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## I Need to See Me on TV: Parasocial Affirmations of Sexual and Gender Identity Development of LGBTQ+ Mass Media Consumers

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I NEED TO SEE ME ON TV: PARASOCIAL AFFIRMATIONS OF SEXUAL AND  
GENDER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF LGBTQ+ MASS MEDIA CONSUMERS

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Communication and Information  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Donald I. Lowe

Lexington, Kentucky

Co-Directors: Dr. Shari Veil, Professor of Communication  
and Dr. Jennifer Scarduzio, Professor of Communication  
Lexington, Kentucky

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### I NEED TO SEE ME ON TV: PARASOCIAL AFFIRMATIONS OF SEXUAL AND GENDER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF LGBTQ+ MASS MEDIA CONSUMERS

This dissertation presents a new cycle model of media usage by LGBTQ+ community members in the United States that reveals a purpose previously unnamed and undefined. While parasocial contact, parasocial interaction, and parasocial relationships have been present in the academic literature for quite some time (as early as 1956 when Horton and Wohl first wrote of the phenomenon), use of media to parasocially affirm one's LGBTQ+ status is unique to this study. This study used qualitative methods to examine a specific mass media audience, LGBTQ+ individuals, and asked them, in one-on-one interviews, how they utilize mass media to assist with their sexual and gender identity development. Participants in this study spoke of a moment of realization of the existence of LGBTQ+ identities and the stigma associated with those identities prior to their recognition or realization of their own sexual and gender identities. Additionally, they reported that no connection was made between this realization and their own sexual and gender identity at the time of this discovery. Participants then reported a variety of time frames passed before their own realizations (i.e., from as little as a few weeks up to 10 years). Next, participants spoke of their own realizations. At this point, most participants spoke of the stigma and fears associated with LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identities. Decisions were made by all to keep their realizations private. This self-imposed lack of interpersonal communication (created under real or imagined rejection scenarios) revealed a need to seek affirmation in more impersonal settings.

Arguably, the most important finding is that: instead of parasocial interactions or parasocial relationships participants reported parasocial affirmations. Parasocial affirmations are defined by this dissertation as usage experiences of media characters/personalities that allow for visualization of self-acceptance. But viewing one media depiction or one interpersonal interaction is not enough to affirm one's sexual and/or gender identity. These affirming associations in turn create a need for additional experiences and the process starts again. The affirmations include information about successful negotiation of sexual and/or gender identity and therefore, affirming their own sexual and gender identity. This process runs from as little as a few days to many years until the individual is secure enough to engage interpersonally with others about their sexual and gender identity. Theoretical implications of this dissertation include an extension of the parasocial interaction/relationship theory with the addition of parasocial affirmations. Practical implications of this dissertation describe how LGBTQ+ community members, allies, social workers, school counselors etc., could use these findings to enhance coping skills of LGBTQ+ community members. Additionally, mass media producers could use these findings to guide their creation of LGBTQ+ inclusive and supportive products.

KEYWORDS: Parasocial Affirmations, Sexual Identity Formation,  
Gender Identity Formation, Intersectionality, Gender Binary

Donald I. Lowe

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April 15, 2021

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Date

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This dissertation is dedicated to all the LGBTQ+ youth who face shame and ridicule for simply being themselves and the mass media producers, writers, directors, actors, etc., who work tirelessly to show these youths that not only does it get better – it gets fabulous! This dissertation is also dedicated to my beloved Helen (our grey Tabby) for her countless interruptions during my writing sessions. And I would be remiss if I did not dedicate this dissertation to my beloved Judi (our black French Bulldog) who patiently lay on my legs in my recliner for hours on end as I read journal article after journal article.

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## CHAPTER 1 LGBTQ+ INDIVIDUALS AND MASS MEDIA

This chapter introduces the focus of this dissertation on mass media's role in sexual and gender identity development of LGBTQ+ community members. The opening pages include the current state of LGBTQ+ *reception* and *representation* in the United States (U.S.) and its mass media, a summary of *identity development* including the key terms associated with LGBTQ+ sexual identity development particularly, and a summary of *parasocial interaction theory*.

### 1.1 Reception and Representation of LGBTQ+ Community Members

The portrayals of LGBTQ+ community members in mass media have been similar to the representations of community members from other minority groups. Most of the early decades of television are absent of any positive portrayal of LGBTQ+ community members (Tropiano, 2002). In fact, according to Gross (2005), the minimal early depictions were of mentally unstable and usually dangerous individuals. These negative depictions coupled with the idea that individuals learn how to be human by instinct, and by example, situates LGBTQ+ sexual identity status as problematic both to LGBTQ+ individuals and others. Due to the fact that frequently human instincts and examples are in conflict, especially when it comes to sex and sexuality, most societies throughout history have shunned, punished, and even exiled members of the LGBTQ+ community (Haggerty, 2000). In fact, until recently, LGBTQ+ community members were not depicted in a positive manner (Palmer-Mehta, 2009). This shift from negative to positive opinions, in part, is due to the large number of people publicly identifying as LGBTQ+.

According to a recent Gallup poll (Newport, 2018), 4.5% of the U.S. population now identifies as LGBTQ+. That number translates to over 13 million people and does not include those unwilling to identify as LGBTQ+, or who have not come out, at the present time. Furthermore, according to *Time* (Steinmetz, 2016), a more accurate estimate of members of the LGBTQ+ community range as high as 10% of the U.S. population, which is over 30 million people. Despite the larger prevalence of people who identify as LGBTQ+, it is interesting that media portrayals have not increased at the same rate. For example, GLAAD, formerly the Gay Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, reported in

2018, that fictional TV characters identifying as LGBTQ+ in featured roles accounted for less than .5% of all TV characters. Generally, TV shows have more than one LGBTQ+ character or none at all (GLAAD, 2018). The vast majority of TV programming is devoid of any LGBTQ+ characters. The lack of LGBTQ+ characters in fictional TV is problematic as it results in underrepresentation which, in turn, could lead to misconceptions of the actual size of the LGBTQ+ community. The inaccurate representations could also result in lack of funding for health care and social support programs at all governmental levels.

This underrepresentation affirms a heteronormative paradigm. The assumption is that everyone in media is heterosexual unless otherwise labeled or identified. Therefore, audiences assume media characters or personalities to be heterosexual (Oswald & Suter, 2004). Furthermore, the identities of most media characters are heteronormative – a world view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation. When a character or personality does not adhere to this heteronormative standard, they are automatically considered as less than the average for their lack of a “normal” identity (Oswald & Suter, 2004, p. 888). At a time in history when LGBTQ+ rights have been recently challenged by the Executive Branch of the Federal Government and more violence and murders of LGBTQ+ community members are occurring seemingly every day (Human Rights Campaign, 2020), it is more important than ever to remember that human beings learn how to construct their identities by instinct and by example (Mead, 1934). Identity development is a fundamental part of human growth and development.

## **1.2 Identity Development**

Identity development is an on-going, never ending process in which individuals process information and interactions to continually revise their self-concepts and self-esteem (Kerpelman, et al., 1997). The Critical Media Project (2018) explains that identity development includes many facets such as sex, race, ethnicity, social economic status, nationality, religious affiliation, age, physical and/or cognitive abilities, political beliefs, and sexual identity. Identity is formed in the early stages of childhood through the systems of language, play, and games (Mead, 1934). The self is not automatically present at birth, but instead is developed throughout one’s lifetime from social experiences, activities, and most importantly, interactions (Mead, 1934). Mead’s theory of the social self is based on

the premise that the self emerges from social interactions, such as observing and interacting with others, responding to others' opinions about oneself, and internalizing external opinions and internal feelings about oneself (Mead & Morris, 1967).

These internal feelings are dramatically different for members of the LGBTQ+ community living in a heteronormative society (Savin-Williams, 2009). Sexual identity development for LGBTQ+ community members, referred to and associated with "the coming-out process," has been studied and conceptualized by scholars in disciplines ranging from clinical psychology, sexuality, health communication, and global leadership for populations at extreme risk for poor mental and physical health (e.g., Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Milton & McDonald, 1984; Morris, 1997; Rosario et al., 2001; Troiden, 1989). Sexual identity development is also studied by mass communication scholars focusing on communicative exchanges and relationships between mass media characters/personalities and audiences (Meyer, 2003).

These exchanges were first studied by mass communication scholars in the 1940s who developed an approach to understanding why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs. This approach, known as uses and gratifications theory, was evolved to its present interpretation throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century by media scholars including West, Turner, Schramm, Blumler, McQuail, Katz, and Relman (Severin & Tankard, 1997). Uses and gratifications was one of the first approaches to abandon the classic media effects theories' approach that focused on the impact on audiences and, instead, changed the focus to an audience centered approach where media is seen as a product that is consumed by audiences (Katz, 1959). Multiple gratifications have been developed within the uses and gratifications approach including but not limited to mood management, excitation transfer, sensation seeking and parasocial interactions (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Parasocial interaction theory guides this dissertation's efforts.

### **1.3 Parasocial Interaction Theory**

Over the years, scholars have studied the interactions that audiences engage in with media personalities (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Extant research has noted that audiences engage in parasocial interactions with newscasters (Levy, 1979; Rubin et al., 1985), shopping channel hosts (Grant et al., 1991), soap opera characters (Perse & Rubin, 1989),



and other television performers (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Children and adolescents as consumers of mass media also identify with their favorite television characters (Hoffner, 1996).

Parasocial interaction is most defined as a “seeming(ly) face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). This definition specifically refers to television and radio programs. Additionally, television and radio personalities “foster an illusory parasocial relationship” with listeners and viewers (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 218). Another concept included in parasocial interaction is the emotional attachment on the part of the audience member who was seeking advice from the media personalities, seeing the media personalities as friends, imagining being part of a favorite program’s social world, and a desire to meet the media personality (Rubin et al., 1985, p. 157). Indeed, media formats and techniques encourage and promote the development of parasocial interactions/relationships in order to build and maintain audiences (Rubin, 2009).

In a heteronormative society where LGBTQ+ sexual identities are routinely chastised and sometimes punished, more positive connections between media personalities and LGBTQ+ audiences are desperately needed (Tod & Hirst, 2014). Furthermore, the rise of media exemplars of LGBTQ+ community members and the simultaneous increase of the number of people identifying as LGBTQ+ in the U.S. (Trotta, 2019), creates a need to study the connection between sexual identity development and parasocial interactions between LGBTQ+ community members and media personalities.

More accurate and varied depictions of LGBTQ+ community members in all mass media are essential. In order to create this type of media environment, it is necessary, first, to understand the current state of representations, how they are perceived, and where they fit in the spectrum of LGBTQ+ sexual identity development.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will examine previous research on identity development of LGBTQ+ community members and review the literature on parasocial interaction and relationships. Consisting of three main segments, in this literature review I will, first, discuss the stages of identity development particular to LGBTQ+ community members along with mitigating factors in the sexual identity development process. Second, I will make connections between sexual identity development and utilization of mass media portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters/personalities by examining identification, parasocial interaction, parasocial relationships and uses and gratifications theory. Third, I will explain concepts present in this process including reasons for engaging in parasocial interactions, findings related to various media attractions, and connections to LGBTQ+ individuals. Finally, I will conclude this chapter with a recognition of the gap in the literature that prompts this dissertation's research questions.

### 2.1 Stages of Identity Development

LGBTQ+ individuals develop their identities using the same information and techniques as their heterosexual and cisgender (denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex) counterparts (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). However, heterosexual and cisgender individuals are exposed to a myriad of messages and experience a plethora of interactions with heterosexual and cisgender role models both in interpersonal (i.e., work, school, church, neighborhoods) and mass media (i.e., television, films, music, literature, sport). In addition to the number of exposures, heterosexual and cisgender individuals receive constant, unquestioned, and positively supported messages about their sexuality and gender roles. LGBTQ+ individuals, follow the same basic stages of confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis (Cass, 1996) as their heterosexual counterparts. Yet, they do not experience as many interactions or representations with, and of, other LGBTQ+ individuals as do their heterosexual counterparts. Complicating the matter is the lack of positive messages, interactions, and portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals. In fact, many

messages and portrayals to date have been negative and very damaging to identity development in general and sexual identity specifically (Gross, 2001).

Members of the LGBTQ+ community are at a disadvantage when developing identity, especially compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Unlike heterosexuals, members of the LGBTQ+ community often find themselves lacking adequate information and role models in order to efficiently develop the sexual aspects of their identities (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Identity development in general and sexual identity development particularly occurs during the formative years of adolescence reaching a first disclosure stage around age 18 and continues throughout the lifespan (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000).

Various scenarios are presented for LGBTQ+ individuals during the formative years of adolescence. First, there is a lack of interpersonal relationships with other LGBTQ+ individuals, especially in rural areas (Duggan, 1993). Second, while there may be some LGBTQ+ identifying individuals in social circles, the individual in the development process may choose not to interact with these individuals for a variety of reasons (Mustanski et al., 2014). This can be due to either a lack of knowledge of LGBTQ+ status, being closeted, or not yet being ready to engage others for fear of rejection (Cohler & Hammack, 2007). Finally, being in a very religious family or living in areas where identifying as LGBTQ+ is considered socially unacceptable, or even dangerous, may create situations where LGBTQ+ individuals have to avoid interpersonal communicative exchanges (Duggan, 1993). These disparities can result in roadblocks toward developing identity such as: (1) negative self-esteem, (2) harming one's self, (3) delaying or denying one's sexuality, and (4) harming others who identify as LGBTQ+ (O'Brien, 2017). In the midst of all these obstacles, LGBTQ+ individuals still must go through the process of sexual identity formation.

## **2.2 Sexual Identity Formation**

According to Rosario et al. (2006), the development of an LGBTQ+ sexual identity is a complex and frequently difficult process. Unlike members of other minority groups (e.g., ethnic and racial minorities), nearly all LGBTQ+ individuals are raised in a community of heteronormativity with few similar others from whom they learn about their

identity and who reinforce and support that identity (Rosario et al., 2006). LGBTQ+ individuals are frequently raised in communities that are either ignorant of or openly hostile toward LGBTQ+ individuals (Rosario et al., 2006). These situations are problematic because LGBTQ+ individuals may feel unprepared to process their identities when they feel unsupported and stigmatized (Rosario, et al., 2006). For example, Muñoz-Plaza et al. (2002) found LGBTQ+ high school students still face extreme discrimination in school environments with little or ineffective support from school administrators. Similarly, Williams et al. (2005) explained that sexual minority youth are more often sexually harassed than heterosexual peers. Williams also found this group reported less closeness with mothers and best friends. Currently, research on the sexual identity development of LGBTQ+ community members has focused on the typical ages associated with identity development, usually with emphasis on adolescence, but some studies have included participants as old as 27 (Bond, 2015). Other studies have examined identification as classification such as: (1) gay males, (2) lesbian females, (3) bisexual females, and (4) bisexual males (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2014). Furthermore, other research has focused on demographics including race and ethnicity such as: (1) African American people, (2) Asian American people, (3) Latino/Latina American people and (4) Native American people (e.g., D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Diamond, 1998; Dube, 2000; Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Maguen et al., 2002; McDonald, 1982; Rust, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1998; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Troiden, 1989; Whitam et al., 1998).

Collectively, these studies lay the groundwork for describing identity formation as a process of integration of sexual orientation, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. When incongruence occurs, dissonance typically also takes place (Rosario et al., 2006). LGBTQ+ community members experiencing a lack of interpersonal relationships with other LGBTQ+ community members, especially those in rural parts of the country and world, and those not yet comfortable with identifying publicly as LGBTQ+, frequently turn to media for assistance in identity formation (Gray, 2009).

Research, thus far, has focused on similar issues including social construction of gender and sexuality, sexual identity formation process for all LGBTQ+ community members, sexual identity formation of lesbians, milestones of sexual identity

development/trajectories, coming out as part of sexual identity formation, media portrayals of minority sexuality (i.e., specific and general), and media effects on sexuality/identity formation. The following review highlights each area of research.

### **2.3 Social Construction of Gender and Sexuality**

Scholars place the social construction of gender and sexuality directly in a context that is sometimes considered oppositional to its success. That context is heteronormativity which is found in most societies around the world (Page & Peacock, 2013). Page and Peacock (2013) refer to this phenomenon as a prescriptive set model that centers heterosexual development for both gender and sexuality. Further, the set model “others” all those who do not fit into the heteronormative context and those others are left to find their own, preferably private, way, toward gender and sexual identity (Page & Peacock, 2013).

The literature pertaining to sexual identity, especially LGBTQ+ community members’ sexual identity, problematizes the heteronormative context. Negative effects are associated with the heteronormative context as the “othering” of LGBTQ+ community members is

effectively stigmatizing and marginalizing those who are not “normal” and therefore, devaluing all other (i.e., non-heterosexual) expressions of sexuality (Warner, 1991). Under the heteronormative context, sex and gender are defined in binary terms (Rich, 1980). Binary terms, according to Rich (1980), refer to the concept that gender is either male or female with binary meaning only two options. Additionally, sex (i.e., sexual orientation) is viewed within the binary as well and there again are only two options – heterosexual or gay. When the dominant paradigm rejects variation, LGBTQ+ community members become marginalized simply by not fitting the strict categorical extremes associated with the binary.

The constructivist literature concerning the sexual identity development of LGBTQ+ community members works within the heteronormative context where scholars not only disagree with the context of placing gender and sexuality in binary terms but support the revision of sexual identity development to a non-binary, fluid process. Additionally, the constructivist perspective of categorizing people is viewed as arbitrary

because it is used to fill some human purpose based on sociopolitical rather than “natural” or biological considerations (Freud, 1994).

Brickell (2006) writes of multilayered characteristics of the social in general and gender and sexuality in particular. For example, several useful concepts from historicism (i.e., the tendency to regard historical development as the most basic aspect of human existence), to ethnomethodology (i.e., a method of sociological analysis that examines how individuals use everyday conversation and gestures to construct a common-sense view of the world) (Brickell, 2006). Additionally, Brickell (2006) explains that symbolic interactionism (i.e., the view of social behavior that emphasizes linguistic or gestural communication and its subjective understanding, especially the role of language in the formation of the child as a social being), and material feminism (i.e., that material conditions of all sorts play a vital role in the social production of gender and assays the different ways in which women collaborate and participate in these productions). With this research in mind, there is a call for the systemization of sociologists’ works in order to more precisely convey the agreed upon processes and systems used to explain sexuality and gender (Brickell, 2006).

According to Gans (2002), underpinning the idea of public sociology is the conviction that knowledge can contribute to processes of inclusion or exclusion, depending on how it is used. Santos (2012) and others call for the adoption of a critical framework that accounts for sexual diversity while simultaneously acknowledging the political situation that “others”, such as LGBTQ+ community members will contribute to the dismantling of sexuality, prejudice, and exclusion. However, there are other theories that criticize existing extensions of social construction of sexual identity such as queer theory. Valocchi (2005) examined the state of queer theory, which is an approach to literary and cultural study that rejects traditional categories of gender and sexuality, in the works of sociologists of gender and sexuality. At that time, Valocchi (2005) called for pushing theorists in an even “queerer” theoretical direction. Ethnographic methods were proposed as the most logical way to combine queer theory with sociological analysis (Valocchi, 2005). Even today, scholars do not believe the field has completed enough research to move toward non-normative alignments of sex, gender, and sexuality, nor has the field

researched enough about the construction of intersectional subjectivities of sex, gender, and sexuality (Kingston, Hamond, & Redman, 2020).

## **2.4 Developmental Process Models**

Social scientists agree that sexual identity formation is a developmental process employed by LGBTQ+ community members (Cass, 1979; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; Milton & McDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1989). The concept that gay people – referring to men and women – go through distinct stages in recognizing and adopting their sexual identity has been examined for several decades. In early research, Cass (1979) proposed a six-stage model outlined within the framework of interpersonal congruency theory. Interpersonal congruency theory (Secord & Backman, 1961) assumes that stability and change, in human behavior, are dependent on the congruency or incongruency that exists within an individual’s interpersonal environment. Cass (1979) theorized that movement from one stage of identity development to the other was based on attempts to resolve the inconsistency that gay people feel between perceptions of self and other.

Cass’s (1979) six stages were: (1) identity confusion, (2) identity comparison, (3) identity tolerance, (4) identity acceptance, (5) identity pride, and (6) identity synthesis. Specifically, Cass (1979) theorized gay people would first notice they are different from others when they begin to realize their sexual orientation has relevance to them – as in thoughts, emotional, and or psychological responses to members of the same sex. This recognition forces gay people to evaluate themselves against the heterosexual portrayals that society assigns to individuals. Recognition of the possibility of being gay is the first step toward a gay self. This incongruency stimulates gay people to begin to cover or hide their identity and to utilize “passing” strategies of avoiding threatening situations, controlling personal information, deliberately cultivating a heterosexual persona, and distancing oneself from other gay people. Each of these strategies will eventually fail and be replaced by more authentic behaviors. This signals that the gay persona has become tolerant of their sexuality. With increased contact with other gay people and self-disclosures to accepting heterosexuals, gay people may begin to accept their sexual identity and eventually gain a sense of pride which ultimately leads to identity synthesis (Cass, 1979). Awareness that the “them and us” heteronormative philosophy, in which all

heterosexuals are viewed positively and all gay people are viewed negatively, no longer holds true (Cass, 1979).

Many models of LGBTQ+ sexual identity development preceded and followed this research (Coleman, 1981,1982; Dank, 1971; de Monteflores & Schultz, 1978; Hencken & O’Dowd, 1977; Lee, 1977; McDonald, 1982; Plummer, 1975; Schafer, 1976; Troiden, 1979). Milton and MacDonald (1984) synthesized these works and reported that what the models have in common is the “conceptualization of a three-stage process: (1) the egocentric interpretation of gay feelings, (2) the internalization of the normative assumptions about gay people, and (3) the achievement of a positive gay identity” (p. 94).

The work of Milton and MacDonald (1984) allowed social scientists to clearly identify stages of identity development. Furthermore, the findings simplified understanding for a number of years until Troiden (1989) re-examined his earlier work and offered a four-stage process of gay identity development that included: (1) sensitization, (2) identity confusion, (3) identity assumption, and (4) commitment. Additionally, Fassinger and Miller (1997) hypothesized a model of sexual minority identity formation with a noticeable change in the labeling of gay people. Fundamentally, the new model added the group dimension to previous conceptualizations (Fassinger & Miller, 1997). The model hypothesized two separate but reciprocal processes of individual sexual identity development and group membership identity development in a four-phase sequence: (1) awareness, (2) exploration, (3) deepening commitment, and (4) internalization/synthesis.

All of the models of LGBTQ+ identity development are similar and can be utilized to understand the interpersonal processes through which LGBTQ+ community members adopt their sexual identities. There are, of course, many concepts at play that interact with the process. Factors such as intersectionality, biological sex, and milestones like coming out play significant roles in sexual identity development and will be summarized next.

## **2.5 Mitigating Factors in Sexual Identity Development**

### **2.5.1 Intersectionality**

In addition to individual identity, sexual identity is influenced by group memberships (Fassinger & Miller, 1997). The concept of intersectionality, first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations



such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. One group membership that can significantly influence sexual identity is ethnicity. Ethnicity as a social category comprises a complex interaction of factors, including culture, religion, family, country of origin, and social experience (Shibutani & Kwan, 1965). Past writings concerning ethnicity and LGBTQ+ community members referred to a “dual identity as a sexual minority and a person of color” and emphasized incompatibility of LGBTQ+ orientations and the prevalence of rejection of these orientations due to religious and ethnic values in minority communities such as African American people, Asian American people, Latino/Latina people, and Native American people (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999, p. 1389). Dube and Savin-Williams (1999) found that participants, regardless of ethnicity, experienced most identity milestones at developmentally appropriate ages, had relatively low internalized homophobia, and became romantically and sexually involved during adolescence.

### ***2.5.2 Biological Sex***

The literature on LGBTQ+ sexual identity development focuses primarily on adolescent males. However, research on lesbians, females who are sexually attracted to other females, has found similar findings and some of the previously mentioned research has included both males and females. Chapman and Brannock (1987) proposed a model of lesbian identity development featuring five stages: (1) same sex orientation, (2) incongruence, (3) self-questioning/exploration, (4) self-identification, and (5) choice of lifestyle.

Studies of lesbians have looked at the role of culture/ethnicity in the sexual identity development process. Interestingly, lesbians in Brazil, Peru, the Philippines, and the U.S. reported realization of adult sexual orientation, first sexual attractions, and first sexual experiences at very similar ages (Whitam et al., 1998). However, a significant number of lesbians report no recollection of the gradually unfolding stages of sexual identity formation during childhood or early adolescence, as is reported by most gay males. Instead, they describe their sexual identity formation as emerging abruptly or entirely at a later point

in their lifespan without any of the traditional early indicators being present (Diamond, 1998).

Soto-Sanfiel et al. (2014) studied *The L Word* (i.e., an American television show focusing on the lives of young lesbian women living in Los Angeles, California, in the early 2000s) in Spain by creating two videos of different scenarios to screen to gay men, lesbian women, straight men, and straight women. The levels of identification were attributed to similarity among the respondents and the characters portrayed. Their results confirmed that lesbian characters can produce identification between audiences of all sexual orientations and both sexes. Interestingly, the respondent's moral judgment did not focus on the sexual orientation of the portrayals but "about universal virtues and related to the protagonist's behavior (e.g., treason or falsehood)" (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2014, p. 295). Precise explanations of this phenomenon are yet to be determined but research suggests mass media narratives are consistent in their teaching of moral lessons as being the master narrative (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2014) and therefore, would be dominant in research responses.

## **2.6 Milestones of Sexual Identity Development**

The models of development discussed earlier included specific milestones associated with particular stages. Milestones of sexual identity development have been labeled and categorized. Offerings include: (1) awareness, (2) sexual contact, (3) same-sex contact, and (4) disclosure (Maguen et al., 2002). Additionally, other milestones include: (1) age first aware of same-gender attraction, (2) age of first same-gender sexual experience, (3) age first told someone, (4) age of first disclosure to a parent, (5) gay/lesbian social immersion, (6) age first wondered about orientation, (7) age of first sex with opposite gender, (8) age first considered self-gay/lesbian/bisexual, (9) age came out, (10) age of first same-gender relationship, and (11) age first told other family member (Floyd & Stein, 2002). Another frequently referenced model describes the milestones as: (1) first same-sex attraction, (2) first same-sex sexual activity, (3) labeling sexual identity, and (4) first disclosure (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). These models depict the sexual identity development process as being linear and ending with self-disclosure or coming out. Additionally, these models provide useful overviews that warrant further examination.

One of, if not the, most publicized milestones for LGBTQ+ community members is that of coming out to family and friends. Many films, television shows, novels, songs and other forms of media deal with this major part of LGBTQ+ life. For many, revealing an LGBTQ+ sexuality identity is a frightening proposition given the heteronormative dominant construct.

Coming out involves adopting a non-traditional identity, restricting your self-concept, rearranging your personal history, and altering your relationships with others and society (deMonteflores & Schultz, 1978). All of this reflects a series of affective and cognitive transformations and changes in personal behavior (Riddle & Morin, 1977). Most of the developmental models of LGBTQ+ sexual identity formation define progress as the replacement of a heterosexual identity with a gay identity. Rust (1993) explained that LGBTQ+ individuals will shed their falsely assumed heterosexual identities and come to a place where they accept and correctly identify their own true identity.

An overall, orderly developmental sequence underlies the coming out process but not everyone progresses in a predictable way (McDonald, 1982). Moreover, that does not mean individuals progress through stages in an orderly sequence (Rust, 1993). Blumstein and Schwartz (1976, 1977) write that many LGBTQ+ community members can switch back and forth between sexual identities. Rust (1993) described lesbians who experience periods of ambivalence during which they wonder about their sexual identities and periods during which they do not identify with a particular sexual identity. Rosario et al. (2006) studied LGBTQ+ community members' sexual identity consistency over time. The research found predominantly consistent identities among survey participants but also a significant number of changes in other participants (Rosario et al., 2006) Thus, one can surmise that coming out is not the final stage but actually the process itself.

## **2.7 Mass Media Portrayals of LGBTQ+ Characters and Personalities**

Central to this study is the role of media in sexual identity development. This section reviews the literature on LGBTQ+ media portrayals, character identification, parasocial interaction, and parasocial relationships.

Portrayals of LGBTQ+ community members in mass media have been similar to those community members of other minority groups. Most of the early decades of

television are absent of any positive portrayal of LGBTQ+ community members due in part to the domination of heterosexual males writing heteronormative scripts (Metz, 2019). In fact, according to Gross (2005), early depictions were of mentally unstable and usually dangerous individuals. A few exceptions, Billy Crystal's *SOAP* (1970s) character and other non-recurring characters in episodes of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, among others, were met with mixed reactions from audiences and the television industry (Becker, 2006).

The "Gay 90s", according to Becker (2006), brought about changes in the depiction of LGBTQ+ community members in both frequency and accuracy. These changes were positive steps forward. *Dawson's Creek* and *Will and Grace* included gay characters; however, "compulsory heterosexuality" (i.e., producers must adhere to industry standards that affirm a heteronormative paradigm) prevailed (Brown, 2002). In a broader sense, Brown concluded that mass media can affect awareness of, beliefs about, and possible actual sexual behavior.

It is important to clarify and classify mass media content into two distinct groups: (1) heterosexual content including LGBTQ+ community members and (2) content created for LGBTQ+ community members as an audience (Ng, 2013). The previously used example, *Dawson's Creek*, has heterosexual content including LGBTQ+ community members and *Will and Grace* is content created for LGBTQ+ community members as an audience. An early 90s foray into LGBTQ+ content was the MTV show *My So Called Life*. The central character Angela Chase, played by Claire Danes, was a fifteen-year-old girl struggling with identity and sexuality issues. Her small but loyal group of friends included a sexually ambiguous teen Latino boy Rickie Vasquez, played by Wilson Cruz. While the show was short-lived (it aired only one season from fall 1994 to spring 1995), its impact is frequently cited and studied by media scholars (Byers, 1998). Byers (1998) writes of the groundbreaking show as still adhering to the dominant heterosexual paradigm. Byers discusses "difference through the normalizing lens of 'good people'" (1998, p. 719). Moreover, Byers (1998) refers to narrative structures that appear to allow viewers to experience others but in actuality position the viewer/reader in a place where they can ignore and take no responsibility for "others". In essence, these critiques refer to the

dominant heterosexual paradigm in which LGBTQ+ community members are normalized by good people who avoid their role in the process in order to avoid any personal pain.

A more recent example of content created for LGBTQ+ community members is the popular musical television comedy *Glee* (2009-2015 on *Fox*). *Glee* was produced by Ryan Murphy, one of only a handful of openly gay television producers. *Glee* featured openly gay high school students. While these depictions are considered groundbreaking and a major step forward for LGBTQ+ community members, studies of the impact on audiences and their views of LGBTQ+ community members remained virtually the same as those portrayals in the 1990s (Meyer & Wood, 2013).

Meyer and Wood (2013) found that viewers normalized their own (i.e., real, straight) identities in relation to the fake and/or queer identities shown in the narrative. Meyer and Wood's (2013) findings reified the existence of the dominant heterosexual paradigm and pointed to the importance of LGBTQ+ community member visibility in mass media. Their findings also acknowledged that in many cases visibility does not equal cultural acceptance (Meyer & Wood, 2013). However, Meyer and Wood (2013) also reported that teen television narratives, such as *Glee*, are repeatedly cited as a primary way that teens obtain information about sexuality. This information holds "a unique power to shape individual viewers' perceptions of their own (and others') identities" (Meyer & Wood, 2013, p. 444).

Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) reported similar findings to the previous study. Their study of LGBTQ+ community members in Texas found that mass media influenced the self-realization, coming out process, and current identities of participants (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Additionally, Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) pointed to providing role models and sources of inspiration as positively linked to LGBTQ+ community members' identities. The authors theorized that increasing this availability of role models may positively influence LGBTQ+ identity (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011).

Even more recently, a quantitative content analysis of gay and lesbian portrayals of sex and sexuality was conducted and found that media serve as "vital" sources of sexual information for adolescents exploring their sexual identities (Bond, 2015). Bond (2015) reinforced the dominant heterosexual paradigm by reporting that "research suggests that mainstream media sanitize depictions of lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) individuals,

preventing LGB characters from engaging in realistic talk or sexual behaviors” (p. 38). These findings are problematic and have resulted in the growth of a niche media industry designed, produced, and marketed specifically for LGBTQ+ community members. In his analysis of this niche media, Bond (2015) found that media have served as the primary sources of information about LGBTQ+ community members’ lifestyles, cultures, and behaviors for individuals dealing with their sexual identity development process currently and at various stages.

Soto-Sanfiel et al. (2014) looked at differences in heterosexual men and women and gay men and lesbians in the appreciation of lesbian narratives found in mass media. Appreciation was defined as a “psychological response to narratives that prompts a profound perception of meaning or a motivation to create reflections or thoughts among audience” (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2014, p. 278). Research found that appreciation differences were present in sexual orientation but not in gender and the research pointed to the overall presence of lesbian narratives as producing appreciative effects that will eventually lead to a reduction of prejudices among different groups of people and greater acceptance of gay people in society (Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2014).

With limited or no interpersonal support, LGBTQ+ individuals struggling with developing a sexual identity must look elsewhere for information, association, and support. Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) suggest that LGBTQ+ community members turn to mass media for information about sexual identities as well as role models who identify as LGBTQ+ to emulate. Bandura (1986) posits that much evidence shows that children – and adolescents – learn from positive and negative televised role models and acquire norms and standards for conduct through media outlets such as television and video games. Comstock (1993) similarly found that television plays a significant role in the socialization of American children.

In order to understand this phenomenon more fully, this dissertation now turns to a basic overview of uses and gratifications theory.

## **2.8 Uses and Gratifications of Mass Media**

Uses and gratifications theory originally sought to switch the focus of mass media effects research from the powerful assumptions of direct influence theories (magic bullet,

etc.) to more indirect effects, particularly a more audience-centered approach. Uses and gratifications proposed that audiences were much more active in their use of mass media. Katz, et al., (1974) proposed uses and gratifications theory to be concerned with the “social and psychological origins of needs, which generate expectations from mass media or other sources, which lead to differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in need gratifications and other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended one” (p. 20).

Haridakis (2012) writes, “ U&G emphasizes the centrality of the individual in the audience–media use–effects relationship. Research guided by this audience-centered perspective has suggested that understanding media effects requires consideration of audience members’ individual differences, expectations, goals, level of purposiveness and activity when using media to satisfy their needs and desires [...] much U&G research has focused on how and why people use media” (p. 378). Therefore, arguments have been made that parasocial interaction/relationships can be considered psychological antecedents of the uses and gratifications approach (Cortese & Rubin, 2010).

Scholars have studied LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identity development through a uses and gratifications lens, with a particular focus on social media usage by LGBTQ+ individuals. Social media apps used for finding community, similar others, potential dates, sexual partners, and information gathering have provided rich data for scholars in this area (Miller, 2015; Gudelunas, 2012; Van De Wyle & Tong, 2014; and Fox & Ralston, 2016). There are also a number of studies that support the use of traditional forms of mass media such as television, films, novels, and music as essential to identity development of LGBTQ+ individuals (Floegel & Costello, 2019; Bond, 2020; Kosenko, Bond, & Hurley, 2018).

Uses and gratifications has supplied a large body of research illuminating and answering questions of why and how users consume mass media product. Parasocial interaction theory, which is housed in the uses and gratification approach, highlights the various means through which consumers use media to engage in processes of identification, parasocial interaction, and parasocial relationships as a substitute for actual, interpersonal communication events. The following sections will summarize each of these possible experiences found in the literature to this point in time.

## 2.9 Character Identification

Generally, research on the televised portrayals has involved short-term exposures. These short-term exposures are usually to characters with whom viewers are not familiar. More specifically, studies have shown that children and adults form affective attachments to recurring television characters and personalities (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Attachment and identification with selected characters are two of the numerous outcomes of television viewing that are believed to regulate the socialization process. The literature has not always provided a clear definition of identification.

Identification has been defined in numerous ways, but commonly refers to the process by which a viewer shares a character's perspective and vicariously participates in his/her experiences during the program (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957). This process extends to the desire to be liked or behave in ways similar to the character, which has been referred to as wishful identification (Feilitzen & Linne, 1975). Cohen wrote, "Identification requires that we forget ourselves and become the other – that we assume for ourselves the identity of the target of our identification" (2001, p. 247). Audiences want to view similar others who are positively received and this, in turn, adds to their liking. According to Maccoby and Wilson, (1957), "viewers position themselves as learners trying to both pay close attention to the learned behavior and assess the outcomes that follow" (p. 255). Similar to the findings of Bandura (1986), Cohen (2001) wrote that identification and modeling are more about imagining a positive future for one's self and less about getting lost in the characters as previous research had posited.

Cohen (2001) also found that narrative portrayals are more effective than non-narratives in reducing LGBTQ+ stereotypes. Indeed, narrative portrayals provide a more nuanced and complete representation, and therefore, understanding of LGBTQ+ individuals. This provides opportunities for viewers to identify with such characters and experience an emotional response to their stories (Cohen, 2001).

In additional descriptions of identification, Chory-Assad and Cicchirillo (2005) discussed Bandura's (2002) work on social cognitive theory as identity increasing characters' influence on viewers and motivations to learn the rewarded behaviors of the characters with whom they identify. Cohen (2001, p. 188) claimed that "psychological similarity (e.g., having similar attitudes or personality traits) is more important for



identification than demographic similarity (such as gender and age)”. Fundamentally, this finding refers to the concept that similarity-based attraction of LGBTQ+ individuals to mass media personalities and characters is stronger with attitudes, values, and beliefs than simply belonging to the same physiological classification.

Another aspect associated with identification is relief from stress associated with maintaining a minority sexual identity. Slater et al. (2014, p. 451) argued that identifying with a character can serve as a way to meet the “fundamental desire for at least temporary release from the effort of maintaining one’s personal and social self, and for expansion beyond the constraints and limitations inherent in being that one particular set of human characteristics and social roles”. Identification is considered more than a singular entity as it can be defined in relationship to small group or societal memberships. While short term exposures are described as identification, when LGBTQ+ community members increase and extend their exposures to media characters, parasocial interaction begins.

## **2.10 Parasocial Interaction**

Parasocial interaction has also been defined in a variety of ways by a variety of scholars. Parasocial interaction can be described as the phenomenon by which viewers form beliefs and attitudes about people they know only through media, regardless of whether those people are real or fictional (Paluck, 2009; Schiappa et al., 2006). The original theorization of parasocial interaction came from Horton and Wohl (1956) who noted that the media present opportunities for interaction that are not available in the everyday lives of most people (i.e., with your favorite singer, author, baseball player).

The studies of this phenomenon have led scholars to address parasocial interactions as the mediated equivalent of interpersonal communication (Schiappa et al., 2006). Many believe these parasocial interactions occur because the human brain tends to process media experiences in much the same way as it processes “direct” experiences with actual people (Kanazawa, 2002). One study of people with disabilities revealed that parasocial contact may be more effective in reducing misinformation, particularly stereotypical information, as media allows for a wider array of portrayals countering stereotypes (Farnall & Smith, 1999). Identification and parasocial interactions are considered by many as the first steps in the process of forming parasocial relationships.

First theorized by Horton and Wohl (1956), parasocial interaction is defined as a “seeming(ly) face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (p. 215). Horton and Wohl (1956) proposed that television and radio personalities “foster an illusory parasocial relationship” with listeners and viewers (p. 218). They also included emotional attachment on the part of the audience member who was seeking advice from the media personalities, seeing the media personalities as friends, imagining being part of a favorite program’s social world, and, of course, a desire to meet the media personality (A. Rubin et al., 1985, p. 157). A. Rubin and Stepp (2000) wrote that media formats and techniques encourage and promote the development of parasocial relationships in order to build and maintain audiences.

Parasocial interaction also suggests a higher level of involvement and a more active orientation to media use (Kim & A. Rubin, 1997). R. Rubin and McHugh (1987) added uncertainty reduction theory to their attempt to define parasocial interactions. Parasocial interactions resemble interpersonal relationships in that uncertainty is reduced over time which allows for increased attraction and eventual relationship growth (R. Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Most scholars agree, parasocial interaction is best explained through the uses and gratifications lens (Harris & Sanborn, 2014).

When addressing the affective involvement aspect of media effects, parasocial interaction can be an “alternative(s) to interpersonal interaction for the immobile, dissatisfied, and apprehensive” (A. Rubin, 2009, p. 169). A. Rubin (2009) referred to parasocial interactions as both real and perceived relationships with audience members. Similar to R. Rubin and McHugh’s (1987) reference to the parallels of parasocial interaction to uncertainty reduction theory, A. Rubin (2009) states that parasocial interaction “reinforces” the relevance of interpersonal concepts such as attraction, similarity, homophily, impression management, and empathy (p. 169). Other aspects of parasocial interaction include effects on media attitudes, through self-improvement (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) and can lead to assimilative effects (i.e., the comparer wanting to become more like the better off comparison target). These types of feelings are associated with increased enjoyment of entertainment content” (Lewis & Weaver, 2016; Lewis et al., 2019, p. 18).

Similar to Bond and Compton (2015), Gillig and Murphy (2016) discovered that young viewers perceived and reacted differently to an on-screen adolescent gay kiss between two boys in dramatically different ways. Gillig and Murphy's (2016) experiment showed LGBTQ+ individuals and heterosexual individuals of emerging adult age clips from the television show *The Fosters* in which an unusually large number of LGBTQ+ characters are portrayed. Similarly, using parasocial contact hypothesis, it was found that there was a "significant influence of gender identity and sexual orientation on viewers' experiences" (Gillig & Murphy, 2016, p. 3842). Basically, LGBTQ+ youth responses were positive and beneficial for their self-esteem while heterosexual youth responses were negative and furthered their prejudicial views toward LGBTQ+ people. While parasocial interactions are higher level actions than parasocial identification, when LGBTQ+ community members take interactions to a more emotional level, they experience parasocial relationships.

## **2.11 Parasocial Relationships**

Parasocial relationships, first proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956) tend to occur in distinct stages, although to date, the actual stages are not agreed upon. Brown (2015) offered four processes of audience involvement with media personae: (1) transportation (i.e., immersion in a narrative enough to forget surroundings), (2) parasocial interaction (i.e., an imaginary interaction between media consumer and media figure), (3) identification (i.e., putting one's self in the place of a media persona), and (4) worship (i.e., idolization of a media figure to degree of emulating worship). Ultimately, parasocial relationships take interactions to a more emotional level than interactions and identifications which take place usually during viewing. Parasocial relationships are more enduring and require more attention while not viewing the medium.

The parasocial relationship literature is replete with studies focusing on heterosexual consumers of media in a multitude of contexts (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Maccoby & Wilson, 1957; Paluck, 2009; Schiappa et al., 2006) and contains a few studies focusing on LGBTQ+ media consumers (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) discovered that lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents used media models to process their self-realizations, coming out stories, and

overall identities. Their respondents said that media models served as a source of pride, inspiration, and comfort. McKee (2000) found that gay men recalled media images as the most important source of information about gay identity from their youth. Most of the participants reported strong impacts from the limited number of available images.

When adolescents seek role models, they tend to focus on the attitudes and behaviors they see depicted by characters in the media, and therefore, may believe the world these individuals create and inhabit is an accurate representation of the world in which they themselves live (Gillig & Murphy, 2016). Essentially, adolescents utilize media product to satiate real and perceived needs.

## **2.12 Parasocial Relationship Development**

Parasocial relationships have been documented in every type of mass media from novels to radio and in a large variety of contexts including entertainment education, reality TV, home shopping channels, news, sports, and religious programming. In attempts to further explain the phenomenon of parasocial relationships, mass media scholars studied these various contexts, clarified reasons to engage, and discovered nuances of old as well as new media.

Involvement in parasocial relationships is voluntary and most people engage in some level of interaction with television (and other media formats) characters (Brown, 2015). But the extent to which audience members engage and ultimately process their interactions with TV characters is still somewhat lacking in clarity for these powerful forms of social influence. Furthermore, Brown (2015) defined transportation as the process during which “audiences become emotionally and psychologically involved in both the narrative and with the characters in the narrative, and audiences often imagine themselves in the presence of the persona” (p. 262). Brown also offered a definition of parasocial interaction by referring to Horton and Wohl’s (1956) explanation, “imaginary interaction between a television viewer and a television personality, which over time may develop into a self-defined one-way relationship” (p. 264).

It is necessary at this juncture to reiterate the differences between parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships. Recall that parasocial interaction can be an isolated event existing between mass media consumer and mass media characters and

personalities. Whereas parasocial relationships are often more than one event and take on more significance for the mass media consumer. Therefore, parasocial interaction best fits this dissertation's scope as findings will support continuous interactions over time while present and are not required for gratifications by the mass media consumer. More on parasocial interaction now follows. Brown (2015) then offers several definitions of identification and how it relates to parasocial interaction, the most recent of which comes from the area of video game research. In this research, identification is conceptualized as a "temporary alteration of media users' self-concept through adoption of perceived characteristics of a media person" (Klimmt et al., 2009, p. 356). Finally, Brown (2015) introduces worship. Celebrity worship can be described as giving celebrities the attention and status normally give to a deity or some other god or God. Notably, Brown (2015) believes all of these forms of interaction can be applied to every type of media.

Tian and Hoffner (2010) studied parasocial interaction with liked, neutral, and disliked characters in the tv show *Lost*. The authors discovered, "Perceived similarity played an important role both in the process of identifying with a character during media consumption and in the development of a parasocial bond" (Tian & Hoffner, 2010, p. 263). The authors went on (1) to break down identification and parasocial interaction as two different processes (according to Cohen, 2001); (2) to point out that once a viewing experience ends audience members are aware that characters are distinct entities from themselves; (3) to describe how efforts are made by viewers to become more like media characters; (4) to refer to Bandura's claim of more influence associated with people audiences perceive to be similar to themselves; (5) to point out that identification was less likely than parasocial interaction to predict efforts of change in audience members to become more like media characters; and (6) to point out that identification is considered more temporary than parasocial interaction. Other variables cited as attraction to and involvement in parasocial interaction/relationship include liking, homophily, loneliness, and age of subjects.

## **2.13 Engagement, Attraction, and Connections**

### **2.13.1 Liking**

Tian and Hoffner (2009) studied the variances between audience members' degree of liked, neutral, and disliked characters on the ABC drama *Lost* (2004-2010). The authors found that audience members associated parasocial interaction characteristics in more positive ways with TV characters they liked or had neutral association than those of disliked TV characters. Four phenomena were examined in relationship to liked, neutral, and disliked characters: (1) perceived similarity, (2) identification while viewing, (3) parasocial interaction with the character, and (4) the extent to which the audience member had tried to change aspects of themselves to be more like the character (Tian & Hoffner, 2009). Tian and Hoffner (2009) found that parasocial interaction was a significant positive predictor of reported change/influence.

### **2.13.2 Homophily**

Reinhard (2005) discovered four aspects of homophily: (1) similarity (physical and psychological), (2) wishfulness (of becoming similar to the TV character), (3) inspiration (TV character as inspiration for change, and (4) role model. Earlier, Cohen and Perse (2003) wrote that identification, parasocial interaction, and imitation are three of the most commonly used terms to describe how viewers relate to television characters. Eyal and A. Rubin (2003) also studied homophily, identification, and parasocial interaction but their study focused the discussion on aggressive television characters. Results suggested viewer aggression predicted identification with aggressive characters but did not predict homophily and parasocial interaction beyond the variance explained by gender (Eyal & A. Rubin, 2003). These findings are consistent with Turner (1993) who reported homophily to be the strongest predictor, among independent variables, of parasocial interaction.

Hoffner (1996) first studied children's wishful identification and parasocial interaction with favorite television characters. More recently, Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) studied young adults and the role of perceived similarity and character attributes with television characters. Hoffner's study of children revealed some basic patterns of identification and reiterated Bandura's social cognitive theory. Hoffner (1996) found that

nearly all boys and about half of the girls selected same-sex favorites. These findings are based solely on biological factors and supports similarity as key in identification and does not address sexual orientation's role.

### ***2.13.3 Loneliness***

Many scientists, including Horton and Wohl (1956), have cited loneliness as a primary reason for participation in parasocial interaction. McDonald and Hu (2005) wrote of loneliness as a key attraction to parasocial interaction and referred to the process as an “opportunity for interaction without the skill requirements of true social interaction” (p. 6). This statement refers primarily to parasocial interaction using the traditional broadcast media and the research pre-dates significant use of internet sites such as social media apps. Most scientists refer to fulfillment of interpersonal needs as the attraction to parasocial interaction stating they replace “real” or “actual” interpersonal contact and alleviate loneliness (McDonald & Hu, 2005, p. 7).

### ***2.13.4 Age of Subjects***

Older viewers watch more television than any other segment of the population (Bedgood, 2017). Additionally, older viewers are also likely to have a more concretely formed their identity (Harwood, 1999). Chory-Assad and Yanen (2005) cite increased leisure time, convenience, declining sensory perception that makes using other resources difficult, lack of other sources of information, entertainment, and companionship as factors contributing to this phenomenon. Loneliness and helplessness are more commonly reported for members of this age demographic and those factors combined increase the number of parasocial interactions as well (Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005).

While older adults spend significantly more time with television than other age groups, their involvement in parasocial interaction is on par with younger segments (Cohen, 1997). Cohen (1997) wrote that like younger viewers, children, and young adults, older adults were more likely to choose performers of the same sex as their favorites. Cohen (1997) also reported that over 71% of all viewers prefer male over female performers.

Tsay and Bodine (2012) found that college students consume different amounts of media and also vary across a multitude of demographic and psychographic features and

therefore, traditional college aged students (i.e., 18-22) do not fit typical parasocial interaction patterns associated with age. Work on younger teens as well as children reiterate previous research and refer to age as an important factor for attraction to parasocial interaction but most also include other variables such as personality, interpersonal need, lifestyle, gender, and ethnicity as equally important. For example, de Bruin et al. (2006) studied parasocial interaction of teens. The research found teens (15-19 years old) to be highly engaged in their media usage and that teens cited the need for realism in television programming as crucial for construction of meaning. Additionally, Hoffner (1996) studied both male and female children from 7-12 years old and concluded that the number of parasocial interactions were nearly the same for both genders and that both genders chose same sex characters to engage with in the interactions. The difference in reasons for selection were attractiveness for girls and intelligence for boys (Hoffner, 1996). Many other scientists have studied the parasocial interactions of children in various age groupings and reported similar findings (Brunick et al., 2016; Eyal & Mastro, 2007; Jennings & Alper, 2016; Richards & Calvert, 2017; Rosaen & Dibble, 2008; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). Age as a factor in parasocial relationship development will undoubtedly change at least in some part due to the changing nature of mass media generally, and the introduction of new, more personal forms of mass communication.

#### **2.14 Bringing LGBTQ+ Audiences to Parasocial Relationship Studies**

Historically, social scientists' focus has been on media's role in the formation of gender identity (Brickell, 2006; Hird, 2001), sexual behaviors (Bleakley et al., 2011; Brown, 2002), and identity negotiation on the interpersonal level (Gilchrist & Sullivan, 2006). There is a dearth of research that examines parasocial relationships and transgender representation or audiences. Studies focusing on both LGBTQ+ media representations and LGBTQ+ audiences include Bond, 2018; Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011; Meyer and Wood, 2013; and Bond and Compton, 2015, with only Bond (2018) and Bond (2015) using the term parasocial relationships instead of interactions.

Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) found that media influences LBGBTQ+ audience members' self-realization, coming out, and current identities by providing role models and inspiration (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Bond et al.'s, (2015), research on the effect of



representation of LGBTQ+ portrayals on heterosexual audiences described a “positive relationship existed between exposure to on-screen gay characters and gay equality endorsement” (Bond et al., 2015, p. 727). Additionally, Bond’s research reported that racial minority participants experienced far greater impact from media portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters than did the study’s white participants. This finding points to the general state of mass media portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals focusing primarily on affluent, white, gay males (Bond 2018). Additionally, research repeatedly shows less support for LGBTQ+ individuals from racial minority groups (Demby, 2013). Exact reasons for this phenomenon are yet to be determined but is often attributed to historically strong religious affiliations of racial minority groups.

The research most directly linked to the study proposed in this text comes from Bond (2018). Bond (2018) examined the importance and the differences of parasocial relationships among heterosexual, lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. Bond (2018) found that LGB adolescents are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to develop parasocial relationships (PSRs) based on factors other than gender. Bond (2018) also wrote LGB adolescents were more likely to establish “stronger PSRs if they did not have real-life social relationships” (p. 472). In other words, “if LGB adolescents are not experiencing sexual identity formation with the assistance of face-to-face communication among peers, they may look elsewhere for support and information. A possible alternative may include turning to television as a major source of information”.(Bond & Drogos, 2009, p. 33).

Pro-social outcomes associated with this type of research ultimately support this dissertation’s argument that positive portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters/personalities are used to process and obtain a positive self-identity in relationship to sexual orientation and gender orientation of LGBTQ+ consumers of said media products. A case can certainly be made that women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, queer, and transgender benefitted from the long run of Showtime’s *The L Word*. Numerous studies have focused on the, frequently described as controversial, series. Guthrie et al. (2013) asked LGBTQ+ identifying women about their perceptions of the texts. The authors examined the contradictions associated with the show specifically and the debate around quantity vs. quality of representation of minority groups.

Meanwhile, viewers of the show spoke candidly about the show's shortcomings citing the "power" of the "lipstick" lesbians who live a privileged life in glamorous Los Angeles. "Accordingly, while *The L Word* gave voice to some lesbians, it simultaneously silenced others who may not 'fit' with the portrayal" (Guthrie et al., 2013, p. 21). This statement illuminates the quantity vs. quality of representations debate. While the complete absence of lesbian, bisexual, or transgender characters is harmful to the community; inaccurate, partial, or stereotypical portrayals are also harmful.

This chapter examined previous research on identity development of LGBTQ+ community members and reviewed the literature on parasocial interaction and relationships. The discussion included the stages of identity development brought forth by scholars in psychology, sociology, and communication. Identity development was then reviewed in relationship to the stages particular to LGBTQ+ community members along with mitigating factors in the sexual identity development process. This review then, made connections between sexual identity development and utilization of mass media portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters for information seeking, emotional processing, and identification. Following those, concepts present in these processes including reasons for engaging in parasocial interactions, findings related to various media attractions, and connections to LGBTQ+ individuals were discussed. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a recognition of the gap in the literature that prompts this dissertation's research questions.

To my knowledge, no specific attention has been focused on the interactivity of LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identity development and the use of mass media product to enhance or replace interpersonal and small group communication. Additionally, little attention has been paid to the intersectionality of gender, race, and sexual identities. This dissertation, recognizing this gap, now puts forth the following research questions.

## **2.15 Research Questions**

RQ1: How do LGBTQ+ individuals describe their use of media featuring LGBTQ+ characters?

RQ2: How do LGBTQ+ individuals describe the relationship between LGBTQ+ media characters and their own sexual and/or gender identity formation?

RQ3: How do LGBTQ+ individuals describe their parasocial interactions with LGBTQ+ media characters?

RQ4: What does an intersectional lens reveal about LGBTQ+ individuals' descriptions of their relationships with LGBTQ+ media characters?

### CHAPTER 3 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

This dissertation looks at how LGBTQ+ community members utilize mass media products to socially construct a sexual and/or gender identity that is of a minority – shunned and ridiculed – status. For my project, I chose purposeful sampling, in which data and research questions, goals, and purposes complement each other (Tracy, 2020). Ethically, I felt this was the best choice since the phenomenon being studied was particular to a specific segment of the population. Additionally, I worked toward inclusion of as many of Tracy’s (2020) “big tent” criteria. I believe this project was conducted with sincerity – meaning I conducted it genuinely with vulnerability demonstrating my openness to others’ lived experiences as well as a willingness to share my own experiences (Tracy, 2020). My efforts included thick descriptions which were achieved, according to Tracy (2020) by explicating contextual meanings specific to the cultural group at hand. These thick descriptions demonstrated resonance with the inclusion of the “feature of the text that meaningfully reverberates and impacts an audience” (Tracy, 2020, p. 279). I examined how and why LGBTQ+ community members utilize mass media products during their sexual and/or gender identity development. While there are trends among community members, the situations and the practices are as diverse as the LGBTQ+ community itself.

The qualitative research methodology I selected served as the backbone of my research study. My decision to utilize semi-structured, one-on-one interviews was based on many impactful considerations. A thoughtful and empathetic approach to answering my research questions came in the form of one-on-one interviews. According to Corbin and Strauss, qualitative inquiry is usually chosen by researchers “to explore the inner experiences of participants, to explore how meanings are formed and transformed, to explore areas not yet thoroughly researched, and to take a holistic and comprehensive approach to the study of the phenomena” (2015, p. 5). Media studies related to LGBTQ+ community members have increased in number in recent years but, historically, most social science research has taken a heteronormative approach (O’Brien, 2017).

Using semi-structured interviews to gain insight into the sexual and/or gender identity development process of LGBTQ+ community members allowed for flexibility to follow the participants’ stories wherever they led. I chose interviews over focus groups mainly to allow for safe, intimate spaces to be created between the participants and myself.

This permitted my project to eliminate any type of group think or social pressure to respond in a given manner that focus groups may create (Baxter et al., 2015). Also, confidentiality can never be guaranteed in the focus group setting like it can be in one-on-one interviews. Tracy (2020) describes qualitative inquiry as being “rich and holistic, offering more than a snapshot – providing understanding of a sustained process, focusing on lived experiences, placed in context, honoring participants’ local meanings, interpreting participants’ viewpoints and stories” (p. 7). Ultimately, my dissertation explains why LGBTQ+ individuals’ resort to media usage to replace interpersonal relationships during their sexual and/or gender identity development. Through data analysis, I became involved in their explanations.

### **3.1 Data Collection**

This section outlines the overall structure of my dissertation study with a description of the data collection completed during the summer and fall 2020. Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 44 members of the LGBTQ+ community recruited via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Gender and sexual identities described by the participants included: Lesbian--A woman who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to other women; Gay--A person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to members of the same gender; Bisexual--A person emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree; Pansexual--Describes someone who has the potential for emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to people of any gender though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree; Queer – A term people often use to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream; Cisgender – A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth; Transgender – An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation; Gender Non-Conforming – A broad term referring to people who do not behave in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender, or whose gender expression does

not fit neatly into a category; Non-binary – An adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman; Agender – A term denoting or relating to a person who does not identify themselves as having a particular gender; and Gender Fluid – Denoting or relating to a person who does not identify themselves as having a fixed gender.

The 44 participants identified their sexual and gender identities as Lesbian=12; Gay=12; Bisexual=8; Pansexual=7; and Queer=5. They also identified gender as Cisgender Female=19; Cisgender Male=16; Transgender Male=2; Gender Non-Conforming=1; Non-binary=5; and Agender=1. The race or ethnic background of the participants was reported as White=32; African American=5; Asian=5; and Mixed Race=2. As for religiosity, participants reported Protestant=16; Nothing in particular=5; Unknown=3; Roman Catholic=1; Jewish=1; Muslim=1; and Atheist=1. Ages of participants were reported as 18-24=17; 25-30=13; 31-40=10; 41-50=2; 51-60=2.

Participants reported media usage on a daily basis ranging from as little as two hours per day up to more than 10+ hours per day, with the average being four hours per day. Media usage cited included most forms of mass communication including novels, comic books, magazines, cable and broadcast television programs, films, radio programs and podcasts, video games, streaming services for music and videos, internet websites, and social media applications.

Semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher followed the construction of a standard interview guide that was approved by the university's institutional review board (IRB), and prior to the interview, informed consent was obtained from the participants. The interview guide is divided into two general segments: demographics and basic interview questions. The demographics section includes the following questions: (1) How you define your gender? (2) How do you define your sexuality? (3) How do you identify your age? (4) How do you identify your race and/or ethnic background? (5) What is your present religion, if any? (6) What is the size of your hometown? (7) Which form/s of media do you use? and (8) How much time do you spend on media (e.g., watching TV, reading newspapers, watching videos, social media, etc.) per day? The basic interview questions section includes four sets of questions pertaining to: (1) sexual identity formation, (2) LGBTQ+ media personalities/characters, (3) interaction with LGBTQ+

media, and (4) sexual identity appraisal. Included in those four areas were eight subsets of questions assessing the participants: (1) identification with LGBTQ+ media representations (either fictional or non-fictional), (2) parasocial interaction with LGBTQ+ media representations (either fictional or non-fictional), (3) parasocial relationships with LGBTQ+ media representations (either fictional or non-fictional), (4) stage of sexual identity development (5) rating of self-esteem in relationship to sexual identity, (6) connection between sexual identity development and identification with LGBTQ+ media representations (either fictional or non-fictional), (7) connection between sexual identity development and parasocial interaction with LGBTQ media representations (either fictional or non-fictional), and (8) connection between sexual identity development and parasocial relationships with LGBTQ+ media representations (either fictional or non-fictional) (see Appendix D for full interview guide).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to ensure the same topics were covered (not necessarily in the same order) in each interview but allowed the researcher to ask additional questions to clarify certain points or to delve further into a topic (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Further reflexivity highlights ethical concerns of use and misuse of the study information. Included in the IRB protocol are the following statements (the “we” refers to my advisors and me): (1) When we write about or share the results from the study, we will write about the combined information. We will keep your name and other identifying information private; (2) We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is; (3) All research materials and participant information will be stored on a secure storage platform (password protected file on a password protected computer) that is accessible only to the authorized users. The only people who will have access to this information are Don Lowe (PI), Jennifer Scarduzio (Co-Chair), and Shari Veil (Co-Chair); and (4) All research materials and participant information will be stored for at least six years after the end of the IRB approval period. These statements reflect not only the formal rules of my institution but the ethical concern of sincerity emphasized by Tracy (2020) in her eight “big tent” criteria for qualitative research. I exercised transparency about all aspects of the project. Once saturation was reached and transcription had been completed, the analysis

began. This project was conducted at the university with minimal materials and minimal costs.

Participants were recruited for the interviews via posters distributed as postings to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and then, through snowball sampling. The posters for recruitment of participants who identify as LGBTQ+ included information pertaining to confidentiality, recording of information, privacy, compensation and directions to enroll in the study. The condition of identification was met by all participants. Thus, no one who enrolled in the study was eliminated. Participants were asked to recruit LGBTQ+ community members and to include a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds in their efforts. Additionally, social media accounts associated with LGBTQ+ communities who also identified as racial and ethnic minorities were included. A total of 44 participants including cisgender men and women and transgender men (no transgender women responded to recruitment efforts) who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, and queer were included. Participants reported their media usage in both type and overall time spent with media.

Participants completed one in-depth interview that lasted between 45-90 minutes. Initial interviews were conducted face-to-face in private spaces on the campus of the University of Kentucky. All interviews following the outbreak of COVID-19 and the limitations placed on socialization that followed, took place via Zoom, Skype, or on the phone on a day and time convenient for the participants during summer and fall 2020. All interviews were audio recorded. A professional transcription company, Rev.com, transcribed the interviews. The PI then reviewed the transcribed interviews and checked the audio files for accuracy. The participants were compensated with a \$20 gift card for their time. The interviews were semi-structured (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) meaning that questions were used to encourage the participants to talk about their experiences and additional questions were prompted based on the participants' responses.

The interview type I chose for this project was somewhere between a respondent interview (taking place among social actors who all hold similar subject positions and have experiences that directly relate to the research goals, Tracy, 2020, p. 159) and a discursive interview (pays attention to large structures of power that construct and constrain knowledge and truth – and how interviewees draw upon larger structural discourses in



creating their answer, Tracy, 2020, p. 160) due to the minority status (LGBTQ+) of the participants. I created the interview guide (see Appendix D) by first compiling a list of as many ideas as I could think of for questions. That exhaustive list had overriding themes and categories, and I then placed a total of 17 questions in one of four major areas. Each area contained generative questions followed by directive questions with possible follow-up questions and probes. The questions were divided into sexual identity formation, LGBTQ+ media personalities/characters, interaction with LGBTQ+ media, and sexual identity appraisal. Each section related to one or more of my research questions which guided me in the process of writing the questions I felt were best suited to discover the answers to the project's overall goals.

The interview guide also contained an introduction with a greeting, a study rationale, informed consent language, and open questions to build rapport. For example, questions such as, "Are you more interested in watching LGBTQ+ characters or heterosexual characters?"; "Can you recall who the first LGBTQ+ person or character you remember seeing in media was - whether it be on television, film, or the internet?"; "How did you feel seeing LGBTQ+ characters/personalities in media? Why?"; "Did these early interactions play a role in how you viewed your own sexual identity? If yes, how? If no, why not?" were included. Also, for privacy and confidentiality as well as aiding in more complete, less inhibited answers, during the interview, participants were asked to select a pseudonym to protect their identities.

Demographic information was collected after the opening and before informed consent. As required by the university's IRB, all participants were consented. Prior to COVID-19, participants were asked to fill out the demographic sheet and sign the consent form in person. Following the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent quarantine, participants were emailed a copy of the Informed Consent Process Form for the study. Prior to the interviews, I read the form to the participants and they provided verbal consent. Ethically, it was necessary to inform them in more detail of the information originally presented to them in the recruitment flier pertaining to confidentiality, recording of information, privacy, and compensation. Included in the consent form are statements about leaving the study at any time the participant wishes with no penalty. If during the interviews, a participant should have become upset due to the sensitive nature of the questions being

asked, I would have stopped the recording and, if necessary, referred the participant to the appropriate counseling service. The participants were allowed to leave the study at any time and still would have received the initially agreed upon compensation. The participants' interview until that point would have been destroyed and their responses would have been removed from the results. Fortunately, all 44 participants completed the interviews without incident. A closing section was included in the interview guide to catch any loose ends and allow participants to add comments they may have inadvertently omitted. This was also a time to thank the participants and ask identity-enhancing questions such as "Is there any topic we didn't discuss you feel we should add to future studies?"

### **3.2 Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were transcribed, I printed each full transcript which resulted in 664 single spaced total pages of data to be examined. I engaged in thematic data analysis by reading the entire data set (all interviews) and engaging in open coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) of the data. Open coding and line by-line reading are very important during the initial coding process. According to Khandkar (2009):

We need to give names to our ideas and concepts to define, analyze and share with others. Once it's defined, we can begin to examine them comparatively and ask questions to systematically specify the states and to imply possible relations with others. It's also important that we name our concepts appropriately; because people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them; and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation. (p. 23)

At each step of the process I consulted with my set of analytic memos kept throughout the process. I believe it is important to take notes during the interviews. Thus, as soon as I could after the interviews, I wrote down my reflections and important moments from each interview. I also wrote analytic memos (Tracy, 2020) each day I worked on the project to keep an accurate timeline. The open coding produced a set of initial codes, or themes. After initial open coding, the list of themes was used to create a codebook (Tracy, 2020). The codebook was created following the guidelines provided by Tracy (2020) and included: (1) an abbreviation, (2) code, (3) definition/explanation, and (4) examples (either hypothetical or in vivo). Using the codebook, I then coded an initial 20 percent of the data

(i.e., approximately 20 pages). At this time, second level coding was employed as codes were divided, rearranged, and collapsed until a final set of codes was determined. Once the coding scheme was finalized, I coded the remaining data. After all data was coded, a check for theoretical saturation was conducted to make sure that no new information emerged from the data that did not fit within the established coding scheme (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). When no new findings were in the data, I stopped data collection due to theoretical saturation having been reached.

At this step in the process, I then engaged in a series of informal member reflection conversations with three participants of the study as well as two committee members. I randomly chose six participants of the study and sent them each an identical email soliciting their participation at this juncture of the process. Within a few days, the three participants I eventually included had responded and agreed to meet individually via Zoom for these informal reflections. Each participant met with me for a period of less than one hour. During the Zoom interviews, I asked a series of directive questions aimed to engage participants in reflection on the data collected overall. As directed by Tracy (2020), I posited certain understandings of the data collected and asked the respondents to comment upon them. Member reflections, according to Tracy (2020), refer to occasions that “allow for sharing and dialoguing with participants about the study’s findings, providing opportunities for questions, critique, feedback, affirmation and even collaboration” (p. 278). Similarly, I engaged in discussions with two committee members and two other colleagues who engage in qualitative research and media studies and utilized similar activities. Committee members also read the results and analysis sections of this dissertation. During these engagements, member reflections supported the general findings and themes discovered.

### **3.3 Reflexivity**

In reflection of my research methods, first, I point to the relationships I forged with other members of my community. These relationships allowed for a greater level of accuracy of participant responses by guaranteeing the participants safe spaces both literally and figuratively to reveal their processes of sexual and gender identity development and the use of media in those processes. I believe that my participants saw me in a positive manner and, therefore, opened up to me in ways that a non-LGBTQ+ researcher could ever

possibly have achieved. With a relaxed tone and a very friendly demeanor, I encouraged my participants to relax and just share their thoughts and feelings. The interviews became, on many occasions, like gab sessions where you just lose track of time catching up with an old friend. We shared our experiences. Mine became theirs and theirs became mine. I do not, however, take the position of insider lightly.

There are many issues associated with being a member of the group you are studying. According to Greene (2014), the “true indigenous insider as researcher holds the values, perspectives, behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge of his/her indigenous/cultural community” (p. 3). I understand this position requires great sensitivity and reflexivity. I am a white, cisgender gay male who came of age in Eastern Kentucky in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Growing up facing prejudice and hate associated with LGBTQ+ lifestyles made me keenly aware of how painful adolescence can be for members of my community. My insider position gave me more knowledge, more ease of interaction with participants, and access to the community. However, this insider status is only relevant to my specific sexual orientation. I do not attempt to place myself in the lives of those in my study who identify in any of the other sexual and gender orientations mentioned.

By practicing sound qualitative research methods including, but not limited to, maintaining field journals, including committee members in every step of the process in order to ensure credibility at all points, and reflexivity on “how one’s positionality affects the type of data that is collected, how it is collected, and how we (I) interpret it” (Greene, 2014, p. 11). My lived experience added perspective to not only the development of the project but to the manner in which participants were recruited and assisted through the process.

I spent many years as a newspaper, radio, and television reporter all the while facing discrimination from employers as well as interview subjects. During those years, I was faced with a variety of difficult interview situations. This coupled with my comfort with my sexual orientation allowed for a controlled yet relaxed and comfortable, and most importantly, safe environment for the participants to engage with the sensitive subject matter.

The subject matter is of utmost importance. I feel the time of using mass media to exploit or denigrate members of the LGBTQ+ community should be over. Only positive representations should be presented from this day forward. The safety and health of

LGBTQ+ community members going through developmental stages of sexual and gender identity formation is paramount. Misinformation spread in mass media messages can and does result in violence against LGBTQ+ community members (HRC, 2020). The understanding of the sexual and gender identity development process of LGBTQ+ community members brought forth through this project could actually lead to societal change that will greatly enhance the lives of LGBTQ+ community members.

While developing the research questions to guide my study, I followed some fairly traditional steps. First, I knew I wanted to study LGBTQ+ people and my area has always been mass media as I have worked in and taught about it my entire career. I do not remember when I knew I wanted to study identity development but it came from the idea that LGBTQ+ individuals do not usually have LGBTQ+ role models, at least not interpersonally and especially during the formative years. I then engaged in an extensive review of the literature concerning LGBTQ+ sexual identity development and the role media plays in that developmental process. I soon realized that in a heteronormative society where LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identities are regularly chastised and sometimes punished, more positive connections between media personalities and LGBTQ+ audiences are desperately needed (Tod & Hirst, 2014).

The guiding question of *how* LGBTQ+ community members interact with media during sexual identity development helped me make some implicit sampling decisions and pointed me toward data-gathering devices. I decided exploratory questions would work best with the conceptual framework. The formation of my research questions preceded, followed, and happened concurrently while developing my conceptual framework. I tried to think of the essence of my study – what I ultimately wanted to know. I had over 10 specific questions that eventually narrowed to four general questions. The refinement of the questions was ongoing. Research questions “may be formulated at the outset or later on and may be refined or reformulated during the course of fieldwork” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 25).

Ultimately, I settled on the four questions because they got to the essence of what I wanted to study. Prior to conducting this dissertation, I was highly interested in how and why LGBTQ+ individuals were reluctant, generally, to discuss sexual and/or gender identity in interpersonal and group settings. Upon examination of this issue, I realized

stigmatization of LGBTQ+ statuses forced LGBTQ+ individuals to closet themselves in early, developmental years of adolescence and young adulthood. Forced into isolation with much to work out for their own acceptance of themselves and other LGBTQ+ individuals, my participants told me story after story of how they replaced interpersonal exchanges with mass media products. I developed a theory of parasocial affirmations which I describe as how LGBTQ+ individuals utilize mass media portrayals of other LGBTQ+ individuals to seek affirmation of their own sexual and gender identities. This is necessary due to the lack of social – either interpersonally or through group communication – support from peers, families, schools, churches, etc.

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The findings of this study elucidate a process by which LGBTQ+ individuals utilize various forms of mass media messages to redefine and renegotiate sexual and/or gender identities previously defined and negotiated negatively from interpersonal and small group messages received from their churches, schools, families, and friends. Generally, most of the participants spoke of sexual and gender identity development as processes that were deeply personal and bound to the confines of their inner psyche with little or no interpersonal communication to assist in reaching fruition. Interpersonal communication among family members and friends employed by their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts was replaced by mass media consumption. This consumption followed a process that included: (1) realizations of LGBTQ+ status, feeling othered and need for explanations and defenses, (2) media usage for information seeking, (3) media usage for emotional processing, (4) media usage for affiliation, and (5) media usage for identity affirmation, all of which culminated in participants' (6) self-acceptance and subsequent (7) coming out interpersonally. While aspects of the process were identified across the interviews, the process was not always linear and participants used media for multiple purposes at different stages throughout their sexual and gender identity development. This chapter now reports the experiences of the study's participants.

### 4.1 Realizations

Realizations from this study's participants were clearly defined as (1) LGBTQ+ identities are othered in most societies and (2) LGBTQ+ individuals must develop skills to explain and defend these othered identities. All participants in this study had already accepted their LGBTQ+ status and had come out to their friends and families, etc. Their recollections focused on past media usage (during adolescence and early adulthood for the most part) to process their sexual and gender identities as their predominant motivation and, to a lesser amount but still of utmost importance, ascertaining the skills necessary to explain and ultimately defend their LGBTQ+ statuses to others. LGBTQ+ individuals become aware of the existence and marginalization of LGBTQ+ sexual and gender

identities earlier and separately from the realization of their own LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identity status.

Participants in this study spoke of a moment of realization of the existence of LGBTQ+ identities and the stigma associated with those identities prior to their recognition or realization of their own sexual and gender identities. Additionally, many of the study's participants reported utilizing media messages about LGBTQ+ individuals to construct explanations and offer defenses of their othered gender and sexual identities. Most participants recalled a media portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters or personalities as their first exposure to "alternative" sexual and gender identities while only a few others said their first exposure was through an interpersonal, face-to-face encounter. "So, I was about 11 when I found out that non-straight orientations existed. So, I Googled it and that was basically my *sex talk*," said Cirice, a white, agender, queer individual. Conversely, Frank, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual said, "My parents had a really good friend, Victoria, who was a drag queen and we went to this drag club when I was like 12 and it was so much fun. I didn't realize what Victoria was until I was much older, but I knew it was outside the norm." These comments emphasize the concept that LGBTQ+ individuals in this study became aware of variations in sexual identity early in life but did not connect the existence to their own sexual identity at this early point of initial recognition.

After an initial recognition of their own sexuality and gender identity and prior to communicating with others about said identity, LGBTQ+ individuals who participated in this study reported engaging in affirmation seeking strategies. Their self-imposed lack of interpersonal communication – created under real or imagined rejection scenarios – revealed a need to seek affirmation in more impersonal settings. "I wasn't able to say it aloud for at least two years – that I'm pansexual. Then my junior year of high school, I came out to my friends but I still had trouble saying it aloud even though I knew this was who I was" said Brenda, a white, gender fluid, pansexual individual. Some actually spoke to other LGBTQ+ community members about their sexuality with tragic results. "I had a teacher in middle school who was gay but not open about it. I talked to him about my sexuality and he was just telling me to take all the precautions I could because we live in the South. He was discovered and had to leave the school. I didn't talk to anyone for years after that" said Lulu, a white, cisgender female, bisexual individual. Flora, a white,



cisgender, lesbian individual had a similar story but with a much more tragic outcome for the person with whom she shared her identity. “I talked to an older boy at my school about being gay and he was very helpful. But he was openly gay and really put himself out there. He was bullied so much, he eventually committed suicide. I decided then not to tell anyone of my sexual identity.” It is clear from these statements that the LGBTQ+ individuals in this study were faced with the tasks of (1) gaining information about LGBTQ+ sexual identities and (2) deciding when and to whom to disclose their own sexual identity. The participants in this study reported processing their sexual identities in isolation due to real or imagined fear of rejection or worse. In this isolation, the participants in this study sought out information from a variety of mass media sources.

For example, Flora, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual stated: “The overlying thought I have with this is that LGBTQ+ people are using media (alone) in these spaces pre-coming out to do identity work. So, you are not really going to be ‘let’s watch it’ – it’s not a group thing.” Flora’s statement illuminates the idea that very little, if any at all, processing of sexual identity – in the initial stages – is done interpersonally or with other people.

The participants in this study suggested that the messages received from three socially constructed units – religious institutions, educational systems, and families contributed to these feelings. “(Because of church messages) I was certain I would burn in hell,” said Abby, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual. “Or at the very least never have a real family.” “At my school, there was a guy running for student council president and at the assembly they asked him what his platform was, and he just screamed ‘BAN GAY MARRIAGE!’” said Bart, an Asian American, cisgender, gay, male individual. “Everyone laughed and cheered. He won by a landslide.” “My family was very strict and very religious” said Matthew, a white, cisgender, gay, male individual. “My father said it (being LGBTQ+) was an abomination. He said fags all go to hell.” These quotations from significant others in the lives of this study’s participants demonstrate the overwhelming obstacles faced by LGBTQ+ community members. The participants reported negative messaging from nearly every facet of their social lives.

First, religious institutions were, to be considerate, not taking chances with their anti-LGBTQ+ messaging. Nat, a white, cisgender, female, queer individual recalled the

night she was saved at her Southern Baptist Church. “There was this play that another church brought and put on for us. It was full of hell fire and brimstone, very apocalyptic and the gay characters were shooting ministers and killing everyone who spoke against them. I was so scared. I was scared into getting saved that night.” Other participants cited anti-LGBTQ+ messaging from religious institutions coming in the form of recognizing the identities but choosing to place God before sinful lifestyles. “The doctrine of the Catholic Church is that it’s okay to have gay attractions because those are involuntary, but it is a sin to act upon those” said Bart, an Asian, cisgender, gay, male individual. He continued, “So, I’m a teenager. I’m horny. I’m gay and when I masturbated, I thought about guys. Masturbation is also a sin so every time I masturbated, I felt I was sinning and would be damned eternally. I was being really injured – it was just a lot.” The participants in this study described how religious institutions effectively use guilt and fear to persuade their LGBTQ+ members to view themselves as sinful and in need of change or at least to atone for their sins by adhering to the religious institution’s doctrine.

Second, others were subjected to the controversial and now illegal practices in some states of conversion therapy. No one in this study, however, was forced to participate in any direct form of conversion therapy but all were familiar with the practice and associated it with religious institutions. Currently, only 20 states have laws banning conversion therapy, according to The Trevor Project (2020). Participants revealed that religious institutions were very clear in distinct messaging intended to create a sense of fear about being of LGBTQ+ status and that acting upon the thoughts and feelings should be avoided at all costs to dissuade a lifetime of ridicule, painful conversion therapy or the worst fate of all – an eternity of punishment in the afterlife.

Third, due to the laws and customs in the U.S. dealing with sexual education of any sort, most participants recalled there was never a mention of LGBTQ+ individuals in any of the curriculum, especially sexual education specific courses. “Oh no, never. It was like it (LGBTQ+) didn’t exist” said Tammy, a white, cisgender, pansexual, female individual. “When I was in school no one talked about it. Not like they do now.” “Our sex ed class was the typical put a condom on a banana and, of course, they divided us into two groups: boys and girls” said Brenda, a white, gender fluid, pansexual individual. In 2020, only 30 states currently require sex education courses at the high school level in public schools

(National Conference on State Legislatures, 2020). These statements indicate the state of sexual education in the United States generally and demonstrate the lack of inclusion of LGBTQ+ sexual education specifically.

Few participants recalled sexual education courses being offered at their public schools and even fewer recalled dissemination of sexual education informational materials. However, when the educational system was a religious one, messaging about LGBTQ+ individuals was on the forefront and incorporated into the curriculum. When asked if there were particular times from the pulpit or from teachers in school that anti-LGBTQ+ messages were disseminated, Basil, a white, non-binary, lesbian individual said, “All the time! I had to write essays about why gay people were going to hell. Oh my God! My friends and I were outed by teachers at that school and made to sit through videos of ex-gays talking about their experiences.” Basil recalled that this treatment began in middle school and continued relentlessly throughout their high school experience. Basil left the school prior to their senior year. Basil’s story exemplifies the prevalence of anti-LGBTQ+ messaging faced by LGBTQ+ youth in many religious school settings.

Most negative messaging about LGBTQ+ individuals comes from peers at schools. GLSEN reported in 2020 that 86% of LGBTQ+ students are bullied and physically assaulted in schools. Participants in this study cited instance after instance of peer bullying with varying degrees of eventual outcomes. Grey, a white, cisgender, gay, male individual, said, “Hardly a day went by that some jock (from the football team) didn’t push me into the wall or against my locker and called me a fag.” Nelson, a white, non-binary, lesbian individual had similar experiences. “Oh no, you’d be surprised! They (female students) pushed me, shoved me, pulled my hair and called me queer.” When asked about administrative assistance with bullying, most of the participants agreed there was none. Nelson added, “The teachers would act like they didn’t know it was happening.”

A number of participants, in spite of the cultural constraints of their schools, chose to confide their LGBTQ+ status to close friends. “I was at a middle school sleepover late at night with a bunch of my girlfriends and I had a crush on a girl, and I felt I needed to reveal this” said Elizabeth, a white, cisgender, female, bisexual individual. “That night they were all very supportive but the next day at school, they outed me to our entire grade – they laughed and pointed and were really cruel.” Alice, a white, cisgender female,

pansexual individual suffered a similar fate. “When I realized (my sexual identity) in middle school, I came out to a good friend of mine and she immediately outed me to everyone else. It was a really traumatic experience. Once everyone forgot about it, I never brought it up again until I was in college.” Alice’s experience demonstrates that some LGBTQ+ individuals process their sexual and gender identities outside interpersonal communication channels due to general misunderstanding and overall lack of support from peers. Similarly, Elizabeth’s story illustrates the precarious nature of disclosing LGBTQ+ status to peers, especially during adolescence.

Leo, an African American, cisgender bisexual, male individual recalled a GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) being formed at his public high school but said “I refused to join or even go near their meetings because of the stigma associated with it. You know, the outcast part.” Gideon, a white, cisgender, gay, male individual did not get the opportunity to join his high school GSA. He said, “I remember when they first formed it. Our school made national news because of all the violence and protests from the religious people in our town. They shut that down really quick.” While the educational system in the U.S. is bound by legal statutes at the local, state, and federal levels, to protect all its students, participants in this study reported a barrage of injustices based solely – or sometimes partially in the case of non-white participants – on their LGBTQ+ status. “I remember my high school principal taking me into her office and explaining to me that I wasn’t gay, and I couldn’t be gay” said Spencer, a white, transgender male, pansexual individual. “She told me that stuff just doesn’t exist and to get it out of my head.” Toby, a white, cisgender, gay, male individual reiterated “It was like 2003 and when gay marriage started heating up and my high school Earth Sciences teacher just went on a rampage. I will never forget sitting in that front row of his classroom and him with tears in his eyes (the Earth Sciences teacher) going ‘It’s Adam and EVE, NOT Adam and STEVE!’” From lack of information about sexual identities and safe sex practices to constant psychological and physical abuse from their peers – which generally went unpunished – to overall climates that make even support organizations such as GSAs sources of ridicule, it is clear the participants in this study feel that the system is failing its’ LGBTQ+ students.

Finally, the family unit is usually the first institution from which messaging comes about LGBTQ+ individuals. Brad, a white, cisgender, gay, male individual said “I have

always known that I was gay and my first memory – I don't know how old I was – my family was at a restaurant and they made a joke about being gay as if it were a bad thing and I remember it kind of stinging me in a weird way and I didn't understand why as a little kid.” Participants cited instance after instance of family ridicule and messaging of disgust and shame about LGBTQ+ individuals in general and specifically direct messaging from their family members to themselves.

“No not on account of religion” said Evan, a white, non-binary, queer individual. “They were more afraid of what the neighbors would think about me not marrying a man. We were not religious at all. Their shame came from society.” Evan and Brad's experiences are similar to the other participants in this study. “When I finally told my mother (I was gay), she flipped out and said it was because I was molested as a child. That's so wrong because how on Earth would I desire what I went through as a child? She was just so ignorant about it all” said Matthew, a white, cisgender, gay male individual. Most of the participants said they experienced ridicule from family members. “They mercilessly called me sissy and fag,” said Bart, an Asian, cisgender, gay male individual. “(My brothers) would really rough me up and they even let the neighbor kids punch me. They all thought it was fun.” “My mom was like ‘are you a dyke (real name deleted)?’” said April, a white, cisgender female, pansexual individual. “She told me she hated it that I wouldn't dress and act like a girl should.” These examples show that instead of support from family members, some LGBTQ+ participants were unsupported, creating distance between them and their families and forcing LGBTQ+ individuals to seek support elsewhere.

Furthermore, other families of participants in this study chose not to discuss or even acknowledge the existence of LGBTQ+ individuals, leaving participants to ponder their family members' feelings about LGBTQ+ individuals generally and about themselves particularly. “I always thought they knew and didn't want to discuss it with me or in front of me because they didn't approve” said Lulu, an Asian, cisgender, bisexual, female individual. Family units are quite often the most powerful sources of affirmation or negation of LGBTQ+ identities, according to psychologists Russell and Fish (2016). For the participants in this study, the American family unit leaned heavily toward negation. From general condemnation of LGBTQ+ individuals to messaging of disgust and shame on the family's image or complete omission of messaging about the existence of LGBTQ+

individuals, most of this study's participants' families also failed to support their loved ones.

These failings on the part of these three influential institutions sent LGBTQ+ individuals into hiding, ultimately creating a state of isolation safely tucked away from the gaze of their oppressors. The power of the anti-LGBTQ+ messaging that comes from these three profoundly influential institutions forces LGBTQ+ individuals to remain closeted much longer than is healthy for sexual and gender identity development (Higa et al., 2014).

During the time period between self-realization and revealing their sexual and/or gender identity to others, participants spoke of using media to gain information about LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identities and eventually affirmation of their own LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identities. Mass media portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals provided private and safe spaces to obtain initial information about and eventual affirmations of LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identities. Most participants spoke of the decision not to reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity until they themselves had enough knowledge and felt comfortable enough to defend themselves.

While most participants said they related to characters or personalities similar to their age, gender, race, ethnic background, and sexual identity, participants agreed the most salient point of attraction was LGBTQ+ status. The processing stage of this journey includes finding similar LGBTQ+ exemplars as well as differentiating among them. "I was never girly, like feminine, so to see someone who was like that (Ellen on *Ellen* sitcom) made it more okay not to be super girly" said Ann, a white, cisgender, pansexual, female individual. "Seeing that movie (*But I'm a Cheerleader*) was also like affirming in a way that like this is just who I am. I knew at that point that this feels like a part of me and it was affirming" said Flora, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual. Conversely, "Seeing gay characters on TV shows like Jack on *Will and Grace* be so extra, I was like well that's not me, you know?" said Johnny, a white, cisgender, bisexual, male individual.

Flora and Johnny's statements represent the stereotypical nature of LGBTQ+ media portrayals. The lack of accurate portrayals force LGBTQ+ individuals to reinterpret characters to find their own meanings. In addition to finding exemplars for processing sexual and gender identity, participants spoke of using media to answer questions and obtain information about LGBTQ+ lives. While the most salient prompts for attraction and

selection of media models were homophilous, participants also spoke of processing their sexual identities by contrasting themselves with media characters and personalities that were on the LGBTQ+ spectrum but not exactly the same as themselves. In this way, LGBTQ+ individuals use mass media to negotiate and process their sexual and gender identities both cognitively and affectively in non-threatening, private settings.

#### **4.2 Media Usage for Information Seeking**

Paramount to the process, according to the participants, was having accessible information that could be obtained safely. “Having the media was like my lifeline to say, okay, this actually exists. It’s not just in my head” said Brenda a white, gender fluid, pansexual individual. “I searched a lot on *YouTube* and tried to find answers on the internet. At the time I felt like I had just opened this secret door to like this whole like world of *YouTube* and music that like I didn’t know existed” said Abby, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual. (The media) “was definitely a safe place to explore that (sexual identity) because I didn’t necessarily need to put myself out there and I could watch things unfold. If there was a depiction of violence or something, it wasn’t like it was my friend getting beaten up” said Brenda, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual.. This example is paramount in this study’s explanation of the phenomenon. Mass media provides safe spaces for negotiation of sexual and gender identities free of judgment and ridicule. Repeatedly, participants spoke of fear of possible isolation, rejection, and violence when revealing their sexual and gender identities or simply discussing LGBTQ+ individuals on an interpersonal level. Additionally, participants spoke of information acquisition continually but did not refer to sexual acts or how to dress, speak, or act. In these examples, it is clear that participants said they did not model behavior but did learn terms and labels. No one mentioned the use of media to learn how to be LGBTQ+ but instead how to accept themselves and how to explain their sexual and gender identity to others.

There were several examples when participants used the media to defend their sexual and gender identity. Brenda, a white, cisgender, pansexual female individual. Told of an encounter with a member of her softball team in high school. “So, she sits me down and says, ‘I don’t get it – how are you gay and a Christian?’ and I was able to explain my experience to her by bringing in media examples to subvert the stereotypes.” “So, by my

senior year I developed a skill set in terms of my capability to debate things” said Basil, a white, non-binary, lesbian individual. “(Through media usage) I knew a lot of facts so I could argue for my rights and debate effectively which is something I would not have been able to do (if not for the media).” Alice, a white, cisgender, female, pansexual individual echoed, “Well, on the plus side (of not talking about her sexuality for years after being shunned by friends), I had a long time to gain knowledge (through media usage) and build my confidence so by the time I had a confrontation with a straight man (about her sexuality) I knew how to combat that.”

Brenda, Basil, and Alice all spoke of experiences that led them to hide their sexual and/or gender identities. Each also spoke of a time period in which they sought information from mass media messages to construct effective explanations for and defense strategies of their LGBTQ+ identities from ridicule. Media portrayals allowed participants in this study to navigate challenging conversations with others and helped them respond to questions about their identities.

Participants also referred to information seeking or gathering as being intentional or unintentional. They actively sought information, for the most part, but on numerous occasions, found themselves discovering information accidentally. “I was watching this show and like someone identified as pansexual and then I Googled this word. Like what does this word even mean? It was quite educational” said Frank, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual. “That was part of the process for me. Finding other media to relate to and make sure that I wasn’t alone. I hate to keep using the term immersing myself, but I was continually just finding things that were more relatable to me and pulling away from the heterosexual base things” said Leigh, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual. And also, “I was kind of like information seeking. It feels weird to say now but when I was first questioning, I was like ‘Do I need to behave a certain way?’ I was (using media) to look for answers” said Johnny, a white, cisgender, bisexual, male individual. Information seeking was purposeful (intentional) by Leigh and Johnny who wanted more information and explanations about their LGBTQ+ status. They said they searched in different media texts to help them gain perspective not available through interpersonal channels. Still others, like Frank, stumbled upon (unintentional) information while simply consuming media. In both cases, participants described the importance of information seeking as



providing evidence to make their case against prior messaging from family, religious, or educational institutions.

Participants also spoke of information seeking through stigma reducing messages and portrayals. “I was drawn to the show because the show came out around the time I started my transition” said Spencer, a white, transgender, pansexual, male individual. “I just always loved her character (Davina, a Latina, transgender, female heterosexual, on Amazon’s *Transparent* portrayed by Alexandra Billings, a Latina, transgender lesbian) and I loved her because she was just very warm and so supportive in that show and that’s what I needed in my real life.” Spencer’s reference to a well-adjusted and kind transgender human being portrayed as the opposite of the messages he received growing up from peers was helpful in his processing of his own transgender identity even though the portrayal was of a different gender.

These statements further support the general findings of media use for information seeking and cognitive processing. Participants in this study reported negative messaging about LGBTQ+ status from all types of interpersonal and group settings. These negative messages necessitate information seeking in non-interpersonal and group settings. Therefore, mass media was utilized to fill in the missing, usually positive, messages for and about LGBTQ+ individuals. Further, information ascertainment frequently, according to the participants, preceded emotional, affective processing of LGBTQ+ status.

### **4.3 Media Usage for Emotional Processing**

Most participants in this study seemed well-adjusted and came equipped with terminology and evidence to support their identity in spite of non-supportive families and religious indoctrinations. “Even though I transitioned a few years ago, my mother still dead names (the birth name of a transgender person who has changed their name as part of their gender transition) me” said Spencer, a white, transgender, pansexual, male individual. “I’ve told her repeatedly how much it hurts me, but she still does it.” Yael, a white, Jewish, gender non-conforming, lesbian individual said, “Since my religion is such a large part of my identity, I have constantly struggled with the shame of being gay and having a different gender expression, especially around my (non-immediate) family members.” These

examples point to the non-supportive nature of families and or religious institutions that were in direct conflict with their sexual and gender orientations.

This state of being well-adjusted and comfortable while discussing their sexuality was discussed in relation to the participants' utilization of media to process the affective dimension of sexual and gender identity development. "I think it's definitely helped normalize it. I think if I hadn't have seen them [media examples], I would have no exposure to anything queer" said Alex, a white, gender fluid, pansexual individual. "I feel like during that time period when I started watching movies and stuff with gay people in it, I liked it so I would look up the LGBT things say on *Netflix* and it felt very normalizing for me" said Frank, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual. Interestingly, participants used the term "normal" to express their feelings about LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identities which further explains that interpersonal exchanges prior to the media utilization for processing positioned LGBTQ+ identities as outside the norm or abnormal.

For example, Nat, a white, cisgender, female, queer individual, said, "Recently, I binge watched *Schitt's Creek* (Pop TV & Netflix) and it was awesome to see David (David Rose played by showrunner Dan Levy) who was talking about his sexuality and he used the wine analogy and I was like "Oh my God! That's amazing!" In Season 1, Episode Ten, *Honeymoon*, David uses an analogy about "liking the wine rather than the label" to describe his pansexuality. Nat referenced how this scene helped her to renegotiate her sexuality and be better able to explain it to others. In the media product, David used figurative language to tell another the meaning of pansexuality which is essentially being attracted to non-physical qualities over traditional sexual attraction. Both of these examples show how media can and does assist LGBTQ+ individuals in processing emotions associated with LGBTQ+ status.

Also, emotional responses to media portrayals of LGBTQ+ community members ranged from envy to elation. "I was definitely envious of them because like they like were able to be whoever they wanted to be" said Mary, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual. "I like how a lot of these characters are just like 'I am who I am' and they are so authentic and they give the middle finger to the rest of the world like screw you all, I'm gonna live my life the way I want to live it" said Jen, a white, cisgender, sexually fluid, female individual. The concept that LGBTQ+ characters/personalities successfully negotiated

their sexual identity processing and now demonstrate this by living authentically, was commonly referred to as something encouraging for the participants.

Affective responses also ranged from immediate to long-term. (On seeing LGBTQ portrayals): “It’s definitely made me feel better. It helped me get rid of the internalized homophobia” said Leigh, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual. “I like seeing (in media) people being accepting of people who are queer. It calms me down. I feel like I can come out and tell people and not be judged for it” said Sophia, a white cisgender, female, pansexual individual. Leigh’s statement represents the participants’ effective processing of their long-term negative emotions associated with LGBTQ+ sexual identities while Sophia’s statement demonstrates both immediate relief and long-term, lasting support. Together both of these examples reveal that mass media messages assisted the participants when processing negative emotions about themselves. Overcoming the stigma was consistently reported as one of the main benefits of information acquisition.

Participants in this study spoke of how after and/or during information acquisition they began to process mainly negative emotional states internally held. Utilizing mass media portrayals, the participants said they were able to re-evaluate the negative messaging from their pasts and replace them with newer, more positive and more realistic perspectives of their LGBTQ+ identities. This emotional processing led to positive identification and assisted in clarifying self.

#### **4.4 Media Usage for Identification and Affiliation**

Feelings of fear generated by the stigma associated with an LGBTQ+ sexual and/or gender identity are quite common (Russell & Fish, 2016). Internalized homophobia and transphobia were cited by this study’s participants as well as negative evaluations of other LGBTQ+ community members. Faced with conflict, again the participants turned to media to help work through these feelings. For example, Abby, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual said:

I can admit, I was not very accepting of the entire trans community when I was younger and dumber. And I think that (the media) definitely helped me educate myself and because I was seeking acceptance for myself, I wanted to see it for other people. I think I

definitely learned the whole spectrum of gender identity and sexual identity from social media and *YouTube*.

Abby's statement refers to the paradox faced by many LGBTQ+ individuals – prejudiced views of others on the LGBTQ+ spectrum (Russell & Fish, 2016). So, in addition to clarifying one's own identity through media usage, participants in this study, like Abby, used media to clarify other LGBTQ+ identities for themselves.

Participants also continually spoke of other LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identities. They found themselves consuming mass media products with portrayals of LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identities other than their own. They consistently reported that they were misinformed about varying identities along the LGBTQ+ spectrum and that their investigations and processing of their own sexual and gender identities led to a heightened awareness and ultimate acceptance of other identities. "She (Callie Torres on *Grey's Anatomy*) came out as bisexual and it was like a huge thing and that was probably my first exposure (to a bisexual portrayal). I was like that's it. That's cool. That's different. That's interesting. That's me" said Johnny, a white, cisgender, bisexual, male individual. "I think especially since when I first was like coming out to myself, I was, I had a lot of internalized homophobia and so I definitely think it helped educate me and also (helped me to) have a more positive view (of myself)" said Abby, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual.

First exposures and coming out to oneself were often mentioned by the participants. The concept of identification (putting oneself in the place of a media persona) greatly assisted the participants in self-acceptance. "The normalization, the subversion of the (negative) messages that I'd been getting all throughout my childhood and adolescence was the main thing. It was just the right little kick for me to like start the acceptance journey" said Cirice, a white, agender, queer individual. Johnny, Cirice, and Abby, as well as other study participants, repeatedly pointed to the media portrayals as enlightening and empowering.

While there are many positive attributes of today's media and its portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals, when examined more closely, issues associated with inaccurate and incomplete representations of the LGBTQ+ community come to light. Stereotypical portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals become increasingly complicated in media when other aspects of identity intersect. According to The Williams Institute (2020), over 21 percent

of LGBTQ+ individuals in the U.S. are Latino/a while another 12 percent are African American and still another 5 percent are mixed race. The Williams Institute (2020) also reported that 58 percent of LGBTQ+ individuals in the U.S. identify as female (or transgender female). These numbers translate into millions of LGBTQ+ Americans and show that diversity of race and ethnic background is common among LGBTQ+ individuals. This results in many LGBTQ+ individuals facing discrimination regarding two or more aspects of their identities, demonstrating the mitigating factor of intersectionality.

#### ***4.4.1 Intersectionality***

This study attended to intersectionality in order to focus on the complexities associated with LGBTQ+ identities in general, and specifically, their media portrayals. In this predominantly white, cisgender, binary society, participants spoke of ordering differing components of their multi-faceted, intersecting identities. Interestingly, participants in this historically white, cisgendered, binary society who fall or reside outside any of these identity components spoke of their intersectionality at astoundingly higher rates of incident. In fact, all white participants rejected the idea of race being an essential part of their identity and placed their whiteness in lower priority to their sexual and gender identities. Most white, cisgender participants said they identify as a “gay man” “a bisexual woman” or a “lesbian” before they consider gender and race. “I never thought about identifying as white” said Jonas, a white, cisgender, male, bisexual individual “Is there a White identity? I can’t tell you what it is or if it exists. I identify as male first and then bisexual, I guess. I never really think about it.”

White participants who identified as existing outside the gender binary such as gender fluid, transgender, non-binary, agender, or gender non-conforming equally reported placing gender identity prior to sexual identity and then thought about race. “There were times when I was young when I would just go in and out of genders” said John, a white, gender non-conforming, queer individual. “I would be playing with girls and just assume that gender (identity). I still do that and it’s weird to think about because I always think about gender but never race. That’s privilege I guess.” White privilege was referred to by most of the white participants in this study. “I cannot imagine having to deal with race and (or) a different gender (identity) on top of being gay” said Murry, a white, cisgender,

lesbian individual. “I know I am lucky in that regard because being white is never a bad thing in this country.” This exemplifies the lack of awareness of a white identity on the part of this dissertation’s participants. They just do not realize whiteness as a part of their identity because it is the majority and is privileged.

The two most commonly mentioned components of identity intersectionality were race/ethnic background and gender. When participants were othered by the whiteness of this society, they regularly spoke of race as being ordered before sexual and gender identity. “So, I have to deal with both, but I always tell people I am Black first because that is what people see first” said Charles, an African American, cisgender, gay, male individual. “I can’t deny who I am, no matter what, right. I am extremely Afrocentric with dark features and dark skin. And then, the femininity, I was given that, so I was just like, there’s no way I can escape this.” This statement from Charles points to the experience of most participants of color in this study who cited being made painfully aware of a minority race status long before they ever knew about any LGBTQ+ status, least of all, their own. Most of the non-white participants in this study reported they became aware of their minority race status as a child usually through some experience of racism. “I can remember being looked at in a weird way when I was young” said Anne, an African American, cisgender, lesbian individual. “I heard the n-word and asked my mother what it meant. She cried and told me. I didn’t understand.” Anne said from that day forward she has always thought of herself as being black first. “I was over 20 before I realized I was (sexually) attracted to women.”

Participants also connected this experience to media portrayals. For example, Geoffrey, a mixed race, non-binary, queer individual explained: “Seeing LGBTQ+ people (in media) was important in having a formed identity but was not super great because everyone was white, like overwhelmingly.” He also elaborated, “There’s just no representation – it’s too male and too white. When I was younger, I got bullied a lot for being Asian. You know, you can pass for straight, but you can’t pass for white.” These examples reveal that the white, cisgender participants most often looked for these positive affirmations in media and, for the most part, were able to ascertain them. Affirmations are lacking for non-white, cisgender, gender fluid, transgender, non-binary, agender, and gender non-conforming individuals in interpersonal and mass communication.

Bart, an Asian American, cisgender, gay, male individual explains: “I watched *Love, Victor* (Hulu) and they included a lot of minority characters, but I feel like even in the gay community minority characters are seen as less attractive (than white LGBTQ+ characters).” Additionally, Yael, a white, Jewish, gender non-conforming, lesbian individual, elaborated, “I really do like seeing like Jewish, LGBTQ+ characters but they are kind of rare.” “You never see the truth about Pakistani families and their relationships with their gay kids” said Pat, a Pakistani, cisgender, gay, male individual. “You always see the negative. The truth is there are families who are open and accepting and have gay weddings and then you have the other end of the spectrum as well.”

These examples illustrate the gap in mass media portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals. To date, most LGBTQ+ media portrayals have been one-dimensional and stereotypical in nature. Most portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals have been produced and performed by cisgender, heterosexual producers, actors, and actresses. While great strides have been made in this area of late to correct this issue, much more work is needed (GLAAD, 2020).

“It was so cool to see him (Trevor on Showtime’s *Shameless* played by transgender actor Elliot Fletcher) a trans-man playing a trans-man” said Buster, a white, transgender male, pansexual individual. “I felt like he forced the writers to write him in an authentic way. So, I’m pretty interested in seeing what other work he does.” These examples are the exception, rather than the rule when it comes to LGBTQ+ and media portrayals. Most LGBTQ+ media portrayals in 2020 are still of cisgender, white males. According to GLAAD, 66 percent of LGBTQ+ characters in films counted in 2019 were White, 22 percent were African American, eight percent were Latinx, and four percent were Asian/Pacific Islander (2020). There is still more room and need for accurate and complete representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in media. As mentioned earlier, the most salient prompts for attraction and selection of media models are homophilous. However, frequently out of necessity, participants spoke of processing their sexual identities by contrasting themselves to media characters/personalities that were on the LGBTQ+ spectrum but not exactly the same as themselves.

#### 4.5 Media Usage for Identity Affirmation

Participants rejected the notion of any type of relationship with media characters or personalities and fully left the experiences with the understanding that their interactions were not interpersonal in nature. “We’re so smart now. It’s all media savvy now. I don’t think Ross and Rachel (*Friends*, NBC) are my friends anymore. Yeah, I really know that they’re actors and it’s just a role they are playing” said Johnny, a white, cisgender, bisexual, male individual. Instead, the participants cited affirmation of their own sexual identities through experiences with LGBTQ+ characters in media. “I love Rosa (Diaz on *Brooklyn 99*, FOX and NBC) to bits and the fact that regardless of her demeanor, she is the biggest softie of the group. My demeanor says I’m the biggest softie regardless. So, it just makes me feel more validated that it wasn’t like the very first thing that you saw (about her) on the show. It was just like Rosa is a badass that wears a leather jacket and stuff like that” said Lulu, a white, cisgender, bisexual individual. This indicates a common view among the study participants. Participants agreed that portrayals are more effective if the sexual identity of the character/personality are not at the forefront of the narrative. Inclusion of LGBTQ+ sexual identity in narratives is essential but should not be the central theme of the narrative.

“Okay so I was almost relieved to see it (LGBTQ portrayals on TV) like now I know there are more people like me. And not seeing it as this big, amazing thing but instead just here’s my son’s same sex significant other and it was just normalized” said Leigh, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual. “I love how on *Brooklyn 99* (FOX and NBC), the captain (Raymond Holt played by Andre Braugher) is gay and it’s just accepted, and it’s never debated. It just is” said Collin, an African American, cisgender, gay, male individual. These portrayals of LGBTQ+ status being “matter of fact” and not central to storylines were cited as affirming by this study’s participants. In essence, the absence of homophobia and transphobia allow for stronger identification and therefore, affirmation of an LGBTQ+ status.

Participants also pointed to the completed and fully accepted sexual and gender identities of the media characters they enjoyed and how these portrayals allowed them to visualize a time when they too could be comfortable with their own sexual and gender identities. “I like the shows that do a good job of showing things like resiliency or showing



authenticity in the experience, especially now that I have gone through it and solidified my sexual identity” said Johnny, a white, cisgender, bisexual, male individual. “It (*Trans Parent*) depicted familial conflict and people navigating loving relationships that are changing and I really liked the concept of families working together to accept one another” said Ann, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual. “So, seeing people like him (Brendon Urie lead singer for Panic at the Disco) that were doing all this amazing stuff but like, and not really talking about their gender or sexual identity really at all. It just made it like seem more normal” said Steve, a white, cisgender, pansexual, male individual. “It’s wildly important (LGBTQ+ portrayal in media). Wanting to see and hear my own voice in the media I am consuming for my own experience, it’s absolutely necessary” said Geoffrey, a mixed-race, non-binary, queer individual. “I think *The L Word* played a big role in my own acceptance of my identity. It helped me feel like there was some sort of future for me with holding this identity” said Flora, a white, cisgender, lesbian individual. “It’s definitely a positive thing to see that people can succeed and be respected individuals in their field (radio, TV news anchors). They even kind of use their (sexual) identity as an advantage to give more context to the way they see the world” said Billy, a white, cisgender, gay male. Johnny, Ann, Geoffrey, and Billy all referred to the affirmations they received when viewing LGBTQ+ portrayals and personalities that exhibited pride of LGBTQ+ status. This reflects an emerging new area of LGBTQ+ portrayals in that the sexual identity status is not only not portrayed negatively but is now seen as an advantage. Observing LGBTQ+ individuals who are already at a positive place of self-acceptance allowed the participants to begin to envision themselves as someday being as comfortable as the media portrayals with which they engaged.

This study’s findings describe how LGBTQ+ individuals seek out and interact with differing mass media product. Lacking in information and support from social institutions that overwhelmingly support their heterosexual counterparts, LGBTQ+ individuals work through sexual and gender identity development issues in solitary ways. Participants in this study reported choosing non-threatening mass media products to gain insights they could not find elsewhere. They reported steady consumption of media products. This consumption followed a non-linear process that included: (1) realizations of LGBTQ+ status, their othering and need for explanations and defenses, (2) media usage for

information seeking, (3) media usage for emotional processing, (4) media usage for identification and affiliation, and (5) media usage for identity affirmation all of which culminated in participants (6) self-acceptance and subsequent (7) coming out interpersonally.

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

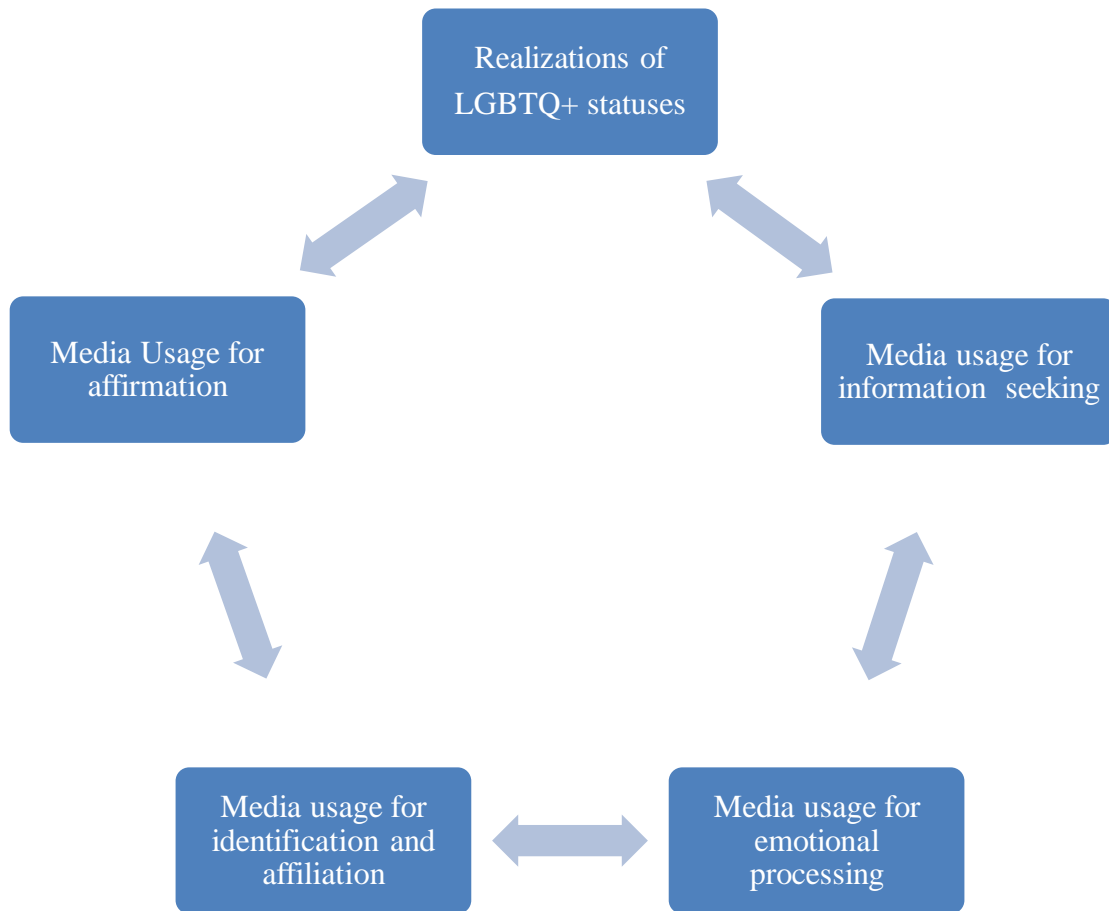
### 5.1 Summary of Research Findings

This dissertation's findings propose a new model of media usage by LGBTQ+ community members that reveals a cycle of identity development previously unnamed and undiscovered. While parasocial contact, parasocial interaction, and parasocial relationships have been present in the literature for quite some time – as early as 1956 when Horton and Wohl first wrote of the phenomenon – use of media to parasocially affirm one's LGBTQ+ status is a unique finding to this study. Based on existing research, this study examined a specific mass media audience, LGBTQ+ individuals, and asked them specifically how they utilize mass media to assist with their sexual and/or gender identity development. First, participants in this study spoke of moments of realization of the existence of LGBTQ+ identities and the stigma associated with those identities prior to their recognition or realization of their own sexual and gender identities. Participants also reported that no connection was made between this realization and their own sexual and/or gender identity at the time of this discovery. Next, participants reported a variety of time frames passed before they realized their own sexual and/or gender identity (i.e., from as little as a few weeks up to 10 years). Then, participants spoke of their realizations.

At this point, most participants spoke of the stigma and fears associated with LGBTQ+ sexual identities. Decisions were made by all to keep their realizations private. Similarly, participants reported a variety of time frames ranging from as little as a few weeks up to 10 years before speaking interpersonally about their realizations. Some participants had interpersonal conversations that had negative results and forced the participants back into a non-interpersonal disclosure status. This self-imposed lack of interpersonal communication (created under real or imagined rejection scenarios) revealed a need to seek affirmation in more impersonal settings.

Participants referred to information seeking or gathering as being intentional or unintentional but driven by homophily. The results demonstrated that similarity drove attraction – attraction prompted interaction(s) which resulted in clarification/identification which created affirming associations for the participants. Participants spoke of mass media

as a safe space to gain information and experiment with their sexual identities without fear of rejection or punishment. For them, this resulted in a state of feeling well-adjusted and comfortable with discussing their sexuality which could be attributed to the participants' utilization of media to process the affective dimension of sexual identity development. Examples of internalized homophobia were also discussed within the participants' responses as well as negative evaluations of other LGBTQ+ community members. When the participants were faced with conflict, they turned to media to help work through these feelings for clarification and identification. Participants rejected the notion of any type of relationship with media characters or personalities and fully left the experiences with the understanding that their interactions were not interpersonal in nature. Instead, the participants cited affirmation of their own sexual identities through experiences with LGBTQ+ characters in media. Participants pointed to the completed and fully accepted sexual and gender identities of the media characters they enjoyed and how these portrayals allowed them to visualize a time when they too would be comfortable with their own sexual identities. These findings lead to a variety of theoretical implications including the development of a model that I detail below.



**Figure 5.1.** Model of the Parasocial Identity Affirmation Process

## 5.2 Theoretical Implications

Derived from this dissertation’s data and the participants’ responses, a model depicting a parasocial identity affirmation process was created. The five-stage model follows the consumption of media products through the process of sexual and gender identity development until LGBTQ+ community members begin coming out to others. Participants in this study engaged in a process that included: (1) realizations of LGBTQ+ statuses, (2) media usage for information seeking, (3) media usage for emotional processing, (4) media usage for identification and affiliation, and (5) media usage for identity affirmation. The model is not linear, nor is it cyclical in nature. Instead, the process of how individuals work their way from realizing the existence of LGBTQ+ statuses to accepting and ultimately revealing their own LGBTQ+ status to others is quite complex

and occurs repeatedly throughout the individual's lifespan. Therefore, some LGBTQ+ community members will take more time at a particular stage of development than their counterparts and vice versa. The model depicts directional movement and is indicated by double arrows to show participants' movement among and between stages. Some participants in this study spoke of nearly 10 years passing between initial recognition of LGBTQ+ status and any examination of this recognition. Therefore, while the model depicts the basic pattern of sexual and gender identity development via media usage, it is not meant to be taken as a uniform representation but instead a guide for understanding the similar but very different process LGBTQ+ individuals experience.

Grounded soundly in uses and gratifications, this model expands upon the germinal 1956 parasocial relationship theory proposed by Horton and Wohl who noted that the media present opportunities for interaction that are not available in the everyday lives of most people (i.e., with your favorite singer, author, baseball player). This model identifies how LGBTQ+ individuals use mass media product to satiate unmet identity development engagement needs usually met interpersonally (for cisgender and heterosexual individuals there seems to be an endless supply of information, models to emulate, and emotional support for their identity development needs). Therefore, this model asserts LGBTQ+ individuals use mass media product to fulfill identity development needs for both gender and sexual identities.

Further, parasocial interactions resemble interpersonal relationships in that uncertainty is reduced over time which allows for increased attraction and eventual relationship growth (R. Rubin & McHugh, 1987). A. Rubin (2009) referred to parasocial interactions as both real and perceived relationships with audience members. Similar to R. Rubin and McHugh's (1987) reference to the parallels of parasocial interaction to uncertainty reduction theory, A. Rubin (2009) states that parasocial interaction "reinforces" the relevance of interpersonal concepts such as attraction, similarity, homophily, impression management, and empathy (p. 169). Other aspects of parasocial interaction include effects on media attitudes, through self-improvement (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) and can lead to assimilative effects (i.e., the comparer wanting to become more like the better off comparison target). The majority of the participants' responses in this study aligned directly with this concept – the idea of seeking out and finding similar "targets" in

mass media – and as a result, they experienced affirmations of their own sexual and gender identities. The participants did not discuss these affirmations in interpersonal or group settings. The studies of this phenomenon have led scholars to address parasocial interactions as the mediated equivalent of interpersonal communication (Schiappa et al., 2006). Therefore, this dissertation study revealed a process not previously identified in the parasocial interaction theory of audience and mass media product.

This dissertation defines a new term that I am calling *parasocial identity affirmation*. One of the most important findings of this dissertation is that, instead of parasocial interactions or parasocial relationships, participants reported their experiences with mass media product as parasocial affirmations. Parasocial affirmations are usage experiences of media characters/personalities that allow for visualization of self-acceptance. However, one simple viewing or interaction is not enough to affirm one's sexual and/or gender identity. These affirming associations create greater need for information and the process starts again. The affirmations are information about successful negotiation of sexual and gender identity and therefore, affirming to one's own sexual and gender identity. For the participants in this study, the parasocial affirmation process ranged from as little as a few days to many years until the individual was secure enough to engage interpersonally with others about their sexual and gender identity.

This study's findings also support the basic tenets of sexual and gender identity development research findings. Milton and MacDonald (1984) synthesized the bulk of this literature and reported that what the models have in common is a three stage process of realizing LGBTQ+ feelings, adoption of the negative assumptions made about LGBTQ+ lifestyles, and finally, overcoming the negative assumptions by accepting a positive LGBTQ+ identity. This dissertation extends those findings by discovering new ways in which LGBTQ+ community members utilize mass media products to process their own sexual and gender identities. Participants described media usage that replaced interpersonal communication. Searching for terminology and explanations of various aspects of LGBTQ+ lifestyles on websites, seeking positive interpretations of LGBTQ+ lifestyles in music, television, and film as well as reading comics, novels, and self-help books for LGBTQ+ community members were among the many uses cited by this study's participants.

Within the model discovered in this dissertation’s findings, there are a set of common, although not identical, practices that participants engaged in during process (see Table 1.1)

**Table 5.1.**Practices associated with Parasocial Affirmation Model

<b>Realizations</b>	<b>Media Use For Information Seeking</b>	<b>Media Use For Emotional Processing</b>	<b>Media Use For Identification And Affiliation</b>	<b>Media Use for Identity Affirmation</b>
LGBTQ+ exists	Terms	Internalized homophobia	Seeing like others with same LGBTQ+ status(es)	Interacting with like others with same LGBTQ+ status(es)
LGBTQ+ status is stigmatized	Information	Internalized transphobia	Seeing similar others on LGBTQ+ spectrum	Interacting with similar others on LGBTQ+ spectrum
Own status is LGBTQ+	Explanations	Gender dysphoria	Understanding LGBTQ+ identity as not abnormal	Seeing like and similar others successfully navigating coming out issues
Need for explanations/defenses	Evidence to support identity	Loneliness and fear	Gaining sense they too can live LGBTQ+ lives successfully	Seeing like and similar others living LGBTQ+ sexual and gendered lives successfully
Decision whether or not to reveal	Strategies to explain identity to self and eventually others	Coping and overcoming feelings	Envisioning own LGBTQ+ successful life	Navigating coming out to self and others

This table illustrates the most common set of practices revealed during the data analysis conducted for this dissertation. Generally, participants reported a steady pattern of realizations followed by media usage for information seeking, for emotional processing,



for identification and affiliation, and finally, for affirmation. When discussing realizations, participants spoke of two basic realizations: 1) that of LGBTQ+ existence and 2) their own LGBTQ+ identity status. Included in these realizations were the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ status and the need to explain and defend LGBTQ+ statuses and a decision whether or not to reveal one's status. Most of the participants reported a "closeted" period in which they utilized mass media product to obtain terminology and other information that would assist in their explanations. Equally important was the ascertainment of evidence to support their identities as well as strategies to understand and explain their identities to themselves and eventually others.

Using media for emotional processing helped participants deal with internalized homophobia, internalized transphobia, gender dysphoria, and feelings of isolation, including loneliness and fear, through discovering similar experiences and coping techniques found in media product. These experiences and coping techniques offered identification and affiliation. Participants accomplished these goals by interacting with media product that contained depictions of like others with the same LGBTQ+ statuses and similar others on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Participants also interacting with media product that portrayed LGBTQ+ individuals as not abnormal and capable of obtaining and sustaining successful and happy lives. Ultimately, participants sought media product that allowed for envisioning their own successful and happy LGBTQ+ lives.

Finally, the table lists the media usage for affirmations discovered in this dissertation's research. Participants spoke of the interaction with depictions of like and similar others as affirming to their LGBTQ+ statuses. They also specifically pointed to depictions of successful coming out narratives as affirming to their future with the event of coming out to others. The interactions with depictions of successful and happy LGBTQ+ individuals living positively with their true sexual and gender identities were seen as highly affirming and motivating for the participants. Finally, the participants spoke of coming out to themselves and others as being affirmed in interactions with media depictions of others successfully navigating these milestones.

This study's model demonstrates the process of using media product to satiate unmet needs. The participants in this dissertation study reported a variety of realizations about LGBTQ+ identities. Realization of LGBTQ+ identities' existence and the

stigmatization of those identities usually occurred prior to the participants' realization of their own LGBTQ+ status. Upon their own realizations (many experienced denial periods with some lasting for years) came the understanding of a need for explanations and defenses of their identity. Most often, these realizations led to a decision not to reveal LGBTQ+ status as a protective measure for physical, sociological, and psychological safety reasons. This step in the process meant that participants were no longer discussing their LGBTQ+ statuses with anyone on an interpersonal level and mass media products became the surrogate for interpersonal interactions.

Once the participants realized any or all of their needs: the need for more information, the need for emotional support, the need for role models or like others for identification, and the need for affirmation, their engagement with mass media products began. Participants described the process as occurring in a variety of sequences. As mentioned earlier, this model is neither linear nor cyclical in that all elements can occur sequentially or simultaneously over brief or extended time periods. Participants reported searching for terminology, information, and explanations to assist in understanding themselves and eventually explaining themselves to others. This discovery adds to parasocial interaction in a new way by revealing participants' use of mass media for the gratification of learning about themselves, their community, and methods of rhetorical defense of their identity. Thus, *parasocial information seeking* is identified as a new term and the next stage of this model.

When sufficient information had been gathered, participants moved onto the difficult work of emotionally processing their internalized homophobia, transphobia, and/or gender dysphoria and their feelings of loneliness and fear associated with both their LGBTQ+ status and their newly found isolation. Participants used mass media to cope with and overcome negative emotions commonly associated with LGBTQ+ statuses. This discovery adds to parasocial interaction research in a new way by revealing participants use of mass media for the gratification of learning skills to cope with negative emotions associated with LGBTQ+ statuses. Thus, *parasocial emotional processing* is identified as a new term and the next stage in this model.

Participants spoke of experiencing relief upon finding like and similar others in media products. Seeing and "interacting" with others with the same LGBTQ+ status or

seeing and “interacting” with others with similar LGBTQ+ status in media products allowed participants a much-needed affiliation (they were not finding in interpersonal or social settings). Many participants pointed to the fact that their “exact” LGBTQ+ status was not necessary for identification and affiliation and that the presence of “any” LGBTQ+ status could be utilized at this stage. Participants used mass media products to redefine LGBTQ+ statuses as no longer being viewed as abnormal. Furthermore, they used media to gain a sense that they too (like the object of identification) can live successful lives as LGBTQ+ community members. The participants also used these identifiers to envision their own happy and successful lives as LGBTQ+ community members. These findings add to parasocial interaction research by revealing how participants use mass media for the gratification of understanding and clarifying LGBTQ+ statuses through affiliation. Thus, *parasocial affiliation* is identified as new term and the next stage in this model.

Finally, the participants spoke of affirmations. These affirmations came through interaction with similar and like members of the LGBTQ+ community. Participants referenced seeing these similar and like others successfully navigating issues associated with coming out and seeing these similar and like others living healthy, happy, and successful lives as members of the LGBTQ+ community as affirming for their own future identities. Participants used all the knowledge gathered throughout the stages to negotiate coming out to both themselves and others. This discovery adds to parasocial interaction in a new way by revealing participants use of mass media for the gratification of obtaining skills implemented by like and similar other LGBTQ+ community members who have and are successfully navigating LGBTQ+ lives for use in their own lives. Thus, I named *parasocial identify affirmation* as a process that describes a part of LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identity development as interaction between LGBTQ+ media consumers and mass media product that positively portrays LGBTQ+ community members and through the positive portrayals allows LGBTQ+ media consumers to affirm their own sexual and gender identities as credible and viable.

Parasocial identify affirmation, then, is the end result of the realizations of LGBTQ+ statuses and their associated variables understood through the processing of information seeking – words, explanations, defensive strategies – emotional processing (i.e., homophobia, transphobia, gender dysphoria, loneliness, and fear), understanding

one's self and others by interacting and identifying with like and similar LGBTQ+ others – affiliation (i.e., normalize LGBTQ+ statuses, understanding possibility of own successful LGBTQ+ life, and envision successful LGBTQ+ life), and combining all these elements to create usage experiences of media characters/personalities that allow for visualization of self-acceptance.

### **5.3 Practical Implications**

The findings of this study can be utilized by mass media producers across the media industry and various other groups who interact with LGBTQ+ individuals. All participants resoundingly spoke of their preference for seeing LGBTQ+ media characters and personalities over heterosexual ones. All participants also agreed there are far too few LGBTQ+ media characters and personalities. Additionally, the current portrayals were troublesome for most in that they are mainly stereotypical, one-dimensional representations of a community that is far more diverse than the one currently depicted. The overwhelming prominence of affluent, gay white males who are effeminate, serves as further marginalization of women, people of color, and those of middle or lower economic status. Participants consistently pointed their discussion to the need for more varied and nuanced representations of LGBTQ+ community members in all media formats. GLAAD (2020) agrees and has challenged media producers to actively seek out LGBTQ+ actors, writers, and directors (as well as all professions associated with media product creation) to engage in the process of presenting a more realistic, diverse set of narratives.

With more realistic narratives in media products, health care professionals, such as social workers, clinical psychologists, school counselors, and others who see LGBTQ+ community members during the key developmental years could use these depictions and this study's findings to develop therapeutic measures. Many participants in this study referred to the lack of information and guidance they received during their formative years and pointed to the importance and value associated with such measures. These new measures could include therapies in psychodynamic, behavioral, cognitive, self-directed, strategic, experiential, and systemic frameworks and incorporate mass media products with positive LGBTQ+ portrayals and representations.

On the individual level, LGBTQ+ community members can use mass media products as affirming agents for both sexual and gender identity development. Through mass media consumption, individuals – both LGBTQ+ community members and allies alike – learn the language, definitions, and examples necessary to make effective arguments for defense of LGBTQ+ statuses to those in opposition to their very existence. These defense strategies can assist in the tumultuous and arduous coming out process.

It is important to note that while our society has grown in significantly positive ways in recent years toward the acceptance of LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identities, it is not better yet. Educational systems are still allowing or overlooking shocking events taking place in their ranks. Two participants in this study, less than five years removed from high school attendance, spoke of direct experiences with teachers and principals in which they were formally chastised for their LGBTQ+ identities. Assignments in religious educational systems cited by still other participants in this study point to the open nature of abuse of LGBTQ+ individuals. One participant recalled being forced to write an essay on why gay people will burn in hell. While in recent years the formation of Gay Straight Alliances in high schools across the country has increased significantly, these clubs often create spaces for additional abuse and ridicule. Several of the participants in this study discussed this phenomenon. The participants said GSAs were most often a source that called attention to LGBTQ+ status and therefore increased physical bullying and verbal abuse. One participant said the attempt at a GSA formation created such controversy at his school that local media covered “the scandal.” Yet another recalled going to great lengths to avoid not only the GSA meetings but anyone who attended the meetings as well. The existence of these events reminds us we still need much more investigation into the practices occurring in our education system. Much, much more work must be done. Educational systems, religious institutions and family units could all utilize the findings of this dissertation to facilitate communication and ultimately create safer and stronger environments for their LGBTQ+ members. Programs could be created to foster open and non-threatening communication in safe spaces.

## 5.4 Limitations

While this dissertation has many positive findings that advance theory and provide guidance for practical situations, it also has limitations. The sample of the study is limited in scope with the lack of inclusion of a significant number of older LGBTQ+ people. Only four participants were over the age of 40. Another limitation of this study sample was the lack of racial diversity. While a number of participants identified as African American, Asian American, and mixed race (African American  $N=5$ ; Asian American  $N=5$ ; mixed race  $N=2$ ), none identified as Latina/o. Since the Williams Institute (2020) reports that 21% of LGBTQ+ Americans are Latino with African Americans making up 12% of LGBTQ+ Americans, it is important to include Latina/o LGBTQ+ participants in future research in this area. Lack of racial diversity in study participants may miss relevant findings that are unique to that group due to cultural, environmental, or physiologic factors (Diaz, 2012). Finally, while the sample included participants who identified as non-binary ( $N=6$ ) and transgender male ( $N=2$ ), no participants identified as transgender female.

During the course of this dissertation research, the COVID-19 Pandemic occurred. While this was discussed in the methods section of this dissertation, the pandemic also impacted the interviews conducted and is in need of mention here as well. My interviews went from being conducted in person in neutral locations to via Zoom. I believe this change affected my interviews and my participants in both positive and negative manners. First, as I was now conducting interviews in my own home office and whichever location my participants chose as most convenient and comfortable for themselves, I was able to, due to the lack of travel time, schedule numerous interviews in one day. This allowed for an overall quicker completion time. Additionally, several of my respondents spoke of the ease and comfort of doing the interviews in their “own” spaces. This could have allowed for the respondents to be more at ease, and, possibly more forthcoming with their responses. Second, the opposite could be true as well. The lack of true face-to-face communication possibly could have negatively affected their responses due to the somewhat more formal nature of Zoom communication. This aspect of the dissertation could be an item for future research.

## 5.5 Future Research

As mentioned in the limitations section of this study, future studies should include participants from a larger variety of demographic backgrounds including other LGBTQ+ identities such as intersexed and asexual individuals. Participants from all ages would bring the perspectives of people who experienced sexual identity development in the pre-internet age. Questions such as “Are their generational differences in media utilization and processes for sexual identity development?” could be answered. This inclusion could result in findings of a different process of information and affirmation and utilization of different media than reported in this study. In addition to age, more inclusion of racial and ethnic backgrounds than the present study would provide more nuanced results across the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Considerations of intersectionality was mentioned by a number of participants in the current study. Examining sexual and gender identity development can be more accurately accessed when intersecting variables such as race, gender, sexual identity, age, religion, among others, are treated equally (Nadal et al., 2015). Future studies should examine this specific intersectionality especially how transgender, gender fluid, and non-binary gender identities impact sexual identity development.

Most participants in this study reported familial impact on sexual and gender identity development. No further probing of family structure was utilized. Family structure could play a role in sexual identity development as well. A study including questions designed to compare different familial structures such as divorced parents, single parents, LGBTQ+ parents, etc. could reveal more effective practices for parenting LGBTQ+ children.

A variety of different media were cited in this study. Studies dealing with specific media such as podcasts, social media applications, and animated programs could yield interesting results. Participants in the current studies cited covert tactics such as using fake handles on social media applications as a way to obtain information and ask questions while virtually eliminating the risks of overt participation. These strategies also proved easier to hide information seeking from parents.

This study focused only on media usage for sexual and gender identity development during the time period prior to coming out to family and friends. A study examining media use before coming out and then after could reveal differences in media

usage for sexuality and gender identity development and sexual and gender identity maintenance. Question such as “Does usage change after coming out?” and “If so, in what ways?” and “What ways do LGBTQ+ community members use media to maintain sexual and gender identity?” These questions could be part of longitudinal studies that interview LGBTQ+ community members when first coming out and a few years later.

Studies focusing on a variety of differing variables including those related to age differences in media usage, those related to intersectionality, those related to varying gender identities, those related to familial structure, those related to new media generally and social media specifically, and those related to maintaining sexual and gender identity after the coming out process has been completed should be added to the growing body of research in this important area of human development. Studies examining the educational, religious, and familial units either individually or interactively in relationship to their impact on the LGBTQ+ sexual and gender identity development process must be encouraged. The impact of allowing the status quo to remain in these institutions can and will be detrimental to LGBTQ+ youth. The CDC reports that more than half of all LGBTQ+ individuals will be a victim of violence this year. GLSEN reported in 2020 that 86% of LGBTQ+ students are bullied and physically assaulted in schools. Currently, only 20 states have laws banning religious conversion therapy, according to The Trevor Project. And a 2019 study found 30.4 percent of youth in foster care identify as LGBQ+ and 5 percent as transgender (childrensrights.org) this is attributed to parents disowning and refusing to allow their LGBTQ+ status children to continue to live in their homes.

## **5.6 Final Summary**

Sexual identity development of LGBTQ+ community members, while similar to that of their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts, occurs differently. Most often during adolescence and early adulthood, sexual identity development occurs alongside other aspects of identity development such as gender, race or ethnicity, class status, nationality, religious affiliation, age, physical and/or cognitive abilities, and political beliefs. Faced with affirming an identity wrought with stigma and emotional pitfalls, LGBTQ+ community members often opt to stay in the proverbial closet and work through the identity development process alone. Whether real or imagined, LGBTQ+ community members fear



ridicule, rejection, and even physical violence upon revelation of their sexual identities. Therefore, they opt for more impersonal means for information seeking, emotional processing, affiliation and affirmation. This study interviewed 44 LGBTQ+ community members and revealed a new aspect of parasocial interaction that I named *parasocial identity affirmation*. Essentially, participants reported following a trajectory of sexual identity development that included: (1) realizations of LGBTQ+ status, (2) media usage for information seeking, (3) media usage for emotional processing, (4) media usage for identification and affiliation, and 5) media usage for identity affirmation, all of which culminated in participants' self-acceptance and subsequent coming out interpersonally. This dissertation explicated these findings, offered a definition of parasocial identity affirmation and a model of the process, and discussed theoretical and practical applications and made recommendations for future research.

**APPENDIX 1      DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Sexual Identity</b>
Blake	Gender fluid	White	Pansexual
Mary L.	CisgenderFemale	White	Lesbian
Cirice	Agender	White	Queer
Lulu	Cisgender Female	Asian	Bisexual
Abby	Cisgender Female	White	Bisexual
Frank	Cisgender Female	White	Lesbian
Jen	Cisgender Female	Asian	Fluid
Leigh	Cisgender Female	White	Lesbian
Johnny	Cisgender Male	White	Bisexual
Ann	Cisgender Female	White	Pansexual
Geoffrey	Non-binary	Mixed Race	Queer
Bill	Cisgender Male	White	Gay
Steve	Cisgender Male	White	Pansexual
Alex	Cisgender Female	Mixed Race	Lesbian
Sophia	Cisgender Female	Asian	Pansexual
Basil	Non-binary	White	Lesbian
Nat	Cisgender Female	White	Lesbian
Spencer	Transgender Male	White	Pansexual
Bart	Cisgender Male	Asian	Gay
Elizabeth	Cisgender Female	White	Bisexual
Evan	Non-binary	White	Queer
Yeal	Gender Non-Conforming	White	Lesbian
Grey	Cisgender Male	White	Gay
Toaster	Cisgender Female	White	Bisexual
John	Cisgender Male	White	Gay
Pat	Cisgender Male	Asian	Gay
Collin	Cisgender Male	Black	Gay
Matthew	Cisgender Male	White	Gay

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Sexual Identity</b>
Nelson	Non-binary	White	Lesbian
Murry	Cisgender Female	White	Lesbian
Meredith	Cisgender Female	White	Bisexual
Buster	Transgender Male	White	Pansexual
Luna	Cisgender Female	White	Bisexual
Brad	Cisgender Male	White	Gay
Charles	Cisgender Male	White	Gay
Alice	Cisgender Female	White	Pansexual
Lez	Cisgender Female	White	Lesbian
Jonas	Cisgender Male	White	Bisexual
Flora	Cisgender Female	White	Lesbian
Toby	Cisgender Male	White	Gay
Anne	Cisgender Female	Black	Lesbian
John	Gender Non-Conforming	White	Queer
Giden	Cisgender Male	White	Gay
Leo	Cisgender Male	White	Bisexual

Total number of LGBTQ+ community members in this study..... 44  
Formal interviews ..... 44

**Sexual Identity**

Lesbian ..... 12  
Gay ..... 12  
Bisexual..... 8  
Pansexual ..... 7  
Queer..... 5

**Gender Identity**

Female ..... 19  
Male ..... 16

Transgender Male .....	2
Gender variant/non-conforming.....	1
Non-binary .....	5
Agender.....	1

**Ethnicity**

White/Caucasian .....	32
Black/African American .....	5
Asian/Pacific Islander .....	5
Mixed Race .....	2

**Religiosity**

Protestant.....	16
Nothing in particular .....	16
Unknown.....	5
Agnostic .....	3
Roman Catholic .....	1
Jewish.....	1
Muslim .....	1
Atheist.....	1

**Age**

18-24 .....	17
25-30 .....	13
31-40 .....	10
41-50 .....	2
51-60 .....	2
60+ .....	0

**Size of Hometown**

Under 2,500..... 3  
2,500-5,000 ..... 8  
5,001-20,000 ..... 12  
20,001-50,000 ..... 3  
50,001-150,000 ..... 4  
150,001-499,999 ..... 7  
500,000+ ..... 7

## APPENDIX 2 INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS DEMOGRAPHICS

### Demographic Information Section One

#### *How do you define your gender?*

- Female Male
- Transgender Female Transgender Male
- Gender Variant/Non-Conforming
- Not listed (FREE TEXT ENTRY TO SELF IDENTIFY)
- Prefer not to answer

#### *How do you define your sexuality?*

- Gay/Lesbian Bisexual Asexual Pansexual Queer
- Not listed (Free text entry)

#### *How do you identify your age?*

- 18-24
- 25-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 60+

#### *How do you identify your race and/or ethnicity?*

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Mixed race Otherer

***What is your present religion, if any?***

- Protestant
- Roman Catholic
- Mormon
- Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Atheist
- Agnostic
- something else?
- or nothing in particular?

***What is the size of your hometown?***

- Under 2,500
- 2,500-5,000
- 5001-20,000
- 20,001-50,000
- 50,001-150,000
- 151,001-499,999
- 500,000+

**General Media Usage Section Two**

***Which form/s of media do you use?***

- Books
- Traditional Newspapers
- Websites
- Magazines
- Network TV

- Cable TV
- Streaming Video
- Podcasts
- Film Radio
- Social Media
- Blogs
- Other

*How much time do you spend on media (e.g. watching TV, reading newspapers, watching videos, social media, etc.) per day?*

- 0 hour
- 1 to 2 hours
- 3 to 5 hours
- 6 to 7 hours
- More than 8 hours



## APPENDIX 3 INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

### **Dissertation Interview Guide/Script**

#### **(Directions for Interviewer in Bold)**

#### **Introduction Greeting, Rationale,**

Hello and thank you for participating in my study. I am Don Lowe a PhD student in the Department of Communication and I am conducting this study as part of my doctoral dissertation. In that dissertation, I am studying how LGTBQ+ individuals interact with LGBTQ+ media personalities/characters and what, if any, role those interactions play in LGBTQ+ sexual identity development.

There are four sets of questions divided into sexual identity formation, LGBTQ+ media personalities/characters, interaction with LGBTQ+ media and sexual identity appraisal.

This entire interview is voluntary, and as stated previously during the consent process, you may choose to end the interview at any time and you are not required to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable discussing.

At this time, I would like for you to choose a pseudonym that I will use as an identifier during the report of my findings. To protect your privacy and anonymity, please refrain from using names of people and places (other than media figures, etc.) that could be used to re-identify yourself.

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Are you ready to get started?

#### **Sexual Identity Formation Section**

#### **(Description of This Section.)**

In this section, we will be discussing sexual identity development including your recollections of your discovery or realization of your sexual identity, how you define and label your sexual identity, your discussions with others about sexual identity and the sexual identity development process in general.

**1. Tell me about your sexual identity**

When did you first realize your sexual identity? How old were you? Was there a specific event that made you realize your sexual identity? If yes, what was it?

How did you feel about this realization? Why do you think you felt this way?

**2. Who, if anyone, did you talk to about this realization? Why did you choose to talk to those? people?**

Did you talk to anyone who identifies as LGBTQ+ about this realization? If so, who? If so, why did you choose those people?

**3. Who is the first LGBTQ+ person you personally met?**

Did you wish you could talk to more people who identify as LGBTQ+? Why or why not?

**4. Does religion play a role in your LGBTQ+ sexual identity development? If no, why not? If so, in what ways?**

**5. Did your school system provide support services for sexual identity development?**

If not, did this impact your sexual identity development? If no, why not? If yes, in what ways?

If yes, what services were made available?

Did you utilize these services? If not, why not? If yes, which ones and in what ways?

Did your participation in these services impact your sexual identity development? If no, why not? If so, in what ways?

**LGBTQ+ Media Characters/Personalities Section**

**(Description of This Section.)**

**Bottom of Form**

In this section, we will be discussing your interactions with LGBTQ+ media characters/personalities including your recollections of your earliest interactions with

LGBTQ+ media characters, how, if at all, those interactions assisted your sexual identity development, and LGBTQ+ media characters/personalities in general.

6. Tell me how you feel about LGBTQ+ media characters or personalities.

Can you recall who the first LGBTQ+ person or character you remember seeing in media was?

Were they on television, film, or the internet? Other?

7. How did you feel seeing LGBTQ+ characters/personalities in media? Why?

8. Did these early interactions play a role in how you viewed your own sexual identity? If yes, how? If no, why not?

Did you turn to media to find someone LGBTQ+ to assist with processing your realization?

If so, how?

Which media?

How often? Please be specific.

### **Interaction with LGBTQ+ Media Section**

#### **(Description of This Section.)**

In this section, we are going to explore those interactions with LGBTQ+ media characters/personalities that you took a step further (again, if there are any) and continued to interact with and we will discuss your motivations for the recurring interactions.

9. Did you ever reach out, comment, respond to social media, video chat, etc. with an LGBTQ+ media character/personality? Please explain.

Why were you drawn to this person or character?

Did you seek out this person or character in media after the initial time? Can you describe any interaction(s) you had with this person or people in detail?

10. Did you repeat your viewing of this person or character? How often?

Do you admire this person or character? Why or why not?

Do you model their behavior? Why or why not? If so, how?

Do you model their language? If so, how?

Do you wish to be like this person or character? If so, how?

**11. Do you feel you have a relationship with this person or character?**

What type of relationship do you feel you have?

Is it a friendship?

Romantic relationship?

Is it a mentoring type of relationship?

**12. Do you seek advice from this person or character?**

If so, on what issues, aspects of your life?

**13. How has your interaction with this person or character affected your self-esteem?**

**14. How has your interaction with this person or character affected your self concept?**

**15. What types of media characters/personalities do you relate to?**

Are you more interested in watching LGBTQ+ characters or heterosexual characters?

If yes, why? If no, why not?

Are you more interested in watching LGBTQ+ characters near your age? Is it important

to you that LGBTQ+ characters be near your age? If so, why is this important?

Are you more interested in watching LGBTQ+ characters of your own race or ethnicity? Is it important to you that LGBTQ+ characters be of your own race or ethnicity? If so, why is this important?

Are you more interested in watching LGBTQ+ characters of your own sexuality? Is it important to you that LGBTQ+ characters be of your own sexuality? If so, why is this important?

Are you more interested in watching LGBTQ+ characters that have the same gender identity as you? Is it important to you that LGBTQ+ characters have the same gender identity as you? If so, why is this important?

- 16.** Where does interacting with LGBTQ+ media people or characters fit in the spectrum of your sexual identity development? If at all?

### **Sexual Identity Appraisal Section**

#### **(Description of This Section.)**

In this section, we will discuss your assessments and appraisals of LGBTQ+ characters/personalities including accurate and inaccurate portrayals, perceptions of non-LGBTQ+ media consumers, and your overall feelings about LGBTQ+ media portrayals.

- 17.** Tell me how you feel when you see stereotypical media characters/personalities.

Have you ever been proud when you saw an LGBTQ+ portrayal? If so, which one?

Have you ever been ashamed or embarrassed when you saw an LGBTQ+ portrayal? If so, which one?

Is it important for non-LGBTQ+ people to see accurate depictions of these people or characters? Why? Why not?

Does the knowledge that non-LGBTQ+ people are seeing these people or characters impact your self view, esteem, concept? If so, how? If not, why do you think this is the case?

- 18.** Have you heard of the expression “bury your gays”? If so, can you give me an example?

Did this impact your self view, esteem, concept? If so, how? If not, why do you think this is the case?

If the participant is not familiar with the expression, read them this definition:

In aggregate, queer characters are more likely to die than straight characters. Indeed, it may be because they seem to have less purpose compared to straight characters, or that the supposed natural conclusion of their story is an early death.

Now, can you give me an example? Did this impact your self view, esteem, concept? If so, how? If not, why do you think this is the case?

- 19.** Tell me about how your interactions with LGBTQ+ media characters/personalities have impacted you.

How has your interaction with this person or character affected your acceptance of your LGBTQ+ identity? Can you think of your specific example?

How has your interaction with this person or character affected your acceptance of others' LGBTQ+ identity? Can you think of a specific example?

### **Wrap-Up, Debrief**

- 20.** That's all the questions I have. Do you have anything to add?

Is there any topic we didn't discuss you feel we should add to future studies?

Thanks so much for your time. Your participation today will assist me in examining this issue and the findings could very well assist others in impactful ways. Thank you for your contribution.

**APPENDIX 4 FINAL CODEBOOK**

<b>Abbr</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition/Explanation</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>R</b>	Realizations	LGBTQ+ people, LGBTQ+ people in media, LGBTQ+ stigma, LGBTQ+ status	“So I was about 11 when I found out that non-straight orientations existed. So I Googled it and that was basically my sex talk”, said Cirice an agender queer.
<b>P</b>	Processing	Decision to delay revealing of LGBTQ+ status, reason for delay, Amount of time before reveal status	“I had a teacher in middle school who was gay but not open about it. I talked to him about my sexuality and he was just telling me to take all the precautions I could because we live in the South. He was discovered and had to leave the school. I didn’t talk to anyone for years after that,” said Lulu, a bisexual.
<b>MI</b>	Media for information	Terms, exemplars	“I searched a lot on YouTube and tried to find answers on the internet. At the time I felt like I had just opened this secret door to like this whole like world of YouTube and music that like I didn’t know existed,” said Abby, a bisexual.
<b>MP</b>	Media for Processing Feelings	Regarding character/personality, pride, embarrassment, negative stereotypes, acceptance of other LGBTQ+	“It’s definitely made me feel better. It helped me get rid of the internalized homophobia,” said Leigh, a lesbian.
<b>MC</b>	Media for clarification	Self-esteem, self-concept	“She (Callie Torres on Grey’s Anatomy) came out as bisexual and it was like a huge thing and that was probably my first exposure (to a bisexual portrayal). I was like that’s it. That’s cool. That’s different. That’s interesting. That’s me,” said Johnny, a bisexual.

Abbr	Code	Definition/Explanation	Examples
MA	Media for affirmation	Visualization, self-realization	“So seeing people like him (Brendon Urie lead singer for Panic at the Disco) that were doing all this amazing stuff but like, and not really talking about their gender or sexual identity really at all. It just made it like seem more normal,” said Steve, a pansexual.



## APPENDIX 5 FACE TO FACE CONSENT



### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

#### KEY INFORMATION FOR LGBTQ+ PARASOCIAL MEDIA STUDY:

We are asking you to choose whether or not to volunteer for a research study about LGBTQ+ individuals' parasocial interactions with media characters and that relationship's impact on sexual identity development. We are asking you because you responded to advertising for this study on websites or social media associated with the PI or were referred by other participants in this study. This page is to give you key information to help you decide whether to participate. We have included detailed information after this page. If you have questions later, the contact information for the research investigator in charge of the study is below.

#### WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

By doing this study, we hope to learn how LGBTQ+ individuals interact with media characters and how those interactions influence sexual identity formation. Your participation in this research will last about one hour for one afternoon.

#### WHAT ARE KEY REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

The most important reason you may want to volunteer to participate in this study is to assist others in their sexual identity formation because the results of this study may eventually be used to implement programs to assist LGBTQ+ individuals.

#### WHAT ARE KEY REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

The most important reason you may not want to volunteer in this study is your perception of your LGBTQ+ status as something you do not wish to discuss with a researcher. Additionally, you may not wish to be audio recorded and therefore, should not volunteer for this study.

#### DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer.

#### WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns regarding this study or you want to withdraw from the study contact Don Lowe of the University of Kentucky, Department of Communication at 859 257 5339 or [dlowe2@uky.edu](mailto:dlowe2@uky.edu) or Faculty Advisor Dr. Shari Veil at 859 257 3622 or [shari.veil@uky.edu](mailto:shari.veil@uky.edu).

If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact staff in the University of Kentucky (UK) Office of Research Integrity (ORI) between the business hours of 8am and 5pm EST, Monday-Friday at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428.

## **DETAILED CONSENT:**

### **ARE THERE REASONS WHY YOU WOULD NOT QUALIFY FOR THIS STUDY?**

A participant could be excluded from participating in this study if they are under 18 years of age, if they do not identify as LGBTQ+.

### **WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND WHAT IS THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF TIME INVOLVED?**

The research procedures will be conducted one-on-one via telephone, Skype or Zoom. You will need to participate one time during the study. Each of those participations will take about one hour.

### **WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?**

For one-on-one interviews, you will be asked to answer questions from a brief demographic survey read to you by the PI. You will be participating in one on one, Skype, Zoom or telephone interviews with PI conducted at dates and times determined by you and the PI. These interviews will be digitally recorded and then sent to a third party, rev.com for transcription. Notes will be taken during the interview by the PI those will be typed/transcribed to field notes. Each interview will take around one hour on one afternoon during the months of July, August, September, or October, 2020. You will be interviewed only once and you will be asked questions about your interaction with LGBTQ+ media characters and the influence of those interactions on your sexual identity formation. You are free to skip any questions on the survey or during the interview for any reasons.

### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

There are no foreseen risks to participating in this study.

### **WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

Personal benefit from taking part in this study will be limited to general knowledge acquisition.

### **IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY, ARE THERE OTHER CHOICES?**

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

### **WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?**

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

### **WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?**

When we write about or share the results from the study, we will write about the combined information. We will keep your name and other identifying information private. The audio recordings will be transcribed by rev.com, a third party transcription service and all identifying information (if any) revealed during the interviews will be removed by the PI Don Lowe prior to the tapes being sent to rev.com for transcription.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. All research materials and participant information will be stored on a secure storage platform (password protected file on a password protected computer) that is accessible only to the authorized users. The only people who will have access to this information are the primary investigator and the faculty advisor. All research materials and participant information will be stored for at least six years after the end of the IRB approval period.

We will keep confidential all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court, or tell authorities if you pose a danger to yourself or someone else. Also, we may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as the University of Kentucky. We will make every effort to safeguard your data, but as with everything online, we cannot guarantee the security of data obtained via the Internet. Third-party applications used in this study may have Terms of Service and Privacy policies outside the control of the University of Kentucky.

#### **CAN YOU CHOOSE TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY EARLY?**

You can choose to leave the study at any time. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

If you choose to leave the study early, data collected until that point will remain in the study database and may not be removed.

The investigators conducting the study may need to remove you from the study.

#### **WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

You will receive one \$20 Visa gift card for taking part in this study.

#### **WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?**

If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about 30 people to do so.

The research is being conducted by doctoral student, Don Lowe, guided in this research by Dr. Shari Veil.

The information that you are providing will no longer belong to you. The research may lead to new educational knowledge.

#### **WILL YOUR INFORMATION BE USED FOR FUTURE RESEARCH?**

All identifiable information (e.g., your name) will be removed from this study. After we remove all identifiers, the information may be used for future research or shared with other researchers without your additional informed consent.

#### **STORING AND SHARING YOUR INFORMATION FOR FUTURE USE**

All research materials and participant information will be deleted and destroyed at the earliest time possible.

**INFORMED CONSENT SIGNATURES**

This consent includes the following:

- Key Information Page
- Detailed Consent

You are the subject or are authorized to act on behalf of the subject. You will receive a copy of this consent form after it has been signed.

<p>_____ <b>Signature of research subject</b> <i>or, if applicable,</i> <i>*research subject's legal representative</i></p>	<p>_____ <b>Date</b></p>
<p>_____ <b>Printed name of research subject</b></p>	
<p>_____ Printed name of [authorized] person obtaining informed consent</p>	<p>_____ <b>Date</b></p>

**Figure 5.2.** Face to Face Consent

## APPENDIX 6 NON-FACE TO FACE CONSENT



### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

#### KEY INFORMATION FOR LGBTQ+ PARASOCIAL MEDIA STUDY:

We are asking you to choose whether or not to volunteer for a research study about LGBTQ+ individuals' parasocial interactions with media characters and that relationship's impact on sexual identity development. We are asking you because you are a student at the University of Kentucky who has voluntarily joined the listserv for the University of Kentucky's Office of LGBTQ\* Resources. This page is to give you key information to help you decide whether to participate. We have included detailed information after this page. If you have questions later, the contact information for the research investigator in charge of the study is below.

#### WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

By doing this study, we hope to learn how LGBTQ+ individuals interact with media characters and how those interactions influence sexual identity formation. Your participation in this research will last about one hour for one afternoon.

#### WHAT ARE KEY REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

The most important reason you may want to volunteer to participate in this study is to assist others in their sexual identity formation because the results of this study may eventually be used to implement programs to assist LGBTQ+ individuals.

#### WHAT ARE KEY REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

The most important reason you may not want to volunteer in this study is your perception of your LGBTQ+ status as something you do not wish to discuss with a researcher. Additionally, you may not wish to be audio recorded and therefore, should not volunteer for this study.

#### DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer.

As a student, if you decide not to take part in this study, your choice will have no effect on your academic status or class grade(s).

#### WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns regarding this study or you want to withdraw from the study contact Don Lowe of the University of Kentucky, Department of Communication at 859 257 5339 or [dlowe2@uky.edu](mailto:dlowe2@uky.edu) or Faculty Advisor Dr. Shari Veil at 859 257 3622 or [shari.veil@uky.edu](mailto:shari.veil@uky.edu).

If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact staff in the University of Kentucky (UK) Office of Research Integrity (ORI) between the business hours of 8am and 5pm EST, Monday-Friday at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428.

## **DETAILED CONSENT:**

### **ARE THERE REASONS WHY YOU WOULD NOT QUALIFY FOR THIS STUDY?**

A participant could be excluded from participating in this study if they are under 18 years of age, if they do not identify as LGBTQ+.

### **WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND WHAT IS THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF TIME INVOLVED?**

The research procedures will be conducted either face to face at a location determined by you and the PI or via Skype or telephone conversations. You will need to participate one time during the study. Each of those participations will take about one hour.

### **WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?**

For face to face interviews, you will be asked to fill out a brief demographic survey using pencil and paper. You will be participating in one on one, face to face, Skype, Zoom or telephone interviews with PI conducted at dates and times determined by you and the PI. If you are interviewed via Skype, Zoom or telephone, the PI will read the demographic questions to you. These interviews will be digitally recorded and then sent to a third party, rev.com for transcription.

Notes will be taken during the interview by the PI those will be typed/transcribed to field notes. Each interview will take around one hour on one afternoon during the months of July, August, September, or October, 2020. You will be interviewed only once and you will be asked questions about your interaction with LGBTQ+ media characters and the influence of those interactions on your sexual identity formation. You are free to skip any questions on the survey or during the interview for any reasons.

### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

There are no foreseen risks to participating in this study.

### **WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

Personal benefit from taking part in this study will be limited to general knowledge acquisition.

### **IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY, ARE THERE OTHER CHOICES?**

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

### **WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?**

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

### **WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?**

When we write about or share the results from the study, we will write about the combined information. We will keep your name and other identifying information private. The audio recordings will be transcribed by rev.com, a third party transcription service and all identifying information (if any) revealed during the interviews will be removed by the PI Don Lowe prior to the tapes being sent to rev.com for transcription.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. All research materials and participant information will be stored on a secure storage platform (password protected file on a password protected computer) that is accessible only to the authorized users. The only people who will have access to this information are the primary investigator and the faculty advisor. All research materials and participant information will be stored for at least six years after the end of the IRB approval period.

We will keep confidential all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court, or tell authorities if you pose a danger to yourself or someone else. Also, we may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as the University of Kentucky. We will make every effort to safeguard your data, but as with everything online, we cannot guarantee the security of data obtained via the Internet. Third-party applications used in this study may have Terms of Service and Privacy policies outside the control of the University of Kentucky.

**CAN YOU CHOOSE TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY EARLY?**

You can choose to leave the study at any time. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

If you choose to leave the study early, data collected until that point will remain in the study database and may not be removed.

The investigators conducting the study may need to remove you from the study.

**WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

You will receive one \$20 Visa gift card for taking part in this study.

**WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?**

If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about 25 people to do so.

The research is being conducted by doctoral student, Don Lowe, guided in this research by Dr. Shari Veil.

The information that you are providing will no longer belong to you. The research may lead to new educational knowledge.

**WILL YOUR INFORMATION BE USED FOR FUTURE RESEARCH?**

All identifiable information (e.g., your name) will be removed from this study. After we remove all identifiers, the information may be used for future research or shared with other researchers without your additional informed consent.

**STORING AND SHARING YOUR INFORMATION FOR FUTURE USE**

All research materials and participant information will be deleted and destroyed at the earliest time possible.

**Figure 5.3.** Non-Face to Face Consent

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## VITA

**Don Lowe, M.A.**

### **Education**

**M.A. Speech Communication, Marshall University, Huntington, WV, 1988**

Research Area: Mass Communication

Cognate: Broadcast News

**B.A. Journalism, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, KY 1985**

**B.A. Broadcasting, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, KY, 1985**

### **Academic Appointments**

**University of Kentucky College of Communication, Lexington, KY**

2010-present, Senior Lecturer, Department of Communication

2002-2010, Lecturer, Department of Communication

**Cooperative Center for Study Abroad, Bowling Green, KY**

2005-present, Instructor

### ***Adjunct Appointments***

**Eastern Kentucky University, Department of Mass Communication, Richmond, KY**

2001-2002, Adjunct Faculty; **Lexington Community College, Lexington, KY**

2001-2002, Adjunct Faculty; **Midway College, Midway, Kentucky**

2000, Adjunct Faculty; **Roane State Community College, Knoxville, TN**

1999-2000, Adjunct Faculty; **Pellissippi State Technical Community College,**

**Knoxville, TN** 1999-2000, Adjunct Faculty; **St. Petersburg Junior College, St.**

**Petersburg, FL** 1998-1999, Adjunct Faculty; **Prestonsburg Community**

**College,**

**Pikeville, KY** 1990-1998, Instructor; **Kentucky College of Business, Pikeville,**

**KY**

1988-1990, Instructor

### **Scholarship**

### **Books**

Lowe, D. (2018). *Media for your life: A consumer's guide to everything media*, (3<sup>rd</sup> ed).  
Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Co.

Lowe, D. (2016). *Media for your life: A consumer's guide to everything media*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Co.

Lowe, D. (2014). *Media for your life: A consumer's guide to everything media*, Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Co.

### **Peer-reviewed Conference Paper Presentations**

Wei, F., Wang, Y.K., & **Lowe, D.** (2020, April). Survival under Americans' fear: Why do African Americans and Caucasians favor/oppose gun control? Paper presented at the Southern States Communication Association Conference, Frisco, TX.

**Lowe, D.** (2019, April). Transgender media: A meta-analysis of works. Paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association Conference, Providence, RI.

**Lowe, D.** (2018, November). Performing difference: Identity negotiation on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association Conference, Salt Lake City, UT.

Frisby, B.N. & **Lowe, D.** (2015, November). Course redesign and innovation: The effects of course format on student, interest, motivation, and learning outcomes. Paper presented at the National Communication Association Conference, Las Vegas, NV.

**Lowe, D.** (2020, August). Image Repair in the #MeToo Movement: An Examination of Kevin Spacey's Double Crisis. Paper presented at Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Conference, San Francisco, CA.

**Lowe, D.** (2020, November). Policing masculinity on *RuPaul's Drag Race*: Discursive strategies employed to maintain the gender binary created within the current American patriarchy. Paper presented at the National Communication Association Conference, Indianapolis, IN.

### **Peer-reviewed Conference Paper Submissions (Pending)**

**Lowe, D.** (2021, May). LGBTQ+ Sexual Identity Development: Examining the Role of Parasocial Interaction/Relationships. Submitted to International Communication Association Conference, Denver, CO.

### **Teaching and Advising**

#### **TCEs**

- (4-year average of all courses taught)

- Teaching effectiveness: 4.18/5.0 for 30 total courses taught

## **Advising**

### ***Undergraduates***

Average of 40 advisees per semester from 2002-2016

### ***Graduate Master's Committee***

Brandee Kemper, 2017

### **CSA**

Communication Student Association Faculty Advisor from 2008-2017

## **Curriculum Development**

### **Sports Communication Track** (University of Kentucky, Department of Communication):

Worked with mass communication faculty to redesign the curriculum to include 21 hours of major courses and 15 hours of cognate courses including four new courses: COM 353 Public Images and Media Profiles, COM 426 Sports Communication and Analytics, COM 460 Sports Industries and Audiences, and COM 563 Culture of Sports Media and Society.

**Created COM 353** Technology Mediated Communication in Sport-- A study of the processes involved in technology mediated communication including interactions between public figures and mass media outlets, with emphasis on the preparation and delivery of messages that directly impact identity management.

## **Professional Development**

**eLearning Innovation Initiative Award** Funded by the UK Provost of Analytics and Technology and the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching to engage in an intensive faculty development program and Faculty Learning Community for online and blended learning innovation. 2014 – 2015. \$4,000.



### **Department Service**

Student Success Committee	2016-Present
Curriculum Committee	2018-2019
Strategic Planning Committee	2010-2011
Academic Appeals Committee	2002-2004

### **Community Engagement**

GLSO Board	2010-2014
GLSO Newsletter Editor	2011-2014
GLSO Pride Festival Board	2011-2014
Pike County Chamber of Commerce	1990-1992
Pike County Preservation Council	1990-1992