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A qualitative report exploring the factors that impact the formation and development of sexual identity.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project aims to determine the prominent factors effecting the formation and development of sexual-identity, whilst also exploring the extent to which the Cass Identity model (Cass, 1979) can accurately account for this formation. Five participants from an array of different orientations were interviewed using a semi-structured interview model. Thematic analysis was utilised (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analyse the data and three prominent themes were generated; 'Importance of representation', 'Label security opposing identities fluid nature' and 'the queer hierarchy'. Due to the distinct nature of individual sexuality, the themes appeared to manifest in each participants' lives in a different way. Consequently, through comparing similarities in experience, it became possible to determine distinct affecting factors that appear to impact identity formation more universally. Findings also indicated the lack of generalisability of the Identity Model as it failed to address the impact of situational and environmental factors on identity formation. The report takes a critical approach by dissecting the models six stages in comparison to the lived experience of individuals. Findings gathered can lead to a greater understanding of the nature of identity formation. These findings enable the formulations of possible future implications and interventions to help ease the experience of identity-formation through the addressing of the difficulties typically experienced.

<b>KEY WORDS:</b>	<b>SEXUAL IDENTITY</b>	<b>CASS IDENTITY MODEL</b>	<b>LABEL SECURITY</b>	<b>QUEER HEIRARCHY</b>	<b>REPRESENTATION</b>
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**Introduction:**

The way in which an individual chooses to identify themselves is often considered to be the foundation of their being. One's personal identity is what differentiates them from others (Constant and Zimmermann, 2008) and as such, it becomes an integral part of our personality. It has been suggested that identity formation can occur and develop through our psychological experiences within society (Schwartz, 2002), consequently, it would come as no surprise that this formation is seen as a lifelong process (Archer and Waterman, 1990).

How we identify will change over the course of our lives, however at any given time, this might not always seem to be the case. This characteristic of identity enables it to take on both a fluid and fixed property (Gardner, 2011). Although seemingly contradictory, defining it as both changing and unchanging, brings us closer to understanding the fundamental properties of individuality.

Identity can be considered the beliefs, qualities, cultures and values, amongst other distinguishing factors, that identify an individual (Rahimi et al., 2018). It is the array of traits that collectively build one's unique character. Focusing on sexuality in particular, sexual-identity is broadly considered to develop due to genes or hormones, as well as self-image or gender identity (Francoeur, 1991), but it is also found to be affected by cultural and religious understanding (Butcher et al., 2016). This demonstrates how various forms of identity interact with one another; sexual-identity is affected by gender identity, as well as ethnic and religious identity.

With any one aspect of an individual's identity becoming so interlinked with various other aspects, it becomes difficult to simply attribute identity formation to one measurable cause. It has been found that whilst innate sexual orientation is not a choice (Luff, 2001), various factors can impact the acceptance and formation of an individual's sexual orientation (Button, 2016), of these, research has placed particular emphasis on the both situational and environmental factors.

Cass's (1979) Model of Identity provides the means by which we are able to compare and attempt to standardise the experience of same-gender sexual-identity formation. Consisting of six sequential stages (Identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride and synthesis), it provides a framework for the experiences of coming to terms with one's sexuality, both internally and externally. There is much criticism for the linear approach adopted by the model (Fassinger and Miller, 1996); emphasising its lack of regard for the difference between internal and external development processes. However, using the Identity model as a foundation to further analyse the effecting variables would enable the observing of any consistencies or shared experiences, whilst simultaneously enabling the exploration of the causes for any variations.

Noticeable research on the identity model has found data to conform to the six stages in varying degrees. A study conducted on a sample on a large group of lesbian women found that their experiences aligned with the earlier stages of development highlighted in the model; identity confusion, identity comparison and identity tolerance (Sophie, 1986), however, the sequence of occurrences was found to differ between women. Most interesting was the findings that the experience of change in one's sexual orientation was highly influenced by social context. Environmental and social factors are consistently found to impact the process of an individual's sexual-identity formation.

For many individuals, when first coming to terms with their sexual-identity being different to their peers, this can prove to be a difficult transition. This often results in individuals attempting to 'pass as straight' (Mark, 2008), and may even manifest in homophobic attitudes (Malyon, 1982). In terms of Cass' model, this would align with stage 2; identity comparison. This is where an individual begins to consider the possibility they may be homosexual and attempts to deal with the alienation that arise with these feelings of 'difference' (Chan, 1989). According to the model, identity acceptance cannot occur until these feelings have been overcome, however it is found that individuals will still hide their identity or attempt to 'pass' as straight, many years after accepting their homosexual identity (Coyle, 1998). This is due, in part, to wider social attitudes and experiences individuals have undergone in regards to their orientation. Homophobic bullying has been found to affect identity acceptance and openness in regards to sexual orientation (Nappa et al., 2018), similarly homosexual parents report hiding their sexuality in order to prevent their children from being teased (Wallis and VanEvery, 2000). This further demonstrates the impact social factors have on sexual-identity openness, and casts doubt on the accuracy of Cass' Identity Model.

During stage 3; Identity tolerance, individuals begin to seek out other LGBTQ+ individuals and stage 4; Identity acceptance, is where there is an increased involvement with the wider LGBTQ+ community (Chung and Katayama, 1998). It is found that increased exposure and involvement with the community can benefit psychological wellbeing through providing support to help deal with stigma and alienation (Wong and Tang, 2004). However, it is made apparent in multi-cultural societies that even within a LGBTQ+ community, discrimination can still exist. A study into the experiences of queer people of colour found systematic and intergroup racism to be widespread within the community, with their experiences and needs often being overlooked (Giwa and Greensmith, 2012). Further evidence of discrete discrimination can be observed when examining the values and general nature of most LGBTQ+ communities. There has historically been great significance placed on gay bars and clubs, as such, the perception of the community itself has become practically synonymous with drinking culture and nights out. In many cases, bars themselves have become central to the LGBTQ+ community, acting as community centres and meet-up points for the communities various members (Clarke and Peel, 2007), LGBTQ+ individuals are even considered to consume more alcohol and drugs than any other demographic (Manning et al., 2012). This can unknowingly create a discriminatory atmosphere for members of the community who don't drink due to personal or religious reasons. It was found that for Muslim students at University,

drinking culture created a sense of alienation (Andersson et al., 2012), this was also found to deter Muslim students from attending University events. For Muslim members of the LGBTQ+ community, this can create a personal conflict of interest and lead them to feel further alienated within a community where they should feel welcome.

It becomes increasingly apparent that any aspect of identity is unable to exist within a vacuum, societal intolerance is found to be '...detrimental to healthy identity formation' (Carrion and Lock, 1997:369). The environment and interactions are shown to, not only impact how one chooses to present themselves and their identity to others, but also an individual's self-perception of their own identity.

Stage 5 of the Identity model is considered to be the stage where an individual will begin to 'come out' to others (Brady, 2008). A large scale study on the experiences of Queer women when coming out found that the degree to which sexuality was disclosed to others was associated with the amount of social support that was received (Jordan and Deluty, 1998). Women also reported the positive effects of coming out, with findings highlighting that those who were able to openly disclose their identity, experienced a better quality life, lower anxiety levels and greater self-esteem. This highlights the positive effects coming out to others can have, however it also brings us to understand that support from family and friends is essential for an individual to consider disclosing their identity. For many, hiding their sexual orientation stems from the fear of endangering their familial relations (Waldner and Magrader, 1999).

The Developmental Model of Parental Reaction (Savin-Williams and Dube, 1998) was proposed to explain the process experienced by family, specifically parents, in regards to learning their child identifies as homosexual. The sequential stages include the initial shock, denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The model finalises by relying on the assumption most parents will eventually accept their child's orientation, however this depends on an array of factors. This becomes increasingly apparent when looking into the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals coming from multicultural or ethnic backgrounds. In cultures where a close-knit community is common and family ties are paramount, disclosing this aspect of their identity seems out of the question for many. This need for secrecy arises from notions of bringing shame to the entire family and fear of putting at risk the families respect within the community (Tremble et al., 1989). These fears stem from the reality of cases within multicultural societies, particularly amongst more religious communities. Homosexuality is often viewed as a 'western disease', coming out is commonly followed by being pressured to get married due to the perception this is capable of 'curing' homosexuality (Yip, 2004). This difference in perception of homosexuality due to culture, renders the model of parental reaction as being unrepresentative.

Relating back to stage 5 of Cass' Identity model, many queer people of colour find they have no choice but to hide their identity from their parents (Groves et al., 2006) despite being secure in internally acknowledging their orientation, due to the factors presented. Using the Identity model as a framework, understanding regarding the various factors which can impact identity formation can be better observed. This can be accomplished through examining deviation from the basic structure of the model in order to see where various internal or external factors emerge. From this, the following research questions are derived:

What prominent factors impact the formation and development of sexual identity?

To what extent does the Cass Identity model accurately account for sexual identity formation?

### **Methodology:**

A semi-structured interview method was adopted, this enables the understanding of individuals' lived experiences (Galletta, 2013) whilst simultaneously allowing both the interviewer and the participant flexibility throughout the process (Sankar and Jones, 2007). As the project required an understanding of influencing factors in an individual's experience of sexual-identity formation, this flexibility proved vital in allowing for the inquiry into relevant topics.

This also proved to be the most ethical research method; for individuals forming their sexual-identity, this can prove to be particularly challenging. A semi-structured technique enables the researched to obtain ongoing informed consent (Low, 2013), through this, the interviewee is aware that they are able to withdraw at any point. It also gives the participants power over what is discussed and enables them to choose how it is discussed (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002), this is particularly vital for sensitive issues as it ensures boundaries are not breached.

Participants were obtained through a volunteer sample, upon hearing about the study, participants came forward themselves. This is a convenient form of sampling (Seers and Critelton, 2001), but is often criticised as being biased (Bogaert, 1996), as those most interested will volunteer. In this instance, although participants were drawn to participate due to interest, it also became clear that there were other reasons. Volunteer samples are found to be intrinsically motivated (Kertzner et al., 2014), this was evident within the sample interviewed as many participants felt that discussing their experiences would prove to be beneficial to them.

Prior to conducting any interview, ethical approval was compulsory; ensuring the entirety of the process adhered to the MMU and BPS guidelines for ethical conduct. The EthOS software was initially used to present the study and apply for approval. Data collection was only permitted once ethics were approved the supervisor's signature was obtained (Appendices).

Upon showing interest in taking part, the participants were given an information sheet (Appendices) which underlined the nature of the study and the topics to be discussed. Once all questions were answered, they were requested to sign the consent form (Appendices). Although this represented their agreeing to partake, it was made clear throughout the process that they could withdraw at any point without repercussion.

Recordings were made of the interview and were stored on a secure, password-protected device. The researcher alone had access to the recordings and they were deleted upon transcription (Appendices). Ensuring not to distort or remove relevant data, identifying features were reworded. All participants were also given the task of choosing a pseudonym used during the report.

In total six participants were initially interviewed, one interview was stopped to ensure the participant was not subject to any psychological harm as the nature of the topic had become difficult to discuss. Of the remaining five, identities ranged from homosexual, bisexual, transgender, asexual, pansexual and genderfluid.

All participants were interviewed in a place of their choosing to ensure they felt comfortable during the process (Irwin and Johnson, 2005). Once data was obtained, analysis commenced following Braun and Clarke (2006) six staged of thematic-analysis; codes were generated and recurring topics were clustered before these clusters were grouped into the final themes.

## **Analysis & Discussion:**

The participants interviewed for this project came from a variety of sexual-identities and backgrounds, thus the formation of their identity proved to be a unique experience for every participant. Studies highlight the importance of understanding the distinctive perspectives of LGBTQ+ individuals (Lemoire, and Chen, 2005), and this unique nature of experiences became evident upon conducting the interviews. It appeared that participants had little in common, however upon conducting thematic analysis, similarities began to arise from within the data.

From these similarities, three key themes were derived; 'Importance of representation', 'Label security opposing identities fluid nature' and 'the queer hierarchy'.

### **Label security opposing identities fluid nature.**

For individuals who have undergone difficulties coming to terms with their sexual orientation being different from the norm, finding a label that they can relate to will '...contribute to healing, understanding, and self-acceptance' (Brown, 2015:23).

These sentiments of label security were demonstrated by the interviewees. Reece; identifying as gay, described the realisation as:

*"...peaceful... It felt like before this I was carrying around this weight of being different and now it was gone. I felt so much peace."* [143-145]

Upon discovering the 'lesbian' label existed, Eleanor similarly stated:

*"...I can't express the relief I felt... this whole time I had thought there was something wrong with me, and now finally I had a name for it and the knowledge there were others like me..."* [47-49]

In regards to the Cass Identity Model (Cass, 1979), this would represent the key experiences of the 'identity tolerance' stage, characterised by the relief experienced through understanding there are similar individuals out there.

This experience resonates with the fundamental aspect to the social identity theory; the concept that people identify, and form a social-identity with others they share similarities with (Korte, 2007). Most importantly, in this instance, is the feeling of



knowing one is not alone that results from social-identity (Simon and Klandermans, 2001).

However this security comes under threat when taking into account the fluid and evolving nature of identity (Reynolds and Hanjorgiris, 2000). This is further addressed by Queer theory, which views sexuality as being a ‘...fragmented, and dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities...’ (Tyson, 2006:335), emphasising its ability to vary at different times of an individual’s life.

For the participants who reported finding themselves identifying differently over the course of their lives, this change proved to initially be difficult to accept. Derek, a bisexual trans man recalled his experience of realising he was transgender:

*“...it was so tough, I had finally found my bisexual community and I had done the hard part of coming out, I was finally comfortable and then realising I was actually trans made me feel like I had lost all of that.” [361-363]*

These feelings of loss can be explained by referring back to the Social Identity Theory; through forming a social identity, we unintentionally internalise the notion of being part of an ‘ingroup’ and all others as part of the ‘outgroup’ (Tajfel, 1982). ‘Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty’ (Connolly, 1991:64), when faced with the realisation one is no longer a member of the ingroup, this self-certainty is thrown into disarray. Loss of ingroup identity is associated with a reduced self-concept clarity (Slotter et al., 2015), this can result in feelings of loss and emotional distress (Tamini et al., 2011). Samantha reported experiencing similar feelings when coming to terms with being pansexual after finally accepting a lesbian label:

*“...I felt at a loss initially, kind of like I had lost this part of me I had grown to love, it was pretty hard... even though deep down I had already accepted I was pansexual and that I just hadn’t been aware of it, I still spent a long time clinging to my lesbian label...” [250-253]*

Aside from demonstrating the difficulty that arises from accepting a new label, this statement also, interestingly, begins to question the validity of the claim of sexuality as being fluid. It is consistently found that individuals will often find themselves learning about new sexual-identity labels through the Internet or other queer individuals (Bowling et al., 2016). Trent similarly recalls:

*“I don’t think the fact that I have identified differently at different points means my sexuality has changed or anything. I’ve just learnt more about myself and I’ve found a more fitting label to accommodate that.” [418-420]*

This further disputes earlier views regarding the nature of sexuality as changing, instead portraying it to be a process of growth resulting from increased knowledge acquisition and understanding of oneself. For many who have already undergone the process of self-discovery and understanding, it is the lack of knowledge that leads to wrongly identifying with a label. Since the 1970s, individuals have been found to adopt broader sexual-identity labels due to the lack of knowledge regarding the wide range of more specific identities that exist (Diamond, 2000).

To ease the process of sexual-identity development, aside from educating young individuals on the spectrum of identities that exist, it would also prove beneficial to provide them with sufficient information on the nature of the formation process. Through highlighting this process as being affected by various life experiences and self-discovery, it would encourage them to be open to the possibility of finding more fitting identities as a result of self-discovery, thus reducing the likelihood of individuals finding difficulty in transitioning between different labels throughout their lives.

### **The queer hierarchy**

The second theme that arose through thematic analysis stemmed from the realisation that different orientations appeared to vary in terms of the difficulty experienced by, and the general treatment of, the individuals identifying with them.

Many of the interviewees first recalled transitioning between identities as they continued to grow and as such, were able to compare their experiences from different identities.

For Trent who identified as gender fluid and bisexual, before realising they were bisexual, initially identified as gay. They recall the differences in their experiences when coming out in both instances:

*“It was weird how suddenly the reactions from the people who had supported me changed... When I came out gay most people were supportive... in contrast when I then came out as bi everyone changed their tone and started telling me I was going through a phase.” [452-455]*

Similar reactions are experienced by bisexual individuals when disclosing their identity, often being stigmatised or not taken seriously (Bostwick, 2012). Bisexual individuals are consistently subject to stereotypes, reports exploring the opinions of heterosexual individuals found that bisexual men were perceived as being more confused and untrustworthy (Zivony and Lobel, 2014). In contrast public opinions on

gay men and women have found to become more positive over time (Hicks and Lee, 2006).

These misconception regarding bisexuality may hold root in the fact that for many people experiencing turmoil and confusion regarding the experience of same-sex attraction, it is often easier to label themselves as bisexual (D'Augelli and Patterson, 1995). This corresponds to the findings obtained from a study conducted on 400 queer identifying women, 40% of the women who identified as lesbians reported initially identifying as bisexual (Rust, 1992).

However interestingly, the same report showed that of the bisexual participants, a significant 75% reported initially identifying as lesbians. This raises the question as to why this is found to be the case when being gay is often seen to be more acceptable. Trent justifies their choice of initially identifying as gay by stating:

*"...aside from realising that people generally weren't as accepting of bisexuality as being a thing, it was also because even within the gay community there was this general dislike for bisexuality, identifying as gay was just easier..."* [458-460]

Trent's experience aligns with findings that have reported bisexual individuals as often adopting lesbian or gay identities due to the prejudice that exists towards bisexuals within both the heterosexual and homosexual community (Diamond, 2000). Samantha similarly states:

*"Before accepting I was pansexual, I briefly identified as bi, and I remember realising that lots of lesbian women refused to date bi girls. Like it was actually a really common thing..."* [261-263]

The negative stigma associated with bisexuality leads to the internalisation of stereotypes, as such, many lesbians are found to be reluctant to engage in a relationship with bisexual women (Callis, 2013). Both within wider society and the LGBTQ+ community, this begins to create an imbalance of power relations (Weiss, 2011), assigning different sexualities different social standings. This imbalance appears to extend beyond bisexuality, with different sexualities receiving different treatment. Derek was able to first hand experience, not only the imbalance in treatment towards bisexual, but also how being transgender was treated in comparison, he stated:

*"...as hard as it was, for me, it was easier coming out as bisexual than when I also came out as trans. Being trans in the gay community makes some people look at you like a traitor..."* [340-342]

Transphobia appears to commonplace within the gay and lesbian community, with many transmen and women feeling no longer welcome after coming out (Rowniak and Chesla, 2013), as such the community places transgender individuals at an even lower position to bisexuality. The power imbalance, however, does not stop there.

Sexuality and sexual-identity is a broad field with numerous identities that are often lesser known or unacknowledged. Identities like pansexuality, non-binary, asexuality and demi-sexuality, to name a few, are consequently placed under the label of 'other' (Walton et al., 2016). With the asexual community being one of the most misunderstood and under-researched sexual minorities (Pinto, 2014), the general population appear to know very little about it, as with most 'other' classified sexualities. When coming out as asexual, most individuals are treated with scepticism, a general lack of acceptance and are misunderstood (Robbins et al., 2016). For Samantha:

*"...coming out as asexual was so hard. Much harder than coming out as anything else. With asexuality you don't feel sexual attraction, most people though I was being extra and that it was wrong to tell them. I got lots of: 'that's not real' and loads of people just straight up refused to believe me, even those closest to me..." [274-278]*

For asexuality, along with many 'other' classified sexualities, this appears to be a typical response. Due to the immense erasure of these lesser known sexualities, very few people understand these marginalised identities, as such, discrimination manifests in the form of ignorance as opposed to malicious intent (Formby, 2017).

Trent describes their experiences of being genderfluid:

*"...its like being a minority within a minority, hardly anyone gets it. It's the + in LGBTQ+..." [463-464]*

The LGBTQ+ acronym has also found itself subject to criticism due to the omission of the broad range of sexual-identities (Formby, 2012), as well as the order that the letters are displayed. For many this provides a visual representation of the order of the hierarchy within the community, with individuals choosing to display the acronym differently depending on which community they belong to (Blackburn and Donelson, 2004).

The existence of this internalised hierarchy can result in the reluctance for individuals of marginalised sexual orientations to accept these identities, and in instances where they have internally accepted their orientation it proves difficult to come out to others (Decker, 2015), thus hindering stage 5 (Cass, 1979). Yet unlike the model suggests, identity synthesis is not impossible in the absence of stage 5; identity pride, the Identity model consequently fails to account for identities other than homosexuality (Van de Meerendonk and Probst, 2004). Through acknowledging the existence of a queer hierarchy, efforts can be made to resolve this imbalance. This would in turn lead to an easier transition for individuals forming their identity.

### **Importance of Positive Attitudes**

The third and final theme arose from the importance the participants placed on positive attitudes, in it's various forms.

This can be further differentiated into two separate sub-categories: attitudes conveyed through representation within media depictions and real life attitudes. Media is shown to play an important role throughout the course of an individual's identity formation, however it proved to be most influential, vital even, during the earlier stages of identity development.

Studies have found that opinions demonstrated through shows or news coverage has a significant effect on shaping the perceptions of children and adolescents (Lemish, 2015; Makadon et al., 2008). This can be further explained using the Socialisation Theory which demonstrates how opinions and norms we are exposed to become internalised (Grbich, 1990). Due in part to still developing cognitive abilities (Van den Bulck et al., 2016), the nature of the media children are exposed to during earlier years significantly influences their mindset and opinions.

For Reece, growing up watching the 90's anime; sailor moon, was his first exposure to queer characters in media:

*"...sailor Uranus and Neptune where 100% a couple, even 7 year old me could see that much... I think watching this growing up really helped with making me feel like loving whoever you wanted to love was normal..." [128-131]*

Although Samantha couldn't recall being exposed to queer characters at a young age, she found the way in which normative gender was conveyed to be of great importance to her growing up:

*"...as a child I was a huge tomboy... My earliest crushes were on tomboyish characters, seeing that girls could be like that, like me, helped without even realising it." [13-16]*

In both instances, the participants found their attitudes being positively affected by positive portrayals. Representative characters or role models are found to serve as a source of comfort in one's identity for LGBT youth (Dobinson and Young, 2000), this in turn, could help ease the transition between stages 2 and 3 in the Cass identity model (Cass, 1979). The third stage; Identity comparison, is characterised by comparing oneself to others and exploring wider implications of their identity (Milton and MacDonald, 1984). Through positive media portrayals being found to influence an individual's 'self-realization, coming out, and current identities' (Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011:330), this has been found to ease the transition between the initial 3 stages of identity development (Craig and McInroy, 2014).

However the model falls short to address instances where positive portrayal is not accessible. Conversely, for Derek, growing up and living in Mexico made accepting his identity all the more difficult:

*"...when I was younger, I never had any television shows with characters that were like me... the first time I really heard homosexuality being talked about was on the news when they legalised marriage... they only wanted to talk about how bad this was and how the country was failing..." [375-378]*

With popular media being utilised by younger children, it becomes one of the main sources from which they will access knowledge about the world. This leads to the developing of attitudes and opinions that align with what they have been shown and has even been found to impact the formulation of their sense of identity (Chung, 2007). In regards to negative portrayal of homosexuality, for young children these opinions and attitudes can become internalised. This can be particularly harmful for LGBTQ+ children growing up as this can lead to an internal conflict, as highlighted by Derek:

*"...after hearing about homosexuality on TV I started thinking badly about it too, like everyone. When I started feeling this way for the first time this negative opinion I had made it even harder. Part of why it took me so long to accept..." [380-383]*

As demonstrated by Derek, the internalised negative opinions led to the hinderance of identity formation. Consequently, the way in which stage 1; identity confusion, and stage 2; identity comparison, is experienced will differ for individuals who harbour these negative perceptions. As opposed to initially experiencing confusion and questioning, leading on to hesitant acceptance (Yarhouse, 2001), this will instead result in the use of denial, where an individual refuses to acknowledge the presence of any homosexual feelings (Troiden, 1989).

While traditional media is found to ignore LGBTQ+ sub-groups and dwell on stereotypes, new media, such as the internet and its various services, offers opportunities for discussion and discovery (McInroy and Craig, 2017). As all participants interviewed were adults, their experiences of media on their identity growing up will differ to the experience of children today. Living in a media-laden era, from a young age children are exposed to the internet and its endless potential (Vandewater et al., 2007), this in turn will affect their experiences. Findings also show new-media as being utilised by LGBTQ+ youth, however research fails to address how this continues to impact the development process (Craig and McInroy, 2014). As media advances, the effects it has on identity-development will change, this further highlights a need for future research.

However, although media is changing, for the most part our family dynamics remain constant. The second sub-category of real-life attitudes proved to be as influential to identity formation for most participants. Reece emphasised how lucky he was to grow up in an accepting household:

*“My aunt has a female partner and growing up this was all normal to me... I was especially lucky to have very liberal parents... the environment they brought me up in was one where I was comfortable to be whoever I was.”*  
[131-135]

For Reece, although there was a degree of struggle when coming to terms with his identity, it proved to be a predominantly smooth process. Findings reported by Hershberger and D'augelli (1995), aligned with this experience, family support reduced psychological stress, but most interestingly, there was a strong negative correlation between psychological problems and self-acceptance. This highlights the importance of family acceptance on individuals coming to terms with their own identity, particularly during stages four and five.

Unfortunately, a positive reaction from friends and family isn't always guaranteed. Upon coming out to their friends, Trent recalls being treated with hostility:

*“...they thought I was crazy, they started ignoring me, when we did talk it was like they were talking to a stranger.”* [469-471]

In comparison, Derek states:

*“...remember, my parents are not only strict Catholic but also Mexican. My dad beat me up and I was kicked out of my house. My mother told me never to show her my face again, I haven't seen her since...”* [399-401]

For both individuals, they had fully accepted their identities and confirmed they felt it was fully integrated with other aspects of their life prior to coming out. This directly contradicts the Identity model which highlights that the reactions to coming out in stage five; Identity Pride, impacts whether the final stage of identity synthesis occurs at all (Halpin and Allen, 2004). In such cases, it becomes important to consider the situational relevance before generalising the model to the varying array of experiences individuals undergo.

As opposed to using one generic model for sexual-identity formation, it may prove useful for future research to compare individuals' experiences with sexual-identity specific models. An example of this would be the 14 stage model of trans identity formation proposed by Devor (2008), being specific to the different experiences of the trans-community would in turn make this model more generalisable to trans participants.

Alternatively, future sexual-identity research could adopt a Queer theory perspective, as Foucault (1976) highlight, the creating of identity categories based on sexual desires are a recent phenomenon. A similar belief led to the development of the Kinsey scale (Kinsey et al., 1949), where sexuality is instead rating from 0 (exclusively-heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively-homosexual).

Through instead measuring the human experience and the fluid nature of sexuality without categorisation, it could prove effective in capturing the essence of the experience, devoid of any label-associated expectations.

The interviews highlighted the prominent factors that influenced participants' identity formation, however the subtle factors that which may not have fit in to larger themes cannot be overlooked. The data has emphasised the multifaceted nature of sexual-identity formation, through analysing and arriving to the three themes it has also been made evident that various underlying social and environmental influences which can effect an individuals' experience. These secondary factors provide a good focus for future research.

### **Reflexive Analysis:**

Conducting the project proved to be a both difficult and rewarding experience. Upon deciding to use semi-structured interviews, I began to formulate my questions. The choice of this research method stemmed from the nature of my study, it required the participants to recall experiences and how they felt and this would also allow me to inquire into different aspects of a response. My initial struggle stemmed from the difficulty I experiences formulating the questions. It was not until I showed my supervisor my initial questions draft that I came to realise they were insufficiently worded. When conducting sensitive interviews, it becomes important to make the



participant feel at ease, the wording of a question then becomes vital. From there I went and read on how to formulate and conduct sensitive interviews, this provided me with a better understanding which in turn, allowed me to come up with a much more adequate set of questions.

As for the participants themselves, they were all known to me prior to the interviews. Typically this would be cause for concern due to the possibility of this affecting their responses as well as making them feel obligated to take part, however in this instance I felt the existing relationships benefitted the data collection. The interviewees all volunteered to take part upon hearing about my study. When I inquired into why each participant had volunteered to ensure they weren't doing it out of obligation, I received responses ranging from wanting to have their stories heard, to more surprisingly, being told that they only felt comfortable coming forward as they trusted me enough to want to share their story with me. Hearing these reasonings banished any doubts I initially had about the professionalism of interviewing people I knew, as it appeared the existing relationship was the reason the interviewees felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

The importance of the interviewees feeling comfortable became more evident as the interviews progressed. For many, the experience of coming to terms with their sexuality was distressing and many participants had had to undergo numerous hardships as a result. Through following the guidelines on conducting sensitive interviews I was able to traverse through the individuals narrative respectfully, paying heed to how their recollection was affecting them emotionally.

Having undergone a similar experience myself meant I was able to relate to the participants better and this further proved helpful in making the interviews more comfortable for the participants. My shared experience led to a sense of understanding and relatability between myself and the participants, making the interactions feel more human as opposed to artificial.

Conversely, my pre-conceptions that accompanied me having a similar experience may have resulted in a projection on to the participants. This could have occurred through the follow up questions I may have asked or the focus of certain aspects I personally found to be prominent factors within my own experience. Being aware of this throughout the process aided in correcting myself as the project commenced. Reminding myself of the importance of authentically conveying the experiences and stories I had been entrusted with helped me in finding an ideal balance between subjective and impartial.

However I remain aware that although I made every effort to distance my personal experience from affecting the report, in any situation involving the discussion of an emotion-evoking subject, it becomes impossible to remain entirely objective.

One interviewee initially approached me as they felt talking about their experience would help them move on, it became progressively clear however, that it was too early for them to discuss this any further. I took the initiative to put an end to the interview and instead took them instead to get food.

In retrospect, it was perhaps not my place to choose to end the interview, however I felt that allowing the participant to continue at this stage would prove to be too traumatic for them. Initially they conveyed feeling guilty for lacking the resolve to discuss their experience, however, upon suggesting that we could continue the interview at whatever point they would be ready to talk about it again, they appeared to be visibly happier at the prospect.

Through this particular interaction, it became clear that aside from me benefitting through attaining data, for many participants this recollection and account of their experiences was proving to hold value to them also. This realisation only further fuelled my motivation to write a report that remained genuine to the experiences, but also deserving of the trust I had been placed with.

Ultimately, I was lucky to have a range of individuals from varying orientations and identities to interview, however I am aware that the LGBTQ+ community is broad and consequently, many identities remain unrepresented. These findings are not generalisable to the entire community and future research on a wider range of participants should aim to use a more representative sample.

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