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“I was always trying to figure it out... on my own terms”: Structural Barriers, The Internet, and Sexual Identity Development Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer People of Different Generations

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Abstract

Recognizing the historical grounding of sexual identity development, we examined the spontaneous narration of the internet’s significance among a diverse sample of three distinct birth cohorts of sexual minority adults ($n = 36$, ages 18-59) in the United States. Thematic analysis revealed two structural barriers and four roles of the internet in sexual identity development. Structural barriers were *being in a heterosexual marriage* (exclusive to members of the older cohort), and (2) *growing up in a conservative family, religion, or community* (which cut across cohorts). Roles of the internet included: *learning about LGBTQ+ identities and sex*; *watching pornography* (which appeared only in narratives of the younger cohort); *finding affirming community*; and *facilitating initial LGBTQ+ romantic and sexual experiences* (which appeared mostly in narratives of the younger cohort). Most participants who described the internet as playing a role in sexual identity development were members of the younger (ages 18-25) and middle (ages 34-41) cohorts. We discuss how the internet has assumed a unique role in history in the development of sexual minority people. Further, our findings highlight that sexual identity development occurs across the lifespan, and how that process and the roles of the internet vary by generation and structural realities.

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INTRODUCTION

The process of developing a sexual identity is complex and involves social context and historical realities, as well as intrapersonal processes and social interaction (Bishop et al., 2020; Hammack, 2005; Troiden, 1988; Whitman & Nadal, 2015). Early theories of sexual identity development (SID) largely depict a linear process for people who identify with a non-heterosexual label such as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (e.g., Cass, 1979; Plummer, 1975). Though, there are a number of complexities involved in the SID process not adequately considered by these early models, including structural and cultural factors such as geographic location, age, race, religion, gender, occupation, and social class (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Eliason, 1996; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Grov et al., 2018; Hoffarth & Bogaert, 2017; Rosario et al., 2004, 2008).

For example, the experience of developing and living with a gay identity is different for Black and White gay and bisexual men (Lee, 2018; Miller et al., 2005; Rosario et al., 2004), and African American and Latina lesbians have been found to reach SID milestones at different ages compared to White lesbians (Parks et al., 2004). Further, people of color, and those from more conservative cultures, may be less likely to be out to family members, and women may come out and have their first same-gender sexual interaction at later ages than men (Grov et al., 2006; Parmenter et al., 2020). The sources of information about sexual identity, gender identity, and sexuality increase and become more available with technological advancement. Research on SID has just begun to consider the process for those who identify with newer labels such as queer or pansexual (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2020), as well as the role of the internet and social media in the SID process (e.g., Bates et al., 2020).

Structural barriers in the SID process have been discovered in relation to such factors as heterosexist (i.e., denial and denigration of non-heterosexual identities and behaviors) and homophobic cultural ideologies and institutions. For some who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or another non-heterosexual label (LGBQ+), SID and the ability to be open about their identity is shaped, in part, by religion, cultural norms, or the presence of conservative friends and family (Fox & Warber, 2014; Page et al., 2013; Parmenter et al., 2020). In one study (Arreola et al., 2013), some Latino gay men described lifelong experiences in homophobic sociocultural environments that interfered with their SID. These included, for example, being in the military or growing up in homophobic environments where gay people were ridiculed. Further, being involved in a religious community that sends negative messages about sexual minorities serves as a source of stress and can interfere with SID (Dank, 1971; Page et al., 2013). Other structural and cultural barriers include living in non-urban environments where it can be difficult to find other LGBQ+ people to connect with (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018; Kennedy, 2010; Mustanski et al., 2011), and intersecting identities (e.g., racial or ethnic identity and sexual identity), which can lead to distress and identity conflict (Parmenter et al., 2020).

In addition to the aforementioned social and cultural factors, the relationship between biography and historical moments must be included in any exploration of SID. This paper employs a life course paradigm that recognizes identity development is tied to the historical

setting in which it occurs and that the impact of a life event or transition depends on timing—i.e., the point in one’s life at which they occur (Elder Jr, 1998; Hammack, 2005; Hammack et al., 2018). Indeed, significant social, political, and technological changes have occurred over the last 30 years. According to a life course perspective, the effect of such changes is that the nature of SID differs for each cohort of young people as they come of age (Groves et al., 2018; Martos et al., 2015; Parks, 1999).

Historical context – that a non-heterosexual identity was once a diagnosable psychiatric illness, the events of the AIDS epidemic, or greater acceptance of non-heterosexual sexual identities in the present – has shaped the SID processes of gay men across generations (Hammack et al., 2018). Other scholars have demonstrated similar generational differences among lesbians (Parks, 1999), and among lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (Martos et al., 2015). The meaning of this progression is illustrated, for example, by research showing that younger LGBTQ+ people reach SID milestones at earlier ages compared to those in preceding generations (Bishop et al., 2020; Martos et al., 2015; Parks, 1999). This likely reflects the existence of stronger anti-gay sentiment in earlier generations, in comparison to the increased visibility and acceptance of today (Groves et al., 2006; Groves et al., 2018; Rosario et al., 2004). Indeed, over the past few decades, in popular tv shows like *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*, *Will and Grace*, *Glee*, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, and others, LGBTQ+ media roles are more central to everyday life and are beneficial to SID (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011).

Particularly for LGBTQ+ people, seeking information to counter negative stereotypes and overcoming negative self-evaluations are critical steps to constructing a sexual identity (Meyer, 2003; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011). Utilizing available media sources for information-seeking is a well-documented practice for LGBTQ+ persons in learning about and defining their own sexuality. The methods used for seeking such information reflect historical realities. For example, among a sample recruited in the 1960s, (Dank, 1971) reported that some men came out after learning about homosexuality and homosexuals in newspapers and magazines. Along with its development and increasingly widespread availability, the internet has been and continues to be a key information source for LGBTQ+ people (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Bond et al., 2009; DeHaan et al., 2013; Havey, 2021; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Robards et al., 2018; Song et al., 2021).

The internet has served as a valuable resource for sexual minority youth to connect with others, increase self-awareness, learn about gay culture, and navigate the coming out process (Harper et al., 2009). For sexual minorities living in rural areas, the internet is a source for learning about other sexual minorities who may live nearby, but where few opportunities allow for meeting people in person (Mustanski et al., 2011). Black and Latino gay, bisexual, and queer men have reported using internet message boards and chat rooms to find community and mentorship with ethnically similar men (Jamil et al., 2009). Further, mobile dating and hookup apps (e.g. Grindr, Scruff) serve as a way for some to explore their sexuality when they have not yet come out or formed a connection to a gay community (Robards et al., 2018).

Studies that have explored the role of the internet in SID have been conducted in: a single city or state in the US (Bond et al., 2009; DeHaan et al., 2013; Fox & Ralston, 2016;

Fox & Warber, 2014); Canada (Craig & McInroy, 2014; McKie et al., 2015); or Australia (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). One qualitative study included a nationwide US sample, but the sample was mostly white and only included participants between 18 and 24 years of age (Pingel et al., 2013). Studies that include diversity in age, geographic region, religion, and ethno-racial groups are missing and needed in order to more fully explore and understand the SID process among LGBTQ+ people (Fox & Ralston, 2016).

This paper begins to fill that gap by exploring the use of the internet in SID among a sample of diverse sexual minority people from three distinct birth cohorts in the United States. We also explore the structural and cultural factors that create a greater need to seek out information and community on the internet for some LGBTQ+ people. Grounded in an interpretive epistemology in which the goal is to interrogate meaning in the narration of a life story (e.g., Josselson & Hammack, 2021; Tappan, 1997), the focus of our analysis is on the way in which interviewees narrated their experience of the internet in their SID process. Our constructionist epistemology (Raelin, 2007) recognized that these narratives represent products of cultural and historical time, hence necessitating a paradigmatic grounding in a life course approach to human development (Hammack, 2005).

METHODS

Participants

The Generations Study is a mixed methods study of identity, stress, and health in three age cohorts of sexual minorities. The study assumed a concurrent, equal-status mixed methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017) such that two distinct samples were recruited at approximately the same time point to address similar questions about similarities and differences in SID, minority stress, and mental health based on birth cohort. Parameters of age cohorts were determined based on the experience of significant historical events (e.g., the Stonewall uprising, the discovery of AIDS, and the marriage equality debates) at particular moments of development (e.g., puberty, emerging adulthood). Members of the older generation were ages 52-59 at the start of the study in 2015, the middle generation ages 34-41, and the younger generation ages 18-25 years. (For detailed information about the study, see Frost et al., 2020; Krueger, Lin, et al., 2020.)

In this paper, we examine narrative data from the qualitative component of the study, which involved 191 interviews from sexual minority people in distinct regions of the US (i.e., Austin, TX area; New York City metropolitan area; San Francisco Bay Area; and Tucson, AZ area). Prospective interviewees were eligible if they (1) fell within the age range of the cohorts at the time of screening, (2) identified with any non-heterosexual sexual identity label to signify a sexual minority status, (3) were cisgender¹, (4) lived within 80 miles of one of the study sites, (5) completed at least a sixth-grade education, (6) had resided in the USA during ages 6-13, and (7) did not have a spouse or partner already enrolled in the study.

¹In recognition that the meaning and significance of social and historical events varies for transgender and cisgender sexual minority people, transgender people were referred to a concurrent companion study. Cisgender people who identified as genderqueer or nonbinary were eligible to participate, as long as they identified with a non-heterosexual sexual identity label.

Other analyses of data from the qualitative component of the Generations Study have focused on such issues as generational differences in narratives of genderqueer people (Barsigian et al., 2020), experiences of and attitudes toward sexual health and culture among gay and bisexual men (Hammack et al., 2019), and healthcare preferences (Martos et al., 2018). Our analysis of these narrative data was thus novel.

Our analysis included the 36 participants that described the internet as playing an important role in their understanding and accepting of their sexual identity (see below for a description of the interview protocol). A large majority identified as gay or lesbian (72.2%) and, unsurprisingly, given the wide availability of the internet during their adolescence, were in the younger generation (69.4%). Participants in this analysis were between 19 and 54 years old ($M=27.5$). The majority identified as a man (55.6%), and 30.6% and 13.9% identified as a woman or genderqueer, respectively. This racially and ethnically diverse subsample was 25% Asian, 25% Latino, 19.4% white, 16.7% multiracial, and 13.9% Black (Table 1).

Procedure

Participants were recruited via targeted, non-probability venue-based sampling within 80 miles of the four metropolitan areas noted above (see Krueger, Fish, et al., 2020 for a discussion of probability versus non-probability samples of sexual minority people). Semi-structured interviews were conducted between April, 2015 and April, 2016 by trained interviewers at either university offices or another location of the participant's choosing. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription company.

The interview protocol consisted of seven major sections in which interviewees were prompted to share their (1) life story, including high points, low points, and turning points in development; (2) social identity labels and communities with which they affiliate; (3) experiences with sex and attitudes about sexual practices; (4) challenges, stressors, and coping related to sexual minority status; (5) reflections on social and historical events related to sexual and gender diversity issues; (6) healthcare utilization; and (7) life reflections and goals. The full protocol can be accessed at Frost et al. (2018), and greater detail about the approach to designing the interview can be found in Frost et al. (2020). Interviewees received a \$75 USD incentive for their participation. Interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed by a professional transcription service. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at University of California Los Angeles, and all participants provided informed consent.

Analysis

A directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was first conducted in which text appearing in interview transcripts was marked with a "sexual identity" parent code, as well as the following sub-codes: "sexual identity label," "sexual identity sentiment and salience," "community involvement," and "sexual identity development." Interview transcripts were coded using Dedoose qualitative data analysis application (Dedoose, 2016). This analysis was conducted by a team of coders which included most of the original interviewers of the study and was supervised by the study investigators, one of whom is the second author of this paper. This first analytic step was intended simply to flag text content related to sexual

identity rather than to offer any interpretations of that text, which occurred in the second analytic step. The coding team met regularly to establish consistency in the application of codes and discuss any challenges or disagreement, which were resolved through consensus. Consistent with standards in qualitative psychology (Levitt et al., 2017), we also engaged in reflexive practices throughout the analytic process by sharing ways in which our own identities might impact our engagement with the data.

The second analytic step involved thematic analysis, “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). All excerpts coded with the parent code, “Sexual Identity,” as well as the following sub-codes: “sexual identity label,” “sexual identity sentiment and salience,” “community involvement,” and “sexual identity development” were extracted. The first author analyzed the coded segments and constructed themes reflecting similar narratives around the role of the internet in participants’ sexual identity development process. This analytic step yielded a total of 36 interviews in which the internet was described as playing a part in the participant’s SID process. All four authors met to discuss and revise emergent themes and continued to review throughout the process to finalize results. Given our grounding in constructionist and interpretive epistemologies, we did not have a priori themes but rather approached the data inductively, allowing major themes to emerge (see Braun & Clarke, 2012).

A constructionist epistemology views knowledge and theories as shaped by culture and our points of view (Raelin, 2007). Thus, we recognize the importance of positionality in research and how our own identities might impact the interpretive process. For reflexivity, we note the diversity of the four authors which include a Black, gay, cisgender man (CKC), a white, gay/queer, cisgender man (PLH), a white, queer/lesbian cisgender woman (ARG), and a Black, straight, cisgender woman (MAL). The four authors fall within the middle (CKC, PLH, and ARG), and between the middle and older generational cohorts (MAL).

RESULTS

In the results that follow, we first discuss structural barriers that create the need for internet-based exploration of sexual identity among some LGBTQ+ people. Structural barrier themes included: 1) heterosexual marriage; and 2) being a member of a conservative family or religion or living in a more conservative geographic location. We then discuss the various ways the internet functioned for participants’ sexual identity development. We identified four themes: 1) Learning about LGBTQ+ identities and sex; 2) Watching porn; 3) Using the internet to find affirming communities; and 4) Facilitating initial LGBTQ+ romantic and sexual experiences. Throughout, we highlight the role of generational cohort in the ways that participants used the internet in their SID process. Representative data excerpts are followed by the participant’s demographic information including pseudonym; gender identity; age; racial/ethnic identity; sexual identity; and study site [e.g., (John; Male; 40; Gay; Bay Area)]. Themes and the cohorts represented in each are displayed in Table 2.

Structural Barriers to Sexual Identity Development

One-third ($n=12$; 33%) of participants in this sample described structural barriers to their ability to freely explore and understand their own sexuality. For these participants, the internet served as a safe and private way for them to explore their sexual interests and develop an understanding of their own identity.

Heterosexual Marriage—Reflecting the absence of the internet during their adolescence, only 3 participants in the older generation described using the internet in their process of discovering their sexual identity. In each of these cases, the participant was in a heterosexual marriage at the time they began to explore their sexuality and form their gay and lesbian sexual identities. Ted described getting married because, “I guess I thought it was what I was supposed to do.” He was also in the military during when the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy was in effect and described his sexual identity exploration:

[My wife] went home to visit her parents in the summer...took the kids... at one point, when she first came home, I had actually been online, probably [Gay.com](#) or something, scared to death... what do I have to lose here? My career...My children, who... God knows what would happen...

After his divorce, the internet continued to provide Ted entrée to his developing sexual identity:

When I used to travel, once I was out of the Navy and I worked for the VA, then the Coast Guard, the Coast Guard job I traveled a lot. I was in Washington, D.C., a lot. I actually met people online, had four to six weeks of communication with them, went out on a dinner date, and we said goodnight. It was something. It was a step in the direction, for me to help say, gee, I really enjoyed that experience, more than I ever liked meeting a woman. It was all validating.

(Ted; Male; 53; White; Gay; NY)

As Francisco described,

Anyway, online, checking this and this, talking, because it was all just text back then. Then my wife, a couple times, was like, “Hey, what are you doing? What are you talking”—oh, nothing, I’m just—so that definitely was the place to go... You’re trying to deal with it. Where do you deal with it? I don’t know if it’s good that we have a computer or not, but that was a place.

(Francisco; Male, 54; Latino; Gay; Bay Area)

When asked if being able to talk to people and meeting people online helped him to accept himself and come out, he replied, “Oh, yeah. That helped.”

Lisa, who was sexually abused as a teenager and spent most of her childhood caring for her sister who was disabled, described herself as getting “married really early to get the hell out of the house.” While unhappily married to a man, she described how she turned to the internet to try to understand her sexuality.

[My husband] was in law enforcement, so he was putting on the whole masculine facade of “I’m manly and I’m—” had the guns, had the cars, had the butchery out—he was all arrrr, doing stuff with the guys all the time... I was starting to question myself because I really wasn’t attracted to what was happening... I was angry with him and in ‘99 I got a job with—still at the same place... and I got into the training division. I had to come up here for training, and this is right around the internet coming out... and I’m online and I’m looking around and I found a community of people I’m talking to. I ended up meeting someone up here and had my first female-to-female experience.

(Lisa; Female; 54; White; Lesbian; Austin)

The narratives of Ted, Francisco, and Lisa illustrate a documented socio-sexual pattern among older sexual minority people: heterosexual marriage preceding coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Grossman, 2008; Jensen, 2013). In each of their cases, the trappings of marriage and the military created structural barriers to exploring their sexual identity out in the open. Thus, the internet became the primary outlet for their self-exploration, identity development, and acceptance.

Conservative Cultures, Families, and Religions—Another structural barrier that created the need for a safe venue for sexual identity exploration was being a part of a conservative culture during and beyond adolescence. Unsurprisingly, given the absence of the internet during the adolescence and young adulthood of those in the older cohort, these participants were members of the younger ($n=6$) and middle ($n=3$) cohorts. These participants discussed their experiences in more conservative communities, and the existence of hegemonic heterosexuality within religions and ethnic heritages, each of which hindered free exploration and expression of their non-heterosexual identities. For example, Ryan described,

... it was the hardest thing for other people to know. I was socially exiled, just cause a lot of people were uncomfortable... That’s when I was lonely, when I was 12, 13, middle school. Middle school’s never fun for anyone, but especially not for a gay boy in Kansas. I just talked to myself. I got really into using my computer. Used the internet as solace, whatever. I would make friends on the internet.

(Ryan; Male; 21; White; Gay; Bay Area)

For Ryan, engaging with other people on the internet was a strategy that allowed him to fill the void of being ostracized for being gay in his small conservative community.

Navya, an Indian woman, described her experience of realizing, as a teenager, that she was a lesbian and how she processed that identity given that, according to her, “Indian people don’t accept gay people.”

Being gay or lesbian or LGBT in any society is really scary, but then, on top of that, my parents are Indian. I was like, this is not gonna fly at all. Then, I guess towards the end of high school, I was like, who am I kidding? I went out on that one date with that dude... Even on the internet, I would try to look at men online. Nothing was happening at all inside me.

(Navya; Female; 35; API; Lesbian)

Similarly, several participants discussed the strict gender roles and expectations of marriage within their culture of origin and religion. These participants were of Mexican and Salvadoran heritage. As Jacqueline described.

I just have a very, very, I would say, old school family, and so my family is just very traditional. The woman stays at home, and finds a husband; they get married, and so I think that's just how—like Mexican American household, there's no way. The lesbian idea or being gay, it's never included. It's just like, okay, you're a man; you're gonna get married to a woman. You're a woman, you're gonna get—do you know what I mean? They have this whole plan set out for you as soon as you're born basically, and so it's like this whole idea of being lesbian was never in anyone's plans.

(Jacqueline; Female; 21; Latina; Lesbian; Tucson)

Salvador described how non-heterosexuality was seen in his family:

We're Latino so with that it has certain connotations of certain stereotypes of upholding strict gender rules, and then it also—and we're also evangelical, so I mean we just—it just wasn't talked about. If it was talked about, it was talked about negatively. If it was talked about, we didn't use certain words like certain colloquial words. We would use the term “homosexual” rather than “gay.”

(Salvador; Male; 23; Latino; Gay; Bay Area)

Salvador also described his parents' belief that God would change him when he first came out to them. For these participants, being LGBTQ+ and of Latin American heritage created a cultural barrier that limited their options when exploring their sexuality. For Salvador, his family's religion was an additional barrier.

This was also true for Sarah, who described how growing up in a strict, Christian community and maintaining connections with that community has hindered her ability to develop and accept her own sexual identity.

I really struggle with [self-acceptance] because also it's not just socially right. Well, it isn't in my immediate social circle... I'm fortunate in that I don't really want children, but if I did, right, I mean you still have to—you have to think about that. Getting married, for instance – shortly after I came out, one of my closest Christian friends got married. All of the people at her wedding were in my chosen family. I just realized that they would probably all come to my wedding if I got married, but they would probably also disagree with what was happening and so that was difficult for me to wrap my head around because it kept me, I think, a little bit from fully accepting it.

(Sarah; Female; 23; API; Lesbian; NY)

For Sarah, her Christian upbringing led her to seek dates with men online, and after realizing she didn't want to go on dates with the men she talked to, she took a chance and went on a date with a girl and realized that she was gay.

Role of the Internet in Sexual Identity Exploration

For most participants ($n=21$; 58%), the internet functioned in a number of ways during their process of sexual identity development. Importantly, nearly all participants who described the internet as playing a role in sexual identity exploration were in the younger and middle generations. Indeed, only three of the 36 participants were in the older generation, which reflects the reality that their process of sexual identity exploration likely predated wide availability of the internet. Each of these subthemes includes narratives describing ways participants used the internet in discovering their sexual identity.

Learning about LGBTQ+ Identities and Sex—The internet served as a resource for participants to explore what identity label would best fit, to learn about the community and what it means to be LGBTQ+, as well as to gain an understanding of the ins and outs of a sexual minority sexuality. Karina described how she used the internet to make sense of her attraction to girls.

... I definitely, when I was first starting out, would go and Google ‘I think I might like girls, how do I know,’ and things like that. Everyone was just like, “However you wanna know. Whatever it is that you feel.” That was great, cause it just taught me that all of this, there’s no fast and straight, this means you’re a bisexual. It’s just up to you, and you figure it out.

(Karina; Female; 23; Latina; Bisexual; Tucson)

Lucian described initially discovering a connection to the word *lesbian*:

... Being young in the age of the internet, there’s lots of Google searches. There’s lots of YouTube videos, lots of episodes of *The L Word* that you can pirate from websites. That was probably what I spent most of my time doing, sitting on my computer reading stuff like that... I would say probably around is 15... That’s around the time where I started to really identify as a lesbian. I was talking to other lesbian identified people online... I figured that must be who I am. I just really encompassed and embodied what that label represented and the subculture of it.

(Lucian; Genderqueer; 23; Latina; Lesbian; Bay Area)

For participants like Karina and Lucian, the internet offered a forum for broad exploration of their desires and attractions, and it provided a way of interacting with others who shared their identities and desires, which assisted in finding appropriate identity labels.

For other participants, the internet filled a gap created by a lack of sources for learning about LGBTQ+ sex. For Marisa, a need to learn how to have sex with a woman after having had relationships with men led her to search for information on the internet:

As far as having sexual relationships with women? That was all lots of Google... There’s a website called Autostraddle that’s for women who date women. They have a whole guide to lesbian sex. That was very informative. I always was like, “Wait, this wasn’t sex when I was having it with a guy. If I was doing this with a guy—I’ve been doing this with a guy since I was 16. Is this—okay, all right.” My view of what sex is has changed dramatically since I started dating women.

(Marisa; Female; 25; Bi/Multiracial; Bisexual; Austin)

And Diego described his lack of understanding of the logistics of having sex with other men:

I didn't start having sex—I came out, and then didn't have it—when I was 15, and I didn't have sex until two years later because I had next to no information about it. I had opportunities to do it, but I turned them down because I was worried. I had no idea how it worked. I didn't understand it. No one had explained it to me. Yeah, I knew how straight sex works... It's like I didn't know how it worked being gay. I was like okay, yeah, I know what anal is, but I have no idea how it functions... It's like I asked my mom, because I always ask my mom everything. She had absolutely no idea... It just ended up me not having this information, and being worried, until I finally was able—I went online. Then even online, around the time when I came out, there wasn't good information that I felt like I could trust.

(Diego; Male; 20; Bi/Multiracial; Gay; Bay Area)

Watching Porn—Due to technological advancements and the availability of the internet during their adolescence, porn played a key role for a number of participants in the younger cohort. No participants in the middle and older cohorts discussed using porn in their process of sexual identity development. For these younger participants, viewing porn on the internet began between the ages of 10 and 16 years of age. For some, the internet allowed them to view porn and nude images of men and women to determine who they were most excited to look at. As Dylan described:

Then once I had kind of private access to a computer when I was 14, 15, it seems like, at first I looked at pictures of naked women, even though I wanted to look at naked men. Because I was like, 'Well, maybe this is where it changes. This is where I start to like girls. Feel attracted to girls.' I felt nothing when I would look at those.

(Dylan; Male; 24; White; Gay; Austin)

Brandon described it this way:

Looking at [pornography] online, finding things that I liked, things started leaning towards men. Eventually, that was the only thing I was focused on, and I never really thought about it. It just was, versus me acknowledging it, until a discussion with my cousin, realized that I am indeed gay. Then that self-realization really made that a major part of who is me.

(Brandon; Male; 23; White, Gay; Tucson)

For these participants, exploring nude images and porn online was a part of how they confirmed whom they were attracted to, and in doing so confirmed their own sexual identity. For Peter, seeing gay porn introduced him to aspects of sex that he had never seen but thought he might like to try.

I think the first time was when my friends were playing a prank. This was probably around middle school... They sent me a link to this website... I clicked on it. It's just a clip of these two guys doing intercourse. I was like, "What the heck?!" I

was shocked by it, but I closed it immediately. In the back of my mind, I was like, “Whoa, what was that?” I’d probably look into it more... I think actually, yeah, maybe high school, because my internet at home wasn’t good for a while. I looked more into gay porn. I was like, “I like this.”

(Peter; Male; 22; API; Gay; Austin)

Internet porn was also an early resource for some as they began to have an interest in sex. It was a way to explore curiosities and an alternative to exploring sex with another person, which was an uncomfortable idea for some. As Andrea explained:

There was this extreme curiosity, going back to the feeling of not being able to be open with my family. When we got to the point where the internet was super accessible, not necessarily on forms of tablets, but at that age you could at least get on the internet on a computer, I just did a lot of research. I would be so excited if a movie came on that featured queer people... Even just porn too, because that was curious for me, because I guess I was afraid of interacting with someone on a sexual level. I didn’t really get into any relationships, so it was like that never happened, but I was always trying to figure it out in some sense on my own terms.

(Andrea; Female; 24; Black; Queer; NY)

Salvador shared that his relationship with porn began in adolescence:

I always wanted a romantic partner and I never had one and in terms of a boyfriend or a date, I’ve never had a date. I’ve never had a boyfriend. With puberty, I just liked soft porn. I’ve always looked at porn; I’ve always watched porn.

(Salvador; Male; 23; Latinx; Gay; Bay Area)

For these participants, prior to engaging in romantic or sexual relationships with other people, finding porn on the internet was a way for them to engage with their own sexuality and tend to their curiosities about sex and sexuality.

Finding Affirming Community—The internet also served as a place for finding and connecting with communities that affirmed and supported participants’ sexual identity. These included both online communities, as well as in-person resources in their local communities. For Joseph, a gay youth site provided him with the opportunity to connect with and learn from other young gay men.

Junior year. And I remember there was like a little help site called the GYC, the Gay Youth Corner. And, I had a forum there and I was just talking to other gay guys and just making friends cause I wanted to talk to people like me... And it was just like relieving or refreshing cause it was just a forum where just people my age talking about their struggles of being gay and just all of us confiding in each other, like, oh, I deal with the same thing, this is how I do it, this is how I cope... And it wasn’t sexualized and that’s what I loved about it.

(Joseph; Male; 21; Black; Gay; Austin)

Matt described turning to the internet to find a local community group that gave him the confidence and courage to accept his sexuality and begin the coming out process.

I think over time I got so sick of hiding it from people, that when I graduated high school I went online and I looked up LGBT resources and I found the Eon Youth Lounge. It was there where I went... I had my first affirming experience of being gay. It was the first time I told someone I was gay too. It was a staff member. It's just like it was so relieving, cause just like, "Oh my God, this is okay and there's other people like me."

(Matt; Male; 24; Bi/Multiracial; Queer; Tucson)

Similar to Matt's experience of finding that there are other people like himself, Laura also found it helpful to find people online that she could relate to.

I think I have—when I was a little bit younger in my early twenties, when I was just dating, I think I went on. It wasn't an LGBT specific—well, sort of. Yahoo Groups, they have different categories. Yeah, I did definitely use the forum on there for—I can't even remember what it was called, but it was specific to LGBT... I think I also used Craigslist for a while because they had women seeking women. Again, I didn't end up connecting with anybody from there, but just scouring it and seeing that there are other people was helpful for me.

(Laura; Female; 34; Bi/Multirace; Bisexual; Bay Area)

Facilitation of Initial LGBQ+ Romantic and Sexual Experiences—The narratives of just under half (47%) of participants in this subsample revealed that the internet played a key role in facilitating their first LGBQ+ sexual experiences. The ability to interact and plan to meet people online provided an opportunity to explore their own sexuality and attractions. It also created the possibility of meeting another LGBQ+ person to date or have sex with at young ages, when they had not come out and didn't know other LGBQ+ people in their communities or schools. For some, these experiences helped them to confirm and accept their own sexuality.

I started using Grindr when I discovered that was the thing. That was back in 2012. I think those initial sexual experiences with others from the app—from people I met off the app or things like that probably solidified my attraction to same sex.

(Juan; Male; 23; Latinx; Gay; Tucson).

Similarly, Jacqueline described her experience this way:

Then once I got to college, and once I came out to my best friend—he was just asking me questions trying to figure it all out, and so I told him. I was like, "You know, I like women, but I don't think I'm physically attracted to them. I don't feel that physical attraction for them."... He was just like, "You'll figure it out. You'll know once you kiss a woman. Then you'll know." That was true. After I actually kissed a woman, then I was like, "Oh"... It's someone I had met online.

(Jacqueline; Female; 21; Latinx; Lesbian; Tucson)

For participants in the younger generation, technological advances made prior to their adolescence also meant that some discovered online dating and hookup apps at relatively young ages. Zach explained how his first sexual experience with another man happened:

I was 14, and I would go onto Craigslist and talk to guys. I never really met up with anybody, because I was always afraid to. Then one day, I just did. It was fun. It was fun, I guess.

(Zach; Male; 22; Black; Gay; Austin)

While in high school, a search for an online community led to Lucian's first girlfriend:

I met her on Yahoo Answers or something like that... It was something stupid like, "I'm looking for people to talk to who are queer," or gay is I think what we used back then. "Does anyone wanna talk?" Then, we decided to Yahoo Messenger or something like that. She lived in Michigan. I was living in California at the time. It was my first experience with feeling like I could just talk to someone about being gay and really just jumped into it... The following February, I told my mom that I was going to San Francisco for the weekend. I did, but then I got on a plane and went to Florida to Disney World to meet my internet girlfriend, who was going there for her birthday with her family... That was when I had my first sexual experience.

(Lucian; Genderqueer; 23; Latinx; Lesbian; Bay Area)

For Zach and Lucian, access to internet-based communities predated the ages at which they began to explore their sexuality. Accessing such online tools facilitated dating and sexual experiences with people outside of their own immediate peer group before and during high school.

Not surprisingly, a large majority (70%) of those for whom the internet facilitated their early sexual experiences were in the younger generation. The internet facilitated the first LGBTQ+ sexual experience for only one participant in the older generation. Lisa, whom we discussed earlier, was in a heterosexual marriage at the time. The internet played a role in sexual identity development for four participants in the middle generation. Their generation was in its adolescence during the early days of social interaction on the internet. For example, AOL chat rooms were popular in the 1990s, which was how Paola met her first girlfriend: "... We were on an AOL chat room or something like that, and got to talking, and realized we were the same age and both gay and both in Austin and both fans of the same music and both single..." (Paola; Female; 36; Latinx; Lesbian; Austin). Benjamin also described using an early social media platform:

This was late '90s... There was this great web chat system called wbs.net. Instead of a normal chatroom where it's just your handle, you could put a photo. If you liked a TV show, you could put something as your avatar for that TV show. You could have a username. You could have a sassy quote or a signature. It was very much like having your own Twitter account and chatting. It was web based. You'd have to keep hitting refresh. I met this guy... We were chatting for a few months. We liked each other. Then it got to the point where I was like, "Hey, I'm actually gonna be in [town]. Do you want me to?" kinda thing. That was my first date slash we ended up having sex that night when we met.

(Benjamin; Male; 35; Gay; API; Bay Area)

DISCUSSION

Utilizing qualitative data from a sample from four different regions in the US, this study examined the role of the internet in the sexual identity development of sexual minority people of three distinct birth cohorts. Guided by a life course paradigm that emphasizes the social context and the timing of historical events in development, we explored the spontaneous narratives about the internet that emerged in longer interviews with this sample. Our analysis revealed the ways in which structural barriers (e.g., exclusionary social policies, stigma, heterosexism) created unique value of the internet for interviewees across generations. Use of the internet largely reflected the historical moments in which members of different generations came of age. For example, younger participants had access to porn, as well as dating and hookup apps during their adolescent and young adult years. Meanwhile, the three participants from the older generation in this subsample each explored and developed their sexual identities later in life, after having been in long-term heterosexual marriages. By that time, the internet was available for them to utilize. Presumably, the other members of the older generation in the larger study sample developed their sexual identities prior to the wide availability of the internet.

Previous studies have found that the internet is an important resource for learning about others that shared their experience, and that porn played a part in some exploring their own attraction and desires (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Harper et al., 2009; Jamil et al., 2009; Mustanski et al., 2011). Similarly, participants in our study described a number of important ways in which they utilized the internet in the process of developing their sexual identity, including learning about LGBTQ+ identities and sex, watching porn, and having their first LGBTQ+ sexual experience. Overwhelmingly, prior studies exploring the role of the internet in SID have focused exclusively on adolescents. Our study adds to this literature by illustrating the important role of the internet for those whose adolescence preceded widespread availability of the internet and those who develop a sexual minority identity later in the life course. Nearly a third of this subsample was born in 1981 or earlier and, thus, the internet wasn't widely available and accessible until many were well into adulthood. Nevertheless, it still served a critical role for many in their SID process.

Participants in our study highlighted their racial and ethnic identities, age, culture, and geography as barriers and facilitators of their SID. Further, as illustrated in other studies (Groves et al., 2006; Groves et al., 2018), those in different generational cohorts described very divergent SID processes and experiences. Although we did not employ an intersectional frame in this study, our findings raise important questions about the ways in which various aspects of identity and structural realities come together to shape SID processes. For example, participants described realizing that they were not heterosexual and having to reconcile that with their religious and ethnic identities. Previous studies have highlighted that, for some, sexual and ethnic identity develop simultaneously and co-constitute each other (Bowleg, 2008, 2013; Jamil et al., 2009). Further, Parmenter et al. (2020) found that some sexual minority persons whose central identities lay at the intersections of race, ethnicity, or religion experienced distress and identity conflict. In contrast, those who saw their sexuality as their single most important identity were more likely to be White and nonreligious.

Other findings from this study suggest that, among Black, Latinx, and White sexual minorities, the pace of SID and the timing of milestones differ based on intersections of generational cohort, sex, sexual identity, and race/ethnicity (Bishop et al., 2020). Further, that 14% of participants in this analysis identified as genderqueer reflects increasing usage of terms for identities outside the gender binary (Hammack et al., 2021; Thorne et al., 2019). Increasing diversity in gender identity labels, race and ethnicity, sexual identity, membership in sexual subcommunities (e.g., kink/BDSM), and structural realities (e.g., limited language and terminology available to describe one's sexual identity) intersect in critical ways to shape sexual and gender identity development and connection to community differently across generational cohort (Barsigian et al., 2020). Thus, future research will need to explore the increasing complexity of the SID process, including the intersections of education, geography, and class, which have implications for the need for and the accessibility of the internet for SID processes. For example, as illustrated by participants in this sample, growing up in a conservative city or state meant that finding other LGBTQ+ people in their community was difficult, if not impossible. These geographic realities created a specific need to use the internet for SID and finding community. Further, there is an absence of LGBTQ+ inclusive, comprehensive sexuality education in many school districts. In several states, teachers are required to portray LGBTQ+ people negatively, or are prohibited from discussing LGBTQ+ people (SIECUS, 2020). These structural barriers create the need to use the internet to explore LGBTQ+ sex.

CONCLUSION: Limitations and Implications

There are a number of limitations of this study worth noting. First, the use of the internet in the process of SID was not a domain that we explored specifically in the interview protocol. These data reflect narratives that arose organically in the process of discussing participants' identity development and coming out process. Consequently, there may be ways that participants utilized the internet for SID that we have not captured. Second, the generations defined for the purposes of the larger study left approximately 10-year age gaps between the cohorts. Thus, we were not able to uncover any potential differences for those in the missing age groups. Lastly, while our sample reflected multiple regions of the country, there are other regions of the country where these questions should be explored to identify additional region-specific structural and cultural factors.

Despite these, our findings expand on the SID literature by exploring the role of the internet across generational cohorts. SID varies across generation and structural conditions, as well as by racial and ethnic identity, culture, geography, sex, gender, and religious faith. While the role of the internet in these complex processes has been explored among adolescent samples, we underscored that SID occurs throughout the life course for sexual minority people. Thus, for some, the need for internet-based resources in the SID process exists well into adulthood. Additional research is needed to explore the role of the internet and social media among those for whom the SID process occurs later in life, as their experiences likely differ significantly from those whose SID process occurs in adolescence. Lastly, while much progress has been made in the acceptance of sexual minority identities, that progress is not uniform across geography, culture, and the various aspect of identity. Our findings highlight the ways that these can shape the SID process. Future research should explore the role of

the internet in the SID process using an intersectional framework. Exploring SID and the variations across multiple axes of identity and oppression is critical for our understanding of SID across the life span.

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Table 1:Sample Demographics (*n*=36)

Age		
Mean	27.5	
Median	23	
Range	19 - 54	
	<i>n</i>	%
Generational Cohort		
Younger	25	69.4%
Middle	8	22.2%
Older	3	8.3%
Sexual Identity		
Queer	5	13.9%
Gay/Lesbian	26	72.2%
Bisexual	5	13.9%
Gender		
Man	20	55.6%
Woman	11	30.6%
Genderqueer	5	13.9%
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian/Pacific Islander	9	25.0%
Black/AA	5	13.9%
Bi/Multiracial	6	16.7%
Latino	9	25.0%
White	7	19.4%
Education		
High School	4	11.1%
Some College	11	30.6%
Associates	4	11.1%
Bachelors	11	30.6%
Some Postgraduate	2	5.6%
Graduate Degree	4	11.1%
Site		
Austin	10	27.8%
Bay Area	12	33.3%
Tucson	6	16.7%
New York	7	19.4%

Table 2:

Narrative Themes of the Role of the Internet in Sexual Identity Development

Themes	Cohort(s) Represented in Theme
Structural Barriers to SID	
Heterosexual Marriage	Older
Conservative Cultures, Families, and Religions	Younger and Middle
Role of Internet in SID	
Learning about LGBTQ+ identities and sex	Younger
Watching Porn	Younger
Finding Affirming Community	Younger and Middle
Facilitating Initial LGBTQ Romantic and Sexual Experiences	Younger

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