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# Community in a Virtual Environment: Can YouTube Build Community for LGBT Youth?

by

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Note: This paper contains verbatim quotes, including language some might find offensive.

## Introduction

[T]he feeling that we are intimate, that we affirm each other's existence, that ties exist between us, that we know each other and to a certain extent are sympathetic toward each other, trusting and wishing each other well...we have certain values in common...a definite mutual action must regularly result... (Ferdinand Tönnies, quoted in Driskell and Lyon 2002:377).

In recent years, there has been growing attention paid to and news coverage of LGBT youth committing suicide (e.g., Trevor Project, 2015), but only limited research regarding predictive factors (e.g., Remafedi, Farrow & Deisher, 1991). Decreasing suicide among teens and young adults – it is the third leading cause of death in this age group (Reiss and Dombeck, 2015) -- is an important challenge for society. But decreasing suicide and suicide attempts among LGBT teens and young adults (hereafter "LGBT youth") is arguably a more urgent challenge, since LGBT youth are more likely to attempt and complete suicide than their

heterosexual counterparts (Harris 2013; Hass et al. 2011; Mustanski and Liu 2013). While LGBTs account for only about three percent of the youth age group, they are 2-7 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Hass et al. 2011). In addition, some researchers suggest that suicide attempts are linked to the age when an LGBT individual "comes out," i.e., acknowledges one's sexual minority status (Hass et al. 2011). And many LGBTs "come out" during the teen and young adult years. Finally, the age at first same-sex attraction is also related to LGBT suicidal behavior (Mustanski and Liu 2013).

Sociological study of the value and relationship of social integration and community to alienation and suicide began with scholars like Durkheim and Tönnies; more current research also suggests that a sense of community can reduce suicidal behavior (Lin and Israel 2012; Frost and Meyer 2012). Arguably, the more stigmatizing the identifying trait, the more important community might be in, say, preventing suicidal behavior in LGBT youth.

But not all LGBT youth are able or willing to access a face-to-face LGBT community. Some LGBT youth live in rural areas, which may be less tolerant of LGBTs and entail greater time/distance/cost in accessing what face-to-face communities exist. Another factor is perceived risk: some LGBT youth may not access face-to-face communities because they fear for their safety. In such cases, a strong online LGBT community could make, literally, a life-or-death difference, providing a virtual community functionally equivalent to a geographically restricted, face-to-face community.

Various types of online (i.e., non-face-to-face) communities have been researched to determine if a sense of virtual community exists within them (Blanchard 2004; Hartelius 2005). However, YouTube is an avenue that remains, in this context, unaddressed by researchers. Due to its popularity among youth – especially LGBT youth – it is worth exploring whether the circumstances exist to create a supportive sense of virtual community for LGBT youth via YouTube.

## Review of the Literature and Theoretical Foundation

### A Brief History of the LGBT Community

A community cannot exist without social interaction. To understand a topic, one should know its history. What are the communication channels for LGBTs and the LGBT community, and how have they evolved? In 1951, the Mattachine Foundation

was formed, a group of homosexuals united in the belief that gay people, a distinct population, should advocate for equal rights (Meeker 2006:38). The foundation's primary mass communication medium was newsletters (Meeker 2006:41). One, for example, detailed "the aims and principles of the society that emphasized, first and foremost, education of the general public and of homosexuals 'to correct... bigotries and prejudices resulting from lack of accurate information regarding sex variants'" (Meeker 2006:41). The foundation's *Mattachine Review*, first appearing on February 2, 1955, became a major communication mode for foundation members and homosexuals around the country (Meeker 2006:45), able to "break through... the conspiracy of silence", enhance communication networks within the homosexual community, and raise public awareness of homosexual organizations (Meeker 2006:59).

Before the 1960s, mainstream media had largely ignored homosexuality. The 1960s marked a pivotal turning point, however (Meeker 2006:151). A "particularly innovative exchange between the mass media, the homophile movement, and gay male community itself..." led to the creation of a *Life* magazine feature article titled "Homosexuality in America" (Meeker 2006:151).

Media coverage of homosexuality continued to grow, leading to the emergence of the 1970's "Do-It-Yourself" gay culture (Meeker 2006:198), as homosexual individuals began creating their own newsletters and guidebooks for gay men and women. For example, *The Lavender Baedeker*, created by Guy Strait, compiled "a list of little known places whose reputation has previously been passed by word of mouth..." (Meeker 2006:212). Such guidebooks promoted a larger, stronger sense of community by improving awareness of and access to homosexual gathering places.

The LGBT community has come a long way since the days of scant media coverage and underground newsletters. The relatively rapid advent of social media and their equally rapid permeation of society raise question of whether social media – YouTube being a prime example – can give rise to new forms of (in this case LGBT) community.

### YouTube

The video-sharing website YouTube, founded on Valentine's Day 2005, has been used to spread messages of hope and support to LGBT youth who are struggling with their identities and to build a virtual community for them. For example, the

"It Gets Better Project", begun in 2010, asked adult members of the LGBT community to make videos describing their experiences, with the goal of informing LGBT youth that life need not always be difficult. Over 50,000 videos -- called video logs or "vlogs" -- have been created ("What is the It Gets Better Project?" 2013). Often the vloggers describe their lives, show what life is actually like in the LGBT community, and suggest how virtual support can be accessed.

Some LGBT channels go beyond such descriptions, calling upon viewers to engage in activism in their communities. If we consider activism "a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue" ("Activism", 2015), then examples of LGBT activism would include voting against anti-gay policies (e.g., those banning gay marriage) or participating in protests against such policies. Activist vlogging includes efforts to address and reduce the level of LGBT adolescent suicides.

Another category of LGBT video answers questions or discusses issues relevant to the LGBT community. "Coming Out" videos seem popular with LGBT vloggers, wherein they tell viewers how they dealt with the reality of their sexual minority status and how they told others. Such videos can spread awareness of a community that perhaps was completely unknown before to someone questioning or new to LGBT identity.

A sense of social support and belonging to a community can decrease the odds of an LGBT youth committing suicide (Teasdale and Bradley-Engen 2010), and YouTube has many features that allow viewers to connect with vloggers. The "comment" feature allows a viewer to express opinions about the video and its vlogger, and to communicate with one another, a precursor to developing a sense of community. The "subscription" feature connects viewers to vloggers. Becoming a "subscriber" automatically updates the viewer on the vlogger's activities, further connecting them. Many vloggers maintain post office boxes to which viewers can send mail, allowing offline (and thus less "viewable") communication; often vloggers will reply with letters to the viewers. YouTube also promotes conventions, such as Playlist Live and VidCon, where viewers can meet vloggers face to face.

Other social media sites, such as Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and Facebook, can further connect vloggers with their viewers. On some sites viewers get a better look at the vlogger's personal life; such sites require less time and effort to

connect viewers and vloggers since people can make smaller posts, far less time-intensive than video production. Also, these sites are arguably less formal, allow viewers and vloggers to get to know each other as "real people", and thus are useful in a different way from YouTube in encouraging a sense of virtual community.

### Suicide in the LGBT Community

Multiple correlates and predisposing factors have been identified regarding LGBT suicidal behavior. Mental health is linked to both general population and LGBT risk for suicidal behavior (Hass et al. 2011; Mustanski and Liu 2013). More specifically, major depression, conduct disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder are strongly positively correlated with suicide attempts (Mustanski and Liu 2013). Not only are mental disorders related to LGBT suicidal behavior, but psychological disorders occur more frequently among LGBTs, and social stigma and discrimination may also increase the likelihood of LGBT suicidal behavior (Hass et al. 2011). Being harassed or bullied is linked to higher levels of substance abuse and other psychological disorders among LGBT youth (Hass et al. 2011; Mustanski and Liu 2013), and, as noted, substance abuse or mental illness increases the likelihood of LGBT suicidal behavior.

Rejection by family members and lack of familial support have also been shown to increase the probability of overall LGBT suicidal behavior, and this is especially true for LGBT youth (Hass et al. 2011; Mustanski and Liu 2013). Teens depend on their parents/families for financial and emotional support; if this support is withdrawn – for instance, if their parents disown them for being gay – the resulting stress may raise the odds of LGBT youth suicidal behavior.

Awareness of correlates of LGBT suicidal ideations and behavior enables the development of prevention and intervention strategies. Information and support from social media such as YouTube, while of course not a complete substitute for parental support, can give a disowned and/or alienated LGBT youth a sense of not being alone. Many LGBT YouTube vloggers have had similar experiences and can give advice regarding successful coping mechanisms.

### Suicide from a Sociological Perspective

A sociological explanation of suicide was first proffered by French sociologist Emile Durkheim ([1897] 1951) well over a century ago. While various iterations on this original formulation have since been put forth (e.g., Henry and Short, 1954),

the fundamentals of Durkheim's argument have stood the test of time. His analysis centers on two primary variables: the degree of social integration experienced by the individual and the extent to which an individual's life is normatively regulated.

By social integration, Durkheim is simply referring to an individual's relationships or attachments to particular groups or broader communities. Durkheim's more complex idea of normative regulation technically refers to the necessity of some form of external constraint on individual desires, which are presumed to be insatiable. More generally, however, the idea also refers to a need for a certain degree of stability or predictability in social life (Ritzer, 2011: 200-203).

Central to Durkheim's theory is the idea that propensities toward suicide will increase if the levels of social integration or normative regulation experienced by the individual are *either too low or too high*. With this in mind, Durkheim identifies four different types of suicide. Low social integration can foster egoistic suicides, wherein a lack of attachment or support from social groups results in feelings of personal isolation. Conversely, extremely high levels of social integration can produce altruistic suicides, typically exemplified by self-sacrifices for other individuals or groups. Low normative regulation is associated with anomic suicides, responses to the uncertainty of disrupted or changing social conditions. Fatalistic suicides, in contrast, are a consequence of the despair that emanates from the sense that one is trapped in a particular social situation.

The applicability of Durkheim's typology (with the exception of altruistic suicide, we would argue) to the higher suicide rates among LGBT youth is fairly evident. Compared to their heterosexual peers, LGBT youth have fewer and weaker social ties because of their stigmatized identities and hence may have above-average odds of committing egoistic suicide. Anomic suicide by members of this same group may be in response to the marked changes that result from, for example, being excluded from family life or having to adapt to life in a new, unfamiliar social milieu. Finally, unrelenting stigmatization from others and the belief that one will never be fully accepted can contribute to fatalistic suicide. (Of course, one should keep in mind that any actual suicide by an individual might involve characteristics of more than one of Durkheim's types.)

### Social Support and LGBT Suicide

Social support and a feeling of belonging (Durkheim's "social integration") are important to wellbeing in general, and especially for marginalized groups such as LGBTs (Lin and Israel 2012). According to Frost and Meyer (2012:36), "[f]eeling connected to one's community represents an extension of the fundamental human need to belong..." Connecting with people who share a common sexual minority status can affect one's ability to create a positive identity and become satisfied with who one is. As noted, LGBT youth are more likely to experience prejudice and persecution compared to their heterosexual peers (Teasdale and Bradley-Engen 2010). The effects of such victimization can be lessened by social support; however, LGBT youth report comparatively limited access to social support (Button, O'Connell, and Gealt 2012; Teasdale and Bradley-Engen 2010), which could be linked to depression and suicidal behavior in LGBT youth. Researchers advise that social support come not only from family but also from a visible, cohesive local LGBT community (Lin and Israel 2012).

While social support and a feeling of belonging to a community are important, LGBT youth can have trouble accessing sources of such support. They may not know where to look for such support in their geographic communities. Even if aware of community-based resources, they might be hesitant to access these due to the fear of others – even non-heterosexual others -- finding out about them (Dehaan et al. 2013). In the non-virtual world, then, it can be difficult for LGBT youth to locate and use the resources they need for socialization into and support for their "new" sexual identities.

The advent of the internet and social media adds a new, different, and in many ways less threatening context. Online, LGBT youth can find, anonymously, information about the LGBT community, non-heterosexual identity, and sexual-identity-related health information (Dehaan et al. 2013). They can connect with others, often age peers, who are in similar situations (Dehaan et al. 2013), fostering a sense of support and belonging.

Discovering and accessing the online LGBT community is especially important for those unable or unwilling to become a part of the face-to-face LGBT community, provided one even exists in their geographic region. YouTube is available to any young LGBT with internet access, and its privacy settings and use of screen names allow channel members to remain anonymous. Thus LGBT youth can access information and interact with others via YouTube without having to worry about being outed.



## Reconceptualizing Community in the Electronic Age

German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies founded the field of community sociology with the publication of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* ("Community and Society") in 1887 (Lyon and Driskell, 2012: 6). Tönnies ([1887] 1963: 231) emphasized a broad historical shift from traditional to modern societies wherein a "period of *Gesellschaft* follows a period of *Gemeinschaft*". Rural villages, marked by holistic personal relationships, shared cultural traditions, and small populations best approximated the ideal type of *Gemeinschaft*. *Gesellschaft*, on the other hand, reflected in the more urbanized and differentiated settings of the contemporary world, was characterized by segmented and impersonal relationships and thus more tenuous connections of individuals to social groups (Lyon and Driskell, 2012: 6-7).

Tönnies' ideas were to cast a long shadow on later research in the sociology of community, elements of which have implications for the study at hand. A key part of Tönnies' ([1887] 1963: 42) conceptualization of *Gemeinschaft* or 'community' was a shared locality or "common habitat". The notion of physical place or geographic area thus became an integral component of most sociological definitions and studies of community that followed (e.g., Hillery, 1955; Lyon and Driskell, 2012). This led some sociologists, such as Driskell and Lyon (2002), to argue that the electronic age's "virtual communities" are not really "true communities". Not only do these authors view shared territory viewed as a necessary condition for community, but they deem the nature of most electronic interactions to be more *Gesellschaft*-like because of the topical specialization of online groups and the effects of social distance on internet relationships.

Not all community sociologists agree with the judgment that virtual communities don't have the potential for a true communal experience. Brint (2001), for example, finds many problems with what he calls Tönnies' "aggregated approach" to community. Specifically, Brint argues that Tönnies' two polar ideal types of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* both contain dimensions that do not necessarily vary together and/or are mutually exclusive. For instance, small rural villages may at times be characterized by more impersonal and segmented relationships (e.g., business transactions in a local market), and larger urbanized areas can certainly evidence strong personal ties (e.g., within multi-unit residential buildings, streets or neighborhoods). As a solution to these problems with Tönnies' typological theory, Brint (2001: 3) advocates the "disaggregated

approach" put forth by Durkheim, whose "conceptual breakthrough was to see community not as a social structure or physical entity but as a set of variable properties of human interaction... ". For Durkheim, one key variable in this regard was the level of social integration, discussed above with respect to his typology of suicide. And, in fact, Tönnies (2001:22) proposed that "the theory of *Gemeinschaft* starts from the assumption of perfect unity of human wills as an original or natural condition which is preserved in spite of actual separation" (Tönnies, ([1887] 1963: 37; italics added).

In sum, combining ideas of Durkheim and Tönnies on social integration and *Gemeinschaft* with Brint's analysis, this reconceptualization of community does not require that communities be geographically defined. Thus virtual communities are possible, since they have the potential for providing a sense of *Gemeinschaft*.

### A Sense of Community in a Virtual Environment

Virtual communities are non-face-to-face communities that, for this study, exist online. While some have debated whether virtual communities (i.e., those not connected by physical location) can in fact be considered communities (e.g., Driskell and Lyon 2002), we argue that, based on the above discussion and with the growth of the internet and social media, the requirement that a community share a physical location has become outdated. A more contemporary position would be that, because of the ability to communicate and interact socially, there is no longer a need for a shared physical location (Blanchard 2008).

Sense of community has been defined as "the feeling members have of belonging to a community, the belief that members matter to one another and to the community and a shared faith that their needs will be met through their commitment to the community" (Tonteri et al. 2011:2216). To see if virtual communities can be functionally equivalent, a "sense of virtual community model," including measures of creating identity, exchange and the development and adherence to social norms, was developed and tested by Blanchard (2008). She proposed that, while there would be some differences between non-virtual and sense of virtual community models, a virtual community would still meet the criteria for community.

Blanchard (2008) also discussed and distinguished between the creation of individual identity and group identity. While some argue that individual identities can hinder the creation of group identity, Blanchard argued that expressing one's

individuality while communicating with other group members could potentially strengthen the group identity and solidarity of the community. Thus, for example, members of a YouTube community can express their individuality through creating videos or commenting on others' videos and, through such interaction, the expression of individuality could lead to a stronger community. Based on a shared identity (e.g., LGBT), members also share group goals that can further strengthen virtual community.

Social exchange -- support given to community members by other members -- is another important reason for joining both offline and online communities (Blanchard, 2008). Virtual community support is manifested by posting content, messages or comments on the website. Active participation is unnecessary for receiving the beneficial effects of support (Blanchard 2008); in fact, support can be obtained just by seeing others' messages and comments. YouTube, through its commenting feature, facilitates social exchange, since members of the YouTube community can interact supportively with both the vlogger and each other.

Another virtual community feature, according to Blanchard (2008), is forming and adhering to group norms, since a tenet of social exchange theory is that group members create norms, which include interaction protocols, and then become limited by them. YouTube is amenable to creating group norms through its flagging feature, whereby members can "flag" a comment as inappropriate, allowing members to control what is acceptable behavior in their community. Members can also comment on inappropriate comments and challenge the poster of a negative message. Each YouTube channel can thus decide what is appropriate for its community.

Common ties and social interaction are important aspects of *Gemeinschaft* (Driskell and Lyon 2002). According to Amitai and Oren Etzioni (as cited in Driskell and Lyon 2002), a sense of commitment, a set of shared values, a culture, history and a shared identity are commonalities necessary to create common ties. All of these elements can be found in the LGBT YouTube community. For instance, evidence of a sense of commitment can be viewers subscribing to videos, as discussed above, and vloggers show commitment by operating their channels. The time and effort needed to maintain a YouTube channel can be another indicator of commitment. There are many shared values within the LGBT community; a belief in LGBT equality is perhaps the most relevant value for this community. The LGBT community has a specific culture, often evidenced within YouTube LGBT channels. The topics discussed, the ways of life, and the ongoing

struggles, while not the same for all, are shared by the members of this community. Another cultural indicator would be LGBT argot -- words and phrases specific to this community. Overall, from before the Stonewall riots and through the AIDS epidemic to the present, the American LGBT community has manifested the identifiers of community. LGBT history has shaped and informed the experience of every LGBT in America; there is no reason why these indicators would not also be evident in LGBT social media such as YouTube.

### Summary

Overall, LGBT individuals are more likely to engage in suicidal behavior than heterosexuals; this is especially true of LGBT youth. Social support and integration and a sense of community are important factors in reducing/preventing suicidal behavior. Thus LGBT youth mental health can be improved and suicide risk lowered via access to some form of LGBT community. However, this is not always possible where one lives: no such community may exist, physical or other impairments may preclude accessing the community, or LGBT youth may be unwilling to self-identify, even if only to other community members. These obstacles can be removed via an online community, especially one that creates a strong sense of group identification/belongingness among its members. Prior studies of sense of virtual community used chat rooms, discussion boards and blogs. Sense of virtual community has never been studied in the YouTube context. Since there is clearly an LGBT presence on YouTube (e.g., the "It Gets Better Project"), and since community can promote positive group identity and solidarity, the challenges faced by LGBT youth, perhaps resulting even in suicide, could be ameliorated via a YouTube LGBT youth community. This study, which focuses on the effectiveness of YouTube LGBT videos in providing LGBT youth with support and a sense of belonging, will assess the extent to which YouTube displays the potential to create a sense of virtual community.

## Methodology

### Data and Coding Categories

The data were comments viewers posted for YouTube videos whose creators could be identified as LGBT vloggers.

Each comment was assigned to one of three main categories and then into one of six subcategories. The main categories were pro-community building, neutral,

and anti-community building. The subcategories were comments directed at the vlogger, comments directed to another viewer, comments directed to the community, comments about personal experiences, comments about the topic in general, and comments (called "other") that had nothing to do with the video or conversation.

(Comments that could not be categorized, usually due to the writing being so poor as to be unintelligible, were discarded without replacement.)

Drawing on the work of Tönnies and Blanchard, a pro-community building comment would be one that could be interpreted as "close and intimate," "emotional and supportive," and/or "based on common values." "Close and intimate" comments would describe, for example, personal experience or a request for advice.

Comments that included expressions of love, compliments, or expressions of agreement were interpreted as "emotional and supportive," as were validating comments that responded to negative comments directed at another viewer or the vlogger. (The negative comments themselves were categorized as non-community building.) Advice-giving comments were categorized as "emotional and supportive," as were comments interpreted as constructive criticism, where the poster appears to be trying to help the vlogger or another viewer grow.

Comments "based on common values" included those that discussed a topic relevant to the LGBT community (whether or not it was addressed in the video). Comments involving disagreement were categorized as pro-community building if they were respectful and non-antagonistic: open and honest communication can be a sign of a community, since if one feels comfortable expressing one's true opinion, one probably feels comfortable with the group.

Anti-community building comments were those judged not only as preventing or hindering the building of community, but also as having the potential to disrupt or break down an existing community. Examples of such comments would be those expressing hatred or making severe, unsupported judgment without any constructive criticism.

Neutral comments were those that were interpreted as neither helping create community nor hindering or breaking it down.

## Pilot Test

Four types of appropriate YouTube categories were identified: gay, lesbian, male-to-female (MTF) transgender, and female-to-male (FTM) transgender.

Next, a list of four channels in each category was compiled, using the first four listed when each category was searched. (YouTube calls an account's homepage a "channel.") A random number generator then determined which of the four channels, one from each category, would be used. (Although the selection of channels was not probability-based, and in fact likely resulted from YouTube's search algorithm, randomly choosing the channels that would provide the data guarded against researcher bias.)

The random number generator was then used to determine which video would be used from each category's channel. For the pilot test, the channels were Wickydkewl, Girlfriends TV, Zinnia Jones, and Skylarkeleven; the selected videos were "Does God Care if I'm Gay?", "Are butch lesbians transgender?", "Transgender women in women's bathrooms: A purely imagined harm", and "Some information on testosterone." A total of 100 comments in response to these videos was sampled, taking the first comment and every third comment thereafter until twenty-five codable comments from each channel had been obtained.

Two of the authors then independently rated the comments, with complete inter-rater reliability. The pilot sample (n = 100) yielded 84 pro-community building comments and 16 non-community building comments. (No comments were rated "neutral".)

In non-probability-based "opt-in" polls, which characterize the data from these YouTube channels, one would expect most comments to come from viewers with strong opinions. (Those who are neutral won't bother.) To conclude that YouTube could build community, then, a simple majority would be inadequate; a more compelling ratio of positive to negative comments should be obtained, such as the 84:16 ratio from this pilot test.

## Sampling and Data Collection

Returning to the four YouTube categories previously identified (gay, lesbian, male-to-female [MTF] transgender, and female-to-male [FTM] transgender), and

excluding the pilot test channels, one channel from each category was chosen: LifeofAGay (gay), Ambers Closet (lesbian), Natalie Sweetwine (MTF), and The Real Alex Bertie (FTM). To qualify, a channel had to have at least five videos. Two videos were randomly selected from each of these four channels. (1)

The sample consisted of all 1108 comments to these videos. In addition to category and subcategory coding, this allows a look at the thread of conversations between a video's viewers, a potentially important element in assessing a sense of virtual community.

### *Data Analysis*

The comments were coded into the three main categories and, within each, into one of the six sub-categories. Percentages and percentage distributions were calculated. As in the pilot test, a large proportion of the comments falling into the pro-community building category would be taken as evidence of YouTube's community building potential.

## Results and Discussion

### Characteristics of the Sample

Table 1 shows that 86.9% of the 1081 codable comments were rated as pro-community building. Nearly 3/5 of these were directed at the vlogger, with just under 15% directed to other viewers and nearly the same percent focusing on personal experience. A bit over 1/10 were about other relevant topics. There were hardly any "other" comments, and none about the community.

The great majority of anti-community building comments (4.0% of the total) were directed at the vlogger (34.9%) or other viewers (41.9%). In the neutral category, almost 40% of comments were directed to other viewers, with another 45% being nearly evenly split between the vlogger and "relevant topics."

Overall, about 9 of 10 comments were pro-community building, and the majority of those were directed to the vlogger. Only four percent of the comments were coded as anti-community building. The pre-determined criterion for the community-building potential of YouTube was met.

Table 1: Comments by Category and Sub-Category (N=1081)

| Category                  | Pro-Community Building | Neutral    | Anti-Community building |
|---------------------------|------------------------|------------|-------------------------|
| Directed to Vlogger       | 545 (58.0%)            | 22 (22.2%) | 15 (34.9%)              |
| Directed to other viewers | 140 (14.9%)            | 39 (39.4%) | 18 (41.9%)              |
| About the community       | 0.0 (0.0%)             | 0 (0.0%)   | 0 (0.0%)                |
| About personal experience | 135 (14.9%)            | 3 (3.0%)   | 0 (0.0%)                |
| About relevant topics     | 115 (12.2%)            | 23 (23.2%) | 5 (11.6%)               |
| Other                     | 4 (0.004%)             | 12 (12.1%) | 5 (11.6%)               |
| Total                     | 939 (99.5%)*           | 99 (99.9%) | 43 (110.0%)             |

\*Some columns do not total 100.0% due to rounding error.

## Results

Of course, the main approach and focus of this study is qualitative content analysis. Following are verbatim posted comments illustrative of the main categories, accompanied by justifications of the coding choices and generalized interpretations of the comments.

### 1. Pro-community building comments

#### A. Viewer:

Thank you for sharing my new son just told me and you have help me not to think of as a loss but change.

From the channel "The Real Alex Bertie" (Bertie, 2013), this vlogger-directed comment evokes both the themes of "close and intimate" and "emotional and supportive," as viewer thanks the vlogger for helping her accept her transgender child. The expression of thanks places this comment in the "emotional and supportive" category, as thanking is a way of sharing emotions and expressing appreciation (to the vlogger). Because the viewer mentions her son and shares her own personal experience, this comment is also "close and intimate."

#### B. Viewer:

Question for anyone: I'm very insecure and am not a big fan of change. I feel like male because I think and do some very masculine things, even as a young child. If I don't think I'm ready for people thinking I'm male, like I don't mind being called my birth name or calling me female pronouns, am I not extreme enough to identify as trans?



Also from "The Real Alex Bertie" (Bertie, 2013), this comment was deemed "close and intimate" theme because the viewer is asking for advice, which entails the honest expression of uncertainty and needs. This viewer risks ridicule by asking for advice, but apparently feels comfortable enough with this community to take that chance. Asking for advice is thus seen as a pro-community building comment.

C. Viewer:

Thanks for all your video uploads...I sub a few weeks ago to your channel. As from a straight persons pov I never really saw or I guess understood it from a Gay persons side' everything they go through and all that...So Ive continued to watch your vids cause in most of them your generally making a point that usually gets missed in other peoples opinions of what gender everyone should be with, or how people should live/act in their daily lives. Plz keep up the honest vids' you & kiarra continue to shine bright like diamonds lol nah jk no idea why I wrote that' Soz about the novel but from a New Zealand Girl 🇳🇿 Fan for sure ❤️

This comment from Ambers Closet (2014) falls into the "close and intimate" and "emotional and supportive" themes, and suggests, perhaps, an evolution of "common values." Again there is an expression of thanks, and the viewer mentions being a "fan." Using this term implies support (as does the tone of the entire comment). The viewer is from New Zealand, showing the potential for a viable global community, one not geographically restricted as in the historical conceptualization of community. Not only could these videos help non-American LGBT youth, they could also help sensitize vloggers, viewers and others to the impact of sociocultural milieu on the lived experience of LGBT youth.

D. Viewer: I feel connected to you just by having watched your videos for a few days! know that you build connections with people, you help people, and you are honestly simply extremely like able :) ANYONE would be lucky to have any sort of relationship with you! I mean you seem interesting, level-headed (even though you may not see that right now), and kind. and...you're really hot. keep your head up! ❤️

From "The Real Alex Bertie" (Bertie, 2013), this comment was also rated "emotional and supportive". The viewer expresses feelings of connection to the vlogger, and lists positive qualities of the vlogger. The viewer mentions feeling a connection to the vlogger after watching their videos, and that the vlogger is making connections with other viewers as well, implying "common values." The beginnings of community are unmistakable.

Here is an excerpt of a conversation from the channel, The Real Alex Bertie (2013):

E. Viewer 1:

Wow, whatever. Just clench your teeth and deal with it.

Viewer 2:

It's obvious he's going through a hard time; this is really insensitive and rude advice.

These comments, from "The Real Alex Bertie" (Bertie, 2013), illustrate Viewer 2 defending the vlogger against a negative comment posted by Viewer 1. (Viewer 1's comment was coded into the anti-community building category.) Viewer 1 invalidates the vlogger's feelings and ridicules the vlogger for expressing those feelings. Viewer 2, however, attempts to negate Viewer 1's anti-community building comment, letting the vlogger (and Viewer 1) know that Viewer 2 believes the vlogger's pain is real, is sympathetic, and finds Viewer 1's comment inappropriate.

F. Viewer:

Love you amber, I will support u forever, boo 😊❤️

Vlogger:

Thank you!! I so appreciate you! I don't even pay most of them any mind....on other videos might but when it comes to Religion, I knew people would feel a certain way so I'ma let them live this time! Lol

These comments, from Ambers Closet (2013), show the vlogger directly interacting with and responding to a viewer. Such communication – two-way, personalized and supportive – is a requisite for creating and maintaining a sense of virtual community. The viewer's comment is "emotional and supportive," and the vlogger returns the sentiments, validating the viewer's feelings. While some might argue that the word "love" is used too often and loosely (e.g., "love those shoes"), the word "love" as used here seems to stand for a stronger feeling, as "...affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common interests" ("Love" 2014). The viewer admires the vlogger, at least in part because of her work, and it is easy to infer from the comments that the two share common interests. And common interests can build community.

## 2. Anti-community building comments

A. Viewer:

GAY PEOPLE GO TO HELL GO SCREW A WOMAN AND BE NORMAL

This anti-community building comment is from the channel, LifeOfAGay (2014), and attacks the core identity of the community. The viewer implies that "normal" men are those who have sex with women. Thus gays are "not normal" -- at least those who don't "screw women." Using capital letters is the equivalent of shouting, intensifying the condemning negativity of the comment. (Using all capital letters makes a comment stand out visually as well. Someone scrolling through the comments is more likely to notice this one.) Of course, if a community is to be built, the positive messages should be the more noticeable ones.

B. Viewer 1:

Fuck off asshole i have family and friends that own a coal mine and they know how to hide a body so watch your back and I'm not threatening you I'm promising you!

Viewer 2:

Get a life! Go fuck yourself! Just go and find your vagina that will love you for being a homophobic prick!

Viewer 3:

Go kill yourself before someone else here does it!

These comments were posted in response to a prior comment on the LifeOfAGay video, "10 Reasons Being Gay is Awesome!" (LifeOfAGay 2014). On the one hand, these comments might be considered supportive, as Viewers 2 and 3 come to the defense of the vlogger. However, the language and prevailing sentiments led to their anti-community building classification. In general, foul language -- especially delivered with the vehemence in these comments -- adds hostility and thus hinders community building. There is no support, no expression of positive emotions, no suggestion of shared values. Viewers scrolling through these comments would lose any sense of virtual community they might have had. The threats of violence and suggestion of suicide contribute to the hostile, anti-community building social environment, and could make any viewer -- not just the commenting viewers -- feel unsafe and unwilling to participate actively in the channel.

C. Viewer:

Lick it slap it rub it down oh no fuck u good Sweet bootypussy is tender.

Of the channels and comments sampled, the MTF channel was the only one where sexually explicit comments, such as the above response to "MTF Transsexual Voice Training," seemed the norm. The comment seems to express a sentiment rather than a focused message. Still, its language certainly could offend viewers, distancing them from a channel they might have hoped would be supportive. This and similar comments intentionally or unintentionally are obstacles to the sense of virtual community that could exist. Sexually explicit comments may also be evidence of fetishism, which can create a problematic perception of MTF transgender people and dehumanizes transgender women, who are conceptualized as sex objects that exist only for the pleasure of those who fetishize them. Obviously, a sense of virtual community cannot be created if the vlogger and/or other members are considered objects rather than humans.

D. Viewer:

RAPE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

This comment from Natalie Sweetwine's (2012a) channel is not directed at anyone in particular (e.g., the vlogger or viewer), is unrelated to the topic of the video, and is not a viewer's description of a personal experience. Nonetheless, it was categorized as anti-community building. Not only is rape illegal, but the word "rape" has a negative connotation that could make viewers uncomfortable, fearful, alienated, and reluctant to continue to participate on the channel, whether actively or passively. Viewers are not likely to feel safe in a community characterized by comments like this one.

### **3. Neutral Comments**

A. Viewer:

I thought this was make up tutorial.

This comment, from "How to Hide Adams Apple for MTF Transsexual" (Natalie Sweetwine, 2012a), is judged neutral since it neither helps build community nor works to break it down. It is a statement addressed to no one in particular; it neither offers support nor says anything negative.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

Suicide, with rare exceptions, is viewed as undesirable and often unnecessary; one cliché calls it "a permanent solution to a temporary problem." Precursors of suicide include depression, stigmatization, alienation, and ostracism, conditions more likely to be felt by those with minority or marginalized social statuses. One such at-risk demographic is LGBT youth, characterized by a disproportionately

high suicide rate.

Both classic and contemporary sociological theory and research support social integration and community as factors that can mitigate the above precursors and provide support, information and education, thereby lessening the odds of suicide. However, many LGBT youth may be unable or unwilling to find the socially integrative and supportive environment they need: such supports may not exist where one lives, or one might be unable to access those supports (e.g., someone with a mobility-limiting impairment), or one might not be ready to reveal one's sexual identity even in what should be an accepting community.

What options then exist for LGBT youth to find the social integration and community that can combat the negative messages they receive from other sectors of society? While traditional conceptions of community include geographic proximity, given the rapid advent and spread of social media, is geographic proximity still a requisite trait of community? Or could targeted social media, such as YouTube channels, provide a sense of virtual community for LGBT youth?

This research explored whether LGBT YouTube channels have the necessary elements to create a sense of community in a virtual environment. Since community requires social interaction, it seemed that a content analysis of YouTube social interaction, using a sample of comments from a selection of LGBT YouTube channels, would be appropriate.

Trichotomizing comments as pro-community building, anti-community building, or neutral, a pilot test on 100 comments and the subsequent analysis of over 1000 comments both found that about 85 percent of comments were pro-community building. That is, they were judged to be "close and intimate," "emotional and supportive", and/or "based on common values," indicative of the social interaction found in a Gemeinschaft-style community.

In addition, the content analysis of comments, several of which are reproduced verbatim and discussed above, lends credence both to the classification scheme and the conclusion that, despite the anti-community building comments, the amount of supportive interaction necessary for the creation of a sense of virtual community, Gemeinschaft-style, does exist within the LGBT demographic on YouTube. It is thus worth considering how to maximize use of this "virtual community" to combat the pressures that can lead LGBT youth to consider, attempt, or complete suicide. Finally, the results of this study suggest a

reconsideration of the conceptualization of "community" to fully take into account the ubiquity, power and potential of social media.

### Limitations

Steps were taken to minimize the odds of researcher or sampling bias. Despite the qualitative nature of this research, probability-based sampling was used in the selection of YouTube channels and, within those, the specific comments to analyze. Still, neither the channels nor the comments can be argued to be representative, nor should the results be generalized without further study.

Given the sampling strategy, some comments were several years old, and may not reflect current situations or events (e.g., the U. S. Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage). The meaning of some comments could not be discerned due to incomprehensible writing quality, and were eliminated from the sample; if there were a pattern to the content of those comments, the results could have been skewed. Other comments were challenging to interpret but were included; incorrect interpretation could lead to misclassification.

The subcategory "about the community" had no pro-community, anti-community, or neutral comments. Future research should consider whether this may have been an artifact of the sample or if this subcategory could be eliminated.

The MTF transgender channel had more negative comments than the other channels, in part because some comments that seemed pro-community building may not have been (and were not so classified). For instance, many comments mentioned the transgender female's looks. This seems, on the surface, supportive, but in fact it may be indicative of the fetishism that exists within the MTF transgender community. Men may turn transwomen into sex objects and no longer view them as people. Thus any comment complimenting transwomen's looks had to be viewed with suspicion, since it may have been a symptom of fetishism.

### Implications for Future Research

There are varied options and directions for future research. This study could, of course, be replicated, using the same methodology but a different selection of channels and comments. A more sophisticated content analysis (e.g., transcribing and analyzing content using content analysis software) might yield deeper insight.

Quantitative or mixed-methods versions of this research are also possible.

The MTF transgender channel had the largest number of sexually explicit comments and a far lower percentage of positive comments than the FTM transgender videos received. This could be further investigated to see if these findings can be replicated and explained, and what differences they might create for an emergent sense of virtual community.

While this research evaluated the potential for a sense of virtual community for a specific population via YouTube videos, it did not measure or examine differences between the level or strength of community of different YouTube channels. If such differences exist, it would be helpful, for both LGBT and community scholars, to know why.

The concept of community should continue to be evaluated and refined, particularly with reference to its dimension of "geographic proximity." Given the proliferation of social media and its use by, especially, younger demographics, the definition of community may be evolving as younger generations replace older ones and as societal values and norms change, just as definitions of concepts like family and marriage have changed.

Studies of suicide and of community have a long and entrenched history in sociology, much more so than studies of LGBTs and social media. But the intersection of these four seems logical and worthy of further investigation, and the results of such studies are potentially beneficial for the well-being of LGBT youth, an at-risk population subgroup.

## Footnotes

(1) From LifeofAGay: "Gay IS a choice" and "10 Reasons being gay is awesome."  
From Ambers Closet: "Can you be gay and religious?" and "Is being gay a choice?"  
From Natalie Sweetwine: "MTF Transsexual Voice Training" and "How to hide your Adam's apple."  
From The Real Alex Bertie: "Offending Trans People" and "My Dysphoria."

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