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Coming out online and on campus: queer perspectives on identity work

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COMING OUT ONLINE AND ON CAMPUS:
QUEER PERSPECTIVES ON IDENTITY WORK

by

Ian Callahan

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to describe the experiences associated with coming out—both on campus and online—for sexually and gender nonconforming college students. In 2014, I conducted a pilot version of this study at a public American university in the Northeast, utilizing data from semi-structured in-depth interviews and a demographic questionnaire. A thematic analysis using open and axial coding techniques found that social media interactions contributed to ‘outing’ students on campus. This finding inspired a second iteration of the study, which replicates the original research design and expands its interview script to include a more expansive series of questions related to social media and internet use. Conceptually, I employ queer theory and bolster it with intersectionality to convey how participants negotiate identity work. My theoretical contribution also troubles an online v. offline dichotomy by relationally exploring how queer individuals come out, both on social media platforms and interpersonally on campus. With a deliberate emphasis on marginalized and nonconforming students, this analysis contributes an intersectional discussion of themes related to ‘digital inequalities’, institutional programming, and identity politics. I pose several research questions, including: what influences one’s decision to disclose identity(s) online? Does the college campus foster a climate that is receptive to coming out and the development of nonconforming identities? Are students pressured or encouraged to come out to peers, and does this vary online? Finally, how do students navigate the coming out process across traditional and digital social networks?
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Upon revising the final version of this manuscript, it’s surreal to think that a simple research question—how do queer students experience coming out?—resulted in an extensive intellectual endeavor that began more than five years ago. From its preliminary design in 2014 to an expanded secondary iteration in 2019, this thesis project is an accumulation of reading, writing, and speaking with students about queerness. My initial interest in this topic was directly informed by my own experiences in coming out to family and friends, but after seeing the progress of my studies over the years, I now recognize that a meta-coming out narrative characterizes this work.

As an academic, wielding a personal stake in a project was utterly compelling and ever-motivating because through this work, I have settled deeper into the roots of my own burgeoning queer identity. I have been regularly coming out in my writing, for example, by retelling my own story. In my interview conversations, I disclosed my identity often and broadened my own vantage point on queerness via the perspectives of students. I felt more present in my analysis because I was intrinsically connected to my methods, which had made room for empathetic and productive conversations in the field. The lessons I’ve gained from student participants and their experiences are paramount; because of their insights, I have been driven to new lines of inquiry, and still, I have so much more to understand and explore, even within the findings of this manuscript. Still, in completing this project, I feel a sense of closure and catharsis—both as a scholar and as a queer person—and I have so many individuals to thank for guiding me to this point.
First, my parents, for whom this has been the hardest. I’m so grateful for your compassion, which has trumped your fear throughout these years. Your support is abundant, and I am lucky for that. Next, my friends: you are my touchstone, my cornerstone, and my foundation. Thank you for your enthusiasm, your interest in my work, and your unwavering confidence in me: Lauren Breza, Melissa Lewis, Denise Bambinelli, Rebecca Marie Jo Flores, Andrew Cutrone, Sara Querbes, Griffin Lacy, Ji-Won Lee, and many, many others—you fill me up.

My road back to academia, too, has been an uncertain one, but it was first paved by my undergraduate mentors who have always offered their most honest, thoughtful opinions on how to proceed. Sangeeta Parashar, you have been the pilot light for my research, always willing to inspire me, ignite my interests, and teach by example. Chris Donoghue, thank you for pushing me, especially when I conducted the preliminary version of this project. Janet Ruane, thank you for your contagious wit and your wonderful ‘Introduction to Sociology’ elective; had I not taken it, I would not be in a doctoral program today. Eric Weiner, it has been years, but thank you for convincing me to pair my passions with the social sciences.

To my brilliant graduate committee at the University at Albany—Kate H. Averett, Ron Jacobs, and Joanne Kaufman—thank you for your professionalism, sharp insights, and willingness to grant me agency in this project. Each of these has been integral to my research process; in the last two years, I have felt equally supported, guided, and empowered to steer my study in unique directions. I’m really grateful for your thorough feedback on this manuscript, because the work is so much better for it. I look forward to future collaborations and conversations with you as this thesis progresses into a dissertation.
And lastly, to my participants—without each of you, this project would not exist. My goal for this research has been to elevate the *perspectives* of queer students on coming out in your own words, and I hope I have succeeded. I am still amazed at the degree of vulnerability you brought to our interviews; being forthcoming about how your identities intersect, coalesce, and diverge made this analysis clear and so profound. You have all been critically aware of positionality in ways I could not have imagined, and this has challenged me to do the same in my work and in my life. Thank you for being fearless in deconstructing your lived experiences to and narrating some of the more difficult parts of your identity work. Thank you for your courage. And thank you for sharing your stories with me.
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‘Coming out of the closet’ (or ‘coming out\(^1\)) is contemporarily understood as a rite of passage (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Saguy 2014; Cooper 2008) for individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer\(^2\). Often considered the first step of a journey toward self-actualization (Guittar 2013), coming out is theorized to consist of two parts: one’s personal acknowledgement of their sexual and/or gender identity\(^3\), followed by what is sometimes seen as a necessary evil—disclosure of the identity(s) to family, friends, and others (GLSEN 2014). The metaphysical closet, then, is represented by the temporal, spatial, and social contexts in which individuals have not shared nonconforming identity(s) publicly and exists in relation to coming \textit{out of it} (Sedgwick 1990).

In practice, however, the metaphor of departing from the closet falters by assuming that 1) identity is inherent, natural, and awaiting actualization and stable over time (Gray 2009); 2) one is ‘out’ for life after their first disclosure of nonconforming identity(s) (DiDomenico 2015; GLSEN 2014; Guittar 2013); and 3) coming out is a normatively good thing and ‘staying in the closet’ does a disservice to individual and community identity (MacLachlan 2012; Plummer 1995). Additionally, in the U.S., the realm of the closet has been imbued with codes of oppression and marginalization for LGBTQIA+ people (Sedgwick 1990; MacLachlan 2012; 

\(^{1}\) The phrase ‘coming out’ emerged first as a repurposing of debutante culture to represent identity disclosure in LGBTQIA+ communities (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Saguy 2014).

\(^{2}\) Unless otherwise noted, queer is used as an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), intersex, asexual, and other sexually and/or gender nonconforming identities (i.e. LGBTQIA+). Among participants, queer largely denotes sexual or gender identity; however, interviews also explored the political connotation of the word queer, i.e. disrupting heteronormativity (see: GLSEN 2014).

\(^{3}\) Older definitions have often excluded transgender individuals and other categories of gender and sexual identities. This paper applies previous findings (Zimman 2009) to posit that coming out stories are be available to all nonconforming (i.e. inclusive of LGBTQIA+ and ‘gender-diverse’ [Vivienne et al. 2016]) identities.
Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Saguy 2014). With these considerations in mind, coming out of the closet is still largely understood as both a means of interpersonal identity disclosure and a powerful rhetorical device for stepping out of the shadows.

It must be recognized that the experiences of queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) have long been excluded in coming out literature (Brooks 2016; Adan Sanchez 2017; Villicana et al. 2016; Zimman 2009). Being multiply disadvantaged as racially stigmatized (Zimman 2009; Kaufman and Johnson 2004) and a sexual/gender minority, the lived experiences of disenfranchised communities include disproportionate risks of harassment (Meyer 2017), violence (Fink and Miller 2014), self-harm (Hendry 2017), and suicide (Miller 2016).

Acknowledging the severity of such realities, this research attempts to challenge and refine concepts of coming out to more aptly conceptualize the experiences of underrepresented queer students of color. By carving out space for the perceptions of participants (Villicana et al. 2016:469), this project primarily endeavors to expand interdisciplinary conversations about race, sexuality, and gender as they relate to identity work.

In the last two decades, the rise of social networking sites (SNSs) and social media applications has prompted studies that analyze how individuals come out in digital spaces. Debunking the commonsense claim that social media is merely an abstraction with non-tangible effects in the ‘real world’, a wealth of scholarship (e.g. Baams et al. 2011; Craig and McInroy 2014; Schwarz and Shani 2016) shows how SNS’ networked structure parallels the civil sphere (boyd 2011) and actually has implications for identity development, both on the Internet and offline. However, the movement between these ‘realms’ of online and in-person sociality—a

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4 See Baams et al. 2011; Brooks 2016; Craig and McInroy 2014; Duguay 2016; Gray 2009; Miller 2016; Owens 2017; Pollitt et al. 2017; Szulc and Dhoest 2013; Thomas et al. 2007.
daily occurrence in the digital age—is rarely observed in digital studies, communications, or sociological literature (Wakeford 1997). Instead, scholars tend to conceptualize online activity as separate from everyday life, planar in its format and access, and homogenous in its cultural norms, discourse, and interactional structures.

My research intervenes at this secondary juncture in an analysis of coming out among college students: it connects relevant works in sociology and digital studies, it highlights the shortcomings of queer theory through intersectional scholarship, and it expands sociological understandings of coming out. In this project, I am particularly interested in how students navigate the interplay between online and offline dimensions of social life, and to this end, I ask several research questions, including: 1) What influences students’ decisions to disclose identity(s) online? 2) Does the college campus foster a climate that is receptive to coming out and the development of nonconforming identities? 3) Are students pressured or encouraged to come out to peers, and does this vary online? And finally, 4) how do students navigate the coming out process across traditional and digital social networks?

Participants and Methods

During the spring semester of 2019, 17 students at a state university in the northeast United States responded to a call for interview participants found on a colorful flyer that read in bold text: “Do you have a coming out story?” With a median age of 22, interviewees\(^5\) included one freshman, three sophomores, four juniors, three seniors, five graduate students, and one transfer student. Across participants, there was a diversity of gender, sexual, and racial identities, and

\(^5\) See Table 1 in Appendix A. for a bird’s eye view of my participant sample, including students’ age, class standing, race, gender, and sexual identities.
while many students identified with more recognizable categorical terms such as female, gay, or white, others employed their own interpretation of identity, including phrases like “gay as hell” or “not straight”, as well as “woman-ish” or “empowered female.” Although the study’s racial diversity was not representative of institutional demographics—i.e. the sample favored white U.S. students compared to others—the interview script (as described in the next section) made careful attempts to probe participants on their understanding of intersectional identity and racial difference. Both white and nonwhite students were able to speak coherently to dimensions of difference; in fact, some students’ knowledge of race, class, and gender oppression rivaled my own, and because of this, I consider many of these participants co-collaborators in the research process.

In order to assure that my methods maintained participant anonymity, I refrained from including any identifying information in transcripts and memos that could be traced back to the individuals themselves. Additionally, I decided against employing full pseudonyms in my analysis for three reasons: first, I did not ask participants to offer alternate names for themselves; second, I wanted to avoid constructing names of my own that may or may not be culturally relevant; and third, I wanted to guarantee complete confidentiality by using names that could not be linked to the students themselves, given that this field site is identifiable via my institutional affiliation. With these considerations in mind, I devised a systematic means of selecting an alphabetical letter to represent each individual (e.g. H. or E.), drawing a letter from their full name that does not match their first or last initial.

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6 Here, a comparison between institutional racial demographics of the student population (denoted by P) and this sample (S) can be seen—white students: 57% (P), 70% (S); Black students: 13% (P), 12% (S); Hispanic students: 12% (P), 12% (S), Asian students: 7% (P), 6% (S), and international students: 4% (P), 0% (S). Most notably, however, 18% of undergraduate students at this institution identify as LGBTQIA+, which is much larger than the national percentage of LGBT people in the U.S. (approximately 4.5% [McCarthy 2019]).
This project relied on purposive sampling to attract students that identify as queer and nonconforming, in terms of their gender and/or sexual identities. Interested students received my contact information and could set up appointments for private, in-depth interviews. Some students were recruited through referrals from other participants; however, these individuals reached out to me on their own accord. By making announcements at undergraduate lectures, posting tear-off flyers around campus, and sharing digital advertisements with university class pages on Facebook, I attempted to cast a wide net in promoting the study, instead of solely soliciting LGBTQIA+ organizations, clubs, and diversity offices on campus. My hope was that I could attract both involved queer students and individuals who did not participate in queer activities on campus. To this end, I was successful: according to my transcripts and coding scheme, roughly half of my student sample said they would describe themselves as “active” on campus, while the other half said they would not.

Before the interviews began, students were informed of the sensitive nature of this study and their ability to opt out at any time. Participants were also provided with information about on-campus psychological services that were available, in the event that our conversations evoked feelings of sadness or insecurity. The interview sessions were semi-structured and followed a prepared script\(^7\) as a guide. Conversations were audio recorded and stored on an external hard drive for later transcription and analysis. The length of interviews ranged from approximately forty-five minutes to two hours, and each appointment was held in either a private office on campus, or an off-campus location of the participant’s choosing.

With over twenty hours of recorded audio footage and nearly six-hundred, single-spaced pages of interview transcripts and analytical memos, this project speaks to a robust dataset that

\(^7\) See Appendix B. for the complete interview schedule used in this project.
has required a detailed and systematic analysis. First, after data collection ended, I spent weeks transcribing interviews, which was conducive to becoming extensively familiar with participants’ stories. From there, I employed MAXQDA, a qualitative software tool, to lay the groundwork for a thematic analysis, which was guided by concepts of open coding and thematic analyses. Graziano (2004) cites a useful explanation of “open coding” from the earlier work of Strauss and Corbin (1990). In this method, data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data. Through this process, one’s own and others’ assumptions about phenomena are questioned or explored, leading to new discoveries (Strauss and Corbin 1990:62).

After reviewing audio transcriptions, my field notes, and analytical memos in tandem, interview data were labeled with preliminary codes. Transcripts were organized with over 1,000 codes, which are derived from the terminology and perspectives shared by participants, as well as guiding questions from the interview script. For example, “understanding race” or a “positive review” of the queer campus community appeared as separate codes. As I moved through my analysis, these coded categories became more specific and robust, expanding into subcodes that relied on participant terminology specifically—e.g. subcodes of “positive review” would include: “comfortable,” “inclusive,” “sense of community,” etc. I did this in order to highlight participants’ own words and avoid conflating their voices with my own means of nomenclature. If any codes or subcodes garnered noticeably large frequencies, they were either translated into broader thematic buckets or broken down into more discrete, concentrated codes.

Perceptions of coming out: using interviews to establish meaning

In the early stages of this project, I was intent on designing a qualitative research project that would garner a “meaning-centered” analysis, à la cultural sociology’s Strong Program (see
Alexander 2003), of coming out narratives. The Strong Program recognizes the influence of “socially constructed subjectivity” in the world (ibid. 5), and it accomplishes a meaning-centered interpretation of social life through a methodological balance of ‘thick description’ and ‘material (read: structural) factors’ to account for micro and macro processes of culture. To attempt this leap between social structures and individual agency, I felt that conducting in-depth interviews would be the most effective means of getting at participants’ interpretations of what coming out is; in fact, Allison Pugh’s work\(^8\) (2013) champions interviews for this very reason.

Thus, I framed my interview schedule\(^9\) as follows: first, after introducing myself and establishing rapport with preliminary questions, I asked participants to share their interpretation of coming out. More specifically, I asked something to the extent of:

\[\text{IC.} \quad […] \text{I always like to talk a little bit in more abstract detail about what coming out is. So we’re already using this term, but I would like to hear maybe from you—} \quad […] \text{it doesn’t have to be a formal definition—but in your own words, what is coming out?}\]

Posing the question in this way allowed participants to emerge as collaborators in the research process; rather than introducing my own bias or operational definition of coming out, I allowed the interviewees themselves to frame the concept in their own words. Doing so was pivotal for establishing the construction of cultural autonomy and meaning making at the individual level. Intentionally, I drafted an interview script that was largely intersectional: drawing on bucketed themes related to identity and disclosure, life before college, college life, and online interactions, questions explored how positionality and overlapping identities contextualized participants’ experiences with coming out. After establishing a thorough understanding of participants’ social

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\(^8\) Pugh explains how four different types of interviewing data all capture and “involve culture – first, the sense of what counts as honorable; second, the schemas that infuse the way people talk about their worldviews; third, their fundamental moral understandings; and fourth, the cultural frames rendering some emotions more acceptable, expected or celebrated than others” (2013:51).

\(^9\) See Table 2 in this manuscript’s appendix B. for each individual’s coded interpretation of coming out.
location, we were able to move into larger conversations that achieved a macro level of understanding of coming out, and together, as co-analysts\textsuperscript{10}, we could identify how identity disclosure was framed culturally compared to individual perceptions.

\textit{Recognizing the Narrative of Coming Out}

Broadly in U.S. culture, coming out is portrayed as a one-time act that momentarily disrupts performance, identity management, normative behavior, and meaning making. Yet, the act of coming out perhaps is not equally groundbreaking for all queers, despite its portrayal in media representations or national headlines; instead, the rhetoric of coming out, as this project demonstrates, is often marked by a whitewashed narrative—one that is less resonant within more marginalized cultural communities (Adan Sanchez 2017). Recognizing that there are cultural differences in perceptions of coming out, I intend to transparently map out my scholarly and anecdotal reference points for what coming out is. To do so, I offer my own story.

Preceded by years of shame and confusion in my childhood home, coming out in college was both earth-shattering and eye-opening. As an 18-year-old living away from home for the first time, I was outed by my first male partner during my freshman year and pressured by friends on campus to come out to my conservative Christian parents. In the aftermath, the emotional turmoil that I experienced can only be described as a collision of my private and public worlds. Despite the trauma I experienced with my family, I recall being amazed by the institutional support for LGBTQIA+ students at my university and the general tolerance of peers, including friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Once I was out, I felt free to explore my sexual

\textsuperscript{10} In Vivienne et al.’s work (2016), a compelling case for co-analysts in digital studies is made: “We argue that engaging our participants as co-analysts and co-curators of their own digital traces helps us to ‘check-in’ with them and uncover personal insights and allows us to ‘check-back’ on how we have interpreted them” (192).
identity freely and shed the demands of a fundamentalist Christian upbringing in a vindicating
rebirth. As a budding scholar, coming out informed my coursework, offering material for term
papers that addressed hegemony and institutionalized norms, and eventually, these interests led
me to my first sociology class.

At that time, the disclosure of my gay identity was occurring regularly; in fact, I started to
realize how coming out is a story I would come to tell countless times throughout my life. As a
rising college senior, this realization spawned an academic interest in the topic. I wanted to
understand how other students came out: what it feels like, how it varies, and how it is, perhaps,
a shared experience. This became the subject of my undergraduate thesis; I conducted twenty
interviews with queer students, which yielded five thematic findings, including 1) perceptions of
campus safety, 2) the effect(s) of institutional programming, 3) the implications of first-time
queer relationships, 4) feelings of altruism that emerged when supporting other students coming
out, and finally, 5) the role of social media in ‘outing’ students. When I entered my graduate
studies three years later, I returned to this pilot study and found a renewed interest in its ultimate
finding. With a more attuned awareness of my privileged stance and the affordances of identity
exploration I had in the past, I set out to design a new iteration of the project—a master’s thesis
that prioritizes an intersectional intervention, featuring the voices of nonconforming students
who have been long overlooked in relevant literature.

Positionality Statement

In a first-year graduate seminar on gender and sexuality, I was struck by Katie Acosta’s
immediate, transparent approach to acknowledging her positionality as a researcher in Amigas y
Amantes: Sexually Nonconforming Latinas Negotiate Family (2013). In her introduction, Acosta
devotes an entire section to describing her insider-outsider status, as well as anecdotal details from her project that illustrate her unique social location. Here, too, I recognize that my own positionality—that of a gay, white, middle-class cisgender man—has both implicit and explicit effects on my placement in the field and the conversations I have had with participants.

To start, I currently occupy a dual insider status on campus: I belong to a queer student community, and I am a teacher’s assistant (TA) and graduate student educator within a public state university. Throughout the course of this project, I have been able to quickly recruit, speak with, and develop rapport with queer student interviewees, which I largely attribute to our similarity in age and shared queer identity. In the recruiting process, my intentions as a graduate student researcher were not typically questioned when attending undergraduate group events, on-campus trainings, or meetings with administrators who work with LGBTQIA+ students. Considering these interactions in retrospect, I recognize now that after disclosing my gay identity and my personal, intellectual investment in a project on coming out, my access to these spaces was justified and instantly expedited.

My whiteness, maleness, and class location have simultaneously garnered additional privileges and posed limitations on my conversations with participants. For example, it may seem obvious that my own coming out story would be useful to share in an interview setting, in order to establish trust and solidarity among students, but in practice, this seemed to be more effective with students with whom I shared dimensions of gender, race, and class. I cannot claim that I was equally successful in this way with each of my participants; my queerness—albeit an ‘insider status’—did not achieve a sense of ‘sameness’ across racial, gendered, classed, and sexualized lines; in fact, clinging to such a ‘single-axis’ (Crenshaw 1989) conceptualization of identity would only provide a finite understanding of coming out. My own experiences with
identity disclosure certainly differ from students of color, and if I overlooked this in my interviews, I could have made egregious assumptions or seriously stunted the range of details that my participants were willing to share. As often as I could, I folded bits and pieces of my own experience with coming out into our conversations; my commentary would resemble something along the following lines—

IC. So, just for a quick overview, in terms of me […] what I’m interested in here [and] my own sort of personal stake in coming out—my coming out experience was pretty rough, to say the least. It was marked by a lot of religious tensions, and um, a bit of a gendered sort of misconception, too, on my parents’ part. So there’s a lot sort of happening there.

But I remember when I went to undergrad., I had this perception of the campus climate as this, like, very liberating experience, and I had this chance to do this [intellectual] work that I hadn’t really been able to figure out for myself. And it was equally liberating but also, like, equally terrifying. And I always wondered how other students […] perceived it.

And not even knowing, like at that time, my own positionality […] was more conducive to a positive on-campus experience than others. So I really wanted my master’s thesis to take a much more intersectional approach to coming out and queer identity largely, and get a better understanding of […] how students are navigating this process in an institution, particularly, that has a lot of really strong queer programming. I’m interested in sort of how students perceive that, in terms of their own […] identity work.

Throughout this project, my greatest concern has been that my privileged lens as both a researcher and gay white male would obscure the perspectives of more marginalized students. I understand that even with an active, focused intersectional awareness of my privilege(s), my capacity for capturing an authentic expression of how more marginalized students experience coming out will always remain partial by the nature of my positionality alone. I recognize that my limited analysis must be bolstered by borrowed approximations, a reliance on previous literature, and a presentation of participants’ stories that captures their own words and demonstrates their unique voices. With these reflections and my intellectual biography in mind, I
hope to offer a sharp awareness of my own positionality (as well as my participants’), an elevated understanding of how marginalized queer students experience coming out, and an intersectional sociological contribution that nuances queer identity work on campus, online, and beyond.

To begin, I deeply explore a queer theory frame in chapter one, positioning it in relation to participants’ perspectives on what coming out means, how it happens, and how it is presented as a necessary component of identity work. I fold in a cultural-historical approach that compares earlier, revolutionary applications of coming out in the public sphere with the contemporary, neoliberal (read: private or individual) takes on coming out that circulate at the levels of public and personal culture.

In chapter two, I analyze a prominent theme within transcripts: the role that heteronormativity and gender roles play in shaping sexual stereotypes, specifically as they relate to coming out. I pinpoint how the theoretical conflation of gender and sexuality, as well as a single-axis queer theory framework, cannot thoroughly account for how gender operates in coming out narratives. Here, I trouble the ‘archetypical’ coming out story from chapter one with instances of disclosure that are affected, and in some cases determined by, gendered expectations and policing.

Next, I situate my exploration of coming out within online sociality. Chapter three describes how students perceive the disclosure of nonconforming gender/sexual identities in digital spaces. I explain that, for some participants, coming out online is recognized as a salient, deliberate act; but for others, queer identity disclosure is not so profound in digital spaces. Also in this chapter, I contribute to theoretical debates about a dichotomy of ‘real life’ versus online
life. Through a participant case study of online identity work, I argue that online and offline dimensions of social life need not be analyzed strictly for their differences, and instead, interpreting how young queer people interpret their interconnectedness contributes new knowledge to the subfield.

My final chapter speaks specifically to the field site, namely, its campus climate and available institutional programming for LGBTQIA+ students. I compare participant interviews with an on-the-record conversation with an administrator to assess general understandings of queer visibility and resources on campus. Applying a critical lens, I comb through the neoliberal strands of institutional logics and conclude by arguing that the university discourages student solidarity around non-assimilatory queer identities.
Several disciplines have individually staked their claims in coming out research, including work in communications, counseling, education, sociology, anthropology, and of course, gender and sexuality studies. Therein, identity disclosure is often described as a circumstantial decision, one that requires a weighing of risks and repetitive assessments of social context and even physical safety (DiDomenico 2015; Duguay 2016; Guittar 2013; Jones 2015; Murchison et al. 2017; Owens 2017; Stotzer 2010). However, sociological literature currently lacks a consistent framework for studying queer coming out stories at the interpersonal level, likely because its incoherent terminology and historically stringent identity models do not account for the “messiness and fluidity of sexual acts, boundaries, and identities” (Pfeffer 2014).

In my interview with I., a white, gay cis male student, he speaks to this messiness well, explaining how coming out is an ongoing journey of identity work, which can occur in a range of scenarios and include verbal and nonverbal forms of communication:

I. For me, it’s a continuous process of continuing to come out to yourself and come out to the people you know, whether it is immediate family, extended family, just friends. It really depends on the person and their situation, but it’s a constant process of learning more about yourself and expressing it to those who you wish to express it to.

And […] it does not necessarily have to be verbal. It can be on social media, it can just be starting to wear different things and hoping people guess. It can be so many different things and it doesn’t necessarily have to be just in sexuality or as a global thing—it can be bits and pieces as they arise and change through our life.

This description, while rich in detail and in seemingly perfect alignment with queer, (i.e. nonbinary) understandings of sexuality, points to a troubling conceptual issue for researchers:
coming out is incredibly hard to define. Considerable energy and decades of publication have been spent researching the structure of coming out, and it still remains a contested and evolving task. In the first section of this chapter, I look to relevant sociological literature and queer theory for guidance on how to define coming out, and I contrast these insights with individual perspectives on what coming out means in relation to participants’ multifaceted ‘identity work’ (Gray 2009). This empirical addition of college students’ voices to the literature provides a starting point for an intersectional discussion of what coming out means, both interpersonally and culturally, and will be useful in later chapters for explaining how participants negotiate their gender and sexuality, both on campus and online.

Some of the earliest sociological studies designed stage models of identity formation (e.g. Cass 1984; see Cooper 2008 for a revised attempt) but have been met with sharp critiques of their implied linearity and causality (Orne 2011). Indeed, stage models require altering and refining to accurately map individuals’ coming out stories and lived experiences (Kaufman and Johnson 2004); thus, they are ineffective in practice and impractical for identifying the workings of larger social structures. To remedy this, social constructionist scholars presented ‘personal definitions’ of coming out (Orne 2011); however, these have been classified as problematic in their limited application and “conceptual inflation” (ibid. 683). In his already referenced work, Orne introduces the concept of “strategic outness” as a potential contender for studying coming out essays; it aims to “[highlight] the contextuality of coming out, including the ways it is embedded within social relationships and discourses” (ibid. 688). On paper, strategic outness closely aligns with queer theory’s commitment to the nuance of identity work, and it seems to have substantial bandwidth for capturing identity management processes throughout the life
course. Yet, it may fall prey to an often default perspective in sexuality studies—that of white, gay, cis men (Brown-Saracino 2018)—and thus, can be expanded here to include the intersectional experiences of gender and sexual minorities, including queer students of color.

For example, C., a white, cis male, pansexual student, describes coming out as being “comfortable enough to express your own gender and sexual identity”:

C. So, being ‘out’ to me means there is not anyone who you would obfuscate or hide your identity around.

[...] Cause we’re always gonna have to, like, come out to new people. Um, so I don’t really see it as being ‘completely’ out because there’s no way to be completely out unless you ran through the streets with a bullhorn or something.

The points C. raises here are strong; it seems logical that disclosing nonconforming identity(s) requires some degree of comfort or willingness to share. Many students similarly described the ‘publicness’ of coming out, which typically is preceded by some sort of ‘self-disclosure’ or ‘self-acceptance’. However, other explanations reveal that coming out is not simply a matter of telling someone upon being introduced to them. Instead, students note that the awareness of one’s audience was salient in the coming out process—i.e. a strategic outness is practiced. S., a Latina, female-identified lesbian, described this in some detail, indicating the stark difference between disclosing to peers or colleagues versus family members:

S. [...] I feel like it depends on who you’re talking to—like, if you’re talking to yourself, if you’re talking to your family, talking to your school, your work? ‘Cause I feel like things like work and school, especially, like here and the jobs I’ve had, for the most part—you can kinda just be like, “Oh, I have a girlfriend,” People would be like, “Okay, cool.” Or, “Oh, it’s not cool.” It’s just kind of, like, a whatever, this-is-a-background—it doesn’t really impact their lives.

To family, like, it’s like a big deal, and it’s like actively telling. Like, word that, “Oh, I’m a lesbian,” or, “I’m queer,” or, “I’m gay,” or, “I’m bi,” or whatever. And I feel like it’s a whole other thing, because you kind of have to come out to yourself, and like, that’s the hardest bit.
This sense of there being risks associated with family disclosure was shared among several participants. O.—a white, cis-female, bisexual student—noted that coming out “feels heavy.” She went on to explain, “There is a potential impact or, like, long-term consequences… And I would always preface it, and things like that, and kind of have to bolster myself up [before coming out].” I detected a sense of anticipation, perhaps fear, in this description, given O.’s awareness of the potential “impact” coming out has on family dynamics. Chapter three explores familial responses in more detail, but here, as O. and S. suggest, coming out is certainly read as dynamic or impactful by others; however, from their point of view, identity disclosure was not necessarily intended to be so disruptive. In the next section, a deeper dive into queer theory’s bold, radical stance on identity work as disruptive contrasts with students’ understanding of coming out: rather than disclosing as a bold, political reclamation, it is seen as a required statement of nonconformity in the face of heteronormativity.

In his introduction to Sociological Theory's 1994 special issue on queer theory, Steven Seidman offers a detailed trajectory of the debates between social constructionist and essentialist camps and collectively problematizes any assumed or “natural” notions of sexuality in academic work. Moreover, he notes that one of the most productive elements of queer theory is its embrace of sexual fluidity, which recognizes that changing identities are not “meaningless” but meaningful in their difference (Pfeffer 2014:7; Seidman 1994:173). Seidman’s introductory piece charges sociologists to imbue queer theory into their work, which, at the time of publication, was rarely done. Even now, an increased interest in sexual and gender minorities has emerged in sociology and related humanities, but Carla Pfeffer still calls for a deeper analysis of
queer actors and their identity work, as they are "both necessary and long overdue in sociology" (2014:8).

But what exactly is queer theory? A product of poststructural thought, the theoretical frame "wishes to challenge the regime of sexuality" in its deconstruction of "bodies, desires, acts, identities, social relations, knowledges, culture, and social institutions" (Seidman 1994:174). This deconstruction occurs via several conceptual avenues, as Seidman explains in a later book chapter (1997). Of these, queer theory first identifies basic binary opposites like male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, among others, as “categories of knowledge” (ibid. 147) which are “unstable” constructs (151, citing Sedgwick [1990]). Second, queer theory aims, via knowledge production, to reveal, disrupt, and deconstruct the dimensions of power that exist within these categories.

To accomplish the latter, Seidman sees value in studying identities, arguing that the ways in which they are constructed should remain a salient focus point in social analysis: "Decisions about identity categories become pragmatic, related to concerns of situational advantage, political gain, and conceptual utility," he writes (ibid. 173). A sociology of queer identities is, in fact, quite tangible, especially if these identities are understood as “interactional social accomplishments” (Pfeffer 2014:35). It should be noted that queer participants, not researchers, can most clearly recognize and articulate their multiple, intersecting, overlapping, and ever-changing selves. However, Pfeffer explains that sociologists still have a tangible analytical opportunity: “to seriously consider the daily lives of queer social actors and to begin to theorize the processes through which these lives and identities are constituted, (mis)recognized, resisted, and embraced” (ibid. 9). Stein and Plummer also champion this perspective, positing that social actors “are not simply passive recipients of […] cultural constructions” but instead:
They use them creatively, accepting parts of them, rejecting others, to actively construct their lives. Queer theorists have attuned us to the importance of looking at texts, but as sociologists we need to look at how identities are constituted in the cultural practices of everyday life, though mediated by texts (Stein and Plummer 1994:184-5).

My initial reading of this passage almost three years ago was an inspiring point of departure for the early stages of this project, and now, it succinctly describes the lines of inquiry that make up the first half of this chapter. As Stein and Plummer indicate, adopting a queer theory theoretical lens is useful and productive when considering how sexually and gender nonconforming students define and come to understand identity work. I insist that acquiring a meaningful interpretation of coming out and disclosure is best accomplished by following queer theory’s tradition of prioritizing texts; thus, in my methodology, I primarily draw on excerpts from interview transcripts—an ideal dataset for unpacking perspectives on identity construction.

When I spoke with D.—a white, queer, “empowered female”—about what coming out means, she recognized the difficulty in producing a definition for coming out, but her description of the experience echoes several tenets of queer theory. For instance, her interpretation of coming out includes how individuals recognize their social location in the process, the consequences of disclosure, the ongoing need to come out, and their individual story in relation to larger cultural narratives (as the second half of this chapter explores). D.’s explanation—although perhaps not a standardized definition—offers some really thorough insights:

D. I feel like coming out is not really something you can give a definition for, because it’s different for everybody. It’s definitely an everyday process. I feel like the narrative is that it happens one time, generally with your family—and it’s big and emotional and you can get kicked out, or they can accept you. But it’s definitely, like, an everyday type situation. Like you’re choosing who you come out to. Not even just like—I self-identify as queer, sometimes that can be a follow-up of like, “Yeah, that was a problematic term before, and now here’s the history of that.”
[...] And I feel like it definitely fluctuates between people—especially with gender identity as well. Especially with trans people; sometimes, they don’t always pass. And that can be a whole different experience that I obviously don’t have. And I just really feel like it can fluctuate from person to person. So I feel like putting a definition on it is pretty hard. [laughs]

With her specific attention to fluctuation and fluidity, D.’s comments were similar to my conversation with I. at the beginning of this chapter; however, D. goes into a bit more detail about how this ever-shifting process of identity varies from person to person. Such variation indicates, as queer theory argues, that sexual and gender “categories of knowledge” are certainly constructed, subject to change, and impermanent. This perspective directly contradicts more traditional, essentialist understandings of coming out and the ‘born this way’ discourse: i.e. that identity formation is linear, unchanging, and crystallizes over time. While some students shared this essentialist view (like T., who claims, “I feel like if I was straight, I would be the exact same person, because that’s just who I am.”), most maintained a more fluid, queer understanding that identities—and especially the act of coming out—will evolve, change, and transform throughout the life course.

A potential pitfall of queer theory is that, in its attention to sexual and gender identities, it obscures or overlooks other salient dimensions of one’s social location (Seidman 1993). By prioritizing the voices of students of color and more marginalized students (e.g. gender nonconforming students, and those that are disabled or identify with mental illness11), transcripts revealed that less privileged students have substantially different experiences with identity disclosure. U., a lesbian student of color, offered a profound illustration about how coming out varies for people based on racial identity, explaining that for white people, occupying a higher rung on the ladder of privilege affords a certain comfort in disclosing nonconformity.

11 For context, two participants explained that their autistic identities were salient, and several students shared how struggles with mental health in their adolescence were intrinsically related to their queer identity work.
U. [...] when you think about gay people in general, there’s that, like [...] well the contributing factor to that is, like, people of color and most of their cultural identities aren’t accepting of the community. And therefore, there are less people that are coming out. There are less people thinking that it’s okay. But, in like, a more Caucasian climate, people are more comfortable just because—I don’t know how that happened, ‘cause that’s not my experience—but I just feel like as a person of color, I’ve seen that [white people are] more willing to do things because... also because of their privilege, because on top of, like, our marginalized group itself, like why would we put ourselves in another marginalized group? For what reason?

Like, so if you’re already up here with your privilege, by taking another step down, but you yourself can help that marginalized group because of your privilege, step back up, it’s okay to take that step back.

But for us, we’re already down here. For us, to take that step back, it’s huge. We’re, like, at a [bigger] disadvantage. So, it’s like, I feel like, that’s why [white] people are more comfortable. And so that’s why we need more representation of people of color to show that, like, even though we are taking that step back, we will move forward together, kind of thing. Yeah.

U. and I discussed the imagery in her description, and I mentioned how it reminded me of a cultural competency training exercise: a group of individuals stands in a line and individuals are allowed to step forward based on certain privileged characteristics. The result—a staggered, uneven line—symbolizes a more realistic playing field for social life. But what sticks out to me the most from U.’s illustration, which I find to be so impactful, is her question: “why would we put ourselves in another marginalized group? For what reasons?” This touches on a certain negotiation of stigmatized identities occurring among students of color that white students are not experiencing, and likely, for many, they are not even aware of.

Employing a similarly critical stance on the coming out process, X., who is queer, white, and trans, incorporated their understanding of heternormativity (Valocchi 2005), and more
specifically, hetero-cis-normativity\textsuperscript{12}, in explaining why coming out is a seemingly necessary step for queer people:

X. Um, coming out is, I guess, like—revealing to people who previously thought of you as straight and cis that you are otherwise. Because there’s, obviously—we live in a heteronormative, cisnormative society. So, like, everyone is expected to be that way.

And then, like, you’re different if you’re not that way. So you have to reveal that because it’s not inherently assumed about you. And it’s usually—coming out usually means coming out to your family, your friends, your close circles, maybe like the general community of your school or whatever. But you also are always coming out, because you’re always assumed to be cis and straight. So, like, it’s a constant process that happens throughout your life.

Here, X. explains that just by being situated in “heteronormative, cisnormative society,” queer people have to reveal their differences in identity. Given this pressure to disclose, coming out is inevitable and perhaps less disruptive than a surface-level queer analysis would suggest. In fact, the act of disclosure actually becomes understood (via dominant hetero-cis-normative logics) as a necessary confessional. Simply by existing in hegemonic straight culture, as X. explains, “you also are always coming out, because you’re always assumed to be cis and straight.” This excerpt from X. shows that establishing one’s difference is an inevitable component of coming out, and other students agreed that coming out was synonymous with disclosing a ‘non-straight’ identity; and interestingly enough, none of these students discussed coming out as a political strategy when discussing their own definitions and understandings of identity disclosure.

Abstractly, the perceived disruptiveness of identity disclosure aligns nicely with a queer theory framework: e.g. coming out as gay demonstrably queers “categories of knowledge”;

\textsuperscript{12} According to Worthen’s (2016) work, hetero-cis-normativity refers to “a hierarchical system of prejudice in which cisgender individuals are privileged above non-cisgender individuals but also, negativity, prejudice, and discrimination may be directed toward anyone perceived as noncisgender and/or nonheterosexual” (31).
normative behavior, and meaning making. However, it’s evident through participants’ interpretations that coming out, in practice, is also a carefully planned means of communication. Orne’s concept of ‘strategic outness’ comes to mind here and holds its own across students’ stories. In their comments about safety and hesitation in identity disclosure, students of color and gender nonconforming participants described a certain calculated approach to how, where, and to whom one may disclose. After all, coming out, albeit inevitable, is a vulnerable acknowledgement of social nonconformity, and for more marginalized students, it feels especially risky. An intersectional queer analysis suggests that perhaps some queer actors have a greater capacity than others to advance binary-breaking reinterpretations of gender and sexuality.

Coming Out and the Implications of the “Possibility Model”

In March 2018, Tyler Oakley, a prolific YouTube content creator, celebrity personality, and queer activist, gave a talk at the institution where this study takes place. I was quick to get tickets for the event; advertised as a part of a larger speaker series, I was interested to see how Oakley would navigate an interview with a university official as moderator and an undergraduate student audience. Upon attending, I was delighted to learn that the conversation would be focused on queer representation and Oakley’s thoughts about the importance of LGBTQIA+ visibility online. As I listened, Oakley made it evident that he is an advocate for digital content that “breaks down the stigma” about nonconforming identities. This is critical for young people, he explained, because if they can “see [themselves] represented” through what he calls the “possibility model”—i.e. “[...] seeing somebody live their life, being fulfilled, [and] having

13 With over 7.4 million subscribers on his YouTube channel, Oakley has acquired a massive following, especially among LGBTQIA+ audiences. He creates vlogs that portray him taking part in various day-to-day activities and discussing an assortment of topics, which often are related to a queer lived experience.
meaningful connections”—they will have access to a digital lifeline. At face value, Oakley’s stance is compelling: it suggests that mass media can have a mitigating effect on the disproportionate levels of harassment and discrimination experienced by LGBTQIA+ youth in the United States.14

The conversation with Oakley also took some strides towards paying attention to more marginalized queer experiences; for example, he implored campus administrators to “listen to students” and “acknowledge that many people aren’t on the same playing field.” As a white, cisgender gay man, he spoke to the salience of youth positionality and social location, noting that “there are so many different ways to be gay [... and] there are so many different stories to be told.” In my interpretation of his comments, it seems Oakley would argue that media representation for queer people is not successful if it is singular (read: whitewashed and hetero-cis-normative). Overall, Oakley’s perspectives are palpable, given his demonstrable online influence. By implying that intersectional queer representation is important, he aligns closely with mainstream queer activist platforms in the U.S. Still, Oakley’s responses echoed what Mary Gray calls a ‘media effects logic’ (2009), i.e. the notion that queer cultural representations in mass media have a direct, profound effect on individual identity work. This vantage point actually overlooks what the lived experiences of queer youth are and assumes that youth always derive value from digital resources, interactions, online marketing, and celebrity icons, for example.

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14 According to GLSEN’s 2017 National School Climate Survey, 70.1% of U.S. students in grades 6-12 experienced verbal harassment based on their sexual orientation and 59.1% of students were verbally harassed based on gender expression. Students who experienced increased levels of harassment were more likely to miss school, get lower grades, and report low self-esteem or depression (GLSEN 2017:xix-xv).
In the second section of this chapter, I investigate how macro-level cultural representations resonate with queer college students in their interpersonal lives, instead of simply assuming that they do. Rather than citing mass media as the driving force for queer inclusivity in the U.S., I identify where cultural images of coming out and identity work are situated in students’ stories and argue that they should be analyzed in terms of how participants interpret them. Gray strikes this chord in her study of rural queer youth online by asking: “What do [queer youth] do with the expectations of visibility that are so central to the identity politics of the LGBTQ social movement?” (2009:1182). Overall, I claim that media images and cultural discourse matter because they can shape understandings of what coming out is; however, media representations only provide a limited archetype for coming out and how identity disclosure is experienced by queer American youth.

**Coming Out as a Cultural Narrative**

Contemporarily in the LGBTQIA+ community, coming out is often coded as a time of celebration. The pomp and circumstance of annual Pride parades accompany public demonstrations of nonconforming identities in nations around the world. In the United States, ‘National Coming Out Day’ (NCOD) on October 11, 2018 marked a 30-year observance of queer visibility, which virtues the group solidarity that is achieved when identities are demonstrated collectively in public spaces. Commemorating the 1987 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, NCOD encourages LGBTQIA+ individuals and allies to “come out, come out wherever you are!” (Leach 2017; MacLachlan 2012).

Historically, such bold themes of honesty, camaraderie, and authenticity have permeated the queer community in the U.S. (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Saguy 2014; MacLachlan 2012), and
in recent years, the ‘join us’ discourse has been paired with a more sensitive message catered to closeted, high-risk youth. As a response to rising rates of LGBTQIA+ teen suicide, Dan Savage launched the It Gets Better (IGB) campaign in 2010 and constructed a global network of allies—including U.S. political leaders, cultural celebrities, as well as ordinary citizens—who contributed encouraging video messages to young people navigating the coming out process (Savage 2011). Creating a “narrative of emancipation” (Jones 2015), IGB was revolutionary in 1) its resistance to negative media framing and cultural tropes that depict queer teens as bullied, alone, and suffering (ibid.) and 2) its agenda for fostering acceptance in online spaces.

Nine years have passed since IGB’s initial launch, but brief talk of its terminology and critiques of its effectiveness appeared in two separate interviews with participants. This suggests that the IGB narrative may still hold some relevance among queer youth. When R., a first-year Latina lesbian student, was describing her interpretation of coming out, she mentioned that “it gets easier, the more that you do it.” A., a white, gay sophomore student who is female-identifying but “figuring it out”, offered a deliberate critique of IGB and explained how employing such an optimistic narrative can actually cause more harm than good:

A. I don’t like when people say, “It gets better.” I don’t really think anyone likes to hear that, in my opinion. I don’t know.

IC. Why is that? I’m curious.

A. It gets better? Because it doesn’t. [laughs] It doesn’t, you know? Like do certain things get better? Yes, but do new things come up that you never would have thought of? Yes.

I don’t know. I just don’t think it gets better. But that’s not just from being LGBT— I think anytime anyone has a traumatic (and I say that because I would honestly say that my coming out was a bit traumatic for me—being pushed into it like that and then being worried about my brother), I don’t think anyone who experiences something traumatic like that—it’s not comforting. Like “it gets better,” that’s exactly what I would not say to somebody.
As A. mentions here, her own coming out experience was inextricably tied to her brother’s queerness; at the time, both A. and her brother were in the closet, and by disclosing her queer identity, she risked simultaneously outing her brother. Concerned about breaking her brother’s trust and worried about her family’s response to her and her sibling’s queerness, A’s memories of coming out are marked by trauma, which, as she mentions, couldn’t be remedied by IGB’s optimistic, future-oriented mantra for change.

Nevertheless, IGB is a useful starting point for theorizing about coming out stories, especially given its placement in digital media, because it clearly illustrates a link between private troubles and public issues (Mills [1959]). In other words, coming out stories do not simply exist in the interpersonal scenes of everyday life; these stories are also told at the level of public culture (Lizardo 2017), where they constitute a broader political narrative:

> It is the coalescence of many, which then feeding off each other set up recurring collective actions, social worlds, [and] habits. The stories of the community are a crucial part of this world – feeding into it, strengthening it, but very much dependent upon it for a space where they can be said and heard. (Plummer 1995:95)

Plummer’s insistence that individual coming out stories fuel a larger political narrative is certainly idealistic and profound, but I argue that more context is required to establish such a macro-micro connection. In fact, it would be quite unsociological (and not very queer\(^{15}\)) to assume that individual identity work and queer storytelling generate change that transcends the meso-level: i.e. communities, structures, and institutions. For example, recent scholarly work analyzing IGB videos found that coming out narratives are saturated with ‘discourses of happiness’ that circulate at an abstract, political level and largely disregard local sentiments of heteronormativity and anti-queer violence (Meyer 2017). And in recalling Lisa Duggan’s well-

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\(^{15}\) Though perhaps obvious, here I use queer to describe a critical awareness of heteronormativity.
documented critiques of neoliberalist LGBT organizations in the U.S. (2014), it is probably unsurprising that IGB contributes to, “rather than [contests,] homonormative constructions of adulthood” (Meyer 2017:332) in its messages to queer youth. In other words, coming out stories do not exist without a contextual backdrop; even at the interpersonal level, they are informed by neoliberalism: e.g. notions of opportunity, equality, and perhaps most forcefully, the implication that coming out is an individual moral responsibility (MacLachlan 2012; Gray 2009; Davies and Bansel 2007).

This shift towards individuation in the rhetoric of coming out has been in development since the early gay and lesbian movement in the U.S. In fact, scholars claim that the “politics of coming out” from the early 70s, which were spearheaded by queer activists and aimed to radicalize the movement’s previous assimilationist agenda, started to fade away shortly after the liberationist era began (Seidman, Meeks, and Dean 2012). This is due to a mainstreaming effect and the pervasiveness of “civic individualism” in the U.S., a “dominant cultural code” that maintains a “politics of normalization” (ibid. 511) around sexual identity. As a result, coming out as a cultural narrative has been stripped of its disruptive political history; to this day, it is portrayed as a morally good, assimilatory act, a responsibility of the individual, and therefore, a privatized means of authenticating one’s nonconforming self.

As the neoliberal offspring of a more radical, queer politic, coming out’s historiography has been briefly accounted for here; however, it should also be examined in terms of its current format and structure. This chapter (and largely, this project) conceptualizes the meaning of coming out as a cultural narrative and identifies its location in personal and public discourse, specifically in the U.S. Following the work of Polletta and Chen (2012), I also frame coming out
as a methodological “object of analysis” that is comprised of 1) “chunks of discourse”, 2) “background accounts”, and a 3) “practice that is guided by institutional norms” (491). To capture the motifs found in coming out accounts, it’s also useful to think of the *bildungsroman*, a German term for the ‘coming of age’ story in canonical literature. As a narrative genre, the *bildungsroman* can provide an “organizing [vocabulary] of contemporary political cultures” (Jacobs and Smith 1997:61): for instance, coming out functions as an archetypal, retrospective tale that 1) exonerates past stigma and shame, 2) validates a newly actualized queer subjectivity, and 3) is conclusive in and of itself, i.e. the story does not go on—it ends once it is told.

Throughout my interviewing, I was thoughtful about the cultural-historical context of coming out in recent decades, as well as above reference points about its form. In the following sections, my analysis demonstrates that the archetypal narrative of coming out appears starkly in transcripts, but beyond identifying these instances, it is interesting that some students actually *romanticized* this kind of storytelling, as seen in popular culture images, and longed for a ‘typical’ coming out experience of their own.

*Fear and the “Expectations” of Coming Out*

As I spoke with L., a white cis gay male student, it was apparent that so many of the memories he shared about coming out mirror aspects of its cultural prototype. His anecdotes are marked by a palpable fear or anxiety surrounding disclosure (especially with family, as chapter two explores), followed by initial reactions of disappointment, which quickly transform into a change of heart and general acceptance. From L.’s point of view, coming out is an emotional and challenging endeavor, and he suspects that other queer people feel similarly:

16 See Buckley’s classic work (1974) for a deeper analysis of canonical literature that reflect the *bildungsroman*. 
L. [...] I think it’s hard for a lot of people. Coming out, those words, even looking at those words—like reading those words—probably scare a lot of people.

Because I know it scared me when I first started coming out, like I didn’t even want to think about that. Anytime anybody would ever mention the words ‘coming out’ to me, I would—my heart would start throbbing. Like when I was in the closet. Because I didn’t even want that conversation around me because it made me so anxious.

As we continued our conversation, L. later revealed that one of the biggest concerns he had was what “other people would think” of him after disclosing a gay identity. Still, he explained that his experiences with disclosure were largely positive: “There was never really a worry to me that there would be a negative response from anybody.” Even when coming out to his mother, L. said she was shocked, but the response was still accepting: “[Her] reaction was different than everybody else’s. It was good, I just don’t think she really knew how to handle it at the time.” An important distinction should be made here: despite feeling quite confident that reception to his queer identity would be entirely positive, L. still experienced fear and anxiety when faced with “those words”—i.e. coming out and the expectations that come with it.

One of these expectations was explained rather succinctly by K., a nonbinary lesbian of color: “There’s that whole big expectation that […] as soon as you figure it out, you’re going to tell everybody.” Throughout our conversation, K. made recurring mentions of fear and anxiety surrounding disclosure, as well as an awareness of their physical safety, which will be discussed in chapter two. In terms of a describing a blueprint, so to speak, for coming out, K. and L. were in agreement that the narrative requires disclosure as soon as a queer identity is actualized. The reason for this, L. explains:

L. Um, ‘cause it’s something about who you are, and it’s something that—people who are close to you, know a lot of facts about you, they know what you like, what your favorite food is. Different things, like what you like to study. And I feel like that’s an important fact that could be—you would hide from loved ones, friends. And it’s something that is important about you that should be known to them.
This excerpt draws on the moral obligation central to the neoliberal underpinnings of a contemporary coming out narrative. Because it is an “important fact” about one’s self, as L. says, it should not remain hidden; instead, queer identity actually requires disclosure so that it can be validated and ultimately rendered normal (read: no longer nonconforming or deviant) by family and peers. K., too, went on to recognize and rebuke this pressure to disclose after “figuring out” one’s queerness:

K. Um, I guess since I figured it out, I was just sort of like, *I guess I gotta tell my friends now.* Because that’s another thing I don’t like about the sexuality narrative, it’s that you ‘have to tell people’. No you don’t. In fact, I hold back a lot nowadays, because, you know, safety.

Again, K.’s attention to safety operates as a form of strategic outness—a red light for avoiding disclosure among less tolerant audiences. In their efforts to avoid this pressure to disclose, K. is critically aware that it is derived from a larger “sexuality narrative”, which dictates what coming out is and how it should operate.

This overarching fear of coming out was expressed in at least half of my conversations with student participants, and upon probing a handful of individuals, there seems to be another expectation at play in the cultural coming out narrative—a trope that the experience itself is traumatic, or a “horror story”. When I sat down with O., a white, cis female bisexual student, she admitted that she wasn’t sure what she would talk about in the interview, because she “didn’t really have any sort of […] traumatic or conflictual” initial coming out experience. Interpreting O.’s logic here, she seems to wonder: because disclosure was not marked as traumatic, was it really coming out at all? To this question, R.’s thoughts are also relevant; a lesbian, Latina student, she thinks that coming out gets easier over time, but when I asked her why, she
explained that it’s quite relative—i.e. the first experience with disclosure is ridden with the most fear and uncertainties:

R. I think it’s scariest the first time you come out because you’ve never done it before, and you have no idea what to expect from other people’s reactions. You hear a lot of horror stories about people getting bad reactions.

Participants seem to present this first-time fear of coming out as a sink-or-swim moment. Because the outcome of disclosure is unclear, the initial act feels risky, scary, and unsettling. Experiencing these emotions, however, as O. seems to imply, is a sort of rite of passage within the cultural narrative of coming out. The phrase, “horror stories”, was also not unique to R.’s interview; in fact, L. said that his fear of disclosure stems from this trope, too.

L. But one thing I did hear about growing up, between when I didn’t know I was gay until before I came out, is I would always hear these horror stories, mainly with a family, like, they’ll kick you out. This, that, and the other. One post that has always stuck with me, and I thought I would just forget it, but it’s always stuck with me my whole life. I remember there was—it was kind of a gruesome story—but it was like, a kid came out as gay to their parents. And it was this terrible, abusive father, ‘cause what he did was he put a shock collar of a dog onto the kid and wouldn’t take it off until he said, “I’m not gay,” or something—to take it back.

And, like, I remember seeing those horror stories as something that got into my head. Not that something like that would happen to me. But I feel like if that could happen to somebody else, like something still negative could happen to me of a lesser degree. I’ve never forgotten it. I’ve seen a couple of horror stories, but that one’s always stuck with me. And that’s one thing I saw online.

Here, again, L.’s access to privilege (i.e. networks of social support and overall acceptance from peers and family alike) is demonstrated. Even as he describes a terrifying story he read on Tumblr about a negative, violent reaction to coming out, he notes, “not that something like that would happen to me.” But despite his expectations that coming out would be positive, he still perceived it to be a negative encounter based on these inhumane and homophobic images he had witnessed online. L. was not alone in this; initially coming out as a white gay male, I. also
recognized that reception to his identity disclosure would be positive, but, “seeing all the
different stories about people’s coming out experiences” had a “catastrophizing” effect on him.

IC. [Your family and friends] both had very positive responses. So what, I’m curious,
what was sort of the reason why you thought it was going to be negative or
catastrophic, as you said?

I. Just reading about other experiences of people coming out and knowing that it can
go so bad, and I was still just a kid in high school. I was seventeen. And I really
did not know my parents well at that point and didn’t know if they ever had gay
friends, didn’t know if they ever knew gay people. So, I just did not know what to
expect at all.

This excerpt resonates with other respondents and is useful for summarizing the kind of
reasoning that occurs among young people disclosing for the first time. Sharing a nonconforming
identity is a scary thing to do, especially when it violates heteronormative logics in a neoliberal
society that privatizes sexual life and experiences. When coming out, young people simply don’t
know what to expect, other than the images, stories, and as the next section will show, content,
they’ve engaged with online and other cultural mediums. When these representations are
negative, fear becomes associated with coming out; when they are positive, they can be inspiring
and fulfilling; and when they don’t exist at all, as we will see, other issues arise.

Coming Out in Mass Media

The chapter has shed light on how coming out operates as a coming of age story in
participant interviews; it is a cultural narrative that is riddled with expectations of honesty and a
fear of negative responses. As I spoke with students, I was really interested in understanding
where these tropes originated, i.e. where else did participants see the “horror stories” or, more
optimistically, where did the positive examples of coming out come from? Some students were
more forthcoming than others about where they remember acquiring the cultural scripts for queer
identity expression. My interview with D. was really captivating because she transparently explained how witnessing queer representation in mass media was integral to understanding her queer identities. After engaging with popular media depictions of coming out in movies and internet resources, D. explained that they were less than enthused with how their own experience came to pass:

D.  Well, I still feel like […] I had no control over [coming out], and it was supposed to be, like, my thing. Have you seen *Love, Simon*?

[…] there’s this scene where he gets outed by this guy, and he’s like, “No, this is supposed to be my choice. I’m supposed to get to do this. It’s my thing.”

IC.  Gotcha, gotcha.

D.  And I told my dad, “You guys ruined my coming out, because you couldn’t just leave the door closed.” Like, I wanted this, you know, the emotional, the tears—you know, I wanted that choice over my coming out, and with my friends and my family, I never got that choice.

IC.  Why do you think you wanted that?

D.  ‘Cause I was dramatic at that time! I wanted the dramatic-ness because that was supposed to be ‘the gay experience’—is coming out—and having those tears. And I was scared of being kicked out because my dad’s a military guy.

And […] my mom has two older daughters, so I’m the last one, so they don’t necessarily need me, even though I’m my dad’s only kid technically. Um, so, I just wanted that choice, because I was already struggling with this in the first place and then, some bitch found out and told everybody. And I don’t harbor resentment towards my mom because of this, um, like—it’s her thing as a parent to open the door and check what I’m doing when I have a friend over. Um, but it just sucks that I didn’t get that choice.

And when I saw ‘coming out story’ as the study, I was like, *I don’t really have one? But we’ll see how this goes.* ‘Cause I don’t have a coming out story that’s like, “I told my dad and then we both cried.”

This passage describes how after being outed in school and at home, D.’s experience with coming out simply did not match her expectation of how the narrative would unfold based on a major motion picture. What D. describes is a lack of agency in the coming out process; robbed of
the ability to disclose her queerness in her own terms and in her own way, her coming out was extremely disappointing and anticlimactic, so much so that she almost doesn’t characterize it as coming out at all.

Several students shared similar sentiments about the value of queer representation in media, particularly on the internet, and how it provides a groundwork for understanding nonconforming identity. However, they also noted a distaste for inauthentic depictions. I., a white, gay nonbinary student, recalled how reading fan fiction was one of the first times he experienced “any kind of literature that involves gay men.” But he later added that now, he actively looks for “media in general that represents gay people in a way that isn’t extremely stereotyped or just super boring.” Quite similarly, S., a Latina lesbian student, describes how in her high school years, she sought out community and connection through roleplaying on Facebook (as chapter three explores), and therein, she discovered queer identity through messaging threads and fan fiction storytelling. But when speaking to more mainstream images of queerness, e.g. non-heterosexual relationships in popular culture, she finds that there is certainly room for improvement:

IC. Okay. So do you think it could benefit from a more representative, like—

S. Yeah, like, real-ish couples? Like couples that are good role models of how to be a queer couple. Because I feel like that was something that early on, I had this idea of, like, how a couple should be that was very heteronormative. But then I had an idea of what a couple should be that wasn’t really healthy, and I don’t even know exactly where I got it. But like, very few ideas of queerness, I’d say, in a couple. It wasn’t really healthy. So, whenever I see a couple now that’s more healthy, I’m like, That’s so good; I’m so happy! Yeah.

Here, S. says that receiving cultural images of heteronormative couples resulted in a form of cognitive dissonance; the lack of queer representation made it very difficult to understand what a “healthy” queer relationship would look like in her own life. These images matter, it seems, to
queer people in their youth and provide a sense of what the future could hold. D. spoke candidly to this point, lamenting how their adolescence lacked illustrations of queer people pursuing successful careers:

D.  [...] I wish I was growing up queer now, rather than queer back in like 2010. Because I feel like there is so much more representation, and it shows that you can be successful in almost any field. I mean, there’s queer people in almost every friggin’ job imaginable, but that’s not something that was visualized back even nine years ago.

As S. and D. indicate, it is fortunate now that for younger generations, career options and companionship for queer people are no longer rendered invisible in mass media; in fact, these images are considerably available and symbolize that achieving such realities is not impossible. Speaking to E.’s experience in adolescence, when they had minimal access to the internet due to their religious beliefs, coming to understand queer identity on YouTube was an incredible discovery:

E.  [...] YouTube was big. I watched a lot of YouTube videos. I think that all those queer couples on YouTube kinda became the people I would look to—I would be like, Wow, that’s a thing. People are doing this.

I think that was a big thing influence in my—when I was still closeted, when I was in my community, I would look at them and look at these queer people in the community, like, People can actually do it, you know?

IC.  Yeah. Who specifically, do you remember, like celebrities and stuff?

E.  Yeah, well, also YouTubers—do you know Joey Graceffa?

[...] he’s like a gay YouTuber. I watched him and his boyfriend a lot. I don’t remember, I think it was Bria and Chrissy, I think—they’re not as well known. Tyler Oakley [...] there’s this Instagram couple called, Crissy and Dominique [Crissy and Domo], I think that’s her name. They recently broke up, but they had a baby together, and I feel like that was always sort of like—I would look at them and their family and be like, Ugh, I love that. You know?
E.’s exploration of YouTube provided inspiration, comfort, and the knowledge that there is a real potential to live a fulfilled queer life. And, considering their unique social location, i.e. someone who now identifies as “gay as hell” after being raised in a self-described “ultra-Orthodox” Jewish community, accessing these images was groundbreaking for redefining their perceptions of queerness.

For the students who admit that they do derive meaning from queer visibility in popular culture, there is a widely held notion that representation has improved dramatically in the U.S., especially when comparing contemporary media queers, such as Tyler Oakley, to earlier cultural pioneers like Ellen DeGeneres and her poignant, televised coming out in the late 90s. A monumental moment in queer culture, it might be argued that Ellen’s legacy eventually set a precedent for increasing queer visibility on TV (Rothman 2013). But recalling minimal representation in her own childhood, D. notes that the queer characters who were available often were not relatable:

D. Um, so yeah, gay people weren’t really in the media except for, like, Ellen [laughs], you know. And there were some gay characters, but they were always the GBF, you know, the ‘gay best friend’. Mostly white. And they were never used for, like, storyline—it was always like, “Oh my god, I need help!” And the gay best friend would be like, “Oh my god, I can help you because I’m gay!” Um [laughs]. So […] there were barely any […] queer women, except for Ellen […] A self-described “very white”, “empowered female”, D.’s commentary displays a keen awareness of how representations of queer people are still lacking in U.S. media; they are mostly male, mostly gay, mostly white, and often operate in the service of heterosexual characters, all of which overlooks queer women and people of color particularly. Similarly, T. and U., both students of color, offered more extensive insights about this and described a problematic dichotomy between the ever-expanding representation of (mostly) gay identity in media and the deliberate oversight of QTPOC (queer, trans people of color).
T. Definitely. I see it everywhere. There’s ads for all of these dating apps. Of course, I see gay culture represented. I just don’t see gay Black culture represented. Anytime I see a Black man person represented in the gay culture, they’re always in interracial relationships—which isn’t a problem. Love is love, believe in all that. But what’s wrong with having two Black people? Like […] why does a Black person always have to be in a relationship with a person of another race? Like that’s not how you show any other gay couple.

U. So, I don’t know. […] And in the media, like The L Word was a huge thing. And, of course, there was diversity in the cast, but it kind of felt like that one family had to be there. They had to put a person of color there, or the show would not be, like, completely, like, you know. So, it’s just that feeling of us having to be there in order to say, “Yeah, Black people are gay, too.”

In these separate conversations, T. and U. recognize that the disparity between white and black queer representation is stark. As U. mentions, television shows that employ diversity casting create a less-than-compelling viewing experience—it seems forced, she says, and “it’s just that feeling of [Black people] having to be there.” T., too, sees racial differences in how queer relationships are illustrated in dating app advertisements: for instance, there is either an overlooking of Black gay couples or a prioritization of white representation in interracial relationships where Black queer people are present. “And it’s like, it’s almost just taboo,” U. added, “to be anything other than white in the [LGBTQIA+] community because of just, like, social norms. And when you see movies, you mostly see white, Caucasian people there.” This is a practice of whitewashing, and as U. explains, it is quite telling: it sheds light on the pervasive effects of racism in media culture, which determines what queer subjectivities are deemed acceptable in society.

While T. suggests that representations of Black culture rarely overlap with queerness, there have been recent notable strides in grassroots activism and even mainstream, primetime television shows (like Pose on FX), which attempt to capture the experiences of QTPOC at the cultural level. C., a pansexual white male student, recognized this improvement in our interview
and below, he explains how an absence of such images, particularly in his childhood, was problematic and limited his scope of what queerness looked like.

C. So, the queer media I had furtively consumed in high school was pretty much very white-centric. Stuff like Milk, Priscilla Queen of the Desert, Parting Glances, um, there’s others but I’m blanking—Rocky Horror. So it wasn’t that I thought all queer people are white, it’s just when I thought of queer culture and queer people, I thought of white people. Not to say that I didn’t think people of color could be queer. It was just that was the standard I thought of.

Growing up without media depictions of more marginalized or culturally-obscure queer identities, C. essentially equated queer with white—it was a “standard [he] thought of.” Here, evidence for the effects of whitewashing media images is quite jarring: as a subconscious process of visual associations, whitewashing has ramifications for how individuals perceive the world and certain groups. To remedy this, social-justice groups and activist changemakers, for example, would likely insist that more expansive QTPOC representation will reduce whitewashing. However, U.’s thoughts on representation and elevated attention for QTPOC offer an interesting and resonant counterpoint:

U. Okay, um. I think that this could be a good thing or bad thing, but for me personally—I think it’s a bad thing. I think that having a distinction, ‘cause you know we have the acronym, QTPOC, and then there’s also the flag with the brown and black stripes. And when I first [saw it …], I was like, “What is that flag?” And then we were like, “Oh, it’s for QTPOC,” like da, da, da. And I was like, Why is that necessary? Like why are we—like I understand that aspect, of like, we need representation, so we’re kind of pulling ourselves out and then pushing through by ourselves.

Considering these comments and U.’s earlier analysis about a sense of mandatory diversity in television programming, we can see that reducing whitewashing only offers a partial solution to racial inequality. In fact, suggesting increased QTPOC representation as a remedy—both at a cultural and interpersonal level—is laden with issues because 1) it does not address the structural racism embedded in meso-level institutions and organizations, and 2) such an emphasis actually
further ostracizes POC from the larger LGBTQIA+ community, which renders multiply-marginalized populations responsible for their own visibility, as U. notes. In other words, by promoting diversity and inclusion but not interrogating the hierarchical structures that require greater representation, marginalized queer actors are pushed further along the fringes of the cultural-social imaginary.

In the second half of this chapter, I answered Gray’s call (2009) for a more stringent focus on new media’s place in social life. Employing a participant-centered analysis of coming out as a cultural narrative, I refute a ‘media effects logic’, the assumption that witnessing macro-level cultural images of queer inclusion directly determine positive identity formation at the interpersonal level. Instead, I operate from students’ perspectives to demonstrate that traces of an archetypal narrative contextualize coming out in interpersonal discourse. Students have many expectations for how identity disclosure will unfold with family and friends, which seem to be drawn from negative macro-level tropes, stereotypes, and cultural images. Still, several participants recall how deriving positive, empowering examples of queer visibility from mass media was inspiring and salient, although not entirely deterministic, in their adolescence. Other students—both white and nonwhite—are more critical of media representation, noting that whitewashing practices intentionally disregard authentic and genuine images of queer people of color. I support the claim that these trends are subliminally racist; they carry a message that QTPOC are marginal, less-assimilated members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Overall, I have explained that media representation is not a singular, causal factor for how participants developed their identities or come out. Things don’t simply “get better” for queer youth after watching a YouTube video or seeing a film; however, the perspectives shared here contribute
important insights how queer students consume, interpret, and make sense of media images in terms of their own positionality.
T. When I first met them, I gave them all hugs, ‘cause I’m just a hugger. And when I came out to all of them, they were like, “That’s how we knew, like, you’re super affectionate.” And I also feel like that’s stupid. Like that’s not why I’m gay. I’m just gay.

IC. Okay. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

T. Yeah, it’s like people just using gay stereotypes: “You don’t like sports because you’re gay,” [or] “I knew you were gay because you wore heels one time.” I just wanted to see what the fucking heels were! Like, I didn’t know what they were, they made a sound—I was baby!

Like, of course, I wanted to. I was always with my mom and my sister when I was a baby, [they] were always wearing lipstick. Of course, I wanna know what the fuck this lipstick is! That doesn’t mean I’m gay; that’s just what I was around. That didn’t affect me in any way, I feel. It’s just that’s what I was around.

In my interviews with students, a frequent theme that emerged in their coming out stories was a reflection on gender normativity and sexual stereotypes. This excerpt from my conversation with T., a black cisgender gay male, resounds with his frustration at the identity logics projected upon him from both family and peers. For example, playing dress-up as a child or expressing platonic affection even now, as an adult, have been rendered synonymous with a gay identity—an assumption that, according to T, is unfounded. In fact, he denounces the perhaps colloquial notion that gender play and displays of emotion are foreshadowing traits of a later gay identity, and he defends an essentialist understanding of his sexual identity, i.e. “I’m just gay… that didn’t affect me in any way.”

The linkage between gendered expectations and queer identity work was established quite clearly across students’ stories; however, this connection has suffered a certain neglect in
academic literature on coming out. As this chapter will explore, perhaps older frameworks of
gender and queer theory do not so thoroughly account for the gendered backdrop of identity
disclosure, particularly among youth during their adolescence and young adulthood. Through the
voices of my participants, I trouble the archetypal coming out story described in chapter one with
instances of disclosure that are affected (and in some cases determined) by gendered
expectations and policing.

Inspecting the embroidery of sexuality and gender

In their introduction to the August 2009 special issue of Gender & Society, which featured the
topic of heteronormativity, Ward and Schneider describe how, at the time, disciplinary
conversations expressed the importance of feminist research that employs heteronormativity as a
theoretical tool (434); doing so, they explained, would allow us to envision the intertwining
mechanisms of gender and sexuality, and particularly, how certain subjectivities and lived
experiences are more marginalized by hegemonic heterosexuality.

In order to define heteronormativity more clearly, I turn to sociology for some tangible
starting points. Valocchi (2005) considers it the “set of norms that make heterosexuality seem
natural or right and that organize homosexuality as its binary opposite” (765). Fields (2001) calls
it the “systemic privileging of the heterosexual couple as the social and sexual ideal” (165). And
again, according to Ward and Schneider (2009), although heteronormativity is entrenched in a
binaristic model of gender (437), research shows that “sexual regulation extends far beyond the
terrain of gender” (438); in fact, it “underpins all social phenomena, including the construction of
identities” (ibid.).
A critical analysis centered on heteronormativity has the capacity to capture multiple discourses of sex, gender, sexuality, and perhaps more holistically, identity work itself. While perhaps not stated in so many terms, we can imagine the domineering presence of heteronormative logics in classic theoretical works of sexuality. For example, Gayle Rubin’s ‘charmed circle of sex’ (1993) illustrates sexual hierarchies based on what makes sex ‘good’ or normal, i.e. monogamy, purity, chastity, and the like. Michael Warner’s classic, *The Trouble with Normal*, identifies the ever-pervasive ‘culture of shame’ (1999) around sex in the United States, and how normativity is ascribed to heterosexuals first and foremost. And of course, extrapolating from West and Zimmerman’s classic “doing gender” (1987) perspective in sociology, heteronormativity operates as a mechanism for regulating sexuality via the construct of gender—a “powerful ideological device” (147) that “renders social arrangements based on sex category as normal and natural… [and] organizes social life” (146).

Considering how these works might frame heteronormativity is useful and a point of departure for this chapter. Contemporary scholars like Denissen and Saguy (2014) critique this literature for its under-exploration of ‘heterogender’ (citing Ingraham 1994), i.e. the fusion of gender and sexuality both conceptually and in interpersonal interactions. The reason for this missing link, Wilkinson and Pearson claim, is due to the single-axis conceptualization (à la Crenshaw 1991) of sexuality in relevant works:

While gender and sexuality are tightly intersecting statuses, recent advances in the sociology of sexualities and queer theory call for a separate examination of sexuality, one that acknowledges sexuality as an organizing principle of power that affects everyone and that avoids the pitfalls of defining sexuality ‘almost exclusively in relation to a discrete orientation or identity category’ (Stein 2008, 116). More work in the sociology of sexuality needs to address, more broadly, how and in what contexts varieties of adolescent sexual attractions and desires become stigmatizing (Wilkinson and Pearson 2009:564).
There is a similar critique of a single-axis blindness in queer theory, even from Steven Seidman himself: “Indeed,” he writes, “I detect a disposition in the deconstruction of identity to slide into viewing identity itself as the fulcrum of domination and its subversion as the center of an anti-identity politic” (1993:132). In other words, a queer theory that prioritizes sexuality above gender or other dimensions of social location actually assumes that identities themselves are producing power relations, rather than the social structures and contexts in which they exist. Coming out literature, too, specifically calls for more careful attention to the “contextualizing” (Klein et al. 2015) of identity work. Therefore, a theoretical focus on queerness that is devoid of an intersectional awareness of social context (i.e. related specifically to one’s gender, as well as race, class, ability, and beyond) is futile, as it obscures more than it explains. Rather than emphasizing the vernacular of identity(s) alone, this chapter applies a bolstered, intersectional queer theory that brings background identities to the forefront, capturing how students navigate and disrupt the gendered expectations of heteronormativity in terms of their various locations in the social world.

**Centering Heteronormativity in the Coming Out Narrative**

With the above critiques in mind, C.J. Pascoe’s book, *Dude, You’re a Fag* (2007), models a successful expansion of queer theory that accounts for the operationalization of heteronormativity as a “key organizing principle” in the matrix of power (Stein 2008:117). As Wilkinson and Pearson explain, Pascoe’s keen analysis of “fag discourse” makes the important distinction that heteronormativity is not exclusively rooted in homophobia but is rather guided by a repudiation of gender nonconforming behaviors (2009:544). Over a decade after its publication, Pascoe’s work remains one of the best examples of a critical analysis centered on heteronormativity that pays careful attention to intersecting, fluid identities. I draw upon this
scholarship here to accompany my analysis of coming out stories, in order to highlight the prominence of gender-based oppression in participants’ identity work, as well as their means of combating discrimination in novel and creative ways.

In Pascoe’s journal article (2005) of the same name, she notes that queer theory “is another tool which enables an integrated analysis of sexuality, gender and race” (332). We see these dimensions in fag discourse: 1) the word “fag” crystallizes a gendered lens, because it equates femininity and male desire with weakness (a ‘penetrated’ masculinity); 2) being ‘gay’ can be accomplished without disrupting gender expectations, in order to produce a sexual identity that is recognized as legitimate, albeit marginalized; and 3) race is unpacked in relation to differences among white and African American boys—e.g. comparing their responses to questions about clothing maintenance and dancing. Given these examples and the interplay between gender, sexuality, and race, Pascoe’s project achieves a fusion of queer theory and intersectionality, in that it conceptually destabilizes identity categories while noting their interconnectedness. Additionally, I suggest that via her ethnographic methods and interview-based techniques, the context and social location of her participants becomes intrinsically available for analysis.

While Pascoe’s ethnography focuses on the “discourse of sexualized identities” (ibid.), in this chapter, I pay more attention to individuals’ perceptions of gender norms and expectations, in terms of their salient intersecting identities. This distinction is important—by identifying, questioning, and describing the oppressive force in question (i.e. heteronormativity), interview data reveal how participants recognize, reify, or refute gendered scripts throughout the coming out process, from their childhood years to now.
Gender Normativity in the Family and Early Schooling

There is a demonstrable range in the age at which participants first disclosed their queer identity(s); however, the majority of excerpts in this section detail how disclosure occurred sometime during participants’ high school years. As this study describes, the often negative institutional impact of heteronormativity is evident for students navigating school (see Wilkinson and Pearson 2009), but participants also explain that in the wake of disclosing to friends and family, the tenets of gender normativity became apparent, dictating how, as M. put it, they “ought to be.”

A white, cisgender gay male, M.’s coming out actually occurred later in life; he explains that disclosing at age 21 was intentional in order to establish financial independence and overall autonomy. But here, M. describes a conversation with his parents post-coming out, which demanded that he should act, present himself, and exist in a nonfeminine way.

IC. Can we talk a bit more about that comment—“don’t be [that] effeminate”—what do you think that was in reference to? Like, was it something that you did? Or was it just more of…

M. It was like they had this idea of what gay is. And it’s like, “You can be gay, but you can’t be that gay. Or you can’t be this type of gay.” And, yeah, I think that my parents live a very stereotypical hetero life; they met at church, dad was a football coach, and it’s this very nuclear type of ideas. So, it just challenges what they think their son ought to be.

This policing of gender by M.’s parents lays bare the interrelatedness of gender expression and stereotypical understandings of sexual identity. Of this, M. was critically aware; in fact, he explained how in response, he went to great lengths to “[push] the boundary” and regularly remind his parents of his nonconforming identities in an effort to ‘normalize’ them and help them grow more accustomed.

M. And I was like, “Okay… I’m gonna be me, I’m gonna be whoever, whatever, but I’ll give that to you because you’re still processing,” you know what I mean? It
was kind of like, *Okay, here you go*, and then I pushed that boundary a little bit. I’d wait a little time, I’d keep pushing them over.

IC. Can you tell more about that?

M. You know it was just like, leaving *Ru Paul’s Drag Race* on the TV, or like, doing, you know—posting going out pictures to the gay bars on social media, which I know my parents follow. Just little bits here and there to make it more ‘normal’, like slowly and surely. And you know, at this point, I feel closer to my parents than I ever have.

M.’s tactics seemed to prove successful in developing an improved relationship with his parents. However, his age and normative gender expression should be considered here as privileged assets of his identity.

This capacity to push the envelope was certainly not available to all participants, as the ramifications for critiquing or violating heteronormative logics are stark and sometimes severe, especially for younger, more marginalized youth. Studies show that coming out at a younger age can have significant implications for interactions in the primary group, given its small size, the closeness of its members, and its sense of shared values and culture (D’Augelli et al. 2005). In another study of LGB high school students, one-third of youth’s parents were unaware of their children’s sexual identities (ibid. 481), and “secrecy” was often seen as the students’ best option for avoiding the consequences of disclosure or the threat of destroying parent-child relationships (ibid.). This was especially true among children that presumed their parents were intolerant of nonconforming identities. Thus, the power of the primary group can be integral in shaping lived experiences among queer youth and can pose severe threats to mental and physical well-being.

When speaking with Y., a white, gay nonbinary student, about coming out in high school, they explained that initially disclosing as bisexual to their family resulted in a “horrific

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17 Synonymous with the family unit, the primary group in sociology is typically understood as “fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual” (Cooley 1909).
experience.” After experiencing violence at the hands of other peers, Y. explained that “they ended up taking that back”—i.e. they ‘un-came-out’ to their parents—“just for physical, emotional, and mental safety.” This illustrates that the primary group effect is palpable; research shows it can drive young adult anxieties, especially in “heterocentric” family units (Cooper 2008:428). Within these kinship structures, silence on the part of queer youth was again considered the only means for maintaining family ties, which consequentially requires subscribing to the creed of heteronormativity. By avoiding disclosure altogether, queer youth don’t rock the boat, risk physical or emotional violence, or disrupt parents’ and family member’s normative expectations of identity development. Y. later explained that, despite the fear of disclosure, they came out again as gay in their junior year. When I asked why, they said:

Y. I was living with so much regret and anxiety, and it was just festering in me. And I’ve always had this natural desire to be truly happy and just live my damn life, and I feel grateful that I had the ability to recognize that I wasn’t and that I knew that I could. So that really just—it was eating me alive—I was not living well.

Here, the power of neoliberal logics is revealed: like in chapter one, the pressure to come out as a confessional or an admission of nonconformity becomes burdensome—Y. notes it was “just festering in me.” By that point in high school, fortunately, Y. acknowledged their autonomy and “knew that [they] could” come out, despite the violent circumstances they experienced earlier.

This bravery and commitment to self-actualization at such an early age was not shared by all participants, nor was it perceived by all as a possibility. In fact, remaining silent, or waiting to come out, was quite common among participants. In fact, H.—who identifies as white, femme, and ‘militantly lesbian’—explained that she understood silence to be a “pragmatic” strategy to assure well-being: “I was perfectly aware [of my identity],” she said, “but I’ve always been a pragmatic person. And I said, Oh, well, that’s awkward for high school. I guess we’ll just ignore that one until we get to college.” One of Pascoe’s main arguments (2012) offers an explanation
for why H. may have felt this way: because high school’s “institutional logics” prioritize masculinity and heteronormativity, there is seemingly no place for coming out or the expression of gender or sexual nonconformity.

Scholarship has indicated that school culture can create feelings of alienation, fear, and loneliness for nonconforming students (Cooper 2008:428, Wilkinson and Pearson 2009), and unsurprisingly, high school students who publicly identify with queer identities are more likely to experience psychological distress than their heterosexual classmates (Ueno 2005). But negative school experiences are certainly not limited to those who publicly claim a nonconforming identity. For example, K., who is Korean-American and a nonbinary lesbian, reported instances of gender-related bullying as early as elementary school, long before they first came out; they were specifically targeted by white female peers and pressured to demonstrate femininity in a series of humiliating acts. D., who is white, cis female, and queer, also had a negative peer experience in middle school. Despite not publicly claiming a queer identity at the time, she explained how rumors began circulating that she was gay, which she attempted to dispel. This, however, resulted in more victimization and confusion:

D. And I was like, “What?! Gay?! No! How? Never!” And suddenly I was being bullied for being gay, and I didn’t even know if I was gay at the time. Um, but now it was this identity that everyone identified me with, and I’m like, Oh shit, I don’t really know what to do with this. And I was like, I guess I’ll just go with it. And then, over the next year of middle school, I dated some other girls, but it was mostly them trying to figure out if they were gay.

Um, and what’s funny, I think, is that when I joined school in 6th grade, there was an 8th grader who was bisexual and he was a guy. And everyone adored him, loved the shit out of him, I think because of this [gay best friend (GBF)] idea. But then when I came out as a lesbian, everyone was like, “Oh my god, that’s gross.” And I was like, Ugh. What about him!?

These scenes of harassment and bullying point to many conclusions—the most obvious being that queerness is still highly stigmatized in primary and secondary schools. Second, the contrast
in responses between D.’s initial, developing lesbian identity and a bisexual boy’s queerness is striking: it shows how heteronormative logics can reject queer femininity but may grant leniency to (some) cis men who publicly violate gender or sexuality norms.

This is surprising, because many scholars would argue the opposite: i.e. heteronormativity polices masculinity strictly, particularly among cis men and cis boys (e.g. Kane 2006); in fact, they often are unable to transgress or redefine gendered boundaries without consequences. Even Pascoe’s ethnographic work (2007) reveals how nonconforming females, rather, can access gender maneuvering (citing Schippers 2002) by participating in female sports or queer organizations like a Gay-Straight Alliance. In these spaces, female students successfully embodied masculinity and “carried themselves in many ways ‘like guys’” (Pascoe 2012:115); however, among their peers, their association with these groups was actually equated with having a lesbian identity. In other words, despite their success in claiming nonconforming gender expression, the girls in Pascoe’s study were still seen as a marginalized other—one that is specifically subject to the male gaze, which perceives lesbian-coded interactions or activities (like playing all-girls sports or being involved with queer organizations) as “hot” (ibid. 119). This misogynistic fragment of a heteronormative logic emerged in my conversation with R., a cis femme lesbian, who described similar encounters with heterosexual boys in high school:

R.  […] I have had guys who have been interested in me, like, this is way later, once I was identifying as a lesbian. And I would tell them I had a girlfriend, and they would be creepy and ask for threesomes, but I just ignored them. [laughs]

IC. Okay, and was that in high school?

R. Yeah.

[...]
IC. [...] and was there any negative response to your lesbian identity, in terms of friends, acquaintances, strangers?

R. Apart from the boys, no.

IC. Okay, so can you tell me a little bit more about that? Were these boys friends, were they classmates?

R. They were just like classmates. At one point—this was in English class—and one of the guys asked me to prom. I didn’t know him. And I told him I had a girlfriend, and he was the one that asked for a threesome at that point. And then I just started acting cold to him, I guess? He would just kind of bug me for a few months after that.

Here, R. explains how the discovery of her queerness was met with unwanted attention from straight high school classmates that fetishized her lesbian identity and solicited her for a sexual encounter. This example provides some nuance to the scholarly claims mentioned above. It may not be that adolescent females have more agency than males in redefining or disrupting gender norms; instead, gendered interactions in high school are steeped within a larger heteronormative ecosystem in which sexism and homophobia are pervasive.

This context offers additional insight for interpreting the reception of D.’s outing: recalling how her lesbian identity was stigmatized while a bisexual cis male peer was celebrated, it might be the case that heteronormativity permits a cis male bisexual identity, so long as it expresses some desire for the opposite sex. For women, however, this leniency may not be afforded, which, again, points to a sexist undercurrent in queer inclusivity. When I spoke with O., a bisexual cis white woman, she shared how her bisexuality has been delegitimized throughout her life; often, it has been considered a “phase” or an identity that disappears upon entering a heterosexual relationship. For example, O. explained how with a recent partner, she tried to advocate for the salience of her bisexual identity and discuss how it was being
overlooked in their relationship. In response, he said, “Well, now that you’re with me, you’re not that way anymore.” In comparing both accounts, a double standard that rejects female queerness is evident. For O., her female bisexuality was rendered invisible and irrelevant by a heterosexual partner, and D. was shamed for a lesbian identity while her cis male peer was admired for his queerness. Overall, the stories in this section from H., D., K., R., and O. describe forms of gender policing that specifically take aim at the performance of queer femininity, and how defying heteronormative expectations of women—via nonconforming gender expression or sexual desire—can result in harassment, alienation, and marginalization.

As participants’ experiences indicate, the physical and mental risks of gender nonconformity in school (and beyond) are ever-looming for queer students; in fact, some were transparent in reporting how stigmatized experiences in adolescence have a range of results on quality of life and well-being. X., who is white and identifies as nonbinary and queer, explained how they felt dysphoric from a very early age, and when looking back on high school, they remember an isolated, lonely experience. “I was so repressed in high school and so, like, depressed,” they said, “and behaviorally just fucked up because of how rejected I felt by the world, and it just came out in very, very bad ways.” To note, X. was not alone in their experience or in their disclosure of mental illness; several participants explained how their mental health was a prominent part of their childhood and adolescence, and some even considered it a salient identity—one that was part and parcel how they came to understand their queerness.

Safety and the Caveat of ‘Tolerance’ on Campus

During my time in the field, my conversations with student participants gave me the impression that queer identities are likely recognized on this particular campus, as this section and chapter 4
indicate, but are they tolerated at large? And is tolerance always paired with acceptance and, more importantly, safety? Eric Pritchard’s work on queer youth of color complicates this question by suggesting that “too-narrow discourses of identities result in an equally insufficient discourse of safety” (2013:334). In other words, we cannot conceptualize safety as an equally available, shared reality for all queer students because tolerance itself is extended to a limited set of ‘acceptable’ identities:

When we say we want to make safe spaces for those outside the “normal,” there has to be a semantic shift that unseats safety from the unquestioned position that treats it as a property right of the sufficiently normative. There really is no other way to begin imagining and creating any tangible change toward making safer environments for more than the few. Otherwise, safety is not safer at all; it becomes just another way to discipline and regulate nonnormative subjects in order that they may qualify for protection while claiming safety and safe space as a right of all (ibid. 340-1).

The narrow distinctions of identity that Pritchard describes are determined by intersecting experiences of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, and, as other scholars of school climate note, these are forged well before one enters the campus environment itself (Pascoe 2012).

To give an example of this, we can see how L.’s early coming out story is marked by such privilege. Aside from identifying as white and cis, L. explained several times that he rarely (if ever) had negative responses to disclosing his gay identity in adolescence. In fact, he mentioned that in one of the few times he did overhear a homophobic slur, he quickly added that he “bit their head off” in terms of correcting the individual. “I got myself angrier than I actually was,” he noted, in order to make a point—both for himself and others—that homophobia would not be acceptable in his company. He seemed to be passionate about the well-being of other people in the LGBTQIA+ community; however, by speaking only to the general ‘acceptance’
and sense of tolerance that exists in his social world, it’s unclear if he is aware that there are stark differences in lived experiences for more marginalized queer youth.

In contrast to L.’s experiences, concerns about safety were a primary theme in my conversation with K., a queer nonbinary student of color. Throughout the interview, they explained how negative memories from childhood, early schooling, home life, college, as well as digital spaces, now carry huge implications for how they disclose identities in everyday life. As you may recall in a quote from chapter one, K. rejected the expectation that coming out is necessary upon self-actualization, and here, the conversation continues, as they debunk the idea that we exist in a society that tolerates nonconforming identities:

K. [...] There’s that whole big expectation that [...] as soon as you figure it out, you’re going to tell everybody. I feel like that’s not—I mean, I don’t just feel like that—that’s not necessarily safe. Like, you know, a lot of people are like, “It’s 2019 now, we’ve moved past that…”

We’ve super-duper not [...] past homophobia. Like, who are we kidding? I don’t think any straight person will ever really understand, like, just how hurtful it can be when there is—when somebody says something that isn’t just wholehearted acceptance. Because people talk about ‘tolerance’ all the time, and I’m tired of people talking about ‘tolerance’ because tolerance doesn’t really do—I don’t really think tolerance does anything. Because it’s like, how would you feel if someone came up to you and said, “You know, I don’t usually agree with people who have brown eyes, but I will tolerate your presence in this world.”

Here, K. recognizes that in the past, disclosing their racial, gender, and sexual identities often resulted in being overlooked interpersonally, or, in some uncomfortable cases, a sense of utter alienation, i.e. “a lot of white people would just silently stare at me.” K. is articulate and confident in dismissing a post-gay rhetoric and offers an empirical example of Pritchard’s intersectional thoughts on safety (2013), particularly how dominant groups “flatten” the identities of nonconforming others. As the following excerpts describe, for individuals who are less privileged, non-white, and/or gender nonconforming, safety in identity disclosure (or even
identity expression) in public spaces like the university campus becomes less of a guarantee due to the pervasiveness of heteronormativity.

Later in my interview with Y., who identifies as nonbinary, white, and gay, I asked them if they felt safe on campus. Their response resembled the thoughts of many participants in my sample: the university climate is largely “fine”, in terms of tolerance for LGBTQIA+ students; however, they “don’t necessarily feel comfortable”:

Y.  [...] I don’t know, the [...] campus kind of feels like an extension of high school [...] I don’t even know, just like if I’m wearing just like, basic little heels or something, there are definitely uncomfortable stares, which is something I’m familiar with…

The uncomfortable stares Y. describes when expressing gender nonconformity suggests that they may sense a perceived threat on campus, an experience that is perhaps specific to those who show visible nonconformity. For participants who ‘pass’ or don’t look visibly queer, this threat to physical safety was not expressed; however, the skepticism about the supposedly tolerant campus climate was still understood by gender-normative students. I was surprised that when I asked O., a white, cis, bisexual woman, about her perceptions of campus safety in our interview, she offered several vantage points that were not her own.

O.  Because I’m covered in privilege. If I wasn’t? Yeah. Could be worse. Could be [...] better. Um, I think, like, I see this transgender woman a lot of days in [...] building, and I think how bold and brave she is, that—I don’t know. I feel weird saying that, but like, how much she must get stared at. And how many comments she must get. And, like, life must just be harder, I’ve gotta imagine. I don’t know.

Here, O.’s reflexivity was a pivotal moment our conversation; her interpretation offers a co-collaborative understanding of how dynamics of safety, tolerance, and heteronormativity vary for
certain subjectivities in the university setting. She later added how it’s hard to imagine that undergraduate students feel included or accepted on campus, because queer identity is “not exactly in the drinking water”; as a potential solution, O. said the university community would benefit from requiring Safe Space training for all faculty and administrators. Her insights, paired with Y.’s sentiments mentioned above, illustrate a disparity, in terms of how the expression of queerness is received by straight students. Depending on one’s level of privilege (including the privilege of passing), I suggest that gender-normative queer subjectivities, at least, are granted more acceptance and inclusion on campus. The same is not necessarily true, however, for visibly nonconforming students.

Feelings of discomfort on campus were also evident in the end of my interview with T., whose words opened this chapter. As we were wrapping up, it seemed like he had something else he wanted to share, but I sensed some hesitation. This was strange; he had been notably vocal throughout the conversation, and our volleying of questions and answers had been rather smooth. Our interview actually covered a lot of ground related to their Black, gay male identity on campus: as chapter four will explain, T. feels that he is caught in the middle, neither belonging in queer-identity groups or students of color organizations. Before ending our session, sensing his hesitation and a desire to share, I decided to probe a bit deeper.

IC. Is there anything else you wanted to ask—questions?

T. I don’t know, I just feel like super conflicted. Um.

IC. Okay. About?

T. Like I don’t think the guys in my house make fun of me, or I don’t think people make fun of me to make me feel less than them, but that’s like the only thing they bring up. And sometimes, like, they’ll make the argument, like, “Well, you bring it up.” It’s like, Of course, I bring it up—that’s my life. If I say, “Why can’t I keep I man?” I’m not saying that because I’m gay, I’m saying that because—I’m not saying that to perpetuate I’m gay, I’m saying that because it’s my life.
IC. Right.

T. I feel like that’s an actual thing I have to live with, so don’t look at it like it’s a gay thing, look at it like that’s his life. And why is anyone making me my sexuality if no one’s making you your sexuality? Like I’m not just a gay guy.

IC. So, it’s so much more emphasized for you, by other people.

T. Yeah. Mhm. And then they’re like, “Oh, but you lock yourself away.” And it’s like, yeah, I lock myself away, ‘cause you guys only see me as one way, but if you actually came into my room and talked to me and spent one-on-one time with me, then you would understand. Like, this is just as uncomfortable for me as it is for you, trust me. Like if you ever feel like you don’t want to be around me, I most likely don’t want to be around you either.

‘Cause it’s that whole straight male thing scares me. Just how, I don’t know to describe it—I just don’t get it. I just don’t get how you are conditioned, and how you are okay with just being like, and not showing emotion. And then calling it selfish, like isn’t emotion natural? Isn’t all that shit natural? So why am I being called too sensitive when I’m reacting to something that bothers me? I just think all that’s stupid.

But it’s hard to tell the guys in my house that, because then, if I say that, then it’s the point that, “you’re still being too sensitive.” So, I just don’t win. There’s no one to talk to in my house. There’s five of them, and like, I love them all to death, but […] these problems I have that I’m telling you about—like I can never talk to them about it. As much as like, they’re like, “Talk to us, stop hiding away from us.” It’s like, No!

T.’s frustration with his straight friends and their expectations of heteronormativity speak directly to how he occupies both subordinated and marginalized masculinities (Pascoe 2012:7), where the former frames T.’s queerness as emasculated in straight society, and the latter renders T.’s blackness disenfranchised, in terms of white culture. T.’s commentary indicates how he is expected to maintain hegemonic notions of strength, emotionlessness, and above all, control; additionally, he is constantly policed for his queerness and dismissed for his ‘sensitivity’. The ambivalence he feels about getting involved on campus seems to be tied to how the mutual exclusivity of his racial and queer identities leaves him in an anomic space that is neither Black nor queer. Because of these contradictions of gendered expectations and sexual stereotypes on
campus, T. feels that he effectively has no one to talk to about his experiences with dating or other dimensions of his personal life.

In this chapter, I have argued that heteronormativity is operating in overt and covert ways in several scenarios of queer identity work. In the family and early schooling, it reveals itself primarily through gendered expectations of masculinity and femininity, and once students arrive to the heteronormative halls of high school, the capacity for queer identity expression is quite limited. Through the experiences of students on this particular university campus, I argue that the expression of LGBTQIA+ identity (particularly queerness that is gender nonconforming) runs counter to what a ‘normal’ or tolerable student subjectivity looks like, and by stepping beyond the very “narrow” iterations of acceptable queer identity categories (Pritchard 2013), some students feel that their safety may be at risk. Given that this field site hosts a prominent LGBTQIA+ resource, the Queer Resource Center (QRC\footnote{Throughout this manuscript, the acronym QRC represents the Queer Resource Center—a pseudonym created for the institutional resource for LGBTQIA+ students at this particular university. As Chapter 4 explores, several students in my sample are actively involved as volunteers or employees in the Center.}), which extends programming to its (largely undergraduate) student population, these perspectives about campus climate are certainly surprising. There may be a disconnect in student awareness about what program offerings and institutional ‘safe spaces’ exist for queer students in the wider campus community. After all, as chapter four will discuss, there are deliberate, ongoing efforts by the QRC to offer intersectional, culturally competent resources for marginalized queer students—an endeavor that has been met with both high regard and critical response from students.
CHAPTER 3.
How Queerness Goes Online

There has been much less attention to the body which is not screened, the one which is 'left' when the computer is turned off, or even what happens to the 'real' body when the computer is on.

– Nina Wakeford (1997:35)

Since the advent of the digital age, the internet has largely been championed as a revolutionary (Haber 2017) and innovative space for queer people. Indeed, the internet’s capacity to be liberating and expansive, inclusive and informative, as well as anonymous and discreet has had a profoundly positive impact on identity work across generations of LGBTQIA+ individuals (Baams et al. 2011; Szulc and Dhoest 2013). From the more recent development of social media applications to earlier means of interaction (i.e. chat rooms, forums, and other SNSs [social-networking sites]), research has identified the benefits of accessing online resources and communities (e.g. Herrera 2017; Miller 2016; Thomas, Ross and Harris 2007), experiencing digital representation (Gomillion and Giuliano 2011; Gray 2009), and participating in ever-changing forms of digital sociality (e.g. Cavalcante 2018; Craig and McInroy 2014; Duguay 2016; Haber 2017; Henrickson 2007) for queer individuals who are stigmatized in heteronormative society.

Of course, the assumption that the internet is an equally liberating, emancipatory space for all queer people is erroneous; in fact, this analysis has been well-established in recent works (see Haber 2017; Szulc and Dhoest 2013). But despite this mounting critique, the literature still lacks a nuanced understanding of how queer people perceive digital life, especially in terms of

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19 Among digital studies, a meaning-centered interpretation of how users move between and perceive online v. offline sociality is largely unrecognized (Wakeford 1997:35). Fisher et. al. (2016) come close by comparing
their social location. There is a need for more meaning-centered explanations of how and why queer people go online in the first place (or, why they don’t) and, more importantly, how individuals link online activity to an assortment of lived experiences. Existing work also tends to employ a single-axis analysis that prioritizes LGBTQIA+ identity first and foremost—and more specifically, the L, G, and B. Because of this, the experiences of more marginalized queer identities (i.e. those who fall on the TQIA+ end of the spectrum) are either interpreted as equivalent to more widely recognized identity categories, or worse, they are rendered invisible. However, beyond that, a larger blind spot remains unaddressed: i.e. how larger systems of oppression—including, but not limited to, racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and ableism—impact queer identity work online.

This chapter addresses these conceptual gaps in scholarship on digital sociality through students’ perceptions of internet access and usage, coming out, and resources and information. With a critical intersectional stance on whiteness and privilege, I demonstrate how the perceived value of the internet can be better understood by taking positionality into account. Overall, it appears that social capital and having robust social networks may partially explain one’s investment (or lack thereof) in online interactions. Through these findings, this chapter also troubles the larger theoretical assumption that online sociality is segmented from the ‘real world’

differences in self-identity across digital platforms; however, offline implications for these differences remain to be seen. Lincoln and Robards make small strides (2016) by juxtaposing offline identity management with the management SNS profiles. With interesting shared themes and a fine thick description of SNSs (i.e. MySpace, Facebook), this work still compares dimensions of sociality, rather than connecting them and lacks an intersectional context, which I argue is nonnegotiable when discussing the online-offline link. Joining Sonja Vivienne, the same research team also produced a chapter (2016) that affirms the methodological ‘self-making’ of gender-diverse and queer individuals online: this involvement of participants as data ‘co-analysts’ is inspiring, but the analysis evokes a homogenous ‘Internet culture’, which assumes that the digital world is equally experienced (and accessed) by all users.
of everyday life. By tempering this duality with nuanced perceptions of queer life—both online and off—a new pathway for conceptualizing digital scholarship can be forged.

**Access and Usage**

One myth of digital technology is the purported equality of access across all users. Access, here, refers not only to having a physical internet connection, but also a working knowledge of digital media and even the development of online literacies. Thus, thinking about “digital inequalities” (Robinson et al. 2015), which broadly refers to the stratification of online experiences, is an effective starting place for an intersectional analysis. As mentioned, what remains unclear in studies of queer identity work online is how dimensions of difference are understood from individual vantage points. This study fills this gap by employing an interview schedule that prioritized participants’ most salient identity categories, which framed later discussions of social media use in terms of race, gender, class and sexuality.

Though it may seem obvious, it should be pointed out that given that all participants were enrolled in an accredited degree program at the time of the study, they had physical, tangible access to an internet connection, at least on campus. But from a more abstract perspective, there were varying thoughts on the value of or need for the internet and social media specifically. For example, two white gay participants explained that they see digital interactions as relatively

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20 As I conceive future projects and lines of inquiry for my dissertation, I would be interested in following an intersectional hunch that I’ve drawn from several interviews with white, gay and largely cis male respondents: i.e. these students may not seek out online resources due to the presence of robust or motivating social support from individuals in childhood and adolescence. Considering W.’s opinion above (“I’m not a social media fanatic”), I also would note that his narrative was marked by a unanimous positive reception to his gay identity. Y.’s disinvestment in social media, too, may have some connection to interaction with positive queer role models throughout their life: Y. explained how a theatre teacher in high school modeled what “[a] visible, happy, healthy, queer individual” looked like, and now, years later, Y.’s current pursuit of drag performance often makes them a role model for others. In order to make the claim that having available interpersonal social supports renders online resources less valuable or meaningful, I would have had to probe deeper with W. and Y. about these experiences specifically; nevertheless, this intersectional hypothesis could be useful to consider later in this chapter.
trivial in terms of their everyday lives: W. said, “I’m not a social media fanatic,” and similarly, Y. explained that, “I’m not really terribly invested [in social media], so for me, it’s like an on-and-off switch.” Many interviewees shared this perspective that social media doesn’t matter too much; if anything, it’s more useful as a means of entertainment (e.g. sending memes on Facebook Messenger; maintaining Snapchat “streaks”\(^\text{21}\)) or finding connections for dating on apps like Grindr, Tinder, etc.

The blunt dismissal of social media’s salience was tempered by the perspectives of less privileged participants (i.e. in terms of their physical ability, as well as racial/ethnic and gender nonconforming identity) who recognized significant value in online relationships. K., a nonwhite, disabled, nonbinary lesbian, was adamant about the importance of finding, forming, and fostering online queer community:

K. Yeah, and honestly, thank God for the Internet, because, all of my friends on the Internet are some sort of not-straight and usually not-cisgender, either.

So that’s like, you can just put in your Tumblr bio, like, ‘I’m nonbinary lesbian. Sup?’ And then you all congregate. It’s like, Thank God.

X., who is trans, Jewish, and queer, was also forthcoming about their struggles with mental illness, and noted that due to having a limited circle of queer friends in high school, they went online to form friendships and relationships, because “it’s easier to find gay and trans people” there. These accounts suggest that for queer adolescents who don’t have access to certain social capital (i.e. whiteness, interpersonal social support, aligning with a binary gender, or being able-bodied), the internet may hold promise for developing social ties that do not exist in their interpersonal realities at school or at home. K. put things into perspective for me when they said,

\(^{21}\) On the photo-messaging application, Snapchat, a “streak” occurs when users send images to each other consecutively for a period of time—days, weeks, and even months for some users. As a means of gamification on the app, a longer streak on Snapchat is understood to be a stronger connection between friends.
“My entire world was my house. And the only people that were in it were me, my mom, my dad, and eventually our six cats, and the Internet.” Thus, the privilege of a robust social network in adolescence should not be overlooked, because as K. and X. reported in retrospect, its absence can have negative effects on quality of life for queer youth—which, as we will see, internet access can only partially mitigate.

Coming Out and Identity Disclosure Online
Chapter one described how recent coming out literature has departed from ‘stage models’ (see Cass 1984) of identity formation, and coming out scholars are now recognizing queer theory’s stance on the “messiness and fluidity” (Pfeffer 2014:7) of identity disclosure. However, adopting this theoretical shift in studies of digital spaces is still a work in progress. In this section, I ask: how—and why—do people “come out” in digital spaces? By interpreting student responses, I demonstrate that a multitude of disclosure practices happen online, and participants understand some forms to be more salient or symbolic than others.

For example, many students suggested that posting a picture with a significant other may hold some meaning, though perhaps less meaning than a more explicit ‘coming out post.’ Similarly, writing a line about sexual or gender identity in a biography section (a “bio”) on a Twitter or Tumblr profile may (or may not) be considered coming out. As K. explained, identity disclosure in social media bios was a salient and informative means of sharing

[...] different conceptions of myself and my gender and my sexuality for a while. I jumped from, like, cisgender woman bisexual to, like, bisexual transmasculine to broadly gay transmasculine to agender asexual, to like, sort of broadly-gay-ish agender to like, woman-ish agender, to you know, here I am, like—oh, guess I’m a lesbian. Okay. Sick!

For K., publicly documenting their sexual and gender fluidity in their bio was a form of coming out; however, X. actually interpreted bios in the opposite way: “I feel like online, there’s no
coming out,” they said, “It’s just like, it’s right there. You know? People put their pronouns in their bio, and it’s like, that’s that.” X.’s comment suggests that less profound forms of disclosure perhaps carry less weight, a perspective that seems aligns with chapter one and the ‘expectations’ of what coming out is—i.e. a dramatic or emotional announcement of nonconformity.

In addition to these informal versions of disclosure online, several individuals reported that they intentionally disclosed queer identities in online posts, photos, and videos. When discussing these examples, I was careful to confirm with participants that they interpreted these instances as coming out in a digital context. In my conversations with H. and I., two white graduate students who are lesbian/cis and gay/nonbinary, respectively, they both explained how in college, they felt compelled to post a Facebook status that explicitly disclosed their queer identity to an audience of family, friends, and peers online. During our interview, H. read me the following “status” that she had posted to Facebook:22

Over the past few months, several people who I have grown up respecting have called me a dyke. Some have suggested that I take my own life. Rather than [indistinguishable] about a topic that I believe to be no one else’s business, I have chosen to stay silent. Upon reflection, I have realized that through my silence, I have become complicit in the homophobia that they espouse. I can stay silent no longer. Dyke is not a label that I would choose for myself. I find the term not only derogatory but overly limiting. However, in solidarity with my LGBTQ sisters and brothers, I publicly and proudly accept this label. I am not looking for support or attention, I’m just done being silent, as I think it may become harmful to others.

As the status vaguely implies, H. was previously outed among a close circle of family and friends, which was compounded by a public shaming from homophobic adults in her community. The Facebook post, it seems, functioned as a means of reclaiming her sexuality in a strategic and powerful way; in fact, H. explained that she even timed the post so that the majority of her

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22 During my interview with H., I did not view or inspect the Facebook post itself; instead, I asked if she felt comfortable reading it to me, which she did, and additionally, she granted me permission to use the quoted passage in this manuscript.
family and friends, who were attending an event, would see it when they arrived home that night. In I.’s experience, he explains that the impetus for his Facebook coming out post came from being tired of family gatherings where relatives would ask, “Well, when are we gonna see your girlfriend? Who are you dating?” In the interview, I. noted that “it scared the shit out of me to post that, and I was thinking about it for weeks or months beforehand.” But when he did, the post read something like:  

I know that some of you may not like this, and this has always been a part of me. I came out to myself recently and I’m actually dating someone great right now. And…if this makes you uncomfortable, if this is something that you do not like… the door is there. You do not need to be in my life anymore. And I would no longer want to be your friend if you’re not okay with me being me. Because I’m the same person that you knew before, and now you just have a bit more information about me.

I.’s post is comparable to H.’s in its powerful tone: both students similarly presented their sexuality in a take-it-or-leave-it manner. The posts vary, however, in certain ways: H. offers her queer identity from a platform of solidarity with her “LGBTQ sisters and brothers”, while I. shares his relationship status and his desire to expel any homophobic naysayers from his network. Additionally, while I. notes, “I’m the same person that you knew before,” H. seems confident in proudly acknowledging difference, admitting that previously that committing to silence about her sexual nonconformity rendered her complicit in the homophobia she experienced in her community. Both H. and I. also seemed to wield demonstrably strong networks of social support in posting these statuses: H. received twenty-seven comments on the post, which while laughing, she noted, “is a lot for my Facebook”; I., too, reported that reactions

23 Because he deleted his Facebook recently, I. was unable to find the post itself. The text included above is his summary of what it said, paraphrased from memory.
to his post was positive, with friends and family on Facebook commenting, “This changes nothing—you’re awesome,” and, “You’re still family who we love.”

Other examples of coming out on social media demonstrated an underlying sense of altruism that informed participants’ desire to disclose. As mentioned above, on National Coming Out Day in 2018, O. posted a selfie on Instagram after being inspired by other LGBTQIA+ pride posts, which she read to me:

Happy National Coming Out Day from me and the bags under my eyes. [laughs] I’m bisexual and proud of who I am. I plan to vote on November 6th. #humanrights #socialjustice #blacklivesmatter #bravery

In describing this post in more detail, O. said she remembered thinking, “I wanna inspire someone else, like pass it on, you know?” H., too, in her Facebook coming out status noted that, “I’m just done being silent, as I think it may become harmful to others.” It’s interesting that these noble sentiments related to coming out, expressed by two white cisgender women, did not appear in interviews with individuals who were nonwhite. Similarly, in this a final example from E., a white, queer, Jewish, nonbinary student, we see the use of video content as a medium for coming out through their affiliation with a nonprofit organization.

E. Last summer [...] I worked with an organization that works with Orthodox queer Jews, and they were doing something called a pledge, where they were basically having alumni from non-Orthodox schools make videos encouraging their schools to take a pledge which would mean that they would protect anyone if they came out, not kick them out, not put up with bullying, stuff like that.

So I made a video and I think that was the first time I shared my queer identity online. I put it on Facebook.

[...]

IC. So what was the response like?

E. A lot of people from college were very supportive. That was mostly the response. People from college who were being really supportive.
This type of coming out that E. describes mirrors Dan Savage’s campaign that was discussed in chapter one, which charged allies to create a database of video-based content “in order to send the message to suffering LGBT youth that ‘it gets better’” (Jones 2015:326). It’s important to highlight that E. garnered positive responses online, because as you may recall, their childhood and adolescence were almost completely devoid of Internet access and queer media representations. Thus, disclosing their queer identity in such a public way seems quite salient, given their lived experience.

Overall, participants’ queer-related content in online forums like Facebook, for example, did not garner many negative responses from family members or friends. Though, it should be noted that some students, like C., explained that they deliberately set privacy settings to exclude more homophobic family from viewing their profiles in the first place. This selectivity of online communication, as X. explains, is a primary difference between offline and online relationships: “Like, you can choose when you respond to someone or when you Skype them, or if you even talk to them at all.” As L. said, “[...] anyone that’s related to me is not on any social media, or if they are, I’ve blocked them, or I don’t know about it... it’s like I like my life separated. I like my family life separated from my friends.” In these descriptions of access and privacy, it’s clear that users are quite intentional about who sees (and does not see) their content, particularly among family members.

Among strangers and acquaintances, however, students described scenarios where negative comments and messages made for a frustrating and intolerant online environment in spaces like Instagram, Facebook, and Grindr. Y. shared how a public-facing Instagram profile for their drag persona is often subject to homophobic trolling:
Y. I get hit with a lot of anti-LGBTQ people just commenting and saying pretty disgusting things. But it hasn’t been anything terribly excessive—not uncommon, that’s for sure. But, I mean, one is excessive, but not anything wild.

IC. If you were to maybe try to put a number on it, how often does that happen since you’ve opened the account?

Y. Uh… if I were to say a six-month period, probably at least, like, 15. Yeah. Probably in particular because I talk about gender, […] I’m very body positive, things like that […]

[…] I actually delete [the comments]—I just don’t want it to be obviously on my page or anyone else kinda having to deal with it. I report it and I also message them; I kinda hit it from all angles.

IC. So I didn’t realize that you—I thought you had mentioned that they were messages, in terms of private messages—but these are public comments—

Y. Oh yeah, comments.

IC. On your photos?

Y. Yeah, I get comments more so than I get messages.

IC. Wow, okay.

In describing what is clearly a regular barrage of homophobia and transphobia, Y. seems to be quite used to this form of online harassment. What’s more important, they noted, is managing the profile so that hateful messages are not present or visible on the account. Y. recalls more veiled instances of transphobia occurring online, too; in the past, it seems that when acquaintances with potential romantic interests have followed their social media accounts, Y. detected traces of discomfort with their gender nonconformity: “I’m no longer ‘suitable’ to be dated, because they’re unsure of this kind of identity,” they said. As the earlier passage mentioned, Y. is quite forthcoming about body positivity in their online profiles—“I’m not posting my entire being,” they clarified, “but I think people are off-put a bit by it.”
Also speaking to experiences with online dating and/or romantic interests, M., who is white, cis male, gay, and married, said that, “[...] one thing I get backlash for would be coming out as having an open marriage.” He went on to describe how this form of homophobia permeates digital interactions as well.

M. People just don’t get it, which is fine—I don’t expect them to get it, I just expect them to respect it. But I feel like that’s much more confusing to people, and I’ve had more negative responses [to] saying I’m in an open marriage than I am as a gay male.

IC. Interesting, and you’ve had negative backlash online for that as well?

M. Yeah, even like on Grindr especially.

IC. Can you tell me a little bit more about that, what those interactions sound like?

M. You know, I’ll say hi to someone and their next response will be like, “You’re married?”

“Yes.”

You know, it’s like, “Man or woman?” and it’s like, “Man.” And then it’s just like—[I block them] [laughs].

IC. Huh, interesting.

M. Or, people will be like, “I just don’t understand,” and like, basically telling me what I’m doing is wrong. And I’m like, *I’ll live my life just the way I want to, and you’re not gonna really deter me from that—sorry about it.*

IC. And that happens often, would you say?

M. Yeah, I would say there’s a good amount of it.

Based on M.’s commentary here, as well as Y.’s, above, it seems like queer students are able to swiftly manage instances of homophobia and transphobia through a confident rebuttal or by
simply blocking other users. In response to family members posting xenophobic and
homophobic content, M. also takes a similar approach (“I just cut it out”), but he described how
his partner instead is quick to challenge his aunt’s display of xenophobia and homophobia:

M. Like, my aunt and him have had arguments about politics. She’s very
conservative, and she’s always very nice to us, but she’s also very conservative
and so it’s like, I don’t know, given what she posts, it’s like I don’t know how
much of this is true to our face. And that doesn’t sit well with my husband as
much. [I’m] like, “That’s her life, [if] she’s gonna be that person, be that person.”
And he’s like, “No! That’s wrong! [M. laughs] This is why!” And I’m like,
“You’re trying to rationalize with someone that’s not rational.”

IC. What is an example of an article, politically, that they would comment on?

M. You know, like some of the xenophobia that’s come out of this [presidential]
administration, and he is a gay immigrant, and so you know, he’ll be like, “Where
are the facts in this?”—just questioning, and some of her friends will post Nazi
memes [M. laughs] back at him, and just like very aggressive. So, I’m just kind of
like, we all know it’s there. Me, I know personally I avoid it; I’m not afraid to
fight, but it’s like I don’t want to.

IC. Have you or your husband ever experienced any sort of homophobic remarks or
comments online? Or even engaged in debates about that?

M. I would say that, like my aunt, she has posted things, like an article saying gays
shouldn’t be married, or whatever. And instead of engaging online, my dad will
pick just up the phone and be like, “What is wrong with you? Take this down
right now. It’s so offensive,” and he’ll just have an actual dialogue with her
instead of… it’s just much more effective.

In terms of homophobia, even if I did, I’m usually just kinda like, Done. I just cut
it out. It’s definitely always how I deal with it, whether it’s in the community or
out.

Here, M. expresses doubts about his partner’s strategy, i.e. refuting homophobic comments and
posts, as it only seems to fan the flames of ignorance in digital spaces. “Having an actual
conversation,” he said, like his dad does, is a better alternative, but ignoring it is, at the very
least, the most passive means of handling online harassment. While M. is transparent in
admitting that he “[doesn’t] want to [fight]”, W., who is also white, cis, and gay, expressed some
desire for retaliation; he admits that after seeing homophobic or transphobic content online (e.g.
 “[a] post about what Trump’s cabinet [thinks] about trans rights”), it “kind of beats me up
inside… I feel like it makes me want to stick up for them almost? Like defend them in a way, or
kind of educate people.”

According to participant voices in this section, the act of coming out online can be
considered just as meaningful as interpersonal or IRL (“in real life”) discourse. While identity
disclosure on social media varies, both in terms of its format and its meaning, I have identified
several instances of online coming out experiences that participants designated as salient
moments of identity work. It’s important to highlight how online, altruistic sentiments, a desire
to disclose widely and profoundly, and efforts to rally against homophobia are often social-
justice oriented motivations for coming out, which differ greatly from interpersonal motivations,
which are often characterized by fear, pressure, or the heteronormative expectation to ‘confess’
nonconformity.

Queer Resources and Finding Community

Across digital studies, researchers have indicated that Internet access is highly impactful in the
coming out process: e.g. users are able to “find the answers that were not readily available, or
that they were not prepared to ask offline” (Miller 2016:615). D. gave an example of this in our
conversation: due to stereotypes of lesbian hypersexuality, she went to the internet to seek out
information about her developing queerness—she remembers searching, “‘What do I do if I don’t
like sex?’ […] of course in Incognito,” she added, laughing. Szulc and Dhoest explore a similar
phenomenon, looking at differences in Internet use ‘pre- vs. post-coming out’ (2013) to find that younger LGB users relied on the Internet for advice, information, and anonymous guidance during the coming out process. Scholars also concur that online resources can be tangible, advantageous, and an integral means of identity formation and development (ibid., Baams et al. 2011; Miller 2016); still, these works show that queer youth are more likely to access the Internet to gather information and seek out social support (e.g. Baams et al. 2011, Szulc and Dhoest 2013) compared to older queer individuals (i.e. typically post-coming out), who rely on digital forums and platforms for establishing community or sexual networks (e.g. Herrera 2017; Henrickson 2007).

So far in this chapter, I have recognized and problematized the conceptualization of online/offline dichotomy, in terms of analyzing queer identity work. To better illustrate how this binary is navigated by queer students coming out, I draw upon a compelling excerpt from my chat with S., a Latina, white-passing lesbian—who, to note, has always seriously questioned her gender identity, but for now, she says, “I guess I’m a woman.” Through an interpretation of S.’s unique experience with roleplaying on Facebook, I offer an important contribution to works in digital studies and sociology: I demonstrate how dimensions of online and offline sociality are actually interconnected and inform one another.

Towards the beginning of our interview, S. casually explained how her interest in anime and manga (particularly the TV program, *Fruits Baskets*) led her to roleplaying on Facebook. “I was like, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, and I roleplayed as Akito,24 and it was fun because I could—I could pretend I was a guy, I could pretend I was a woman, because it fit the

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24 A character from the TV program, *Fruits Baskets*, S. informed me that Akito “is raised as a boy but is actually a woman. It’s like, this big plot twist. You’re like, *Oh my god!*”
character.” As our conversation about coming out and identity work progressed, S. drew on this experience frequently, so much so that I understood her roleplaying to be a serious hobby and a significant means of exploring queerness. To garner more context, I asked S. how roleplaying typically would unfold online, and she explained how it required creating a separate Facebook profile for roleplaying specifically. Because it mostly occurs within Facebook Messenger, a subsection of the platform, roleplaying was almost entirely textual and required an extensive production of fan fiction scripts as well as a constant interplay with other users (or ‘characters’). The result is a performance that fosters a sense of community within a fictional, yet tangible, online world.

In recalling a quote from chapter one, Stein and Plummer (1994) established a demarcation between analyses of ‘texts’ and ‘everyday life’ in queer theory, which should be noted because it implies that they exist independently of one another. However, the relationship between text-based digital communication and interpersonal interactions has become a topic of interest in contemporary digital studies (e.g. Hogan 2010; Schwarz and Shani 2016), and some scholars suggest that the online-offline link is especially relevant, in terms of youth identity.

For young people, sculpting a presence online is a rite of passage that takes place well before they are entitled to vote, drive a car or live independently, and it entails complex negotiations with family, friends, authority figures and institutions, as well as unknown individuals and communities (Vivienne et al. 2016:192).

To this point, I want to contextualize and emphasize the significance of S.’s roleplaying. Her participation in the online activity came after years of experiencing ignorance, misogyny, and homophobia in the Christian church. In terms of her queerness, she was rendered largely invisible by her church community and her Christian school network alike, but interacting with an online community of role players provided a sense of support, positive reinforcement, and validation. Online, S. had the agency to “sculpt”, explore, and try on a series of shifting
identities; as she says herself, she could “play” with the idea of being bi, being queer, and being a lesbian in spaces that were receptive and tolerant of nonconforming identity(s).

As S. became more involved with roleplaying, she developed romantic interests in another female user she met; however, this attraction was hard to understand, because it was a very real social connection, as well as fictional, metaphysical story.

S. And, I guess, through roleplaying, like, as this character, and having this relationship in this strange, borderline between, Was it the characters or us? I, like, accepted, at least to some extent, I wasn’t straight. And I realized I couldn’t actually picture myself in sexual situations with men. Like I couldn’t actually picture myself in good, lasting relationships with men. Like, the only time I had a boyfriend, I broke up with him at church camp to see if he’d cry on a dare. And he did.

Despite navigating the confusing “borderline” between fiction and reality, S.’s online relationship was significant in that allowed her to acknowledge her queerness—perhaps for the first time—to both to herself and other users. “Even if I wasn’t really out to them, I was kind of out,” she said, “and they saw me progress.” S. went on to explain how roleplaying soon became “everything”—in fact, “I could not live without it,” she insisted. “I couldn’t go more than two days without talking. It was an entirely different world.” Towards the end of our interview, S. reflected on her experiences with online identity work and remarked,

S. I wouldn’t have come out without having had the roleplaying […] I wouldn’t have known exactly what queerness is, or like—there’s just so much I wouldn’t have known without online, I guess, community.

This is a notable contrast to a body of literature that suggests online life is segmented from interpersonal life; S.’s story provides a brief study of queer digital identity that validates

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25 Notable works in digital studies (e.g. boyd 2011) have developed innovative means of mapping the ecosystems of social networking sites (SNSs), and many recent additions incorporate applications of Goffman’s (1956) dramaturgical metaphor in studies of online identity (Dugay 2016; Hogan 2010; Lincoln and Robards 2016; Miller 1995; Robards 2014; Robinson 2007) because it illustrates the deliberate, “back stage” measures that are taken in
digital interactions as meaningful and profound and demonstrates that the influence of online interactions in one’s lived experienced is observable. Through roleplaying, I suggest that S. was able to account for and unpack her understandings of gender and sexuality and find answers to questions that would not have been permissible in her everyday world.

The Contested Case of Tumblr

Throughout the last decade, the growing popularity of Tumblr among queer young people has been reflected by increasing scholarship on the online platform. Tumblr is culturally understood as a discursive, “safe space” for exploring queer identity (e.g. Cavalcante 2018; Haber 2017; Robards & Byron 2017), especially for those whose gender/sexual identities are less visible or represented (e.g. asexual, trans, genderqueer, and nonbinary individuals). The information available on the platform can be integral for gaining a keen understanding of individual identity and community norms surrounding queerness, as well as developing an awareness of inequality that extend beyond the LGBTQIA+ community.

In my conversation with X., a white, trans queer student, they explained that, “[Tumblr is] really where I found all the information about being gay and being trans and different genders and stuff like that. And also, a lot of social justice stuff and learning about racism and sexism...” X. was not alone in their experience with pursuing identity work on Tumblr; R., too, a cis lesbian Latina student, admitted that she made an account via her interests in fandom, but upon using the platform, she said,” I found out that there was this whole social justice side of it, and I read a lot about the discussions people were having on there.”

IC. Like what? Can you give me an example?

constructing users’ “front stage” social media identity(s); however, its application in digital studies mistakenly compartmentalizes and disconnects online and offline life.
R. There was a lot of discussion about, for example, oppression versus privilege. A discussion about, like, sexual identities, gender identities, racial identities.

IC. Mhm. Do you find that these were particularly helpful for you?

R. Mmm, it definitely made me feel like I had to place to talk about it, back when I wasn’t open about it in middle school.

As X. and R. both seem to indicate, one of the more salient incentives of using Tumblr is its availability of resources, content, and visual forms of representation, which aid young queer users who are navigating, naming, and exploring their identities for the first time.

A published interview from 2014 between academics Marty Fink and Quinn Miller offers a similar claim, i.e. the structural features of Tumblr are both aesthetically and politically appealing to its queer users—specifically individuals who are trans and genderqueer—because they are able to mobilize ‘self-representations’ and stories “beyond local contexts and spatial boundaries” (ibid. 624) and acquire support, a feedback loop, and a sense of belonging. Using blog posts, ‘re-blogs’, and ‘notes’, queer Tumblr users become creative agents of cultural production that disrupt gender and sexuality norms (ibid.) while also garnering meaningful support from an online community. Fink explains how his introduction to the site ultimately provided this sense of community in his own life:

[...] I came to the site to connect to a community of queer introverts in my daily “real” life who spend much of their time building digital cultures online. I wanted to be part of these communities as well as the (often far less accessible) ones we were building offline. At present, Tumblr plays a unique role as a particular digital forum for disseminating self-representations of trans experience beyond local contexts and spatial boundaries (614).

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To add, Tumblr was historically notorious for being a premier online clearinghouse for queer and sex-positive porn; like participants in Cavalcante’s study (2018), students I spoke with noted that in the past, they also accessed Tumblr for this reason, but since the platform rolled out recent policy changes on censorship (which L. said was “dumb on their part”), the website holds less appeal: as S., a lesbian Latina, explained, “I kind of [shun] Tumblr now [...] because they took off all the porn, so, I’m like, Where am I gonna get good porn?” For specifics about the policy changes, see Paul Byron’s recent, detailed account (2019) on the “queer life and death of Tumblr.”
Fink would likely agree that these often-daily online interactions do not operate distinctly from ‘real life’; instead, a Tumblr presence seems to benefit a queer lived experience (ibid.; Robards and Byron 2017). Thus, Tumblr embodies what Wakeford (1997) would call a ‘cyberqueer space’: a “new [place]” within which LGBTQIA+ experiences can be shared, discussed, and challenged (410).

Such discourse, while productive, can quickly become “toxic,” as X. said, and D. explained that one of the pitfalls of social media broadly—and Tumblr in particular—is that, “you’re sometimes excluded by people in your own community.” D., a white cis female who now sexually identifies as queer, described how in their experience with Tumblr, conversations and message threads were harshly critical of ace-identified individuals and dismissed asexuality from the LGBTQ+ spectrum.

D. [...] when I identified as ace [i.e. asexual], there would be so many posts, like, “If you’re ace, you’re just trying to be special.” And I already felt broken, and like, not like a person, kind of? And hearing that from the community that’s supposed to be accepting me, just like, kicks a dead horse when it’s already down. It’s like—it feels like [...] half of my identity y’all are fine with but the other half is suddenly just not okay?

And even just taking that in a passive way and not necessarily engaging with that, and like, arguing that—because sometimes you just don’t have the energy to argue that.

In this excerpt, the lived realities of being exposed to online policing of asexuality are evident: D. was left feeling hurt, invalidated, and admittedly too tired to rebuke the offensive comments.

She went on to speak broadly to the stigma cast upon ace individuals in the larger queer community, and attempted to explain why such prejudice exists:

D. [...] the LGBT community [...] is super exclusionary to people who are ace. Um, because who knows why? Um, because they’re just seen as people “trying to be special”, and like, “Oh, some people don’t like sex. You’re not queer because of it. It’s based on oppression,” or whatever.
What D. describes here is an exclusionary LGBT logic, which asserts that because asexual-identified individuals are (mis)perceived as not experiencing sexual attraction or intercourse, the identity category does not share common ground with queer oppression historically. This latter claim is also faulty, because it wrongly suggests that discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people is always about sexual orientation or sexual acts. K. explained other instances intracommunity prejudice in more detail, noting that they had personally been “heckled” online several times, and additionally, one of their online friends had been seriously verbally abused by other users.

K. But for example, on Tumblr, they get especially white LGBT people harassing them all the fucking time about stuff like that, where it’s like, “You can’t be a woman and agender, you’re faking being transgender.” And [my friend] is like, “I don’t know if you can talk to me like that.”

But people are just on [them] all the time for this, and the fact that it’s almost always white people who are saying this to [them]—and if not a white person, it’s a non-Black person of color. And [my friend] is Black, by the way. And it’s like, you really think you can just go up to any Black person and […] impress a white-version of what gender is supposed to be onto them?

Even when you’re saying you’re rejecting the notion of gender that your people have created and impressed upon people like me and like [my friend], you’re still going up to people like us and saying that we’re doing it wrong. That’s—that’s crazy.

For K., after witnessing this wildly groundless policing of identity work, especially by white LGBT users, they realized Tumblr was not a safe space for them. X. shared a similar perspective: originally invested in Tumblr for its anonymity, experiences with verbal abuse on the platform rendered it a “hellscape” that was too threatening for continued use. This polarization between positive and negative experiences on Tumblr is conceptualized well in Cavalcante’s work (2018): describing it as both a “queer utopia” and a “queer vortex,” the platform often becomes a double-edged sword for LGBTQIA+ users. As a bastion of cyberqueer culture, Tumblr’s most progressive online communities offer resources, spaces for nonconforming identity expression,
and a forum for critical discussions of oppression and its pervasiveness in everyday life.

However, Tumblr’s “vortextuality” (ibid.) becomes apparent, as participants note, when the policing of sexual identity work runs rampant in messages and posts from other users.

This section has argued that internet resources may provide an outlet for queer individuals that lack social supports or larger networks in school and family life. As already mentioned, Tumblr has substantially important meaning for sexually and gender nonconforming populations:

As a venue for self-representation, Tumblr points to the potential as well as to the limitations of digital cultures in moving sexuality out of the fetishized realm of the obscene and into more productive conversations of how desire functions alongside daily experiences of factors like racism, disability, and gender-based violence that converge to influence offline lives (Fink 2014:621).

What Fink describes here is Tumblr’s capacity for fostering discourse that problematizes the marginalization of queer communities. Digital networks then, offer a connection that transcends isolation in everyday life; with relationships that are ‘selective’ and temporal, the internet is a necessary space for social connection among more disenfranchised or marginalized queer youth. However, we must remember that these discussions, while operating in bounded space of Tumblr’s platform, consist of subjectivities who occupy embodied experiences of queerness: i.e. they are often young people—adolescents who are navigating questions of identity work for the first time. For these users, reading or engaging with content on Tumblr that rejects or dismisses identity as inauthentic can leave a lasting imprint on understandings about queerness and notions of self-esteem. In other words, the effect of online sociality is palpable offline, especially because it is perceived as a meaningful and impressionable form of social interaction among queer users.
Through participants’ stories, we have seen how negative online experiences can certainly affect interpersonal life outcomes; to assume they do not would be a blatant misinterpretation. However, X. offered a final thought that troubles the idealized vision of the internet as a queer-affirming space. It was perhaps the most compelling moment I experienced throughout this interview process.

X. Yeah. I guess, like, one comment I would make is that [...] I think a lot of gay people and trans people go online just because they’re so isolated and lonely. And like, I don’t know. It’s just very painful to have to do that. Like, to be pushed to do that because there’s no one in your life, or there’s so little people in your life that, like, validate your existence and make you feel that you deserve to be in the world, or that you are, like, loved. Because I think especially as adolescents, we just get these ideas that the world hates us and that we don’t belong, and that we never will find a place to belong.

While a rosy vision of the internet is characterized by access to visibility, connection, and tolerance, X. offers more a realistic interpretation: that for queer users, going online is sometimes a necessary means for avoiding the isolation and loneliness that they have experienced in their everyday worlds. This reality is not a pleasant one; in fact, it’s quite painful, to have to navigate the internet as a response to interpersonal marginalization. In this way, we might consider the online v. offline dichotomy, not as a means of comparison, but to recognize how crossing from one realm to the other is a pragmatic escape for the queers who might need it the most.

In this chapter, I have challenged the commonsense claim that the internet provides equally accessible resources that are free from stigma, prejudice, or discrimination. Through the stories of participants in their own words, this intersectional analysis explores how the internet certainly offers substantial benefits to queer and nonconforming youth; however, interpersonal bias and systems of oppression pervade online forms of communication and social media applications. Additionally, I trouble the notion that the internet is experienced as a ‘safe space’
for anonymous or uninhibited explorations of queer identity. In fact, despite the internet’s practical affordances of identity work, there are severe limits to tolerance and inclusion in online sociality, and because of this, doing queer identity work online has the potential to exacerbate the isolating effects of homophobia and discrimination.
CHAPTER 4.

Campus Climate and the Institutionalization of Queer Resources

This is a story not of the practiced shaping of the self or of the body as performance, but about our exquisite, though often ignored, sensitivity to our environment; it is a story about the unintentional and unplanned remolding of the self in relation to one's surroundings.


In the U.S. imaginary, the college campus often represents a symbolic space characterized by independence and a freedom to experiment with identity. Given potentially oppressive or restrictive nature of the heteronormative primary group—as chapter two explained in regard to family and early schooling—attending college or university can be seen as a “sexual emancipation” (Epstein et al. 2000:156) for queer youth. In fact, students may arrive on campus with deliberate intentions of “trying on” or developing new identities (ibid.), perhaps with the hope that college will provide a “freer cultural environment” (ibid. 156) in which they can broaden their social circle with new friends and relationships. This departure from the primary group can be especially liberating in the sense that an on-campus schooling experience is relatively long-term (Ellis 2009); thus, especially for students moving away from home, the college or university setting offers an unprecedented opportunity to delve into matters of sexual and gender identity without the influence of family and secondary school institutions surrounding them.

However, research has shown that discrimination is unquestionably at large on campuses nationwide. In Stotzer’s work (2010) on campus safety and institutional policies for LGB

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27 At the time of data collection, three students in this sample reported that they commuted to campus and lived nearby in their family home, and five students lived in on-campus housing. The remainder of participants said they lived off-campus locally.
students, there was an increase in the prevalence of hate crimes on campuses within states that
have policies to protect queer individuals; this contradictory finding suggests that overall, there is
likely an underreporting of hate crimes in the universities and states that lack LGB policies. At
large in the U.S., it’s like that these types of realities on campus are not uncommon. In recent
years, there has been a stark increase in the number of Christian colleges and universities that
have successfully petitioned the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) for religious exemptions to federal
mandates of Title IX (Coley 2018), which is designed to protect LGBTQIA+ students from sex-
based discrimination. The consequences of unregulated collegiate environments are severe for
queer students and can include stigmatization, marginalization, and potentially, student expulsion
from the institutions themselves. These contexts, while perhaps housing a subset of the
LGBTQIA+ population, illustrate perhaps the most severe sites of homophobia in higher
education today.

In this chapter, I argue that coming out should be understood in terms of the institutional
contexts in which identity work occurs. In the halls of higher education, neoliberal logics shape
understandings about which students can access resources and safely do identity work on
campus. Through an analysis of campus climate as reported by participant interviews, I broadly
claim that the “calculated invisibility” of neoliberalism (Davies and Bansel 2007:254) effectively
limits institutional offerings for and perceptions of queer programming. To begin, I summarize
the case of neoliberal queer subjectivities, and discuss perceptions of tolerance and safety among
participants. I also add nuance to competing scholarly claims about the perceived benefits of
institutionalized spaces such as the classroom and student-led organizations for the LGBTQIA+
community through participants’ experiences. To offer an administrative point of view, I fold in
field notes and excerpts from an interview with a university official who leads the on-campus
queer resource center (the QRC) at my field site. Finally, I conclude by demonstrating that the responsibility of fostering safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ students is highly contested and seems to be delegated to departments and organizations that specialize in ‘diversity’ or ‘multiculturalism’, rather than being championed by the university at large. This silo-ing effect, I argue, has ramifications for how queer students perceive campus safety and climate and informs how they disclose their identities with peers and administrators.

*The Homonormative Implications of Disclosure*

In the *Twilight of Equality*, Lisa Duggan (2014) presents a captivating analysis of the emergence of neoliberalism in the United States and particularly, its effects on cultural discourses within the greater LGBTQIA+ community. Among advocates of ‘equality’, she describes the rise of “a new homonormativity”—“a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but sustains and upholds them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50). Such politics pervade institutional and interpersonal dimensions of social life, and in the context of the American university, neoliberal logics of homonormativity render the experiences of nonconforming, nonwhite queer subjectivities as arbitrary and detached from dominant discourses of visibility and purported equality.

In terms of student life, research shows that on-campus activism by LGBTQIA+ organizations can have a direct effect on creating affirmative spaces for its members (Graziano 2004). Jonathan Coley (2018) finds that students’ participation in queer organizations at Christian colleges and universities profoundly shape individual identity formation as well—especially among students from conservative, less tolerant backgrounds—and can also be
integral in transforming campus climate to benefit queer student life more broadly. In this way, Coley highlights LGBTQIA+ student advocates as “change agents,” making these students similar to those highlighted in Rasmussen’s earlier work, wherein she found that “those who do come out may be celebrated as role models promoting tolerance and inclusivity, empowering themselves and others” (2004:145).

However, when considering a rhetoric of inclusivity—e.g. the ‘join us’ discourse described in chapter one—among peer allies and organizations on campus, Rasmussen offers a warning: the promotion of coming out, especially in organized events around holidays such as National Coming Out Day, can produce an adverse effect or a negative pressure on LGBTQIA+ students (ibid.). Often, homonormative connotations are imbued in such programming as suggestions that those who do not come out in solidarity may be considered lacking, dishonest, or even resistant to assimilation (ibid. 145). Of course, the larger whitewashed backdrop of these assumptions cannot be overlooked, for after all,

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mainstream narratives of coming out imply a white subjectivity, one that forgets the influence of culture, family and heritage. For many queer people of color, coming out is a much more nuanced process than a single moment of verbal disclosure (Adan Sanchez 2017 [online]).
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Thus, students who might consider membership in such groups may be ultimately dissuaded from joining if dominant messaging excludes their social location and/or indicates that presenting a sexual or gender identity is necessary (Rasmussen 2004).

In a conversation with T., I was struck by their forceful disinterestedness in pursuing on-campus groups that organize based on sexual or racial identity. In discussing the intersections of his Blackness, maleness, and gayness, it was evident that he detects a lack of space for overlapping identities, at both a cultural level and on campus:
T. [...] Like all the struggles I get are for being black and gay. Because I have the gay people telling me I act straight and the Black people telling me that sometimes I’m not Black enough, or just call out the fact that I’m gay. So you have all of these movements going on for both parties, like Pride and Black Lives Matter, and I am in the middle, not knowing how to feel, because, yeah, “Black Lives Matter,” but you don’t mean that for gay people. And then you have Pride, where most people look at Black people as sex objects. So I’m in the middle of both of them, and every time there’s something going on, I’m like, Damn, that sucks, and of course I feel bad, but I’m always like, I’m not taking a position on it, I’m not taking a stance, I’m not taking a side. Because in both ways, I’m affected, but in both ways, like, those two parties are clashing, and I’m not gonna take a side.

IC. Okay, so then, do you know anyone or any friends of yours that do participate in anything on campus for LGBTQ programing, for example? Or any organizations for students of color?

T. I don’t have gay friends.

IC. Okay.

T. I know all about the, like, students of color organizations, but I just don’t feel comfortable, being that, my black and gay identity are always clashing.

IC. Interesting, so that’s always stopped you from joining those, you would say?

T. Mm-hm.

Davies and Bansel explain that, under neoliberal logics, “schools and universities have arguably been reconfigured to produce the highly individualized, responsibilized subjects” (2007:248), who, embedded in neoliberal institutions, often perceive their individuation as ‘freedom’ or agentic autonomy. In this interview segment, the participant explains that they choose to not get involved in identity-based organizations on campus, but this “choice” almost seems predetermined for them (and thus, represents a lack of choice), given a lack of discursive space in larger social movements and a perceived dissonance between identity-based groups on campus. Here, the “calculated invisibility” of an oppressive neoliberal regime reveals itself on two counts: first, for queer students that dismiss opportunities for collective action by avoiding
solidarity groups, queer bargaining power is abandoned (Davies and Bansel 2007:249), and for queer students of color, who are multiply marginalized via identity politics, the costs of joining such groups may not be understood to be worthwhile or rewarding.

‘Lifting’ Queerness in the Neoliberal University

To garner a deeper understanding of institutional offerings and campus climate for queer students at my field site, I attended a Safe Space training in early February 2019. The four-hour session, facilitated by Taylor, the Coordinator of the Queer Resource Center (QRC), was comprehensive, emotionally heavy, but overall, motivational. Taylor was relatable in their presentation: they inserted quip remarks often, embellished their slides with sarcastic and humorous anecdotes, and gave what felt like an honest, rather than romanticized, appraisal of the lived experiences of queer students on campus. Contrary to my expectations, the session was not a preachy interest meeting that advertised a shiny, affirming campus; rather, the goal of the training, Taylor said, is “to create space for more identities and consciousness to exist.” The Safe Space training I attended is just one branch of the QRC’s programmatic offerings for students on campus; additionally, weekly discussion groups and monthly events are facilitated by student leaders, semester- or year-long internships and employment opportunities are regularly available, and opportunities to attend regional conferences and local queer events are also extended to interested students. Most programming events, however, are held in the QRC’s main office, which is a unique on-campus space.

My first impressions of the QRC came from attending a discussion group last fall, where I conducted some informal field observations. In my description of the center, I noted being

28 A pseudonym has been used here to obscure participant identity.
mesmerized by bright-colored walls plastered with an assortment of flyers, advertisements, and informational brochures related to LGBTQIA+ identity, safer sex awareness, and various social justice platforms. Besides Taylor’s private office, the QRC has an open floor plan made up of lounge areas that are conducive to working, eating, and hanging out with other queer students. The main seating area resembles something of a prototypical teenage basement—several bean bag chairs as well as a large L-shaped couch with built-in drink holders and side tables outline the space, and pillows and blankets and cushions make it feel very comfortable, soft, and almost protected. The massive flat-screen TV facing the seating area is the centerpiece and boasts a loaded entertainment system—movies, video games, board games, etc.—and a snack station complete with a mini fridge and an eclectic collection of mugs. Given my initial introduction to the space and the solidarity I felt in the informal, yet supportive discussion group, I could see firsthand how the QRC seeks to preserve a physical environment on campus that is welcoming, fun, comfortable, and accessible for any student that walks through the door.

In the spring, I scheduled a follow-up interview with Taylor, to obtain more context and background information about the QRC for my study. I was delighted to learn that the center is approaching its ten-year anniversary. Originally founded in 2009, the QRC was created by students to talk about issues related to gender and sexuality, and Taylor, who was pursuing their graduate studies at the time, contributed to these efforts in a student leadership position for three years. In its early stages, student organizers of the QRC “wanted to tap into the anonymity of students who felt there was nothing for them” on campus, Taylor explained, adding that for queer students at the time, “there was no concept of social or emotional institutional help.” Coley’s work would classify the earliest iteration of the QRC as a “solidarity group” (2018)—a student-led community rooted in affinities of nonconforming identity(s). Speaking to the mission
of those early years, Taylor said, “[We] were trying to hold so much space and community,” and indicated that the eventual goal was to “lift that through institutional programming to change the [campus] climate [for queer students].” Still, they explained that at the time, even with the alleged need for identity-based student engagement, the club would “implode” at the end of each academic year—likely due to a variety of reasons, including graduating members and rising academic workloads and extracurricular conflicts among younger students.

In the years since its founding, the QRC has secured a clearly defined position in the university’s organizational infrastructure. Operating under ‘Student Affairs’ (and currently moving towards ‘Student Life’), the center is housed beneath the department of Intercultural Student Engagement. This placement is important, as it renders the QRC distinct from four active LGBTQIA+ organizations that exist beneath the Student Association umbrella, which are student-led and operated. In response to the QRC’s current location in the institutional scaffolding, Taylor assured me, “I try really hard not to have [the students] feel the weight of the institution.” In fact, they expressed a deep-seated commitment to “helping people imagine and create” the future of queer student involvement, as well as fostering “growth potential” for undergraduate students. Still, providing the tools and the resources to do so, Taylor explained, is only one step of the process. Articulate in their intersectional orientation, Taylor emphasized that the positionality of student members and their access to campus resources must be taken into account when envisioning the very futures they speak of.

Although a sense of hierarchy is intentionally not fostered in the center, Taylor explained that there is an assumption among students that Taylor’s role is more impactful within the institution than perhaps it actually is. This presents issues interpersonally, they explained: Taylor described moments in which student staff have approached them democratically with lists of
demands and needs for queer students on campus. But Taylor admitted that direct-action organizing is not always compatible with the QRC’s place in the university’s hierarchy. “[We’re] deeper under the layers,” they said, and even given Taylor’s personal commitment to disrupting hegemonic power, they explained that such power nevertheless exists. Taylor described how this reality has been disheartening to student members who try to hold university administrators accountable for driving institutional change, and as a result, perhaps trigger a sense of disillusionment with the QRC itself.

Traces of neoliberal pressure can be detected within Taylor’s commentary about the QRC. Rather than having the ability to spearhead institutional change at higher levels in the university, Taylor insisted that the primary responsibility of their role is to maintain “a student-centered approach” to LGBT resources and programming, which includes a student leadership structure that, by design, passes the gauntlet to student “understudies” and rising undergraduates through training and mentorship. While this set up seems sustainable and community-driven, such logics also characterize the work of the QRC as what Davies and Bansel (2007) would call a “technology of choice,” which furthers the individualistic, morally-charged sentiments of neoliberalism and drive subjects to “take over responsibility for areas of care that were previously the responsibility of the [institution]” (251). In other words, by carving a space for queer programming and student resources, the institution itself delegates responsibility for the LGBTQIA+ community to a particular entity, which is effectively organized by a singular administrator—a heavy lift, to say the least.
Student Impressions of the Queer Resource Center

Fostering a physical space for queer identities on campus is one of the primary responsibilities of Taylor’s role, and their commentary indicates that the QRC, by design, facilitates community building, a leisurely, relaxed atmosphere, and an ongoing dialogue among queer students. Such efforts have certainly been met with positive reviews; indeed, one student reported liking the QRC because it’s somewhere she can “eat and sit with people, and […] just feel safe.” Many participants praised the center for offering new knowledge on queer identity and social justice, and it was reported to be a “support system” for students, led by an administrator who “[has their] back.”

The majority of students in my sample had no official ties to the QRC; i.e. they did not participate in sponsored events, attend meetings, or frequent the center. However, four students did describe a clear commitment to the QRC, either through part-time employment or volunteering. When I spoke with each of them, I had already been made aware of some controversial on-campus rumblings about the center; one student shared that the QRC has a “reputation that is problematic that we’re working on.” In my interviews with the four involved students,29 I asked if they were willing to offer a more detailed explanation about the state of things at the QRC, and they agreed to disclose the information organized below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>stigma, queer POC representation, intracommunity divisions</td>
<td>So, it’s like, […] and I’m working at the center. Obviously, this is like a super tangent so I’m not even gonna get into it, but there’s almost a stigma on queer people of color, and we’ve had to make our own, like, thing, separate from LGBTQ+, because we have to make our presence known, almost.</td>
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</tbody>
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29 In this section, I intentionally do not use identifying initials or characteristics, in order to guarantee confidentiality and the anonymity of participants.
Whereas, they’re talking about stuff here like [...] how, like, it’s not entirely safe here more for Hispanic people, and how they feel like the [QRC] sometimes is good in there, but it depends on who’s in there. But, I feel like that’s more of where you originally come from. So, like, if you’re from a place that just has more people or just, like, I don’t know—maybe not more liberal, but like, has more access to people? Then, it might feel… I don’t really know how to put it, I guess. I’m sorry.

IC. No, that’s okay. So, it sounds like—I mean, I don’t want to misinterpret what you’re saying, but from what I’m gathering—it sounds like it’s safe and inclusive here, largely speaking. But not, maybe as accessible as it could be, or like, the Center itself might not be as accessible as it could be for, maybe, less represented or more marginalized students?

I think, yeah, for more people of color and stuff. But again, I don’t really have that much of an experience as a person of color because my ethnicity—it’s almost like a technicality. Like, yes, I’m [ethnicity], but I didn’t have those experiences for the most part.

And then [to] be here until 9pm for the end of [a QRC] event, and I have to get the bus back. And I have to walk from the station. So, like, I do not like—do not like—how all the events are at night. I know it makes the most sense for the majority, but I don’t like it.

It’s honestly ‘cause the [QRC] needs to do better. Because we do have a reputation for being a very white, problematic space. Um, and I think, like, having these conversations, especially with my supervisor, um—gay people don’t want to have to need that space. There’s like, people who are like, okay with using that space, and they’re like, Yeah, I go here; it’s really queer, it’s really great. But then there are other queer people that don’t want to need that space or don’t want to go to that space, because then it’s showing that, like, they are different.

And I think there’s definitely a dichotomy within the queer community of, “No, we’re just like you.” And it’s like, “No, we’re different and that’s okay.” Um, and I see that a lot in the community as well as on campus. Um, and I think that, like, personally, it’s like the colorblindness thing. It’s like, no we are different, we have to acknowledge that. It’s the same thing with queerness. It’s like, no we’re not straight people; we’re different. We have different experiences, and it’s important to acknowledge that instead of being like, “No, we’re just like you!” Like, “We wanna get married!” It’s like, no, we’re different because we’ve been oppressed for a while. Like people used to get killed just for liking someone. And that’s super important to acknowledge.

So, this is complicated but… this is, like, months, even like, years, in the making. But essentially, it’s a very white space. Which, obviously, is not initially affecting me as it’s affecting students of color. But basically, there’s this group there now of people who are white and very racist, but they don’t understand how terrible the things they’re saying are. Like, they don’t—they’re all very weird people and they make everyone so uncomfortable, and like, it’s not even just racism. It’s so many other things that they’re saying in the space, and so many people, like on-staff and not on-staff have gone to the Coordinator to tell them about so many instances, and like, they’ve never done anything about it. […]
Two students gave operational critiques about the center: one highlighted how on average, the center’s daily student attendance count has decreased in recent years, and another student added that the QRC’s program offerings are not ideal, as most events occur in the evening—so for commuters, they are almost impossibly inconvenient. Beyond calling for better attendance and earlier programming, however, student critiques reveal how the QRC’s notorious, problematic representation stems from issues of racial representation. There is a perception that the QRC is largely a space for white queer students. One student explains that queer students of color feel like “we’ve had to make our own… separate LGBTQ+ [subgroup], because we have to make our presence known, almost.” Students note that this is not intentional on the administrative or leadership side of the QRC; instead, one participant explained that the racist dialogue originated with certain white student members who frequent the center. This language has implications for how queer students of color experience the QRC: one student said that Hispanic students, for example, have mixed sentiments about who can access the space, and generally, queer students of color have expressed discomfort in the space due to the reported racist commentary. As a response to the QRC’s internal struggle with racism, one student recalled that they and other members of the center approached Taylor with a list of issues, demanding: “It has to change.”
Regarding the discourse of critique that surrounds the QRC, it seems that first, inconvenient programming dissuades off-campus students, including commuters and perhaps graduate students, from joining. Second, intracommunity exclusivity and alleged racist dialogue via white student members presents problems with privilege, access, and QTPOC representation in the center. Taken together, these issues make more marginalized students feel unwelcome in a theoretically “safe space”, which may partially explain why LGBTQIA+ students of color are dissuaded from joining in the QRC in the first place. As we saw earlier in this chapter with T., he embodies a neoliberal sense of individuality and chooses to not get involved with on-campus queer organizing because from his vantage point, his identity is not visible in that space.

Returning to my interview with Taylor, they raised some interesting thoughts about the greater U.S. LGBT movement that might partially explain the QRC’s intracommunity divide. At large, Taylor suggested that there is a rift between queer people of color and white queers (often represented by cisgender gays and lesbians) who promulgate a homonormative message that equality can be achieved via cultural assimilation (Duggan 2014). Such activist rhetoric is problematic, however, because it is rooted in white privilege and especially excludes the marginalized position of queer black and brown bodies, who may lack the systematic advantages, networks, and capital of white activists leading LGBT nonprofits and organizations in the U.S. Because of this, assimilation for equality’s sake is 1) often not possible, or 2) not even idealized by all queer people, especially among those who are systematically oppressed.

Taylor described how the center tries to ‘tether’ this cultural chasm interpersonally through program offerings and community organizing that maintain an intersectional understanding of non-white queer lived experiences. In other words, they impressed upon me
that they seek to disrupt understandings of how students of color come to the space, as opposed to white students. To accomplish this, Taylor is careful to create programs that are sensitive to cultural differences among more marginalized students. Research shows that even the very idea of coming out has been critiqued as a white cultural construct (see Adan Sanchez 2017, Villicana et al. 2016); thus, it may be the case that underrepresented students don’t want to, are unable to, or lack the social support to come out in the same ways as more privileged queer students. To this point of privilege, Taylor also said that when seeking out more marginalized students, “the emotional capacity of getting involved” is something to consider, because that, too, is a privilege in itself and an indication of access, resources, and networks of support. Anecdotally, Taylor shared that they regularly encounter white students who, having more access to social supports, dismiss the idea of joining the QRC and maintain a more elitist response to community organizing around queer identity (e.g. “I don’t need to come and sit in [this] space and ‘be gay.’”). This, of course, could also be an indication of internalized homophobia, to which Taylor noted, “We could address [that] in programming, […] but the QRC is] focusing on more marginalized [students] and those with less means and less privilege.”

By and large, according to Taylor, queer students on campus are certainly benefiting from the center’s work, whether they know it or not. In fact, they assured me that having “the choice of going to the QRC or not speaks to campus tolerance itself,” and noted that in earlier years, trans students, for example, would get involved in order “to survive,” since the center was the only safe space available. “Now that we’ve lifted the weight,” Taylor said, “people with least resistance [i.e. white queer students] are going somewhere else.” While participant anecdotes suggest the opposite, it seems that at the end of the day, all students need a compelling reason to join the QRC, which Taylor recognizes. Whether it is to experience solidarity, get class credit,
find a safe space to ‘hang out’, or garner employment experience, the QRC is committed to providing such opportunities.

Some of the student-raised issues of white privilege and the lack of intersectional awareness among QRC members were clarified in my conversation with Taylor. As the Coordinator of the QRC, they were able to offer a fairly high-level and robust explanation that qualified how the center actually takes serious strides towards hosting events that prioritize the needs and experiences of more racially marginalized queer students. In my own reading of the center’s recent activities and events on campus, it does seem true that the center is committed to hosting regular discussions (both in-house and via partnerships with other on-campus organizations) that are aimed at addressing the experiences of queer and trans students of color. Additionally, Taylor, who is white, has a self-reported resounding commitment to educating white student members about their privilege, and according to my participants, the visible majority of student staff in the QRC appear to be largely white.

Still, by comparing the center’s programming efforts and Taylor’s priorities with my conversations with student participants, a dissonance certainly remains, particularly between the QRC’s perceived educational offerings and its day-to-day internal culture. The latter seems tenuous and unresolved due to a host of issues, including limited racial representation in staffing, as well as racist peer-to-peer interactions in the center. Should this reputation worsen or remain unresolved, I would imagine that securing the interest of students of color will become more difficult, despite the QRC’s deep-seated commitment to intersectionality and more representative programming. In fact, representation alone does not guarantee an institutional unraveling of
racial oppression\textsuperscript{30}, and the inclusion and tolerance on campus that Taylor describes may not necessarily be extended to gender-nonconforming subjectivities\textsuperscript{31}. Thus, a deeper unpacking of racist rhetoric in the organization should be prioritized in order to remedy these issues and guarantee that the QRC provides a safe, inclusive space for all students, particularly the marginalized students of color that have felt threatened in the space.

\textit{Institutionalized Homophobia and Campus Climate}

Beyond the walls of the QRC, students find that the university seems generally accepting of LGBTQIA+ identity. They explained that the climate feels largely “comfortable”, “inclusive”, and has a “sense of community”, and some students feel “surrounded by queerness”, freedom, diversity, and pride. At large, institutional programming acknowledges queer identity through offerings like Sexuality Month, and there is some “visual inclusion” of queerness, as O. said, as they recalled seeing Pride flags and Safe Space stickers around campus. And according to U.—a lesbian student of color—the fact that one of her professors came out in class was incredibly valuable; seeing him “[claim] his sexuality” was a firm demonstration of queer representation on campus.

However, in more specific instances, students described moments in which they verbally disclosed a queer identity to peers or professionals on campus, and in their responses, traces of discreet homophobia were evident. For example, E., who is white, nonbinary and “gay as hell”, recalled feeling excited about disclosing their queerness upon moving to campus, especially because they imagined it would be a tolerant social environment and a stark contrast from their Orthodox Jewish upbringing. After disclosing, it seems that E. sensed a lukewarm acceptance

\textsuperscript{30} U. made this point in their comments about diversity in television programming in chapter one.

\textsuperscript{31} Y. and O. observed in chapter two when discussing perceptions of safety on campus.
and confusion from their new friends; below, they describe these mixed responses to their enthusiasm for their emerging queerness:

E. But like […] once I got into college, I gave zero fucks. I was like, You know what, I’m just gonna say whatever I want. And my friends would be like, “You talk about gay people a lot.” I was like, “That’s ’cause no one else does!” But like, they were all really suspicious; they were like, “That’s weird.”

I saw similar comments in two interviews with graduate students who were policed for mentioning or ‘bringing up’ queer identity among their straight peers specifically. H., a white, cis lesbian, was challenged by a fellow graduate student (“Why do you talk about gay shit so much?”) after discussing a queer film, and C., a pansexual cis man, experienced pushback from a colleague in his department when he inquired about the potential for a line of queer student funding (“You just want your own funding,” he was told). C. also recalled, in a meeting with the graduate student assembly, how an administrator who was soliciting ideas for new building names offered a jarring homophobic response to C.’s suggestion:

C. And I said, “You should have something named after Harvey Milk,”32 and she said, “Well, we can’t name a building after Harvey Milk, because if we do, we can’t ever take the name off, and we need to be able to have a name that we can take off if a donor comes along.”

This final example points to an obvious, deliberate oversight of queer identity by a particular administrator; however, this should not be excused or overlooked as a singular incident. The anecdotes in this chapter have highlighted how on campus, responses to identity disclosure—whether it be in larger coming out moments or in small gestures, physical expression, and interpersonal comments that elucidate a queer identity—are shaped by neoliberal logics about nonconforming identities in higher education. As H. and E. explain, students are encouraged to be “assimilated, gender-appropriate” (Duggan 2004) members of the queer community on

32 The late Harvey Milk—a globally recognizable activist, politician, and pioneer for LGBT rights in the U.S.—who was assassinated on November 27, 1978, attended the institution (Class of ‘51) where this study takes place.
campus. Additionally, the pushback against a dedicating a building to Harvey Milk, a global advocate for queer representation, is first, blaringly ironic, and second, it suggests that acknowledging queerness visibly, in the form of a building or monument, would be detrimental to the university’s overall image. Considering these examples of institutionalized homophobia, I claim that neoliberal discourse determines that drawing attention to queerness is unnecessary or unwelcome on campus, likely because nonconforming identities do not align with the ‘logic of the market’ (Davies and Bansel 2007:257) and the image that the university hopes to maintain.

This chapter has established that institutional context is incredibly important for understanding identity work. Considering the voices of queer students on campus, as well as the perspective of an administrator of LGBTQIA+ resources, there is a traceable disconnect between the intentions of institutionalized queer programming and its reception among a targeted undergraduate population. While Taylor’s commentary describes neoliberal limitations for how much they can accomplish as an institutional actor, students seem to expect more of the QRC, like guaranteeing access and better representation for queer and trans students of color (QTPOC), as well as expunging any traces of interpersonal racism in the center itself. Zooming out beyond the debates of what needs to be done within the QRC, however, students make it quite clear that there is systematic, homophobic dismissal of queer identity from other members of the university community, including straight students and administrative actors alike. Thus, even at an institution that houses an established location for LGBTQIA+ identity (i.e. the QRC, a technology of choice), the campus climate is still characterized by noticeably regressive, hetero/homonormative tendencies which negatively impact the lived experiences of queer students.
CONCLUSION

In drawing on the experiences of college-age queer participants, this thesis contributes several intellectual insights to relevant research in sociology and its adjacent disciplines; here, I highlight three of these. First, the project makes several important theoretical interventions: I apply sociological frames like queer theory and cultural narratives in a body of digital studies literature; I also employ a bolstered queer theory that pays careful attention to intersectionality and the positionality of participants; and finally, I illustrate how an online v. offline dichotomy can be troubled conceptually via participants’ unique accounts of queer identity work.

Second, this project supports previous literature by offering a more nuanced, queer understanding of what coming out is. Through participants’ experiences with identity disclosure, both on campus and online, I demonstrate that coming out 1) can be classified as a declarative means of personal culture that legitimates stigmatized identity, 2) is a life-long process, 3) is an experience that is individuated but informed by social location and cultural patterns of meaning making, and 4) is difficult to describe using a singular definition, model, or medium. In the college context, coming out has binary-breaking potential in certain spaces like the QRC, but the expression of queer identity can be dissuaded by institutional discourses that promote hetero/homonormativity and ideologies of neoliberalism.

Finally, this project shows that institutional dynamics of a U.S. university campus certainly contextualize the lived experiences of these queer students and their identity work. Pairing the insights of participants from interview data with my interpretation of their words and experiences, I suggest that the current campus climate for gender- and sexually-nonconforming students is quite bleak on this particular campus, despite its appearance of acceptance and
inclusivity. Considering national sentiments about LGBTQIA+ advancement, which are based on the slow and steady acquisition of civil liberties for queer Americans, we see an interpersonal disconnect with students on campus from these larger cultural narratives of tolerance and visibility. Concerns about space (both virtual and interpersonal), audience, language, safety, expression, and presentation are visible throughout participant interviews, and at the institutional level, neoliberal logics are certainly at play in suppressing queerness. The oversight of nonconforming identity, which renders it a private concern for students, at least partially explains how participants perceive and navigate issues of identity politics, disclosure decisions, and engagement with on-campus programming.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Given the focus of this project—specifically, student perspectives on coming out—I should first recognize that the stories and timelines shared by participants are limited in their scope and of course cannot capture a full lived experience of queerness. With more time and a longer set of interview questions, I am certain that additional themes, probes, and directions would have emerged both in the field and in my analysis. Due to my institutional affiliation, I was unable to maintain a confidential field site; however, I did make careful accommodations to guarantee the anonymity of my participants by relying on minimal identifying information and developing vague pseudonyms that were only loosely linked to students’ names.

It’s likely that my investigation of online coming out stories would have been complemented by secondary data sources, namely, social media content from the participants themselves. I considered submitting for this in my IRB application, but decided against it for two reasons: 1) to stay on track with a strict thesis timeline, and 2) I felt I didn’t necessarily need to
see social media posts, photos, etc. myself. So long as participants were willing and able to
describe the content in their own words, that would suffice. Another limitation is perhaps the
most obvious: the findings offered here cannot be generalized to other college or universities.
Originally, I had planned to collect data at a second, local field site in order to offer a
comparative analysis of campus climate and student attitudes between northeast U.S. educational
institutions; unfortunately, I was unable to make progress with an IRB contact at that school.
While doing so would have doubled my sample size, in retrospect, it was an ambitious goal. I’m
fortunate to have had garnered a relatively robust, manageable sample for a thesis project.

I plan to incorporate several sections of this thesis into my larger dissertation work,
which I expect will be a deeper dive into topics from chapter one, particularly how coming out,
as a cultural narrative, operates in new media formats in the U.S. In that project, I will employ a
more robust intersectional analysis, one that includes more students of color in my sample and
draws on a diverse array of literature such as the queer of color critique, as well as works by
scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks. Should I need more respondent data to
complement that project, I will likely draw from the interviews I conducted in the first iteration
of this study (circa 2014) and/or seek out a third sample of participants.

In terms of scholarly recommendations, this project’s insights on access, representation,
disclosure, and digital resources may offer new insights for educators and practitioners working
with queer youth. Specifically, teachers should offer more expansive queer representation that
captures everyday lived realities, rather than stereotypical characters or plots. One pathway for
accomplishing this would be a collaborative effort, allowing students to garner and determine
what images resonate with them and their respective communities. Additionally, mental health
scholars and practitioners should pay more careful attention to how youth access queer resources
online; as participants explained in chapter three, the value of the internet is demonstrable for queer youth, but online LGBTQIA+ discourse can quickly turn toxic and exclusionary. For young people experiencing isolation and navigating mental illness in their everyday lives, facing discrimination or rejection online could have drastic effects on how they perceive themselves and interpret how acceptance is (or is not) extended based on discourses of exclusionary identity politics.
### Table 1. Study participants (n=17), in order of scheduled interviews.

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<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Class standing</th>
<th>Housing status</th>
<th>Campus involvement</th>
<th>Racial/ethnic identity</th>
<th>Gender identity</th>
<th>Sexual identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Off-campus with friends</td>
<td>Not involved</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Cisgender male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Off-campus</td>
<td>Not involved</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>Off-campus with partner</td>
<td>Not involved</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cisgender male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Off-campus with family</td>
<td>Not involved</td>
<td>“Woman-to-the-left”, “womanish”, nonbinary</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Off-campus with family</td>
<td>Not involved</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cisgender male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>On-campus, dorm</td>
<td>Involved</td>
<td>White, Jewish</td>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>Not straight, queer, “gay as hell”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>On-campus first year, off-campus since</td>
<td>Not involved</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cisgender male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>Involved</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Cisgender female</td>
<td>Lesbian, femme “Militantly lesbian”, femme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>Off-campus with family</td>
<td>Not involved</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cisgender female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| I. | 23  | Graduate student | Off-campus         | Involved | White | Cisgender male, “working towards gender nonconformity” | }
| U. | ~20 | Sophomore      | On-campus         | Involved | “I guess I’m a woman” | Cisgender female | Gay |
| S. | 24  | Transfer student | Off-campus with partner | Involved | Latina | “Empowered female” | Queer |
| D. | 21  | Junior         | Off-campus         | Involved | “Very white” | Cisgender female | Bisexual |
| O. | 26  | Graduate student | Off-campus         | Not involved | White | Cisgender female | |
| X. | 21  | Junior         | On-campus         | Involved | White, Jewish | Trans, nonbinary | Queer |
| C. | 27  | Graduate student | Off-campus         | Involved | White, Irish-Catholic | Cisgender male | Pansexual |

33 Refers to participant’s response to a question about overall involvement (i.e. “Do you consider yourself active/involved on campus?”) in clubs, sports, and organizations. Specifics are excluded to maintain anonymity.
Table 2. Participants interpretations of coming out, derived from transcript data (n = 15).34

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>What does coming out mean to you? How would you define it?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M.</td>
<td>&quot;challenging assumptions,&quot; &quot;lifelong&quot;</td>
<td>[...] I feel like coming out isn’t necessarily a [...] right of passage that just happens; it kind of happens in day-to-day life. Every time you meet somebody, you don’t know if you’re going to have to come out to them. [...] It’s just kind of like an evolving process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K.</td>
<td>coming out to yourself, narrative of coming out</td>
<td>And I’m like, I can’t relate. I really can’t. Sure, there might have been early signs that I was interested in women and not necessarily interested in guys, maybe, but I just—I don’t think it’s as cut and dry as a lot of, especially media makes it out to be.</td>
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<tr>
<td>K.</td>
<td>expectation to disclose, considering safety</td>
<td>IC. Is that the extent of it for you, in terms of what coming out is? K. Um, no, I don’t think so. There’s that whole big expectation that […] as soon as you figure it out, you’re going to tell everybody. I feel like that’s not—I mean, I don’t just feel like that—that’s not necessarily safe.</td>
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<tr>
<td>W.</td>
<td>&quot;self-identification&quot;, anxiety and fear</td>
<td>W. Like, um, self-identification, I think. And I think it’s dark for a lot of people. Coming out, those words, even looking at those words—like reading those words—probably scare a lot of people. Because I know it scared me for when I first started coming out, like I didn’t even want to think about that. Anytime anybody would ever mention the words ‘coming out’ to me, I would—my heart would start throbbing. Like when I was in the closet. Because I didn’t even want that conversation around me because it made me so anxious.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IC.</td>
<td>lifelong, can be verbal/nonverbal, “that’s a lot”, considering safety, others’ perceptions of queerness</td>
<td>IC. [...] before I offer, sort of, my thoughts on coming out, I’m curious to hear what you think about the term, the process, what does that mean to you, when I say coming out? E. Um, coming out, I feel like when I hear it, I’m just like, Ugh, that’s a lot. IC. Did you say a lot, or a lie? [laughing] E. A lot. It’s also a lie. No [laughing]. I feel like you never stop coming out.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

34 As I became more familiar with my interview script, I realized I needed to explicitly ask students what their interpretation of coming out is, rather than expect them to offer a description unprompted. In my first two interviews with T. and Y., however, I only shared an operational definition (as I did in all interviews; see Appendix B for phrasing), asked if the participants agreed or disagreed with it, and both students found the description to be suitable for our conversation. Thus, in this table, I cannot offer T. or Y.’s interpretation of coming out in so many words.
IC. Can you tell me more about that, or say a little bit more about that?

E. [sighs] Yeah. Okay. Let me connect it to something else. Um, I feel like, as soon as I came out, I cut my hair. Like short. I was like, *Well, if I’m gay, that’s what I’m supposed to do.* That’s not the only option, I learned later—I’m trying to grow it out again. I feel like when your hair is short and you’re a femme-identified person, or people perceive you as such, you’re appearance kind of comes out for you. People will assume things about you—they’ll assume that you’re queer, they’ll assume your sexuality, sometimes your gender. So I feel like […]

[pause to collect thoughts]

I feel like when you don’t look stereotypically queer, and even if you do, it’s like a lifetime— you have to keep coming out to every new person you meet. It’s not like a one-time thing that’s done, and now you have a sign over your head that’s like, “I’m gay. I’m queer.” No, it’s like a lifetime of like, making sure it’s safe to say that to people. Like waiting a few weeks until you tell them. Yeah.

| L. disclosing as non-straight | L. Um, I would say coming out is when you first tell someone of your sexuality and it isn’t straight. Because straight people, they don’t always have a coming out story because it’s just always proscribed. So I feel like coming out has to be something where it’s not straight. You have to be gay, bi, something other than that. |
| "making someone aware of your [LGBT] identity" | I guess making someone aware of your identity. |

| R. "it gets easier", scary the first time | R. It gets easier the more you do it. |
| IC. Why is that? Why do you think that’s true? | IC. Why is that? Why do you think that’s true? |

| R. "it gets easier", scary the first time | R. I think it’s scariest the first time you’ve come out because you’ve never done it before, and you have no idea what to expect from other people’s reactions. You hear a lot of horror stories about people getting bad reactions. |
| [...] But once you do it a few times, and a lot of the time, people just won’t mind, it gets less scary. |

| H. "self-disclosure," "deviation from the norm" | H. Self-disclosure of your sexuality or your gender identity… [i.e.] you’re not what you were assigned at birth. |
| IC. Anything else? | IC. Anything else? |

| H. "self-disclosure," "deviation from the norm" | H. Not really. I mean, statistically, the deviation from the norm, but I don’t like that definition at all. |
| "a gut feeling" or emotional response | H. Uh, I mean, if I get a gut feeling, a little hit of adrenaline, then it’s probably coming out. If it’s just a reminder, then I don’t have an emotional response. |

| I. lifelong, unique to the individual, can occur in many | I. For me, it’s a continuous process of continuing to come out to yourself and come out to the people you know, whether it is immediate family, extended family, just friends. It really depends on
| Scenarios, can be verbal/nonverbal | the person and their situation, but it’s a constant process of learning more about yourself and expressing it to those who you wish to express it to.

And […] it does not necessarily have to be verbal. It can be on social media, it can just be starting to wear different things and hoping people guess. It can be so many different things and it doesn’t necessarily have to be just in sexuality or as a global thing—it can be bits and pieces as they arise and change through our life. |
|---|---|
| A. confirming others' perceptions of queerness | A. I feel like for me, coming out is really just, at that point, like, making it known to people who probably already know. I guess I haven’t really thought about what it means to me, which is kind of sad. [laughs]

IC. That’s okay. That’s totally fine. |
| A. confirming others' perceptions of queerness | A. Um, like, I feel like it just kind of […] I don’t know if justified is the right word, but it kind of just, like, confirmed, what people probably are already thinking. Because by high school—and I said early elementary/middle school, I was just kind of like, I don’t think people really have an idea—until high school, when I started kind of being a little bit more open with how I was dressing, things like that, so by the time I did come out to my close friends, I think at that point, it was more of a confirmation like, “Oh yeah, that’s definitely been said before.”

And like, that’s just like that. I guess. |
| U. disclosing as non-straight, can be verbal/nonverbal | U. Um, I think coming out, honestly, is just having to say—whether it’s verbal or nonverbal—having people know that you are, like […] anything different from the heterosexual norm of society. |
| S. dependent on one's audience, coming out to yourself | S. Oh boy. Like, I feel like it depends on who you’re talking to. Like, if you’re talking to yourself, if you’re talking to your family, talking to your school, your work? ‘Cause I feel like things like work and school, especially, like here and the jobs I’ve had, for the most part—you can kinda just be like, “Oh, I have a girlfriend,” People would be like, “Okay, cool.” Or, “Oh, it’s not cool.” It’s just kind of, like, a whatever, this-is-a-background—it doesn’t really impact their lives.

To family, like, it’s like a big deal, and it’s like actively telling. Like, word that, “Oh, I’m a lesbian,” or, “I’m queer,” or, “I’m gay,” or, “I’m bi,” or whatever. And I feel like it’s a whole other thing, because you kind of have to come out to yourself, and like, that’s the hardest bit.

IC. Hm, can you tell me a little bit more about that?

S. And it just kind of, like, happens. At some point you’re just like, Oh, I guess this is me. And it sticks. It’s not like an ‘I guess,’ like it just sticks. You’re like, Oh, didn’t quite know that. But now I do. [laughs] Like, yeah. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Column 1</th>
<th>Column 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>96</td>
<td>D. I feel like coming out is not really something you can give a definition for, because it’s different for everybody. It’s definitely an everyday process. I feel like the narrative is that it happens one time, generally with your family—and it’s big and emotional and you can get kicked out, or they can accept you. But it’s definitely, like, an everyday type situation. Like you’re choosing who you come out to. Not even just like—I self-identify as queer, sometimes that can be a follow-up of like, “Yeah, that was a problematic term before, and now here’s the history of that.”</td>
<td>[...] And I feel like it definitely fluctuates between people—especially with gender identity as well. Especially with trans people; sometimes, they don’t always pass. And that can be a whole different experience that I obviously don’t have. And I just really feel like it can fluctuate from person to person. So I feel like putting a definition on it is pretty hard. [laughs]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O. I thought of [coming out] as, like, ‘becoming public with your sexual orientation’, and maybe even gender identity. I thought it was really cool that you brought up social media, because that’s not something I thought of but was the hardest part for me. Um, like, I came out as bisexual when I was a freshman in high school with my friends, and, like, dating, and things like that. But I didn’t come out with my family until probably college.</td>
<td>[...] And I guess maybe that’s because it wasn’t, like, a thing that was done, but I saw other people doing it, and I was like, Oh no, I’m not brave enough to do that. Everyone’s gonna see this. And is it really necessary to—is it attention-seeking?</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>O. I think when I think of coming out, it feels heavy. There is a potential impact or, like, long-term consequences. When you come out with a friend and a family member, it might affect your relationship, which is why I always did it in the first thing, because if it doesn’t work out, then I might not have ever liked you anyway, so it doesn’t matter. So, it doesn’t—sure, it is coming out, and it does, like, I did have to like, Okay, now I’m gonna tell you this thing. And I just wanna let you know...</td>
<td>And I would always preface it, and things like that, and kind of have to bolster myself up, but it feels different.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X. Um, coming out is, I guess, like—revealing to people who previously thought of you as straight and cis that you are otherwise. Because there’s, obviously—we live in a heteronormative, cisnormative society. So, like, everyone is expected to be that way.</td>
<td>And then, like, you’re different if you’re not that way. So you have to reveal that because it’s not inherently assumed about you. And it’s usually—coming out usually means coming out to your family, your friends, your close circles, maybe like the general community of your school or whatever. But you also are always coming out,</td>
</tr>
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</table>
because you’re always assumed to be cis and straight. So, like, it’s a constant process that happens throughout your life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C.</th>
<th>being comfortable enough to disclose, lifelong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IC.</td>
<td>Okay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>So, being ‘out’ to me means there is not anyone who you would obfuscate or hide your identity around.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[...] Cause we’re always gonna have to, like, come out to new people. Um, so I don’t really see it as being ‘completely’ out because there’s no way to be completely out unless you ran through the streets with a bullhorn or something.</td>
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APPENDIX B.

In-Depth Interview Script

**Give a brief introduction.**

- Principal investigator’s background, field of study, etc.
- Study topic
- Logistics of study: length, ability to stop, ask questions, audio recording request, guarantee of confidentiality

**Establish rapport and set context with preliminary questions.**

- Your name? Pronouns?
- How old are you?
- Are you a resident student, or do you commute?
- What is your academic standing at [INSTITUTION]?
- Describe your course of study, including any majors or minors.

**Introduce Topic 1: Identity and Disclosure.**

- Please describe your identities—including, but not limited to gender, sexuality, and race.
  - Can you tell me more about your gender, sexual, and racial identities?

  **Offer prompts, if needed:**
  - How did you come to understand these identities?
  - Do you remember a time where you first identified in this way?
  - How did this feel, in relation to your other identities?
  - Do you recall feeling conflicted about any of your identities?
  - How do you understand these identities in relation to one another?

**Reiterate the study’s focus on identity work; ask respondent what coming out means to them.**

**Consider their interpretation and summarize their response in your own words to confirm meaning. Offer to read a prepared operational definition for coming out, if it seems helpful.**

“Coming out” refers to the disclosure of one’s nonconforming identity(s) related to gender or sexuality. Based on prior research, I do not suggest that coming out is a one-time experience; in fact, it likely occurs often throughout the life course.

- Did you ever feel compelled to disclose these identities to family or friends?
  - Did you ever have to disclose your gender, sexual, or racial identities?
    - Some would refer to disclosing gender or sexual identity as ‘coming out’—would you agree?
      - How would you define coming out?

---

35 Interview directions for researcher are italicized. Topics, questions and prompts are in plain text. Additional prompts (e.g. “Why?”, “Can you tell me more about that?”) were also be used, but are not included here.
When you think back on these moments, what factors may have encouraged you to disclose your identity(s)?
Were there any factors that would have discouraged this decision?
  - What types of reactions have you received when disclosing identities?
    - How did you family react?
    - Friends?
    - Acquaintances?
    - Strangers?
  - Do you find that you disclose your identities often?
    - Do you think identity disclosure varies or changes in certain situations?

Introduce Topic 2: Life Before College.
- Please describe your family, particularly the group you lived with during childhood.
  - What does that network look like? How many guardians or parents? Siblings?
  - Do you still live with this family when you’re not at [INSTITUTION]?
- Are these family members aware of the identities we discussed a few moments ago?
  - Which ones?
  - Are there identities that your family members are not aware of?
- Can you discuss your coming out experience(s) you have had with family members?
  
If necessary, use prompts:
  - Who did you decide to tell? Why? How did you decide?
  - In what way did you disclose your identity(s) to your family?
  - Was it important to you for them to know?
  - Did you expect them to respond in the way that they did?
  - Do you find that you’ve had to come out more than once to them?

Introduce Topic 3: College Life.
- Tell me about your involvement at [INSTITUTION]. What activities or organizations are you a part of?
  - Would you describe yourself as active on campus?
  - How often would you say you participate in campus activities?
  - To what extent are your friends involved on campus?
- What made you decide to go to school at [INSTITUTION]?
  - How do you feel about this decision?
    - Are you satisfied?
- Recall your identity(s) we discussed earlier. Were you fully aware of these when you first arrived at [INSTITUTION]?
  - As you developed new friendships or relationships, did you share any ‘nonconforming’ identities publicly?
  - Has this changed since you started at [INSTITUTION]?
- Considering your identities, do you feel supported at [INSTITUTION]?
  - Do you feel safe on campus?
  - Do you find that your identity(s) are recognized here?
  - Do you have access to resources related to these identities?
• Would you say you’ve had coming out experiences on campus? When and/or how?

*If necessary, use prompts:*
  ○ Who did you decide to tell? Why?
  ○ In what way did you disclose your identity(s)?
  ○ Was it important to you that they knew?
  ○ Did they respond in the way you expected?
  ○ Do you find that you’ve had to come out more than once to them?

*Introduce Topic 4: Online Interactions.*

• Describe your social media use.
  ○ What apps do you use daily or often?
  ○ Which apps don’t you use?

• Tell me about your identity(s) online.
  ○ Are your accounts public or private?
  ○ What types of things do you normally share on the platforms you use?
    ▪ E.g. what do you usually post on Facebook? Can you show me an example, if that’s helpful?

• Generally, do you feel like your online profiles represent your identity(s)?
  ○ Do you think your identity(s) differ online?
  ○ Are there any identities you don’t represent in online profiles?

• Would you say you have had a coming out experience online? Tell me about that in more detail. You’re welcome to show me any relevant posts, if it’s helpful.

*If necessary, use prompts:*
  ○ Was disclosing your identity(s) something you had planned to do?
  ○ In what way did you disclose your identity(s) online?
  ○ How did users react to this disclosure?
  ○ Do you find that you’ve had to come out more than once online?
  ○ Did this affect any offline interactions?

• Does social media use come up among friends, family, or acquaintances offline?
  ○ Tell me more about managing your online identity(s). What does this involve?
    ▪ Are there some posts you don’t want certain people to see?
    ▪ Was there ever a time that a post revealed one of your identities?
    ▪ Do you think it’s easy or difficult to manage online identity(s)?
    ▪ Do you think about your online identity(s) often?
  ○ Do you think that online interactions affect your life offline?
    ▪ What about the opposite—i.e. do offline interactions affect online life?
    ▪ Consider the identities we’ve discussed today. What does it feel like navigating these between online and offline spaces?

*Give final remarks. Thank participant and remind them that on-campus resources are included in their consent form.*
REFERENCES


Robards, Brady. 2014. “Digital Traces of the Persona through Ten Years of Facebook.” *M/C Journal* 17(3).


Zimman, Lal. 2009. “‘The Other Kind of Coming out’: Transgender People and the Coming out Narrative Genre.” Gender and Language 3(1).