

Unveiling the Continuum of Intended and Unintended Consequences: Exploring Social Media's Impact on the Connections Made by Individuals who Self-Identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Queer (LGBQ)

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become synonymous with every day communication in our technologically advanced society. Individuals use it to share information, make plans with friends and keep up with folks geographically dispersed from them. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) individuals often use social media to find other individuals with whom they can share about their sexual orientation. In this study, we use qualitative methods to explore the impact of social media on the connections made by individuals who self-identify as LGBQ.

Keywords: Bisexual, Coming Out, Cyberbullying, Gay, Lesbian, LGBTQ, Queer, Sexual Orientation, Social Media, Social Networking Sites

INTRODUCTION

Social media provides a means by which individuals can communicate in one-on-one and community settings on the Internet. People can engage in chat, group discussions, forums, blogs, and interact on social networking sites. A survey of 2,412 adults in the U.S. revealed

that gay and lesbian adults used online social networking sites more than heterosexuals; of the respondents, 73% of gays and lesbians used Facebook versus 65% of heterosexuals. The same variance occurred for MySpace which had 32% vs. 22%, LinkedIn which had 22% vs. 16%, and Twitter which had 29% vs. 15% (Harris Interactive, 2010). While both

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heterosexuals and LGBTQ people share and retrieve information, connect with others, and experience a variety of outcomes, one major difference between the two groups in the use of these sites by LGBTQ individuals to disclose their sexual orientation, often referred to as the 'coming out' process. Coleman (1982) defines coming out as the stage of sexual development during which an individual acknowledges his/her homosexual feelings and begins to tell others. Haag and Chang (1998), who studied how the Internet impacts social services delivery, stated, "[t]he computer has allowed the coming out process for young gays and lesbians to be an easier process by both allowing one to keep anonymity and to take that initial step more slowly and carefully" (p. 86).

However, anonymity doesn't exist only for gay and lesbian computer users. Heterosexuals observing this coming out process who may not be accepting of different sexual orientations also have anonymity, which has led to the advent of cyberbullying. Grading, Strohmeier, & Spiel (2010) define cyberbullying as the use of modern technology with the intention of hurting another individual through repetitive negative actions in situations where one feels more powerful than the bullied person(s). Existing Information Systems (IS) literature examines the role of social media in the lives of users; however, explorations of use by the LGBTQ community specifically are mostly absent. We contribute to IS research by focusing on how social media impacts connections made by LGBTQ individuals. Thirteen years ago, Internet networking was predicted to be a positive addition to the lives of non-heterosexual individuals. Unfortunately, cyberbullying is also a consequence of this connectivity. Through qualitative research we explore the question: *What impact has social media had on the connections made by individuals who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer?* Using literature regarding the coming out process and descriptions of social media use, in this paper we outline the sensitive nature of this question and describe its importance for IS and sexual development research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Coming Out Process

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

Two main themes were evident in the literature regarding coming out. The first explores the feelings and emotions experienced during the coming out process. Johnston and Jenkins (2004) examine coming out in mid-adulthood and the related psychosocial issues. They found six themes: 1) interrupted relationships, 2) fear of losing everything, 3) self-destructive behavior coping mechanisms, 4) grief over the loss of a 'normal' adolescence, 5) oppression related to religion, and 6) strength and courage. These six themes informed our follow-up questions during the interview process when asking questions about the coming out process for adults at varying ages and social media's role at those times. Vaughan and Waehler (2010) studied the unique rewards and stresses experienced during sexuality disclosure. The use of social media during the coming out process may affect the feelings and emotions experienced.

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