safety, recognition, and community well-being. Though this is currently an ideal and will continue to face pushback, what is certain is that the solution to Morocco's treatment of LGBT individuals must be created and advocated for by Moroccans in order to best encompass respect for the Kingdom of Morocco, Moroccan culture, and most importantly the specific needs of the Moroccan LGBT.

Appendix

Appendix A.

1. What is your:
 - a. Name
 - b. Age
 - c. Place of residence
 - d. Gender
 - e. Sexual preference
2. Can you briefly explain how to came to recognize yourself as a person whose sexual preferences did not line up with what is considered normal in Morocco?
3. To what degree are you open about your sexual preferences in your everyday life (do your friends or family know, is it displayed on Facebook or any other social media, do you attempt to project this message in any way...)
4. What role, if any, does social media play in your interaction with other LGBT people?
5. Have you met any LGBT friends or partners through social media? Through which social media platforms?
6. Did you meet any of these individuals in person or only communicated online?
7. If you hear any news or information about LGBT in Morocco, how do you receive this information?
8. What websites, magazines, apps, or other sources of information produce LGBT information? What language is this information produced in?
9. Are there any places that you have gone to with the intention to meet other people who identify as LGBT (coffee shops, clubs, parties, concerts, etc.)?
10. How do you believe Morocco currently treats its LGBT community? How do you believe that Morocco should treat its LGBT community? Do you think progress has been made or will be made?
11. Do you believe that you will continue to live in Morocco or do you have any plans to eventually move away?
12. Do you have any information that you believe could be helpful to circulate to the LGBT community in Morocco, or that you believe would help me to better understand the community or get in touch with leaders or members of the community?

Appendix B.

1. General:
 - a. Name
 - b. Age
 - c. Place of Residence
 - d. Gender
 - e. Sexuality
2. Can you describe your experience with the Moroccan LGBT community? (Including when you began interacting with the community, if your experience has been with individuals versus group settings, and your experience as a member versus as an advocate/activist, etc.)
3. What do you consider to be your roles as an LGBT activist? (Including reaching out to individuals, publishing information, lobbying, being “out” publicly, etc.)
4. What is it like to be an activist for a group that is largely ignored by the government and major political parties? Is there resistance? Have you ever felt threatened because of your status as an activist?
5. How does social media play a role in your activism?
6. Which media outlets specifically do you use? What kind of interaction/engagement do you see on various medias?
7. Kifkif, Aswat, and Mali are all well-known Pro-LGBT media producers. Do you see one of their methodologies being the most successful or useful for helping the LGBT community?
8. Do you have any specific goals for the LGBT community in Morocco? What do you see as the necessary steps to reach this goal?
9. How has social media and online dating (including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tinder, OkCupid, etc.) changed life for the LGBT community? How do you see the potential for social media and the Internet to bring positive change for the community? Have there been negative developments because of social media as well?
10. Do you believe campaigns such as #FreetheGirls or #LoveisNotaCrime are effective in helping LGBT individuals at risk of prosecution by the Moroccan Government? How could the community be better supported (by it’s own people and activists as well as the international community)?
11. Currently is online use by the LGBT community mostly about shared experience and finding like-minded people or is the online community also used to mobilize change or discuss current LGBT issues?
12. Do you believe that anonymity is key to why the Internet has been helpful for the LGBT community? Do you believe that this either:
 - a. Could put the community at risk if online monitoring is increased by the government? Or...
 - b. Hinders development of the community because people still stay closeted in their public life?

13. Do you have any suggestions of other organizations or people that I should get in touch with in order to better understand the Moroccan LGBT population and their online presence?

Appendix C.

1. General:
 - a. Name
 - b. Age
 - c. Place of Residence
 - d. Gender
 - e. Sexuality
2. Can you describe your involvement as a member and/or activist of the Moroccan LGBT community? What are some of your roles and your daily involvement?
3. The Moroccan LGBT has been described as largely ignored by the government. What challenges does this present when trying to represent and improve the status of the community?
4. How does social media play a role in your activism?
5. Which media outlets specifically do you use? What kind of interaction/engagement do you see on various medias?
6. How has social media and online dating (including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tinder, OkCupid, etc.) changed life for the LGBT community? How do you see the potential for social media and the Internet to bring positive change for the community? Have there been negative developments because of social media?
7. Do you believe that anonymity is key to why the Internet has been helpful for the LGBT community? Do you believe that this either:
 - a. Could put the community at risk if online monitoring is increased by the government? Or...
 - b. Hinders development of the community because people still stay closeted in their public life?
8. Do you have any specific goals for the LGBT community in Morocco? What do you see as the necessary steps to reach this goal?
9. How could the community be better supported (by it's own people and activists as well as the international community)?

Appendix D.

School for International Training Multiculturalism and Human Rights - Rabat

Consent Form

Project Title: “Love is not a Crime: Social Media as a Tool of the Underground Moroccan LGBT”

Researcher: Savannah Vickery

Purpose : You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Savannah Vickery from Santa Clara University. The purpose of this study is to better understand how social media is currently used and could be used in the future by the LGBT community in Morocco to locate one another, find potential partners, and distribute and circulate relevant information. This study will contribute to my completion of my Independent Study Project.

Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants in a location chosen by the participant and the researcher. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to personal and perceived communal use of social media in relation to life as an LGBT person. With your permission you will be audio taped.

Time Required

Participation in this study will require approximately 30-60 minutes of your time outside of any time spent commuting to the site location.

Risks

I do not perceive any risks or more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study. The investigator perceives the following are possible risks arising from your involvement with this study:

- Potential stress from discussing personal experiences as an LGBT person or challenges facing the LGBT community.

Benefits

Potential benefits from participation in this study include:

- The chance to discuss a part of your life in depth that may not always be open to discussion

-Possible new information about resources of LGBT information and community, or the ability to share this information with others for an increased LGBT community

Confidentiality

The results of this research will be documented as an ISP paper and presented orally to the SIT MOR students and staff. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers (including audio – video tapes, if applicable) will be destroyed.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any individual question without consequences.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact me at:

Researcher's Name: Savannah Vickery

Email address: savvy.vickery@gmail.com

Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent to be (*video/audio*) taped during my interview. _____ (initials)
(If applicable, please include this consent box and statement.)

Name of Participant

Name of Participant (Signed)

Date

Name of Researcher (Signed)

Date

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