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## Investing in Grindr: An Exploration of How Gay College Men Utilize Gay-Oriented Social Networking Sites

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**INVESTING IN GRINDR:  
AN EXPLORATION OF HOW GAY COLLEGE MEN UTILIZE  
GAY-ORIENTED SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES**

A Dissertation Presented

by

MICHAEL T. DODGE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2014

Educational Policy and Leadership

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MICHAEL T. DODGE

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## **DEDICATION**

This project is dedicated to my students (past, current, and future) who constantly impress me with their commitment, engagement, and passion. You inspire me in ways you may never know. I am forever grateful for all of you.

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I consider myself lucky to be surrounded by all of you. You have inspired, challenged, engaged, and moved me to be better and reach further than I ever thought possible. I could use so many words to express my gratitude but I will keep it simple. Thank you!

## **ABSTRACT**

### **INVESTING IN GRINDR: AN EXPLORATION OF HOW GAY COLLEGE MEN UTILIZE GAY-ORIENTED SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES**

MAY 2014

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The use of social networking sites appears to be a dominant fixture in the lives of college students. Recent studies estimate that over 94% of traditionally aged college students utilize social networking sites (Matney, Borland, & Cope, 2006; Salaway, Katz, Caruso, Kvavik, & Nelson, 2007; Smith & Caruso, 2010). College students' near universal adoption and use of social networking sites is having a significant impact on how they develop identity and interact with others (Lloyd, Dean, & Cooper, 2007; Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Studies have explored the impact of gender differences on social networking sites' use and how students of color utilize these sites; however, research has not examined how White, gay, male college students utilize and are impacted by social networking sites (boyd, 2007; Gasser, 2008; Hargittai, 2007; Slater, 2002).

This exploratory study fills not only a critical gap in the research regarding the experiences of White, gay, male college students' use of gay-oriented social networking sites but of college students' use of these sites. Designed as a phenomenological study, the research consisted of a set of two semi-structured interviews. Data were collected



from nine participants who attend one major research university. The two interviews and questions were designed to build rapport with the participants. The nine participants provided significant exposure to the ways that gay students utilize gay-oriented social networking sites. This study's focus on White, gay, college men's use of gay-oriented social networking sites makes three significant contributions to the literature: (1) explores and describes what the experience is like for these students, (2) identifies common benefits and challenges students' experience, and (3) offers critical insights for higher education professionals, specifically student affairs administrators, tasked with providing services for gay students.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Introduction

I met Blake, a gay White 22-year-old male, in 2007 while working at a small, private, liberal arts college in rural Pennsylvania. He approached me one afternoon in early September at a Student Activities fair on campus. I had seen Blake only once before in mid-August when he participated in a student leadership retreat. Blake told me that he had attended my diversity session where I came out as a gay man. He wanted to know if we could set up some time to talk because he thought I could help with a problem he was having. Not wanting to miss an opportunity to connect with a student, I met up with him the next day in my office.

Blake seemed nervous so we talked about how things were going for him on campus and what his plans were for after graduation. He then shared that he was struggling in the relationship with his girlfriend and that his feelings for her had changed. Blake was “pretty sure” that he was gay as he shared that he had been talking to and seeing men he met on the Internet. After he disclosed this information he broke down crying. He had not told anyone else and realized that he couldn’t keep lying to his friends and girlfriend. I told him it was ok if he was gay and that I would be there to support him.

As Blake collected himself, I asked him why he used the Internet to find men and he plainly said, “I can be more of myself online.” He added, “It’s not safe to be *that* open here.” As a senior, he worried what his girlfriend, friends, classmates, and faculty would say. Blake had seen posters for the Gay Alliance student group on campus defaced and had witnessed openly gay individuals being harassed, threatened, and called homophobic



names. Furthermore, he had learned that the rural area surrounding the college was extremely conservative and not accepting of differences. He worried for his safety if people found out.

The social networking site (SNS) adam4adam.com, provided Blake a greater feeling of belonging, safety, and security than did his college campus. This site provides gay men the opportunity to connect with and meet other gay men. When Blake talked about his experiences on this site his eyes lit up. Blake described this site as a refuge from a campus and town that did not fully accept him, a place where he could explore and be more fully himself. It was clear to me that he had become an invested member of this online social networking site. Blake shared that he would spend several hours each day on the site. He also noted that he encountered fellow students on the website, and soon learned to trust them. Blake talked of a sort of unwritten code among these students that they had “just as much to lose as I did” if people found out.

As my conversations with Blake and others like him (and there were quite a few) continued over the past several years, I realized how little I knew about students’ experiences with social networking sites. Although I may have been an avid user of Facebook, I did not understand the extent to which SNS provided these gay students with an outlet to express and be themselves. My lack of awareness was especially troubling to me because I felt that I was missing a critical aspect of the student experience. The study described here aims to remedy this lack of awareness; this exploration sheds light on gay, male students’ use of gay-oriented social networking sites -- a salient and contemporary activity about which little is known.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Blake's experience and those of many of the other gay college men I have worked with, highlight a critical intersection of two issues facing higher education professionals today: understanding and meeting the needs of gay students and the growing impact of social networking sites on campus. Although significant research exists on the experiences and identity development of gay students (Cass, 1979; Cass, 1984; D'Augelli, 1994a; D'Augelli, 1994b; Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007; Rankin, Webster, Blumenfeld, Frazer, 2010; Renn, 2007) and the use of social networking sites by college students (boyd, 2009; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009; Matney, Borland, & Cope, 2006; Salaway, Katz, Caruso, Kvavik, & Nelson, 2007; Smith & Caruso, 2010; Tapscott, 2009), there is a gap in the literature. The experiences of White gay, male college students' use of social networking sites have not been explored. Additionally, this research can serve as an important entry into understanding the experiences of gay men of color, bisexual and questioning individuals, and lesbians.

Throughout the following research, I explore these issues in-depth to understand the dimensions that contribute to White, gay, male college students utilizing gay-oriented social networking sites. These include the following: navigating the development of a gay identity, the impact of campus environment, the socio-historical connection and its impact on gays and lesbians, and the increased use of social networking sites by college students. Each of these aspects will be explored in further detail in the next chapter.

## **Gay Identity Development in College Students**

Identity development is a critical task for young adults, many of whom are college students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968). This process is especially salient and complicated for traditionally aged college students who are working to develop a gay identity (Levine & Evans, 1991). These students must navigate their identity in more intentional, conscious, and careful ways than heterosexuals (Levine & Evans, 1991). Failure to do so may subject them to discrimination, homophobia, and acts of violence.

The study of gay identity development has resulted in the creation of several models (Cass, 1979; Cass, 1984; D'Augelli, 1994a; D'Augelli, 1994b; Savin-Williams, 1995; Troiden, 1989). These frameworks share several similar characteristics such as developing a personal awareness, disclosing to others, and recognizing that sexual orientation is an aspect of self-identity (Levine & Evans, 1991). For college students, the process of disclosing one's gay identity to family and friends, also known as "coming out," may require students to consider what will happen if the individual receiving this information rejects them (Cass, 1970; Rankin, 2003). Additionally, students who are in the process of developing a gay identity may need to reconcile it with other aspects of themselves, such as their race and religion. The intersection of these identities may cause students to experience discomfort (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Miller, 2000; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989). Love, Bock, Jannarone, and Richardson (2011) identified that students struggle to resolve the tension between being gay and religious beliefs that assert homosexual behavior is immoral. Given these complex issues, the use of social networking sites may help gay students further explore and understand their identity. Specifically, these sites may provide students with environments where they can more

safely explore their identity. The use of these environments may help students develop connections with other gay identified individuals.

### **Impact of Campus Environment**

Although there have been significant shifts in the racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, and gender composition of American colleges and universities since their inception over 300 years ago, students, staff, and faculty at these institutions are still impacted by negative attitudes and oppressive behaviors (El-Khawas, 2003; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Randolph, 1990). In response, significant attention has been devoted to examining, understanding, and addressing the impact of the campus environment and people's attitudes pertaining to historically underrepresented student groups, such as women, people of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals (Rankin et al., 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). Therefore, another contributing dimension to gay, male college students' use of gay-oriented social networking sites is the impact that campus climate has on the student experience (Cass, 1984; Clark, 2002; Levine & Evans, 1991; McRee & Cooper, 1998; Rankin, 2003). As defined by Bauer (1998), campus climate assesses "the current perceptions, attitudes, and expectations that define the institution and its members" (p 2). These assessments focus on students' perceptions of how "welcoming" or safe a campus is for non-heterosexual students.

Findings from localized, regional, and national studies consistently demonstrate that campus environments are unwelcoming and inattentive to the needs of gay students (Cavendish, 2004; McRee & Cooper, 1998; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Specifically, Rankin et al. (2010) identified that LGBT students are among the least accepted group on campus when compared with other historically underrepresented

groups (such as students of color). Additionally, LGBT students were more likely to experience harassment than their heterosexual classmates (Dolan, 1998; Noack, 2004; Rankin, 2003). These studies may support the notion that gay students turn to and utilize social networking sites as a tool to develop their identity and engage with other gay individuals (Burleson, 2005; Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

### **Impact of Policies and Societal Attitudes on Gay Individuals**

In the United States, gay individuals face a number of challenges in their day-to-day lives, including expressions of hate and intolerance, religious discrimination, and unequal rights in the areas of health, marriage, and employment (Human Rights Campaign, 2010; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005; Marcus, 2002). Policies exist at institutional, local, state, and national levels that restrict the rights of gay people. For example, one of the most prominent human rights issues facing gay people today is the inability to marry. A map of the United States first developed by Bump (2010), identified 19 states where it is legal for people to marry their first cousins while only 14 states and the District of Columbia allow same sex marriage or civil unions (Freedom to Marry, 2013; Liebelson & Raja, 2012). Additionally, 31 states have passed constitutional amendments prohibiting gay and lesbian couples from marrying their same sex partners (Badash, 2011).

Beyond intolerant policies, gay individuals are targets of hatred and bias because of their sexual orientation. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI, 2010) annual reporting of hate crime statistics, approximately 19% of all hate crimes *reported*, identified as those "motivated by bias," were against individuals who identify

as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) (para. 1, 2010). In comparison, the results in 2008 and 2007 identified that roughly 17% and 15%, respectively, of the total cases were based on sexual orientation (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2007; 2008). Although the total number of reported hate crimes declined from roughly 7,500 to 6,600, there was an increase in the proportion of hate crimes against LGB individuals. The number of reported hate crimes perpetrated against LGB individuals has continued to rise yearly since 1995 when the collection of these statistics began.

While alarming, these findings represent only those crimes that were reported by law enforcement to the FBI and do not reflect all acts of intolerance faced by gay individuals. A U.S. Department of Justice study found that only 44% of hate crimes were reported (Harlow, 2005). The severe under-reporting of these incidents can be attributed to a variety of factors such as the lack of reporting by victims to police, failure by police to identify it as a hate crime, and failure to report statistics to the state. The staggering number of hate crimes targeted towards non-heterosexual individuals is alarming and affirms the need for additional work to be done to achieve safety and equality.

Some progress, such as the recent repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” military policy prohibiting gays and lesbians from serving openly, has been made to address inequities, violence, and discrimination facing the gay community (Badash, 2011). However, heterosexuality remains a privileged sexual orientation within American society (Marcus, Meem, Gibson, & Alexander, 2010; Shepard, 2009). This is especially problematic for gay college students who are not only defining their identity but also learning to navigate in a society that does not accept them (Henquinet, Phibbs, &

Skoglund, 2000; Rankin, 2003). The use of gay-oriented social networking sites by these students may help mitigate the harassment these students experience.

### **College Students' Use of Social Networking Sites**

For the Millennial generation of college students, those born after 1982, the Internet and social networking sites (SNS) are an integrated part of their everyday lives (Coomes, 2004; DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Wilson, 2004). The belief that gay students will utilize gay-oriented SNS is supported by literature on the Millennial generation of college students and their engagement with technology (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). Jones (2002) noted that college students' current reliance on the Internet for knowledge development, fostering connections, and establishing and maintaining relationships is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. As a result of the use of technology, such as social networks and the Internet, students have greater accessibility and freedom to explore new concepts and ideas than previous generations (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). They are no longer limited to the books and articles found in their campus' library or the people with whom they share a residence hall. They access online libraries, Wikipedia, and a host of other Internet websites for information and to complete course assignments (boyd, 2006; Donath & boyd, 2004).

Students now access Facebook and other social networking sites to connect with people across the campus and the world (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007). Social networking sites have become an indispensable part of today's college student culture. According to Gasser (2008), students' use of SNS may "not only assist them on campus, but may also partially define their college experience" (p. 64). Additionally, Smith and Caruso (2010) recently conducted a quantitative study of approximately 37,000 college

students throughout the country, and found that 94.1% of traditional college students, aged 18-24, are members of at least one social networking site. They found that students spend on average between one to four hours each day on these sites. Given the widespread usage of social networking sites, there is a need to understand what college students, specifically White gay students, are experiencing in these contexts (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Tapscott, 2009).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Therefore, the purpose of this inquiry was to examine how traditionally aged, White, gay, college men utilize gay-oriented social networking sites. The study explored what effect those sites have on White, gay college men. Additionally, the study provides valuable insights into how White, gay, male, college students construct, express, and manage their identity and develop and maintain connections with others on social networking sites.

### **Central Research Questions**

Since my intent is to explore the experiences of White, gay, male, college students utilizing gay-oriented social networking sites, two exploratory research questions are posed:

1. How and to what extent do traditionally aged (18-24 years old), White college men, who identify as gay, utilize gay-oriented social networking sites?
2. What benefits and challenges do White, gay, male college students experience because of their use of these sites?



Qualitative research methods, specifically a phenomenological approach, seem most appropriate to explain how traditionally aged, White, gay college students utilize gay-oriented social networking sites. The phenomenological approach provided rich detail and description of what the experience and process is like for White, gay, male, college students utilizing these social networking sites. Additionally, this approach helped me gain critical insight into students' perspectives on the impact of this experience (Locke, Silverman, & Spirduso, 2004). The source of primary data collection was a series of two in-depth interviews with gay, White male college students who utilize gay-oriented social networking sites.

### **Significance of the Study**

The use of social networking sites appears to be a dominant fixture in the lives of college students. Recent studies estimate that over 94% of traditionally aged college students utilize social networking sites (Matney, Borland, & Cope, 2006; Salaway, Katz, Caruso, Kvavik, & Nelson, 2007; Smith & Caruso, 2010). College students' near universal adoption and use of social networking sites is having a significant impact on how they develop identity and interact with others (Lloyd, Dean, & Cooper, 2007; Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Not surprisingly, significant research has been conducted to examine how students utilize these sites and what impact they are having (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Cummings, Lee, & Kraut, 2006; Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006). Studies have explored the impact of gender differences on social networking sites use and how students of color utilize SNS; however, research has not examined how gay, male college students utilize and are impacted by social networking sites (boyd, 2007; Gasser,

2008; Hargittai, 2007; Slater, 2002). A study that focuses on how White, gay, college men utilize gay-oriented social networking sites will make three significant contributions: (1) explore and describe what the experience is like for these students, (2) identify common benefits and challenges students experience, and (3) offer critical insights for higher education professionals, specifically student affairs administrators, tasked with providing services for gay students.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions are used to provide a common language for understanding this paper:

Gay/Gay Identity: Although the terms “gay” and “homosexual” have been used interchangeably, researchers recognize that there are critical differences between the two (Beemyn, 2003; Rankin, 2003; Renn, 2007). The term “homosexual” focuses on a person’s sexual behavior. The term “gay” recognizes that sexual orientation is a part of an individual’s larger identity. I will use gay or gay identity throughout the paper to reflect this distinction.

Social Networking Sites (SNS): boyd and Ellison (2007) provided the following definition for social networking sites:

“Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 2).

For the purpose of this study, I will use their definition as it captures the purpose of social networking sites and is widely accepted in the literature (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009; Kramer & Winter, 2008; Richter & Koch, 2008). Examples of social networking sites include Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn (Donath

& boyd, 2008). Sites specifically targeted for members of social identity groups have also been developed. For gay individuals these include adam4adam, Grindr, dlist.com, Manhunt, and gay.com.

Computer-Mediated Communications (CMC): Broadly defined as any interaction that occurs between two or more networked computers (McQuail, 2005). Examples of CMCs include email, chat rooms, instant messaging clients, and social networking sites. Computer-mediated communications can be thought of as a larger umbrella term for interactions that occur through a network.

### **Overview**

The next chapter provides a literature review that focuses on the four dimensions to help explore and understand gay, male college students' use of gay-oriented social networking sites. The four dimensions include: frameworks for understanding gay identity development, the campus environment for gay students, the socio-historical context for gay individuals, and the influence and structure of social networking sites. The review will draw from multiple fields of study to provide a comprehensive and holistic understanding of White, gay, male, college students and social networking sites.

Chapter 3 explores the phenomenological research methodology and design that was used for this inquiry. I review the research questions that guided this inquiry while also providing a detailed description of the research plan used to select and recruit participants and to complete the data analysis. Additionally, I address important ethical considerations and discuss the limitations of the study. Chapter 4 provides a descriptive summary of each participant involved in the study. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses the implications of the findings, identifies areas that

require additional research, and provides student affairs professionals with suggestions for effectively supporting and working with this population.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

Although research on the experiences of gay college students exists, this body of knowledge continues to be sparse in comparison to other historically underrepresented populations (Dilley, 2005; Rhoads, 1997; Sanlo, 2004). The research has focused predominantly on identity development (Cass, 1979; 1984; D'Augelli, 1994a; 1994b; Savin-Williams, 1995; Troiden, 1989) and the impact of the campus environment on gay students (Beemyn, 2003; Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Rankin, 2003). The focus on identity development and environment fails to provide a holistic understanding of gay college students. These students face significant challenges as they navigate their identity and college experience. One challenge for understanding the needs of these students, as noted in the first chapter, is a gap in the literature on how gay, male college students utilize gay-oriented social networking sites. This topic is especially salient given that approximately 94% of college students use at least one social networking site and report that these sites are an integral part of their campus experience (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). As a result, the literature review is organized around four dimensions that contribute to and support gay, male college students' use of gay-oriented social networking sites. These include: gay identity development models, campus environment for gay students, the socio-historical context for gay individuals, and the use of social networking sites by college students.

The first section offers a summary of the existing gay identity development models, specifically stage-based and lifespan, discusses the limitations of these theoretical frameworks, and situates this development in online environments. The second section explores how gay students understand and experience their campus environments and what impact these climates have on student learning. The following section examines American society's homophobic policies, beliefs, and attitudes and the resulting impact on gay, male college students. Finally, an overview of social networking sites is offered, which includes providing a definition and identifying key features, understanding their emergence and growth, and exploring their significant presence in higher education. Additionally, I identify and explore three areas of research regarding social networking sites that may be especially salient for gay, male college students. These include the impact of impression management, social capital, and how students navigate issues of privacy.

### **Gay Identity Development**

A critical task for all individuals is the development of one's identity. For many people, identity development occurs during their time at college (Arnett, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Throughout this time, traditionally aged students (18-24 years old) are discovering and exploring their feelings and emotions and learning about themselves and sharing who they are. For gay college students, the identity development process is further complicated as they must navigate their identity development "against a backdrop of heterosexism and homophobia that often do not support and encourage same-gender sexual desires" (Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009, p. 298). Several studies have shown that negative attitudes of heterosexual peers about gay men have an impact on gay

students' identity development (Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Stevens, 2004; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). The research consistently demonstrates that gay men experience a negative impact on their GPA and the quality of their social interactions as a direct result of intolerant attitudes and behaviors by their heterosexual peers.

Given the challenges that gay, college students' face, significant research has been conducted and models created to understand gay identity development (Cass, 1979; 1984; D'Augelli, 1994a; Dilley, 2004; Savin-Williams, 1995; Troiden, 1989). These human development theories offer insight and understanding of the developmental issues facing gay individuals. From a review of the research, there are two distinct theoretical frameworks: stage-based models and lifespan models. McEwen (2003) found that two of the most often cited stage models in the literature are Cass and Troiden while D'Augelli's model is most often referenced for lifespan models. This section will provide a review of these models of gay identity development because they serve as a framework for understanding the experiences of gay college students. Additionally, I will discuss the limitations of these models and how they might help inform White, gay students' use of gay-oriented social networking sites.

### **Stage-based Models**

One of the pioneers in the development of stage-based gay identity models is Vivienne Cass. From her work as a clinical psychologist treating gay male clients, Cass (1979) proposed a model of homosexuality development. Cass collected and used the coming out stories of many of her clients to inform her model. She believed that generalizations could be made of gay people based on the emotions, feelings, and

behaviors that they demonstrated. Drawing from these stories, Cass proposed 16 dimensions that could describe a person's gay identity development. Some of these included the person's level of commitment to being gay, the extent to which they had disclosed their identity to others, and the level of socialization with other gay individuals. As a result of people's location within each dimension, she proposed six stages of identity development for gay men. These are confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis, which will be discussed later in this section.

Recognizing the limitations in developing a model that relied solely on stories from clients, Cass (1984) conducted a quantitative study to examine the accuracy of her proposed stage descriptions and to explore if identity development was a linear process. She recruited a total of 178 participants from her clinical practice, people she met at private social events, and those who responded to advertisements in newspapers. From the total, 109 were male and 69 were female. To explore these factors, Cass developed a "Homosexual Identity Formation Questionnaire" and a "Stage Allocation Measure" (p. 158). Both instruments were administered to all participants. The questionnaire was developed to measure the 16 dimensions, which had been proposed in her earlier model. This measure had 210 multiple choice questions and checklists for participants to complete. Cass created a scoring tool based on how she believed a person from each stage would respond. One of the multiple choice questions asked "How much do you feel you fit into homosexual groups?" (p. 157). Based on the participant's responses, Cass would then be able to predict what stage this person was in. Cass' second instrument, the Stage Allocation Measure, was developed for participants to be placed into one of her proposed six stages. The descriptions for each stage were based on her 16 dimensions of



the gay identity development process. Participants were provided seven profiles of people, which included a pre-identity confusion stage. They were instructed to select one that they felt best represented who they were.

Based on these two measures, Cass (1984) conducted substantial data analysis, which included comparing people's responses between the two measures and correlation tests. However, during this analysis, a total of 12 participants were removed from the study because they identified as belonging to more than one stage. Cass' descriptions of each stage were supported but the study offered little to defend their sequencing. Next, I will examine each stage in greater detail.

In the first stage, identity confusion, individuals begin to wonder if they might identify as gay. Those at this process have begun to superficially consider this possibility or simply rejected it. In this stage, the person may feel a heightened sense of anxiety and may or may not seek out connections with other gay identified individuals. If they choose to consider the possibility, Cass asserted that they would move to the next stage.

In identity comparison, Cass noted that individuals might begin comparing themselves to those who identify as gay and those who identify as heterosexual. At this point in their development, some individuals may make contact with gay or lesbian individuals. College men in this stage may strongly believe and disclose publicly that they identify as heterosexual even if they are engaging in sexual activities with other men. Moving from this stage towards identity tolerance, Cass asserted that individuals are becoming increasingly committed to the gay identity and may seek out additional points of connection with gay and lesbians. However, Cass acknowledged that those in this process might only tolerate the concept of homosexuality rather than completely

embracing it. If a student has a negative interaction with a gay or lesbian person, they may not progress any further.

Next, Cass (1979) noted a shift from tolerance towards identity acceptance. In this stage, individuals begin to develop an increasingly positive view of being gay and may articulate that they belong to the gay community. Students at this stage of development might have a number of relationships with gays and lesbians. However, individuals at this stage may try to act as heterosexual and will have difficulty disclosing to friends and others that they identify as gay. In the fifth stage, identity pride, individuals often feel a great deal of pride towards identifying as gay. These individuals will identify strongly with other gays and lesbians and may feel anger at a homophobic society.

The last stage of identity synthesis, which evolved from Cass's later work, noted that gays and lesbians have been able to incorporate their sexual orientation as merely another aspect of their identity (1984). Individuals in this stage no longer feel the need to be ashamed of who they are nor do they feel compelled to excessively display being gay (Cass, 1984). Students who reach this stage may be proud of who they are but do not discriminate who they are friends with based on their sexual orientation.

While Cass' (1979; 1984) theory provided significant insights into the identity development of gay individuals, Troiden (1989) sought to expand this understanding in a revision of his original 1975 model. His original model emerged from the synthesis of other identity development models and included four stages: sensitization, identity confusion, identity assumption and commitment (Plummer, 1975; Ponce, 1978). In particular, his updated model sought to address three critical areas: separate and recognize identity disclosure and identity development as different processes, provide

approximate age ranges for each stage, and allow individuals to revisit developmental stages. Troiden did not empirically test his models. As a result, the stages are based on a prediction of the behavior of gay individuals.

Troiden (1989) articulated that the first stage, sensitization, traditionally began prior to adolescence (ages 9-13 years old) and involved individuals experiencing a feeling of difference. He identified that this feeling was most often connected to set societal expectations of gender. More specifically, Troiden believed that an individual would experience a feeling of being less of a man because of their attraction to someone of the same gender. The implication of this, as Troiden noted, was a change in an individual's self esteem, which was often negative.

Troiden (1989) drew from Cass's (1984) stage of identity confusion, which was believed to occur during adolescence (ages 13-20 years old). This confusion was marked by an individual's experience of increased anxiety and tensions as they attempted to define their orientation. However, Troiden conceptualized this stage somewhat differently. He noted that individuals began to recognize their behaviors and feelings as gay. He asserted that individuals often experienced a lack of congruence between their past and present identity because of these behaviors. Additionally, at this stage, Troiden identified that there were a number of coping mechanisms that help the individual process. These include denying or avoiding one's feelings or accepting those as a part of their identity. Individuals at this stage may have difficulty in developing intimate relationships or an inability to express their emotions and feelings.

The next stage in this model involved identity assumption and was most likely to occur during young adulthood (ages 18-30 years old). Similar to Cass's (1979) stages of

tolerance and acceptance, Troiden identified that, at this stage, individuals begin to have increased interactions with other gays, lesbians, and bisexual people. Comparable to stage two, this stage also involves coping mechanisms. These include taking on a negative view of LGB individuals or they may 'pass,' act like they are heterosexual. Similar to Cass's (1979) stage of identity pride, Troiden (1989) identified that another coping mechanism included individuals immersing themselves in the LGB community and may avoid interactions with heterosexuals. The final stage in Troiden's model, commitment, also draws close parallels to Cass's (1984) stage of identity synthesis. Specifically, this stage includes integrating an individual's sexuality into their identity. He noted that this stage happens shortly after stage three and could still be considered part of early adulthood (Troiden, 1989).

The stage models presented by Cass (1979; 1984) and Troiden (1989) represent a critical exploration and understanding of the issues facing gay individuals. At the time that these models were developed, little attention was directed towards understanding the needs of gay people. Specifically, these theorists recognized that a gay identity is one part of a person's larger self-identity. Further, these models acknowledge the challenges that gay individuals face, such as disclosing to others and feeling confused, while developing their identity.

### **Research on Stage-based Models**

The stage models presented by Cass (1979; 1984) and Troiden (1989) represented a substantial step forward in understanding and explaining the experiences of gays and lesbians. However, further research has been conducted to determine whether the stage models appropriately represent the experience of gay and lesbian identity development

(Brady, 1983; Brady & Busse, 1994; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Kahn, 1991; Lark & Croteau, 1998; Levine, 1997; Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000). From a review of these studies, there is minimal support for stage-based models of gay identity development. This section will provide a review of two studies that best demonstrate this limited empirical support.

The first highlighted study was conducted in 1994 by Brady and Busse and expanded on the research done by Cass (1979; 1984) and Brady's (1983) earlier work with gay men. Brady and Busse developed and tested the Gay Identity Questionnaire (GIQ), a 45-item, true/false survey, that was derived from Cass' Stage Allocation Measure. The GIQ's purpose was to assist researchers and psychologists in quickly locating where gay men were in relation to Cass' six stages. The 45 items included three questions to validate a respondent's same sex attraction and seven questions for each of Cass' six stages. A total of 225 respondents, who were referred to participate in the study by psychologists and clinicians, completed the GIQ with twenty nine participants needing to be removed because they identified as being in more than one stage or identifying in a stage that had too few respondents. The demographic breakdown identified them as predominantly white men who were all from Southern California. Brady and Busse (1994) were able to validate the last four stages of Cass' model. However, results from the questionnaire were unable to validate the first two stages of Cass' model due to too few respondents identified as being in those stages.

In contrast, the study conducted by Degges-White, Rice, and Myers (2000) provided strong and more recent evidence to support that stage models may not adequately explain the identity development process of gays and lesbians. The

researchers developed structured interview questions for each of the six stages. For example, some of the questions for the identity acceptance stage included “Tell me about when you first accepted the self-label of “lesbian” and the feelings that accompanied this. What feelings did your first experiences with other homosexuals create for you?” Each participant was asked all of the questions for all stages regardless of their level of gay identity development. The purpose was to develop detailed descriptions. The researchers utilized a convenience sample of nine initial participants and through snowball sampling included three additional participants. The sample consisted only of white women, aged 22 to 46 years old, with varying socioeconomic levels. After the interviews were completed, the researchers reviewed the transcripts and video and made determinations based upon their understanding of Cass’ model as to who had progressed through each stage. In their findings, Degges-White, Rice, and Myers found support for Cass’ notion of identity confusion (stage one) and identity acceptance (stage four), however, found significant variation in the other stages and experiences that were reported. As a result, they identified that the experience of gay identity development may not neatly fit into the stages that were initially proposed by Cass. There are weaknesses to the research method used, such as the use of a convenience sample and a lack of description about the data analysis techniques employed. However, the study provides support for moving away from a linear understanding of identity development towards a more multi-faceted and complex one.

### **Lifespan-based Model**

While Cass’s (1979; 1984) and Troiden’s (1989) models asserted specific stages for an individual to progress through, D’Augelli’s (1994b) theory proposed, “individuals

develop and change over the entire course of their lifespan” (p. 123). D’Augelli’s model was based on an analysis of the homophobic and oppressive culture in which gays, lesbians and bisexuals develop and of human development theory (D’Augelli, 1994a). Similarly to Troiden, D’Augelli did not empirically test his processes to determine their accuracy. D’Augelli focused on six processes and acknowledged and accounted for several environmental factors that impacted how individuals formed their identity. These processes provided a more comprehensive way of conceptualizing how gay identities develop. In contrast to Cass, this model acknowledges the impact and influence of external conditions. These variables included how individuals perceived themselves and their identity, the impacts of interpersonal relationships, and the role of relevant cultural and social norms.

D’Augelli’s six processes included abandoning one’s heterosexual identity, developing a personal and social gay identity, becoming an offspring, developing an intimacy status and entering a gay community (D’Augelli, 1994a). A critical aspect of this theory is the recognition that individuals may experience multiple processes concurrently.

The first process involved leaving one’s heterosexual identity. D’Augelli argued that someone would do this by first identifying internally and then begin telling people that he was gay (1994a). This may seem particularly challenging as a first process; however, D’Augelli assumed a lifespan model with the first process involving someone openly identifying as gay (1994a). Next, developing a personal identity includes working through any internalized incorrect beliefs about what it means to identify as a gay individual. Often times this process begins when individuals seek assistance from others

who identify as they do. From these experiences, individuals develop a gay social identity, which D'Augelli (1994a) noted as a third process in his theory. This process involves developing a support network of individuals that include lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual people.

Another process includes becoming a gay offspring. D'Augelli (1994a) noted that individuals would disclose to their parents their sexual orientation. As a result, many people seek to redefine their relationships with their parents. During this process, college students may experience stress or anxiety depending upon their parents' reactions. The next process involves developing an intimacy status. D'Augelli (1994b) noted that this process is more complicated for gay individuals who are seeking a romantic partner due "to a heterosexist culture that provides no routine socialization for lesbian and gay development" (p. 127). Specifically, this lack of opportunity for routine socialization leads to gay individuals developing "personal, couple-specific, and community norms" about romantic relationships (D'Augelli, 1994a, p. 327). The sixth process entails becoming an active member of the gay community. Admittedly, D'Augelli (1994a) noted that some individuals might never realize this process and those that do may face risks.

D'Augelli's lifespan model represents a critical shift in the understanding and conceptualization of how gay identity is developed. Specifically, the transition towards a more holistic model is especially important as more researchers describe the process of identity development as complex and influenced by other identities (Jones & McEwen, 2001).



## **Research on Lifespan Model**

The research on D'Augelli's (1994a; 1994b) lifespan model presented an alternative approach to understanding the development of a gay identity that extended beyond early linear models of Cass (1979; 1984) and Troiden (1989). While the lifespan approach provides a more holistic understanding of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity development, there has been no research conducted to validate the theory (Baker, 2008). The lack of research can be attributed to the scope and breadth as identity development occurs over a lifetime model. A substantial longitudinal study would be needed to capture this change. Further, unlike Cass' Stage Allocation Measure, D'Augelli did not provide an instrument with which to test his model (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

While no research exists to support the gay identity development process proposed by D'Augelli (1994a; 1994b), researchers have found benefit in its application to explain the development of other social identities (Bilodeau, 2005; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). Specifically, Bilodeau used the processes to explain the identity development of transgender individuals. Bilodeau's study recruited participants who were members of an electronic listserv of LGBT students from a larger, public university in the Midwest. Two trans-identified individuals agreed and participated in the study. Using a semi-structured interview, students were asked to reflect on their experiences as a transgender individual. Bilodeau found that the students' responses matched closely with D'Augelli's earlier descriptions of the six processes. Although there were clear limitations to the study such as the small number of participants, the results appear to support the need for additional research on the lifespan model.

## **Limitations and Criticisms of Gay Identity Development Models**

As with all models, limitations and criticisms exist for both stage-based and lifespan models of gay identity development. These critiques have addressed both methodological limitations of the study and the failure for the models to adequately explain the process of gay identity development for all individuals.

Cass' (1979; 1984) and Troiden's (1989) theories on gay identity development have faced many critiques from other researchers and practitioners. Some of the most widely cited critiques identify that Cass' and Troiden's theories fail to account for populations other than White males and does not allow for individuals to identify as being in more than one stage (Dilley, 2002; Renn & Bilodeau, 2006). In particular, these models do not account for the impact and intersection of identities, such as how does someone who identifies as Black reconcile different cultural expectations and representations of gender, race, and sexual orientation (Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000)? Additionally, Cass herself articulated that the order of the stages might not be correct.

Degges-White, Rice, and Myers (2000) and Renn and Bilodeau (2006) raised concerns that Cass' sample was comprised solely of White gay males. They claimed that this theory failed to recognize the development of other populations of students (e.g. women, lesbians, bisexuals, people of color). Further, Renn and Bilodeau (2006) identified an inherent limitation in utilizing a stage-based model. They asserted that stage models assume a "homogeneity of experience and developmental style" which may not be universal for all students (p. 348). It is clear that these types of models do not adequately account for multiple intersecting identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000). They

also articulated that a stage model provides a distinct end point for an individual's identity development. Others have argued that identity development does not happen in a linear manner (Dilley, 2002). Troiden's (1989) model is further critiqued for failing to be tested empirically.

Critiques of D'Augelli's lifespan model raise concerns about his research methodologies and data collection techniques to develop his theory (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The sampling used was extremely small which limits the ability to make broader generalizations. Similarly to Cass (1979), D'Augelli drew on anecdotal observations (Bilodeau & Renn). Additionally, D'Augelli's model is criticized for failing to account for the impact that the college experience has on identity development (Bilodeau & Renn). By failing to address this impact, his theory does not account for the significant emotional, social, and cognitive growth that students experience as a result of attending college compared to their non-college going peers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

### **Identity Development in Online Environments.**

Given that the most widely cited gay identity development models were developed over 20 years ago, there is a significant need to explore what impact newer technologies, specifically social networking sites, have on development (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The use of these sites as part of the process of identity development may be especially salient for college students who have integrated this technology into their everyday lives (Howe & Strauss, 2004). In particular, these sites offer an environment for gay students to explore who they are while developing connections with other gay people. However, an exhaustive review of the literature found that no studies have been conducted on the experience of gay identity development in online environments.

Therefore, the processes that D'Augelli (1994a; 1994b) introduced in the lifespan model may prove helpful in conceptualizing how gay students utilize gay-oriented social networking sites. Specifically, my experiences with gay, male college students seem to support the processes of developing a personal and social gay identity and entering a gay community. This model also fosters a holistic perspective of identity that intersects with other aspects of an individual's life. Additionally, these models provide gay students with an opportunity and context to understand their development and personal growth. For these reasons, I will focus on D'Augelli's six key processes to help explore and explain how gay students utilize gay-oriented social networking sites.

### **Impact of Campus Environment**

As a reflection of society, institutions of higher education continue to see growth in the diverse composition of their student populations (Rankin & Reason, 2008). To attend to the increased diversity of students and staff on campus, significant attention has focused on fostering a welcome campus environment for historically underrepresented populations, including people of color, women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people (El-Khawas, 2003; Rankin, 2003). However, efforts to foster understanding and tolerance of differences has not eliminated incidents of oppressive behaviors, such as acts of discrimination and violence, which continue to negatively impact students, faculty, and staff (Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008).

In response to these situations, higher education administrators have increased their focus on assessing, evaluating, and understanding campus climate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hart & Fellabaum, 2008; Rankin, 2009). The term campus climate, as defined by Bauer (1998), refers to an assessment of "the current perceptions, attitudes,

and expectations that define the institution and its members” (p 2). Gay students are one of the student populations that continue to be most impacted by negative behaviors and unwelcoming environments (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Utilizing Bauer’s definition and several campus climate studies, this section will examine how gay, male college students experience and are impacted by their campus environment. Specifically, I will identify the impact of these environments on the learning and identity development of gay, male college students. Additionally, as this study seeks to understand the experience of gay students’ use of gay-oriented social networking sites, I will explore how these sites could mitigate the impact of unwelcoming campus communities.

### **Campus Climate Studies**

For the past two decades, campus climate studies have been conducted to identify and understand the experiences of LGBT individuals (D’Augelli & Rose, 1990; Eliason, 1996; Rankin, 2003; Silverchanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2007). The studies, while varying in size and scope, have focused on three specific areas, which include: (a) the experiences of LGBT people, (b) others’ perceptions of LGBT people, and (c) the impact of programs and policies serving LGBT people (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Collectively, the studies have overwhelmingly demonstrated that campus environments continue to be viewed by LGBT students, staff, and faculty as unsafe and unreceptive (McRee & Cooper, 1998; Noack, 2004; Rankin & Reason, 2008; Rankin et al.). From the multiple campus climate studies conducted, I highlight three, which shed light on the experiences, learning, and development of gay students while also demonstrating how unwelcoming campuses are towards LGBT individuals. The selection

of these studies was based on the strength of the research methodologies used, the size of the sample, and scope of the project.

The first selected study was conducted in 2003 by Dr. Susan Rankin, a noted expert in assessing and evaluating campus climates. Supported by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, this national study included the largest number of LGBT respondents at that time. The focus of the study was to examine how LGBT individuals experienced their campus climate (Rankin, 2003). The project included 1,669 LGBT identified participants from four private and ten public colleges and universities from across the country. The recruitment of participants on each campus happened through purposeful sampling, which included snowball-sampling techniques. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, participating students, faculty, and staff completed a survey of 35 questions with a variety of Likert-scale items and short answer responses.

An analysis of the data found that 43% of all respondents were undergraduate students with approximately 51% identifying as female, 43% as male, 4% as transgender, and 2% declining to respond. People of color comprised only 14% of the study with an overwhelming 86% identifying as White. Sexual orientations of the participants was also reported with 35% identifying as gay, 28% as lesbian, 21% as bisexual, 8% as heterosexual, and 5% who were unsure (Rankin, 2003). Beyond the demographic information, 36% of respondents identified that they had been harassed or targeted because of their sexual orientation with 20% feeling unsafe in their environment. Additionally, 50% of students chose to hide their sexual orientation out of concerns for safety. These statistics are alarming and illustrate that LGBT individuals must navigate unwelcoming campus climates.

The second selected study was conducted by Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, and Magley (2007) and highlights the impact that homophobic behaviors can have on LGBT students' academic and personal growth. This study utilized a census approach and involved 3,128 heterosexual and LGBT undergraduate students from a small, public northwestern university. Employing a quantitative research methodology, an online survey was developed which asked students to assess the campus climate with regards to homophobic harassment they had observed. The survey included multiple choice responses and Likert-scale items.

The demographics of the study revealed that 49% were female, 51% were male, with 90% identifying as White, which closely matched the composition of the student body. Eleven percent identified as LGBT with 41% of participants reporting that they had either experienced or observed homophobic harassment. Additionally, LGBT individuals were 58% more likely than their heterosexual peers to witness or experience homophobic harassment on campus. These students also reported that this harassment negatively impacted their academic performance.

The final selected study I will discuss was conducted by Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, and Frazer (2010) and previously highlighted in Chapter One. This national mixed-methods study sought to provide a comprehensive perspective of the climate for LGBT individuals. The questionnaire consisted of 96 multiple choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended responses. The researchers sought out institutions throughout the country that had an office focused on LGBT student issues. All institutions that met this requirement were invited to participate. A total of 5,149 students, staff, and faculty from 100 institutions in all 50 states participated in this study.

Demographically, the study was composed of 42% males and 58% females with 46.3% identifying as undergraduate students (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, and Frazer, 2010). The racial composition of the study included 77% identifying as White, 8% as multiracial, 5% as Hispanic/Latino/a, 5% as Asian/Asian American, 4% as Black/African American, and 1% for both Middle Eastern and American Indian/Native American. The sexual orientation of respondents was reported as 33% gay, 20% lesbian, 12% bisexual, 16% queer, 16% heterosexual, and 2% asexual. An analysis of the responses revealed that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals were 23% more likely to experience harassment than their heterosexual peers. Additionally, 66% of gay men reported being called derogatory names, a rate that exceeded other sexual orientations. As a result, LGB individuals were far less likely to rank their campus climate as safe when compared to heterosexual students.

### **Impact on Learning & Identity Development**

The findings from these three campus climate studies are especially troubling. They depict campus environments that are, at best, unwelcoming but more often than not are unsafe and oppressive for gay college students. These unwelcoming environments have a significant impact on gay students' experiences, learning, and identity development.

Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) identified that stereotypes and negative attitudes towards minority students, which includes LGBT students, have detrimental impacts on their ability to learn. Additionally, as highlighted in Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, and Magley's (2007) study, homophobic attitudes and behaviors inhibit gay, male college students' learning (Rankin & Reason, 2007). From these studies we can conclude that the



educational success and learning for gay students is compromised in campus climates that are unsafe.

Another result of an unwelcome campus climate is the impact on the identity development process of gay students (Evans & Broido, 1999). The complex process of developing and navigating a gay identity often occurs during students' time at college (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Rhoads, 1995). The experience is further complicated for students when a homophobic campus climate exists (Rhoads, 1995). The combination of identity development and navigating homophobic campus environments can result in strains being placed on students' physical and mental health (DiPlacido, 1998; Rankin, 2003). Specifically, Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morphey (2001) found that gay students can feel isolated and unsafe, experience anxiety and depression, and may contemplate suicide.

These findings are especially troubling considering the recent news of multiple lesbian and gay identified students who have committed suicide (CNN, 2010). Specifically, Tyler Clementi from Rutgers University committed suicide after his roommate and next door neighbor broadcast him having sexual intercourse with another male through a web-camera via the Internet. Further, gay students, such as Raymond Chase from Johnson and Wales University, Eric James Borges from College of the Sequoias, and Corey Jackson from Oakland University all committed suicide after struggling to find acceptance and support within their campus environments (CampusPride, 2010; Ng, 2012). These suicides are just a few of the more than a dozen that received substantial news and media attention over the past several years. They represent the significant strains that gay students continue to experience on campus and

support the notion that these students will shift to exploring online environments for support and connection.

### **Finding Safer Environments Online**

As the volume of research on campus climate continues to grow, the picture that has emerged is a startling one of intolerance, harassment, and violence aimed at LGBT students (Rankin, 2003; Rankin, 2001; Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2007). It is promising to note that universities and colleges have instituted a number of programs and policies to respond to the negative campus climate (Rankin, 2003; Sears, 2002). Some of these initiatives have included the creation of LGBT student centers, Safe Zone programs which focus on developing supportive allies, campus-wide committees focused on the retention of LGBT students, and introducing comprehensive non-discrimination policies (Henquinet, Phibbs, Skoglund, 2000; Rankin). However, the negative, unwelcoming, and unsafe campus climates continue to have a significant impact on the personal, academic, and social aspects of gay college students (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010).

As a result of these unfriendly environments, White, gay, male college students may seek out alternative environments, specifically gay-oriented social networking sites, to augment the lack of inclusive campus communities. This assertion is further supported by the use of social networking sites by nearly all college students (Smith & Caruso, 2010). These sites could provide students with relatively safe and contained settings with which to explore and express their identity and develop connections with other gay individuals. A review of the research found that no studies have been conducted to understand this experience. Therefore, the current research project fills a critical gap by

examining how White, gay, male college students use gay-oriented social networking sites.

### **Socio-Historical Context**

Over the past sixty years, the United States has made significant progress in advancing equality for people who identify as gay or lesbian (Marcus, 2002; Meem, Gibson, & Alexander, 2010). Although these gains have helped to shift Americans' perceptions, a homophobic culture of attitudes, beliefs, policies and laws that limit the rights of gays and lesbians remains (Badash, 2011; Shepard, 2009). Specifically, college students who are developing a gay identity are likely to experience and be negatively affected by this culture (D'Augelli, 1994a). Therefore, in order to explore how today's gay college students utilize gay-oriented social networking sites, it is critical for this study to situate and examine the impact of the homophobic culture in American society.

For the purpose of understanding the socio-historical context of gay individuals, I have organized major movements into four distinct and overlapping narratives of gay life. These narratives form a historical timeline and include birth, liberation, HIV/AIDS and survival, and equality. Each of these stories continues to play out in American society today.

### **Narrative of Birth**

The birth of the gay rights movement began in the 1940s and 1950s (Boyd, 2003; Marcus, 2002). During this period, gay and lesbian individuals were considered "sexual perverts" who had been introduced by Communists to weaken American society (Marcus; Shepard, 2009). In an era of intolerance, Senator McCarthy began investigating all departments of the federal government in an attempt to rid it of homosexuals. It was

clear from extensive government hearings on the matter and a Senate subcommittee on the “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government” that homosexual behavior was not acceptable (Duberman, 1991). The fear of homosexuality led to countless people being investigated and fired for engaging in questionable acts, such as subscribing to certain magazines, interacting with known gays and lesbians, or engaging in homosexual acts (Johnson, 2004). During the Lavender Scare, from 1947 to 1950, more people lost their jobs for being gay or lesbian than for being Communist (D’Emilio, 1983; Johnson, 2004).

Although significant fear and hatred existed, a few brave individuals organized the Mattachine Society in 1950 (Shepard, 2009). This group, led by Harry Hay, focused on fighting against the intolerance that gay and lesbian individuals faced (D’Emilio, 1983). Other groups with similar purposes emerged in the late 1950s to lend their voice to the ongoing discrimination. As the movement continued to gain momentum, gays and lesbians began to connect with each other and recognized that they were not alone.

### **Narrative of Liberation**

Through the late 1950s and 1960s, gays and lesbians emerged as a minority identity group with a voice longing to be heard (Shepard, 2009). During this time period, nightclubs and bars began to open as an outlet and expression for gays and lesbians (Marcus, 2002). The need to be open about one’s identity overpowered the fear of staying silent. One powerful voice of the time that supported this liberation movement was Jose Sarria, a gay man from San Francisco. He joined the voices of those who advocated for a more tolerant attitude of gays and lesbians (Feinberg, 2005). In a significant step forward

in the gay rights movement, he became the first openly identified gay person to run for public office in 1961.

Although the voices of gays and lesbians continued to grow louder and more forceful throughout the 1960s their impact was still localized to more progressive communities (e.g., San Francisco, New York City) (Marcus, 2002). The Stonewall Riots in 1969 shifted the LGB narrative of liberation to the national forefront (Shepard, 2009). This riot occurred when police entered the Stonewall Bar in Greenwich Village to conduct their nightly raids for any inappropriate gay behavior (e.g., people of the same gender kissing or touching, men wearing women's clothing) (Marcus). Instead of going quietly, gays, lesbians, and drag queens chose to take a stand and fight against the police (Shepard, 2005). The purpose of these riots was to demonstrate that all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation, should be treated with dignity and respect. In 1973, the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality as a mental disorder, which further supported the belief that gays and lesbians deserved equal treatment (Meem, Gibson, & Alexander, 2010). The movement towards fighting against homophobia and heterosexism continued with the creation of the Gay Activist Alliance in the mid 1970s (Shepard, 2009). This narrative continued with an external focus on changing heterosexuals' and society's negative perceptions of gays and lesbians.

### **Narrative of HIV, AIDS, & Survival**

The early 1980s ushered in the health crisis of Gay Related Immune Disease (GRID) (Shepard, 2009). Although GRID was initially thought to affect only gay and bisexual men, scientists soon realized that the disease, today known as HIV/AIDS, could affect all individuals. This epidemic flamed the misconception that LGB individuals were

only sexual beings and by nature inherently ill and deviant (Marcus, 2002; Meem, Gibson, & Alexander, 2010). Pat Buchanan, a conservative politician, went so far as to say that for gays and lesbians, “AIDS is nature’s retribution for violating the laws of nature” (FAIR, 1996). The 1950s McCarthy attitude of seeing gays and lesbians as sick and perverted appeared again. The stigma towards people with HIV/AIDS continued through the 1980s, into the 1990s, and still exists today.

In response, the gay and lesbian community came to support the people who were directly and indirectly impacted by the disease through programs such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and Queer Nation (Marcus, 2002; Shepard, 2009). These individuals sought to define the HIV/AIDS movement not as a moral one but as a health crisis. This response became not only the narrative of HIV/AIDS but also one of survival. Many communities and groups to this day continue prevention efforts aimed at limiting the transmission of HIV and AIDS (Marcus; Shepard).

### **Narrative of Equality**

The central premise for the movement of gay rights has consistently been that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals receive the same rights and privileges as their heterosexual peers (Marcus, 2002). As the LGB community and greater society continued to understand and respond to the impact of HIV/AIDS, a movement focused on creating greater equality emerged (Marcus; Rothblum, 2002; Shepard, 2009). A turning point in the movement towards equality occurred in 1993, when President Bill Clinton signed into law the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy (Marcus). This policy sought to provide opportunities for LGB individuals to serve in the military so long as they did not publicly disclose their sexual orientation (Meem, Gibson, & Alexander, 2010). At first glance, this

policy appears to undo decades of intolerance towards LGB individuals who wished to serve their country as members of the military. However, upon further review, I would argue that this was a veiled attempt at reinforcing the concept that a LGB identity is fundamentally unequal and less valued than a heterosexual identity. By requiring individuals to compartmentalize their identity and place caveats on their service, the message is a tolerance for difference so long as it is not blatantly displayed.

With the new millennium, the focus on equality began to extend to same sex marriage, health benefits, and repealing the policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (Halloran, 2011; Meem, Gibson, & Alexander, 2009; Rothblum, 2002). Although several states now allow same sex marriage and recent polls show a promising trend of more positive perceptions towards gays and lesbians, there is still significant work to be done to achieve equality (CNN, 2011; Marcus; Shepard, 2009). Arguably, this will continue to be one of the greatest narratives over the next 20 years.

### **Impact of Socio-Historical Context on Gay College Students**

These four narratives communicate significant historical shifts in the understanding and recognition of gays and lesbians as an integral aspect of American society. While progress has been made, the discrimination and hatred that LGB individuals continue to face in today’s society is extensive (Halloran, 2011; Rothblum, 2002). As a result, gay college students continue to be one of the most impacted groups by this homophobic culture (Rankin, 2003).

For gay college students, the homophobic culture aggravates issues of identity development, results in acts of violence, and the absence of safe physical environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; D’Augelli, 2005). As a result, gay students may explore online

social networking sites as a way to alleviate some of the stress that they experience. This concept is supported by the literature, which posits that if students are to be successful they need to feel safe from physical harm and feel respected by their peers (Holley & Steiner, 2005). By using gay-oriented social networking sites, gay students may be able to mitigate the effects of the negative culture. Specifically, these sites provide relatively safe environments where students explore who they are, develop connections with other gay individuals, and learn about gay culture (Driver, 2006; Gee, 1990; Pope, 1995).

### **The Impact of Social Networking Sites**

Although social networking sites have existed for only 15 years, their impact of has been widely felt and they have quickly become an integrated part of American society (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). More specifically, these sites, which include Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace, have dramatically changed how people develop, connect, and interact with one another (Shirky, 2008; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). The impact of these sites has been especially significant for college students who were one of the earliest groups of adopters and remain the largest population of current users (Smith & Caruso, 2010). Research has been conducted to explore the impact of the use of these sites on college students (boyd, 2008; Hewitt & Forte, 2006). However, minimal attention has been directed towards the experiences of gay, male college students (boyd & Ellison; Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009). Given the previously identified challenges facing gay students, such as developing a gay identity in a homophobic culture and unwelcoming campus environments, this lack of



research is especially concerning. As a result, the current study proposes to address this gap.

In order to address the study's central research questions, I define several key features of the sites, review the historical development of social networking sites (SNS), and explore their presence at institutions of higher education. Additionally, three emerging areas in the research on social networking sites are identified that may prove helpful in conceptualizing how White, gay, male college students use gay SNS. These include: (a) managing and performing an online identity, (b) the development of social capital, and (c) the navigation of issues of privacy and safety.

### **Defining Social Networking Sites**

As previously discussed, boyd and Ellison (2007) conceptualize social networking sites as:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p. 2).

Although multiple definitions of SNS exist, boyd and Ellison's definition has gained widespread acceptance and use among researchers (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Kramer & Winter, 2008; Richter & Koch, 2008). Given this recognition, I will utilize boyd and Ellison's definition of social networking sites for this study.

While there is great diversity among the services offered by each individual SNS, common themes and features exist (boyd, 2006; O'Shea, 2003). These include the opportunity for individuals to create and share a profile and to identify and expand connections between people and groups (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Before accessing a social networking site, the user is prompted to answer a set of questions that will create

her profile (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The profile serves as the first impression of what others on the site see (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). The questions often ask about information such as demographic markers (e.g. race, gender, sexual orientation, job/profession), personal characteristics or traits (e.g. personality, height, weight, appearance), and an image or photo (Donath & boyd, 2004). The user is able to customize the profile based on their needs and what information they choose to disclose to others (boyd & Ellison).

Once a person creates their profile, they are provided an opportunity to begin building their connections (boyd, 2006; Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). Most often an individual will search for people they know by name to see if they have an account, enter search parameters about shared interests that were provided in the original profile, or by importing a list of mail addresses (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman). A request is then sent to the particular person or group who is then prompted to approve or deny the person's request to connect (boyd & Ellison, 2008). If the person accepts then they are added to the network of connections. If an individual declines an invitation, the person is not added to the network. With most SNS, the expansion of one's network will then provide a list of individuals with whom they might share mutual acquaintances (boyd & Ellison; Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman). These extended networks of people are developed from software, which uses an algorithm, to scan and locate similar matches based on information contained in the profile and existing connections (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman). Further, as social networking sites continued to expand, additional features such as access to news, email, and instant messaging have been added (facebook.com, 2010; Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009; Tapscott).

Social networking sites provide individuals with the ability to connect with others regardless of time zones or geographical constraints (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The power of social networking sites is rooted in the user's ability to identify and make visible their connections to others (Beer, 2008; Haythornwaite, 2005; Richter & Koch, 2008). For White, gay, male college students the use of gay-oriented SNS could help to recognize and provide a supportive network of other gay individuals. Additionally, the security measures, such as limiting who can view your profile, described by boyd and Ellison could offer these students a sense of greater safety while using the site.

### **History and Expansion of SNS**

The history of social networking sites is a relatively short one. However, these sites are a subset of a much larger and longer context, called computer-mediated communications (CMC) (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). Computer-mediated communications refer to any communication made possible through the use of two or more networking computers and include email, instant messaging, and social networking sites (McQuail, 2005). While this study's primary purpose is to explore the use and impact of social networking sites, I offer a brief history of CMC as a backdrop for the development and use of social networking sites.

Significant technological developments in the 1960s and 1970s allowed for the first communications to occur via computers (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). The earliest CMC was made using ARPANET in 1969 between two computers at Stanford and UCLA (boyd & Ellison, 2007). This program used networked computers to connect and efficiently send and receive data over long distances. ARPANET is recognized as the first email client and the beginning of what is now referred to as the

Internet. From this advancement, a host of CMCs such as computerized bulletin board systems and Usenet (earliest online forum) were launched in the late 1970s (Sunden, 2003). Additionally, multiuser dungeons (MUD) were created in 1978 and would serve as the first online gaming network (boyd & Ellison). Virtual communities, such as the WELL and Mosaic, were developed in the 1980s and 90s and helped to launch the Internet (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004).

The evolution of CMC also resulted in the development of online social networking sites. Utilizing boyd and Ellison's (2007) definition, one of the earliest social networking sites was Sixdegrees.com, which launched in 1997 but ceased operating in 2001. The purpose of this site was to demonstrate the interconnected nature of the world. Specifically, it was a social experiment that sought to prove that any two people, although they may live in different geographical regions, could be linked to each other through no more than six connections (Tapscott, 2009). Becoming a member of Sixdegrees.com provided people with online space to develop a profile where they could list personal interests and demographic information, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Utilizing this online profile, people would then search for others based on shared personal interests or connections (boyd & Ellison). SixDegrees.com began to lose members and was closed in 2000 because it failed to provide users with things to do on the site beyond identifying connections.

The site was replaced with more powerful SNS, such as Friendster and MySpace (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Haythornwaite, 2005). These sites emerged and provided additional tools, such as email accounts and instant messaging, which allowed users to further develop their connections to others (O'Shea, 2003). However, both sites struggled

to maintain their dominance with Friendster being redesigned as a social gaming site for countries in Asia (Goldberg, 2007) and MySpace declining in its number of users and popularity (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). In 2004, Facebook was created at Harvard University, which continued the expansion of SNS (Cassidy, 2006). Although the site was initially restricted to students at Harvard, it quickly became popular and expanded to other college campuses. The site was opened to the general public in 2005 and has continued to be the most widely used social networking site in the world with over 400 million users (Facebook.com, 2011).

The popularity and use of social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, has continued to rise. As a result, it is not uncommon for an individual to utilize and be a member of multiple SNS (boyd, 2006; Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). The presence of multiple accounts has made it difficult to determine how many people utilize SNS (Arrington, 2005). However, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that approximately 35% of all people in the United States belong to a SNS (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010).

Although the previous discussion focused primarily on more well-known sites, historically underrepresented groups, such as women, people of color, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, have also developed SNS (Donath & boyd, 2004; Geidner, Flook, & Bell, 2007). These sites, such as iVillage.com, BlackPlanet.com, and planetout.com, provide many of the features of social networking sites previously identified. However, they provide a community comprised of individuals who share similar identities (Cassidy, 2006). Participation in these social networking sites serve as

an articulation of a community and an individual's network, which is often missing for populations who have historically been marginalized and discriminated against (Cassidy).

The history and growth of these sites provide a critical context for this study as it helps situate the experiences of White, gay, male college students who utilize gay-oriented social networking sites. Specifically, the history of gay-oriented social networking sites appears to mirror the rise and fall that other sites, such as MySpace, sixdegrees.com, and Facebook, experienced (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). Gay.com (planetout.com, 2011) was redesigned while dlist.com (2011) and connexion.org (2011) were closed. Manhunt.net and planetout.com have replaced these sites and boast having millions of users (manhunt.net, 2011). Appendix A highlights some of the most widely used social networking sites in American society. Additionally, gay SNS are also included in this table given the focus of this study.

### **Emergence of SNS in Higher Education Environments**

The emergence and growth of social networking sites as a popular tool for communication can be attributed to college students who remain as one of its largest populations of users (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Cassidy, 2007). Recent studies conducted by Smith and Caruso (2010) and Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman (2009) offer a holistic context for understanding college students' use and its impact. The two studies were selected because they represent the most recent and in-depth exploration of this topic.

First, the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) has conducted an annual mixed-methods study since 2007 that examines how undergraduate students are utilizing technology and what impact they have experienced (Smith & Caruso, 2010). This study provides critical longitudinal data for 2007, 2008, and 2009, with which to

make comparisons and draw conclusions about the use of technology. As a result, the research presents one of the most comprehensive examinations to date of students' technology use.

Although the ECAR study does not solely address the use of social networking sites, multiple questions explore the use and impact of these sites by students. Given that this project seeks to understand gay, male college students' use of gay-oriented social networking sites, I will examine these findings in greater detail. The most recent ECAR survey was conducted in 2010 and included multiple choice and open-ended responses from students at 127 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada (Smith & Caruso, 2010). In total, 285,000 students were emailed the survey and 36,950 freshmen and seniors responded which provided a low response rate of 12.9%. This rate is attributable to a significant non-response bias. Although the response rate was low given the sample size, students from different types of institutions such as public, private, four, and two-year institutions and academic majors were represented. An analysis of the data found that women comprised 61.8% of the study. Other demographic categories, such as race and ethnicity, were not provided. In addition to the online survey, focus groups were conducted with 84 students at four institutions.

The results from this longitudinal study found that from 2007 to 2010, the use of social networking sites has risen from 90.1% to 94.1% (Smith & Caruso, 2010). Further, the researchers found that 96% of students use these sites to remain in contact with friends and 72% use them to share photographs, videos, and other media. Students were also asked about the presence of social networking sites in their classes. Approximately 30% of respondents reported that faculty incorporated these sites as a part of the

curriculum. However, only one-quarter of the students were interested in having these sites integrated into the academic experience. Although this represented a gradual increase from previous studies, the researchers identified that students see the use of SNS as essential to the social experience of college but not necessarily to their classroom learning.

The second critical study to explore the use and impact of social networking sites was conducted by Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman (2009). This study examined how students used Facebook and its impacts on the culture of college campuses. The study is especially noteworthy as it is one of few in-depth explorations of how undergraduate college students use and are impacted by social networking sites. Two surveys and ethnographic interviews were conducted over a three-year period, from 2006 to 2009. The two surveys were used to explore and situate the context of online social networking sites for college students. The ethnographic interviews were then conducted to describe what the experience and impact was for students.

The first survey, conducted in 2006, consisted of multiple choice and open-ended questions. Undergraduate students with Facebook accounts at a large, private institution were invited to participate. The students saw a message posted on the institution's Facebook page. A total of 123 responses from an undisclosed number of students were received and coded by the researchers. From these responses, three themes emerged which included: "(a) agency, (b) performance, and (c) relationality" (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, p. 52). The term agency was used to describe the extent to which students felt they could control the contents of their online identity while performance was defined as students managing and influencing how others viewed their profiles.



Relationality identifies the impact that Facebook has on reshaping the campus community to include online environments.

The survey was administered again in the fall of 2007 and served as a revision and expansion of the initial three themes (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). For this questionnaire, an undisclosed number of undergraduate students at 20 public and private residential colleges across the country were invited to participate. A total of 321 participants completed the questionnaire; however, the response rate was not reported. The same coding structure used for the first analysis was again employed. The result involved the development of four themes: “(a) use-consciousness, (b) campus culture, (c) identity factors, and (d) voyeurism and impression management” (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, p. 54). However, the researchers did not define each of the four themes as they had in the previous analysis. Instead, Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman posited that use-consciousness and voyeurism and impression management were most closely related to the earlier description of performance and agency. Campus culture was the result of expanding the earlier conception of relationality. The addition of identity factors was the researchers’ attempt at exploring how participants’ race, ethnicity, and gender intersected and impacted their user of social networking sites.

Using the results from both surveys, questions were constructed for the ethnographic interviews. The ethnographic interviews were conducted with 20 undergraduate students from residential college campuses throughout 2008 (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). Researchers reported that these interviews were conducted with men and women, students of color, and varied sexual orientations to represent the diversity among those who use Facebook, however, specific demographic

breakdowns were not provided. Participants were asked to share their Facebook profile with the researchers and to explain how they created each section. Additionally, the participants were asked a set of questions that had been developed as a result of the two preceding surveys. These questions included how they perceived themselves online and how others perceived them. The codes that had been developed for both surveys were also used to code the interviews. From the ethnographic interviews and surveys, four portraits of students who used Facebook were developed. Specifically, these portraits summarized how students manage their online identity and the impact that campus environment has on their use.

From the ethnographic interviews, Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman (2009) selected the portraits of two men and two women as representative of Facebook users. The students were involved members of the campus community who discussed how their gender, racial and ethnic identities impacted and informed how they used the site. Additionally, these portraits recognized the complexity for students who must manage their online identity and the impact that campus environment has on their use. As a result, Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman (2009) asserted that college students view Facebook and other social networking sites as a “fundamental component of their lived experiences” (p. 42).

There are limitations in the techniques utilized by Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman (2009). First, the research design of the study has multiple flaws and limitations. Specifically, the population surveyed for each sample was not provided and response rates were not reported. There were also insufficient descriptions of how participants were recruited to participate.

Second, the response rates for both surveys were not reported. The researchers only briefly mention that the first survey was conducted at a large, private institution. The second questionnaire was limited in respondents when drawing from 20 campuses. From these smaller numbers of responses, 123 and 231 respectively, it is particularly difficult to know if the themes they described represent the larger population.

Finally, the four themes that were developed from the second survey lacked detail and definition. Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman (2009) only identified how they aligned with the earlier themes. Additionally, the selection of only four portraits from a field of 20 participants is problematic. Specifically, this approach assumes that the experiences of student leaders and those who may not be as involved are similar.

While certain limitations to the research exist, Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman's (2009) work underscores the need to further explore the central role that social networking sites have on today's college students and their identity development. The proposed study seeks to expand on their initial work by exploring how White, gay, college men utilize gay-oriented social networking sites. Specifically, Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman's theme of voyeurism/impression management is consistent with the existing research on social networking sites and may prove helpful in conceptualizing how students are utilizing these sites. This concept and two others will be explored in greater depth in the next section.

### **Impact of SNS on Gay College Students**

Research on social networking sites has been conducted to examine how students' race and ethnicity (Byrne, in press; Gajjala, 2007) and gender (Geidner, Flook, & Bell, 2007; Hjorth & Kim, 2005) impact their experiences. The research has identified that

historically underrepresented groups of students, such as people of color and women, are more intentional when crafting their online profiles and in the posting and sharing of information for several reasons. Specifically, these students are acutely aware of being misperceived and judged by their White and male counterparts for how they express their online identity. However, there is a noted absence of research exploring the experiences of White, gay, male college students' use of gay-oriented social networking sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The lack of research on these students is particularly concerning as the online culture has become an integrated part of the college experience (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009; Smith & Caruso, 2010). A review of the literature identified no studies that solely explored the use and impact of these sites by gay individuals. Given this gap and an analysis of the existing research on social networking sites, I suggest three areas that may prove to be especially salient for White, gay, male college students. These include (a) impression management and online identity development, (b) developing social capital, and (c) navigating issues of privacy.

### **Impression Management**

Erving Goffman (1959) first introduced the concept of impression management. Goffman posited that people choose to represent themselves in ways that attempt to influence how others view them. He argued that in order for people to do this successfully they must scan the environment and account for certain factors such as the social situation and what role they play in it. The scanning and subsequent response requires individuals to interpret social cues. Goffman and later boyd (2007) argued that this is a critical social skill that is learned over time and with experience. Additionally, they asserted that this process serves as the core of socialization for the society. However,

the introduction of online environments, such as social networking sites, complicates this socialization because individuals lack the ability to have face-to-face interactions and make observations. As a result, impression management, which is synonymous with self-representation, has become increasingly popular in research on the use and effects of these sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Donath & boyd, 2004; Marwick, 2005; Skog, 2005). These efforts have been focused on understanding how people present themselves and are perceived by others (Barash, Ducheneaut, Isaacs, & Berlotti, 2011; boyd, 2004), and how an online identity is developed (Sunden, 2003; boyd, 2007).

One of the earliest explorations of impression management involved boyd (2004) examining how individuals used Friendster, a once popular dating and social networking site, to present themselves to others. Utilizing an ethnographic methodology, boyd interviewed an undisclosed number of users and found that they created profiles from demographic information (such as age, gender, race), personal interests, photographs, and a list of other Friendster users. The information served as a “coarse representation” of the person (boyd, p. 2). However, this information often did not accurately reflect the user due to the blended nature of the site as both a networking and dating site. Many users who hoped to use the site for dating expressed concerns over what family members or work colleagues would think if they were to discover their profile. They adapted their behavior and crafted their profile to reflect what would be socially acceptable for the widest audience. Additional researchers have also identified similar behavioral responses in users of social networking sites (Marwick, 2005; Skog, 2005).

Other researchers have conducted studies to examine users’ self-perceptions and how they are perceived. Specifically, Barash, Ducheneaut, Isaacs, and Bellotti (2011),

explored the content shared by Facebook users. On Facebook, users can post status updates, which refer to what they are currently doing, feeling, or experiencing, referred to as status updates. The researchers developed an application that integrated with Facebook, “Rate Your News Feed,” which allowed participants to assess each of their status updates. The researchers conducted a pilot study of 20 Facebook users who they had been previously connected to on the site. They used the application to rate five binary dimensions for status update posts, which included “(1) cool-uncool, (2) entertaining-boring, (3) uplifting-depressing, (4) self-deprecating-self-important, and (5) appreciative-critical” (p. 208). Each dimension was then mapped on a five-point scale, such as one being most uncool and five being most cool. These dimensions were then used to rate the content shared by Facebook users. Barash et al. collected 674 status updates from 100 participants over the period of three weeks. However, there was no description of how the participants were recruited or their demographic makeup. The original authors of the updates were then asked to reflect if what was shared was a positive representation of themselves. The participants were then instructed to rate these statements using each of the five dimensions. Additionally, all participants were given the updates, excluding their own, and asked to rank how they perceived the individual writing them using the same dimensions. Not surprisingly the original authors believed that the updates positively represented themselves and ranked themselves higher on each of the dimensions. However, other users ranked their perception as less positive for each dimension. Specifically, some users felt the original authors more often appeared to be self-important and critical. As a result, participants misinterpreted how they are presenting themselves to

others. This study also highlights the balance that Facebook users face and must maintain when sharing information so as not to be misperceived.

An interwoven aspect of impression management is the development of an online identity. Sunden (2003) was one of the first to explore the process of developing identity in online environments. Utilizing early online role-playing games, known as multi-user dungeons (MUD), she identified that in these environments, users had to type characters and their actions, items, and settings into existence. The constant creation and development required in this setting forced users to be explicit in their details and descriptions. As a result, Sunden introduced the concept of “writing identity into being” in these social networking sites (p. 3). Additionally, boyd (2007) extended this idea by recognizing that profiles serve the function of expressing aspects of one’s identity to others.

For the purpose of this study, the concept of impression management may be helpful in exploring and understanding the process with which White, gay, male college students choose to represent themselves on gay-oriented social networking sites. Based on the existing research on impression management, gay students may be likely to develop profiles that would best represent themselves and be socially accepted by other members of the gay community. Additionally, the concept of developing and performing a gay identity online could prove cognitively and socially beneficial for students as a way to help them develop a positive gay identity.

### **Social Capital**

Another area of research that could be helpful in understanding what impact the use of gay-oriented social networking sites have on White, gay, male college students is

the development of social capital. Specifically, Bourdieu (1985) first introduced the concept of social capital by describing it as the total resources a person is able to access from their respective social networks. He further posited that social capital is the combination of three resources: physical, emotional, and informational. Physical resources include the act of doing something for another person, such as lending a textbook to a friend, while emotional resources involve someone caring or being empathetic to the needs of another. Emotional resources can be both a tangible product, such as physically embracing a friend who is upset, and an intangible one, for example feeling that you are cared for and are part of a larger community (Stutzman, Vitak, Ellison, Gray, & Lampe, 2012). The final resource, informational, reflects one person providing information and insight to someone within his or her social network. An example of an informational resource could be a gay male providing advice or guidance about their own coming out experience to a friend who is questioning their sexual orientation.

Lin (1999; 2001) expanded Bourdieu's (1985) earlier work and identified that people develop reserves of social capital from interpersonal interactions, which in turn they use to further develop and strengthen their social networks. Additionally, Putnam (2000) and Lin (1999) recognized that there are two categories, which included bridging and bonding. Bridging capital is the result of a person's associations with different groups of people and most often results in the development of weak ties between individuals. However, these ties may prove useful in beginning to develop connections between individuals. Conversely, bonding capital, also known as strong ties, comes from emotional connections to family, close friends, or people who may share similar



characteristics. Research on these categories of social capital has become increasingly important as there is growing support that the use of social networking sites may be positively associated with a person's sense of self-worth (Shaw & Gant, 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). The results of this critical research may be especially appropriate for White, gay, college men who utilize gay-oriented social networking sites as a tool to foster connections and social capital among other gay individuals. Further, the use of these sites may help gay students develop the self-confidence with which to endure and respond to the homophobic behaviors of others that they are likely to experience in offline environments.

While no research exists on the development of social capital for White, gay, college men who use social networking sites, Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfeld (2006) sought to identify the types of connections students' developed. The study consisted of two surveys, one sent at the beginning of the fall 2005 semester and one at the start of the spring 2006 semester. From the 7,200 first-year students at Michigan State University (MSU) invited to participate, a total of 1,440 students completed the first survey resulting in a 20% response rate. The second survey yielded a response rate of 75% with 1,085 completing the follow-up survey. While the first survey identified 84% of respondents as Facebook users, the percentage of respondents who were Facebook users jumped to 95.5% in the second survey. The results of this study, however, are limited, as other demographic information was not made available to the researchers because University staff administered the survey. Both surveys used a Likert-scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree and asked participants to respond to several statements. These included items such as, "I use Facebook to keep in touch with an old friend or someone I know

from high school” or “I have had a face-to-face encounter with someone that I learned about through Facebook” (Lampe et al., p. 3). They found that students were more likely to strongly agree (mean=4.63) to the first statement while slightly disagreeing (mean=2.41) with the second. Additionally, the survey asked them to identify what groups of people they believed were viewing their profile. Overwhelmingly, participants identified that high school friends (93%), people in their classes (86%), and people they met at a social event (70%) were most likely to be looking at their profile. The authors identified that students utilize social networking sites to further develop their offline connections.

The findings from Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld (2006) study seem to support the notion that people generally use social networking sites to maintain existing social relationships rather than to meet new people. However, this research has assumed that people will already have established offline networks of support. For White, gay, male college students this may not be the case given the challenges that these students face related to their identity development and unwelcoming campus climates (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). These students may utilize social networking sites to facilitate the development of weak ties, also referred to as bridging capital, with others who are more comfortable identifying as gay. From these interactions, students may benefit socially and emotionally by beginning to identify a network of support. Finally, as gay students continue to develop these interpersonal relationships with others, these sites help serve as a tool to develop stronger ties or what Lin (1999) refers to as bonding capital.

### **Navigating Privacy and Safety**

The final area of research on social networking sites that this study will review includes how students are navigating issues and concerns for privacy and safety. Research has identified that there is often a contradiction between what a person shares on a social networking site and that individual's need for safety and privacy (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Barnes, 2006; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007; Stutzman, 2006). Specifically, social networking sites are environments where a person willingly and prominently shares their identity for others to view, comment on, and engage with (boyd, 2007). The constant engagement can place significant stress on an individual who quickly recognizes that a social networking site is a "nonymous" space, the opposite of anonymous (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008, p. 1818). The nonymous concept reflects that by participating in the site, everyone within a specific network can and often does know information about any person in that space. An individual who wants to maintain their privacy in these types of environments is challenged to do so effectively. In order to accommodate the need for privacy, Zhao et al. suggest that individuals need to view privacy as a fluid process where a person must manage the access of others to their personal information and identity. Sites such as Facebook and Manhunt provide a privacy setting that allows individuals the ability to limit who has access to view their profiles and information. However, these privacy measures have often been inadequate to ensure a person's online safety

Over the last ten years several high-profile incidents, which included sexual predators gaining access to profiles of minors on MySpace, disclosures of personal account information on Facebook and the suicide of Tyler Clementi, a gay college student, at Rutgers University, have heightened the awareness of threats to individuals'

online privacy and security (George, 2006; Kornblum & Marklein, 2006). Additionally, individuals who use social networking sites may also be confronted by acts of stalking and cyber-bullying (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001). These situations continue to highlight the inherent tension between social networking sites and the need for privacy. While individuals perceive social networking sites to be safe places where they can share and express themselves, there are individuals who seek to exploit and profit from this shared information.

In response to the violations of individuals' privacy and the public's trust, administrators of social networking sites have responded with services to report misuse and abuse while also offering users enhanced privacy settings to manage the flow of what information is shared and who can access it (boyd & Ellison, 2008; boyd, 2006; Haythornthwaite, 2005). Beyond the effective and safe administration of social networking sites, users often also adopt strategies for mitigating and minimizing risks. Lampinen, Lehtinen, Lehmuskallo, and Tamminen (2011) identified that these strategies often included changes in behavior or shifts in people's cognitive processing. Individuals who made behavioral changes might utilize privacy features that were customizable by the site, such as turning on filters to limit information or specifying which connections could view their personal information. In these situations, the individual is able to exert greater control over the types of information that people can access. Individuals who use cognitive strategies to manage their privacy use what Hogan (2010) describes as the "lowest common denominator" approach (p. 384). Using this method, an individual only shares information on the social networking site that they would be comfortable with all people within their network knowing. An example of the lowest common denominator

approach might be someone who posts minimal information on Facebook such as their college affiliation but few other details about their time in college.

It is promising to note that many college students appear to be increasingly aware of their need for privacy and security as users of social networking sites. In 2005, Gross and Acquisti, examined the Facebook profiles of more than 4,000 students and found that less than 10% had implemented any privacy settings. Lewis, Kaufman, and Christakis (2008) reported that of the 1,710 students from a private university who were Facebook users, only 33% of them had implemented privacy settings. However, more recently Smith and Caruso (2010) identified that of the 36,950 respondents to a national study on undergraduate students' use of technology, approximately 40% had applied some privacy settings to their online profile. Another 50% identified that they had place significant restrictions on what others could view. Only 7% of the students acknowledged they had no restrictions. Additionally, Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman (2009) highlight the desire of college students to have social networking sites that provide privacy safeguards that can be tailored to each person's needs.

The findings from Smith and Caruso (2010) and others seem to support a growing trend towards college students being more apt to employ privacy and safety practices while engaging in online social networking sites. Although no research exists on how White, gay, college men navigate issues of privacy and safety, it is likely to be a particularly relevant and complex one for them to address. For these students, the stakes are exceptionally high as identifying gay in online environments may subject them to increased scrutiny and further discrimination. Additionally, by self-identifying as gay in broader social networking sites (such as Facebook) and gay-oriented social networking

sites, these students are exposing themselves in more intense and personal ways than their heterosexual peers. They must confront questions such as “Do I want to identify as gay on all sites or just a select few, how do I go about sharing/identifying online that I am gay?” They might also consider “Is it safe for me to come out as gay and what would I do if something happened to me because of what I posted online?” Another concern for gay students who utilize gay-oriented social networking sites may be how to manage the different and possible overlap of networks of friends and peers. Specifically, how does the student manage his interactions with someone that he is connected to both on Facebook and on a gay-oriented social networking site?

### **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the literature on gay college students and the rise of social networking sites on campus. The research regarding the experiences of gay college students is still limited but what is known paints a picture of campus climates that are unwelcoming and unfriendly. For these students, being gay and developing social relationships with other gay individuals is a complex process that requires them to navigate their college experience differently and in more intentional ways than their heterosexual peers. The emergence, influence and role of social networking sites on college campuses may provide a tool for gay students to connect and interact with each other. Although the research is still emerging, several important concepts such as impression management, social capital, and the issues of privacy and safety may prove to be helpful in understanding how gay students use and are impacted by these sites.

The research on the intersection of these issues has been non-existent. However, it appears from this review that the developmental, environmental, and socio-historical

challenges that White, gay, male college students experience, may be mitigated by the use of gay-oriented social networking sites. As a result, the current research seeks to address this gap by offering insight into how gay students use gay-oriented social networking sites.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine how White, gay, male college students utilize gay-oriented social networking sites and what effect these sites have on students. This chapter will describe the methodology used to answer the research questions. The first section of this chapter will review the central research questions and several key assumptions that guide and shape this project. The next section will provide a rationale for the use of qualitative research methods, specifically a phenomenological approach, to answer the research questions and guide this inquiry. The third section provides an overview of the research design, which addresses the selection of the site, recruitment and selection of participants, and describes the process for data collection and analysis. The final section explores trustworthiness and transferability, important ethical considerations, and the study's limitations.

#### **Central Research Questions and Assumptions**

Corbin and Strauss (2008) highlight the importance of selecting a research methodology that is informed by the central research questions that the study seeks to answer. Given this, I return to the central research questions introduced in Chapter One. The following two exploratory research questions are posed:

1. How and to what extent do traditionally aged (18-24 years old), White, college men, who identify as gay, utilize gay-oriented social networking sites?
2. What benefits and challenges do White, gay, male college students experience because of their use of these sites?



These central research questions arose from my professional experience with gay, male college students and supported by a review of the literature. The review revealed four dimensions that contribute to the use of gay-oriented social networking sites by gay male college students. These included the development of a gay identity, the impact of unwelcome campus climates, society's homophobic culture, and the growth of students using social networking sites. Additionally, the development of these questions was also impacted by the following personal assumptions that I made about gay college students and social networking sites:

- The experiences of White, gay, male college students utilizing gay-oriented social networking sites play a critical role in students' development of a gay sexual orientation identity.
- White, gay, male, college students are using gay-oriented social networking sites to help develop connections with other gay individuals.
- Common themes, such as isolation, exist among the experiences of White, gay, male, college students.
- White, gay, male, college students may encounter homophobia at their institution of higher education.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

The primary purpose of qualitative research is to help understand how individuals socially construct and make meaning of those lived experiences (Merriam, 2002). Using qualitative methodologies, the researcher must document "what they see, hear, and read from people and places and from events and activities" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 4). By employing this approach, researchers collect and analyze data that is then used to

develop an understanding of a specific phenomenon or experience (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Within qualitative research there are several types of data collection techniques, such as document analysis and observations; however, interviews are viewed as central to the qualitative research process (Rossman & Rallis). Interviews provide a view into participants' experiences and their lives that would be difficult, if not impossible, to capture by using other methods.

As this research project explores and seeks to understand the experiences of White, gay, college men's interactions with gay-oriented social networking sites, a qualitative methodology is especially appropriate. Particularly, White, gay, college men are often categorized as an invisible population, which makes identifying and exploring their experiences difficult to capture and represent using quantitative research methods (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). It would be exceptionally challenging to answer the central research questions that have been proposed. Additionally, the use of individual interviews provided rich descriptions of a phenomenon that has not yet been explored but appears to be an emerging area in the field of higher education.

### **Phenomenological Approach**

Within the tradition of qualitative research methodology, several genres exist such as case studies, ethnographies, and phenomenological studies. For this study, I chose to utilize a phenomenological approach as it aligned best with the central research questions and goals of this study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The phenomenological approach focuses on investigating and describing what is happening in people's environments instead of attempting to explain why it is occurring (Van Manen, 1990).

Studies that employ a phenomenological approach utilize in-depth and exploratory interviews (Moustakas, 1998). The purpose of these interviews is to identify and explain the core of an experience from the detailed descriptions provided by participants (Merriam, 2002). A phenomenological approach allows a researcher to dig deeper into an individual's lived experiences thus allowing for a more comprehensive understanding about a specific phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

The structure for a phenomenological approach is a series of longer structured interviews each with a specific focus (Seidman, 1998). Seidman proposed a structure of three interviews that began with the researcher exploring participants' life story. The next interview focuses on the topic being explored by the researcher with the final interview examining what impact the topic had on the participant. Other examples of phenomenological research include action research and analyzing personal texts (Lester, 1999). While there are multiple approaches to conducting phenomenological research, the primary focus is for extended contact and interaction with participants that allows for rich descriptions and details of participants' lived experiences to emerge. The phenomenological approach seems best suited and appropriate for this study as it allowed me to explore and understand the experience that White, gay, male college students have while using gay-oriented social networking sites (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Given that the research project is a relatively new and unexamined topic, there is significant benefit from a methodology that allows for in-depth interactions with participants.

### **Conceptual Framework**

While there is no research on how White, gay, college men utilize gay-oriented social networking sites, this study will draw from concepts identified within the literature

about these sites to form an initial conceptual framework. The proposed framework utilizes four critical components to help explain how White, gay, male college students use gay-oriented sites and what challenges and benefits might they experience. These components include: gay identity development (D'Augelli, 1994a; 1994b) impression management (boyd, 2006; Goffman, 1959), the development and maintenance of social capital (Lin, 1999; Putnam, 2000), and the need to navigate issues of safety and privacy (Lehtinen, Lehmuskallo, & Tamminen, 2011).

One of the primary purposes of social networking sites is for individuals to develop and foster relationships and exchange information within a network (boyd & Ellison, 2007). By using these sites, participants develop an online identity where they are able to share pictures of themselves, their interests, identities, and other relevant information. The development of this online identity may also help individuals who are working to explore, resolve, and articulate one of their social identities (i.e. coming out as gay) (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Hewitt & Forte, 2006). Additionally, the process by which an individual crafts and presents this identity, also referred to as impression management, is a critical and continuous task (boyd, 2006; Goffman, 1959). This process of socialization further requires individuals to be aware of how they are perceived by others (Barash, Ducheneaut, Isaacs, & Bellotti, 2011).

After developing an initial online identity, participants engage in a process of building social capital, which includes developing connections and a network of friends and peers (Lin, 1999). The creation of these networks serves as a powerful resource (Putnam, 2000). Individuals are then able to leverage their accrued capital to take advantage of relationships with others and to expand their network.

While individuals are engaging in the process of managing their identity and developing their respective networks, they must also be aware and prepared to respond to potential threats to their safety and privacy (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). These threats can range in severity from a minor nuisance, such as a spam message, to the extreme disruption, which includes online bullying or having your account hacked. Individuals may respond to these threats by limiting who they allow in their networks, changing or limiting their identifying information, or leaving the network (Lehtinen, Lehmuskallo, & Tamminen, 2011).

The conceptual framework that was previously introduced may assist in understanding and explaining what the experience is like for White, gay, college men who utilize gay-oriented social networking. First, they may have scanned their respective campus environment and existing friends and identified that these networks do not provide the necessary connection to the gay community that they are seeking. Given their likely experience with other popular social networking sites, such as Facebook, and the perceived lack of connection to other gay men, these students may turn to gay-oriented social networking sites. For these students, the creation of their online identity is likely to be a complex and continuous process that they would navigate carefully and intentionally to avoid being misperceived or misrepresented. Additionally, the use of gay-oriented social networking sites may help these students resolve and articulate their gay identity. Finally, these students must also ensure that the sites they join provide confidentiality and security so as not to jeopardize their safety.

After developing their profile, White, gay, college men may begin seeking out connections with other gay men. The formation of these networks are likely to develop

students' social capital and supplement their connections with other gay men that might be lacking on their respective campus. As a result, the connections that these gay men make through these sites may take multiple forms, such as friendships, acquaintances, or romantic relationships. In contrast to the current research on social networking sites that articulates that these sites often serve as an extension of pre-established networks, the framework recognizes that gay men will use these to develop and foster new connections (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006). Additionally, as White, gay, male, college students continue to use gay-oriented social networking sites they must continue to be vigilant about their personal safety and privacy for any potential threats. While threats exist for all individuals who utilize these sites, gay men must operate with a heightened awareness towards potential privacy and security concerns, such as being harassed online or for having their sexual orientation disclosed to individuals who they have not yet told (e.g. family, classmates).

### **Research Design**

The exploratory study fills a critical gap in the research regarding the experiences of White, gay, male college students' use of gay-oriented social networking sites. Designed as a phenomenological study, the research consisted of a set of two semi-structured interviews with approximately eight to ten participants. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential for participants to withdraw from the research project, I sought to enroll 10-12 participants. The two interviews and questions were designed to build rapport with the participants. The proposed number of participants will provide sufficient exposure to the ways that White, gay male college students utilize gay-

oriented social networking sites thus ensuring saturation of the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

### **Research Site**

The proposed study was conducted at one large, public land-grant university, referred to as LGU, in a Northeastern state. The institution is a premier campus that is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a research university with very high research activity (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2005). The undergraduate population at LGU is approximately 21,500 students and with such a large population was likely to produce more participants who meet the criteria for selection than a smaller campus. Additionally, the institution is recognized as having a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) student center (Beemyn, 2003). Given the presence of a LGBT center, gay students may be more willing to share their lived experiences than on a campus where a center did not exist. Beyond the existence of a LGBT student center, the institution has been recognized for providing services and support to LGBT students and staff, and is situated in a state that recognizes same sex marriages. These factors played an important role in the selection of this site as this study seeks to understand the experiences of White, gay, college men who are often described as an invisible population by researchers (Bieschke, Eberz, & Wilson, 2000; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Additionally, the site was also selected so that should participants in this study report an unwelcoming campus climate towards LGBT individuals then the experience for gay college men on other, less supportive college campuses would likely be significantly worse. Finally, the institution was selected

because of my personal and professional relationships with members of the campus community. These connections allowed for the greatest access to gay, White college men.

### **Participants**

Participants were identified, recruited, and selected for this study using two purposeful sampling strategies, which included homogenous and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The homogenous sampling approach is helpful because the research sought to understand the experience of a specific subgroup of students, in this case White, gay, male college students (Rossman & Rallis). The snowball sampling approach is helpful as participants were able to refer other acquaintances that met the selection criteria to participate (Patton). Participants interested in the study had to meet all of the following selection process criteria:

- Be 18-24 years of age
- Be enrolled as an undergraduate student at Land-Grant University (LGU)
- Identify as a White, gay man
- Currently utilize at least one gay-oriented social networking site
- Access and utilize social networking sites at least four to five times per week.

By intentionally limiting who is eligible to participate in the study, I was able to limit variability in the sample and to explore participants' use of gay-oriented social networking sites in greater depth. I intentionally excluded students who identify as non-White (i.e. Black, Latino, Asian) given that they are likely to experience the development and representation of a gay identity in significantly different ways than White students (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Specifically, these students have to navigate different cultural expectations and representations of gender and sexual orientation (Degges-White, Rice,



& Myers, 2000). It would be beyond the scope of this project and my ability to capture their lived experiences. Additionally, I recognize that my own social identities as a White, gay male may allow for greater connection with White, gay male participants in the study. I explore the impact of these limitations in greater detail later in this chapter.

### **Recruitment of Participants**

In addition to identifying the characteristics of those who would be eligible to participate in the study, I developed a recruitment plan to identify participants. Given the presence of a LGBT student center on the campus where this study occurred, contact was made with the director responsible for the management of the office. It was important to ensure the support and assistance of the LGBT center staff members with this project as they served as critical gatekeepers (Hamersley & Atkinson, 1983). From my knowledge of the institution and in conversations with the director, I was made aware that the LGBT student center maintains an email listserv of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people and their allies. The listserv is comprised of 2,169 students, faculty, staff, and community members. However, no further information is available to describe the number of undergraduate students (i.e. academic class year, gender, sexual orientation) on the list given the sensitive and confidential nature of email addresses. As part of a weekly communication between the members on the listserv and the LGBT student center, the director sends a weekly email newsletter that highlights major programs, social events, and opportunities to participate in LGBT-focused research. The director approved the request, pending final Institutional Review Board approval, to include this research study as part of the weekly email.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval for this project, a brief summary of the research project (Appendix B) was included in the weekly email newsletter in mid-March 2013. The initial description encouraged participants to contact me via email for further information. After prospective participants responded, I followed-up with each one, engaged them in light conversation over email, and provided them a more detailed description of the project (Appendix C). Participants who were interested were then directed to complete the online demographic information sheet (Appendix E).

Two weeks after the initial email message was sent to the center's listserv six individuals made contact but only four met the selection criteria. The two who were eliminated included a transgender graduate student, and one person not affiliated with the University. Given the limited response from the email listserv, the snowball sampling approach was employed at the end of March 2013 (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). I contacted each of the current study participants and asked if they would be willing to refer other suitable individuals to the study. From the referrals, six additional participants were identified and contacted. Of the six, five met the criteria and were invited to participate in the study. The one who was eliminated did not make contact until late-May 2013 at which point the study had been completed. A total of nine participants were eligible and agreed to participate in all parts of the study. All who were not selected or who were ineligible to participate in the study were notified that they were not being selected and thanked for their interest. A detailed summary of the participants' ages, academic majors, class years, and length of time using social networking sites is included in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Demographic Summary of Study Participants**

| <b>Participant Pseudonym</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Age when they came out</b> | <b>Academic Class Year</b> | <b>Academic Concentration</b> | <b>Primary General SNS Membership(s)</b> | <b>Frequency of Use (per week)</b> | <b>Primary Gay-Oriented SNS Membership(s)</b> | <b>Frequency of Use (per week)</b> |
|------------------------------|------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Noah                         | 18         | 14                            | Freshman                   | Humanities                    | Twitter                                  | 2-3                                | Grindr  | 6+                                 |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               | Facebook                                 | 6+                                 |   |                                    |
| Robert                       | 22         | 14                            | Senior                     | Humanities                    | Facebook                                 | 6+                                 | Grindr  | 4-5                                |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               | Twitter                                  | 6+                                 | adam4adam                                     | 4-5                                |
| Isaiah                       | 21         | 16                            | Senior                     | Management                    | Twitter                                  | 6+                                 | Grindr  | 6+                                 |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               | Facebook                                 | 6+                                 |   |                                    |
| Patrick                      | 22         | 16                            | Senior                     | Social & Behavioral Sciences  | Twitter                                  | 6+                                 | Grindr  | 2-3                                |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               |  |                                    | Recon.com                                     | 4-5                                |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               |  |                                    | adam4adam                                     | 2-3                                |
| Brandon                      | 18         | 17                            | Freshman                   | Natural Sciences              | Twitter                                  | 6+                                 | Grindr  | 6+                                 |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               | Facebook                                 | 6+                                 |   |                                    |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               | Tumblr                                   | 6+                                 | Jack'd  | 2-3                                |
| Leo                          | 19         | 18                            | Sophomore                  | Natural Sciences              | Twitter                                  | 2-3                                | Grindr  | 4-5                                |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               | Facebook                                 | 6+                                 | adam4adam                                     | 4-5                                |
| Parker                       | 20         | 18                            | Sophomore                  | Social & Behavioral Sciences  | Twitter                                  | 6+                                 | Grindr  | 6+                                 |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               | Facebook                                 | 2-3                                |   |                                    |
| Mason                        | 21         | 18                            | Junior                     | Social & Behavioral Sciences  | Facebook                                 | 2-3                                | Grindr  | 2-3                                |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               | Instagram                                | 2-3                                | Manhunt                                       | 4-5                                |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               |  |                                    | Realjock                                      | 6+                                 |
| Cole                         | 22         | 21                            | Senior                     | Management                    | Twitter                                  | 4-5                                | Grindr  | 6+                                 |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               | Facebook                                 | 6+                                 |   |                                    |
|                              |            |                               |                            |                               | LinkedIn                                 | 2-3                                |   |                                    |

## **Data Collection**

Several data collection techniques were used for this study. These included a demographic information form, individual interviews, student profiles from social networking sites, member checks, and maintaining a reflective journal. By collecting multiple sources of data, I was able to strengthen and develop trustworthiness within the study (Patton, 2002). Specifically, multiple data sources allowed for triangulation that will further increase the study's credibility and to ensure accurate findings (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Additionally, I discuss the issue of trustworthiness further in the data analysis section.

A primary consideration in collecting data is to ensure that the participants are protected from any negative repercussions and that confidentiality is ensured. Given the homophobic culture and unwelcome campus climates that many gay, male college students encounter, additional steps must be taken to protect confidentiality. While soliciting participants for the project, each prospective individual was provided with the "Letter to Prospective Participants" (Appendix C). This letter provides further detail about the research project and what was required for those interested in participating. Before any interviews began, each participant was sent an electronic "Informed Consent Form" (Appendix D) to review prior to the first interview. This form identifies in detail information about the study, how collected data will be shared, the confidentiality and procedural safeguards, and other critical information. The participants were also advised that I would individually meet with anyone who would like to discuss its contents before scheduling the first interview. Additionally, I reviewed the form in detail during the first interview to ensure that each individual was aware of his rights as a participant in the

study. Each participant signed that they had received this information and this documentation was maintained in each participant's file.

All data obtained was kept strictly confidential with pseudonyms being developed for each participant (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2010). Each participant provided his own pseudonym on the Demographic Information Form (Appendix E). It was critical for participants' identities to be shielded and identifying information to be removed. Additionally, participants were allowed to terminate their participation in the study at any time. Any information gathered from those participants would not be included in the analysis of the data.

### **Demographic Information Form**

Prior to beginning interviews, a demographic information form was completed by all interested participants. The form was hosted online through SurveyMonkey.com, which is a web-based data collection tool, and served to track all submissions. The content of this form is provided in Appendix E. The data collected from this form asked participants to disclose their age, undergraduate class year and academic major, whether they are in or out-of-state students, their sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and what social networking sites they utilize. The information collected from this form was used to select participants for the study and for use in the data analysis.

### **Individual Interviews**

In the tradition of phenomenological research, this project consisted of two semi-structured interviews that built upon each other (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The interview question protocol that was used for the interviews is provided in Appendix F. The two semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to explore other topics that arose

during the conversations. Each interview lasted approximately 60-75 minutes and occurred in a private, small conference room on the LGU campus. Given the sensitive nature of this topic, concerns for confidentiality, and potential for interviewing fatigue, I was concerned about having participants withdraw from the study. While Seidman (1998) suggested three interviews, for the purposes of this study and the population, I limited the number of interviews to two.

Drawing from Seidman's (1998) work with phenomenological interviewing, I was able to use the first interview to establish rapport with participants and ask them to share their experiences with general social networking sites. The second interview occurred between two and three weeks after the first and sought to understand participants' use of gay-oriented social networking sites. The last part of the second interview explored what challenges and benefits the students have experienced from their use. Additionally, the second interview also provided closure for the participant. The first central research question was answered based upon participants' responses collected during the first two interviews. The second research question drew from responses given during the end of the second interview.

Given the length of interviews and the number of participants, I employed two phases of interviewing. The first phase involved five participants with interviews occurring over a period of three weeks in early to mid-April 2013. The second phase involved the final four participants with interviews occurring over a two-week period in late April 2013. The timeframe provided sufficient time to ensure transcription of the interviews and member checking. By implementing multiple phases I was able to better track emerging themes, refine questions, and more effectively manage the study.

Each interview was recorded to facilitate analysis of the data. I transcribed the recordings after each first interview so the transcript could be shared with participants at the beginning of the second interview. The second interviews were sent to Hi-Tech House, a third-party company that provides transcription services for educators and medical professionals. I employed this company as the final interviews occurred in late April and students complete the semester in early May and leave campus for summer break. This company was selected as they provided a signed confidentiality waiver ensuring that they would not disclose the content of interviews. Additionally, they were able to ensure transcription within one week of receiving the data files. The transcription from the second interview was sent to participants in early May 2013 for their review. By providing both sets of the transcribed interviews to participants, they were able to check to ensure their thoughts and perspectives were accurately recorded. Participants who completed both interviews were provided a \$30 gift card thanking them for their participation.

### **Social Networking Site Profiles**

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked during the second meeting if they felt comfortable sharing their online profile from a gay-oriented social networking site. Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008) identified that the online profile is often the first impression that people have and it provides valuable information about an individual. Given that the profile serves as an online representation of a person's identity, it was important to see how students in this study are crafting and presenting their identity. If participants selected to share their profile, no physical copies of it would be kept as to protect their confidentiality and privacy. The only record of the profile

would be general comments in my field notes. The six men who chose not to share their profile were not penalized and instead were encouraged to reflect on what sorts of information they share on these sites.

### **Member Checks**

Member checking, also known as participant validation, allows participants the opportunity to actively engage in a reflective process to review interview transcripts and share whether they agree or disagree with statements they have made and possible themes that are emerging (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The process further clarifies for the researcher that they have accurately captured the lived experiences of the participants. In this study, I sent participants each transcribed interview to provide them an opportunity to ensure that their thoughts and experiences were accurately captured. The transcribed interviews were sent to participants approximately one to two weeks after each interview and they were given one week to respond with any corrections or deletions. If they were dissatisfied or have edits, they were be able to clarify any of their remarks. Additionally, at the beginning of the second interview, I engaged participants in light conversation about some of the themes that have I observed. At the conclusion of the project, participants were provided the opportunity to have a final copy of the dissertation sent to them via email.

### **Reflective Journaling**

Corbin and Strauss (2008) recommended maintaining a journal throughout the course of a research project. The purpose of the reflective journal is to provide the researcher with an opportunity to capture those enlightening and challenging moments throughout the process. For this study, I maintained a journal that was a collection of my



thoughts, feelings, and ideas as the project progressed. Specifically, I completed the reflective journal after each individual interview with a participant as a way to highlight which responses were especially enlightening. I was able to use the journal to help identify which questions or parts of the interview may be unclear for participants. The feedback collected helped further refine and tailor future interviews. The journal entries were logged in the third-party coding software, Dedoose, which was used to assist in analysis of the data.

### **Data Analysis**

For this study, the data to be analyzed included transcripts from the two individual interviews, information collected from the demographic information sheet, and any field notes taken. By analyzing the data, I was able to explore and make meaning of the lived experiences of participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Specifically, I employed phenomenological data analysis to identify themes and parts that compose the experiences of White, gay, college men using gay-oriented social networking sites (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). For this section, I will describe the organizational structures that were used to manage the data while reviewing the strategies, such as coding and the creation of participant profiles, to analyze the collected data.

Qualitative research is categorized as a time intensive process that generates a substantial volume of interview transcripts, field notes, memos, and other artifacts (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). In order to effectively manage the considerable data, I created a folder for each participant that included interview transcripts, copies of the recorded interviews, the signed informed consent form, demographic information sheet, document all communication, and other notes. After each interaction with participants, I engaged in

a reflective writing process that summarized what I experienced, my initial reactions and insights, and other relevant information. Given the sensitive nature of the research, all materials were kept in a locked cabinet in my home office and all computer files were encrypted for further security. Additionally, I utilized Dedoose, a commercial web-based software program to assist in the coding and analysis of the interviews. The software ensures the secure encryption of all data and allowed the input, creation, and management of multiple forms of data, the codebook, and research memos.

Beyond structures for managing and tracking the data, it is critical that the data analysis be intentional and thoughtful. To achieve this, I employed an ongoing analysis method that allowed for prolonged engagement and reflection of the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Additionally, as this research utilized a phenomenological methodology it was critical to conduct data analysis that allows for the identification of themes and parts that compose the experience of using gay-oriented social networking sites (Rossman & Rallis). Using a phenomenological data analysis approach included utilizing the following strategies: meaning condensation, meaning categorization, and meaning interpretation (Kvale, 1996; Van Manen, 1990). Meaning condensation is the process of examining large parts of interview transcripts in order to create a description of the phenomenon being studied. Categorizing meaning involves the development of categories, either before or during the study, to help organize the data. Meaning interpretation requires the researcher to make “speculative interpretations of the text” (Kvale, p. 193). For this study, I used those three strategies to help understand and make meaning of the experiences of White, gay, male college students’ use of social networking sites. The strategies are appropriate for this analysis because little is known

about this phenomenon and they provided me with significant immersion in the data. As a result, common themes and experiences may begin to emerge (Morse, 1995). I also used member checks to ensure that participants' experiences aligned with the proposed themes and are accurately represented.

As a means to begin to understand the significant volume of data collected and initiate the coding process, I read each interview transcript multiple times and reviewed the relevant field notes and reflective journal entries. After reviewing each participant's responses, passages that seemed especially significant and salient to them were highlighted. These passages were then organized to create individual profiles for each participant. The profiles, highlighted in Chapter 4, provide an in-depth and rich account of each participant's lived experiences as a gay, White college man and how they use and are impacted by their use of gay-oriented social networking sites. Additionally, each profile highlights the participant's coming out process (i.e. self identifying as a gay man) as it served as a common experience that all of them shared.

The nine participant profiles are presented in a blended style of writing using both the third and first person so as to incorporate direct quotes to honor and provide valuable insight into the experience of each individual. For example, one of the participants, Brandon, recalled the experience of how his father called him a "faggot" and how he "tried to send me to a couple of therapists but they said you can't de-gay a child" after finding out that Brandon was gay. The direct quote provided by Brandon is powerful in helping understand and situate his experience as a gay man. Additionally, this approach is best aligned given that this research sought to explore and understand how gay, White male college students' use gay-oriented social networking sites.

Once the individual profile for each participant was created, I revisited, read, and reread each of the interview transcripts. As each transcript was reviewed, I highlighted responses that appeared to be especially significant to participants or those that seemed to capture a critical aspect of the experience. By engaging in an inductive approach of analysis, themes and categories began to emerge from the data (Patton, 2002).

Additionally, I employed what Corbin and Strauss (2008) described as a two-stage process of open and axial coding. Open coding involves the breaking apart of data into smaller pieces, comparing those to other pieces and looking for similarities. When similarities are found, these pieces are grouped together under broader categories (Corbin & Strauss, p. 198). Axial coding involves reconstructing the pieces from the open coding process by “relating concepts to each other” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 195).

Throughout the coding process, I developed a codebook to help make meaning and organize the experiences of gay, White college men (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). These codes were organized around broader categories of experiences that emerged from the data analysis. For example, Leo, Robert, Isaiah, and several other men spoke to learning about unwritten rules and the culture of using gay-oriented social networking sites. In particular, they spoke about how you respect the privacy of other men on the sites by not “outing” them to friends or others.

Additionally, as a means of further making sense of the significant volume of data collected, I engaged in a reflective process that involved the writing of several research memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The process of writing helped me shape, clarify, and advance my thinking of what gay, White college men are experiencing when using gay-oriented social networking sites. An example of this clarity

came from reflecting on the second interview with Leo. He spoke extensively about how his use of Grindr was beneficial because it allowed for “healthy experimentation” when he felt more “closeted” and afraid to identify as gay. By reflecting on these statements, I was able to develop a deeper understanding of the experience and find connections among participants.

Finally, I ensured the validity of this project by recording all participants’ interviews throughout the study. Member checks were conducted twice during the project. The first and second check happened after each interview with participants being provided copies of the transcript to ensure that their thoughts, opinions, and experiences had been adequately captured and represented. When documenting the results of this study, I have included direct quotes from participants to accurately capture and represent their experiences.

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research studies are judged by two criteria, which include “Does the study conform to standards for acceptable and competent practice? Second, does it meet the standards for ethical conduct with sensitivity to the politics of the topic and setting” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 43)? Studies that are judged as credible and ethical are considered to be trustworthy. The following strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

First, the research explored the experiences of White, gay male college students who utilize gay-oriented social networking sites. Given that this topic had not been examined before, the use of the phenomenological methodology was appropriate to shed light and develop an understanding of the experience of using social networking sites.

The conceptual framework draws from several critical concepts about social networking sites such as gay identity development, impression management, social capital, and navigating privacy and security (boyd, 2006; D'Augelli, 1994a; 1994b; Goffman, 1959; Lehtinen, Lehmuskallo, & Tamminen, 2011; Lin, 1999). The study utilized multiple forms of data collection, such as interviews, reviewing social networking site profiles, and member checks. Additionally, a reflective journal was maintained to track emerging ideas, concepts, and reactions. The methodology articulates important considerations such as the selection of a site, the participants, and the rigorous process with which the data was analyzed.

The second criterion ensures that qualitative studies are conducted with the highest ethics and care for participants. There is a significant need to protect the participants given the significant history of discrimination that this population has experienced (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). The stringent protocols for confidentiality, safeguarding student identities, the use of pseudonyms, and gathering consent of the participants are critical as this study explored the needs of White, gay, male college students. In addition, participants were provided the opportunity to withdraw at any time from the study. As the interviews required the sharing of personal information, all interviews were conducted in a private, small conference room on the LGU campus and required significant rapport and trust building.

### **Transferability**

In contrast to quantitative research, phenomenological research does not produce generalizable data. However, Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) have advanced the concept of transferability, which encourages a reader to examine and identify connections between

the context of this study and other contexts. They identified two primary ways for researchers to ensure transferability in their studies. These included providing rich descriptions of the data and offering substantial detail of the context for the study. As such, the results of this study may be highly transferable to other research contexts. Specifically, the conclusions about issues of online safety for gay men from this study may be transferable to non-gay men or female students.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2003) cautioned that ethical issues arise in all types of research. It is imperative that researchers conducting a study avoid causing undue harm to the participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). As this project explored how White, gay, male college students utilize gay-oriented social networking sites, the concern to avoid harm is especially important. Prior to beginning this research, two ethical considerations were identified and addressed in the design of this study. These included limiting participation to those who identify as gay and recognizing my status as an “insider” or member of the gay community (Schwandt, 2007, p. 152). During the study, an additional ethical issue arose when a participant disclosed that he had been sexually assaulted after using a gay-oriented social networking site. The following is a discussion of these three issues.

Individuals who have begun to explore a gay identity may yield significant insights. However, in designing and implementing this study, I included only participants who identified as gay. Given that students who are developing a gay identity must navigate this process in more intentional ways than their heterosexual peers and that they face significant challenges, such as harassment and discrimination, it would be

inappropriate to have included them in this study. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) and Hemmings (2006) identified the importance of beneficence. Specifically, I have an “obligation to act in ways that benefit other people, or at least in ways that do not harm them” (Guillemin & Gillam, p. 270).

An additional consideration for the design and implementation of this study was the impact of my identity as a White, gay, male researcher. As someone who identifies as gay and has engaged in the process of coming out, I have critical knowledge of some of the challenges and experiences facing gay students (Griffith, 1998; Schwandt, 2007). I am aware that my identity and professional work with gay college students has led me to explore this topic. I also brought my personal preconceived notions and beliefs to the research process. The role as an insider may provide me with access to participants and may enhance my ability to connect with gay students. However, Groenewald (2004) identified the importance of allowing the “data to emerge” and not forcing what the researcher believes to be true about the studied phenomenon (p. 11). Throughout the study, I used member checks, engaged in reflective journaling, and remained aware of these factors to ensure quality analysis of the data. I also ensured that I was transparent with participants both about my own social identities and the interviewing process. Specifically, there were several times throughout the project where a participant identified to me “oh, you know what I am talking about” or I would say “I think I know what you mean.” In those instances, I intentionally identified to participants that “while I believe I know what you referencing, can you explain it to me in greater detail.” By engaging in this transparent process I sought to ensure trustworthiness within the study.



A final ethical issue arose during a participant's second interview when he identified as the survivor of a sexual assault in February 2013. The disclosure of this assault happened when I asked, "What challenges have you experienced while using gay-oriented social networking sites?" Admittedly, the response was unexpected and powerful but at the end of this participant's story I identified that I was going to stop the interview and the recording. In our conversation off the record, which he identified he was comfortable with me sharing, Brandon made it clear to me that he wanted to continue the interview and to make sure his story was heard so that others would not experience a similar situation. I thanked Brandon for sharing his story, provided him appropriate referrals for support on campus and in the area, and identified that his experience would be shared. As a researcher and educator, I found myself challenged to both support the student while also wanting to capture this significant experience. After his interview, I consulted with my committee chair and confidentially with a staff member at the University to ensure that all ethical and legal obligations for supporting Brandon were met. Finally, as part of the participant profile in Chapter 4, I will highlight Brandon's experience in greater depth.

### **Limitations**

As with any study, there are several limitations to the proposed study. These limitations are a result of the research design and were made intentionally to limit the size and scope of the project. The purpose of the study will be exploratory in nature with the focus seeking to explore in greater depth the experiences of White, gay, male college students use of gay-oriented social networking sites. These limitations include the targeted population, the research site, and the sample size of the proposed study.

### **Targeted Population**

First, this project seeks to explore and describe the experiences of White, gay, male college students who frequently used gay-oriented social networking sites. As such, the participants do not represent the experiences of all White gay men at all colleges and universities. Furthermore, the men who were selected for this study were also required to utilize social networking sites at least four to five times per week. As a result, men who used the sites less frequently were not represented.

Students who identified as non-White have been excluded from participating in this study. While it was a particularly difficult decision to limit the population to only White, gay, college men, it was critical to limit the variability of participants in the sample size in an exploratory study. Including students who identify as Black, Latino, Asian, or another racial/ethnic identity would be beyond the scope of this project to accurately and appropriately capture their lived experiences. Another limitation related to the population of this study was that it excludes other sexual orientations, such as lesbians, bisexuals, and those who might be questioning their identity. The experiences, concerns, and challenges of these populations are likely to be significantly different than gay men. Future studies should further explore lesbians, bisexuals, and those who are questioning and the intersection of identities as it relates to the use of gay-oriented social networking sites.

### **Research Site**

Another limitation is that the proposed research will examine college students from only one institution. Students at institutions other than Land-grant University may have different experiences and confront different issues related to their gay identity. As

was identified earlier, the Land-grant institution has an active LGBT student center and the campus has been recognized for providing support for LGBT students. Other campuses may not have allocated similar resources to attend to the needs of LGBT students.

### **Sample Size of the Study**

A final limitation is that the sample size was limited to nine participants. Although this sample size is consistent with qualitative research and allowed for rich descriptions of students' lived experiences, it is not likely to represent all White, gay, male college students. There are differences, such as religion, socioeconomic status, and geographic location, among White, gay, male college students that may impact their experiences with gay-oriented social networking sites. While there may be themes that emerge, it is not possible to capture the diversity of experiences and backgrounds of these gay students.

As a result of these limitations, attempts to apply the findings to other White, gay individuals, those with other sexual orientations, or from other campuses should be done carefully. However, the proposed research will serve as a critical entry point to understand what these students are experiencing and to engage in a conversation about how to best support them.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study is to explore how White, gay, male college students utilize gay-oriented social networking sites. Given the central research questions, a phenomenological approach was the best choice to describe and understand the meaning of these students' experiences. Specifically, this approach focuses on the "essence of the

phenomenon” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 12). The conceptual framework for the study describes how students use these gay-oriented networking sites and what sorts of benefits and challenges they might experience. The findings from this study provide rich descriptions of the lived experiences of gay students. Thus, this research will fill a critical gap that has been identified in understanding and supporting the needs of gay college students. Chapter 4 will provide the nine participant profiles while Chapter 5 provides the findings from the analysis.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **PARTICIPANT PROFILES**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter begins with an introduction of the most frequent social networking sites used by the gay men and then provides in-depth participant profiles for the men involved in the study. The profiles serve two primary purposes. First, they provide a rich introduction of each participant and their lived experiences to the reader. Second, the profiles help answer this exploratory study's two central research questions:

1. How and to what extent do traditionally aged (18-24 years old), White college men utilize gay-oriented social networking sites?
2. What benefits and challenges do White, gay, male college students experience because of their use of these sites?

The responses provided and shared in this chapter illustrate the significant impact that the use of these sites had on these nine men.

The development of profiles drew heavily from direct quotations so as to honor the lived experiences of each participant while also providing important biographical context. Although the experiences and responses varied among participants, the profiles are similarly structured and focused around four major areas, which were covered during the two interviews. Each profile begins with a brief summary of their current experiences as a college student. Next, the profiles intentionally highlight each participant's coming out story and their life as a gay man. The coming out stories provided common ground and a starting place for all of the men. The profiles then review each participant's use of both general and gay-oriented social networking sites. Specific attention is given to

understanding how the men learned to use and navigate within these sites. While greater variation in the sites that participants used was anticipated, all of the men primarily used one site, Grindr. As a result of this important finding, significant focus is devoted to describing the features of Grindr and exploring how the use of this site impacts these men. If participants referenced other sites, those were included in their profiles.

The profiles presented in this chapter have been organized in order of when each of the men identified openly to someone as gay. Additionally, to protect the identities of the participants, pseudonyms were used and some potentially identifying details have been withheld. A summary of the demographic information of the nine study participants can be found in Figure 1.

### **Overview of Social Networking Sites**

The nine men in this study reported using several general and one gay-oriented online social networking sites. Specifically, the men primarily used sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter and the gay-oriented site Grindr. Given the rapid evolution and development of social networking sites, I provide a brief description and introduction to each of these sites in this section. Additionally, I discuss each one's primary purpose and highlight site-specific features.

### **Primary General Social Networking Sites**

Within the broad category of general social networking sites, the men in the study reported using MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter most frequently. Each of these sites provided a variety of features that they could use to connect with others. The men recognized that their use of each of these sites evolved as they move from middle and high school to college.

All of the men in the study first reported learning about and using MySpace. This site served as an important introduction and orientation to these online environments. MySpace was launched in the summer of 2003 as the developers sought to build on the successes of Friendster, one of the earliest social networking sites. MySpace allowed users to create a profile, share information and pictures of themselves, highlight music interests, and connect with others. Initially, the features were limited to writing posts and commenting on other users' posts. However, as the popularity of the site grew, new features, such as private messaging and video uploading, were added. At its peak, MySpace boasted membership of over 250 million users and was the most visited social networking site in the world from 2005 to 2008 (boyd, 2008). Although membership has declined, MySpace was re-launched in 2012 and has since become a popular site for aspiring musicians.

Another site that all of the men reported using was Facebook. Initially launched at Harvard University in 2004, Facebook began as a social networking site restricted to current college students. The site required users to verify their identity by registering with their school-issued email address. After registering, users were prompted to create a profile where they shared information about themselves (e.g. class year, birthday, interests, academic majors/minors) (Facebook.com, 2011). The site also allowed for photographs to be uploaded. With their profile created, users were then able to search for others and submit a "friend request." The request allowed the other person to either accept or decline the connection. Once connected, a user is considered to be "friends" with this other person and is able to view his or her posts, information, and other connections. In response to growing popularity, Facebook opened membership to include

anyone who had an active email account. The site has also continued to add new features such as video sharing, the addition of online games (e.g. Farmville), messaging, and video and voice calling (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). Facebook overtook MySpace as the most visited social networking site in 2008 and currently boasts over 400 million users.

The final general social networking site that many of the men in the study used was Twitter. The site began in 2006 and has grown to have over 500 million users. Similar to other sites, Twitter requires each user to create a profile and provides space to upload a picture (Richter & Koch, 2008). The content of the profile is much more limited than the other sites. Additionally, unlike Facebook or MySpace, Twitter limits users' posts (tweets) to 140 characters. A user articulates their connections to others on the site by clicking the "follow" button. This feature allows a user to see what others are tweeting about in a summarized list. Additionally, Twitter employs the use of a hashtag (i.e. #) to help users search for specific topics. For instance, some participants in the study identified that they would search #gay as a way to find other users who also tweeted gay in their message. Due to the character limits and the general ease of using the site, Twitter has emerged as a highly popular and successful social networking site.

### **Primary Gay-Oriented Social Networking Site**

From the study, Grindr emerged as the gay-oriented social networking site that was used by all of the men. Grindr was launched in 2009 and has over three million current users (Grindr, 2014). The site uses the geolocating software found in smartphones and tablets to provide users with up-to-date information about the proximity of other members to them. Additionally, Grindr is only accessible by downloading an application



for a smartphone or tablet. Within the site, there are two versions available for download. The first is a no cost, free version, which limits the users to viewing 100 people within a 20-mile radius, and a monthly-fee paid version (Grindr Xtra), which provides access up to 300 profiles found within a 100-mile radius.

Grindr allows users to develop a profile, post one picture, and connect with others. After creating a profile, a user sees a grid of men's pictures that are in close proximity (i.e. less than 5 feet away and up to 2 miles away) to them. The user clicks on the thumbnail picture and is then brought to their profile, which includes a larger version of the original picture and some additional information. The profile information includes physical characteristics (e.g. weight, height, age) and personal interests (e.g. what they are looking for from others, sexual interests). After reviewing the profile, a user has the ability to send a message and additional pictures to the other person. Based on these interactions, additional conversations can occur.

### **Noah**

Noah was an 18-year-old freshman student who came to LGU with substantial interest in other cultures. It was no surprise that he decided to pursue a major in the Humanities, however, he remained unsure if this was the best fit for him to pursue as a career. While he wants to be fluent in another language, he questioned whether or not he should declare it as a minor. His interests seemed split between focusing more on advocacy work and pursuing issues of sustainability.

Although only in his first year, Noah became actively involved in student organizations and worked on campus. Noah was also working as a facilitator of educational presentations as part of his advocacy work. He also lived in a residence hall

on campus that had a strong commitment to diversity and social justice issues. Noah was soft-spoken and somewhat introverted but seemed like he was trying to make the most of his time at LGU. He appeared to have the knowledge about LGBT issues and was working to further develop his confidence.

### **Coming Out in a Liberal Family**

Noah appeared to be self-assured in his identity as a gay man having come out when he was a freshman in high school. He initially told two friends from other schools that he was bisexual. Noah was motivated to come out after developing “a crush on the only other gay person at the school.” However, he quickly clarified to them that he was gay. Noah was nervous to tell his mother and father “even though I knew they were very liberal.” Instead of telling them in person, he wrote his mother a note, handed it to her, and then walked away. Noah says his mom must have read the first line of the note, which said he was gay because she started to follow him. She called his father who came home early from work. Although Noah did not want to make “a big thing” about his identifying as gay, his parents were very supportive. He felt that he was well supported in the process and afterwards. In fact, Noah has a twin brother who recently came out as being gay as well. Noah felt like he helped make things easier for his brother but wonders why it “took him so long.”

### **From A Bad Rap to Integrated Experience**

Noah’s first exposure to social networking sites came in the form of stern warnings from the media.

I was in sixth or seventh grade. Don’t let your teens on MySpace cause they’re going to find an adult man and it’s gonna be really bad. I was just sure they [his parents] were going to say no because it had such a bad rap in the media.

Noah saw himself as a “goody too-shoes” and that the “site was bad and I felt guilty if I was going to be on it.” He eventually joined MySpace and shortly thereafter was encouraged to join Facebook after attending a day camp. At the camp, the counselors showed Noah their Facebook pages and taught him how to navigate around the site. Noah remained hesitant but joined Facebook after seeing a popular female in his school who had joined. Although he did not initially tell his parents, when they eventually asked him, Noah admitted he had one. He said their response was surprising in that they didn’t really seem to care.

Noah continues to use Facebook as it combines many different types of information in one place. He is able to share pictures, read about updates from friends, and post on others’ accounts. While he uses Twitter and Instagram, Noah’s primary use of Facebook is extensive and appears to be an integrated part of his everyday life.

It’s automatic when you open the computer and when you go to do your homework. I’d say like more than 10 times a day. Not for extensive time. And especially because it’s on my phone, I use it to message people. I think it’s an embarrassing amount of time, cause I go on a lot before I go to sleep. So probably two hours.

Although his use of Facebook has become integrated into his daily routine, he does not update his profile and connections as frequently. Noah updates the profile information, such as a picture and the demographic information, every two weeks. However, he recently eliminated roughly 500 of his 800 or so Facebook friends. The smaller number of 300 is a better representation for him about the types of connections that he has.

People that were eliminated were done so for a number of reasons.

I keep those folks because I want to see what they have to say. There were some people that I wasn’t interested in hearing about. And some people I was hoping that they would notice I deleted them because I never really liked them.

In addition to being intentional in narrowing his number of connections, Noah is also deliberate in which friend requests on Facebook he offers and accepts.

I don't give any friend requests unless I just recently met them. Everyone I want to be friends with right now are those who I'm friends with. I get a lot of friend requests. As soon as I get the request, I'll either choose "not now" or "yes." I don't leave anyone in permanent purgatory. I'll try to decide.

While he tries to be thoughtful in accepting or declining, there are sometimes when it can be "superficial." However, Noah also tries to use other pieces of information, such as people's mutual friends, pictures posted, and things they have liked to make the decision. He also used these types of information on occasion to determine if people are also gay. Although Noah does not specify on sites such as Facebook and Twitter that he is a gay man, he recognized that people would be able to make assumptions based on the content (e.g. links to LGBT articles, events occurring at the LGBT center, pictures) about his identity.

Although Noah may have eliminated a number of connections from his Facebook, privacy and safety do not seem to be of significant concern.

I don't really care if they know that I'm from a small town and I go to LGU. If there is something I want to block from my family or mom, I just block it. I use it to keep me in check.

However, he has heard of people on job interviews and during college visits being asked about their Facebook profile but does not view it as a real concern for him. The one area that he was adamant about was not being in pictures that show alcohol. He seems to have established some boundaries to protect how others view him on social networking sites.

### **"Feeling Like You're Not Alone": Use of Gay-Oriented Social Networking Sites**

Similarly to his first exposure to sites such as MySpace, Noah learned about gay-oriented social networking sites while watching an episode of Saturday Night Live. The

characters were portraying themselves as gay men and parodying their use of Grindr. He recalls being in high school and being intrigued by the concept. After looking into the site he found that users had to be at least 18 years old to access it. Noah, being the rule follower that he was, chose not to sign up for an account. However, his use of gay-oriented social networking sites was not limited as he visited online gay teen chats and teen dating sites. Although he did not use these sites to meet other gay teens, Noah enjoyed the ability to talk to people who were having similar experiences.

After arriving on the LGU campus, Noah purchased a smartphone and began using Grindr exclusively. He believes that the site has become a significant part of the experience of many gay men on the campus. As such, Noah quickly learned how to create a profile that represents his best self.

So there is a picture of me and I'm smiling, so I look friendly. Mine says I'm 18 and then you have the option to put in your height and weight and everything. You can see what I look like in the picture and then there's a little "about you" description. Mine just says college freshman. And you can have options to put in a name but I always think mine's really lame so I don't put in anything.

The site provides users with the option to provide a creative title or header for their profile. Some of Noah's friends also use it to describe what they are looking for, such as "FWB" (Friends with Benefits). Although Noah had put his name in the header, he recently removed it so that he could be anonymous and seem "more mysterious." While he wanted to be mysterious, Noah saw it as important that he have a picture of himself on the site and not leave it blank like other men.

I don't do that because people don't tend to like it. I don't want to talk to someone who doesn't have a picture. That's kind of sketchy feeling, you know.

From his experience reading other people's profiles, Noah seemed to be evolving and learning new approaches to ensure that others will see his profile and contact him.

Noah has also learned how to navigate Grindr to meet other men. Over the course of a day, Noah will access the application six times or more to see if he has messages waiting for him. As he sees himself as shy, he is often not the one to initiate the first contact but waits for other men to message him.

I will, on occasion, be scrolling through to look at other profiles. Then I'll look and be like, 'oh, I hope this one messages me.'

If Noah receives messages from other men he often evaluates whether or not he is going to respond to them.

And so definitely if they're really unattractive in my opinion, I probably wouldn't. Or if they're unattractive and they say something really friendly, then I'll respond because that was nice. But if someone's really attractive then all they have to say is hi and I'll probably respond.

Noah also highlighted that what he's looking for on Grindr changes based on how he is feeling.

Honestly, to put it forward, it depends on what kind of mood I'm in. If I'm kind of in a flirty mood, it would be a lot easier or more likely that I would respond to someone. If I'm really not in the mood to talk, a lot of times I've deleted the app and then I just re-download it later. And that's less common. And then I'm really horny or something, I might not even want to meet up with someone but I'll still respond and flirt with them.

Regardless of his mood, his initial conversations with many of the men are often around surface level topics. They begin with finding some common experiences and from there progress to more sexualized conversations.

We'll just be having a normal conversation just like what's up, you're from LGU right?' And then the small talk and then they'll say something like, flirty. And I guess on occasion, I've said something flirty to initiate and then they'd be like, 'any pics?' So it's kind of escalated thing, they'll send a face pic, then a shirtless pic, and not a lot of people send nude. I wouldn't say it's the most common thing. But then the last one would be a nude picture.

For Noah, the sending of pictures needed to be started by the other person. By receiving them first, he was able to use this information to help him judge what types of pictures they were looking to share. While he has received naked pictures, he has shared them only once. While the experience of sharing pictures was often a progressive experience, he did identify that some men in their first message to him sent graphic nude pictures. When those instances happen and depending on how he is feeling, Noah often chooses not to respond or limits what he says. He did not seem to be shocked by these disclosures and understood that he believed a significant portion of the site was dedicated to random hook-ups.

In addition to having substantial conversations with men to find similar interest, Noah also receives messages from people who, after reading his profile, are looking to explore their sexuality.

I've had people message me saying that they were straight and they were just trying to 'see what the gay world was like, but I'm straight.' I try to be respectful in like, 'oh that's cool' but I don't know. I feel like that might be a difficult situation so I never met up with anyone who might be coming to terms with themselves.

Noah wrestled with wanting to be supportive of these men but also recognizing that Grindr is a gay-oriented social networking site.

Although he spends time messaging and looking at people's profiles, Noah has only "met one random person" to have sex with from the site. The other connections and hook-ups that he had were often with people he knew in prior settings. After meeting these men in person, seeing them on Grindr served as impetus to initiate contact with them. In many ways, it provided a validating mechanism that help Noah feel comfortable in knowing that this person was friendly and safe.

The concept of feeling safe was especially important to Noah as he is aware that people often misuse and misrepresent themselves on Grindr.

I don't post a lot of personal information. I know for a fact that two of my friends who are girls have made fake profiles. They use it as a joke. Like 'oh look at this person' and then they message people. They've even been forward and it makes me realize that most of these people are probably not who they say they are.

While being frustrated about imposters on the site, Noah had friends who had been put in compromising situations.

I definitely have heard more than one story of people meeting up with people. And it's not who they say they were or the pictures they sent.

Collectively, these experiences seemed to frustrate Noah and made him consider and change how he uses the site.

I want to make sure that I know who they are. I would meet them outside my building so it's in a public place. I would be like meet me in this parking lot with lots of people around and then you can pick me up. Just to make sure everything checks out.

Although he had had challenges with using the site, Noah viewed his overall experience as positive and one where he has developed a sense of community.

You feel like you're not the only one out there or that you're not the only one looking for a hook. Cause it might seem like that when you're just sitting in your dorm. But then you put on Grindr and you find a whole page of people that are gay and wanting to hook up with you. So that makes you feel good too and you don't feel like you're alone. And you feel like you have options. I've gotten messages from a couple people who were in high school who didn't really know anyone that was gay and they just wanted to talk.

Noah also recognized a significant shift in his opinions about sex and relationships since using Grindr. Specifically, he came to LGU as someone who had not had sexual intercourse and who held strong beliefs that a relationship should be between "two people who love each other."



Upon reflecting on his use of Grindr, Noah felt that he had become more assertive and learned a lot about himself as a gay man.

My self-confidence – Making me feel like I’m facing my fears of talking to people and stuff like that. I’m much more likely to go up to talk to someone and get what I want now.

Noah’s experiences with gay-oriented social networking sites have allowed him to develop important connections on campus.

### **Robert**

Robert was a 22-year-old, senior who was preparing to graduate from LGU. He was pursuing a double major in the Humanities who hoped to pursue a career in the arts. As someone who was highly involved in the performing arts program on campus, he regularly participated in musical and dramatic performances. In fact, when we met for the interviews he was wrapping up one final show before graduation.

As one of four graduating seniors in this study, Robert displayed a keen ability to engage in critical reflection. He was exceptionally grounded and thoughtful in talking about his life and use of gay-oriented social networking sites. Additionally, he had a strong friendship with Patrick, another participant in the study. Both men had spent significant time with each other and this relationship was clearly important to them.

### **Affirming A Gay Identity by Using Social Networking Sites**

Having realized he was gay when he was 14 years old, Robert had spent his entire time at LGU as a proud gay man. However, he was not always as aware and confident in his identity. In middle school, he found difficulty in expressing and establishing his identity. As a result, he turned to using online social networking sites, such as MySpace, to help with this process. The use of these sites helped him “put himself out there.”

Being in middle school and having a difficult time establishing my identity and not really realizing yet that I was gay or really who I was outside of what I was doing. Which was not much then. They gave me sort of a way to project an identity out there into cyber space basically and to interact with people in sort of like a premeditated way. You know you can post, it was really nice. It was cathartic in the sense that you could post whatever you wanted. You could talk, it was sort of like therapy you know. You post your feelings. I remember so specify what I'm listening to and what I'm feeling. And it felt really good to tell people that for some reason. It felt like a way of getting out some of the angst that was coming along with growing into a teenager.

As he was finishing middle school, he was better able to articulate who he was. It was at this point that he decided to come out as gay in what he described as a “rolling basis between 8<sup>th</sup> grade and freshman year.” His parents were extremely liberal and supportive of his identity.

While coming out was largely a positive experience for Robert, his relationship with his sister suffered. He viewed her as considerably more conservative when compared to other members of his family. In one interaction with him, she claimed that he was “being too gay on Facebook.” His response challenged her to further explain herself and caused him to exaggerate stereotyped behaviors of what he felt “being too gay” were.

I was like explain that to me. How can one be too gay on Facebook? I didn't have pictures of me kissing men or wearing a tutu, which would be the worst way she could possibly have meant that. So that was an intriguing discussion that was open. Which prompted me to get gay on Facebook.

Though the tension with his sister remains, Robert seemed to have taken it in stride. He recognized that it was not a good use of his energy or time to dwell on her misperceptions. Robert also appreciated that the level of support and acceptance he received from countless other friends and family members outweighed the concerns of a few people.

### **“Addicted” to Facebook: An Essential Part of His Life**

As noted previously, Robert relied heavily on social networking sites in high school to help develop and affirm his identity. He first learned about these sites in seventh grade from his peers. They encouraged him to join MySpace and LiveJournal, a mixed purpose site where users could share their personal narratives via blog posts and interact with others. Although becoming a member of these sites was optional, Robert expressed feeling some peer pressure to join and maintain membership in these sites.

It was more sort of just like a thing that you just did, at least in my circle I guess. So without thinking much about it because it was part of maintaining an identity and having a circle of friends. But I definitely remember talking to people about connecting with people on those sites to sort of, you know MySpace you had like a list of top friends. You had like six people that were your closest friends so sort of having that as a way of establishing your friend group was a big deal back then.

Peer influence aside, these sites provided him with an “important way of connecting more with friends.” Robert found that the ability to articulate a network of friends and connections helped foster his sense of self-confidence.

Because growing up in elementary school and middle school, I was very like internal and very shy to some extent. I was very personal. I didn't have a large group of friends. And then late middle school, early high school when I was identifying myself as gay when I was discovering my identity. It made it a lot easier to be able to bounce my identity off people around me. You know, connect to people and receive affirmation from people I liked based on the things I was doing, the person I was becoming.

The need to build relationships with peers online continued for Robert as he entered high school. During this time, he remembers learning about a new exclusive site called Facebook. As the site had just begun expanding to include users outside of college and a select few of his friends had memberships, Robert found himself drawn to it.

So knowing that the people that I looked up to and were sort of helping me become like a social being were on this social networking site. It became just very alluring. In a pretty short period of time, I got an invitation and jumped right in.

Yeah I guess it was just the fact that it was really popular among people I looked up to.

For him, the allure of the site was multifaceted. It allowed him to instantaneously chat and learn about his friends, provided a source of support, and a nearly constant source of possible new connections.

It is very satisfying to be able to like very quickly and very easily contact people and say something to get their attention or to have a moment of I like you and you like me. That's great. That's why were here. So that is usually when I'm really active on Facebook. That is what I guess I'm in need of.

Not surprisingly, the sense of online community and connectedness that he experienced from using Facebook soon became an important part of his identity. Similar to other participants' experiences in the study, Robert reflected that he felt "addicted" to using these sites.

I identify myself being very addictive because I grew up becoming a social being with the advent of Facebook. And it became a way. So it's very much ingrained in my psyche as part of my social identity.

Additionally, Robert acknowledged that this extensive use caused him to be overly diligent in managing how others perceive him. In needing to control his profile, he would often delete pictures where he did not "look good" or where he was "making a funny face." He would even go through pictures of himself that friends posted with his name and remove any online association, referred to as "untagging," them. The process of "untagging" allowed Robert and others who viewed his profile to only view the best pictures. He remarked that he was learning how to let go of this need for control and recognized "that is dumb and just because I don't love a picture of myself does not mean that that it not a picture of me."

Eight years after first joining Facebook, Robert continues to be an avid and frequent user. His connection to the site has remained an important part of his identity as he often logs on to the site three to four times over the course of a day.

If it's somewhere in the middle of the day it can be as short as 5 minutes to a minute. But then later on when I get home and I'm de-stressing, relaxing, I'll usually linger on there. I mean it can stay open in that tab for I mean up to two hours but constantly being on Facebook, never usually more than like 30 minutes.

The time that he spends on Facebook and other sites, such as Twitter, demonstrate that his use has become an integrated and central part of his life. While he has not altered how he uses the site in the same ways that other participants previously described, he has become more aware of how Facebook can help him network professionally.

I have become more recently attune to the advertisement aspects of Facebook because working in theater and taking advantage of social networking for that purpose has become a big thing at least in my awareness of the professional world.

As he prepared to graduate from LGU, he recognized that there might be a need to modify the content he shared on these sites to better adapt in the professional working world. However, Robert felt that this was still some time in the future.

### **From Understanding Identity to an Integrated Experience**

Similar to other participants, Robert did not intentionally seek out gay-oriented social networking sites. While he hoped to find people in his daily life to talk about being gay, Robert found high school to be a challenging environment and found that many of his male peers displayed what he called a “bro side.” As described by Robert, the “bro side” or “bro mentality” is like a “gym going, kind of stupid, backwards hat wearing, sports watching; sort of like the typical masculine male or hyper-masculine male.” The attitude of these men turned Robert off from engaging as he found their behaviors to be

homophobic. In response, he began using the gay chat rooms as an outlet to share and discuss his experiences as a gay teen. It was while using these chat rooms that he began to see advertisements for Manhunt. He visited the site and was almost immediately hooked.

Just lots of people got straight to the point, I guess. Which at that point, when I started looking at gay social networking, I was not looking for sex or hook up or that sort of thing. But once I discovered it. It was awesome. It was all very exciting, that whole world. I mean, the prospect of meeting someone online was very exciting, especially because I didn't have a lot of gay people that I knew.

As the use of Manhunt quickly became a regular part of his everyday routine, often logging on multiple times per day, Robert found himself becoming more and more immersed in the gay culture. He learned how to effectively navigate the multiple features of the site from posting a profile and uploading photos of himself to using messaging features to communicate with other men. He engaged with other men who shared many of the same feelings and experiences that he had. These interactions allowed him to develop his identity and supplement the interactions with the gay community that he felt he was lacking in his high school.

While he was initially drawn to Manhunt to meet similar people, his focus for using the site shifted from talking about his identity to sex.

What was exciting was getting attention or just having a dialogue with men. And if it was because they found you attractive, it was usually a pretty good affirmation. So, that sort of being a very, obviously, visceral physical plus to go on these sites. I think that's what I remember the most. That's when it became about not really chatting about being gay or identity but about sex and attraction.

Though the conversations focused on sex, Robert was conscientious about with whom he talked. Specifically, he often talked to men that were a considerable distance away from him. This helped reinforce a feeling of safety for him. It was not until the summer after

his senior year that Robert met offline (in person) with someone from Manhunt. He did not disclose many details about this first interaction but did share that it went well and fueled his interest for meeting up with other men. The use of the site allowed him to fulfill whatever his needs were at the time, which ranged from good conversation over coffee to having casual sex.

Robert's use of gay-oriented social networking sites evolved as he went off to college. Manhunt was replaced with Grindr as it was more widely used by students at LGU. He found that the site, while lacking some of the in-depth customizable profile options Manhunt offered, still provided him a "personal and private way" to connect with gay men. His profile on the site included a photo of himself along with some basic information.

I'm on a new phone now, so I think it's blank at the moment. But, as of last week, before the phone was new, it just said something about being a student and looking to chat. Usually I'll have a picture of -- I have this funny picture of me in like a Louis G spandex wrestler outfit that sort of looks simultaneously silly. But also, it's not an unflattering picture.

He hoped that men who were viewing it would find him to be charming and engaging without appearing to have tried too much. The need for validation and recognition without being viewed as attention seeking was a delicate balance that Robert found himself trying to negotiate while using the site.

So, without discouraging positive attention, being able to not take myself seriously on Grindr because there's this weird thing about if you take yourself too serious on Grindr, there's also a stigma; I think there's a stigma.

This stigma, as he described, appears to be deeply embedded in the site and the men who use it. While Grindr markets itself as a gay dating application, Robert's understanding

and experience was that “it’s clearly for men to hook up. It’s a clear gay hookup app.” He learned this important lesson quickly.

Yeah, you can’t really put your heart up on profile. You have time to basically say either I’m looking for hookups or I’m not looking for hookups, which are the categories of Grindr, and it’s always funny because if you’re not looking for hookups, a lot of people are going to disregard you entirely.

He realized that the men were not seeking dates but rather looking to engage in casual sex. Additionally, he found most often that people on the site were exceptionally fast to articulate what they were looking for, even if it was mean-spirited.

You see so many profiles where it’s a picture, text, and people say ridiculous things so they can get away with it. If it’s a picture of your nipple or your torso, no one’s going to recognize that, so you can say, no fat, no femme, no Black, no Asian, under thirty. Really sort of robotically harsh and judgmental things.

While men who were new to Grindr may have struggled with understanding and situating these types of comments, Robert’s extensive previous experiences using these sites gave him important perspective. As a result, he discovered that lowering his expectations and a “don’t take yourself too seriously” attitude helped him manage his interactions and any rejection that he might experience from these men.

Well, there’s this attitude that comes with Grindr where it’s very easy to reject someone. It’s very easy to get positive and negative attention. So, going in with a safeguard of this is silly or I’m just here. Patrick (another participant in the study) always tells me he only goes on Grindr when he’s pooping and it’s like, instantly, oh, so you clearly don’t take this seriously whatsoever. You’re not looking for any sort of affirmation. It’s as if to say, “Oh I’m not honestly looking for sex on my phone, because that would be crazy and slutty and ridiculous”. So, I do think it’s very funny that there’s this whole culture surrounding it of like try to take it just the right amount. If you try to take it seriously, only to a certain point. It also depends on the day, if I’m not feeling like horny is what it is, then I’m not going to project an image of myself that is like specifically attractive. I’m not going to go out of my way.

This more relaxed approach seemed to help Robert remain grounded as the use of the site was for his enjoyment and the occasional “hook-up” but not necessarily something more



long term. By understanding what the site was actually used for he was able to use the site to fulfill his changing needs and interests.

Another important aspect that Robert learned about while using sites, such as Grindr and adam4adam, was how he shared photographs of himself with other men. Although his profile displayed one photograph, he had multiple other pictures of himself. These included pictures of his entire body, face, chest, and genitals that he would have saved on his smartphone. He would share these photos when he was messaging with another man. However, before sending additional photographs to another user, he needed to be comfortable and have some level of attraction to the other person.

I think it's like a system of comfort for someone to send a picture. Like, I need to identify you as a human first and then a man and then a man that I know or don't know. So, I'll usually ask for a pic because I do want to know if there's a context in which I know this person, or if I've seen them before.

While he described his process for sharing pictures of himself, Robert found that other users did not always have such a discriminating approach. In particular, he often received pictures of a man's abdomen or genitals, what he referred to as "dick pics," even before they had exchanged any messages. Robert was caught off guard the first few times that this occurred. However, he soon learned from talking with other gay men that it was a typical part of their experience. Initially he chalked this up to the men's desires to be anonymous while still sharing a very personal part of themselves. For the men who shared these pictures, Robert recognized that they were often identified as "being in the closet" or wanting to experiment without many others knowing. As he reflected further about receiving these types of pictures, he believed that using these sites "give you permission to be totally led by your libido and totally not even think about making a human connection." These observations seemed to further support his belief and that of

others in this study that Grindr and other sites were primarily used for casual sexual encounters.

Though Robert shared that he occasionally “hooked up” with men from these sites since arriving at LGU, his purpose for using them changed since entering into a long-term relationship. His current use is more focused on developing new friendships with men. Robert had developed some “boundaries,” though he would not disclose what these looked like, that allowed him to continue to use the sites without compromising his relationship. He did share that he was not in an “open relationship,” what he defined as one where both people could engage in casual sex with other men. Even with a “serious boyfriend,” he visited these sites several times over the course of each day and would talk with other men and exchange pictures. He shared that most of the conversations were innocuous and often led to new friendships. If a man would message him with unwanted sexual comments, Robert found that he could reference his relationship status to disengage or avoid awkward interactions.

In addition to using these sites for making new friends, Robert and his friend, Patrick (another participant in the study), developed a Twitter account to parody and “poke fun” of Grindr. The specific names of their Twitter and YouTube accounts have been withheld to ensure the confidentiality of both participants. The two men use the Twitter account and semi-regularly released YouTube videos to talk about their experiences with the site. They discuss “the things that people say, the way that people act, and the things that this makes people do” while using the site. Their running commentary, which was direct and comedic, appeared to serve an important role in helping them keep a realistic perspective about their use.

Robert's use of gay-oriented social networking sites appears to have evolved since he began using them. He has moved from needing these sites to explore and understand his identity to connecting with men for casual sex to becoming an integrated part of his experience as a gay man. Additionally, he viewed them as a means to continue to develop connections within the gay community. Similar to other participants, the use of these sites Robert continued to use the site even though he had begun dating someone. He also seemed to believe that his use of these sites would continue for the foreseeable future.

### **Isaiah**

Isaiah was a 21-year old senior who was preparing to graduate from LGU with a degree in Management. As a result of his academic pursuits, he was completing a fifth year at the institution. Additionally, he was an involved student on campus who worked as a Resident Assistant, an active member of multiple student organizations, and worked part-time. While at LGU, he had also become involved in the electronic dance music (EDM) culture and regularly attended concerts and music festivals. During our interviews, Isaiah appeared to be very self-reflective.

One area that gave him pause was what his future plans would be. As he thought about graduating in May, Isaiah shared a sense of both excitement and nervousness to leave a place that had been home for the last five years. He did not have plans to attend graduate school but knew that he would return to work at his family's business in Eastern Massachusetts for the summer. After the summer, he planned to move to a larger city to begin working in the hotel/tourism industry.

### **Being Gay: Making it Facebook Official**

For Isaiah, identifying as a gay man began when he was a sophomore in high school. At age 16, he had come out to close friends and found that he had a “relatively easy time coming out.” He shared that those he told were accepting and supportive. However, Isaiah still found himself becoming overinvolved in clubs and organizations, such as sports teams and student council. He did not want others to perceive him differently and that “being gay changed nothing about my personality or motivation to succeed in school.”

Although he was out to his peers, he waited to tell his parents until he was in his first year at LGU. Isaiah felt that he needed to let his parents know but found that doing so seemed to be “less calculated” than he expected. His mother found and read his journal while he was on winter break. In it he described that he was gay, even though he had previously told them that he was bisexual. Isaiah’s father was much more accepting and receptive to this information than his mother. She had an ex-husband that had come out as gay and “felt haunted by this disease.” Not surprisingly, there was some tension between him and his mother that seemed to ease over time. Unfortunately, she suffered a heart attack and passed away in the spring of 2011. He shared that she was “on her way to fully accepting it” when she died. This was clearly a difficult and challenging experience for him to manage.

After coming out to his parents, he changed part of his profile on Facebook to reflect that he was “interested in men.” This appeared to be a defining experience for Isaiah as he received significant attention and support from other family and friends.

Specifically, “I got a lot of likes and messages supporting me for coming out.” He also recognized that he had not experienced any negative feedback.

### **From Reluctant User To “Creeping” on Facebook**

Isaiah’s early experiences with social networking sites came when he signed up for a MySpace account in the eighth grade. The site allowed him to connect with others who shared similar interests (e.g. music, books). As he used the site, he learned how to navigate the different webpages and options that it provided. While he has retained his MySpace account, he shared that he does not access it as often as other sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. He found that these other sites provided more features and greater numbers of users.

The introduction of Facebook to Isaiah happened in high school. At that time, Facebook had begun to expand beyond current college students by providing current members with invitations to share with non-users. One of his friends, who was also in high school, encouraged him to join, however, he remained skeptical of the site.

It was very much that you need an invitation to be a part of Facebook. So it was actually a gay friend in high school who invited me that I first joined Facebook. If all my friends weren’t involved then I didn’t really know what I would get out of it.

Although he was satisfied with MySpace, he recognized that growing up with technology meant constantly exploring and trying new sites. As a result, he found himself interested in exploring some of the features on Facebook.

It’s very much that my generation kinda just fell into it. The more you played with it, the more you got it. I remember that there were gaming systems that I didn’t know how to use or when computers first came into our household. It was trial and error until you got it. And as Facebook changed, there was a learning curve of not really knowing how the new Facebook worked and as you played with it you kind of learned how the system worked.

Even with an interest in newer technologies, Isaiah's account on Facebook remained mostly unused until the middle of his senior year of high school. He realized that very few friends were using the site and that it lacked a distinct purpose for him. It was not until he was preparing to graduate and leave for college did he find that Facebook filled an important need. Specifically, he then viewed the site as being a tool for him to retain old connections and develop new friendships.

I started using it to network with friends who were graduating, putting pictures, and making Facebook statuses. Then coming to college, it was a way to connect with friends from high school and make friends here.

After arriving at LGU, he found that his use of Facebook became central to managing his connections and developing a social life.

Once I got to college, it was very much friend-ing people, writing on their walls, and looking at their pictures. And I used it to update my friends and family as to what I'm doing with my life, going on trips, grad school, summer jobs, things like that.

Features, such as messaging and viewing people's wall updates and personal photographs, allowed him a sense of near constant connection to friends and others on the site. Additionally, when he received his first smartphone and downloaded the Facebook application, he found that this was enhanced and he could communicate with and know even more about people. The information he was able to access about others seemed limitless and further reinforced his desire to be connected. However, he reflected that this need for information led him and others to develop negative behaviors. Specifically, he referred to the constant stalking of other peoples' profiles as Facebook "creeping."

It's the ability to actively update yourself on someone else's life without them actually knowing. Make assumptions about the statuses and pictures that they are updating.

Facebook “creeping” was not the only destructive behavior that Isaiah recognized he had developed. He also found that he would post all sorts of inappropriate comments, status updates, and pictures on his Facebook and Twitter accounts. These remarks were intended to provide others an “unfiltered insight” into his personal thoughts and observations.

A lot of my friends and I would be out, or at the dining hall, or going to class. We would tweet about it. A lot of them would be very sexual and not explicit photos or explicit writing. But my personal sex life, I kind of put it on Twitter. Not with people's names but ironic funny things that got a lot of retweets. In the moment, great idea. And then hindsight kicked in.

His posts on Facebook and Twitter, while intending to be funny, often put stress on his relationships with friends. On more than one occasion he found himself apologizing for what he had posted. Additionally, as he knew he would be graduating in May, he had begun to rethink and edit all of the posts he had previously made.

Recently as I am graduating and trying to find a job, I’m taking the pictures down and privatizing my settings. My Twitter is private and I use that mostly for news and retweeting things on sites.

As he continued to use both sites, Isaiah has become much more aware and intentional in the content that he posts and the connections he makes.

### **Shifting from Outsider to Insider in the Gay Community**

Isaiah’s initial experiences with gay-oriented social networking sites began after arriving at LGU. As a gay man on campus, he was hesitant to make friends within the gay community.

I didn’t have any friends in the gay community on campus. When I first came here I kind of distanced myself from that because I saw the gay community as like the stereotypical gay community. A little flamboyant than I had wanted to be at that time as part of my process of coming out. I had heard that the gay community here was very incestuous and I didn’t want to be a part of that.

He felt that by being connected with these men that his heterosexual friends and other people would perceive him as being “just like them.” However, in his sophomore year, he recognized that he needed to develop some connections with the gay community. As he set out to make new friends, Grindr was quickly becoming a popular application that many of the gay men were talking about and using. It was at this time that Isaiah connected with another gay student who was using Grindr. This new friendship seemed to change how he saw the gay community. Specifically, his preconceived notion of what it meant to be a gay man were challenged by this new friend. Isaiah acknowledged that he could be seen as “just like” his heterosexual friends while also connecting with members of the gay community. From his conversations, his friend encouraged him to download the application.

I made a friend and he already had Grindr. So I downloaded it to see what it was like and see if I would enjoy it. I think my intentions at first were just to test the waters. And that obviously changed through my time at LGU.

Before owning a smartphone, Isaiah initially downloaded the application to his iPod Touch so that he could access the site. His initial impressions of the site were rather negative.

I thought it was kind of dirty and kind of gross. Just because the whole idea of talking to someone that you’ve never met and it shows like their location and their stats or what they chose to post for stats. It just seemed wrong because it didn’t, in my mind it didn’t seem safe and that you just have to trust whatever they’re saying and then you know if you’re looking for something that’s more than just talking. If you want just like if you’re looking for sex and you’re on the site you are trusting what they’re saying until you meet them in person. That’s pretty risky. And you put a lot of trust in someone 1700 feet away and in an area of campus that could be anywhere or anyone. And so I thought it was, I thought it was pretty sketchy to begin with.



He found the initial conversations to be somewhat limiting as he did not seem to have much in common with the men other than being gay. However, he also quickly learned that the majority of the conversations focused on men wanting to have casual sex.

They're interesting just because you have nothing, you strike up a conversation with someone and you have nothing in common except the fact that you're both using Grindr and potentially both gay. Half the people, not half but a percentage of the people I've talked to were not out and were looking. They were curious. Some were just like looking to try and test the waters with a guy. But the conversation is usually like 'Hey what's up?' Very common and then depending on how much effort you want to put into you could try and have a conversation like, 'Oh do you go to LGU', 'What's your major', 'What year are you?' And like sometimes you just go like 'Oh what are you looking for?' And you hear 'like friends, dates, hook ups.' And then from that question is where the conversation would change to just friends. Like it's a pretty simple conversation and you kind of make it what you want it to be. And if it's hookups it gets pretty sexual, pretty fast. And then dates it's right kind of in the middle.

However, he noticed that his impressions shifted after multiple conversations with different men on the site. Additionally, he began to develop criteria to determine which men he would contact and those he would ignore.

I would talk to people whose profile pictures that I recognized. And I started to like make a decision, that people would message me without pictures, face pictures. I wouldn't respond to those and people who did (have pictures) I would and go from there. If I recognize the profile and it's someone who I just don't want to talk to, that I like know from campus, or just their profile or picture and I show no interest in. I usually just don't respond. If their adamant and keep messaging me. Like I'll just be all over them and I'll say thank you or just something like that. Because from my own experience I'd rather be told that they're not interested, and just still messaging someone and looking like an idiot.

After using the site for a few months, Isaiah reflected that his use had changed completely. He was no longer hesitant to engage with the gay community but rather found himself immersed in the sexualized aspects of it.

So I don't know if this is a real thing but I think everyone goes through a slut phase. And I think mine happened to be my sophomore year at college. It just coincided with when I had a Grindr and so it was a very easy way to meet people. I think all of the people on it are all at kind of the same stage or close too it. I

wasn't committed to anyone. So I figured like if I had the urge and wanted to have sex, to meet someone on there. And if I felt comfortable with it, maybe hookup or to meet up or whatever. It was a convenient way to do that.

Additionally, the description of a "slut phase" was similar language that he and other participants used to describe having casual sex with multiple different men. At first he viewed these sexual acts as a form of experimentation since he was unable to engage in sex with men prior to coming to college. However, his experiences led him to understand the behavior as a normalized and important part of the process that most gay men experience.

While Isaiah would engage in casual sex, he found himself communicating some personal boundaries and limitations with men. At times, he had to reinforce these for men who seemed to need to have sex with such great desire that they were willing to take significant risks.

Because at one point I was single but there was a guy on there (Grindr) who wanted to go to the bathroom in a building on campus and have sex. So I brought it up. I was like 'First of all I work in this building. So no', and 'Second of all it's 2 p.m. So no not just in broad daylight.'

Beyond these individual interactions, Isaiah also revisited his earlier perception that the campus culture for gay men was highly sexualized and engaging in regular sex with each other ("incestuous"). He was conscientious about not being viewed by other men as being "easy" or a "sure thing."

Yes I think, my opinion of the gay culture, like at LGU, that they are very open sexually. Randomly sleeping with guys. And there was also that fear of the stigma of being called a slut. And them being called a slut is derogatory but like a gay slut, it just means they could be hot or like down for fun. And so it's almost a good thing in -- you think it's a good thing when you're in there and so like you kind of want that.

Even though he seemed to rally against this label, his behaviors reflected a strong motivation to fit in with this culture.

Although the majority of Isaiah's experience focused on Grindr, he also tried out sites such as Manhunt and Scruff for shorter periods of time. However, he found that Manhunt was not as easy to use as it did not provide the simple user interface that Grindr offered. At that time, Manhunt was also not a stand alone application but rather users had to login with their website browsers. In contrast, Scruff catered to a subsection of gay men who were attracted to men who were "otters/bears" (heavier set), "mature" (older), and "scruffs" (facial and body hair). He found that this site did not provide the types of men that he was most likely to find attractive. As a result, he returned to using Grindr as his primary gay-oriented social networking site.

Finally, he recognized that his use of Grindr, much like Facebook and Twitter, shifted considerably over time. He still logs on "three or four times a day just to check for messages." However, his purpose for using the site changed from wanting casual sex to being more focused on finding friends.

But it's mostly to make friends and then I'm not against like going on dates. But I haven't ever had a good experience with dates from Grindr and so now it's mostly friends, friendships and chatting.

For him, the change in focus seems to coincide with preparing to leave campus and begin a professional career.

### **Patrick**

Patrick was a 22-year-old, senior who was excited to leave LGU with a degree in Social and Behavioral Sciences. Though he enjoyed being in a major that served others he felt that his true passion was art and design. He intended to work at a hospital in New

York City for some time after finishing his degree. After working he was hoping to be financially stable enough to pursue a career in fashion design. Patrick saw working at a hospital as a “great way to make money” and recognized that his interests and passion did not always provide enough income. Although he identified he could have attended a number of top colleges and universities, Robert chose LGU as he felt it would provide him with a strong education without leaving him with substantial debt.

During his time at LGU, Patrick had become an integrated member of the community and developed a strong network of peers. He had become involved on campus and taken a part-time job in the local community to help develop his resume and offset any expenses he had. The position off-campus also helped him connect with members of the area’s gay community, as his current supervisor was a gay man. He found that working for this man provided him important insight and a role model as he sought to begin his career. Additionally, Patrick had a long-standing friendship from high school with Robert, another participant in the study. This relationship was clearly important to him as he referenced it multiple times.

Patrick was also direct in sharing his opinions about the campus community. He had experienced and heard from others that there was a culture of “rampant homophobia” and people who “get away with some really awful shit” on the campus. While he did not disclose further, he shared that he had observed friends being called homophobic names and threatened with physical harm. He was rather pragmatic in sharing these observations and had spent significant time thinking about and considering his experiences. His pragmatic and reflective nature coupled with his strong sense of humor provided important insight about his experiences.

## **Identifying as Gay and Not Caring What Others Think**

Patrick knew he was different from other boys when he was in the seventh grade. However, he waited until he was 16 and in high school to begin coming out as gay. Though he did not share why he waited, he remembers being very young when his grandparents took him to Provincetown, a gay-friendly city, and showed him, Cabaret, a musical focused about a bisexual relationship in 1930s Berlin. These early interactions with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people seemed to affirm for Patrick that being gay was acceptable.

At 16, Patrick began attending parties where he would drink alcohol. It was at one of these parties that he casually started “making out with a boy.” As he had been drinking, Patrick found another male at the party whom he was attracted to and started kissing him. At that time he knew others were watching but felt as if he did not need to explain his actions.

I knew and some of that was mixed with I didn't care what other people think of me anymore. So I didn't even feel the necessity to tell people, anybody. And by Monday (after the party) the whole school knew.

For many adolescents, this type of attention at school would be unwelcomed, however, Patrick seemed to be unfazed as others “gossiped” and “outed” him. He seemed to be resolute in his identity as a gay man and viewed his high school experience as generally positive given his involvement in student council and strong connections to many students and administrators. Nonetheless, he still experienced some homophobic behaviors from his peers, such as name-calling. Though supportive peers often quickly rebuked these comments and came to Patrick’s defense.

After multiple people shared what Patrick had done at the party, he decided that he needed to tell his family. He knew that they would soon find out and wanted them to hear it from him directly. Once he told his parents about what had happened, he waited for their reaction. Their response caught him off guard as they focused more on him going to a party and drinking rather than him identifying as gay. He has since found his parents and family to be extremely open-minded and accepting of his identity.

### **Frustrations with Facebook Lead to Using A New Site**

Patrick's early experiences with social networking sites began in the eighth grade when his friends began signing up for Facebook accounts. Prior to this exposure, he had been an active and frequent user of online messaging applications, such as AOL Instant Messenger (IM), and had heard about MySpace. However, he did not see the draw for MySpace and instead opted to use IM to connect with others and to develop his communication and computer skills. When Facebook began emerging in his middle school, Patrick was able to use what he learned from IM and apply it to this new site. He reflected that, at the time, it had fewer features and was more focused on photographs and sharing status updates.

In thinking about his use of these sites, Patrick shared that he felt as if he “grew up with it.” When he began high school and become a more involved student, his use of Facebook continued to expand and evolve. He worked with the Good Samaritan Club and Student Council and found that the groups wanted to develop their own Facebook pages.

People started to catch on and were like shit we have to get a Facebook pages. Cause we have to start social media-ing. Unlike the corporate organizational side of things, seeing it from a high schooler's perspective.

These groups would then use their Facebook accounts to share information about upcoming events and connect with users. As membership to these groups was restricted and required that you be invited to join, Patrick recalled feeling and seeing people be excluded. He found at the time that this restrictive nature created an atmosphere and desire to fit in and be liked. Though he recognized these challenges, his usage of the site continued as Facebook began offering additional features such as “bumper stickers” and sharing videos. Additionally, he continued to experience benefits from using the site, such as developing new friendships and being knowledgeable about what was going on with his peers.

When Patrick left his hometown and came to LGU he found that Facebook was the predominant social networking site for students. He continued to use the site to share pictures and stay connected with friends and family. However, he began to become weary of its impact while completing his academic coursework. He felt strongly that Facebook, which was developed as a way to build connections, had begun to destroy people’s relationships and their self-esteem.

I’ve been working with suicide ideation and have done a lot of research on it. And it’s B-A-D, bad for teenagers and young adults. Unless you’re doing it from a purely digital marketing, like musicians and you want to get your shit out there like MySpace. Facebook is just straight up bad. It is crafting an artificial profile, that you craft after I don’t even know what the hell you want in popular culture. And popular culture is that you can drink a lot, have a lot of sex, and be happy all the time, and have a perfect boyfriend. It’s all kind of digitized and put out for you right there. And so girls and boys, mostly girls, will craft themselves a profile knowing that it’s fake and it’s a huge hit to your self esteem. When you don’t meet that thing in real life, then you try to and you like can’t drink as much as it says. And since it is so easy to do it in real life and it causes depression, isolation, and totally adds into suicide.

Additionally, Patrick realized that these behaviors that he was seeing were increasing and becoming an integrated part of people’s daily lives. He was clearly exasperated by this

issue and struggled with how others allowed themselves to become so influenced by this site. Of all the men in the study, Patrick was the most critical about his dislike and distrust towards Facebook.

As a result of his frustrations with Facebook, Patrick began looking for a new social networking site. During his sophomore year, he began working for a public relations manager off-campus who was using Twitter heavily to market and brand new products. Patrick was impressed with how his supervisor used the site to “build up something instead of tearing it down.” From his experience, he found that Twitter limited users to 140 characters per post and did not allow for the myriad of profile information and other features that Facebook provided. Patrick found this to be a new and refreshing experience.

You have 140 characters. Most of the people that try to express themselves personally end up deleting their accounts. And I can't express myself in 140 characters. And that's what people see about twitter. It's not going to be misinterpreted. I like Twitter for that reason.

After exploring further into the site, Patrick signed up for an account. He found that it slowly became the site he uses most frequently. Currently, he reads Twitter an average of four or five times a day. This time is spent reading other people's Twitter accounts and occasionally posting something he thinks is “witty” or “funny” or “re-tweeting” another person's post. He follows less than 60 people on Twitter compared to over 1,200 “friends” on Facebook.

Although Patrick spoke highly of Twitter, he recognized that people still misused Twitter and posted “stupid” things as they had on Facebook.

People are as dumb as they are on Twitter as they are on Facebook. But Facebook has like more than one use. Where Twitter, you sound so stupid if all of your tweets are presented to you. “OMG.” “Another beer -- YOLO (you only live



once).” “OMG A boy.” And that's almost a direct statement of what's on Twitter. And the folks are like why don't you follow me. And I'm like look at your goddamn tweets.

He seemed to be able to better manage his frustrations with Twitter as he was able to block people or could choose not to follow them. Whereas with Facebook, Patrick did not necessarily feel that he had the option. He was able to minimize the amount of irrelevant posts that he viewed.

As Patrick looked forward to graduating from LGU, he had begun to think about his use of social networking sites once he began a full-time position in a hospital.

I think I should probably start thinking about privacy as I have a career coming up. Not that I have anything incriminating on my Facebook. I'm not super worried what employers might think.

However, he was aware that some other students and people in his chosen career had inappropriate posts that could compromise their integrity and possible job opportunities. Patrick realized that depending on which nursing positions he pursued that he might have to further restrict his profile settings or more carefully evaluate friend requests. He felt that if his use of social networking sites needed to change that he would be able to make these modifications rather easily and without much disruption.

### **Helping Stay Connected: “Keeping an Ear to the Ground” of Gay Culture**

Similar to several of the other men in this study, Patrick began using gay-oriented social networking sites, such as dudesnude and Manhunt, when he was in high school. His first exposure to these sites came at around the tenth grade when a mutual friend approached him and shared that another friend, John, a gay man, had posted nude photographs of himself on dudesnude. As Patrick was extremely concerned, he confronted his friend and said “Don’t you know what happens? You get raped and they’ll

find you.” He was clearly worried for his friend’s safety and had heard consistent messages from family and the media that the Internet was not safe for children and teenagers. Patrick reinforced many of the same messages that he had previously heard to his friend.

After talking further with John and viewing his profile on the site, Patrick realized that he was intrigued. In looking on the site, he found that the risk for his safety was not as significant as he expected and that he could limit the types of information that he shared. Soon after their exchange, he signed up for an account on dudesnude and it remained one of his favorite sites.

I remember when I was first interacting with it, I was, like, this is so simple, everyone’s on the same page. There will guys who just want to see guys naked, it’s clean, it’s easy to use.

Once the initial excitement had passed, Patrick realized that he found the site to be “boring” as it did not have many members. Though he loved the user experience, he was unsure of what else it could provide. It was shortly after this that he found himself being contacted frequently from other users. He enjoyed the attention that others gave him but felt that the experience lacked “a certain camaraderie” as few others were similar to his age. The men were either college students or in their twenties and thirties.

As Patrick continued to use dudesnude, he also began searching for other sites to meet men who were around the same age as him. He found sites such as adam4adam and Manhunt, which provided him additional connections to the gay community. These sites were similar to dudesnude and allowed him to manage how much information he shared. Each of his profiles on the site included basic information, such as his weight, height, interests, and a few pictures of himself. As he became more comfortable with using the

sites, he shared additional information. From using these sites, he recognized that he had developed a strong set of connections and some friendships that continue to exist.

As he went off to college, Patrick continued to use Manhunt and dudesnude but began to explore sites that catered to his sexual interests. Specifically, he shared that he was interested in kink, fetish behavior, and leather as a part of having sex. While he could find a few men on these sites that shared his sexual interests, Patrick wanted more opportunities to connect and discuss them. After some searching in his freshman year, he found Recon.com, which is a dating, informational, and networking site for men who are into fetish gear (e.g. leather, slings, latex, rubber). He was excited to have finally found a social networking site that catered to his interests.

They're definitely people who I talk with on a regular basis that are my age, that are as into the things that I'm into as they are. That's like a real -- that's very real to me only because you can't -- it's hard to find to people that are into what you're into if you have a kink or if you have a fetish, anything like that, which mine aren't anything, like, wicked-wicked out there but it's hard to find people that are as into it as I have always been.

For Patrick, the site seemed to provide him an important outlet to explore and validate his experiences.

I've actually made a lot of friends that way on Recon. It's fun and easy to exchange stuff like that with people who -- it's like being in high school with all the people who you wished you were in high school with.

He spoke passionately and was visibly excited about how much he valued this site and the connections he developed from it.

After finding Recon, Patrick began hearing about a new gay site, Grindr, in his sophomore year at LGU. At the time, many of his gay friends began talking about it, as they believed it would be the next emerging gay-oriented social networking site.

I guess everyone was talking about it in hushed whispers of, like, the big secret of Grindr. Like, “oh, I saw him on Grindr” and stuff like that. Then I got it. I was, like, this is it? Really? This is what we’re all talking about?

While Patrick initially found the concept of Grindr to be “funny,” he soon realized how much of an integrated part of the gay community it was becoming. The interface was simple because it limited your profile to few words and one photograph. It was also extremely mobile since it could only be downloaded and accessed from smartphones or tablets. This allowed all users, regardless of their sexual orientation or their level of comfort with it, to easily access the site. Patrick believed that these features led to it becoming so successful.

After designing his profile, which included a short sentence about himself and a picture, Patrick began engaging with men on Grindr. He found that the conversations quickly moved from “what’s up?” to more sexualized topics such as asking to exchange naked photographs or the possibility of “hooking up.” Patrick seemed comfortable engaging in these conversations even if they rarely led to him meeting someone for casual sex. He was mindful that this was not necessarily the type of connection he was looking for. Patrick was also acutely aware that using sites like Grindr did not lead to long-term relationships.

As Patrick continued to use and interact with men on the site, he began to struggle with the impact that Grindr was having on some who used it. In particular, he was concerned about the men who were questioning their sexual orientation and for those who were not “out.”

We all know you’re not there to look. We know you’re there to find someone to send them pictures and hook up with them. That person will tell someone else who will then tell everyone else. It’s only a matter of time until you’re outed, no matter how careful you are on one of those sites.

And we all talk about Grindr and hooking up and having sex because what else is there to talk about at college? We tell each other who's on Grindr and what's out there. And I saw who's not on Grindr and it's not our fault. It's our networking app. It's like Dan Savage said, 'it's the same as going to a gay bar. You're taking a risk because then suddenly, everyone that is gay knows that you're there for a reason and you can be outed.'

While Patrick had significant experience navigating these sites and knew that he was gay, he found that others lacked this knowledge. Specifically, he found that these men expected their information to remain private but did not fully understand how people were actually using Grindr.

It's not on everyone else to keep you in the closet, you know what I mean? We're all out. We have nothing to lose and we actually want you out of the closet because that helps us seem more normal. We're not more normal but it helps, it obviously helps.

Though he recognized that there was a culture of talking about and outing people, this behavior clearly bothered Patrick. He became very frustrated and upset at this behavior.

I think that that's a huge crime in the gay community is to out someone else. Everyone who knows me knows that that is a big no-no to me. You are allowed to come out when you're ready.

In response, he distanced himself from engaging in these types of conversations with friends.

At about the same time, Patrick began dating his current boyfriend. He found that being in a relationship shifted his use of these sites. While he saw value in the sites, he also became more critical of their impact. In response to his frustrations and challenges with Grindr, Patrick decided to begin parodying gay-oriented social networking sites. It started after he and another gay friend were looking at the site together one evening. He thought that he could infuse humor and his perspective to help others think about their use. Patrick reached out to Robert a few days later with his idea. As noted in Robert's

profile, YouTube and Twitter accounts were created to “poke fun” at these sites. They began filming and posting their reactions and commentaries while using Grindr. The feedback they received from these videos was extremely positive as they found many men who could relate to what they were talking about. Additionally, these accounts served an important purpose for Patrick as it helped him remain grounded about his use of gay-oriented social networking sites.

Similar to his use of Twitter and Facebook to keep engaged Patrick found that sites like Grindr, adam4adam, and Recon, allowed him to “have an ear to the ground of what’s going on with gay social networking.” Although he was in a long-term relationship, these sites have become an integrated and important part of his daily life. He continues to check each of these sites multiple times over the course of each week. As a result of his significant use, he developed some lasting and important friendships. Additionally, Patrick believed that he would continue using these sites to help further develop and build new connections.

### **Brandon**

Brandon was an 18-year-old, first-year college student who appeared determined to work hard to achieve his dreams. He grew up in New York but moved to another part of the state when he was a junior in high school. Brandon has an older brother and grew up in a home where his parents were married. Brandon came to LGU initially to pursue a degree in communications. However, Brandon’s true passion was to be an doctor. Guidance counselors told him that he did not have the required grades to succeed in this field. After moving to a different high school, Brandon sought out an internship at an orthodontist practice and knew that he had to “work very hard to get there.” After

arriving on campus, Brandon applied and was accepted to a program in Natural Sciences. Brandon was clear that LGU was his second choice school but seemed to be enjoying himself. Brandon has made friends and gotten involved in student activities on campus.

### **Struggling to Come Out to Family**

Although Brandon seemed outwardly happy in describing his identity, it soon became clear that he faced several struggles in coming out and living as a gay man. Brandon's earliest interactions with another gay man happened when he was 16 and attending an overnight summer camp. While at the camp, he met a counselor who openly identified as gay and learned that he was using the gay-oriented social networking site, Grindr.

He didn't know that I was gay. He was just mentioning Grindr in conversation. I asked him what that was and he said 'ah never mind.' I was really intrigued because I knew he was out and gay and I was like what is this thing that I could use because I was in the closet.

Although it was a brief conversation, it had piqued Brandon's interests, as he was attracted to other men. Brandon was curious and decided to download Grindr once he returned home. Although initially overwhelming, he began using it to connect and talk to other nearby gay men. While this exploration was happening, Brandon's parents remained unaware of their son's online activities. However, he worried that his parents would find out and be disappointed, as they were very homophobic.

At roughly the same time as Brandon started using Grindr, his family needed to relocate so that the father could start a new job. However, a few weeks before they were leaving their old home, Brandon and his older brother were arrested for shoplifting from a local department store. After being picked up by his parents from the police station,

Brandon decided that because of the stress of using Grindr and the pending move that he needed to tell them he was gay.

I was going to tell my parents even though my dad's really conservative and I was just worried about where I was going to go. My dad was obviously raging because of what just happened that night. In his rampage, he went through my room. He found a pamphlet for gay teen programs, like for help. He was like, "You're a faggot" and it was just a bad thing.

As Brandon expected, his father continued to struggle with his son identifying as gay. In response, Brandon was sent by his father to several therapists in an attempt to "de-gay" him. While the therapists all shared that it was impossible to change a person's sexual orientation, Brandon conceded and told his father "that it worked and I'm straight. From then on my parents thought I was straight and everything was all good." With his father temporarily appeased, they relocated to another city and Brandon continued to use Grindr.

After moving Brandon connected with a man, Jason, who had just graduated from the high school he was going to attend. Brandon was extremely excited about this new connection as it marked his first gay relationship.

So we first started our relationship just casually hooking up, sneaking out of the house and going to his house or he would come over if my parents weren't home.

However, the relationship changed when people from high school started asking Brandon how he knew this recent graduate. Brandon was faced with having to skirt the issue so as not to make Jason feel uncomfortable or disclose his sexual orientation. Jason stopped the relationship after "freaking out and deleting (him) off Facebook." They did not talk until Jason returned from college for summer break at which point they started having an intimate sexual relationship again. As Jason and Brandon were not out, people in their town began to talk and speculate that they were gay and in a relationship. The stress



caused them to break up again and to stop talking to each other. Although this relationship did not continue Brandon spoke fondly of Jason.

I ended up getting a relationship and we're still pretty friendly. After a long time of not talking to each other, we're friendly again and talking. I'd say that was definitely a good experience and a learning experience.

Until he arrived at LGU did Brandon decide to tell his parents again that he was gay.

And then parents weekend here I told them because I was only here a month and a half and I like obviously knew that who I was, was who I was. My dad put a lot of blame on my old town for how I behaved and for me being gay. But I told them I'm here now and I'm still gay.

While this was a challenging experience for Brandon, it seems important that he be honest and forthright with his parents. These experiences helped shape his identity as a gay man.

### **Twitter Famous: Managing How People See Brandon Online**

As highlighted earlier, Brandon's use of social networking sites factored significantly into his daily life and activities. He began learning about and using MySpace, one of the mainstream earlier social networking sites, when he was younger.

I remember being in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and my older cousin had a MySpace and my parents said I couldn't have one. But I had a computer in my room and I like made my own MySpace. Every time my parents would come up the stairs, I'd exit out of it.

From this early interaction, Brandon began using MySpace and AOL Instant Messenger as a way to communicate and stay connected with friends. His use of social networking sites evolved when his parents purchased high-speed wireless Internet access for their home. While using MySpace, Brandon recalled Facebook beginning to emerge as a popular site. His use of Facebook started after coming home from a sleep-away camp

where other teenagers encouraged him to sign up. At times, Brandon became “dependent” on Facebook as he saw it as addictive and he was spending significant amounts of time “going through people’s pictures and wall posts and statuses. It was just so much information.” His use of Facebook, roughly 2-3 hours per day, continues to be his primary social networking site. It offers the volume of information that he feels he needs to stay current with the 1,030 friends, family, and other connections on Facebook. Additionally, the site also allows him to upload some 27,000 photographs.

Brandon’s use of social networking sites is not limited solely to Facebook. He also has an active Twitter and Tumblr account and referred to himself as once being “Twitter-famous”

I’ve been called Twitter famous because I had like 9,000 followers. I wasn’t posting anything that was interesting. The only thing that was interesting was that in my sophomore year of high school I met Justin Bieber like a bunch of times. I got to have a private concert and then got to meet him after it. He followed me on Twitter and tweeted me. So at that point I got a ton of followers.

After gaining significant attention on Twitter, the security of Brandon’s account was compromised and he was forced to start a new account. His new account now has about 200 people who follow him and 100 people that he follows, a significantly smaller number of connections. Although he views Twitter as his last choice application on his phone, Brandon does tweet (the process of posting a message on Twitter) on occasion when “something interesting is happening.”

While Brandon was able to share information freely on social networking sites, he recently became more concerned about who he is connected to and the content of his posts.

Everything is coming into perspective. Like, I’m going to be getting a job soon. I’m going to be graduating college and I’m going to be making connections. They

are going to be more professional. I definitely cleaned up. I used to post picture if I was at a sweet 16 and people were drinking. If I'm tagged in them on Facebook, I'll usually un-tag myself. So I care about every time I post something.

Brandon's increased scrutiny of how he is perceived and viewed on Facebook and Twitter has caused him to be much more cautious and intentional. His focus has also shifted as he thinks about pursuing a career as an orthodontist. Brandon was insistent in that he did not want patients from his internship to see pictures of him drinking. He also recently reviewed all 2,500 of his Facebook connections and pared it down to just over a 1,000 people. Brandon was motivated to make these changes when he realized that he did not know or care about who many of these people were. The focus on the need for privacy and the quality of relationships instead of the quantity seemed to mark an important transition in his use of these sites.

### **Important Lessons Learned from Using Grindr**

Given Brandon's significant use of sites such as Facebook and Twitter, it was not surprising that he was also comfortable using and engaging with gay-oriented social networking sites. As noted previously, Brandon first learned about gay-oriented sites, such as Grindr, when he was 16 years old from a summer camp counselor. After downloading the web-based application on his iPod touch, he quickly became a member of Grindr as he found it to have an easy and intuitive user-interface. After joining, he was prompted by the application to upload a picture and create a brief profile to share information about himself, what he was looking for (e.g. relationship, hooking up/casual sex, friendship), and their interests.

Once the profile is uploaded and active, the application uses a GPS tracking function to find other users who are nearby. The application is calibrated so that it can

track users who are as few as 20 feet from each other but no more than 100 miles apart.

Users are able to read the profiles of people nearby and a built in message feature that allows users to communicate and share pictures with each other. Given its ease of use and message features, Brandon used Grindr rather frequently.

Over the course of a day, I'll open it many, many times. I could open it up to 50 times. Just like walking and just opening it and see if I have a message. Seeing if there's anyone new on there and just refreshing it. So, I open it a lot of times but the time I actually spend on it probably doesn't amount to more than an hour a day.

However, unlike other social networking sites, Grindr does not provide immediate, or what is referred to as "push", notifications that alert the user on their device when they have a new message. In order to check to see if they have new messages, a user must open the application frequently. The application does provide these types of notifications if a user is willing to pay a monthly nominal fee (currently \$0.99). Brandon, like all of the men in this study, opted not to pay for the push notifications.

In addition to sharing about how someone would use the site, Brandon also described that his current profile was a picture taken of him in a tuxedo smiling at a formal dance. He shared his height, weight, race, and identified that he is single and from LGU. He chose this picture because he felt it best represented him – "very clean and put together." The choice to disclose this information was a personal one for Brandon guided by his desire to be in a relationship, his past experiences, and what he's learned about using Grindr.

Usually the people who don't have a face picture up are in the closet or bi-curious or straight-curious. It's not what I'm looking for because I'm looking for someone to date and be in a relationship with ultimately. I've been in a relationship with someone who was in the closet and it's just not something that I want to do again.

Brandon wanted to ensure that he presented as best as possible to others who saw him on this site. The development and maintenance of his profile helped make clear to others that he was interested in a relationship and not simply looking to have sex with people who were unsure of their identity.

While Brandon spent time crafting his profile, he spent the majority of his time having conversation with men who either approached him or those he found attractive. The conversation often focused on more surface level topics and often sought to find what, if any, commonalities they shared. Brandon noted that while the end goal was to have a long-term relationship, he would occasionally be looking for a “hook-up.” The concept of a hook-up was broadly defined as more than simply kissing and included oral or anal sex. He went on to describe the process that he uses and the exchange of information that typically happens before they meet for a hook-up.

At some point in the conversation we decide, oh yeah we’re both looking for a hook-up. I’ll usually be like do you have any more face pics? Then they’ll be like, ‘do you have any more?’ And then I’ll be like what kind of pictures. Then depending on how I feel about that and if I think they’re attractive then I will send them other pictures. It could be nude pictures.

For Brandon, the process for sharing nude pictures with each other requires that there is some mutual trust. He said he often would share a picture once someone shared one with him. Brandon also found a need to reaffirm for the other person that he would not “share those pictures” with others. The sharing of pictures seems to ensure that each person is mutually interested and as a way to develop trust. Once the pictures have been shared and there is mutual interest to move forward, they decide to meet and have sex.

Beyond sexual connections, Brandon also managed to develop some strong friendships.

It definitely opens you up – when I was younger it definitely had an impact on me, because I saw how much I wasn't alone. Every high schooler or middle schooler who's gay feels alone and in solitary because of this whole coming out process and learning who they are. So seeing all these people so close to you, it definitely showed that you're not alone.

Sites such as Grindr and Jack'd helped him realize the existence of a community of other gay people who had experienced some of the same feelings, emotions, and situations he had. Another critical benefit to Brandon was that he was able to further explore his identity as a gay man.

Like these hook-ups and stuff, you can learn from mistakes. You can learn from good things that have happened and you make connections. Especially that one guy that I met who was a dental student. That was a really good connection to make.

While Brandon spoke about his significant positive experiences from using gay-oriented social networking sites, not all of his interactions were positive. His use of the sites has sometimes become excessive and a “distraction” from school work.

Additionally, at times he receives unwanted messages from men. Specifically, they often seem to come from older married men wanting to hook-up and have casual sex. While he felt that he was being clear and direct, there were times when Brandon had to block or not respond to messages.

Additionally, one of the most challenging situations Brandon faced was when he was sexually assaulted while visiting a friend at a university in Florida. While attending a house party, Brandon went on Grindr to see who was nearby. He began a conversation with a man on Grindr, Joseph, who said he was also a college student. The conversation quickly moved outside of the application when they shared their personal cell phone numbers. While they were sending text messages, Joseph said he was no longer available. Instead, Joseph gave his friend, Mark, Brandon's number and told Brandon that they

should start texting each other. Brandon texted with him for a short time but stopped after Mark refused to send a picture. Mark then asked if they could talk over the phone before they met so that he could feel more comfortable. After the conversation, Mark arrived at the house party and Brandon met him outside. At this point, Brandon was intoxicated and Mark invited him in to his car.

He sped off with me in the car. I was telling him to stop the car and let me out. He just wouldn't and I had no idea where I was because I was in Florida. I had no idea how to get back. Then he said, "If you want to get back to your friends, you have to suck my dick." I was telling him no and I said I was going to call the police. My phone was dying and I was in such a terrible situation.

It was at this point that Brandon performed oral sex on this man as he feared for his safety and felt there were no other options available. After the assault, Brandon deleted the Grindr application from his phone. Although he downloaded the application two months after the incident, Brandon said the incident changed how he uses the sites and "caused a lot of trust issues." He now takes extra steps to confirm the identities of people he is messaging such as checking into them on sites such as Facebook and Twitter. He is also especially careful when meeting for the first time.

Brandon's use of gay-oriented social networking sites has clearly helped him understand and live his identity as a gay man. He has been able to reflect on each situation and identify how he could best learn and grown from it. While he has had some difficult experiences, Brandon has managed to maintain a positive and upbeat attitude with a focus on his future career aspirations.

### **Leo**

Leo was a 19-year-old, sophomore student who came to LGU to pursue a degree in the Natural Sciences with aspirations of attending medical school. He was involved on

campus as a Resident Assistant and as a member of a varsity sport. During high school, Leo and his family relocated multiple times. For his senior year, he relocated from the Midwest to the Northeast so that his parents could take advantage of discounted tuition for in-state students. As a result, Leo chose to come to the institution because it was financially affordable. Since arriving on campus, he has been able to develop strong friendships and become connected. Although only a sophomore, Leo immediately struck me as a self confident and focused student who was open and could be reflective about his identity and experiences as a gay man.

### **Coming Out: An Internal Struggle**

Leo's confidence in his gay identity during the interviews was the result of several challenging years of wrestling, reflecting, and ultimately accepting who he was. He spent his last two years in high school and his first year in college struggling internally to be viewed by others as a straight man. While he was externally hoping to be seen this way, he was using sites, such as Grindr, Adam4Adam, and Manhunt, to engage in sexual intercourse with other men. The use of these sites provided him a relatively safe outlet to experiment with other men who were also struggling with their identity. Although looking back he shared some moments of regret, he felt that it was an integral and critical component of his development as a gay man.

Having accepted his identity, Leo found the process of coming out as a gay man to his family and friends as one where he felt supported. While he had disclosed to a few close friends that he was gay, he came out to his parents over winter break. Leo found that by coming out to his parents and other family members it strengthened his



relationship with them. While his younger siblings were initially confused and did not seem to understand what was going on they seemed to move past it quickly.

Beyond his family, Leo had found support at LGU as a Resident Assistant and in the residence halls in which he lived. Similar to two other men in this study, Leo shared that he had met someone, Paul, and they were in a long-term relationship together. Leo had felt comfortable bringing him home to meet his family. The relationship with Paul seemed to be strong and extremely important to Leo.

### **Using Facebook as a Tool to Survive then Socially Thrive**

Like several other men in this study, Leo began using sites, such as MySpace, when he was in middle school. Although his parents did not support his use of sites at such an early age, he made it a point of explaining to them that he would take steps to be safe (e.g. not disclosing personal information, posting inappropriate pictures) and respectful in these online environments. He used MySpace to learn about other people and their interests but was limited in his interactions with others as some of the interactive features (e.g. messaging with others) were not present. The use of these social networking sites expanded in the ninth grade when one of his friend's sisters signed up for a Facebook account. Leo was at first intimidated as it felt to him that the site was geared more towards high school seniors preparing to leave for college. However, many of his friends began signing up for accounts at this time and he wanted to make sure that he was included. After signing up, Leo acknowledged that he fumbled his way through as a new user and often learned by exploring the site and trying out some of the features (e.g. messaging, writing posts, posting pictures). He quickly became an avid user of

Facebook and realizing that it offered more features than MySpace quickly abandoned that site.

At around the same time that he learned to use Facebook, Leo discovered that his family was relocating to the Midwest as his father accepted a new job. This was particularly challenging news, as Leo felt particularly connected to his friends and his school. Nevertheless, Leo was determined to make the best out of a terrible situation and used his experience with Facebook to his advantage. Having successfully navigated and developed an identity on Facebook, Leo was able to begin to build new connections with his peers prior to moving to the Midwest. While he was not particularly happy about leaving his comfortable environment, Leo found that it allowed him to “do this investigative work behind the scenes.” The advantage of using the site is that it allowed him to understand people and their dynamics.

I used it to navigate the social fabric of where I was going. It allowed me to assimilate into my high school culture really easily. And I ended up making friends really quickly. So I didn't have to go and fail a bunch of times like getting to know people. I just knew what was up.

When he arrived in the Midwest, Leo established himself and had begun to rebuild his network of peers. The skill of using Facebook to establish connections helped him again when before starting his senior year the family relocated back to the Northeast. During this transition, Leo's social life was far less disrupted than three years earlier. He was able to maintain not only the connections he made in the Midwest but to develop additional relationships in his new hometown. Leo's use of Facebook has continued into college, as he believes it's one of the most universally used and known social networking sites. While he uses other sites, such as Twitter and LinkedIn, Facebook has offered greatest depth of users to help him stay informed and connected.

## **From “Headless Horseman” to Being in a Long-Term Relationship**

As a junior in high school, Leo began using gay-oriented sites, specifically Grindr and Adam4Adam, after seeing advertisements on gay pornographic websites. When he first found these sites he was unable to admit to himself or others that he was a gay man. However, these sites provided him an important outlet and a sense of anonymity to connect with others who were having similar experiences and feelings.

I think that’s the thing about the site that was so different than any other site. It’s so oriented towards hook-ups. And that’s what I was looking for by using that at such an early stage. I wasn’t looking to make friends. I had friends. For what I needed it for, it worked well. You could sort by so many different categories and then find people based on location. Where else could you find where someone is in real time if you’re not tracking them and their location?

Leo’s desire for anonymity also manifested itself in the way in which he created his Grindr profile and how he sought to protect his identity online.

I was a headless horseman guy on Grindr. I never put up a face picture or anything like that. It was a picture of my torso and abs. And then it would just a very cryptic message that said nothing about who I was or my personality. Just the stats of who I was. Not everyone cares what your favorite books are on Grindr.

He provided only the information that he felt others would want to see and know about him. When contacted by others, Leo was hesitant to share information for fear that it would be used as “leverage and to out me, against my wishes.” He wanted to be discreet so as not to be the subject of gossip for other men. Specifically, he had conversations with other men who would reference other men on Grindr who did not publicly identify as gay. These interactions left Leo unsettled with a stronger desire to be cautious with other men.

After crafting his profile intentionally, Leo began receiving messages and contacting people he found attractive. Many of the comments he received were positive

and directed at his picture. The men found him attractive and he enjoyed the attention he received. Conversations would then often begin and included a basic introduction such as “hey, what’s up?” or “you’re cute!” There were questions often asked such as, “What are you looking for?” and “What are you into (sexually)?” Depending on how the conversation progressed, the two men would share pictures with each other. Most frequently, Leo would share a photograph on the site of his body or face followed by any nude pictures. He viewed this process as a “pass or fail” for the men after each picture he received. If he liked what he was seeing, he would continue sharing pictures. If he wasn’t interested then he would stop responding and sharing.

Leo shared that he would often ask the other man to begin sharing first as a way to develop trust and assess the person. Additionally, during the conversations, he would be assessing how trustworthy he found the person.

I feel like I’m constantly scanning this person. Are they legitimate, do their pictures match up? Is what they are telling me seem correct? Do they seem honest?

While much of his focus was on checking the accuracy of the pictures, he was also reflecting on how he was feeling about his conversations. If he felt that the pictures and the messages were reliable, Leo would recommend continuing the conversation via text messaging or talking on the phone. In these discussions, they would often discuss what sexual acts they would both be comfortable doing (e.g. kissing, mutual masturbation, oral, anal sex) and identifying where they could meet (e.g. residence hall room, car, bathroom on campus). Leo found that often what they agreed to do before meeting served as a set of boundaries regarding what the sexual intercourse would be.

After meeting the men in person, Leo found that many would become close friends or people who he could connect with for casual sex. If these were connections that were meaningful to Leo, he would add them on Facebook.

So the sign of a true friendship would be if we became friends on Facebook. That's the real Leo on Facebook and that's who I show the world and that's where my values lie. And so I feel when that happened, it was a bona fide friendship.

This process was an important one as it allowed him to build a network of supportive friends.

Leo described his use and reliance on Grindr affectionately as his “slut phase” where he was able to experiment and connect with multiple men. He shared that he would often “hook-up” (e.g. casual sex) on average with two to three different and new men from the site each month. Additionally, he would also have sex with men he had met on the site previously. He found that while he was not always proud of himself afterwards, he enjoyed being desired and wanted by other men. Although he is now in a relationship with Paul, he found it difficult to stop using Grindr.

I feel like you use Grindr until you find someone you are willing to give it up for. Because, I mean, no guy is just going to give up Grindr. Why would you unless there was a reason.

Since coming out to his friends and family and entering into a long-term relationship, Leo has been able to reflect on his experiences with the sites. His reflection was a powerful statement on the significant role that these sites played in his development.

I've never really thought much about this but how it kind of was my drug. There was so much pain surrounding being gay and not knowing what to do about it. Not being open to myself. And feeling like I needed to fool everyone around me and be straight. I feel like Grindr was a way to deal with that. Like a drug would normally deal with pain. It's kind of what I did. I got through those hard times with hooking up with friends and people and not having to deal with being out and the negative aspects of it.

While his use of Grindr has been significantly limited since starting his relationship with Paul, Leo admits that he still downloads the application occasionally. However, he and his partner often log on together for a shared experience. Leo identified that they have used the site for multiple purposes such as finding other gay men to be friends with or to engage in sexual intercourse with a third person. The new uses for this site have allowed him ways to continue to explore himself and connect with others. His use of Grindr has clearly evolved as he has become more comfortable with his identity as a gay man.

### **Parker**

Parker was a 20-year-old, sophomore student who was heavily involved as a student leader and worked as a Resident Assistant on campus. He was involved in the gay community and the LGBT community. Parker chose to attend LGU to pursue a double degree in Social and Behavioral Sciences. He viewed LGU as extremely aware and supportive of LGBT issues. As an involved student, Parker seemed comfortable and confident with his knowledge of campus and of himself.

### **Seeing a Bigger Picture**

Although Parker was comfortable and engaged, he did not disclose many details of his coming out process. He did share that he had come out in his senior year of high school but did not directly speak to how it impacted him or how family and friends received it. It is still unclear to me exactly what that experience was like for him. However, in his responses later in the first interview, he indirectly offered that he openly identified to his parents and family as gay. Specifically, Parker referenced how he was

navigating requests to be friends from his younger cousins on Facebook. While his family knew about his identity, he felt uncomfortable giving them access to his profile.

Parker seemed to have integrated his identity as a gay man into a more holistic understanding of himself. He credited this to the many courses he had taken on issues of diversity and social justice which helped him take a broader perspective. Parker also believed that LGU was an accepting and progressive environment where “I don’t even think of my gay identity as being one of my most prominent identities.” His interests seemed more focused on raising awareness of issues that face the gay community. For example, the first interview happened shortly after the Boston Marathon bombings. Parker had read an article online where a gay man was unable to donate blood to help the victims because of the federal ban on blood donations from gay people. He retweeted the posting because he felt especially passionate and wanted others to know about this important issue. In this instance, he was less concerned about someone knowing he was gay and more focused on increasing awareness of the discrimination gay men face. Parker saw social networking sites as a way for him to have a voice to highlight injustices.

### **Effectively Managing Multiple Connections**

Having used social networking sites since the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Parker viewed his exposure and experience as continuously evolving. Regardless of the site, he often learned how to use and navigate each site through a combination of trial and error and learning from others. The initial entry and use of these sites began with MySpace. The site was quickly replaced for him as Facebook became more and more popular. He had

approximately 1,000 friends on the site. Although he remains a user of Facebook, he viewed it as becoming less reliable and central to his use.

But even Facebook, I see it phasing out. At least for me, I don't really find as much value in it. I feel like Twitter now is more for the news sites that I follow. I feel like it's a better source of news than Facebook because Facebook is more biased.

In addition to the biased and at times offensive content, Parker found himself becoming frustrated with people on Facebook. He felt that they often lacked real depth in their posting. Instead of choosing to share something more meaningful, they would post about going for a "walk in the park." However, he struggled with the process of eliminating these types of connections, also known as "de-friending" someone. He believed this action, when seen by others, would be viewed as passive aggressive. From his experience using this site, severing the online Facebook connection caused the other person to respond negatively. Most frequently this manifested itself in an argument between those involved or comments being made by a third-party, such as a mutual friend. Rather than engage in this process, Parker found it more convenient to disengage.

As a result of his detachment from Facebook, Parker found and began using Twitter. He felt that Twitter's platform, which limits users to 140 characters, provided shorter, more meaningful interactions and insight into a user's "direct thoughts." On the site, he "followed" (i.e. was able to read and see their tweets) approximately 150 people's tweets and 130 people were "following" his tweets (i.e. others reading messages he tweeted). Given the limited space, Parker felt he could be more open about his thoughts and less worried about managing his privacy settings. From his reflections, Parker also viewed Facebook and Twitter as having distinct purposes and the need for such significant differences in the numbers of connections.



With Facebook, you basically friend everyone you've ever met. So I have friends from both high schools. I have family that have friend requested me. I did a lot of traveling last summer and I have a lot of people I met while traveling. That's just a way to stay in touch with people. Twitter is more like daily use. So if you're interested on what I'm doing on a day-to-day basis, that's when you follow me on Twitter.

Parker's use highlights how he compartmentalized his use of social networking sites.

They also seemed to be an especially important tool for him to stay in touch with his multitude of connections.

Although Parker saw the sites as a way to express his identity and personality, he recognized that there were disadvantages and limitations. Specifically, managing all of the connections on these sites was a time intensive process, which required significant immersion and effort on his part. The time spent on these sites was often diverted from other important tasks such as academic coursework and spending in-person time with friends. Additionally, Parker spoke about sometimes feeling "insecure" as it seems like people are constantly posting positive and exciting moments in their lives. The result was that he felt the need to keep up which was difficult to achieve. As a result, Parker sought out different ways to handle these challenges. In particular, Parker was challenged by how ingrained Facebook had become in his life.

If someone is having an event, I understand you can't text everyone because that would be too much. But I want to give up Facebook up all together but I realize that while I'm still in college that's not a possibility because so much happens on Facebook that I need to be aware of.

As a way to manage this strained connection to Facebook, Parker "gave it up for Lent." The result was that he found it helped refocus his attention and allowed him to disconnect from the social networking sites. After Lent was over, Parker allowed himself to revisit Facebook every Sunday. This allowed him to remain "updated on what people

are doing and with events I know what's going on." However, it seemed to serve as a helpful strategy to manage his connections and use of the site.

### **Profile of an Evolving User**

Although Parker had used social networking sites extensively in high school, his first exposure to gay-oriented social networking sites came during his first-year of college. He learned of Grindr in his first semester but did not have a smartphone and felt that it was too intimate as it showed how close in proximity other users were to him. However, Parker found that many of the gay men he interacted with were using Grindr.

But all the gay men that I knew had Grindr. So I just kind of assumed that I would eventually, if I had a smartphone, have Grindr. I'm a gay man, why wouldn't I have Grindr?

Parker's hesitations towards using the site seemed to subside as he recognized that the use of Grindr was an integral part of being gay. Once he downloaded the application for the smartphone, he found the user interface to be intuitive to set up a profile. Parker shared that he posts very little information about himself and avoided providing a picture of himself for his account. Although Parker seemed to have managed his uncertainty towards Grindr, he brought up how he still feels "sketchy" about using it several times during the interview.

It seemed like the idea of using Grindr to meet people seemed really sketchy, in the sense that I don't want people to know how close I am. Even now, it makes me feel kind of uncomfortable. If someone doesn't have a picture but they can see me on Grindr but I can't see them. And that made me uncomfortable.

Parker also identified that he did not want people on Grindr to view him as being "really desperate" by posting too much information or having to use a social networking site to find dates. He seemed to struggle with how others saw and perceived him online. He shared that many times he saw profiles that were very revealing.

People will put their sexual positions and what they are interested in. It's stuff you wouldn't disclose to someone until you have a really personal relationship with. People will feel free to just put that on their Grindr profile.

Similarly to many of the other men in the study, Parker noted that there seemed to be two primary reasons why people used Grindr which included: (1) engaging in casual sexual intercourse or a "hook up" and (2) making connections for dating and friendships. As this appears to be themes consistently identified by participants, I will more fully explore these uses in Chapter 5. While Parker primarily used Grindr for making connections, he acknowledged that he judged people for how and why they use the site. Specifically, he found that after using Grindr for some time that he could quickly sort through the list of user profiles and identify which men he would be interested in talking to. After using Grindr for some time, Parker realized that he became familiar and knew many of the men on the site. For those he did not know, Parker recognized that he could tell a lot from a person's profile.

You can usually tell based on their profile. People will put exclusively I'm looking to hook up. Or if they put their sexual position, that's not like 'hey, let's go get a cup of coffee.' That's more like 'hey come over and let's have sex.'

After narrowing down men that he was interested in talking with, Parker would reach out to those men by sending a message within Grindr. He shared that the message feature works similarly to text messaging on a cell phone or smartphone and allows for pictures and text to be shared between two individuals. While Parker was intentional to who he reached out to on Grindr, he identified that many of these conversations with men felt "superficial" and "shallow." The men often asked questions such as "What's up?", "Where do you go to school?", and "What do you like to do?" As Parker's primary use of Grindr was to develop connections and friendships, he struggled with this lack of

substance and finding people of interest on Grindr. However, Parker experienced some successes as he connected with several men on the site and developed some meaningful connections. He spoke of building relationships with a few men at other local colleges that have become lasting friendships.

While the majority of Parker's conversations with men began innocently enough there were occasions when he was immediately asked about his sexual preferences (e.g. "What are you into?") or if he would share photographs of himself (e.g. "Any pictures? Naked pictures?"). In response, he would often ignore these men. If the contact continued, Parker would use a feature in Grindr that allowed a user to "block" someone from seeing his profile. He seemed to treat this as more of a nuisance than a significant problem.

Parker's use of Grindr provided him with both opportunities to connect with other gay men and feelings of frustration that many on the site seem to only be interested in casual sex. This has presented a clear tension for Parker, which has resulted in him needing to develop skills to effectively navigate his use of the site. Specifically, he learned that he needed to be clear about wanting only friendships when first talking with other men. When he becomes frustrated with seeing "the same people over and over again" on the site, he deletes the Grindr application from his smartphone for a period of time and then downloads it again several weeks later. While he understands that using Grindr is one of several tools he could use to meet and connect with other gay men on campus, he keeps going back "to see what's out there."

## **Mason**

Mason was a 21-year-old, junior who came to LGU to pursue a degree in Social and Behavioral Sciences and to compete in a varsity athletic program. Originally from California, he came to LGU as a way to explore his options and “to see all of the seasons.” He found his niche on campus and found several supportive networks of friends. After arriving on campus, Mason changed his major to . Additionally, Mason mentioned that he was hard of hearing, however, it did not appear to play a significant role in his experiences with gay-oriented social networking sites.

While Mason was connected to campus through his involvement in athletics, he seemed to be struggling with the semi-rural nature of the surrounding community. Specifically, he enjoyed spending time in larger metropolitan cities (e.g. Chicago, New York City, Miami) as it allowed him to connect with people he found more attractive. Mason’s interactions with people from campus and the area appeared to leave him feeling unfulfilled and wanting more.

### **Seeking His Family’s Acceptance**

Realizing that he was different, Mason began identifying as gay during the latter part of his junior year in high school. By the middle of his senior year most of his friends and family knew. Through this process of coming out as a gay man, Mason developed a strong network of supportive friends and teammates. Although Mason did not share many details about what he experienced in telling others, he found that his friends were largely encouraging and happy for him. He recognized that the support that he received from his peer group was extremely important to him.

While he had generally positive experiences in disclosing to friends and family, Mason's relationship with his mother and brother suffered. The reactions from his mother and brother seemed to have a significant impact on Mason. Specifically, his tone and demeanor changed from very direct and open to being much more soft-spoken and guarded. Although he clearly felt the strain that this put on his mother, Mason tried to take it in stride. "I mean I'm sure for all mothers if they have a child that comes out, it's going to be hard at first." However, Mason saw the relationship evolve over time with the mother taking an interest in "meeting all of my gay friends and going to gay bars with me."

Unlike with his mother, Mason had not experienced a similar shift in the relationship with his brother after coming out. While he feels like his brother is tolerant, Mason has not been able to be as open as he would prefer with his brother. "I don't talk to him about my gay friends, the gay part of my life." Mason seems to have accepted and compartmentalized that being gay will not be something he is able to share with his brother. While this clearly bothered Mason, he recognized that it was an important and valuable relationship worth having in his life.

### **Remembering What His Family Taught Him**

Mason's earliest experiences with social networking sites can be traced back to eighth grade when friends began discussing MySpace. They encouraged him to join the site by sharing features (e.g. picture sharing and meeting new people) that they thought he might like. He explained that he was not someone who "had to have that hot new thing" and that he preferred to be outside and be active. Although Mason did not initially join the site like his friends had, he thought it was an interesting way to connect with

friends and meet new people. His resistance to signing up for MySpace continued for the next several months. However, he eventually joined the site after continued encouragement from his peers. Like many of the social networking sites he has joined, Mason learned to use MySpace by logging on and experimenting with different features and options.

Almost immediately after joining the site, he found that the site caused a significant amount of tension between him and his younger cousins and older family members. The older family members had heard “horror stories” in the news media about children being abducted, taken advantage of sexually, and physically assaulted. These news stories caused his family to be overly protective. In response, Mason’s mother placed significant restrictions on the frequency and duration of his use of sites such as MySpace and later on Facebook. While his family continues to be skeptical of the safety of online social networking sites, they taught him to be conscientious and thoughtful with the types of information and photographs he posts online. Mason reflected that this advice remained in the forefront of his thinking and continues to impact how he uses these sites.

Currently, Mason uses Facebook as his primary social networking site to keep in touch with over 1,500 friends from around the country and to post pictures and photographs of his travels. He spends approximately an hour and a half each day on the site, which he accesses from both his computer and smartphone. Mason’s time on the site is spent reading and commenting on other users’ posts, communicating via the built-in messenger feature, and looking at pictures. Although this amount of time might seem extensive to some, Mason sees it as important to keeping him connected to his friends.

He has found that by using Facebook and other social networking sites (e.g. Twitter, Instagram) that he is able to take advantage of his connections, learn about upcoming events and parties, and build networks.

Although he uses these sites extensively, Mason continued to share that he is intentional about the types of information that he shares and who he is friends with. Specifically, he assesses each friend request to determine how well and in what capacities he knows the person. If he knows the person or that person is connected to another friend, he is likely to accept the request to be Facebook friends. If he does not know this person, he might ask the person questions such as “How do I know you?” or he might not respond. It became clear that the lessons about being safe that Mason’s family taught him continue to have an impact on how he uses these sites.

### **Managing Memberships at Multiple Sites**

Mason’s initial exposure to gay-oriented social networking sites happened shortly after he signed up for a MySpace account. At the time, he was entering the ninth grade and found the site, Adam4Adam, while searching the Internet for gay teen chat rooms. He was looking to talk to others who were having the same feelings about being gay as he was having. However, given the impact that his family had on his use of general social networking sites, Mason was cautious about joining.

At first I was a little skeptical of it because of the pictures. It’s like most of the pictures, the public pictures; they wouldn’t necessarily include the person’s face. And so, I was like ‘who am I talking to? What do they look like?’ And most of the pictures were just like shirtless pics or nude pics.

Although he found the experience overwhelming at first, he quickly learned how to effectively navigate the site and create a profile. He abandoned Adam4Adam several



years ago in favor of other sites that better met his interests and reached more people (e.g. Manhunt, Grindr).

Unlike many of the other participants in this study, Mason was a member of several gay-oriented social networking sites. Specifically, he had accounts on Realjock, Manhunt, and Grindr. Mason found that each site allowed him to meet men that shared his interests (e.g. fitness, sexual relationships, friendships).

It's just like I like meeting new people. I like making new friends. I like to explore. It would be fun to make friends with someone. Let's say in Chicago that I met somewhere before that if I ever went to Chicago I can meet up with them. They can show me around. I can meet their friends.

By utilizing various sites, Mason was able to develop multiple networks of support and connections that he could access in the future.

The primary gay-oriented social networking site that Mason used was Realjock. At its core, Realjock connects gay men, who share common interests in healthy living and promoting wellness.

Realjock is, it's pretty much Facebook with a little bit of articles on there as well. Plus it's more like a social network for gays to share their workout plans, their meal plans. It's like a fitness social networking site for gay people.

Similar to other social networking sites, Realjock allows users to create a profile where they can share information about themselves. The site also allows users the ability to upload multiple photographs (both non-nude and nude) for others to see. Photographs can be tagged as either "public," meaning all members of Realjock can view them, or "locked," which allows the user to share them with individuals they approve. The ability to control who sees each picture provides greater control for the user over their information. Mason took advantage of Realjock's features and created a limited profile for all to view, while reserving private pictures for those whom with he established a

stronger connection. In reflecting on the content of his profile, Mason noted that it provided other men an introduction to who he was and what his interests were.

So it's got pictures of me, where I'm located, my age, my stats and information. Like how tall I am, my weight, sports I like, my weight training, cardio training that I do. Just a quick about me section. And a section that's called guys I'm looking to meet.

After developing his profile, Mason used the search and tracking features in Realjock to find other men who shared his similar interests (e.g. fitness related goals, sports).

Additionally, unlike Grindr and some other social networking sites, Realjock notifies users when other men have selected and read their profile. The ability to track these users allowed Mason to see who was viewing his profile and if there were any mutual interests.

Once he identified men he found interesting, Mason began communicating with others by using the site's built-in messaging feature. This tool allowed users to send messages and pictures to one another. Most often these conversations focused on areas of mutual interest, however, some men often shared ("unlocked") nude photographs of themselves or talked about wanting to have casual sex ("hooking up") with him.

Although he spoke rather nonchalantly about these types of conversations, he shared that at first this process was overwhelming. However, after using the site regularly, Mason came to recognize and learn that there were some unwritten expectations and norms about how people interact and share pictures on Realjock and other sites.

Realjock shows you guys that checked out your profile and sometimes they'll unlock their pictures for you. If they do, the courteous thing is to unlock your pictures for them as well. Because there are some guys on here where their public pictures don't really include face pics, and if they unlock their pictures it will be face pictures and normal pictures. So you unlock yours for them as well. Or say if I find someone attractive that has all their pictures public and no unlocked ones, I'd show them my unlock photos. When you read some of the profiles, some of them will say 'Don't expect me to unlock for you if you're expecting nudes. I don't have any nudes on here.' I mean my profile's like that too as well.

In addition to his use of Realjocks, Mason was also a member of Manhunt and Grindr. He joined these sites after hearing about them from peers and reading about them online. Mason believed that they provided him with positive opportunities to connect with men who were more interested in dating or having casual sex.

So I use it to meet people, to hang out and then kind of see where it goes. If they're an attractive person, I'd be down for a hook-up. I mostly use it, like I go on it more frequently when I travel to know what the gays are like and wherever I am.

He also found that he needed to craft his profile on these sites to share more about his sexual interests and upload pictures that people would find attractive. The information that he posted on Realjocks did not necessarily appeal to the larger gay male audience on these other sites. This shift in approach was important to keep others interested and engaged by his profile.

He also learned that the design of some of these sites limited the types of information he could or wanted to share. On Manhunt, he found that he was able to share more information about what he was looking for and the types of men he found attractive. He felt that the site provided users with the ability to express themselves more fully. Additionally, Manhunt allows users to leave some photographs open while locking others from the general public. Mason shared that although he had uploaded naked pictures of himself to this site, he ensured that these were locked. He would only share these photographs with the men he felt there was genuine mutual interest. The sharing of nude photographs happened only after multiple conversations with another man. He did not share nude pictures of himself without developing a sense of trust and security with someone. In contrast, the design of Grindr limited Mason to one picture that could not be

graphic or include genitals. The site also lacked the features to provide greater detail or depth about his interests. Although he would not post naked pictures on Grindr, he could share these in the messaging feature after establishing a strong connection with someone.

Mason recognized that having profiles on three sites could, at times be inconvenient, as it required him to spend additional time online. There was similar content on all three sites, such as physical characteristics (e.g. weight, height, age), sexual and personal interests, and photographs. However, his use of Realjock provided additional space for information about current fitness and meal plans, workout techniques, and his interests in sports. The three profiles to manage along with responding regularly to messages from multiple sites kept him busy. He saw this as necessary if he was to continue to develop and maintain his connections to the gay community. Additionally, all of these sites engaged different subpopulations of gay men. Specifically, people in larger, more urban areas used Manhunt and Realjock whereas Grindr was more widely used by gay men on the LGU campus.

Everyone else that we knew that was gay on campus had Grindr as well. And when we hang out with those other gays, they still have it. All right, so like everyone that's gay on campus must have a Grindr. That seems to be the number one app that everyone's using.

While Mason generally spoke positively about using gay-oriented social networking sites, he shared some experiences that were similar to other participants in this study. In particular, Mason learned firsthand about the importance of safety and protecting his identity while on these sites. Specifically, people, also known as “picture trolls,” will develop fake profiles that appear to be that of a real user. The falsified profile will often include information such as height, weight, interests, and pictures. A “picture troll” seeks to pose as someone else and engage other users in conversations. The

ultimate goal is for the troll to obtain the trust of the unsuspecting person so that they unlock or share their personal photos. These photos are then either kept or used to perpetuate future scams.

I've also learned to be careful with who I exchange my pictures with. I will say that I have seen my pictures being used elsewhere online as well. They've like created a profile. And used my pictures that I know are mine. In a way, I'm just like – why the hell would they do that? You know, like 'Why my pictures?'

Although he was clearly disturbed and frustrated with this invasion of privacy, Mason seemed to appreciate the interest that others had taken in him.

But at the same time I'm like, 'At least my pictures look good you know.' Who knows when other people are talking to me, that looks good then I'm happy with that.

Mason's use of gay-oriented social networking sites reflected a challenging navigation of his values and beliefs that sometimes appeared to be at odds with each other. During the interviews, he revisited his family's value for being respectful, responsible, and limiting with what is shared online. However, he also recognized that being gay in today's culture required him to take risks by disclosing private information (e.g. sexual desires, nude photographs) about himself to others. Mason seemed to be developing his own set of beliefs that blended both family influences and his lived experiences with these sites. For him, the use of Grindr has become a critical and integrated part of what it means to be a gay man.

### **Cole**

Cole was a 22-year-old senior who was preparing to graduate from LGU with a degree in Management. He was originally from a rural town in the Northeast and chose LGU for the caliber of the academic program and to be exposed to different types of people. He was a quiet and relaxed individual who was focused on his academic

coursework. Through his involvement in clubs, organizations, and various internships, he had been accepted to a prestigious graduate school in the Midwest. He was excited to finish his final year at LGU while looking ahead to his future.

### **Becoming Comfortable with What He Knew All Along**

Unlike the other men in this study, Cole had recently started identifying openly as a gay man. Over the past year, he had become more comfortable with people knowing. Prior to this, he knew that he was interested in men, but he never felt comfortable expressing it openly.

I just started coming out like at the beginning of this year actually. So I dated women all throughout the time. I kind of didn't want to believe it for a while. Now I've kind of become more familiar with it.

Though he was involved in sports in high school, he viewed himself as a very different person. Cole recognized that at the time he used to obsess over pictures of himself on Facebook to see if he “looked gay.” Specifically, he checked the photographs to see if others would view his “body language or clothes” as being gay. His perceptions and stereotypes of the gay community led him to consider if the clothes he was wearing were too tight or if he had made a gesture that could be misconstrued. He admitted that he did not want to initially be viewed as being gay because he was unsure of how friends and family would react. He also recognized that his hometown was extremely small, conservative, and unwelcoming to differences.

Cole continued to deny that he might be gay until he came to LGU. Soon after coming to campus, he was dating a woman but began to regularly visit gay-oriented websites. He saw these sites as a way to safely learn about himself. He found that he could stop visiting them if he felt uneasy. Once he ended the relationship with this

woman he found that he was able to explore further and become comfortable identifying as a gay man. In addition to visiting those websites, he also began using gay-oriented social networking sites to help develop his connections with the gay community.

And even though I haven't met a lot of friends, who I consider like good friends of mine or actually pulled people into my network of friends, I'd say that even just talking to random people here and there has been really helpful in order to like accepting myself and kinda being more accepted into the gay community, I guess.

Although he is still working on understanding what it means to be gay, he has become more comfortable with pictures he posted and what others think of him.

But now I'm like kind of more embracing it but like, lets say I do like look gay or whatever. I'll post it and I won't put a funny line on it or anything like that. But I'll like it or something or anything along those lines.

He has told several of his close friends that he is gay but has not yet disclosed to his parents. Cole hoped to tell them soon as he felt it was an important part of his life that they should know about.

### **Using Facebook and Twitter for Validation and Understanding**

Cole's initial experiences with social networking sites came from using Facebook when he was a sophomore in high school. Prior to this, he was not very interested in using computers to access the Internet and felt that it was a "waste of time." Additionally, he was involved with sports teams and high-speed Internet was not available in his hometown. In lieu of Facebook, Cole would often use Instant Messenger (IM) to augment his time online. He found that it met his needs and allowed him to communicate with his peers without having to have a fast and reliable Internet connection.

However, after pressure from his friends to become a member of Facebook, Cole signed up for an account. He continued to be resistant to it, as he did not understand why

people would want to spend their time in this way. He recognized that having to use dial up to connect to the Internet was an inconvenience. Cole also felt that if he needed to communicate with someone he would call or talk to him in person. As he prepared to leave for college, he began to see how Facebook could help him remain connected and share photographs with friends from high school.

I guess its like another thing where you like learn about people that you wouldn't really know about before. Nowadays, especially when you graduate high school, you're not going to be hanging out with a lot of people anymore. It's just mainly when you go home for breaks but this – it kind of gives you the opportunity to still keep in touch with somebody without actually talking to them. But your still learning about what their doing.

He also found that using Facebook provided him important insights about others' attitudes towards social issues, such as gay marriage. In particular, he found that many of his Facebook friends changed their pictures to reflect the red equality sign when the United States Supreme Court was hearing oral arguments against the Defense of Marriage Act in March 2013.

And everybody kind of changed their picture to some sort of equal signs. I use that quite a bit to see like who was supporting it and who was against it. And I thought that was a very interesting aspect of. I spent a lot more time on Facebook when that was what was going on. Just to see of my friends and kind of give me gauge of back home who was in support and who wasn't. I learned that there was a lot more support than I actually thought there was. Which actually gave me a lot better feeling of like how I was and how like it would be completely fine to be coming out at home.

Cole was visibly happy as he got excited talking about the number of people on his Facebook page that had changed their profile picture. He seemed to feel validated by this external expression of support.

In addition to his use of Facebook, Cole had recently received an iPad as a Christmas gift. Though he did not have a smartphone, he found that the tablet allowed



him to remain even more connected. He also began exploring and using Twitter to further extend his networking opportunities. Cole shared that he was learning to navigate the site and finding that it offered him additional understanding and insights about the gay community.

I've actually thought about using it a little bit more as a gay tool. I'm following more like you know, gay – like trying to branch out more into the gay community with Twitter. Because that's something I really won't do in Facebook.

However, Cole did not yet feel comfortable sharing his identity that widely. He had seen other younger men from his high school that were openly gay on Facebook. He seemed conflicted in that he wanted to disclose this information but could not bring himself to do it. As he thought about the future, he hoped that in the “next year or two” that he would feel ready to post this information.

### **Finding Comfort in Using Gay-Oriented Sites**

Cole began exploring gay-oriented social networking sites at the beginning of his sophomore year at LGU. He came across the site, adam4adam, while using Facebook and reading blogs “to get a sense of the gay world out there.” Prior to finding this site, he realized that he had “no idea that stuff like that existed before.” He found himself captivated by what it had to offer and quickly signed up for an account.

The first few times that Cole used these sites he recalled being overwhelmed at how direct and forward the men were. He noticed that they often had explicit or nude photographs of themselves and many of them were looking to engage in casual sex. Cole quickly learned that his profile was the entry point into the site and served as a reflection of himself. He posted information about himself (e.g. weight, height, interests) but did not share a photograph. As he still focused on being comfortable identifying as gay, he

did not want people to know who he was. Not sharing a picture allowed him to remain somewhat anonymous to those on the site. He felt that if he developed a strong connection with someone then he could share a photograph of himself.

After creating his profile, his initial use of the site focused more on meeting other gay men as he previously had limited contact with them.

I never really had any friends of mine who were gay, and so I didn't really have anyone I could relate to, I guess, with my sexual orientation. So that is what mainly brought me to that is to try to talk to people, even just finding a mentor type person even just to talk to about stuff and just help me through it I guess.

However, he found this to be a challenging task as many of the men were interested in "hooking up" and not necessarily on talking about their experiences. He did eventually find men who were more interested in having a conversation than casual sex. As Cole began to develop connections with these men, the topic shifted to meeting in person. He was nervous about meeting others from the site as he worried about what his roommates or other people would think if he saw him out with someone from the site.

But at that point, I would never have met anybody who I would like introduce to my friends from that. Absolutely not. Because it would have been a completely foreign concept to have met somebody online. And then you have to obviously think of the questions like "How did you guys met?" or "How do you know each other?"

Cole was intentional in identifying what locations he would meet men if they decided to "hang out" in person. He wanted to be certain that it would not be a place that his friends frequented. This was most often the other person's place or a lesser known bar or restaurant in the area. He found that these spaces allowed him to feel comfortable and safe while also allowing him to meet other men.

Cole continued to use adam4adam during his sophomore and junior year at LGU. He had become more comfortable using the site and developed a number of strong

friendships. These people varied from those who were openly identifying as gay to those who were struggling with their sexual orientation. Cole found that this site filled an important need to connect and meet men that other sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, could not. Additionally, he used these sites to engage in casual sex with other men.

As he began his senior year at LGU, Cole began hearing more about Grindr, as a popular gay-oriented social networking site. However, he was unable to access the site because it only worked as an application on either a smartphone or tablet. It was not until after Christmas 2012, when he received an iPad, was he able to begin using Grindr. Once he was able to create an account, he found that it quickly replaced adam4adam and became the primary site he accessed.

Similar to the experience that other participants in this study described, Cole shifted to using this site because of how easy it was to navigate and minimal information was needed for a profile. He also found that the profile was simpler to write having had previous experiences with other sites. It consisted of his height, weight, and what he was interested in (e.g. friends, hooking up, long-term relationship). Unlike adam4adam, Cole shared his picture, which included his head and shoulders. He felt comfortable identifying more openly as a gay man but still placed restrictions on who could see his profile.

I'm not really concerned with who knows anymore. I did see one person in my major whom I'm actually fairly familiar with. I know him because I have classes with them that I did block. I was oh if they see me then they will definitely know. And I think in the beginning I wasn't quite ready for everybody to know.

However, Cole struggled with having restricted this person and thought he might “unblock” them in the future. This seemed to be a significant moment for him as he took an extended pause.

After creating his profile, Cole found that his primary purpose for using the site continued to be meeting new men, making friends, and occasionally for hooking up. He shared that he spent an average of 30 minutes a day using the built-in messaging feature and looking at others' profiles. The frequency with which he accessed the site each day varied from just a few times to more than 10 times depending on the types of conversations he was having. When other men attempted to message him, he shared that he evaluates each point of contact before deciding to respond.

If I see somebody and they are not that attractive, I usually won't respond. Or if they have a very weird About Me Section or stuff like that, I usually won't respond then too. And then for me to initiate it again it has to be if you're attractive, I'll send out a message.

Again, he found that many of the users, similar to adam4adam, were more interested in meeting to have casual sex. Cole seemed to have adjusted his expectations and viewed this was an important part of using the site.

While he focused the majority of his time on the site to developing a "network of other gay men," he was not averse to having casual sex. He found that there was a progression with which hooking up happened. First, there would be some general conversation topics, such as 'What's up?' and 'What are you interested in?' From there, if there continued to be mutual interest, there would be an exchange of pictures within the application.

We'll be talking a little bit I always ask at some point "Alright, you got any pics or pictures or whatnot?" And a lot of times they will send either a face shot or what most of the time they will send more than a face shot, a body shot or whatever.

However, when it came to sharing nude pictures, Cole always asked the other person to go first. He felt that this provided him an "out" if the person did not want to share.

Additionally, he never shared a picture of his entire body (i.e. face, chest, genitals) as he

learned that it “can get saved and whatnot.” He was weary of someone using this type of picture for creating another profile or that it could be shared with others. Though he did not experience this issue firsthand, he spoke with other men who did and they cautioned him against it. If both men continued to be interested after sharing pictures the conversation would progress. Finally, one would invite the other over to his apartment for casual sex. The process often happened over a few days, most frequently during the weekends where there was greater chance for availability and roommates to be away.

As Cole continued to use Grindr, he found that some men would overstep what he found to be comfortable and take extraordinary measures to get to know him. In particular, he had one encounter where he was talking with someone on the site for a few days and had exchanged names. This person then sought him out on Facebook, friend-ed him and attempted to “friend request” one of Cole’s straight male friends.

So I hit him up, “Why are you friends with my best friend.” He was like “Oh, I’m sorry, like a friend of mine thought he was cute and like friend-ed him on my phone and liked one of his pictures.” So I freaked out and I’m like “What are you doing?” So I learned my lesson real quick, that you, I’m just keeping them separate and I’m not even going to be worrying about that type of stress.

Cole was extremely frustrated by this behavior, as he felt disrespected by this person. Consequently, he treated his connections on Grindr and his Facebook friends as separate groups of people. Similar to the experiences of Leo, Mason, and Parker, Cole felt more comfortable having distinct boundaries between the sites.

Cole’s use of these sites not only helped him connect with men in and around the LGU campus, but he began using them as he visited graduate schools. In particular, he used Grindr while doing a visit to the school he would be attending in Fall 2013.

When I went to visit a university for Graduate School and I actually used that a lot to talk to people. Wasn’t really looking so much for the hookup, I was just

looking to see what was the gay scene out there? I was talking to people about how they liked the school and asking about things to do. Ended up meeting up with one person to get drinks with them and stuff like that. So I used it, like it was great to actually get an insight to how, like the gay scene is out there.

He was able to apply what he learned from using Grindr and other sites to help with his transition to a new city and campus. This seemed to help him relax as he seemed excited and confident for this new chapter in his life.

Cole's use of sites such as Grindr and adam4adam helped him feel more comfortable identifying as a gay man. They provided him with a relatively safe online space where he could explore, as he felt comfortable. As he continued to use these he seemed to view them as a central part of his identity and what it means to be a part of the gay community. Reflecting on his upcoming transition to graduate school, Cole has already used and believed that he would continue to use Grindr to help him navigate a new environment and build new connections.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter Four presented nine profiles, which provided a synopsis of the participants' lived experiences. These profiles highlighted the experiences of gay men as they learned to use and navigate gay-oriented social networking sites. As noted previously, specific attention was directed towards the site, Grindr, as all participants of this study were actively using this site. While each man described their use and interactions on the site somewhat differently, common themes began to develop across the profiles. In Chapter Five, the findings will illustrate the significant and overarching themes that emerged from exploring how these participants used and were impacted by gay-oriented social networking sites.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The purposes of this exploratory study are: (a) to examine how White, gay, male college students utilize gay-oriented social networking sites and (b) understand what effect the use of these sites are having on the men. This chapter presents a detailed analysis of the nine participant profiles that were reviewed in the previous chapter. To guide the analysis, I return to this study's two central research questions:

1. How and to what extent do traditionally aged (18-24 years old), White, college men who identify as gay, utilize gay-oriented social networking sites?
2. What benefits and challenges do White, gay, male, college students experience because of their use of these sites?

Drawing from the extensive data that was generated by the nine participants, several significant themes emerged that illustrate how gay college men use and experience gay-oriented social networking sites. This chapter is organized around four themes, which include: (a) profile development, (b) making connections, (c) navigating sexual encounters, and (d) investment in the sites. Though briefly described below, I explore each of these in further detail in this chapter.

The first theme, *profile development*, describes how men crafted their online identity and what types of information they chose to disclose. By engaging in a process of impression management (boyd, 2007; Goffman, 1959), participants communicated to others who they were and learned how to make intentional decisions about what they shared. As the men became more comfortable using the features on the site and

identifying as gay, the content shared often evolved to include more personal information. Next, the theme of *making connections* highlights how the participants used gay-oriented social networking sites to interact with other men. This section will describe the criteria and process that the men used to decide who they would interact with and what they would communicate. From using these sites, men develop social capital (Bourdieu, 1985; Lin, 1999; 2001), which helps them feel a sense of connection to others.

Another important theme, *navigating sexual encounters* emerged and often appeared as the primary focus for men using gay-oriented social networking sites. This section will examine how participants navigated these sites to engage in casual sex, what they referred to as “hooking up” with other men. As a result, these men also discussed strategies they developed to minimize risk and negative consequences. The final theme highlights one of the principle findings of this study, the *significant investment* that men had made in these sites, particularly Grindr. As noted in Chapter Four, one of the unanticipated results was that every participant in the study used Grindr. Additionally, they viewed it as the most important gay-oriented social networking site on campus. This section explores how the use of this and other sites remains a central and critical component of what it means to be a gay college man today.

### **Profile Development**

A critical aspect of using social networking sites is the development and display of an online profile for others to view and engage with (boyd, 2008; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2007). Thus, one cannot begin to understand the experience of men using gay-oriented social networking without first examining how they develop their online profile. This digital representation of oneself plays a critical part in men’s understanding of



themselves and how others view them. In this section, I briefly review how men found gay-oriented social networking sites and review the key components of the online profile for these sites. Further, I explore how these men negotiated the act of impression management in constructing and updating their profiles.

### **Locating and Understanding Gay-Oriented Social Networking Sites**

The concept of creating a profile for a social networking site was not an unfamiliar one for all of the participants in this study. According to Isaiah, the use of social networking sites was something that he and his peers had “grown up with” as they progressed throughout middle and high school. Additionally, many of the men acknowledged that they viewed their profiles and the use of these sites as a core part of their lived experience. Over time they had become familiar with MySpace and later on avid users of Facebook and Twitter. These sites became an important tool for men to express themselves and connect with others. By the time the men arrived at Land Grant University, each had several years of experience in both developing a profile and navigating social networking sites.

At about the same time that the men in the study were using MySpace and Facebook to develop articulated networks of support (boyd & Ellison, 2007), each participant was exploring and understanding what it meant to be gay. For some, like Patrick and Robert, this was a process that happened early in high school, while others, like Cole and Leo, came out during their time at college. Regardless of when this happened, the men found that the use of the Internet began to play an important role in the development of their gay identity. Specifically, Mason and Robert found online gay chat rooms, Leo visited gay pornographic websites, and Cole and Noah read gay blogs.

As a result of visiting these sites and engaging with other gay people, the men learned about gay-oriented social networking sites. These sites quickly became “an important outlet to talk and connect to other men about being gay” (Robert).

These early experiences resulted in them finding sites, such as Grindr, adam4adam, and Manhunt. While the initial experience was often overwhelming as the men were coming to terms with their own sexual orientation, they found that these sites allowed them to connect in relatively safe ways with other men. Specifically, the social networking sites were online and could be accessed from a computer in the privacy of their bedroom or home. As a result, a man had complete control over his level of engagement with a particular site (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Stutzman, 2006). If he became uncomfortable, he only needed to exit the website or navigate to a different site. Additionally, these sites provided these men with the anonymity that they needed to feel safe.

### **Components of a Profile**

Similar to Facebook and Twitter, gay-oriented social networking sites require that users answer a series of questions about themselves. These prompts often include describing one’s physical characteristics (e.g. height, weight, age, body type, eye/hair color), sexual interests (e.g. kissing, casual sex, long-term relationship, friends only), and other biographical information (e.g. hobbies, career). Additionally, there is space to upload photographs. Collectively, these components represent the online profile and serve as a digital representation for not only the user but also others on the site.

Each site prompts men for similar information to create a profile. However, the space provided varies from a few details to extensive descriptions about a user’s interests,

passions, and future goals. For instance, Grindr allows a user to input minimal information about themselves. These fields include some characteristics about the user (e.g. age, weight, height, relationship status), a “Looking for” section (i.e. the types of men or relationships they are interested in), and a text box limited to approximately 150 characters to further describe themselves. Users of Grindr are also limited to one non-nude photograph, which serves as a backdrop for the profile. In contrast, Manhunt and adam4adam allow a user additional space to communicate more detailed information about himself. Specifically, the sites provide users with unlimited characters to describe their specific interests and sexual preferences. Additionally, they allow a user to upload between five and ten photographs with minimal restrictions on their content.

### **Crafting an Online Identity: The Art of “Writing Identity into Being”**

After finding and becoming familiar with gay-oriented social networking sites men were faced with the task of creating a user profile. This experience required that users engage in self-reflection where they consider how they want to represent themselves (Brake, 2008; Reed, 2005). For the men in this study, the act of successfully portraying oneself on sites such as Grindr or Manhunt proved to be a complex process of both knowing and articulating their identity and interests. This experience required that the user make many important decisions about the information they shared and the ways in which they wanted to be received.

Drawing from boyd’s (2008) work, crafting a profile can be thought of as a way of men “writing their identity into being” (p. 126). In physical environments, people’s identities, such as age, gender, or race, and their verbal and non-verbal cues are often recognized and understood. However, in online social networking sites, these identities

and cues are more easily hidden. The disclosure of characteristics on these sites requires the user to type them into existence. Additionally, D'Augelli's (1994a; 1994b) lifespan models of gay identity development posit that an individual engages in a process of developing a personal and social gay identity. For participants, the process of writing their identity into being also serves as a way to articulate and develop a gay identity.

On gay-oriented social networking sites, participants engaged in the process of constructing a profile using two forms of media: text and photographs. First, the men typed their responses to prompts on the site that they wanted to answer (e.g. What is your height/weight? What do you like to do for fun?). A user also had the option to skip any question that made them uncomfortable (e.g. What are you looking for sexually? What is your preferred sexual position?). These responses served as the text for their profile (i.e. what others would be able to read) and the explicit representation of their identity in the online environment. Some of the profiles developed by men included additional details about themselves and their interests. For example, Brandon's profile described him, as "I'm nineteen. It has my height, weight, and says I'm white. And it says I'm single and then in the info section it says I go to LGU and some other things I like." However, other users such as Cole and Patrick preferred to provide only basic information about themselves, such as their age and location.

The second critical element in the development of a profile was the uploading of photographs. Similar to the prompts men completed in creating their profiles, users chose which, if any, pictures they would share on the site. Although the profile did not require one, the use of pictures provided the men with a visual representation of their physical identity. The picture was an important communication tool that allowed the user to

describe himself in greater detail and with better precision than words or space would often allow. Additionally, the photograph served in the absence of a physical body that would typically be present in face-to-face interactions. For men, such as Brandon, Leo, Mason, Isaiah, Robert, and Cole, they uploaded and shared pictures of their faces, bodies, or interests and hobbies. In contrast, the others in this study preferred, for a variety of reasons, not to post pictures of themselves online.

Additionally, for those users that were members of more than one gay-oriented social networking site, the “art of writing identity into being” needed to happen multiple times. For men, such as Brandon, Robert, Mason, and Patrick, the process of managing multiple profiles required them to think about the content on each one. However, most often they would use much of the same content from one profile to another (e.g. same username, physical characteristics, interests). There were few exceptions to this, which were more a result of particular sites features and the population it targeted rather than a conscious personal choice. For example, Mason joined Realjock because it catered to those gay and bisexual men interested in physical fitness. The site allowed him to share information about his workouts and meal plans that other sites (e.g. Manhunt, Grindr) did not. In contrast, Patrick joined Recon because the site was designed for men who had specific fetishes such as bondage, leather, piercings, and other types of kink behavior. Sites such as Grindr did not appropriately allow him to share his fetishes or offer contact with men who had similar interests. In the next section, I examine further the ways in which participants negotiated and made decisions about the content of their profiles.

## **Managing How Others See You**

Creating a profile is a delicate balance that requires the users to not only display their identity but also engage in learning about, analyzing and adapting to the norms of a particular site in order to represent to others their best possible selves. These acts, what Goffman (1959) referred to as “impression management”, significantly influenced how participants developed their profiles on gay-oriented social networking sites. For the men in the study, the skill of not only communicating one’s identity but also managing how others viewed and perceived them was a process that occurred from prolonged engagement with the sites. Regardless of the participant’s comfort with their sexual orientation, each person wanted to ensure that they were representing themselves in the best possible way. The men’s desire to portray themselves in positive ways represented their attempts at impression management (boyd, 2007; Goffman). As a result of this learning, participants recognized that their profiles had shifted considerably from how they had initially been crafted to what they currently communicated.

### **“Learning as You Go”: Developing a Profile Without Context**

Each participant had extensive experience in developing a profile and using general social networking sites. However, designing a profile and navigating a gay-oriented site was new and unfamiliar territory for the men. This sense of uneasiness was attributable to multiple factors such as a lack of understanding what purposes the sites provided (e.g. building connections, casual sex), being unsure of how to create a profile that best reflected their identity and interests, and being unaware of how to influence other users to view them in positive ways. Additionally, for many of the men, the use of these sites came at a time when they were still negotiating and learning to accept what it

means to be a gay man. These factors, what I refer to as context, played a critical and, at times limiting, role in the understanding and experience of men using gay-oriented social networking sites.

Similar to their early experiences using MySpace and Facebook, participants sought to develop a greater understanding of the context of these sites with minimal guidance, direction, and support. They frequently articulated that using these sites was an experiential approach of “learning as you go along and use it” (Patrick). The result was that the men in this study were learning to construct their profiles at the same time that they were developing this broader context. This presented challenges for which they developed strategies and mechanisms to cope.

One strategy that several participants employed involved completing only those elements that the site required to create a profile. For most sites, this involved a username and basic demographic information (e.g. age, gender). This allowed the users to have full access to the site without having to spend time responding to prompts. For Parker, whose initial impressions of Grindr was “sketchy,” this approach required minimal commitment but still allowed him to use and become more comfortable with them.

Other men, such as Cole, Leo, and Brandon, also used a similar strategy as Parker by limiting what information they disclosed in their profile. For Leo, the site provided a relatively safe and important outlet for him to engage sexually with other men.

The primary purpose for me was just to find people to hook up with because I was a closeted curious guy. And this was sort of safe in the sense that it was discreet. So, I think that’s what really drew me into it.

In response, these men took additional care as they were also exploring and articulating a gay identity. They wanted to maintain a level of privacy and were concerned that if the

profile was personalized too much that other people would be able to identify whom the user was. This created a significant amount of stress on the men that led them to be even more conscientious about which men they were contacting. From their use of these sites, they learned that those who did not have a picture and shared only minimal information in their profile were often those who were “experimenting or closeted” (Brandon). After understanding this important context, Cole shared that he would talk to these men as they were often “in the same place as me” and had “as much to lose as me if others found out.” For these participants, the process of developing a profile not only helped them connect with others on the site but also served as an important tool for understanding their own identity.

Another strategy involved participants visiting other users’ profiles after they crafted their own. The purpose of this behavior was to see firsthand how other users were crafting their identities in ways that others found appealing. From examining others’ profiles, participants would then revisit their own user profile to make modifications. Sometimes this involved sharing more information with fellow users. For example, Isaiah found that when he first began using Grindr that many of the men were using the site to engage in casual sex. These men would post detailed information about themselves including their physical traits and interests. As he was looking to engage in similar behavior, he also shared a similar level of detail.

I put everything up what I was looking for, that I was single, height, weight, and allowed my location to be seen. I put my first name up and then a little about me. I would change like lyrics just because I didn’t know what would be fitting for a gay social app. My picture was always of me and sometimes it was like me and a group of people.



He also felt that if he shared everything about himself that other users would find him to be open and thus more personable. The result for Isaiah was that he had more men contact him who shared his interests.

Yet others in this study, such as Noah, employed a different approach when using the site. Specifically, he was looking to develop a large network of friends and was less focused on having sexual intercourse. From his experience looking at profiles, Noah found that the men that seemed the most interesting were those who shared few details about themselves. They seemed to be alluring and thus he was interested in getting to know them. As such, he used his profile to portray himself as “mysterious and exciting” with the hope that others would take notice. He left out details, such as his username and descriptions about his interests, and only posted a picture and his “stats” (e.g. weight, height, age). Though he was expecting to be contacted by men who were interested in developing a friendship, he found men whose primary interest was in casual sex messaged him most frequently. Noah quickly learned that this was not the way that he wanted to be perceived. Thus, he modified his profile to communicate that he was not interested in “hook ups.” He found that by sharing more about his personal interests and stating that he was “looking for friends,” men whose interests matched his own contacted him more frequently.

### **Developing Context from Prolonged Exposure: The Iterative Nature of Profiles**

While the men employed a variety of different strategies to craft the initial profile, their understanding and use of it evolved over time. Seven of the nine men in this study had been using gay-oriented social networking sites for more than a year while only two having had been on the sites for approximately six to eight months. Further, all of the

participants identified that they often logged onto the site multiple times over the course of each day. This extended engagement with the site allowed the participants to gain critical context about the role that the profile played and how they could construct one that appropriately represented themselves and engaged others.

For these participants, this was an iterative process that allowed them to use the knowledge they gained from interactions on the site to continuously manage the content of their profile. Often these interactions came in the forms of engaging with other users, reading profiles, and reflecting on their own experiences with the site. As a result of this engagement, all of the men described two similar learning moments that emerged for them as they continued to use their profiles on these sites. These included (a) understanding the purposes of the sites in order to effectively communicate their interests and (b) developing ways to effectively engage in acts of impression management while maintaining one's online identity.

First, each of the men articulated in their interviews that they learned there were two primary purposes for using sites, such as Grindr, adam4adam, and Manhunt. They categorized these as either dating/casual sex or developing friendships. Isaiah perfectly captured these two purposes.

It's like I see it now. There's like the two sides. There's like the friends. The people who are just looking for friends. And then there's like the highly sexualized part. The people who are just like using it for sex.

Some men learned and experienced that the sites could help them develop friendships with new people. Patrick shared that from his experience he had people reach out to him who were "just looking for friends" while using Grindr and Recon. He also found that it allowed him "to keep in touch" with friends he had made previously. In contrast,

participants' understanding of the dating/casual sex purpose was a direct result of the multiple questions that the profiles asked about their sexual interests, multiple interactions from other men that focused on sex, and the often explicit (depending on the site) pictures that they saw others post. Leo shared that "not everyone cares what your favorite books" on these sites but rather are more interested in what someone looked like.

It became clear to the men that sex was a significant part of the experience of using these sites. As such, they learned that the profile served to communicate to other men which of these purposes they were intending to use it for. For instance, Patrick, Leo, Robert, and Noah were more focused on using Grindr to develop connections with other men. Three of the four men were in long-term romantic relationships with the other hoping to develop more connections in the gay community. In contrast, Brandon and Isaiah used the site primarily as a tool to "hook up" with men. Others, such as Parker, Cole, Mason, used the sites to have both casual sex and extend their network of gay men.

The second learning moment for the men, which often occurred multiple times, happened as they learned to balance their online identity with managing how others on the sites viewed them. Regardless of whether they intended to develop friendships or engage in casual sex, the men found that the continued use of the sites provided them multiple opportunities to articulate and clarify their online profile. It also allowed the men the ability to alter their interests (i.e. moving from developing connections to having casual sex or preparing to graduate from LGU).

Specifically, Cole described that when he first used Grindr he did not openly identify as being gay. He chose to post only minimal information in his profile about himself. However, as he had become more proficient in using Grindr and comfortable in

identifying as a gay man, he found that his profile had also become a more consistent reflection of who he was. Cole shared more detailed information about himself, such as his interests, and posted a photograph of his face and shoulders. He also began telling certain straight friends, such as his roommates, that he was using the site.

Another participant, Leo, initially used Grindr to engage in casual sex. However, he realized that over time that he “did not like the person (he) was becoming” as his profile communicated that he was only interested in sex. Specifically, he shared that he was a “headless horseman on Grindr” as his profile picture was one of his chest and torso. It became important for Leo to manage and reshape how others viewed him on this site. In response, he removed the content that was focused on having sex and replaced it with more general information about his interests. He also replaced the photograph of his body with a picture of his face. Leo felt that this new profile more closely aligned with how he viewed himself. Additionally, he had begun dating another man and did not want his past profile to negatively affect his relationship.

Still other men modified their profiles to communicate to others important transitions or milestones. For instance, Isaiah noted that he had removed much of the initial content he had shared on Grindr. He did this as he was preparing to graduate from LGU and relocate to a new environment and thus was not interested in establishing new connections.

Within the past year I took down like everything except for like my height. I allow my location to be seen. That’s about it. Oh, also it’s not even my picture. It’s a picture of like a random scene.

Thus, for Isaiah, the profile allowed him the space to begin the process of closure as he prepared to leave campus and begin working in the hotel and tourism industry.

## **Summary**

The development and management of an online profile served as both a critical entry point and continued space of learning for the gay men in this study. Additionally, this profile served as a virtual representation of the man. These men were not only writing themselves into existence in online environments but they were also using this technology to begin to articulate a gay identity in the physical world.

Beyond the articulation of their own identity, the men were also creating a profile so that other users to view and interact with. However, this did not happen in a void but instead relied on others' experiences to inform and supplement. In particular, it provided each of the men with an introduction to the gay community and offered valuable insight into the purposes of the site. As such, the process that gay men engage in when crafting their profile is best understood as a multifaceted and prolonged experience.

The creation of these profiles laid the initial framework and foundation to allow the men to engage and make connections with others on the sites. I explore these further in the next section.

## **Making Connections**

Central to the experience of using any type of online social networking sites is the ability to engage and connect with others (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009, Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). This articulated connection allows for users to exchange information and develop relationships with people who share common interests, experiences, and identities. The participants in this study were heavily engaged in using Grindr, adam4adam, and other similar sites to facilitate interactions and foster connections with other gay men.

While Chapter Four focused on these men's individual experiences on these sites, this section summarizes some common elements of what this process of connecting with others looked like. This section also details some of the common approaches and techniques that they utilized to determine who to connect with and how to maintain these relationships. Additionally, I revisit the two primary purposes of these sites, engaging in casual sex and developing friendships that were introduced in the previous section, as they continued to have significant impacts on how men used these sites to make connections. However, given additional dynamics that the men needed to negotiate when engaging in casual sex (i.e. "hook ups"), I will highlight how they managed the "hooking up" process more fully in the next section.

### **Connecting with Others: A Dynamic Process**

After crafting their online profile on these sites, the men in this study began reaching out to other users. This experience can be conceptualized as the process by which these men enter into a gay community (D'Augelli, 1994a). The process of deciding with whom to engage proved to be a complex and dynamic process that required each participant to consider and manage multiple aspects within short periods of time (most often less than just a few minutes). Specifically, the men had to know what they were hoping to achieve as a result of their use (e.g. casual sex, friendship), search for users who appeared to have similar interests or who they found physically attractive, make decisions about who to contact based on an evaluation of their profile, and initiate contact.

Drawing on D'Augelli's (1994a; 1994b) lifespan model of gay identity development, developing a profile on these sites can be thought of as a process of

developing a personal and social gay identity. The development and use of online profiles allowed the men to explore and articulate their gay identity. The men seemed to experience varying levels of incongruence between their portrayal of their identities in the physical environment (i.e. daily face-to-face interactions with friends and family) and these online environments. Specifically, many of the men arrived at these sites before they could openly acknowledge and identify to others that they were gay. They would then use their profiles on Grindr, Manhunt, and Adam4Adam to articulate a gay identity. As a result, they were able to become comfortable articulating in online settings, such as these sites and gay chat rooms, what they were unable to share with their friends and family. As the men in this study became comfortable identifying as gay in online environments, they were then able to resolve the tension between their physical and online environment.

The participants described that this process was initially time intensive as it required them to scan each profile and make decisions about whether or not to contact the respective user. Specifically, users, such as Isaiah and Brandon, found that when they were first using Grindr that they would often spend anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour reading through the profiles. They would give careful consideration to what the other men had written or the picture they shared.

As time went on and they became more familiar with the site, Brandon, Parker, and Cole, like the other men, developed systems to move more quickly through the lists of other users. Some of these included not looking at profiles where the men did not share a photograph, rating how attractive a man was, and scanning for words and phrases that best aligned with their interests.

Usually the people who don't have a face picture up are in the closet or bi-curious or straight-curious. And it's not what I'm looking for. I'm looking for someone to hang out with. Also if their profile says like "I'm looking for friends." That's typically what I'm looking for. (Brandon)

I feel like a lot of people, if you don't have a picture, it's because you're not out or you're not ready to come out. Or I don't want to start something with someone if I know that they are just looking to hook up. (Parker)

I base it mainly off of if I would have an attraction to that person or see myself like actually hanging out with them. Or if they have a very weird About Me Section or stuff like that, I usually won't contact them. (Cole)

These techniques helped the men move more quickly through the profiles. Additionally, the men learned that while there were new users to the sites, a significant portion were men whose profiles they had reviewed previously. This allowed the men to more quickly move through the newer profiles.

After making the initial contact through the messaging feature within the site, the participant would engage the user in light conversation, such as "how's it going?" or "what's up?" (Isaiah). Depending on how the other user perceived the men from reviewing their profile, they would either respond to the initial questions, identify they were not interested and "block" someone (i.e. restrict someone from seeing the profile), or ignore the message. The participants in this study recognized that waiting for a user to respond was an exciting yet stressful part of the experience as it occasionally resulted in being rejected. In response to this rejection, participants experienced a variety of emotions.

I'm just like, it happens. I mean, the way I look at it, I'm just like well there's what seven something billion people on this planet, that's only one person out of all of those, like who cares. (Mason)

If I send a message and don't get a reply, then maybe like a week later I'll send another message just because and then I don't get a reply, I just figure they're not interested and then just don't message them again. (Brandon)



I feel like I'd get really upset. It didn't happen all that frequently but I feel like Grindr, to be honest, I feel like Grindr sort of bumped up my confidence and I became really cocky about not even my looks but I guess a lot of people found my body attractive and I talked to a whole host of different ages and different fitness levels and stuff. But I feel like I was used to people fawning over me, so when there was someone who didn't fawn over me and I'd have to fawn over, it would be so much harder to do. And, it would be like a struggle and if they rejected me, I would get so frustrated, so angry. It would actually really hurt. (Leo)

As a result, participants reflected that they developed “a thicker skin” to help cope with the rejection (Patrick).

While the men experienced some rejection on the site, most often the conversations progressed further. Robert used these questions to better understand and begin to develop a connection with the men.

There are a set of questions that usually a person will ask if not, I might ask, are you out? Do I know you? What's your major? There's this game of can I identify you, do I know you at all? There's a sense of relief if you don't know that person, but it's still a sense of either fun or fear.

The users were consistently evaluating the other person's responses to determine if there were enough shared interests and a physical attraction to sustain continued contact. This threshold to continue conversations varied for each man and often depended on what they were looking for from the contact. If the conversation stalled or the men expressed significantly different interests (i.e. one wanting casual sex and the other wanting to engage in additional conversation) then the users would find ways to exit this interaction. The process of ending the conversations often included stating they had to go to class or work, articulating that they were not interested, or waiting for the other person to lose interest.

## Responding to Others

At the same time as men were deciding who to contact, other users were also evaluating the men's profiles to determine if there was mutual interest or physical attraction. The participants, such as Robert, shared that when this happened they often felt validated in that others were interested.

Feeling seen and acknowledged is probably the biggest benefit of using the site. People that you may never meet or won't meet see you and are liking what they see. To get value for the way you look and how you present yourself in your profile.

While being contacted by other men was affirming, they were also faced with having to evaluate whether or not they were interested. They used the same strategies when this happened as they did when they were deciding whom to contact. However, they also had to navigate ways to decline or reject those whom they did not find interesting or attractive. Most often, these men employed similar responses that they had experienced. They would identify that they were not interested, ignore the message, or in extreme cases block the person.

If someone messaged me and it would say this person would like to send you a message. You can either accept it or deny it. Normally when that happens I would view their profile to see what their profile is like. If they have like no pictures or there's like no description on their profile, I'd just reject it. (Mason)

Most of the time I don't block them because it's really obvious. If the message is there on Grindr and they messaged me and they're waiting for a response and I block them it goes away. When that happens to me I just kind of feel crappy. So, I don't do that. I just don't answer them for a while and then maybe a day or two later then block them. (Brandon)

The men recognized that this was a challenging experience and wanted to be as kind as possible to the other men. Robert recognized that "we have all been there" and it was important to treat the other men with respect.

## **Sharing Pictures**

In contrast, if they found someone with whom they connected then the conversation would shift to sharing additional pictures. This process was complex given the design of the site, the types of photographs that men would upload and the ways in which they shared them.

Many of the sites, such as Manhunt, adam4adam, and Realjock, allowed users to post multiple pictures of themselves. The sites further allow a user to leave some photographs “unlocked” or accessible to all users. Some photographs can be “locked” or restricted to only certain users. This allows men the ability to tailor who see which photographs. However, Grindr allows only one photograph to be uploaded that all users can view. All of the sites allowed users to share additional pictures in the messaging feature. Additionally, the men in this study shared that there were three types of photographs that they most often saw or received while using the site. These included pictures of other men’s faces, bodies (e.g. chest, shoulders, lower abdomen), and genitals (e.g. penis, buttocks).

The sharing of pictures on the site depended on what purpose the men were hoping to achieve by using the site. For those men who were looking to extend their network of friends and less interested in casual sex, pictures were more focused on the person’s face and less with their body. Parker shared that he “would only send face pictures, just because I think, since I don’t use it for hooking up, there would be no reason for someone to see a picture of my body.” Additionally, if he were going to meet with someone from Grindr then he would send a picture so the person knew what he looked like.

For other men, who were looking for “hook ups”, the sharing of multiple photographs served to escalate the conversation to be more sexually explicit. The users would often negotiate who would send the first photograph and agree that if “I send one then you’ll send one” (Cole). At the beginning, the photographs were relatively innocent and included a user’s face and chest. As the conversation progressed, additional pictures, such as the lower torso, back and arms were shared. The final set of pictures shared were often that of the penis and buttocks. Most of the participants shared that they had had experience engaging in this process and used similar language to describe it.

So, I feel like once the conversation goes sexual. I feel like it's all -- it's really like feeding off the other person. It's very back and forth. But the conversation goes back and forth pretty quickly. And it usually goes down a certain path. So once body pictures are exchanged and then face pictures are exchanged, it's sort of customary for me to comment if they sent a picture, sort of if I liked it or not. (Leo)

So, there’s always this ‘you send first’, or send to receive, or S2R, is part of that. So, even if you say, you send first, some people will just ignore you. Some people are not willing to -- don’t trust you to send your picture back or don’t trust that you don’t know who they are. I would say that once you’ve sent the face pictures and you can acknowledge that you don’t know the other person, you can feel comfortable sending other pictures. Because it’s not like this person is going to show them to everyone you know. (Robert)

For sites that allowed users to unlock certain photographs for individual users, there was also an implicit understanding of how and when this process happened. Mason described that he first learned about this from using Realjock.

Real Jock shows you guys that checked out your profile and sometimes they’ll unlock their pictures for you. If they do, the courteous way to respond is by unlocking your pictures for them as well. There are some guys on there where their public pictures don’t really include face pics. And if they unlock their pictures it will be face pictures and normal pictures. So you unlock yours for them as well. Or say if I find someone attractive that has all their pictures public and no unlock, I’d show them my unlocked photos as well too. When you read some of the profiles, some of them will say “Don’t expect me to unlock for you if

you're expecting nudes. I don't have any nudes on here." I mean my profile's like that too as well.

From participants' sharing of photographs, they were able to better develop connections with the men on these sites.

### **Managing Unwanted Contact from Others**

While the majority of the users on these sites were respectful, several of the men reported that there were times when they received mildly harassing or inappropriate messages. Most often these came in the form of repetitive messages, such as someone saying "hey" or "what's up" over a shorter period of time (i.e. five to seven days). The men would choose not to respond to these users in the hope that they would understand that they were not interested and stop making contact. However, if the contact persisted, some men shared that they would block (restrict) the user from seeing that they were online.

Another experience that some men shared included when a user would immediately send nude pictures of himself before engaging in any sort of conversation. Robert seemed to acknowledge that this was part of the experience and that he learned to disregard these types of messages.

So, a lot of the time it's so funny because you'll get people who don't even say hi, they'll just send you a picture of their nether region, or like a very particular part of their chest. It's very interesting to people because you can frame how you send your pictures. You can show a very specific context, whether it's sexual or not. There's always those pictures of people with their business and like a bottle or a can. It's very, very much, it feels very juvenile sometimes the way that people send naked pictures on Grindr.

Similar to Robert, other users reported this type of behavior but recognized that it did not happen often. They would also block these users to avoid receiving additional pictures.

## **Managing Contact Across Multiple Sites**

Another factor that the men had to negotiate while establishing connections with others was how they handled contact across multiple social networking sites. Each of the men often posted identifying information (e.g. pictures and interests) and then shared additional content in private conversations (e.g. name, academic major, additional pictures). The result was the ability for other users to be able to locate the men on other general social networking sites. In fact, many of the men reported having conversations with someone on Grindr, Manhunt, or Adam4adam and then being contacted by that person on Facebook.

Initially, the men shared that they struggled with how to manage these requests in order to maintain their privacy. For users like Cole and Parker, Grindr provided an important outlet for exploring and engaging their gay identity. They preferred not to blend their connections on Grindr and Facebook. As a result, they would decline or ignore requests to connect on Facebook from the men. Others, such as Patrick, Robert, and Isaiah, were more comfortable blending their networks of connections. Still others, such as Noah and Leo, preferred to develop stronger connections with men on the sites before committing to accepting their requests to connect on Facebook and Twitter. While each participant had different expectations and strategies for managing contact across multiple sites, each man had considered how they would navigate this situation.

## **Next Steps: Moving from Online to In Person**

After sharing and receiving pictures on the site, the men would again evaluate the connections they had made on the site and determine whether or not to continue them. If the men felt that there was not a physical connection, they would find ways to disengage.

These often included not responding to the men's prompts, identifying that their interests had changed (i.e. no longer interested in casual sex), or telling the person that they were not interested. If they remained interested, then the men would continue their conversation. This would often lead to exchanging cell phone numbers so that they could communicate more directly than using the site. In addition to feeling more comfortable having established some rapport with the person they also found that the use of some of the applications put an additional strain on their phone's batteries.

As they continued to engage in conversation, one of the men would often suggest meeting in person. The purpose of these meetings ranged from "hanging out to hooking up" (Patrick). Depending on the nature of the interaction, the men would often meet at a previously agreed upon location such as a bar, restaurant, residence hall room, or coffee shop. If the meetings went well they would continue to develop their relationship. This could involve pursuing a sexual relationship, dating, or remaining friends. If these interactions did not go well, they were not likely to happen again and the relationship would be limited to communicating online (if at all). These in person meetings helped further develop the men's sense of connectedness to the site and their understanding of what it meant to be a gay man.

Additionally, although these face-to-face meetings were occurring, the men in this study were also simultaneously continuing to connect online and in person with other men. This process was not limited to one person at a time and several of the men reflected that they were often managing multiple points of connection. As it was beyond the scope and focus of this study, I did not explore further how participants made meaning of these face-to-face experiences.

### **Building Social Capital from Using the Sites**

Beyond the initial benefits of establishing connections that men experienced while using the sites, these interactions also helped them develop a broader sense of community. As a result of using these sites, the men developed multiple forms of social capital, which included both informational and emotional (Bourdieu, 1985; Lin, 1999; 2001).

Specifically, participants accrued informational capital when they were talking to other gay men on these sites and learning about their experiences. For the men, such as Cole and Brandon, who had only recently begun identifying as gay, this allowed him to understand and become comfortable with the gay community.

My starting intention is to just meet friends. Because I don't really have a network of gay people who I go hang out with or stuff like that. I've gone to have drinks with people that I've met on there. (Cole)

One time I was visiting one of my friends at (another local college) and we were just sitting in his room one night with nothing to do and we were just seeing who was on Grindr. We told this kid come upstairs and hang out and we ended up making a friend and we are still friends today. That was almost a year ago. (Brandon)

Additionally, these sites provided him with certain level of anonymity and safety that still allowed him to explore and gain an understanding of what it meant to be gay.

The development of emotional capital happened as the men started to feel that they were a part of the larger gay community. While this was relatively intangible, men such as Patrick and Robert, recognized that they had benefitted in broader ways.

I will say that there have been a lot of benefits from using these sites. I have met people that I really do connect with on a very friendship level. Like I said people who I just wouldn't have met had I not been given access to them in such a direct route. (Patrick)



Oh, well, I think that a lot of, there are lots of circles of gay men, because being a minority; it's easy to identify with someone else and create a group. Because having a place where lots of gay people are hanging out makes it easier to feel like you're not a minority, or not ever going to find love or etcetera, etcetera. (Robert)

Drawing from Putnam (2000) and Lin (1999), the men developed bonding capital, which was the result of using these sites to develop meaningful connections with other gay men. Specifically, these men were often engaging frequently with others who shared similar interests and identities, which resulted in the creation of strong connections. These bonds support Valkenburg and Peter's (2008) notion that the use of social networking sites are positively associated with a person's sense of self-worth.

### **Summary**

This section examined how the men in this study came to understand and experience making connections with others as a complex and dynamic process. This process required that they apply what they learned about themselves and their purposes for using the site (i.e. casual sex, friendships, or both) from the creation of their profile. Additionally, they needed to be able to understand what others users were looking for and if there were shared interests and attraction. To better guide this analysis, the men developed strategies and techniques that would help them do this quickly and effectively. These included scanning user profiles and assessing for mutual interests or attraction.

As a result of these approaches, men would then initiate contact or be contacted by others who had engaged in a similar process of examining profiles. The development of these new connections proved to be both an exciting and challenging time for the participants in this study. Many of the men shared how they engaged with others through conversation on these sites and the sharing of pictures. When the connections were

strong, participants would move from the online environment to in-person meetings. However, these men also learned what it felt like to both be rejected and to have to reject others when mutual interests or attraction did not exist. Collectively, these connections helped the participants articulate a network of other gay men and foster a stronger connection to the gay community.

While this area focused primarily on how the men developed relationships with other men that were less sexual in nature, each participant identified that a significant part of the user experience on these sites focused on casual sex. As such, I explore how the men utilized these sites to have sexual encounters further in the next section.

### **Navigating Sexual Encounters**

One of the more significant findings of this study was that participants identified that gay-oriented social networking sites were used to facilitate sexual interactions with other men. Each of the men shared that they not only recognized this as core to the experience but also had used the sites themselves to engage other men in this manner. As such, this section explores further the process that men used to engage in sexualized conversations and arrange sexual encounters. Specifically, this section will examine the common elements of the experience including how the men came to understand these sites were focused on sex, the escalation of conversations to be more sexually explicit, and strategies to protect their safety and minimize risk.

### **Recognizing the Sites for the Purpose of Casual Sex**

As the men reflected on their initial exposure to Grindr, adam4adam, Manhunt, and other sites, they recalled seeing semi-naked men in suggestive poses on the front pages of many of those websites. Additionally, they often had taglines such as “Any guy.

Anytime. Anywhere.” to entice visitors to join the site (Manhunt.net, 2011). These less than subtle messages provided important context about the sites, however, the men were not aware enough to recognize this. For newer users, such as Cole, this first experience was jarring as he “wasn’t expecting it to be like a porn site. It was a little overwhelming.” As the men became more comfortable and learned to navigate the site they soon understood these messages.

Beyond the initial viewing of the front pages, the men began to recognize the sexualized nature of these sites as they were completing their online profiles. Depending on the site, these profiles often asked for users to share personal information such as “What is your preferred sexual position (e.g. top, bottom, versatile)?,” “What is your HIV status?,” and “What size is your penis?” While these questions were optional, the participants found that many of the profiles of other users that they were reading included this information. From the participants’ experiences, these types of questions reinforced that “hooking up” was a primary purpose of these sites. As a result, some of the men, such as Leo, Isaiah, Brandon, and Patrick, who wanted to engage in casual sex often, included this information about themselves in their profile.

Participants also learned about the focus of casual sex through how men described themselves in the “About Me/Other” section that some profiles provided. Some users found that immediately after reading a profile they could determine what the other person was hoping to achieve.

But other than you can usually tell based on their profile. People will put exclusively I’m looking to hook up. Of if they put their sexual position, that’s not like hey, let’s go get a cup of coffee. That’s like, hey come over and let’s have sex. (Parker)

There are a lot of horny people on Grindr. It's a gay chat application that tells you how far you are away from people. Of course, there are going to be people who are going to be looking for sex or gay sex chat. (Robert)

Further, all of the sites, allowed users to upload photographs that others could view. These pictures often ranged from relatively innocuous (e.g. face, arms) to those that were more sexualized (e.g. penis, buttocks, suggestive poses). The men learned that if someone posted a picture and was fully clothed in it that they were not likely to be looking for casual sex. In contrast, those who shared nude photographs were most likely interested or open to having a "hook up." In his Grindr profile, Robert shared that he posted a photograph of himself "in like a Louis G spandex wrestler outfit that sort of looks simultaneously silly. But also, it's not an unflattering picture." From his experience and learning about the sexualized nature of these sites, he recognized how to solicit attention from others who might be interested in engaging in casual sex.

#### **"Are You Interested in Hooking Up?": Connecting with Others for Casual Sex**

As a result of understanding that one of the primary purposes of these sites was to engage in sexualized conversations that could lead to casual sex, the men needed to identify if they were interested in participating in this type of behavior. Given that all of the men in this study had used these sites to engage in casual sex with someone they met online, they were each able to reflect and share what this experience was like. This process proved to be a complex one for each person. For men, such as Noah, this required additional thinking and reflection.

I get really scared that they're not who they say they are or they're not who they say they are in the fact that they could be a perfectly decent person who in no way wants to harm me but they're still maybe -- because that was to hook up with them, they're not like the attractive person I thought they were. So then that'd be really awkward and I wouldn't know what to do about it.

In contrast, some users, such as Isaiah, this seemed to be a relatively easy decision for him to make.

I mean I wasn't committed to anyone and so figured like if I had the urge and wanted to have sex, to meet someone on there and if I felt comfortable with it maybe not have sex but to hook up or to meet up or whatever it was a convenient way to do that.

After identifying that they wanted to pursue casual sex, the men needed to craft their profile to reflect this interest and engage with other users who felt similarly. Within their profiles, participants such as Brandon, Isaiah, and Leo, would choose the option that reflected they were interested in "casual sex." They, along with other users, would then write brief descriptions about the types of men (e.g. more athletic, swimmer's build) that they found attractive.

From updating their profile, the men would begin reading other users profiles and determining if there were shared interests. Similar to how the men were using the sites to establish friendships, they would often scan profiles and determine if they were physically attracted to this person. They reached out to those that they were attracted and began a conversation through the site's built-in messaging feature. The responses would often be short, such as "hey, what's up?" and "are you interested in hooking up?" (Leo). Based on the other man's response, this conversation would often continue and escalate in intensity so that eventually both men were sharing their sexual interests (e.g. kissing, cuddling, oral sex, anal sex). If there was continued and mutually shared interests, the conversation would continue. If not, the men would find ways to exit the conversation similarly to how they had developed friendships with other men (e.g. needing to attend class/work, state they were not interested, act disengaged). At roughly the same time that men were communicating with others, there were users who were contacting them to

express interest and a desire to engage in casual sex. The participants used similar strategies that they had previously developed when talking to people with whom they could become friends.

As the conversation progressed, one of the men would ask if the other had additional photographs to share. For the participants, seeing additional photographs allowed them to determine if there was continued interest and physical attraction.

It sort of escalates. A lot of people are just very to the point. If it started like that, I would ask for pictures. If they send some in return then we'd share face pictures. Once I saw their pictures. So I would never send my face picture first. I would also be I want to see your face pictures first. I want to make a decision if I want to send you mine. (Leo)

If you send me a picture, I'm going to send you one too. I'll put that out there that I'm not going to share these pictures. Sometimes that will make them feel confident to send them. (Brandon)

I usually won't send one below the belt unless they have sent one first. Body pictures I'm pretty open with that and then face pictures, I'm pretty open with that. I never will send a picture that has my face, body and belt. (Cole)

Additionally, some users would not post nude pictures of themselves on the sites, However, many of the men, such as Patrick, Robert, Isaiah, Brandon, and Cole, disclosed that they had these pictures but would only share them with other users with which they had established a connection.

Once the mutual sharing of photographs occurred, the conversation would either continue or someone would find a way to disengage. If it continued the men would continue to talk about their sexual interests and explore the possibility of meeting in person. The intent of meeting in person was most often to engage in some form of sexual intercourse (e.g. kissing, oral, anal). Often times these meetings would happen in another person's living space (e.g. residence hall room, apartment off-campus) if it was available

or in more public spaces (e.g. library bathroom, administration building bathroom, secluded area on campus). Some men shared the frequency with which these hook ups were occurring. Two noted that they had only had one interaction while using the site. Four of the men identified that these happened less frequently (less than 1-2 different men per semester). Others reported that they had previously engaged in this behavior more frequently (2-3 different men per month).

As it was beyond the scope and purpose of this study, I did not ask the men to disclose specific details about their individual sexual encounters as a result of using the sites. However, some of the participants chose to share this information to illustrate negative experiences that they had encountered so that others could learn from these. With respect to those men, their narratives have been summarized and included in the next section to understand how participants managed risk and safety.

### **Protecting Safety and Minimizing Risk**

As the men's conversations on these sites became more sexually explicit in nature and contact moved from online environments to in person interactions, there was a need to develop strategies to protect themselves from harm (Lampinen, Lehtinen, Lehmuskallo, & Tamminen, 2011). Depending on the individual, these were strategies that were developed proactively or often as a response if incidents occurred.

#### **Proactive Response Approaches**

Some users, most often those who had recently begun identifying as a gay man or who wanted greater privacy, shared only basic information and used what Hogan (2010) described as the "lowest common denominator approach" (p. 310). For men like Cole and Noah, this consisted of sharing information that could not easily be traced back to

him (e.g. weight, height) and not posting pictures of themselves widely. This provided a high level of control over the profile. If they shared information with another user, it was only after a careful vetting process where they felt a stronger connection to this person.

Another strategy involved some participants, such as Leo, asking for additional photographs of the man that they were messaging.

Once I'd see a certain number of pictures, I'd always ask for more than just one picture to show that they had, obviously, some kind of continuity in their pictures to show that they were legitimate.

The purpose of this approach was to ensure there was some consistency with the types of pictures that they were seeing. Pictures that did not appear to be real or belong to the user often received another level of scrutiny. The participant would often ask for additional pictures so as to ensure they were not being misled.

Other users preferred to establish and articulate to men their own personal boundaries to help limit what types of sexual contact they would have. One participant, Leo, found that this helped him and the other man navigate this interaction.

I feel on Grindr things would already get planned out as to what would happen in real life. The sex would be all planned out. People would say what their sexual preferences were, what they wanted to do, very explicitly and very openly. And then if both parties were okay with it, I feel it would then go to texting to actually get things organized.

By predetermining what would happen, Leo was able to be more comfortable and enjoy the sexual intercourse. He did not have to spend as much time worrying about what would happen next.

### **Reactive Response Approaches**

In contrast, several of the men shared that they had experienced their personal safety or comfort be violated by other users. These ranged from minor nuisances such as



“picture hunting” to more severe issues such as being sexually assaulted. As a result of these incidents, participants were challenged to reconsider or develop new approaches to regain feelings of safety and privacy.

Similar to the experience in developing friendships, some participants found that the same user contacted them repetitively over a short period of time. These users often wanted to engage in conversation or would post pictures of their genitals. Although a minor nuisance, a few of the men used the option to “block” (restrict) these people from being able to see their online profile and from contacting them.

Another more serious invasion of one’s privacy happened when participants experienced “picture hunters.”

Picture hunters are people who will put up a fake ad or a fake ad on any of the sites. Fake profile or anything and they’ll try and get you to send them pictures of you that they will then keep for, I don’t know, jack-off albums or whatever. Or just get off on the thrill of ‘I’ve seen you naked.’ (Patrick)

Several of the men in this study, including Mason and Robert, had their pictures taken and used by these men. In response, Mason acknowledged that he was happy that people thought he was attractive enough to take his picture. He recognized that it was frustrating but that he did not feel that he could address it more broadly. Robert confronted the person and identified that it was not appropriate.

The most challenging situation that one of the men faced as a result of their use of these sites was to be sexually assaulted. As was noted in Chapter Four, Brandon was on vacation in Florida when he was speaking to another man on Grindr. This man initially portrayed himself as one person, only to then change who he was at the mid-point of the conversation. Although Brandon had some reservations, he met this person in front of a house party that he was attending. After Brandon entered the car, the driver drove off

thus kidnapping him and subsequently forced him to perform oral sex. He was told that if he did not comply, the driver identified that he would kill Brandon. Once the sexual act was performed, the man drove him back to the house. Although Brandon did not choose to report this incident to the authorities, the impact of this situation caused him to reassess his use of these sites. As a result, he acknowledged that he is more cautious with the men that he communicates with and if he meets people from the site it is done in a public setting.

### **Summary**

This section examined how the men in this study navigated the experiences of navigating and engaging in sexual encounters as a result of their use of gay-oriented social networking sites. While this process had several similarities to how gay men developed friendships on these sites, there were multiple key differences. These included understanding how gay men recognized that Grindr, adam4adam, Manhunt, and other sites could fulfill their need for sexual contact and interactions with others and how they successfully navigated these interactions.

As a result of using these sites to engage in casual sex, the men also needed to develop strategies to ensure their safety and privacy. For some of the men this came in the form of proactive measures, such as restricting information and requesting additional photographs of users. However, others developed more reactive measures from experiencing challenging and often negative consequences. These men experienced unwanted contact through the site, people co-opting pictures (e.g. “picture hunters”), and being the survivor of a sexual assault.

### **Investment in the Sites**

Being a member of Grindr, adam4adam, Manhunt or another site served not only as a digital representation of their gay identity but also provided them with near unlimited opportunities with which to connect with other users. Additionally, this experience required the men to develop a user profile, establish connections with others, and determine whether or not to engage in sexual encounters. This was an intensive and complex process for the men. As such, the most significant finding of this study was the participants' substantial level of investment of themselves and their time into gay-oriented social networking sites.

This section will examine the frequency and duration with which the men engaged with these sites. Additionally, this section examines two common benefits that emerged as a result of extensively using these sites, which included better understanding their own identity and developing stronger connections to the gay community.

### **Frequency of Use**

At the beginning of this study, participants completed a Demographic Information Form (Appendix E), which asked them to disclose the frequency with which they accessed gay-oriented social networking sites. The men were provided five options, which ranged from “no more than once per week” to upwards of “4-5 times per week” and “more than six times per week.” Four of the men reported that they accessed at least one site between four and five times per week. The other five reported that this use was more than six times per week. However, during the interviews, the men often reflected that their use was significantly higher. Many stated that they accessed the site, multiple times per day.

That totally changes depending on the week, but I would say on average, like on a week that is neither spending too much time on the computer or spending a lot of time on the computer. I'd say like ten to fifteen, maybe. (Robert)

Over the course of a day I'll open it many, many, times. Well, I could open it up to fifty times. Just like walking and just opening it and seeing if I have a message. Seeing if there's anyone new on there. (Brandon)

So, I mean I probably go on like if I'm not talking to anyone continuously through the app I probably go on like three or four times a day just to check for messages. (Isaiah)

I'll go on multiple times a day. So I'll go on like every time I pick up my tablet, it's like when I open up my browser. Every time I go on my tablet I'll hit up Grindr and then I'll hit up Facebook and Twitter and whatnot. (Cole)

While they were accessing the site frequently (e.g. opening the application or logging on), each man spent varying amounts of time on the site. The time that an individual user would spend on the site depended on the types of interactions they were having (or hoping to have) with other users.

I'd say maybe half hour a day. My time is mainly spent having conversations. From having a conversation with somebody and then it will give or take. And some nights I don't talk to anybody, so I might be open and on for 10 minutes 15 minutes that I'm actually looking at it, but other nights it might be 45 minutes to an hour that I'm having conversations with people. (Cole)

I could go on it for like five seconds, just like open it, see and then close it. So, I open it a lot of times but the time I actually spend on it probably doesn't amount to more than hour a day. (Brandon)

Other users, such as Leo, Noah, and Mason, would log on multiple times each day for roughly 10 minutes each. The men were spending, on average, roughly 30-45 minutes each day of the week. This significant time investment, approximately three to five hours per week, helped them not only interact with other gay men but feel connected to the larger gay community.

## **Investing in One's Identity**

Although the primary purpose of these sites was to facilitate connections between users, some men in this study found Grindr, Manhunt, adam4adam and others allowed them to explore, become comfortable with, and articulate a gay identity. They were able to use the development of their profile and their connections with others on the site to help form their own identity.

One participant, Robert, found that using Manhunt and Grindr allowed him to safely explore and understand what it meant to be a gay man.

I think that the first thing that I did was that I was looking for gay chat. Something so I could have an outlet. I think I did a search one day for gay chat and I think I found Manhunt first. That sort of indoctrinated me fully into the culture of gay social networking from there on.

By spending time developing his profile, he was able to clarify his own thinking about what it meant to be gay. Although he knew he was different in middle school he did not have the words to fully explain what he was experiencing. However, using this site allowed him to explore and find words to articulate his identity. As a result of using these sites, he was able to spend time reflecting and thinking about who he was.

Another participant, Cole, shared that, as a result of using these sites, he was able to become more comfortable and accepting of his identity as a gay man.

I was on Grindr and my roommate was in our apartment. He went to a party and asked me if I wanted to go. I said no I'm going to stay and unpack. I ended up going on Grindr and started talking with this person. We were just talking randomly about how me and my roommate brew beer and whatnot. And the kid starts asking me, "Is your roommate, Paul?" And I said, "Excuse me!" He responded with "Oh yeah, I just talked him. I'm at the same party as him." I was planning on telling my roommate that I was going to be using a site to meet people, just to get the awkwardness out right away. Because we have the same group of friends. So if I'm going to see somebody random, or just go hangout. He'll be like, where you going? And I'd have to make up a story.

I decided I'm done lying and whatnot. So I wasn't planning on telling him that soon, but it literally forced me. So it made me pretty much come right out to him and be like, yeah I'm using this site. I was freaking out at first, but in that sense, it really helped me to get out of my comfort zone and be able to tell my roommate right away. Like yes, I use this site to meet people and that's just how it is. And that is something that really helped me accept being gay.

While Cole had previous experience with sites such as Grindr and adam4adam before coming out to this roommate, he felt that he was hiding an important part of his identity. He recognized that the interactions with other men from these sites had helped him develop confidence in who he was.

### **Becoming Invested in the Gay Community**

Beyond learning about and investing in one's identity, the use of these sites allowed men in the study to develop stronger connections to the gay community both on the LGU campus and the local community. For many of the participants, this proved to be an important part of the experience. The use of these sites affirmed and helped situate for the men that they were part of a larger community where they did not have to feel alone. Further, these sites helped some participants make new and often unexpected connections while others focused on developing connections for the future.

One of the participants, Brandon, found that using Grindr "opened up his world."

I just saw all these people I've never seen in my area before who all identified as gay men. It was literally at my fingertips and I could have conversations with them. That really opened up the world to just talking to other gay guys. The only other gay male that I talked to until I was sixteen was this senior at my high school when I was a freshman. I came out to him through Facebook and then we became friends in person. It was really intriguing and really interesting to be able to talk to all these different guys in the area that I didn't know existed.

Given his minimal previous contact with other gay men, Brandon struggled to understand that other men were experiencing many of the same feelings and thoughts he was having. Additionally, his father was particularly unsupportive and intolerant towards gay people.

As a result, he shared that while he had multiple friends, he often felt isolated and alone. The use of these sites provided him with a critical outlet to meet other men and articulate a network of support.

Another benefit that multiple men spoke about from using these sites was the ability to develop a network of other gay men that they might not otherwise have met.

I have met some interesting people on Grindr. I guess in that sense it's nice to know I have those connections. Like one guy I met, that goes to (a local college) and now we're still friends. He's friends with a lot of people on my floor and we're friends with a lot of people from (his school). And in that sense, I think that is a real benefit, because if we did not have that connection we wouldn't all be friends now. (Parker)

I definitely found a different kind of community too. I'm part of the (gay student organization on campus). So there's like, there's an overlap but it's definitely like a Venn diagram of gays. Like there's the one's that are in (the student organization) and like, the activism kind of part of it and then there's the kind that are looking for like, hookups. Then there's like an overlap but I've definitely just at least got to know a couple other people that I wouldn't have found just going to (meetings of the organization). (Noah)

For Parker and Noah, these connections were important as they allowed both men to become invested in the larger gay community. Other men, such as Leo and Isaiah also shared that they had extended their network further. Although Leo was in a long-term relationship, he used Grindr to establish friendships with other gay men. Isaiah used these sites to extend his network of other men who also shared his passion and interest in electronic/dance music.

Another approach that some participants, such as Mason, Patrick, Isaiah, and Cole, employed was to develop connections through these sites to the gay community that could be leveraged in the future.

You will eventually talk to people who will then meet in the future at some point. And it'll go whether you guys becoming friends, hang out a lot more, like expanding your network. I've talked to a couple of people that say they know or

worked for someone that I can possibly talk to in the future for a job or anything like that. (Mason)

When I went to visit a university for Graduate School and I actually used that a lot to talk to people. Wasn't really look so much for the hookup, I was just looking to see what was the gay scene out there? I was talking to people about how they liked the school and asking about things to do. Ended up meeting up with one person to get drinks with them and stuff like that. So I used it, like it was great to actually get an insight to how, like the gay scene is out there. (Cole)

The men believed that building these connections, whether they be to prepare for graduate school, potential job opportunities, dating, or friends, were essential to remaining involved and current in the gay community.

### **Summary**

This section highlighted how gay-oriented social networking sites are central and critical to the experiences of the men in this study. In particular, each man had devoted significant time and attention to crafting an online profile, making connections with other users, and deciding whether or not to engage in sexual encounters. While there was slight variation of each participant's frequency and duration of use, all of the men were spending several hours each week engaged on the sites. The result of this prolonged engagement allowed users to not only better understand and explore their own identity but to develop a strong connection with members of the gay community.



## **CHAPTER 6**

### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

Recent studies estimate that over 94% of college students are members of and use at least one online social networking site (Salaway, Katz, Caruso, Kvavik, & Nelson, 2007; Smith & Caruso, 2010). This staggering adoption of technology has resulted in significant research to understand and examine the impacts that the uses of these sites are having on specific subpopulations (e.g. women, people of color) and college students at large (boyd, 2007; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Cummings, Lee, & Kraut, 2006; Gasser, 2008; Lampinen, Lehtinen, Lehmuskallo, & Tamminen, 2011; Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009; Slater, 2002). While these studies have provided important insight into the experiences of students, they have not examined how gay college men utilize and are affected by social networking sites, specifically those that are gay-oriented. As there was no previous research on this topic, this exploratory study sought to understand:

1. How and to what extent do traditionally aged (18-24 years old), White college men, who identify as gay, utilize gay-oriented social networking sites?
2. What benefits and challenges do White, gay, male college students experience because of their use of these sites?

In this final chapter, I return to these central research questions to discuss the major findings from this study and the effect on the experiences of gay college men using these sites. I begin by highlighting the four primary themes from the research, which included the ways in which men developed an online profile, made connections with

other men, navigated sexual encounters, and invested significant time and attention to using these sites. Next, I discuss these findings in light of my initial assumptions about the experiences of gay college men and the influence that using these sites has on their lives. As a result of collecting this data, I am situated to provide several recommendations for student affairs professionals, which may improve the experiences of gay men in college who are using these sites. Additionally, given the exploratory design of this study, I discuss several focus areas for future research that would continue to extend understanding of this phenomenon.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

The data for this study was gathered by utilizing phenomenological interviews with nine White, gay, undergraduate men at Land Grant University (LGU) ranging in age from 18-22 years old. The sample included men from all class years and a variety of academic course backgrounds. Each of the men in this study identified as gay and was a heavier user (e.g. 4-5 times per week) of gay-oriented social networking sites. Each of the men participated in two, 60-90 minute interviews where they were asked a variety of questions to reflect on their lived experiences with these sites.

Given that there were no previous studies conducted on the experience of gay, college men's use of gay-oriented social networking sites, several key findings emerged. Specifically, there were four major findings that emerged from the individual responses provided by the participants. These included how gay college men developed their online profile, established and managed connections with other users, navigated sexual encounters, and made substantial investments in the sites. I briefly review each of these in this section.

After locating gay-oriented social networking sites, the participants in this study found that in order to be able to use them that they were tasked with constructing a profile. This profile served to digitally represent a user while also allowing others to engage with this representation (boyd, 2008; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2007). Further, the profile was a summary of multiple sources of information that a user would share. While the men in this study identified as gay, all of the men reflected on their past experiences of creating a profile. For those who had struggled with their sexual orientation, the development of a profile often consisted of less identifying information (e.g. weight, height, hair color) and did not include a profile picture. Those men in this study that were more comfortable and had established their gay identity often shared more extensive information, such as their personal hobbies and sexual interests (e.g. oral, anal, kissing, cuddling). These men would most often upload pictures of themselves so that other users could have a visual representation of what they looked like.

After developing a profile, participants in this study began establishing and maintaining connections with other users. This required the men to review each user's profile and make a determination if there were any shared mutual interests and/or if he was physically attracted to the other person. Initially, participants described this as a challenging process as they lacked the requisite understanding and exposure on the site, what I referred to as "context," to determine who to contact. This lack of informational social capital resulted in the men needing to spend significant amounts of time reading and reviewing profiles to make determinations about whom to make contact (Bourdieu, 1985; Stutzman, Vitak, Ellison, Gray, & Lampe, 2012).

From using these sites, participants learned that other users were most often interested in either developing friendships or were looking for casual sex. Often this came in the form of information shared in the profile and in their initial interactions with other men. For example, some users would only share sexually suggestive pictures of themselves, such as Leo who posted a picture of his chest on Grindr. At the time, he was only interested in having casual sex as he was still coming to terms with his own sexual orientation. In contrast, other men were more focused on being able to develop lasting friendships and extending their network of other gay men. Still other men in this study preferred to use these sites for both purposes as they recognized that their interests and desires were in flux. As the participants in this study were both making contact with other users and managing contact from others, they were beginning to experience requests to meet in person. Though it was beyond the scope of this study, the move from online environment to the physical world was one that required the participants to develop strategies to navigate these interactions successfully.

The final major finding from this study was each man's significant level of investment in the use of these sites. Similar to their peers' use of sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, the men in this study utilized gay-oriented social networking sites frequently to engage, connect, and interact with others. Smith and Caruso (2010) found that 59.3% of college students access at least one social networking site and often spend between 1-4 hours each day using the site. This accounts for a substantial amount of time spent per week. This significant use is consistent with the finding that the men in this study spent an average of 30-45 minutes each day viewing profiles and connecting with others.

Given each man's significant investment of time and attention in using these sites, it is no surprise that they play such a key role in the student's experience. The participants often described their use as a part of their everyday lives. They shared that because the sites were often accessible via their smartphone or tablet that it helped them stay connected. Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009) described the integration of the use of these and other social networking sites as a "fundamental component of their lived experiences" (p. 42).

### **Discussion of the Findings**

As I reviewed the significant findings of this study to answer the central research questions, the data illustrated that gay students' navigation and use of gay-oriented social networking sites is a complex and multi-faceted process. At the beginning of the project, I made several initial assumptions based on past professional work about the experiences of gay college men and their use of these sites. In this section, I examine the extent to which my assumptions about gay college men aligned with these students' lived experiences.

### **Revisiting Initial Assumptions**

In Chapter Three, I highlighted four assumptions about the experiences of gay college men and their use of gay-oriented social networking sites. In this section, I revisit each of these assumptions in consideration of the major findings of the study.

- The experiences of White, gay, male college students utilizing gay-oriented social networking sites play a critical role in students' development of a gay sexual orientation identity.

For most of the men in this study, the use of gay-oriented social networking sites served as an important outlet for exploring and developing a gay identity. They described feeling as if they “grew up alongside social networking sites” and as a result found using them to be a safe, easy, and engaging tool (Patrick). While these sites are having a significant impact on the identity development of these men, current theoretical frameworks do not adequately address the influence of these sites.

In the literature review, I discussed at length the existing theoretical frameworks for gay identity development. These included stage-based models (Cass, 1979; 1984; Troiden, 1989) and the lifespan model (D’Augelli, 1994a; 1994b). Though I proposed drawing on D’Augelli’s framework of lifespan to help understand and explain this experience, there is a need to better understand and conceptualize this experience. Specifically, this study found that the men were investing in these sites to not only make connections but as a tool to guide their identity development.

The use of gay-oriented social networking sites has increasingly become an inextricable part of the experience for gay men. For example, the men often described feeling an increased sense of awareness of themselves and connection to not only the site but to the larger gay community as a result of using these sites. The participants viewed their individual investment of time and energy into the sites as a helping them develop and extend a network of fellow gay men. Given the importance that these men are placing on the use of these sites, it will be important for student affairs administrators to design educational initiatives to help support these men. Additionally, it will be critical that newer theories of gay identity be developed in recognition of and response to the changing environments that students engage with. I explore some potential programmatic

interventions and suggest directions for the development of gay identity theories in a future section.

- White, gay, male, college students are using gay-oriented social networking sites to help develop connections with other gay individuals.

While my past experiences working with gay college men led me to recognize that they were using gay-oriented social networking sites, I did not fully understand the extent to which their use served as a critical avenue for connecting with other men. Throughout the interviews, I consistently heard from all participants that these sites had two primary purposes, which included developing connections and engaging in casual sex. This became even more evident as the men's level of investment and engagement resulted in them spending several hours per week connecting with other men through these sites. Additionally, all of the men shared that they would check their online profiles multiple times over the course of the day to see if others had contacted them and to make new connections.

Given the significant time and attention that was devoted to using gay-oriented social networking sites, the use of these sites had become an important and incorporated part of each of the men's daily routines. As a result, gay-oriented social networking sites and arguably all social networking sites are having a significant impact and influence in shaping how people interact and engage with others. Additionally, as college students continue to be some of the greatest and most frequent users of online social networking sites, it is imperative that additional attention be devoted to understanding and supporting the use of these environments. In the next section, I discuss several implications for

practice, not only for working with gay college but all students, as a result of this increased use and integration.

- Common themes, such as isolation, exist among the experiences of White, gay, male, college students.

From the results of this study, there appeared to be some common themes that existed among this sample of gay men. Although I initially conceptualized these themes as being only negative (e.g. isolation and alienation), important common positive experiences emerged among the men as well. These included developing confidence in their identity and locating and establishing a supportive gay community.

The men reflected struggling with their gay identity and as a result felt isolated and alienated. These experiences were often during high school and early on at LGU. Some students, such as Isaiah, Mason, and Brandon, described similar challenges in coming out as gay to their family. Their struggle to be accepted by parents and siblings highlighted the continued challenges that gay adolescents face.

Although much of the literature on the experiences of gay men focused substantially on the challenges they face (e.g. bullying, harassment, assaults) (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010), participants in this study generally viewed their experiences as gay men in positive ways. Many of the men spoke about the presence of gay-straight alliances in their high schools and having teachers who were supportive or who openly identified as gay. Further, though the men may have experienced moments of isolation and alienation, they seemed to have developed self-confidence and pride over time in their identity as a gay man. This confidence was largely the result of their coming out process to friends and family. All of the men reflected that while they initially



struggled to identify as gay, they came to accept it as an important aspect of their identity. Participants, such as Patrick and Noah, found the coming out process to be a validating and affirming experience of their gay identity. For other men, such as Cole, Brandon, and Robert, the experience of coming out was a lengthy process and involved them becoming more aware and comfortable with themselves.

Another shared positive theme that emerged was the importance of developing a supportive community of gay peers. For the men in this study, the development of this network appeared to be primarily facilitated by their use of gay-oriented social networking sites. In fact, all of the men recognized that one of the primary uses of these sites was for establishing connections. The use of these sites helped them develop and extend their networks and connections with gay men.

- White, gay, male, college students may encounter homophobia at their institution of higher education.

As noted in the literature review, the volume of research on campus climate continues to reflect that acts of intolerance, harassment, and violence aimed at LGBT students (Silverchanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2007). In particular, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people continue to be among the least accepted subpopulation of students on college campuses (Noack, 2004; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Rankin & Reason, 2008). Within the context of this study, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences at LGU and share their insights about the campus culture towards LGB individuals. Some participants reported encountered acts of homophobia at LGU. Specifically, the three seniors in the study reported that either themselves or their friends had experienced homophobic name-calling or anti-gay vandalism. Additionally, they

identified areas of the campus and subpopulations (e.g. athletes, members of fraternities) that felt unwelcoming. In contrast, the other six men in this study shared that they felt largely welcomed and comfortable on campus. They identified the presence of the LGBT center, engaging with supportive faculty and staff, and hearing about and the campus' commitment to fair treatment of all. Though it may appear promising to note that only three of the men reported homophobic behaviors, additional information must be collected to develop a more complete picture of the experience of gay students on campus. However, it remains highly problematic that at least some students continue to experience acts of homophobia while on the LGU campus.

### **Implications for Practice**

There are several implications for practice for student affairs administrators and staff as a result of this study. These professionals, who are most often tasked with developing initiatives and interventions to ensure the holistic learning and growth of students, can play a critical role in helping support gay college men as they use and navigate these sites. The implications that I outline are intended to not only better support the experiences of gay college men but also the broader student population.

First, student affairs professionals need additional training and capacity building opportunities to extend their own individual knowledge of gay-oriented social networking sites. In order to comprehensively and intentionally develop professional capacity, I propose a tiered approach, which attends to the learning needs of both current practitioners and those in graduate training programs. Current professionals should be encouraged and supported to attend professional development opportunities such as training sessions and conferences that focus on the needs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual

students and technology. There are national (e.g. National Gay and Lesbian Task Force) and regional (e.g. drive-in day-long intensive) conferences that provide learning intensive opportunities for current professionals to expand their understanding of the needs and challenges facing these students. Additionally, national student affairs organizations, such as National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), host a variety of webinars focused on topical issues (e.g. impact of social networking sites) for professionals.

In addition to developing current professionals, many of the higher education administration preparatory graduate programs provide only minimal information about the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students. Specifically, the use of identity development theories such as Cass (1979; 1984), Troiden (1989), and D'Augelli (1994a; 1994b) is often inadequate to fully explain the experiences of today's gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. In response, the faculty members of these graduate programs need to critically examine how this population of students is being discussed and support. Further, programs need to offer educational opportunities (e.g. courses, seminars) that explore the experiences and examine the impact of both general and gay-oriented social networking sites on college students. It is critical that current and future administrators have an increased understanding and awareness of these issues. I address the need for new research on the topic of gay identity development in the next section.

Second, there is a need to critically examine and assess if the resources and supports provided by a campus are adequately and appropriately supporting students who utilize these sites. Although the campus that this study was conducted on had a LGBT student support center, only four of the men reported being connected to this resource.

However, all of the participants in this study used Grindr, adam4adam, and other sites to help articulate and understand their gay identity. The use of these sites provided an important outlet for the men that many did not feel existed in their physical environment. As a result, they often relied on information and experiences they had with other men online to guide their development. While this type of peer-to-peer engagement can be helpful in supporting and guiding individuals, this approach is limited to the knowledge and experiences of the others in the group.

Student affairs administrator must recognize that while the presence of an LGBT center can support some students, it is not likely to meet the needs of all LGBT members. In response, they must design programs and initiatives that meet the needs of students and help support and affirm the experiences of all men. Specifically, they should provide opportunities such as support groups and access to counseling services to help these students feel empowered and engaged. Additionally, they need to develop online spaces, such as Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, where they can convey important information (e.g. social networking site etiquette, strategies for online safety) and outreach to additional students who may not want to visit a physical space.

Another critical implication that emerged from this study was the need for further education for men on how to safely navigate these sites. Specifically, several of the participants shared impactful stories where their personal safety was jeopardized and they were violated (e.g. online and in person) as a result of using these sites. Students should be educated on ways to best navigate and manage their interactions with other men. These should include discussing strategies to manage the types of information that

participants share and identifying ways to protect themselves when having a face-to-face meeting with other men.

Although it was beyond the scope and purpose of this study, each of the men in the study acknowledged that they had engaged in casual sex with at least one man from the site. Additionally, several of the men alluded to the fact that they did not always engage in safer sex practices (e.g. using a condom, asking about a partner's sexual history). There is a need to both explore this area further and greater education about sexually transmitted infections and safer sex practices. Further, student affairs administrators should offer free and easy access to condoms and confidential STI/HIV testing.

In addition to supporting gay college men in their use of these sites, it is imperative to develop a comprehensive approach to educating all students, regardless of sexual orientation, about the responsible and safe use of social networking sites. Many of the men in this study recognized that their use of these sites often required them to invest a substantial amount of time (i.e. several hours per day) to develop and maintain connections. One participant, Brandon, referred to the volume of time he spent on these sites as a "time suck" which negatively impacted his academic coursework and other commitments. As a result, he found himself needing to use online sites, such as Rescue Time, to block his access to Facebook and Twitter. This program allowed him to devote his attention to homework and group projects. As the use of online social networking sites continues to become an interwoven and blended aspect of the college experience, student affairs professionals need to be prepared to help students develop strategies to more effectively manage their time.

Additionally, the men in this study spoke about the importance and reliance of using sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, to facilitate connections with others. College students see the use of these sites not as distinct separate environments, where they leave one to go to another, but rather as seamlessly integrated in their lives. However, student affairs professionals have not adjusted either their thinking about or practice to recognize this significant shift in students' experiences. Currently, student affairs administrators often rely on more traditional methods of engaging students (e.g. programs set in physical spaces, fliers on bulletin boards in lobbies). By raising awareness of emerging trends in online social networking sites, these professionals would be able to adapt and respond more effectively.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As a result of this study, several recommendations for future research have emerged. This research served as an important and initial entry into the experiences of gay men using gay-oriented social networking sites. It will be important for this study to be replicated at other types of institutions of higher education (e.g. private, public, 4-year, varying sizes) to both further describe and understand these experiences and determine if consistent themes exists.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the four major findings (profile development, making connections, navigating sexual encounter, and investment in the site) that emerged should be individually explored further. Each of these results captured an important facet of the men's experience. For example, it was beyond the scope and purpose of this study to explore how participants made meaning of the face-to-face interactions (e.g. sexual encounters, socializing) that they had with other men as a result

of using these sites. However, these meetings were especially important to the men as they fulfilled the purposes of the sites and served to help them further develop their identity and connection to the site. As such, delving deeper into each finding through additional inquiry would result in a more nuanced understanding of the experience.

Another area that will require research involves a critical examination of gay identity development theories. As I noted previously, many of the models for gay identity development were developed over 20 years ago and do not necessarily capture the lived experiences of today's college students. The stage models developed by Cass (1979; 1984) and Troiden (1989) are limiting in understanding gay students in a holistic way. They assume a linear development of identity that is not consistent with the experiences of today's college students. Additionally, both stage and D'Augelli's (1994a; 1994b) lifespan models fail to account for the impact of technology (e.g. social networking sites, smartphones, tablets) on identity development. As a result, students can be experiencing multiple and different stages or processes in multiple contexts all at the same time. For example, Cole engaged in his physical environment as a heterosexual man who was questioning his identity but in the online context was articulating a bisexual (and later gay) identity and engaging in sex with other men. It is essential that newer paradigms of identity development recognize and account for the multiple contexts (e.g. physical, online) that students engage with.

Further, the existing identity development models do not appropriately address the impact of or explain how gay college students navigate sexual intercourse as part of their identity. The models focus on how men think about and conceptualize their gay identity without examining their own sexual behaviors. However, the men in this study

clearly articulated the importance that the role of engaging in sexual intercourse played in their identity as a gay man. Though it was beyond the scope of this study to explore further, some of the men, such as Leo, described how engaging in sexual intercourse with others provided him with an important outlet to clarify his identity. Others, such as Isaiah, described experiencing a “slut phase” where after finding these sites and identifying as a gay man, he would engage frequently in casual sex with multiple partners. The critical intersection of thinking about one’s gay identity and engaging in same sex sexual encounters must be further explored.

Additional research should focus on examining men with multiple intersecting identities. Specifically, this study limited participation to men who identified as White and gay. Further research should be conducted to explore and understand the experiences of men who may identify as bisexual, heterosexual, or questioning. It will be important to understand how these men make sense of their experience and if they have to navigate their use in different ways than gay men. Additionally, gay men of color often experience the development and representation of a gay identity differently than their White peers (Bilodeau & Renn, 2004; Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000). For these men, the navigation and use of these sites may need to occur in different and more intentional ways.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The impetus for initiating this study stemmed from my interactions with Blake, a gay college man, who was using gay-oriented social networking sites to engage and connect with other men. Although I identify as a gay male, I had minimal understanding at the time of what this experience was like and the significant impact it was having on



these men. Additionally, I recognized not only my own lack of awareness regarding this critical aspect of the student experience but also that student affairs professionals were not equipped to respond to and support these students.

As such, this exploratory study began to explore and understand how gay college men are using these sites. The nine men who participated in this study shared many significant experiences and reflections from their use of these sites. As a result of these perspectives, the findings illustrate the emergence of several critical themes which included developing a profile, making connections, navigating sexual encounters, and significant levels of investment from participants. Beyond understanding the mechanics of developing a profile and establishing connections, participants experienced the use of these sites as an important and integrated part of what it meant to be a gay man.

The key findings represent an important starting point for understanding the experiences of these men. However, like any exploratory study, this research is far from complete. Areas such as how the men engaged with others during in person meetings and strategies they used to develop there profile require additional attention as they were beyond the scope of the project. Further exploration and examination of the phenomenon of how gay college men experience and utilize gay-oriented social networking sites is needed.

## APPENDIX A

### TIMELINE OF MAJOR SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

| Year Introduced  | Year Closed | Website         | Membership*   | Primary Population of Users   |
|--|-------------|-----------------|---|---|
| 1997   | 2001        | Sixdegrees.com  | 1 million users   | All people  |
| Late 1990s   | 2008        | Gay.com         | 15 million users;<br>Re-launched as planetout.com                                       | LGB individuals   |
| 1999   | --          | Livejournal.com | 3.9 million users   | All people  |
| 2001   | --          | Manhunt.net     | Over 1 million users  | Gay & Bisexual individuals  |
| 2002   | --          | Friendster.com  | Over 115 million users; Re-launched in 2011 as gaming network serving countries in Asia | Served Adolescents & college students<br>Now serving online gamers                          |
| 2003   | --          | LinkedIn.com    | Over 65 million users   | Professionals   |
| 2003   | 2011        | Connexion.org   | 200,000 users   | LGB individuals   |
| 2003   | --          | Adam4adam.com   | 400,000 users   | Gay & Bisexual Individuals  |
| 2004   | --          | Myspace.com     | Over 100 million users  | Initially college students & adolescents; Now primarily used by music artists & adolescents |
| 2004   | --          | Facebook.com    | Over 400 million users  | Initially college students; Now open to all   |
| 2006   | 2011        | Dlist.com       | 25,000 users  | Gay & Bisexual Individuals  |
| 2009   | --          | Grindr          | Over 3 million users  | Gay & Bisexual Individuals  |
| 2011   | --          | Scruff          | Over 5 million users  | Gay & Bisexual Individuals  |
| * If site has closed, the peak membership is reported. |             |                 |   |   |

## **APPENDIX B**

### **ANNOUNCEMENT OF STUDY**

The following announcement was posted in the weekly e-newsletter from the LGBT Student Center:

Title: Share your experiences and participate in a study on the use of gay-oriented social networking sites

Description:

My name is Michael Dodge and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Policy and Leadership program here at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. My dissertation topic examines how White, gay, male, college students utilize gay-oriented social networking sites and I am looking for individuals who be interested in participating in the study. Those who are selected to participate in the study would complete two (2) interviews lasting approximately 60-75 minutes each over the course of the Spring 2013 semester. Participation in the study is voluntary and confidentiality will be ensured. Those who complete both interviews will receive a \$30 gift certificate. This study has been approved by the School of Education.

If you would like more information about the study, please contact me at [dodge@educ.umass.edu](mailto:dodge@educ.umass.edu). If you are interested in participating, please visit <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/9T5CW56> to complete a brief information form. This form is confidential and secure and will be used to select participants for the study. Also, I would ask that you please share this widely with others who may be interested.

## APPENDIX C

### LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

Dear (STUDENT NAME),

My name is Michael Dodge and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Policy and Leadership program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. My dissertation topic examines how White, gay, male college students utilize gay-oriented social networking sites. I am seeking students who would be interested in participating in this study. The following is a brief description of the study and the criteria that will be used for selecting participants:

#### Brief Description of the Study:

The use of social networking sites appears to be a dominant fixture in the lives of college students. However, research has not examined how gay, male college students utilize and are effected by social networking sites. This exploratory study seeks to examine the experiences of gay, male college students' use of gay-oriented social networking sites.

#### Criteria for Participant Selection:

Participants must meet the following criteria:

- Identify as a White, gay man
- Are between 18-24 years of age
- Enrolled as an undergraduate student at Land-grant University
- Currently utilize at least one gay-oriented social networking site
- Access and utilize social networking sites at least four to five times per week.

Those who are selected to participate in the study would complete two (2) semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60-75 minutes each over the course of the Spring 2013 semester. Participation in the study is voluntary and confidentiality will be ensured.

The interviews will be scheduled at the convenience of each participant and would happen in a private, secure, small conference room on the Land-Grant campus. If you meet the criteria, please contact me at [mtdodge@educ.umass.edu](mailto:mtdodge@educ.umass.edu) or 315-868-5375 (cell). If you know of others who meet the stated criteria, I encourage you to share this opportunity with them as well.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have additional questions. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Michael Dodge, M.A.  
Doctoral Candidate

## **APPENDIX D**

### **INFORMED CONSENT**

#### **EXPLORATORY STUDY OF HOW WHITE GAY, MALE COLLEGE STUDENTS UTILIZE GAY-ORIENTED SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES**

I volunteer to participate in this qualitative study and understand that:

1. I will be interviewed by Michael Dodge using a guided interview format consisting of two, 60-75 minute interviews with multiple open-ended questions.
2. The questions I will be answering address my experiences related to and use of social networking sites. I understand that the primary purpose of this research is to explore what the experience is like and what benefits and challenges might arise from its use.
3. The interviews will be tape recorded to facilitate analysis of the data.
4. My name will not be used, nor will I be identified personally, in any way or at any time. I understand that I will be given the option to select a pseudonym to protect my identity. If I choose not to provide a pseudonym, one will be generated for me. The purpose of the pseudonym is to describe participants' experiences for the dissertation (e.g. John, a sophomore student, said....)
5. I may withdraw from part or all of this study at any time.
6. I have the right to review and provide edits to the interview transcripts prior to the submission of the dissertation. Once the project is completed, I may request a final copy of the dissertation.
7. I understand that results from the interviews will be included in Michael Dodge's doctoral dissertation and may also be included in manuscripts submitted to professional journals for publication.
8. I am free to participate or not to participate without prejudice.
9. Because of the small number of participants, approximately six to ten, I understand that there is minimal risk that I may be identified as a participant of this study.
10. I understand that if I complete both interviews I will receive a \$30 gift card as a thank you for participating.

If you have questions or comments regarding this study, please feel free to contact Michael Dodge. Michael's phone number is 315-868-5375 or email [dodge@educ.umass.edu](mailto:dodge@educ.umass.edu).

Additionally, you may also contact Michael's chairperson, Dr. Kathryn McDermott, at 413-545-3562 or email at [mcdermott@educ.umass.edu](mailto:mcdermott@educ.umass.edu).

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Researcher's Signature

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Participant's Signature

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Date

---

Date

## APPENDIX E

### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET

This information will be kept confidential and will be used for describing the data. For the purpose of preserving the confidentiality of participants, you may choose or be provided a pseudonym that will be used for reporting out the results of the study.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred Pseudonym (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Sexual Orientation: \_\_\_\_\_ Age When You "Came Out": \_\_\_\_\_

Are you an In- or Out-Of-State Student? \_\_\_\_\_

Academic Major: \_\_\_\_\_

College Year: \_\_\_\_\_

Which social networking sites are you currently a member of or have been in the past:

\_\_\_ Facebook \_\_\_ LinkedIn \_\_\_ Twitter \_\_\_ MySpace

\_\_\_ Tinder \_\_\_ Google+ \_\_\_ Livejournal

Other: (please identify) \_\_\_\_\_

How frequently do you utilize these sites?

\_\_\_ No more than once per week \_\_\_ 2-3 times per week \_\_\_ 4-5 times per week

\_\_\_ More than 6 times per week

Which gay-oriented social networking sites are you currently a member of or have been in the past:

\_\_\_ Manhunt.net \_\_\_ bros4bros.com \_\_\_ downelink \_\_\_ fabulis

\_\_\_ adam4adam.com \_\_\_ Tinder \_\_\_ Grindr \_\_\_ distinc.tt

\_\_\_ gaylivenetwork.com Other: (please identify) \_\_\_\_\_

How frequently do you utilize these sites?

\_\_\_ No more than once per week \_\_\_ 2-3 times per week \_\_\_ 4-5 times per week

\_\_\_ More than 6 times per week

## APPENDIX F

### INTERVIEW QUESTION PROTOCOL

In addition to the two semi-structured interviews, I will use a demographic information form to help gather information, such as name, age, what social networking sites they belong to, from the participants.

#### ***Interview #1 – Building Rapport & Use of Social Networking Sites***

##### ***Introduction & Rapport Building***

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself?

##### ***General Social Networking Site Usage***

Before we get into one specific site, I'd like to ask about some general social networking site usage.

2. When was the first time you heard about social networking sites?
  - a. What do you remember about what you heard?
3. What activities do you use these sites for?
  - a. How did you learn to use social networking sites?
  - b. What were your initial impressions/reactions?
  - c. What attracted you to these sites?

##### ***Site Specific Questions***

Let's focus on the social networking site that you use most frequently.

4. What site do you use most frequently?
  - d. How often do you access (INSERT SITE NAME)?
  - e. Why do you use (INSERT SITE NAME) this site more so than others?
  - f. How did you find out about this site?
5. Can you describe what your profile looks like on this social networking site?
  - a. What types of information do you include?
  - b. Do you post photos?
  - c. How regularly do you change/update the content you post?
  - d. How do you manage whom you are connected to on this site?
  - e. Can you describe what happens if someone you know requests to connect on this site? Someone you don't know?
6. How often do you interact in offline (physical) settings with people you are connected with on the site?
  - a. Are there some people you've never met in person that you only know online?
  - b. Is there are a reason why you haven't met these people?
7. Do you think about your safety while using this site?



- a. If yes, what do you think about? How frequently do you consider your safety?
- b. If not, why not?

### ***Wrap-Up for 1<sup>st</sup> Interview***

I want to wrap up our first interview with two final questions.

- 8. What do you get (what sorts of benefits do you experience) from using this site?
- 9. Have you experienced any challenges or struggles with using this site?

### ***Interview #2 – Use of Gay-Oriented social networking Sites & Closure***

#### ***Gay-Oriented Social Networking Site Usage***

Before we get into one specific site, I'd like to ask about your usage of gay-oriented social networking sites.

- 1. When was the first time you heard about gay-oriented social networking sites?
  - a. What do you remember about what you heard?
- 2. What attracted you to using gay-oriented social networking sites?
  - a. Why do you use gay-oriented social networking sites?
  - b. How did you find out about these sites?
  - c. What was your impression of these sites?

#### ***Gay-Oriented Site Specific Questions***

Let's focus on the social networking site that you use most frequently.

- 3. Can you describe your profile on the gay-oriented social networking site?
  - a. Would you feel comfortable reviewing your profile with me?
  - a. What types of information do you include?
  - b. Do you post photos?
  - c. How do you manage the content?
    - i. How do you choose which information to share/not share?
    - ii. Do you have more than one profile?
  - d. How frequently do you check/update your profile?
- 4. Can you describe for me what you do when logging on to gay-oriented social networking sites?
  - a. Can you describe what your routine looks like once you've logged in?
  - b. Are there certain features (i.e. chat, messaging, posting) that you utilize more than others?
  - c. How do you determine who to make contact and interact with?
  - d. Are there people you avoid contacting or engaging with?
- 5. How often do you interact in offline (physical) settings with people you are connected with on the site?

- a. Are there some people you've never met in person that you only know online?
  - b. Is there are a reason why you haven't met these people?
- 6. Do you think about your safety while using this site?
  - a. If yes, what do you think about? How frequently do you consider your safety?
  - b. If not, why not?
- 7. What benefits and challenges have you experienced while using gay-oriented social networking sites?
  - a. What have you learned about yourself from using these sites?
    - i. Have you made any friends by using the gay-oriented social networking sites?
    - ii. How have using these sites impacted your identity as a gay male?
  - b. What have you learned about the gay community from using these sites?

**Wrap-Up for 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview**

I want to wrap up our last interview with one final question.

- 8. If you could provide one piece of advice to other gay students who might be using gay-oriented social networking sites, what would it be?

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