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1 “Let me do what I please with it [...] don't decide my identity for me”: LGBTQ+ youth
2 experiences of social media in narrative identity development.

3

4

Abstract

5 Social media provides LGBTQ+ youth with daily access to a broader socio-cultural dialogue
6 that may shape narrative identity development. Through in-depth narrative interviews, the
7 present study sought to understand the lived experiences of 11 LGBTQ+ undergraduates (*Age*
8 *range* = 19 – 23) building narrative identities in the cultural context of social media, and the
9 role of social media within this process. Interviews were analysed using an interpretative,
10 individual analysis of personal stories. These experiences were then compared and contrasted
11 through thematic analysis to identify four shared narrative themes. *Narratives of merging safe*
12 *spaces* highlight how LGBTQ+ youth now have regular access to safe environments
13 on/offline which facilitate more secure identity development. *Narratives of external identity*
14 *alignment* describe social media as a tool for LGBTQ+ youth to seek out identities that match
15 their pre-existing sense of self. *Narratives of multiple context-based identities* encapsulate
16 how adolescents' identity markers are multiple and invoked in a context-dependent manner.
17 Lastly, *narratives of individuality and autonomy* characterise how LGBTQ+ youth perceive
18 themselves as highly individualised members of a wider community. These findings highlight
19 the complex role social media plays within LGBTQ+ youth identity development. The
20 implications are discussed within.

21

22 *Keywords:* Identity development, narrative identity, social media, sexuality,
23 adolescence, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Plus (LGBTQ+), queer

24

25 **“Let me do what I please with it [...] don't decide my identity for me”:** LGBTQ+ youth
26 **experiences of social media in narrative identity development.**

27 Adolescence is a key developmental period for identity formation (Erikson, 1968;
28 McAdams, 2015). Defined as the transition from childhood to adulthood, it is characterised
29 by biological, cognitive, and social changes (Bell, 2016). In contemporary society, identity
30 development takes place over a prolonged period, now extending into the third decade of life
31 known as ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, Zukauskienė, & Sugimura, 2014). A key feature of
32 identity development during this life stage is the emergence of the ability to construct a sense
33 of personal continuity over time and across contexts (Erickson, 1968; Pasupathi, Mansour, &
34 Brubaker, 2007). Narrative identity refers to an individual’s developing life story;
35 synthesising characters, plots, and events, and between self and society to bring an
36 overarching explanation and meaning to a string of potentially random life moments (Frank,
37 2000; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean et al, 2018). Sexual attraction and romantic
38 relationships are important elements of this identity development (Savin-Williams, 2005).
39 However, sociocultural expectations surrounding gender and relationships can be highly
40 complex, especially for those who experience same-sex attraction (DeVito, Walker, &
41 Birnholtz, 2018; Hammack, Thompson, & Pilecki, 2009).

42 Social media has become prominent within all aspects of adolescents’ daily lives and
43 also now plays an integral role in identity, social, and romantic relational development for
44 most adolescents (boyd, 2014; Davis & Weinstein, 2017). For Lesbian Gay Bisexual
45 Transgender Queer Plus (LGBTQ+) youth, social media plays a critical part in providing
46 opportunities to share stories of similar experiences, access sexuality-relevant information,
47 and experiment in the presentation of versions of one's self to the rest of the world (Duguay,
48 2016; Kuper & Mustanski, 2014). Thus social media provides LGBTQ+ youth with daily
49 access to a broader socio-cultural dialogue that may facilitate and influence their narrative

50 identity development. The present study aims to explore the narrative identity development of
51 contemporary LGBTQ+ youth, who are the first generation to have persistent access to social
52 media throughout their adolescence, and the role of social media within this process.
53 Importantly, the study adopts an inclusive perspective of LGBTQ+ youth, focusing on the
54 experiences of same-sex attracted youth who may or may not adopt conventional labelling
55 (e.g. homosexual) around sexuality, also known as queer youths, who have been
56 underrepresented in research examining social media and identity processes (Driver, 2007;
57 Mathers, Sumerau & Cragun, 2018; Randazzo, Farmer & Lamb, 2015), e.g. those who
58 identify as female as many previous studies have focused on male-identified queerness (e.g.
59 Heath & Goggin, 2009). By using person-centred narrative interviews to understand life
60 stories, we aim to develop an enhanced understanding of LGBTQ+ youths' cumulative
61 experiences of developing a sense of identity within the digital age.

62 **LGBTQ+ Youth and Identity Development**

63 Sexual identity is an important, normative and expected aspect of identity
64 development (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Though difficult to accurately measure, in early
65 and mid-adolescence, roughly 15% of youth experience a period of sexual questioning and
66 experimentation, reporting emotional and sexual attraction to genders they themselves
67 identify as (Carver, Egan, & Perry, 2004) and approximately 4-5% of youth (16-24) identify
68 as same-sex attracted (Office of National statistics, 2016). However, this does not accurately
69 capture the various sexual and gender identities individuals now project in contemporary
70 society. Coming out and the disclosure of one's LGBTQ+ identity (rather than concealing it)
71 is important to psychological health (Solomon, McAbee, Asberg, & McGee, 2015).
72 Therefore, the ability to integrate sexual desire, sexual activity, sexual openness and the
73 ability to articulate sexual identity has particular positive outcomes and benefits for LGBTQ+
74 individuals (Parent, Talley, Schwartz, & Hancock, 2015). However, this research often

75 focuses on ‘more traditional’ homonormative sexual identity descriptors such as ‘lesbian’ and
76 much less is known about queer youth (Driver, 2007; Mathers, Sumerau & Cragun, 2018;
77 Randazzo et al., 2015), who may identify ‘in-between’ these now established categorise.

78 LGBTQ+ youth have not always had the freedom to express their romantic and sexual
79 interests, and this is even more salient for less well understood subcategories such as
80 ‘pansexual’, ‘fluid’ or ‘mostly straight’(e.g. Randazzo et al., 2015). This process has often
81 been characterised by negative stereotypes, homophobia and victimisation (e.g. Pearson &
82 Wilkinson, 2013). Importantly, negative reactions by known individuals and the broader
83 community to disclosure can diminish its positive psychological effects (Mustanski,
84 Andrews, & Puckett, 2016). Furthermore, the cultural context for a new cohort of LGBTQ+
85 youth has shifted dramatically in the twenty-first century (Cohler & Hammack, 2007), with
86 significant political and social gains towards equality (e.g. The U.K. Civil Partnership Act,
87 2004), and a dramatic increase in visibility of ‘alternative’ sexual identity within many areas
88 of the modern media (Raley & Luckas, 2006). However, many of these ‘alternative’ identities
89 are grouped into binary categories (e.g. homo- or heterosexual) and LGBTQ+ individuals
90 spend significant time and mental energy managing how these ongoing disclosure decisions
91 occurs (Manning, 2016).

92 **LGBTQ+ Identity Management and Social Media**

93 The emergence and widespread adoption of social media have further shifted the
94 sociocultural landscape for sexual identity development (Davis & Weinstein, 2017; Kuper &
95 Mustanski, 2014). Approximately 95% of 16-24-year-olds in the UK (Ofcom, 2018) and 96%
96 of 18-29-year-olds in the United states (Anderson, 2019) own a smartphone, with 96% of
97 smartphone users in western societies using the internet for social media use (Office of
98 National Statistics, 2017). These social media users actively engage in multiple digital
99 platforms, with Snapchat, Instagram and Youtube being the most popular among 18-24-year-

100 olds (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Current emerging adults or ‘Zillennials’, – born between
101 1995 and 2010 (Turner, 2015), are the first generation to have lived their entire adolescence
102 with immediate and personalised mobile access to social media which continually and
103 persistently accompanies them through all of the environments they inhabit in their daily life
104 activities.

105 Social media applications offer distinct new lines of identity exploration and
106 expression in a context largely disparate to that of previous generations (Lijadi & Schalkwyk,
107 2017). Scholars now argue online environments such as social media are a key functional
108 context for healthy developmental tasks related to identity development (boyd, 2014;
109 Haimson, 2018). They can offer a safe and accepting online environment (Craig & McInroy,
110 2014), ready access to information and social support (Baams, Jonas, Utz, Bos, & Van Der
111 Vuurst, 2011), the ability to connect with peers across geographic boundaries to identify
112 similar individuals to themselves and assist in identifying sexual partners not available offline
113 (Miller, 2015). This is particularly important for marginalised groups such as LGBTQ+
114 individuals (Fox & Ralston, 2016). The anonymity and pseudonymity (e.g. exploration of
115 social media without evidence of visitation) the internet can provide, paired with the
116 disinhibition (Suler, 2004) and ubiquitous nature of daily public online communication
117 increase opportunities to experiment with unexplored aspects of the self, without risk of
118 stigma (Davis & Weinstein, 2017). As this exploration continues, social media can facilitate
119 controlled self-disclosure within the coming out process (Fox & Ralston, 2016), assisting
120 LGBTQ+ individuals in constructing, managing and expressing identity projections as they
121 shift over time. Adolescents now hold in their hand the ability to continually project self-
122 expression, self-edit, reshuffle, revise and reorganise aspects of the self, which provide new
123 opportunity to learn from and influence a more diverse audience of others (Davis, 2012).

124 However, the complex daily decision-making challenges and how self-presentation
125 decisions are made in relation to their LGBTQ+ social media use also brings risks (DeVito et
126 al., 2018). Early online experiences were generally distinct from offline life, but as social
127 media use increases bridging the physical and digital, online identities have become more
128 consistent with offline selves (Davis & Weistein, 2017). DeVito et al., (2018) suggest that
129 due to social media use, identity presentation for adolescents is now complicated in ways that
130 are not captured by existing models of self-presentation. Adolescents are required to manage
131 the ongoing process of identity presentations both linearly across time, and latterly across
132 multiple often overlapping network profiles, with differing norms, expectations and
133 audiences (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). This process is made even more complex when
134 individuals do not fit neatly into well understood categories and can make the task of identity
135 self-definition and realignment even more complicated. It is of note that many popular social
136 media sites did not always allow users to define their own identity e.g. Facebook did not
137 expand its binary choice of gender options until 2014 (Bivens, 2017). DeVito et al., (2018)
138 reconceptualise these interactions in the form of a ‘Personal Social Media Ecosystem’
139 highlighting the task of balancing a constantly shifting set of factors between personal,
140 structural and context-based decisions to avoid stigmatisation; while still allowing the need
141 for space particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals to experiment and express LGBTQ+ identity
142 safely.

143 However, for users who face high-stakes in their use of online presentation e.g. a gay
144 Christian in conservative midwestern united states (boyd, 2014), inadvertent disclosure of
145 LGBTQ+ identity can lead to potential harassment or employment discrimination (Birnholtz,
146 Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014). As individuals tailor behaviour for certain audiences
147 within a specific context (Goffman, 1959), many LGBTQ+ users continue to intentionally
148 and surgically separate their self-presentation, tailoring performance to specific segmented

149 contexts (DeVito et al., 2018; Duguay, 2016; Fox & Ralston, 2016). This is particularly
150 salient for those who have yet to, or partially transitioned in their identity realignment (e.g.
151 coming out). Indeed, the very notion of ‘coming out’ for many presumes an established
152 binary ‘end position’ e.g. redefinition from heterosexual to homosexual as a point of
153 completion or fulfilment of the process, but for some queer individuals that is not the case
154 (National Centre for Transgender Equality, 2018). The level of interactive and targeted
155 audience provided by social media now allows highly specific self-expression (Fox &
156 Ralston, 2016) in ways individuals were not able to previously experience.

157 However, the convergence of multiple disparate audiences within and across
158 platforms, and merging of off- and online identities, has meant it is increasingly difficult to
159 control the diverse audiences that may see specific social media identity presentations (boyd,
160 2014). This context collapse (boyd, 2011; 2014) - a non-intentional flattening of the spatial,
161 temporal and social boundaries that may otherwise separate audiences on social media - leads
162 to the risk of unintentional interactions between multiple identity presentations, and the
163 inadvertent disclosure of LGBTQ+ identity in non-supportive contexts can have highly
164 negative personal consequences (Birnholz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014).

165 **LGBTQ+ Youth and Narrative Identity**

166 One framework which offers a structure to better understanding these often disparate
167 multiplicities of identity elements is through the lens of Narrative Identity development.
168 Whenever we tell stories which ‘explain’ ourselves to others, we are guided by ‘narrative
169 plots’, which express life stories that are far more complex than a simple catalogue of events
170 (Sarbin, 1986). These stories are constructed from pre-existing sociocultural templates or
171 master narratives (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Hammack et al., 2009; McLean & Syed, 2015)
172 that individuals rely on to tell big or small tales of a human agent embedded in a social world
173 (Bamberg, 2006). The use of narrative, therefore, seems inherently connected to bringing

174 meaning to past experiences and the multiple identity presentations individuals exhibit on-
175 and offline to their different audiences. It offers a method for investigating how individuals,
176 within real contexts, attempt to synthesise multiple elements of identity presentation into a
177 workable construct of coherent identity.

178 Hammack et al. (2009) explored the whole life experiences of 18-25 year olds who, as
179 emerging adults, occupy an 'in-between' place characterised by attempts to make sense of the
180 struggles of childhood and adolescence while also considering the possibility of imagined
181 contexts of adult happiness. They argue that adolescent sexual identity development is
182 fundamentally tied to their construction of a personal narrative, which integrates desire and
183 behaviour into a meaningful and workable configuration in context. Combining previous
184 research on narrative identity development and LGBTQ+ youth, they highlight three integral
185 components of narrative identity development. The first is *narrative engagement*, which
186 denotes the need for individuals to participate actively in those narrative elements which
187 affect future choices or attitudes (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2005).
188 Secondly, such engagement leads to a process of *identity configuration* (Schachter, 2004)
189 which integrates the different core elements of an individual's experience that lead to a
190 workable identity (Hammack et al., 2009; Schachter, 2004). Thirdly, narratives function to
191 create a link between past, present and future through the identification of common life
192 themes or tasks (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). This
193 narrative sense-making (Bruner, 1990) or *meaning-making* focuses on how individuals make
194 sense of their life experiences in relation to their own identity. This transpires most notably in
195 the form of turning points or critical moments when a realisation or significant life event
196 occurs (McAdams & McLean, 2013). These three components are particularly salient for
197 LGBTQ+ youth who must reconcile potentially conflicting experiences and configure

198 specifically individual elements of non-normative sexual attraction, behaviour, and broader
199 identity into a single overall sense of self (Hammack et al., 2009).

200 The examination of the dynamic identity formations of contemporary LGBTQ+ youth
201 would now seem incomplete without consideration of the contextual role social media plays
202 in that identity construction (Hammack et al., 2009). Individuals draw upon shared
203 underlying sociocultural templates or master narratives (McLean & Syed, 2015) (that is the
204 stories communities tell about themselves) accessed through social media which assist in
205 composing expectations of how life will play out. This allows them to locate and story their
206 own life experiences within that identity negotiation, drawing upon shared narratives
207 accessed all around, and then offering their own identity projections and expectations to
208 others. If it is through the culture that we find the forms of storytelling, then social media
209 now seems to be the vehicle through which these merged personal and public narratives of
210 youth development are shared.

211 **The Present Study**

212 The present study explored the narrative identity development of contemporary
213 undergraduate LGBTQ+ youth, who are the first generation to have had persistent access to
214 social media throughout their adolescence. More specifically, it aimed to explore experiences
215 of contemporary LGBTQ+ youth (including queer youth with identities that do not conform
216 to traditional sexual orientations and may be underrepresented in research) building narrative
217 identities in the broader cultural multi-context of social media, with a particular focus on the
218 identity processes of narrative engagement, identity configuration and meaning-making.
219 Furthermore, the study adopts a person-centred narrative approach that aims to understand
220 the role of social media in the process of identity development. LGBTQ+ youth took part in
221 in-depth semi-structured narrative interviews. Data was analysed by first examining
222 individual narratives, then using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify shared

223 narratives themes across the pool of participant stories to understand the ways social media
224 informs and facilitates identity development.

225 **Method**

226 **Participants and Procedures**

227 Emerging adults were directly recruited from a small public university in an English
228 city-centre campus (Population: 6250, Female: 67.5%, Male: 32.5%, White, 91.2%,
229 Hetrosexual: 81.5%, LGB+ 9.6%, Cis: 93.5%, Trans: 2.7%; (York St John University, 2018)
230 through email advertisements across enrolled class lists (e.g. psychology, social science) and
231 university societies (e.g. Theatre, Music and the LGBTQ+ society). Participants were
232 recruited anonymously through an online appointment system and did not have to give their
233 details of their gender/sexual identity to be part of the study. The university has a reputation
234 for equality; it was ranked 24th out of 434 organisations who took part in Stonewall's
235 Workplace Equality Index (Stonewall, 2018) and the Students Union list sexual and gender
236 equality as a key policy priority. Our aim was to understand better the situated stories of
237 those who were 'same-sex attracted' (thus encompassing a broad definition of LGBTQ+
238 youth). Purposeful sampling was used to obtain information-rich cases for study (Patton,
239 2002, p.230). Seventeen full-time undergraduate students ($M = 20.29$, $SD = 1.40$, $Range =$
240 $19-23$) participated in interviews. Participants defined themselves as a variety of sexual and
241 gender identities: 4 female bisexual ($n = 4$), 1 bisexual non-binary born female ($n = 1$), 2
242 female and 1 male pansexual/fluid/queer ($n = 3$), 2 female and 1 male homosexual ($n = 3$),
243 and 5 female and 1 male heterosexual ($n = 6$). As the purpose of the study was to understand
244 themes in LGBTQ+ youth identity narratives, the heterosexual participants who had clearly
245 misunderstood the recruitment call for "same-sex" attracted youth, were excluded from the
246 study. This exclusion occurred after data collection, as it was only during the interviews that
247 this became apparent. This exclusion enabled us to focus in detail on the shared narratives of

248 the LGBTQ+ youth and foreground their experiences. Participants were interviewed
249 individually in a neutral interview room on campus during April and May 2018. Interviews
250 lasted between 37 and 68 minutes with the average interview lasting approximately 55
251 minutes. The study received full ethical approval from the relevant ethics committee at York
252 St John University and adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the British
253 Psychological Society.

254 All participants used multiple social media every day. All participants expressed
255 relative levels of outness, but with varying degrees of how openly this was presented online
256 (e.g. ranging from 'liking' LGBTQ+ posts, to open relationship representations). Seven
257 explicitly mentioned some form of past or present religious affiliations (5 Christian, 2
258 Spiritual/New-Age). All participants identified as being from a low or medium
259 socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, though reported a mixture of city, town and rural
260 upbringings prior to joining university. The majority identified as Caucasian ($n = 10$) which
261 is representative of the local geographic area (86% Caucasian; Office of National Statistics,
262 2011).

263 **Interview Guide and Procedure**

264 Semi-structured interviews were employed by the first author to offer a focused yet
265 flexible exploration of how youths' personal life story and culture come together in narrative
266 (McAdams, 2015). Key questions based on the McAdams life story interview (2008) were
267 adapted to focus on what role social media played in the enactment of their identity
268 presentation (Hammack et al., 2009). Interviews were participant led, enabling them to focus
269 on what they considered most important, identifying critical elements (Riessman, 2008)
270 which highlight moments participants considered significant in the development of their
271 identity (*narrative engagement*) such as dealing with a family members death (e.g. Ricoeur,
272 1983/1984). They were also asked to identify turning points (McAdams, 2006) that had

273 required participants to understand/negotiate/express their e.g. same-sex desire, behaviour
274 and identity and integrate them into the general life story (*identity configuration*) and how
275 participants made sense of these lived experiences (*meaning-making*) (e.g. McAdams, 2006;
276 McAdams & McLean, 2013; Pasupathi et al. 2007) offline and on social media. Many of the
277 questions were explicitly focused on social media and were mapped to narrative identity
278 elements. For example, “Can you tell me about a time when using social media in relation to
279 your sexual identity made a significant impact to your life?”. The interviewer also played a
280 key role in deliberately using probing follow-up questions to explore these stories in detail.
281 The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the principal researcher from audio recordings.

282 **Narrative Analytic Strategy**

283 Participants’ narrative interviews were initially examined individually, allowing a
284 holistic examination of personal stories (e.g. Kuper & Mustanski, 2014). A narrative thematic
285 analysis (Riessman, 2008) was employed as its primary focus is on the story itself as the unit
286 of analysis (the content of the data is what is said). Firstly, memos and initial observations
287 were noted throughout transcription, taking a critical self-reflective approach (Riessman,
288 2008) in the form of open coding. Possible within-person critical elements that created a
289 behavioural renegotiation of their identity were labelled, which could come in many forms
290 (e.g. significant experiences of bullying). Relevant text was identified and then possible
291 narrative coding themes were built around these.

292 After individual stories had been examined by the lead researcher, a reflexive
293 thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019) was employed to identify similar prominent
294 codes across participant’s stories. All coding (both within and between participants’ stories)
295 was performed by the first author, with the second and third author providing support and
296 guidance by looking at a small subset (two transcripts). This approach is consistent with
297 Braun and Clarke who advocate one author performing all coding (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

298 Themes were then created that link together common and contrasting elements to form a
299 pattern of narrative identity development among participants, in an iterative manner through
300 discussion between authors. After identifying these common and contrasting narrative themes
301 (Frank, 2000), experiences were contextualised in relation to the broader sociocultural
302 context. Particular attention was paid to how individuals felt they held agency and voice
303 through their use of social media, and how this interacts with social context in mutually
304 impactful ways, connecting their individual meanings to “*more global assumptions and*
305 *worldviews held by individuals within the culture under study*” (Riessman, 1993, p. 61).

306 As qualitative research is co-created in nature (Riessman, 2008), the authors position
307 requires identification as this will have had some effect on the participants’ choice of shared
308 stories (Riessman, 2008), his role in identifying, synthesising and selecting narratives, and
309 then reporting them to the reader (Josselson, 2011). The primary researcher who performed
310 the interviews and initial analysis (with input from two co-authors who also looked over
311 coded interviews and discussed coding and themes) is a white male in his early 40’s, self-
312 described as ideologically liberal, and has worked in UK Secondary Schools (11-19-year-
313 olds) teaching Sex Education, Psychology, and Religious Studies for 17 years. His motivation
314 for study was routed in multiple students who had come to seek counsel on issues related to
315 complex sexual and gender-related issues in the past, and as a cisgender heterosexual white
316 male, wished to understand the lived experience of LGBTQ+ youth better and assist other
317 allies in future support. To ensure the validity of the research’s interpretation of these
318 findings, after the report was produced, the analysis was verified by independently checking
319 themes against the original recordings and transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The results
320 and discussion section of the report were then shared with a sample of participants as a form
321 of member-checking, who were asked to indicate the extent to which the report reflected their
322 own experiences and that of their contemporaries. The participants suggested minimal

323 revisions indicating that the findings did arcuately reflect their experiences, and the quotes
324 used had not been misrepresented.

325 **Results**

326 Across the dataset, four inter-related narrative themes (with sub-themes) were
327 developed that encapsulate LGBTQ+ youths' experiences of social media during the process
328 of narrative identity development: (1) *Narratives of merging safe spaces* which highlight
329 regular access to safe spaces on/offline which facilitate more stable identity development; (2)
330 *Narratives of external identity alignment*, illustrating a desire to be known for 'Who I already
331 am'; (3) *Narratives of multiple context-based identities*, identifying a rejection of a single
332 sexuality-based core identity; and (4) *Narratives of individuality and autonomy* which outline
333 highly individualised members of a community. Names and place names have been
334 anonymised to preserve the anonymity of participants.

335 **1. Narratives of Merging Safe Spaces Off/Online**

336 **1.1 Safe spaces facilitate stable identity development.** Participants' stories of
337 forming identity projections that reflected aspects of their sexual identity highlighted how
338 engagement in such projections was only possible when they felt safe. These projections
339 were important aspects of their story as they ultimately led to a more secure sense of identity.
340 All participants reported regular and easy access to contexts for safe and open expression in
341 their present experiences, feeling 'safe and accepted' as LGBTQ+ youth in nearly all
342 situations on- and offline. When Sharron reflected on the theatre production group she is part
343 of, she notes regular and positive expressions of support:

344 ... I think a lot of people like weren't out at the start of the year, and throughout the
345 year it's sort of [I: Mmm] come out that people are gay or bi or trans or whatever
346 because I think people, people realised that they would be accepted no matter what
347 (Sharron, 19, bisexual)

348
349 She highlights a common story told by participants - that the social environment on-
350 and offline now affords security when expressing non-normative identity across

351 environmental contexts. It did not mean others claimed to understand their exact sexual or
352 gender identity, but there was an acceptance that their expression of a ‘differing’ identity
353 would not diminish their friendships. One of the critical turning points shared by many
354 participants is that of their coming out stories, which straddled the on- and offline world.
355 Although on balance these were all positive experiences, stories varied in format, and even in
356 homes where individuals’ felt safe and accepted, some participants expressed apprehension.
357 Sarah who has experienced significant friendship rejection in the past, remembers having ‘no
358 issues’ when coming out to parents, but possibly due to internalised stigmas (evidenced in
359 past research examining master narratives such as struggle and success e.g. Savin-Williams,
360 2005) and past experiences she:

361 ... refused to tell my dad, I made my mum tell my dad [because he] grew up with a
362 religious background and he never ever ever said anything against it, like anything
363 like that, but it was just one of those things I just couldn’t face doing it. I was like I
364 can’t, I can’t tell him. It’s really funny because he ends up off sick from work the next
365 day, and I was at home because I had no classes on, and I was like for god sake, so it
366 was just me and my dad and we just like made lunch, and it was like really awkward,
367 and we ate lunch and he just stood up and just went ‘give me a hug, I don’t care as
368 long as you’re happy’ and I started crying, and I just remember my dad was like ‘why
369 are you crying’ and I was just like ‘I’m just really happy’. (Sarah, 19, Bisexual)

370
371 Although occasionally experiencing initial fears of rejection, many felt their
372 relationships had been enriched by sharing sexual or gender identity transitions even if only
373 in a developing form with family members, leading to a more positive sense of self.

374 **1.2 Social media is a safe space.** Participants’ stories of safety and acceptance had
375 translated from ‘safe’ online environments into participants’ offline contexts. In line with
376 previous research (e.g. Duguay, 2016), online is largely a safe space for many LGBTQ+
377 youths. Xander, the oldest participant, who identifies as queer and uses the pronoun ‘he’, was
378 bullied offline for much of his early childhood. Here, he reflects on his experience before
379 accessing social media:

380 In terms of forming identity I think it's good, because there are lots and lots of people
381 putting their own experiences forward, and that makes room for validation and self-

382 discovery, and I think, you know, 11-year-old me wouldn't have gone through that oh
383 my god everyone around me's straight, and I'm gay, if I had social media because I
384 would have seen there were more people out there. (Xander, 23, Queer)

385
386 Feeling safe and accepted within social media environments often stemmed from the
387 sharing of similar experiences with others, many of whom were not known to participants in
388 the offline world but offer a space to explore their non-normative, but still developing
389 identity and allows an opening of a dialogue (both intra and interpersonally) about how they
390 may go about defining this difference in identity. Sarah remembers the first time she shared
391 her potential LGBTQ+ identity with a friend she considers close, but has never met offline:

392 No, never met her [I: right, OK], no, a lot, a lot of these people I haven't met, erm and I
393 think, I think, I can't remember what it was, I think my friend, one of my other friends,
394 she just, she just come out as gay, and I was like 'I don't know how to handle this cause
395 I was, cause I like, I feel exactly the same as she does, but I'm like I don't really know
396 how to talk about it [I: right] because it was never, no one ever talked about us where I
397 was from, I didn't think I knew anybody [I: hmmm] at that point, [I: yeah] that I knew
398 of anyway.

399
400 Participants reported experiencing safety in social media environments due to privacy
401 settings. This allowed participants to express identity as privately or as publicly as they
402 wished. Paul/a who had a positive critical turning point during a counselling session, recounts
403 their decision to start subtly shifting the information their family has access to:

404 ... you can set posts that people, not everyone, can see [I: Yeah] so I have like, er,
405 certain style of post which pretty much all the adults in my family life, they are just
406 blocked from seeing certain posts [I: Yeah] that I post, and those are normally the
407 ones that are about gender and identity and sexuality and stuff like that, I've started
408 kinda of, kinda, creeping into showing them more stuff [I: Yeah] cause if I don't have
409 to come out to them, and they just know, that's so much easier [I: laugh], If my
410 grandma came to me and was like, are you, are you not... a girl, are you not straight,
411 I'd be like no, I'm not, and that would be so much easier than to sit her down...
412 (Paul/a, 20, Nonbinary bisexual born female)

413
414 This seems to identify a dual function for participants, offering both a level of security
415 and control which gives the participants the ability to choose how, when and with whom they
416 will express their LGBTQ+ identity, allowing more gradual and nuanced coming out

417 experiences; but also initiates potentially ‘difficult’ conversations with older relatives
418 controlled by the participant.

419 2. Narratives of external identity alignment

420 **2.1 ‘Who I already am’ drives meaning-making.** In nine interviews, participants
421 expressed a desire to be known for ‘who I already am’. This desire to align the inner self with
422 external self-presentation seemingly drives meaning-making for LGBTQ+ youths. A critical
423 aspect of most identity narratives related to the process of self-definition. Participants, like
424 Sandy described past experiences of searching to find identity labels that matched what was
425 *already* inside:

426 I was like maybe I’m nothing [laugh], so I went through that for like 2 years, then I
427 got to Middle School which is like, 12, 13, and I was like ‘hmm maybe I’m bi’ [I:
428 Yeah], that didn’t work either [I: laugh] so I’m trying all these things, and then,
429 recently when I got to uni I thought, I’m probably pansexual, cause that, it, I was
430 struggling with like, the boundaries [I: Yeah], because I understand the necessity like,
431 of labels but that also wasn’t working, [I: Yeah] so I’ve just started saying that I’m
432 queer [P/I: laugh] which covers everything, but not to say that I am everything, it just
433 covers all grounds, because it’s just people at the end of the day. (Sandy, 19, Queer)
434

435 Sandy’s story highlights a common dissatisfaction that labels, even many found
436 already within the LGBTQ+ community, do not fit pre-existing selves. This desire to be
437 known externally for who they *really are* influenced online self-presentations. Though online
438 presentations did not have to completely align with internal identity, most acknowledged that
439 their social media presentations were now close proximities to their perceived self. When
440 Xander considered his self-presentation, he noted that social media offers the ability to
441 transcend physical restraints:

442 I think they are close, but, also, not at all at the same time, because they are, it is a,
443 erm, cherry-picked version of yourself you know, you’re putting, my own twitter
444 tends to be consistently positive and productive updates, and it’s not, I, a long time
445 ago steered away from posting kind of moany things or like, oh I’ve had the worst day
446 or whatever, that kind of stuff, unless I felt it was contributing to a necessary
447 conversation
448

449 None of the participants used social media to create an entirely different persona online.
450 Instead social media was used to facilitate self-presentations that were true to their inner
451 selves. There was a shared understanding that social media enabled a ‘cherry-picked’
452 presentation that could be used as an opportunity to safely project their inner self, or desired
453 ideal self, to an external audience. Identity relevant information could be released over time,
454 first segmented using social media, then slowly opening privacy settings to reveal an identity
455 projection shift to a broader audience. This could entail posting subtle pictures with a same-
456 sex partner, or attraction-based commentary first on- and then offline possibly to avoid
457 context collapse by pre-empting unintentional information leakage (boyd, 2011, 2014). For
458 instance Paul/a described recently using social media more to disclose their LGBTQ+
459 identity:

460 ... the trans awareness video, I posted that on my Facebook without putting the
461 blacklist on [I: Yeah] so that was kind of like, my caption also kind of implied that I
462 was non-binary, though obviously, the video says it explicitly, so I'm gonna post this,
463 and see if anyone comments on it... And I think a couple of like my aunts or something
464 did like it, so I'm like, ok so cool, so they know... but erm, my grandparents didn't
465 mention it, but like, I kind of want to start... doing that more and I feel like social
466 media is... helpful for that, because I'm a bit naff at like talking about serious things
467 face-to-face.

468 **2.2 Terminology and labels.** Terminology and ‘labels’ were both loved and loathed by
469 participants, and were key stories in all interviews. Tim, who has several long-term mental
470 health issues, described social media as a very positive device for self-understanding and
471 meaningful interaction:
472

473 I'm a huge fan of labels... there's plenty of people within the LGBT community that
474 say oh let's do away with labels and be, you know like, be that kind of thing. I'm not of
475 that opinion; I am of the opinion that I need, an identifier, I can't just say I'm me
476 because that's too broad... I can say I'm me, and me constitutes these different
477 characteristics [...] social media is good for identifying labels because there are boxes
478 to fill in that says, gender, pronouns, sexuality, that kind of thing, you can use social
479 media to give that list of who you are, that kind of, you know, slightly more publicly
480 identify... (Tim, 23, Homosexual)
481

482 For Tim, who identifies as a well-understood term in contemporary society, labels give
483 a framework to understand himself and bring a name to his internalised state. Labels also
484 helped him to better contextualise his relationship with others, allowing him to understand
485 who he is in relation to others and be a 'better friend'. However, other participants found
486 labels could be complex, problematic and misleading. For example, Polly when defining her
487 own identity said:

488 ... generally, I'd say bisexual, but I prefer pansexual, but people don't know what that
489 is and think you're doing weird things to woks... I think I don't... I've never really
490 like been like specifically attracted to one gender; it's kind of the person... And I'm
491 not a big fan of labels as they are quite restrictive [...] having one word you can use
492 to get across something that can be quite complicated [...] that's when it causes
493 problems, because everyone's got a different idea and it's so personal that people get
494 quite defensive when they disagree (Polly, 19, Pansexual)

495
496 Polly suggests there are many ways to conceptualise both sexuality and gender, and it
497 is unnecessarily limiting to express sexual attraction in the narrow way labels provide. This
498 need for customisable terminology was an underlying theme in most interviews, but was
499 most evident when interviewing those that identified as 'non-binary', 'pansexual', 'fluid' or
500 'queer'. When asked if 'queer' was a useful label, Xander replied:

501 I'm not sure, I think because queer used to be such a vitriolic word I know that a lot of
502 people struggle with it, people still hear it as a slur, so they don't want to identify as it,
503 erm, for me, it's more just like an umbrella of, like a... a straying away from labels
504 even though it is essentially a label in itself, it's a label to kind of cover everything...
505 Its identifying as something without tying it down its... Yeah, erm, I think it's
506 difficult because its, we talk about identity through labels [I: Yeah] and when you're
507 the sort of person who identifies away from labels, there's, it's really hard to
508 communicate that because so often people want to know what's your sexuality,
509 what's your gender identity...

510
511 He identifies as 'queer' to express a fluid identity, which for him means he could
512 identify as multiple or differing genders and be attracted to individuals who identify in ways
513 that change day-to-day and reach beyond the simplistic male-female binary. Like Polly, he
514 consciously holds the tension of acknowledging the need to identify in some way and the

515 importance in denoting some non-normative state, while rejecting labels due to their
516 imperfect nature.

517 3. Narratives of multiple context-based identities

518 Non-normative sexuality was perceived as a core identity status for participants when
519 first acknowledging their internal sexual desires, and again when transitioning to their use of
520 external labels with others. However, after this initial period, these became only one of
521 several key identity markers. Tim clearly articulated this when expressing his identity as a
522 ‘gay, male, recovering Christian, geek’. When asked to explain what he meant, he said:

523 Mostly in the past it depends what takes precedence, erm, so, so so at the moment, like,
524 gay is the pri, is my primary identifier at the moment because erm, I just co, come out
525 of a relationship looking at other guys you know, so my head is in that kind of mode.
526 Whereas a couple of weekends ago, erm, er, when we had the [Club society night], I
527 was in geek mode [I: Yeah] and that was my overriding identifier... its probably more
528 the context, if something's going on that's... driving one particularly area of my identity
529 [... but] if I could only pick one [I: Mmm], it would have to be geek.

530 Not only does Tim identify multiple overt identities which he shares across off and
531 online audiences, but also comments on a hierarchy of identity statuses, which shifts in
532 different contexts. Many participants reported that they felt LGBTQ+ identity was now
533 accepted and ‘normal’ across audiences on and offline to their family and friend. Although it
534 was still an important identity marker, it did not necessarily merit special attention and they
535 did not purposefully compartmentalise these multiple identity projections online. Paul/a
536 highlighted that sexuality, and gender, are so normalised in their mind that, similarly to Tim,
537 context on and offline often drives their consideration of identity:

539 I think at the moment, like, when I was younger, you know, the last few years I think
540 my identity gender and sexuality wise was really important, and it was kinda
541 something I was very out and loud and proud for a lot of time, but I’m, over the last
542 you know, year or so, I’ve kind of mellowed out a lot about it a lot [I: Yeah] it’s just
543 kind of, I want people to know just so that they, you know understand and respect me
544 and then I don’t have to come up with a billion questions, but... I think now I’m older
545 it’s kind of yea, I want other people to see other parts of me whilst also still
546 understand that this, this major part of my identity you know [I: Yeah] my gender, it's
547 as important to me as someone else's is like, men can be very territorial about you
548 know their own masculinity, women are very like, I’m a women this is what I am,

549 and, you know I feel the same way about mine, it's just other people think that, there
550 must be more emphasis on it because, it's kinda divergent from the you know, the
551 norm

552
553 For participants, living within a sociocultural space that is now largely accepting of LGBTQ+
554 identities meant the need to pay sexuality or gender more attention than other aspects of
555 identity was lessened. When Xander was asked if sexuality was prioritised in his identity
556 development, he responded:

557 It's really not, I think the experiences related to growing up with the queer sexual
558 identity, those are important, erm, because they form aspects of your personality [I:
559 Yeah] and how you treat people, but it's, the label itself is, I mean I'm not interested
560 in it at all, that's why I identify as queer as [I: Yeah] I just think, and I actually get
561 quite frustrated when it's the first thing people see or talk about, you know, erm, like
562 when you're the gay best friend or whatever for instance [I: laugh] erm, that's
563 frustrating as it's very very reductive [I: Yeah], and really, it doesn't actually say
564 anything about a person – their sexuality, erm, beyond what they want to say [I:
565 Yeah] but people make an awful lot of assumptions when it comes to labels

566
567 Though presenting as the significant core identity when first coming out, this over
568 simplified view of their sexuality becomes only one of several defining identity markers over
569 time (even for those with less familiar identities e.g. queer) and participants aim is often to
570 open these differing identity contexts for others to better understand them.

571 **4. Narratives of individuality and autonomy**

572 **4.1 A community of individual experiences.** Stories of individuality within
573 community were shared by many participants. Ownership of highly personalised identity
574 labels unique to each individual was felt to conflict with membership of a broader group
575 identity at times, and the validity of other interpretations of the same labels. Xander describes
576 how his personal identity is balanced with a communal understanding of being LGBTQ+:

577 People just tend to assume an awful lot, and it's like, like, cause I was actually gonna
578 write about this, about being in a post coming out society, whereas beforehand, you
579 had to come out and tell people for them to know, which people still do, but then now
580 it seems more there's that much kind of awareness of different sexualities, you almost
581 have to say, no, come out twice like people will come, make you come out because
582 they'll assume what your sexuality is, and then you have to come out again and say
583 actually no, that's not, I am coming out but not in the way you think I am.

584

585 His experience of what he calls a ‘post-coming-out’ culture is one where people
586 accept non-normative sexuality, but immediately attempt to categorise what they perceive
587 that non-normative sexuality to be. This removal of personal autonomy over his identity
588 status is difficult, as although we may all present with a multiplicity of identities, his identity
589 is itself a fluid process that shifts across time and context on a daily basis. Xander continues:

590 I’d explain how fluid identity is, and how it’s not, you know [I: Yeah] erm, so rigid,
591 cause I think there’s this understanding that if you’re not one thing, you are the other,
592 like it, you have to fit somewhere and if you don’t fit somewhere then your feelings
593 aren’t real [we need] to stop thinking in umbrella generalised terms, cause what it
594 means, because even if you choose a specific label, for like gay, what it means to be
595 gay for one person is completely different for another person [I: Yeah] and there is
596 such diversity in that

597 He acknowledged now living in a society where confrontation of heteronormative
598 stereotypes is less necessary, and one can establish oneself as different. However, he noted
599 that care must still be taken even within the LGBTQ+ community to respect the dynamic
600 evolving differences between individuals as identities intersect in multiple and varying ways.
601 This was a view shared by others, as Polly noted:

602 I learned about non-binary, gender fluid and, like grey gender and agender, not that
603 it’s, if you’re trying to be inclusive as an LGBT community you can’t, exclude
604 someone from your field of eligible just because they don’t match up with a binary
605 identity, so this group of individuals is possibly a better way to look at this
606 community now.

607 Inclusion by difference seems both a complex but imperative community task for
608 LGBTQ+ youth, who are often grouped together due to difference. This was also evident in
609 participants’ discussion of high-profile LGBTQ+ individuals. Paul/a, a self-professed movie
610 buff, highlighted how famous LGBTQ+ role models could help some people to understand
611 their identity choices, but was not helpful to them (Paul/a) because they (Paul/a) did not feel
612 these fully represented their (Paul/a’s) personalised identity:

613 ...it’s hard for me to explain to other people so... I know a lot of people who are
614 trans, who since you know, erm, Caitlin Jenner, and Laverne Cox and all these [I:
615 Hmm] icons kind of [I: Yeah] became public about being trans, they found it much
616 easier to come out as trans because they had these cultural pinpoints that they could

619 say to their parents, like [I: Yeah], I am like this [I: Yeah], where I feel with non-
 620 binary and even still bisexuality its... there's a lot less representation, so it's a lot
 621 harder to be, there's no one person that I can be like, oh grandma – I'm like this.

622
 623 **4.2 Social media and autonomy.** Permeating through all interviews, was the
 624 participant's desire for autonomy and control over their own personalised labels. Participants
 625 reported that social media offers a space unconstrained by physical appearance or social
 626 interaction difficulties, in which they had explored identity labels as part of a desire to match
 627 these to pre-existing internalised concepts (See *narratives of external identity alignment*).
 628 The ability to choose more accurate personal expressions when pre-existing labels did not
 629 match internalised self-concept was a critical factor for Paul/a who remembers first seeking
 630 out new ways to better express their shifting sense of identity online:

631 I saw trans first, I kinda saw that and I tried, I dabbled in it for a little bit, and I was
 632 like, owwww, this still doesn't fit, erm, but then at one point I saw the phrase non-
 633 binary and I was like, Oh! There we go, that's it! It's just this in the middle thing...
 634 erm of not really aligning yourself to any specific gender, just kinda being this
 635 weird... purple thing [I: Laughs] in the middle [because...] if boy is blue and [I:
 636 Yeah] girl is pink, er reddish, then non-binary is kinda this entire gradient of purple

637
 638 Many participants narrate the positive function of social media which allows new
 639 expressions of identity projections and offers space to disseminate them to others. When
 640 considering how people share their identity on and offline today, Sarah observes:

641 ...similar to like pronouns, you use the pronouns that people ask you to use, you use
 642 the names that people ask you to use, if they ask you not to use a name, you don't use
 643 that name [I: yeah], and I think that's, that's really important and it's, it's not even
 644 about acceptance, it's about like tolerance and like, just, decency, like com, it's like
 645 common [I: yeah] decency to use the name that people want you to use... sometimes I
 646 will say lesbian or something like I'm gay, like, sometimes I will say that, and it's like
 647 one of those things where it's like my identity let me do what I please with it but don't
 648 like, don't decide my identity [I: hmmm] for me

649
 650 Through autonomous ownership of a self-defined personal identity, participants were
 651 able to project a coherent internalised self, but with multiple identity presentations, which co-
 652 exist to the world. By providing participants with exposure to a multiplicity of labels as well

653 as the facility to self-designate identity labels, social media was confirmed as integral to a
654 contemporary experience of this process.

655 **Discussion**

656 The present study aimed to understand the experiences of contemporary LGBTQ+
657 youth building narrative identities in the broader cultural context of social media, and the role
658 of social media within this. A narrative thematic analysis was employed, which first focused
659 on individual participants' life stories, and then compared and contrasted them across
660 participants, leading to the identification of four key themes within narratives: (1) *Narratives*
661 *of merging safe spaces*, (2) *Narratives of external identity alignment*, (3) *Narratives of*
662 *multiple context-based identities*, and (4) *Narratives of individuality and autonomy*.

663 **Narratives of merging Safe Spaces**

664 Participants' stories were consistent with previous research (e.g. Fox & Ralston,
665 2016) highlighting online experiences as safe spaces that perform multiple beneficial
666 functions (e.g. access to networks for specific information) in relation to identity
667 development. Participants such as Paul/a and Polly saw benefit in the use of multiple social
668 media sites to compartmentalise information (such as Facebook) when performing specific
669 identity tasks dependent on the audience (Fox & Ralston, 2016). This was particularly
670 valuable during early identity exploration and transition work (Haimson, 2018), enabling
671 adolescents to perform various types of identity work safely in ways not previously available.

672 Though past research has focused on this hiding or compartmentalisation of
673 information for specific audiences (e.g. Devito et al., 2018), our participants' narratives
674 centred around projections of identity which were still multiple but purposely made more
675 open to audiences. Participants attributed feelings of safety online with a decision to open
676 contexts (across online platforms and offline) which portrayed a more authentic form of
677 identity presentation. Rather than pursuing identity presentation that were segmented across

678 different on and offline contexts, participants described experiencing identity development in
679 a cultural environment that seems largely accepting of non-normative sexuality and gender.
680 The increasing cultural normalisation of LGBTQ+ identities meant previous stigma and
681 templates of how ‘normal’ life will play out (i.e., master narratives of struggle and success
682 e.g. Savin-Williams, 2005) were significantly weakened and no longer seen as inevitable or
683 expected for our participants. That is not to say that participants did not face negativity on
684 and offline. Certain online platforms were still favoured for certain tasks, and there was an
685 acknowledgement by participants that some platforms such as Tumblr were more ‘queer’
686 friendly than others. However, for our participants, these different tasks were not usually
687 segmented from view to a wider audience. For instance, Polly told a story of friends from her
688 childhood who had come across projections of her sexual shifting identity on Facebook (not
689 an expected platform for such information within some studies) and they had responded
690 negatively on her profile. Multiple allies rapidly responded in her defence, and this like many
691 of our participants only heightened their expectation that they had the right to express their
692 identity within and across any form of social media they desired.

693 **Narratives of External Identity Alignment**

694 The internal desire to be known for ‘Who I already am’ seemed to drive narrative
695 engagement and meaning-making for LGBTQ+ youth. Stories told by Sandy, Xander and
696 Tim included an early realisation that their internalised self-concept did not match their
697 external presentation. Acknowledgement of an internalised dissonance between who
698 participants perceived themselves to be and how others perceived them on and offline was
699 catalysed through critical moments (e.g. counselling) and turning points. This promoted new
700 levels of narrative engagement, encouraging participants to reconsider and re-story past
701 experiences, as they sought alignment of their internal perception(s) with their external
702 presentation of self. As Xander and Sandy’s stories illustrate, this search for terms and labels

703 to match pre-existing internal self-concepts is not merely the exploration or *trying on* of new
704 versions of self, but rather an active reconfiguration and ownership of labels as a result of an
705 already internalised, if still developing state.

706 This is an important reframing. Previous research suggests youth *experiment* with
707 different identities and *then* choose one (e.g. Hillier & Harrison, 2007) including on social
708 media. However, in our study, youths expressed a desire to change external identity
709 presentations when they felt their internal sense of who they *already are* did not match their
710 external presentation to others. Disconnections between internalised identity and external
711 presentation or ‘identity gaps’ (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011), led to attempts to balance out
712 disparities, initiating the process of narrative engagement that ultimately led to a more
713 successful shift in identity configuration and thus overall sense of self through meaning-
714 making. Social media was positioned as a powerful tool in the bridging of these identity gaps
715 by providing LGBTQ+ youth with the facility to explore and engage in the creation of
716 identity presentations and shared narratives which reflect their present but shifting
717 experiences even if they did not fit within conventional LGBTQ+ identity categories (e.g.
718 Xander and Paul/a). This echoes Haimson’s (2018) Social Transition Machinery theory
719 which suggests the identity realignment youth experience on social media should be
720 reconceptualised as a new rite of passage. By enabling the projection of multiple identities
721 simultaneously, adolescents and emerging adults are able to present in different ways in
722 different contexts and this significantly assists in disclosure choices over time and in differing
723 environments. For example, participants echoed previous findings that Tumblr is often used
724 more for exploration and experimentation, while Facebook is employed for more formal
725 identity transition disclosure (Haimson, 2018). Furthermore, our findings extend this work,
726 suggesting the aim for our participants was to eventually open up these multiple and differing

727 identity presentations online in conjunction with offline identity presentations to offer a more
728 authentic if sometimes contradictory projection of identity across contexts.

729 **Narratives of Multiple Context-Based Identities**

730 Consistent with past research, participants expressed acceptance of the overlapping
731 interconnected nature of social media, and the complex task of managing a changing identity
732 presentation with a potentially permanent disparate lifetime digital footprint (Davis &
733 Weinstien, 2017). Though fragmentation and context compartmentalisation were described as
734 helpful in the early stages of identity development, audience segmentation was much less
735 prevalent in participants' stories than has been previously documented (e.g. DeVito et al.,
736 2018; Haimson, 2018). Participants such as Xander highlighted the tension between the
737 permanence of many social media channels such as Instagram that encourage socially
738 desirable presentations, and an acceptance by contemporary LGBTQ+ youth that it was still
739 important to express changing, disparate and momentary identity projections that may not
740 necessarily reflect their preferred overarching identity. Some participants outlined a move
741 towards ephemeral social media such as Snapchat, which provide low stake ways to express
742 in-the-moment identity projections (Davis & Weinstien, 2017). However, many of our
743 participants now in emerging adulthood found this segmentation, along with the use of
744 multiple accounts (e.g. Finstagram) as 'trying too hard' and was almost seen as a childlike
745 response by some of our participants. Most instead perceived themselves as a bundle of
746 different identities portrayed over time and across contexts. These were not hidden or
747 segmented for particular audiences, but rather participants expressed an expectation of the
748 right to openly portray shifting multiple identity projections simultaneously, while still
749 synthesising an overall identity.

750 Participants narrated a comfortableness with this view of identity presentation and
751 emphasised the opportunities the internet provides for actively crafting and expressing their

752 multidimensional identity projections, and then chose key identifiers to drive interactions
753 dependent to context (Weststrate & McLean, 2010). Participants told stories in which
754 sexuality was only one of several identity markers. For example, Tim primarily chose to
755 identify as 'geek' before any traditional sexual designation, but acknowledged how identity
756 projections interact in multiple ways, e.g. His favourite shows also featured pro-
757 sexual/gender diversity characters such as DC's The Flash or Supergirl.

758 As the interconnected nature of social media platforms continues to flatten (boyd, 2011,
759 Haimson, 2018), rapidly developing technology now retooled for the social world offers the
760 ability to synthesise and project intersecting identity expressions already existing within
761 individuals (Crenshaw, 1989). Participants such as Tim and Polly appear to be attempting to
762 align an understanding which has been long accepted within offline interactions, that an
763 individual tailors' behaviour for certain audiences within a specific context (Goffman, 1959).
764 As social media now allows *others* to simultaneous access an individual's presentation of
765 multiple 'moments' written across time responding to these different contexts (including
766 potentially more fluid and queer identity expressions), contemporary online social norms
767 mean youth no longer expect to access a static identity projection of any given individual.
768 Rather it was portrayed that individuals present themselves as a suite of shifting contextually
769 based identity presentations with no single identity presentation offering the holistic sum of
770 their identity.

771 **Narratives of Individuality and Autonomy**

772 Past research has documented the individuality and diversity of LGBTQ+ youth
773 identities and how simplistic category labels (e.g. gay) masks nuanced experiences (Hostetler
774 & Herdt, 1998). Many of our participants' stories (such as Sandy or Polly) initially began
775 identification with a simple sexual label, of the type often found in quantitative data sets (e.g.
776 gay, lesbian). However, as their stories unfolded, they narrated a much more complex set of

777 experiences that required the reconfiguration of sexual descriptors (e.g. pan/queer/fluid) to
778 represent a more nuanced identity that also intersected with wider social classifications such
779 as gender. Such nuanced understanding of identity are important - recent studies have
780 highlighted the differing and distinct experiences of discrimination, stress and psychological
781 health across such identity intersections (e.g., Corrington, Nittrouer, Trump-Steele and Hebl,
782 2019). By acknowledging how an individual's multiple identities intersect (Crenshaw, 1989),
783 social media offers the ability to tailor new identity configurations of personal and cultural
784 narratives for specific groups (e.g. Queer and of colour) which emphasise autonomy,
785 individuality and choice. For instance, Sarah or Paul/a's stories serve dual roles of both
786 producer and product of discourse on sexual and gender identity (Hammack et al., 2009). By
787 taking control of contexts and opening up multiple identity presentations which co-exist
788 simultaneously, they demonstrate agency which seemed to challenge and reject, rather than
789 continue to replicate the monolithic notions of sexual and gender identity development of
790 previous generations (Driver, 2007; Hammack et al., 2009).

791 By creating autonomous multi-layered identity configurations online, participants
792 were able to employ a more elaborate integration of personal narratives and meaning-making
793 into an overall coherent identity configuration. This rejection of previously prescribed
794 plotlines and characters (Polkinghorn, 1988) even led to questioning the need for a consistent
795 identity altogether. Xander and Sandy employed more 'open' ambiguous terms such as
796 'queer' to denote the fluidity of identity allowed them the ability to express a moving *beyond*
797 label categorisation, rather conceptualising a non-consistent identity *as* their core identity. It
798 is of note that by taking control and expressing their different identity labels and projections
799 as publicly or privately as they wished, all participant stories were of things getting better.
800 This did not mean they had no past or present negative interactions, but they no longer felt
801 they had to engage on Tumblr to share queer identity expressions safely, or Facebook was

802 off-limits for fluid identity expressions. The wider cultural access social media now offers
803 across time and context, empowers adolescents and emerging adults to adopt identities that
804 do not 'fit' within traditional hetro- and homonormative expectations (master narratives)
805 which may have once led participants to consider themselves deviant (Herek, 2007).

806 **Implications**

807 By offering a person-centred exploration of participant-led narratives, the present study
808 provides an enhanced understanding of how LGBTQ+ youth and particularly those who do
809 not identify within more established identity categories (Mathers, Sumerau & Cragun, 2018),
810 synthesise a coherent sense of identity in the complicated multi-context of contemporary
811 society that straddles two overlapping worlds; offline and online. Our participants told stories
812 of narrative engagement, identity configuration and meaning-making within their identity
813 constructions which were actively shared across multiple contexts. Participants expressed
814 themselves as highly self-reflective individuals, aware of their online identity expressions
815 (Davis & Weinstein, 2017) and how their presentations and ecosystems interact, both off and
816 online. Rather than attempting to 'edit' or revise a past history of their own lives (Safranova,
817 2015), participants accepted that permanent evidence of past identities is an inherent feature
818 of the digital world (Davis & Weinstein, 2017). Changing expressions of identity over the
819 course of adolescence were instead integrated into their overarching life story, and these early
820 identity projections - or 'origin stories' - were an important expression of who they had been.

821 This has important social implications. Although youth consider social media to be a
822 safe space, their data may be used in ways that they did not intend. Previous papers have
823 recommended that App designers and social media companies need to provide still more
824 explicit safeguards and clear controls for personal information especially for converging
825 cross-platform information sharing practices (Haimson, 2018), but our participants no longer
826 believed that the removal or ability to edit past digital footprints were possible. Instead, they

827 shifted their approach and expectations of how they used social media. As young people
828 become more accepting of their past digital displays, society must adapt to this developing
829 open multi-projection of identities. The need to recognise that singular past identity
830 projections (e.g. traditional media outlets portrayal of a celebrity tweet using inappropriate
831 (potentially insulting) terminology from their pre-fame teenage years) should not be taken out
832 of context especially for individuals with identities that were still less well understood by the
833 general public, such as those who express more fluid identities. Participants shared stories of
834 displaying sexual and gender identities in more nuanced and subtle ways (such as images
835 with a partner) and no longer relied on the features of any given site for such projections.

836 The findings of the present study highlight how social media plays a critical and
837 overwhelmingly positive role in facilitating LGBTQ+ and particularly queer youths'
838 narrative identity development. All participants recounted some form of positive learning
839 experiences or redemptive meaning-making (McAdams & McLean, 2013). By offering
840 individuals the ability to reconcile and resolve divergent internalised self-concepts and
841 multiple identity descriptors, social media was identified as a key asset for the task of better
842 contextualising (Erickson, 1968; McAdams, 2015; McLean et al., 2018), and disseminating
843 stories of their adolescent and emerging adult LGBTQ+ lived experience which led to highly
844 positive outcomes of a more stable, secure and authentic sense of their projected identity. To
845 best facilitate future healthy psychosocial development of LGBTQ+ youth, social media
846 should not simply be vilified, or its use discouraged indiscriminately.

847 **Limitations**

848 Though attempts were made to recruit inclusively with regards to sexual and gender
849 identities (i.e. focusing on same-sex attracted youth rather than specific sexual/gender labels),
850 the group consisted mainly of white university undergraduates who already openly identified
851 as LGBTQ+. Furthermore, all participants were recruited from one university, which is

852 renowned for inclusivity, yet the small sample of participants represent just a small
853 proportion of the LGBTQ+ community of this institution. Thus, the positive accounts of
854 social media that are presented in this paper may be limited to well-adjusted LGBTQ+ youth
855 living within a particularly inclusive, safe and accepting environment. Given the diverse
856 nature of LGBTQ+ experiences, and the way in which sexual identity intersects with other
857 aspects of identity (e.g. class, gender, race; Crenshaw, 1989), the experiences reported in our
858 sample are likely different from other LGBTQ+ youth. Importantly, not all LGBTQ+ youth
859 have such positive experiences (DeVito et al., 2018; Haimson, 2018), especially those for
860 whom being LGBTQ+ intersects with other marginalised identities (e.g. low SES, race)
861 and/or live within less supportive offline spaces (Taylor, Falconer, & Snowden, 2014).

862 Narrative approaches are at least in part retrospective studies which focus on
863 participants re-storying their life, how they make sense of these experiences and how this
864 impacts their identity development over time. As the methods used to collect data are focused
865 on the retelling of past events, stories may change and not accurately represent the events
866 themselves. As our focus is on how participants bring meaning to these life moments to find a
867 secure sense of identity bridging their adolescence and adulthood, this may account for their
868 positive outlook recollecting their teen years. Future research is needed to explore how
869 younger adolescents experience social media and identity development ‘in the moment’, as
870 their responses may differ to those given in retrospect. In particular, younger adolescents who
871 may be less comfortable in their LGBTQ+ identity may be an important group for further
872 study, though accessing such individuals may be difficult.

873 **Conclusion**

874 Participant stories highlight how social media has become a transformative tool for
875 LGBTQ+ youth, and the part social media plays in the reconciliation of nuanced and highly-
876 personalised multifaceted identity configurations, which are adaptive to context and change

877 over time. Multiple social media platforms were used differentially and often simultaneously
878 to perform differing identity work, particularly during life transitions (Haimson, 2018).
879 Moreover, our research highlights how LGBTQ+ youth, particularly queer female youth, are
880 actively bridging these differing identity projections to take control of their own life stories
881 and make their voice heard (Driver, 2007). By sharing their unique all too often invisible
882 experiences within a world of dominant models of sexual orientation and gender binaries,
883 they reject previous cultural templates which promoted both dominant hetero- and
884 homonormative binary master narratives that do not begin to address the diversity of
885 LGBTQ+ youth lived experiences that are playing out today. By highlighting the safety,
886 autonomy and control afforded contemporary LGBTQ+ youth by the social media
887 environment, we have further contributed to understandings of the process of contemporary
888 youth identity construction, particularly for queer youth and women who have typically been
889 underrepresented in research.

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