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# Opening the Closet Door: Exploring the Role of Social Media in the Coming Out Process for Individuals who Self-Identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and/or Queer (LGBQ)

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## ABSTRACT

Social media has become synonymous with every day communication in our technologically advanced society. Individuals use it to share information, make plans with friends and keep up with folks geographically dispersed from them. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) individuals often use social media to find other individuals with whom they can share about their sexual orientation. In this study we use qualitative methods to examine the role of social media in the coming out process and the experiences of individuals who self-identify as LGBQ. We focus on one emergent theme: feelings of decreased risk in sharing online.

## Keywords

Social media, social networking sites, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, coming out, sexual orientation

## INTRODUCTION

Social media provides a means by which individuals can communicate in one-on-one and community settings on the Internet. People can engage in chat, group discussions, forums, blogs, and interact on social networking sites. A 2010 study conducted by Harris and Witeck-Combs Communications surveyed 2,412 adults in the U.S., 271 of who self-identified as gay or lesbian. The survey revealed that gay and lesbian adults used online social networking sites more than heterosexuals. Of the respondents, 73% of gays and lesbians used Facebook versus 65% of heterosexuals. The same variance occurred for MySpace which had 32% vs. 22%, LinkedIn which had 22% vs. 16%, and Twitter which had 29% vs. 15% (Harris Interactive, 2010). A major difference between the two groups in the use of these sites is the disclosure of their sexual orientation, often referred to as the 'coming out' process. Coleman (1982) defines coming out as the stage of sexual development during which an individual acknowledges his/her homosexual feelings and begins to tell others. Haag & Chang (1998), who studied how the Internet impacts social services delivery, stated, "[t]he computer has allowed the coming out process for young gays and lesbians to be an easier process by both allowing one to keep anonymity and to take that initial step more slowly and carefully" (p. 86).

However, anonymity doesn't exist only for gay and lesbian computer users. Heterosexuals observing this coming out process who may not be accepting of different sexual orientations also have anonymity, which has led to the advent of cyber-bullying. Grading, Strohmeier, & Spiel (2010) define cyber-bullying as the use of modern technology with the intention of hurting another individual through repetitive negative actions and in situations where one feels more powerful than the person(s) being bullied. Existing Information Systems (IS) literature examines the role of social media in the lives of users; however, explorations of use by the LGBQ community specifically are mostly absent. We contribute to IS research by focusing specifically on the role of social media in the coming out process. Thirteen years ago the networking provided by the Internet was predicted to be a positive addition to the lives of non-heterosexual individuals. Unfortunately, the advent of cyber-bullying has shown a dark side to this connectivity. This discourse presents the opportunity to explore the question: *How is social media impacting the coming out process for individuals who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer?*

Using literature regarding the coming out process and social media use, in this paper we outline the sensitive nature of this question and describe its importance for IS and sexual development research. In addition, we share one emergent theme of our ongoing qualitative research: feelings of decreased risk for LGBQ people when sharing online.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Coming Out Process

Literature on the coming out process for LGBQ people predates the advent of social media simply because it is a human experience that was occurring for centuries absent technologies. Coleman (1982) breaks the sexual identity development of same-sex individuals into five stages: “pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationships, and integration” (p. 470). Our study focuses on the coming out process (the point of acceptance and disclosure) within these developmental stages. Coleman notes that these stages are fluid and iterative but that “the framework is useful in understanding individuals and helpful in facilitating them through the stages to a healthier and more mature outlook” (Coleman, 1982, p.470). Zimman (2009) refers to this as processuality: “the notion that coming out is not a single event, nor even a finite series of acts after which the individuals may be considered completely out, but rather a lifelong process of claiming gay or lesbian identity” (p. 60). The result of the current research could shine light on social media’s role in aiding or hurting individuals as they come out various times throughout their lives.

Two main themes were evident in the literature regarding coming out. The first explores the feelings and emotions experienced during the coming out process. Johnston and Jenkins (2004) examine coming out in mid-adulthood and the related psychosocial issues. Through semi-structured interviews they found six themes: 1) interrupted relationships, 2) fear of losing everything, self-destructive behavior coping mechanisms, 4) grief over the loss of a ‘normal’ adolescence, 5) oppression related to religion, and 6) strength and courage (Johnston & Jenkins, 2004). These six themes inform our study through providing ideas that could be used for probing during the interview process. However, participants in our research could have come out during any phase of their life. Therefore, the current study examines the coming out process for adults at varying ages and social media’s role at those times. Vaughan and Waehler (2010) studied the unique rewards and stresses experienced during sexuality disclosure. The use of social media during the coming out process may impact the feelings and emotions experienced. The second theme explores the disclosure patterns that develop during the coming out process. Beals and Peplau (2006) presented questionnaires to 55 lesbians and 89 gay men for the purpose of understanding to whom they disclose and their perceptions regarding the relationships with those individuals prior to coming out and after. Participants reported improved relationship quality with individuals who knew of their sexual orientation, greater relationship quality with individuals to whom they came out directly, and greater acceptance of gay or lesbian individuals if they found out about them directly. This article informs our study through an examination of off-line social network disclosure patterns, which may be found to differ from disclosure patterns experienced through online social media. Rossi (2010) looked specifically at the disclosure experiences of gay and lesbian youth as shared with their parents. The author found that mothers were typically told before fathers and usually through direct disclosure methods. The current study observes the role of social media in the disclosure decisions of adults. This theme has bearing on our research in that the disclosure patterns which develop during the coming out process may differ when social media is used.

While the aforementioned studies provide significant foundational information for the current research, none discuss technology. The findings of our study, focused on the role of social media, will add to the literature regarding the coming out process for individuals who self-identify as LGBQ.

### Social Media and the LGBQ Community

Social media is defined as web sites with structural and interactive features which “seem to foster ongoing discussions between their authors and their readers making them more dialogic in nature than traditional Web sites” (Dickey & Lewis, 2010, p. 140). Forms of social media include chat rooms, forums, blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook, Bebo, LinkedIn, Twitter and MySpace. As previously noted, gay and lesbian individuals have been identified as heavy users of social media.

Within the social media literature related to LGBQ people, three main themes emerge. First are the examinations of the offerings for gays and lesbians on the Internet and the utility of those offerings. Haag and Chang’s (1998) article is a good starting glimpse of how the Internet began to impact the lives of individuals within the gay and lesbian community. They identified bulletin boards and online services aiding gay and lesbian individuals in rural communities; their work demonstrates that the Internet has impacted the lives of gays and lesbians. Our current study goes one step further to examine how current social media technologies specifically impact the coming out process. McKenna and Bargh (1998) examined

how Internet newsgroups provided an anonymous place of belonging for individuals with stigmatized identities. They found that these individuals did modify their behavior in response to the reactions of other members in the group. Our study examines a similar phenomenon; however, we have a distinct focus on the coming out process for individuals with stigmatized identities. Macintosh and Bryson (2007) assert that social networking sites are everyday locations of engagement for youth. They come to this conclusion through the analysis of MySpace and the deduction that the value of such sites is found in the social capital built through interactions on the sites. This theme applies to our research through the establishment of Internet offerings for LGBQ individuals. If individuals are utilizing social media daily, including to come out, understanding how those interactions affect individuals can aid in shaping the technology and the education of the use of those technologies.

The second theme which emerges is the use of the Internet by LGBQ individuals. Lever et al. (2008) explored the use of Internet personal ads by age, gender, and sexual orientation. Their focus was on the “use patterns and indicators of success in sexual and romantic partnering between gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual visitors on personals sites” (Lever et al., 2008, p. 235). Baams et al. (2011) examined the differences of Internet use between age groups of individuals who are attracted to others of the same sex. They found that younger same sex attracted individuals used the Internet for social support and older same sex attracted adults for sexual purposes. In our study, we also look at LGBQ individuals’ use of online social media; however, the focus of our research is specifically how social media is used in and impacts the coming out process.

Coming out in an online environment is the third theme. George (2011) looked at online blogs bisexuals used for the purpose of coming out. Through the analysis of text on the sites, he came to the conclusion that “it is the role of the reader and commenter on the blog that is key to the beneficial effect that blogs can have” (p. 320). Our current research not only allows individuals to share their perspectives directly through interviews, it is not exclusively focused on bisexuals. Additionally, our study examines all uses of social media and how they impact the coming out process for LGBQ folks. Munt, et al., (2002) examined a purely lesbian online community inclusive of “an analysis of how sexualized bodies emerge in virtual spaces” (p. 125). Their study contributes to our research in that it presents a way to compare online and off line coming out experiences. However, our study looks at the role of various online social media uses in the coming out process for LGBQ individuals.

This literature presents research focused on several types of social media: blogs, newsgroups, social networking sites and the Internet in general. The methods used to evaluate these types of social media include textual analysis (George, 2011), survey (Baams et al., 2011; Lever et al., 2008), content analysis of posts (Munt et al., 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 1998) and online resource identification (Haag & Chang, 1998). While several researchers discussed look at particular ‘groups’ of individuals within the non-heterosexual community (Munt et al., 2002; Macintosh & Bryson, 2007; George, 2011), our study involves a wider pool of individuals. Additionally, our work does not focus on any one type of social media; people are encouraged to share experiences with all social media forms. We are less interested in the form of social media and more interested in the role of the chosen type in an individual’s coming out process. In summary, we build upon the current literature with a unique angle; we examine the use of social media in the coming out process by individuals who self-identify into any one of four groups—lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer—to uncover how social media may be impacting people in the coming out stage of the sexual development process.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is an ongoing qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews and an open-ended question survey. Qualitative research “primarily seeks to understand and describe social phenomena from perspectives of participants” (Glesne, 2010, p. 17). In order to understand the phenomenon of social media’s role in the coming out process, it is necessary to share the stories of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Asking open-ended questions through qualitative inquiry allows those stories to be told and heard. For this paper, we analyzed the transcripts of thirty surveys and two face-to-face interviews with adult social media users who self-identify as LGBQ. Participants were recruited through groups at a regional university and online social media. The interviews provided the most thorough information given that facial expressions, body language, inflections and pauses can be captured along with the content of the answers and follow up questions could be asked for clarification of responses. These additional information cues and follow-up question answers add to the stories being told by the participants. The online version of the questions was created using survey software that allows for open-ended questions and unlimited responses. This was disseminated using social media software through online social networks and groups that identify as LGBQ friendly. The online survey allowed the feature of anonymity. Sharing one’s coming out story can be difficult and doing so face-to-face can increase the risk that individuals feel in disclosing their sexual orientation (Coleman, 1982). The online survey provided an environment with potential lower risk for participants. The same questions were asked in both the interviews and the online survey; they are listed in Table 1.

Using inductive thematic analysis (Johnson & Christensen, 2004), we examined the interview transcripts and survey responses for themes. Johnson and Christensen (2004) define inductive analysis as “immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships; [it] begins by exploring, then confirming, [and is] guided by analytical principles” (p. 362). Thematic analysis aided us in understanding the role of social media in the coming out process for participants. The use of online survey software allowed for not only a greater set of data, but the ability to reach individuals who utilize social media through the medium itself. Exploring the role of social media involves its ability to allow people to connect; therefore, the use of that connectivity is fitting as part of the research methodology. The digital responses produced documents similar to the interview transcript upon which inductive analysis could be performed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Category	Question
Demographics	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Country</li> <li>• City</li> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Race</li> <li>• What label do you use to describe your sexual orientation?</li> <li>• What social media technologies do you use? (Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, etc.)</li> </ul>
Targeted Content Questions	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How old were you when you chose to begin sharing with others about your sexual orientation?</li> <li>• What has the process of coming out been like for you in terms of how you felt about it?</li> <li>• What has the process of coming out been like for you in terms of how others reacted?</li> <li>• What role, if any, did social media play in your initial steps to share about your sexual orientation?</li> <li>• Most people come out more than once in their life, for example: to different people, in different situations or different employment settings.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Please describe what role, if any, social media played in those experiences?</li> <li>○ If you haven't already, please describe experiences where someone else has used social media to out you and what occurred as a result.</li> <li>○ If you haven't already, please describe experiences where you witnessed someone else “being outed” on social media.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Cyber-bullying is defined as “the deliberate and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (Konig, 2010, p. 210).               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Please describe any experiences in which you have been the victim of cyber-bullying.</li> <li>○ Please describe any experiences in which you have witnessed or known of someone else who experienced cyber-bullying.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Describe any instances in which you have come out to someone through social media whom you might not have come out to without social media.</li> <li>• What role do social media play in sharing about your sexual orientation now?</li> <li>• What role do social media play in engaging in activities related to being LGBQ?</li> </ul>
General Questions	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What role do you see social media playing in the lives of the LGBQ individuals now?</li> <li>• What potential do you think social media holds for LGBQ individuals in the future?</li> <li>• Is there anything else which you would like to share?</li> </ul>

**Table 1. Social Media and Coming Out Interview Questions**

**RESULTS**

The inductive thematic analysis produced clear themes regarding the coming out process and social media use that can be divided into two main categories: positive impacts and negative impacts. Three themes emerged regarding the potential

positive impact of social media on LGBQ people's lives. Participants' stories revealed that social media can: 1) aid LGBQ individuals with finding accepting communities, 2) create a platform for LGBQ activism, advocacy, and awareness, and 3) provide a venue for sharing about one's sexual orientation with decreased risk from face-to-face interactions. However, social media also has the potential to negatively impact LGBQ people's lives. Participants' named: 1) concerns about what employers/potential employers might see online, 2) distress and oppression they or LGBQ friends experienced as a result of cyber bullying, and 3) worry that social media is replacing face-to-face communication regarding coming out and LGBQ issues. Due to space limitations, in this paper we discuss only one theme: the feeling that social media provides a venue for sharing about one's sexual orientation with decreased risk from face-to-face interactions. Within this theme individuals discussed truth, distance, safety and comfort levels.

Coming out can be viewed as a release of one's truth; it's handing a piece of one's self over to the world without the certainty of acceptance. The risk of rejection factors into people's willingness to share their truths. Social media is one mechanism through which that risk may be moderated. Through social media stories can be shared and realities constructed. As one participant said, "Social media/internet allows us to create our own content, so we see ourselves reflected in our own languages, in our own words, and in our own truths." Virtual locations like Facebook allow LGBQ individuals to control how much of their truth is shared. Some individuals opt for a sharing of all pieces of their life: personal, work, family, friends, etc. A person has the option to represent him/herself holistically, painting a virtual image of his/her complete truth. One individual revealed, "It's not so much about sharing my sexual orientation as it is sharing the things that are important to me and that express who I really am, and part of that is that I'm gay." To omit disclosure of one's sexuality can feel like hiding an integral part of the full picture of one's life.

Distance related to social media was described in two ways. One way is the literal distance created between people by the computer screen to create a buffer. Social media creates one possibility for individuals to speak their truths to others without having to be face-to-face. This allows the message receiver time to consider a response before sharing it, putting him/her less on the spot. Additionally, it negates the need for the message sender to witness the receiver's initial reaction. Participants shared stories of hurtful reactions by family or friends when they came out in person. Respondents used phrases like "horrifying experience" and "family alienation". One individual shared, "Most family voiced their disapproval and some still do not speak to me today (16 years later)." Survey responses showed through statements like, "I had a rough coming out" that discussions regarding one's sexual orientation can be difficult, emotional, and end badly. Feelings get hurt; "I remember my mother crying and assuming that I would never becoming home again." Relationships shatter; "my father never said a word". Children are disowned; "family was not accepting of lifestyle choice". These excerpts demonstrate how isolating the coming out process can be. As if in response to this idea of isolation, a survey participant expressed this thought regarding the role of social media in the lives of LGBQ individuals, "I think social media (and the internet overall) can function as a way to de-isolate individuals, particularly young people and folks in rural areas." This leads to the second description of distance within social media: a way to bridge geographical distance. One participant stated, "It has made it somewhat easier to come out to certain people, for example friends who have moved or who I don't see anymore." Another individual, thinking on a larger scale believes that "[w]e can be a truly national, or international 'community' with it, if we try". Through the medium of the computer screen, the manifestation of distance within social media can both act as a buffer during times of difficult communication and as a tether to bring people together in conversation.

Social media as a buffer tool is connected to safety. One participant shared that the process of coming out was "unnerving, frightening, difficult, and exhilarating all at the same time." Another noted that "over the years the process has been easy, empowering, scary, difficult, challenging, funny, fun, lonely – it all depended on who I was coming out to, where I was (private or public space), the other person's reaction." These variables lead LGBQ individuals to seek a safe environment in which to come out. Some participants see social media as a tool to increase safety; "I think social media can play an important role for LGBQ individuals now. It provides an avenue for discussion and exploration in a general safe way." Additionally, social media allows LGBQ individuals to control the virtual environment through actions such as choosing how, and how much, to share and receive. For example, one participant stated how Facebook allows you simple state, "whom you're interested in," and another noted "on every media I've seen there's a way to put a wall up, to block input from others." This control of sharing and receiving allows for the construction of a personal virtual space for individuals who "use social media to provide a safe forum in which to discuss and share LGBQ issues."

Lastly, social media allows users to share the amount of their truths about which they are comfortable in different ways with different people at different times. Social media can be used for career purposes, such as LinkedIn. It can be used for quickly sharing information/thoughts/ideas with a large group of people, such as with Twitter. Sites like Facebook and its predecessors allow individuals to choose the purpose for using the site and the degree of themselves they wish to reveal. For example, one survey respondent discussed how simply changing one piece of information allowed her to come out to a group of individuals. She shared, "I came out to my online friends (via LiveJournal) ... I used Facebook to sort-of come out years

later, by changing my 'interested in' information and hoping it would out me to a large group of people with limited discussion." Coming out is a process that LGBQ individuals navigate throughout their lives; they 'come out' more than once. As they move, change employment, seek out different circles of friends, etc. they may share about their orientation to some degree in each new circumstance; the comfort level in each situation will likely vary. One participant shared this story of how she used Facebook to "out" herself to people she might be interested in who wouldn't necessarily know she's gay. She stated, "...when I don't feel like outing myself I know that if somebody finds me on Facebook they'll know. Um, so also there's that awkwardness of when you like meet someone and like, you don't know if they know that you're gay. You're trying to talk to them but there's no way to be like 'by the way I'm gay if you wanna date me.' So I can always resort to, and I do it all the time I'm like 'oh you should add me on Facebook'." These stories reveal that social media may make coming out more comfortable in particular situations.

While there is no perfect environment, these glimpses into the data reveal attributes of social media which can positively impact the lives of LGBQ individuals. The risks inherent in sharing about one's sexual orientation may be moderated by social media's platform for truth sharing, creation of geographical distance, foundation for building a safe sharing environment, and the allocation of space for individuals to act within their comfort zones.

### LIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

The main limitation of this study lies in the lack of generalizability, which exists generally with the use of qualitative methodology. While the collected data cannot be generalized to a large population, face-to-face interviews and open-ended survey questions provide an in-depth look into the social phenomenon of how social media impacts the coming out process of LGBQ individuals. Additionally, a self-imposed limitation is the decision to not include transgendered individuals in the study. This decision is due to evidence that the coming out process differs for individuals who self-identify as transgendered. According to Zimman (2009) transgendered individuals can experience two distinct coming out processes: one before and one after a change in gender roles. Therefore, it is assumed that data obtained from individuals who self-identify as transgendered would differ greatly from those who self-identify as LGBQ.

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Our focus on the impact of social media brings a unique perspective to the current research regarding coming out experiences. Zimman (2009) said, "[c]oming out narratives are largely about coming to *be*, and they are stories worth telling because of the challenges inherent in coming to embrace a contested identity" (p. 71). This study provides a means for some of those stories to be heard. Our study revealed six themes regarding both positive and negative potential impacts of social media on the lives of LGBQ people. The theme we highlighted in this paper reveals how social media can decrease the risk inherent in face-to-face interactions of the coming out process. The results of this study have implications for practitioners developing social media platforms in that they can design software which eases the steps for LGBQ individuals to find safe communities for their contested identities. Additionally, individuals who work with LGBQs can guide them with regard to communication techniques within the virtual environment.

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