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Exploring the Role of Social Media in the Identity Development of Trans Individuals

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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

OF TRANS INDIVIDUALS

A Master's Thesis

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By

B Doss

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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

OF TRANS INDIVIDUALS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of social media in the identity development of trans individuals and whether it can be viewed as a means to gain social support and thus enhance positive identity development. Traditional models of identity development, as well as those for trans individuals, count social support as a key factor in psychosocial well-being, and adaptive coping. However, many trans people may face difficulty in finding or accessing direct social support. This study consisted of five semi-structured interviews with trans individuals exploring their experiences using social media and their perceptions of its influence on their identity development. Using, Queer Theory as well as D'Augelli's Model of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity Development to inform this phenomenological study and analysis, three major themes were identified: Social Support, Negative Interactions and Microaggressions, and Access. Sub-themes of visibility, coming out, direct experiences of negativity and pressure to conform, indirect experiences of perception and external expectations along with frequency of use and social media resources were also identified. Participants reported both positive and negative aspects of social media usage that they felt had influenced their identity development and self-image. Regardless of their perceptions of its influence, all participants continued using social media. The findings of this study informed the recommendations for practitioners serving the trans community as well as trans community members themselves about the variety of potential experiences for trans people who might seek or advise others to use social media as a means to find or access social support.

KEYWORDS: transgender, trans, identity development, social support, social media

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional models of identity development count social support as a key factor in psychosocial well-being and adaptive coping (Cohen, 2004; Finch, Kolody, & Vega, 2000; Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Aaron, 2015). The importance of social support has also been found to be a key factor in the identity development of trans individuals (Davey, Bouman, Arcelus, & Meyer, 2014; Budge, Adelson, & Howard, 2013; Erber, 2015). Models of trans individuals' identity development confirm, "positive social experiences breed self-confidence, security and skills in communication" (Bockting & Coleman, 2007, p.185) and indicate lack of "social support is directly and indirectly related to depression and anxiety, with avoidant coping as a mediating variable" (Budge et al., 2013, p.554).

Historically, subjects and models of research on identity development have been almost exclusively based on cis-gendered and /or heterosexual participants. Even in instances where the sexuality or gender identity of participants is not explicitly identified, it is assumed that it does not need to be stated because they are heterosexual or cis-gender, the "default," and thus the erasure of trans identity. Those psychological models and approaches that do focus on trans identities have been overwhelmingly pathological/medical in nature, meaning that trans individuals have been seen as having an illness or condition that requires diagnosis and treatment. This study, informed by Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008), works to challenge some of the basic assumptions of sexuality and gender identity, and will allow for the development of "new ways of exploring issues of human identity and relationships- issues that are arguably of prime importance and interest to psychologists" (Butler & Byrne, 2008, p. 89). In

understanding more about the vast array of experiences of identity and relationships, we can come to a greater understanding of ourselves.

There is a great need for positive identity development models for the trans community (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Erber, 2015; Mallon, 1999). To quote Marian Wright Edelman, "It's hard to be what you can't see" (Edelman, 2015). Trans individuals have been forced out of sight, systemically stigmatized and pathologized particularly in western culture. There are relatively few resources available in terms of positive identity development that acknowledge the healthy development of trans individuals. "Psychology may thus be described as being in the production of knowledges that have served to reinforce the normalizing of heterosexuality and gender dichotomy and the oppression of other practices and identities" (Butler & Byrne, 2008, p 90). The use of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) in psychology aids in deconstructing this hierarchy of social power and control by identifying the emphasis of heteronormative power and the oppressive practices that influence individuals and society at large. It allows space for the voices of 'other' disenfranchised populations. Because, while it may be true that pathologizing "queer" behaviors and identities has been the history of counseling and psychology, it should not be the future. Counselors and mental health professionals have a responsibility to adhere to the ethical standards set forth by the American Counseling Association (ACA) through the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) committee on Competencies with Transgender Clients (Burnes, Singh, Harper, et.al., 2009). Counselors need also to educate themselves generally on the factors that impact the identity development of trans individuals in order to inform models of positive identity development for trans clients so as to better serve not only their trans clients, but all of their clients. The challenge is, with relatively little information available, this can prove to be a

daunting task. More research is needed in order to gather the necessary information to develop a better understanding of the factors that impact identity development of trans individuals and to create positive models of identity development.

Problem Statement

Despite calls for further research (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Erber, 2015; Mallon, 1999), there is a dearth of research and information regarding identity development of trans individuals. The information we do have suggests social support is a key factor in identity development of trans individuals (Cohen, 2004; Finch et al., 2000; Noh & Kaspar, 2003; D'Augelli 1994). However, social support may be difficult to obtain for many trans people. Isolation, stigmatization, bullying, violence, and rejection are just some of the factors that may impede the ability of trans people to obtain social support. The internet and more specifically social media potentially provide an outlet where people can seek social support. However, this avenue also holds its own risks in terms of bullying, shaming, threats of violence and isolation. To date there has been limited research on whether the use of social media can translate to social support and even less research specifically on the role social media may play in the identity development of trans individuals.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

This study seeks to determine whether technology/the internet, expressly social media, bridges any of that gap in providing those "positive social experiences [that] breed self-confidence, security and skills in communication" in trans individuals (Bockting & Coleman, 2007, p.185). Additionally, this study seeks to understand how the possible negative aspects of

social interaction such as isolation, bullying and transphobia might also be experienced by trans individuals via the internet. Specifically, this study asks the following research questions and corresponding sub-questions: (1) What are the experiences of trans individuals when using social media? (2) How do trans individuals perceive the experiences of accessing and using social media as they pertain to their identity development? (2a) What are the experiences of trans individuals who use social media when it comes to perception of social support?

Identity development in this study is conceptualized along the lines of D'Augelli's model of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity Development, which also speaks to gender identity (D'Augelli, 1994). This lifespan model is based on a social context where simultaneous multifaceted identity development processes can occur throughout an individual's life through social interaction, self-concepts, relationships with family and connection with friends as well as connection with community. D'Augelli posits six stages of identity development: (1) Exiting traditional identity; (2) Developing a personal identity; (3) Developing a social identity; (4) Becoming an "offspring"; (5) Developing an intimacy identity and; (6) Joining a community. Becoming an "offspring" refers to a phase in an individual's identity where they may have a role model or mentor in the LGBTQ+ community they rely on for information and support. The individual may have this mentor but may not be "out" to family/friends or the community. D'Augelli's model of identity development and Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) are able to be combined to address intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990) of identities of trans individuals. That is to say the participants in this study are more than just a singular identity. They are not only trans people; they have multifaceted identities that are entwined uniquely to make up a whole. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990) is a common term used to illustrate this concept when describing identities/identity development. Queer theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) acknowledges

and respects this multiplicity of identity by allowing for a person to self-identify with multiple identities and understanding each identity is no more or less important than another (Brown, 2012).

Research Approach

This study primarily followed a phenomenological methodology and implemented in-depth interviews of self-identified transgender individuals in order to gain an understanding of the experiences of those individuals as it pertained to social media usage and their perceptions of its role in their identity development. The primary focus of the study was the phenomenon of social media usage by trans individuals. More broadly, the study hopes to provide a deeper understanding of the influences on identity development of trans individuals and to inform positive models of identity development for trans individuals, mental health practitioners and their communities at large. Information gathered from this study helps identify influences on the identity development of trans individuals as well as provides additional information to the general public about the identity development process of trans individuals. This is in the hopes that deeper understanding will lead to a decrease in rates of self-harm and violence against those who identify as trans.

The interviews involved in this study were conducted in person by the researcher at neutral locations. Calls for interview participants were distributed through a variety of means including, but not limited to, electronic distribution, email and in-person distribution. The researcher also distributed information/calls for participants to area organizations that serve the trans community. All participation in the study was voluntary and the researcher discussed with participants their ability to withdraw or discontinue participation in the study at any time.

Assumptions

Assumptions leading into this study were that most if not all participants would be aware of social media and how people use it. It was assumed that however limited, participants would also have access to the internet whether that was through school, the library, a home computer, smartphone or other means. Other factors such as participants' age, socio-economic status, ability level, race and/or ethnic identity were also identified as aspects that might have impacted the results. Given the most recent census statistics for the research location, it is possible many of interview participants would primarily identify as white or Caucasian and may live well below the poverty line (US Census, 2015). That being said, this research worked to obtain information from a diverse participant base.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher is a graduate student at a public Midwest university located in the central U.S. who is seeking a degree in counseling in effort to work as a Licensed Professional Counselor counseling diverse populations which include the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ+) population.

The researcher comes from a small town, where many formative years were spent before the Internet became a mainstream commodity, a necessity. Growing up, and when coming out, the researcher did not have the opportunity to connect with other people online, to find acceptance, to question; this support was not found until moving to a comparatively larger city that had an established LGBTQ+ community. Growing up, the researcher did not know anyone who identified as gay, and did not know anyone who was trans. There was relatively little opportunity to access to information about anyone who existed outside of the heterosexual, cis-gender norm.

The little opportunity that may have existed was overshadowed by shame and other oppressive cultural norms that were both directly and indirectly expressed in the researcher's childhood community. Now, as part of an LGBTQ+ community that is situated in a marginally metropolitan area surrounded by substantially rural areas, and as part of multiple online groups and with access to local resource centers, the researcher questions how different it must be for people who live in isolated circumstances with the technology of the current time. They have access to connections, information, and support; one would suspect that it must be better for them than it was prior to the development of this technology. Through the experiences of several online groups, the researcher has observed an immense amount of support and resource sharing. Still the question remains, what is the impact of those transactions? Do they translate to social support? What role do they play in the lives of trans people who are developing in terms of their identity?

Rationale and Significance

About two years prior to this research study, in the community where the research was conducted, there were certain additions to the non-discrimination protections adopted by the larger metropolitan area. These additions included protections against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity for housing, employment, healthcare, and services. After an immense effort to add those protections succeeded, the additions were repealed by a popular vote. During that time, a large network of LGBTQ+ community members came together to volunteer in the effort to quash the repeal. They came from the metropolitan area, neighboring towns and rural areas alike. On one occasion the researcher observed a mother and her teen child enter the volunteer center. They had come from several hours away to volunteer. The teen- who

identified as trans- and their mother- were nearly in tears as they walked around the room of volunteers. "I didn't know there was anyone else like me," they said. It was a profound experience. It begged the question, even with all of this technology -- the Internet, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter -- and even with the ability to connect and communicate instantaneously with people from all around the globe, how could this teen still feel alone? This led the researcher to thinking about instances of online bullying and how most reports would indicate it was on the rise and the feelings of isolation that can develop as a result of negative interactions. So what then is the impact of this technology on identity development for people like our volunteer teen? Do interactions via social media and other electronic technology translate to perceived social support? Do they combat those feelings of isolation or enhance them?

Preliminary searches indicate that while there have been several studies regarding perceptions of social support stemming from social media usage, few have focused on marginalized groups and virtually none on the trans population. This study provides additional information about the perception of trans individuals on factors impacting their identity development, specifically on the use of social media, and how that may influence their identity development. The current lack of information regarding the use of social media by trans individuals, and how that use may or may not translate as perceived social support leaves a gap in understanding identity development outside of a socially acceptable cis-gender model and impedes our understanding of trans individuals' identity development and the potentially important factors already in play.

This study, at its core, seeks to expand understanding of trans individuals' experiences and development. By adding to the body of work currently focused on trans individuals, this

study hopes to provide insight into key factors influencing those experiences and development-enhancing both the way the trans community and its advocates come to approach the experiences and development of trans individuals.

Definitions and Key Terminology

Cis-gender: Those who have "a gender identity or perform a gender role society considers appropriate for one's sex" (Crethar & Vargas, 2007, p.59).

Transgender, Transsexual, Trans-identified/Trans: "'Transgender' refers to having a gender identity that differs from one's sex assigned at birth. 'Gender identity' refers to the basic conviction of being a man, woman or other gender (e.g., bigender, genderqueer, gender questioning, gender nonconforming)" (Bockting, 2015). Trans is more commonly used to encompass this umbrella of identities (Human Rights Campaign, 2017).

Sexual orientation: "[R]efers to one's sexual attraction, sexual behavior and emotional attachments to men, women or both" (Bockting, 2015).

Gender Dysphoria: "Gender dysphoria" is a term that reflects more accurately than gender identity disorder when an individual is distressed about a conflict between their sex assigned at birth and their gender identity/role (Bockting, 2015).

Transphobia: "A range of antagonistic attitudes and feelings against transgender or transsexual people, or against transsexuality. Transphobia can be emotional disgust, fear, anger or discomfort felt or expressed towards people who do not conform to society's gender expectations" (Chrisler & McCreary, 2010, p. 366).

Identity: Self-image (one's mental model of oneself), self-esteem, and individuality. Identity is how an individual views and presents themselves as a whole. This self-image takes

into account time and the continuity of the construct of one's self in the past, present and future. "A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future" (Weinreich, 1986, p. 317).

Identity Development (formation): A process of development of a personality made up of "persistent and distinct characteristics" by which a person is known. "This process defines individuals to others and themselves. Pieces of the person's actual identity include a sense of continuity, a sense of uniqueness from others, and a sense of affiliation." A person comes to recognize themselves as a "discrete entity" that also holds affiliation with others. This identity formation may take place in "stages through which differentiated facets of a person's life tend toward becoming a more indivisible whole" (Sharma in Menon, Sinha, Sreekantan, 2014, p.120).

Social Media: Computer mediated technologies that allow the creating and sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks. The variety of stand-alone and built-in social media services currently available introduces challenges of definition. However, there are some common features: 1. Social media are interactive Web 2.0 Internet-based applications. User-generated content, such as text posts or comments, digital photos or videos, and data generated through all online interactions, are the lifeblood of social media. 2. Users create service-specific profiles for the website or app that are designed and maintained by the social media organization. 3. Social media facilitate the development of online social networks by connecting a user's profile with those of other individuals and/or groups. (Obar & Wildman, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Boyd & Ellison, 2007)

Life Satisfaction: "[R]efers to a cognitive judgmental process…a global assessment of a person's quality of life according to his chosen criteria" (Shin & Johnson 1978 as cited in Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985, p.71).

Social Support: "[T]he allocation of psychological and tangible resources with the intention of providing assistance to recipients in order to cope with stress" (Cohen, 2004, p.676).

Well-being: The dimensions of well-being encompass "a breadth of wellness that includes positive evaluations of oneself and one's past life (Self-Acceptance), a sense of continued growth and development as a person (Personal Growth), the belief that one's life is purposeful and meaningful (Purpose in Life), the possession of quality relations with others (Positive Relations With Others), the capacity to manage effectively one's life and surrounding world (Environmental Mastery), and a sense of self-determination (Autonomy)" (Diener et al., 1985, p.71).

LGBTQ+: An acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Trans Queer/Questioning, and others (Human Rights Campaign, 2017). The acronym can be broken down when referring to more specific subsets of the overarching umbrella. For example: GB when referring to Gay and Bisexual only, GT when referring to Gay and Trans only.

Folx: A gender neutral umbrella term for people with sexual orientation or gender identities that lie outside the binary (Peters, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed contextualizes the usage of social media both in the broader population of the United States as well as specifically in the LGBTQ+ population. Current studies indicate there is some correlation between the use of social media and the perception of social support (Kim, 2014; Olson, Liu & Shultz, 2012). These studies have not focused on marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ population. Specifically, there is a lack of research regarding the usage of social media by trans individuals and the role it plays in their perceptions of social support and identity development. The literature review also contains a review of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) to identify its relevance and application to this research. Predominantly, the literature reviewed has been organized into the following four categories: (1) Importance of Social Support in Identity Development; (2) Prevalence of the Use of Social Media in the United States; (3) Social Media as a Form of Social Support; and (4) Prevalence of Social Media/Internet Usage Among LGBTQ+ Individuals.

Queer Theory

"What is queer is therefore that which is subjugated in relation to that which is dominant, not the affirmation of an alternative identity: it is to be 'other'" (Butler & Byrne, 2008, p 94). Queer Theory is a "critique of the notion of universal truths" (Butler & Byrne, 2008, p 92). The framework is built on the self-determination and identification of individuals for themselves and views constructs such as gender and sexuality as fluid and existing outside the dichotomous binary. It is a particularly poignant theory when working with identity development of marginalized people and populations, lending a voice to those who are pathologically silenced.

Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) unearths the construction of power in order to subvert it. Power allows its possessor to create that which is considered "natural," "normal," "healthy," or "desirable." These constructions are then used to grant absolution or validity to certain behaviors and identities, while invalidating other behaviors and identities, and thus setting up a hierarchy of power which ultimately creates an "other" and feeds back into itself to create more power. The "policing" of sexuality and gender, as described by Foucault, is a primary construct of power, which is derived through the social control of the constructs of sexuality and gender (Spargo, 1999).

Queer Theory looks to subvert this authority through the "construction of new meanings and narratives outside the limiting and oppressive societal definitions of what is 'normal', 'healthy' and 'desirable'" (Butler & Byrne, 2008, p 89). This is why Queer Theory is particularly well suited as a theoretical framework for this study. Traditionally, "psychological approaches to trans identities… [have been] conceptualized almost totally within a medical/pathological model" (Butler & Byrne, 2008, p 90). Use of words such as "disorder" or "dysphoria" are symptoms of this construct of power that deems some identities to be valid or "natural" and "others" to be perverse. This study uses a "queer" lens in order to give voice to those who have historically been "policed" to the point of silence and death. New meanings and narratives will be brought to light and will hold a light, thus subverting the darkness and silence, of oppression.

Importance of Social Support in Identity Development

There is a large body of research that indicates greater perceived levels of social support are related to lower levels of depression and anxiety (Wareham, Fowler & Pike, 2007; Wester,

Christianson, Vogel & Wei, 2007; Wright & Perry, 2006). Social support and community are also considered significant factors in resilience and creativity (Bith-Melander, Sheoran, Sheth, Bermudez, Drone, Wood, & Shroeder, 2010). Yet our society remains largely tied to a gender binary that does not openly tolerate identities outside of those strictly defined as male and female (Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Singh & McKleroy, 2011). This can lead to feelings of isolation by individuals who may not identify within that strict binary. This isolation may be further compounded by other aspects of the individual's identity such as their physical location, ethnicity, race, age, socioeconomic status and mobility/ability status. Social support has also been noted as a key element of enhanced well-being in trans individuals regardless of multiple marginalizations (Bith-Melander et al, 2010; Golub, Walker, Longmire-Avital, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2010; Meier, Sharp, Michonski, Babcock & Fitzgerald, 2013). So even though social support has been shown to be an important element of enhanced well-being for trans individuals, it may be particularly difficult for trans individuals to access social support due to oppressive and restrictive societal stigma.

Prevalence of the Use of Social Media in the United States

Increasingly technology, specifically the availability of the internet and development of social media, has created new avenues for social interactions and connections. The internet as a whole has been found to be a "pervasive" influence on many aspects of our lives (McMillan & Morrison, 2006, p. 88). According to a recent study conducted by the Pew Research Group nearly eight in ten *online* Americans (79%) now use Facebook, 24% report using Twitter, 31% Pinterest, 32% Instagram and 29% LinkedIn. On a total population basis 68% of all U.S. adults report being Facebook users, while 28% use Instagram, 26% use Pinterest, 25% use LinkedIn

and 21% use Twitter. Roughly three-quarters (76%) of Facebook users report that they visit the site daily (55% visit several times a day, and 22% visit about once per day). The study also states more than half of online adults (56%) use more than one social media platform (Pew, 2016, p. 2-10). So it would seem with 68% of all U.S. adults using some kind of social media (Pew, 2016), that it is likely many trans individuals have access to and may use some form of social media.

Social Media as a Form of Social Support

Several studies have been conducted to determine whether social media usage and interaction translates to feelings of greater social support, life satisfaction, and well-being. (Stefanone, Kyounghee & Lackaff, 2012; Kim, 2014; Olson, et.al., 2012). These studies have shown that individuals who used Facebook perceived some resulting form of social support. For example, some studies indicate among individuals who have a smaller network of social support, Facebook is more influential than the number of strong ties in terms of social support in their times of need (Kim, 2014). However, these studies also consistently found that "face-to-face" or "offline" interactions were more highly correlated with feelings of social support (Kim, 2014; Olson et al., 2012); and they also suggest that social media usage had "no significant effect on life satisfaction" (Kim, 2014, p. 2213; Olson et al., 2012, p. 141). Additional studies have shown that the internet and its applications have enhanced social capital. Online communities allow users to connect on a variety of topics to exchange information and provide social support (Olson et al., 2012). These avenues of social support, though not measurably as significant as "face-to-face" or "offline" encounters, can potentially be quite impactful for individuals who may not be able to find or seek out other avenues. So it would seem there may be some uncertainty when determining what kind of role social media plays in the perception of social support and

subsequently identity development. The current research leaves questions to be answered as to the overall role and influence of social media on individuals and their perceptions of social support and well-being. Particularly in the case of some trans individuals who may not have an extensive network of "face to face" sources of social support. What, if any, influence does social media have on their perception of social support and identity development?

Prevalence of Social Media/Internet Usage Among LGBTQ+ Individuals

Research suggests one such population that could be significantly influenced by the use of the internet/social media is the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Questioning population (LGBTQ+). In a recent study published by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2013) it was found that LGBTQ+ youth spent an average of five hours per day online- which is about 45 minutes more per day than the non-LGBTQ+ youth in the study reported. Additionally, LGBTQ+ youth reported knowing substantially more online friends than non-LGBTQ+ youth: 50% of LGBTQ+ respondents reported having at least one close online friend, compared to only 19% of non- LGBTQ+ youth. LGBTQ+ youth rated their online friends as more supportive than non-LGBTQ+ youth rated their online friends. Half (or more than half) of LGBTQ+ youth who lacked LGBTQ+ peers, close LGBTQ+ friends, GSAs (Gay-Straight Alliances), or LGBTQ+ community groups had used the Internet to connect with other LGBTQ+ people, providing evidence of the importance of online resources for LGBTQ+ youth who may lack relevant resources elsewhere. More than half (52%) of LGBTQ+ respondents who were not out to peers in person had used the Internet to connect with other LGBTQ+ people (GLSEN, 2016, p. 5-10).

The GLSEN study also reported LGBTQ+ youth were nearly three times as likely as non-LGBTQ+ youth to say they had been bullied or harassed online (42% vs. 15%) and twice as likely to say they had been bullied via text message (27% vs. 13%). LGBTQ+ youth were four times as likely as non-LGBTQ+ youth to say they had been sexually harassed online (32% vs. 8%) and three times as likely to say they had been sexually harassed via text message (25% vs. 8%). LGBTQ+ youth in rural areas experienced substantially higher levels of victimization online and via text message compared to LGBTQ+ youth in suburban and urban areas. Youth who experienced both online/text and in-person bullying and harassment reported lower GPAs, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of depression than youth who were bullied only in person or online/text, or not at all. Trans, cis-gender lesbian, gay and bisexual females, and youth with "other" genders reported higher levels of online victimization compared to cis-gender male gay and bisexual youth (GLSEN, 2013, p. 5-10).

Cis-gender male gay and bisexual youth were more likely to have searched online for information on sexuality or sexual attraction compared to cis-gender lesbian, gay and bisexual females; and also more likely than cis-gender lesbian, gay and bisexual females to have searched for information on HIV/ AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) (GLSEN, 2013, p. 12-16). Trans youth and youth with "other" genders were more likely to have searched online for information about sexuality or sexual attraction than cis-gender female lesbian, gay and bisexual youth. Trans youth were more likely than other lesbian, gay and bisexual youth to have searched for health and medical information and information on STIs, perhaps because of a lack of relevant information in schools. In addition, cis-gender gay and bisexual males, transgender, and "other" gender lesbian, gay and bisexual youth were more likely than cis-gender lesbian, gay and bisexual females to have used the Internet to connect with other LGBTQ+ people online.

Rural LGBTQ+ youth were more likely to be more out online than in person, compared to urban and suburban youth (GLSEN, 2013, p. 12-16).

The study concluded many LGBTQ+ youth also go online for social support, either to reinforce their existing, in-person networks of support or to expand them. Youth who are not out in person, and youth who feel less comfortable identifying as LGBTQ+ in their schools or communities, may be especially reliant on online resources. In addition, a substantial number of youth said that they only participated in civic activities online, suggesting that online spaces may serve as a safe venue for engagement for many LGBTQ+ youth. The implications for practitioners are that they may find it helpful to encourage some youth more than others to connect with resources online while educating them on the potential risks for bullying and sexual harassment. In addition, given the stigma that LGBTQ+ people face in many schools and communities, "teachers, parents, and other adults who work with youth may recommend the use of online spaces to support civic participation among LGBTQ+ youth" (GLSEN, 2013).

A multiple case study comprised of four trans participants was completed by Erber (2015). This study suggested, "online resources and communities [were] instrumental in incorporating transgender identity into an [individual's] self-concept" (Erber, 2015, p 182) and proposed, "the internet may supplant the physical community" for trans individuals in rural areas (Erber, 2015, p 214). This research coupled with that done by GLSEN strongly suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals have access to and use the internet and online resources to seek out information and to reinforce or expand networks of support.

Conclusions from Literature

Though the GLSEN (2013) study and others like it do provide some insight on the influence the internet and social media have on the LGBTQ+ population, information specifically related to the perceptions of influence on identity development, life satisfaction, and well-being of trans individuals is lacking. What previous literature has proposed is that "The internet provides ample opportunity for transgender individuals to connect with peers and resources" (Bockting & Coleman, 2007, p. 185) and that "the internet may supplant the physical community" for trans individuals in certain areas (Erber, 2015, p 214). We can see from the statistics related to overall social media usage in the U.S., as provided by the Pew study, that it is highly likely social media and online interactions are a part of a trans person's life (Pew, 2016, p. 2-10) and we can conclude from the research conducted by GLSEN (2013) and Erber (2015) that the influence may even be more significant than for cis-gendered individuals. However, what we also see is that there is a potentially significant variance in effect, ranging from enhanced social capital and feelings of social support to increased instances of bullying and feelings of isolation. Further research is needed to determine what kind of influence the internet, specifically social media, has on the identity development of trans individuals. This study works to bridge the gap of knowledge and provide a greater understanding of the internet and social media as factors in the identity development of trans individuals.

METHODOLOGY

This study explores the role of technology (the internet and use of social media) in the identity development of trans individuals. Does social media help fulfill a need for social support in trans individuals? The study also investigates whether social media interactions influence identity development by providing those "positive social experiences [that] breed self-confidence, security and skills in communication" in trans individuals (Bockting & Coleman, 2007, p.185). Additionally, this study examines the potential for gaining social support through the use of social media along with the possible negative aspects of social interaction such as isolation, bullying, and transphobia? Specifically, what are the experiences of trans individuals when using social media? How do trans individuals perceive the experiences of accessing and using social media as they pertain to their identity development? What are the experiences of trans individuals who use social media when it comes to perception of social support?

The principles of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) were used as a theoretical framework to gather, analyze and synthesize the data from this study. Phenomenological methods were used to uncover the lived experience of the participants as it relates to social media and their identity development. In this study, the researcher joined with the participants through in-depth interviews in order to construct new meanings through the narratives of the participants and provide a broader lens for the understanding of identity development in trans individuals.

Rationale for Phenomenological and Action-Oriented Research Design

Phenomenology as a research methodology is a "systematic attempt to uncover and describe structures of lived experience to arrive at a deeper understanding of the nature of the

meaning of experiences of phenomena" (Cilesiz, 2011, p. 492). As a methodology, phenomenology is committed to the description of experiences and not explanation or analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, phenomenology is a well suited form of analysis within the framework of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008). It is also well suited to the study of experiences surrounding interactions with technology because it aims to study the experiences from the perspectives of those experiencing them in order to develop a deeper understanding of the shared experiences of the phenomenon. In phenomenology, the researcher's perspectives, opinions or interpretations should not "enter the unique world of the participant" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). Distinctive features of phenomenology were used to comprise this study. This study employed description through the use of in-depth interviews. These interviews were conducted under the principles of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008), in an egalitarian manner where the participant is the expert of their own experience; and examined through the use of phenomenology in order to cultivate a deeper understanding of the experiences of the individual through phenomenological reduction which will seek the most "invariant meanings for the context" (Cilesiz, 2011, p. 493).

The purpose of action-oriented research is to work toward "solutions to everyday, real problems…rather than dealing only with the theoretical, action-oriented research allows practitioners to address those concerns that are closest to them, ones over which they can exhibit some influence and make change" (Ferrance, 2000, p. 1). This purpose is central to the current study and is in alignment with the principles of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) which work toward the subversion of oppression. A recent study indicates a "suicide attempt rate of 41 % among trans (e.g., trans, transgender, transsexual/transsexual, genderqueer, two-spirit) individuals" (Moody & Smith, 2013, p.739). The highest ever murder rate of identifiable

transgender individuals was reported in 2017 with 2018 looking to match or exceed those numbers (Lee, 2017). Reports also routinely show that violence against trans individuals is on the rise. Yet there continues to be a lack of dedicated research on the experiences of trans individuals and what influences positive identity development. This study works to bridge that gap and contribute to a greater understanding about the influence of the experience of social media on identity development of trans individuals and thus help create a greater overall understanding of how to empower positive identity development and community experiences.

Participants

The U.S. Census Bureau recorded the population of the greater metropolitan area where a majority of the participants reside to be 541,991 in 2015. Median age is 33.2 years. In a binary-choice only reporting system, females were reported to be 51.5% of the overall population. In terms of racial make-up, 88.7 percent of the population is reported to be white, 4.1% African American, 0.8% Native American, 1.9% Asian, 0.2% Pacific Islander, 1.2% from other races, and 3.2% from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino of any race was 3.7% of the population. In 2015, the Census Bureau reported 25.7% of individuals living in the area to be living under the poverty level. Data from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) as reported by the Williams Institute indicates that approximately .6% of the population of the United States (about 1.4 million) identify as trans. Roughly 25,000 of those individuals reside in the state where the study took place. This ranks the state 25th in terms of trans population in the United States and puts the percentage of the population identifying as trans at about .54% (Flores, 2016, p. 3). Historically, it is thought the number of trans individuals in the population of the United States is underreported. Census data has not included questions or information on gender identity until

around 2011 and even with these additions, underreporting due to fear of stigmatization and unclear definitions of gender identity likely continues (Flores, 2016).

The participants for this study were identified on the basis of availability through convenience and snowball sampling. Prior approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). Interview participants were chosen on the basis that they self-identified as trans, are over the age of 18 and do not have a legal guardian. Data collected from the interviews were analyzed, synthesized, and crosschecked by a peer-debriefer to generate results. Interviewed individuals were recruited through the area LGBTQ+ community center as well as through online groups and personal contacts. Information regarding the research project was posted both physically at area organizations that provide services or come into contact with trans individuals as well as posted online. When the research study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (November 5, 2017; IRB-FY2018-333), the researcher gave information about the study as well as contact information to group leaders at local centers and requested that they have any self-identified adult trans individual interested in participating in the interview process contact the researcher. Interview participants were chosen on the basis of availability and whether they met the criteria for the study in terms of age and self-identified identity. Informed consent was reviewed with potential participants and they were informed that they were free to discontinue participation in the research project at any time.

According to the principles of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008), the researcher worked to maintain an egalitarian relationship with the study participants. The participant is viewed as the expert of their own meaning and experience. The objective of the researcher was to record that meaning and experience as accurately as possible. During the course of the interviews, the researcher utilized techniques such as member check-ins, in the form of interview

transcripts given to the participants, to confirm with the participants that the researcher illustrated an accurate understanding of the participants' narrative and responses. Additional second interviews were offered to participants in the case they wanted to add to or edit their responses from the first interview once they had an opportunity to review the interview summaries from the researcher. The researcher discussed with the participants the possibility of a potential second interview, for the purposes of clarification, during the initial contact and initial interview stages. No secondary interviews took place.

The need to protect the identity of the individuals involved in the study was particularly critical in this study since it is possible the participants may not have chosen to self-identify as trans outside safe spaces. The researcher went over the steps that were taken to protect the identity of the individual with each participant. The steps included but were not limited to: the use of participant chosen code names to refer to each participant in the study; minimizing the number of documents that tie the participant to the research; keeping the document(s) that do connect the participant with the research locked in a safe until they are destroyed; and in accordance with MSU IRB guidelines identifying a timeframe within which any identifying documents will be destroyed.

Instruments

The study consisted of in-depth interviews from local trans individuals who volunteered for this study. Each participant reviewed the Informed Consent with the researcher prior to signing (see Appendix B). The interview questions were semi-structured and focused on the phenomenon of the use of social media and self-perceptions of trans individuals' identity development (see Appendix C). A self-reflective journal that focused on the experiences of the

researcher while conducting the research and analysis was completed by the researcher (see Appendix D). The study, interview and journal protocol were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting the research or analysis.

The process of using experiential data directly from the population being studied to inform the researcher's interview questions is in line with Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) because it attempts to center the experiences of transgender individuals throughout the study. The results of the interviews, in following with the phenomenological approach, are valid in and of themselves as they have meaning to the respondents. Also in line with phenomenology, the self-reflective journal completed by the researcher provides insight into the experiences of the researcher while conducting the research and works to aid in keeping the perspective of the researcher separate from that of the participants.

Data Collection Methods

The study consisted of five in-person interviews conducted by the researcher which were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Participants responded to items in a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C). The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The researcher stored any and all raw data and identifying information on a password protected drive. Aside from participant-selected code names, no personal identifying information of the participants was recorded in the analysis, synthesis and subsequent results of this study. The participants selected a code name prior to recording the interview. The researcher used this code name to title the interview recording which was kept on a password protected device. The interview recordings were time/date stamped and coincided with the date of signature of the Informed Consent form (see Appendix B). The self-reflective journal was completed by the

researcher after interviewing each participant (see Appendix D). All information and data regarding the study was kept on a password protected drive.

In line with Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008), the researcher interviewed participants in a neutral, safe location of their choosing. Also in line with Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008), interviewing participants face-to-face was a primary goal, but the decision as to how and where the interview was conducted was ultimately up to the participants. The goal of phenomenology is to capture the essence of the participants' experience. Therefore, it was important the participant felt free to respond to interview questions honestly without fear or concern for their well-being. Potential options for safe, neutral spaces were identified by the researcher prior to conducting the interviews.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

This study followed a phenomenological approach within the theoretical framework of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) in that the goal was to understand the experiences of the participants as they were described by the participants. The answers given by participants were considered valid in that they were the lived experiences of the participants in their own words. Therefore, in line with a Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) approach, the researcher used "member checks" during the interview process to confirm with the participants that the researcher captured their responses and meanings accurately. Interview transcriptions were presented to the participants for review to confirm the researcher correctly recorded their responses (Vogt, 2005).

Triangulation was used -between the interview responses, previous literature, self-reflective journal and a peer debriefer- to increase trustworthiness of the study. The researcher

worked with a peer debriefer, a reviewer who did not take part in the study, for the purposes of diminishing bias on the part of the researcher and adding another step towards trustworthiness of the study. Bracketing, or Epoche (Moustakas, 1994), an important step in phenomenological research where the researcher takes steps to be more aware of their biases and judgments, was implemented. This was purposeful in keeping with the principles of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) and phenomenology because the selection of a debriefer keeps with an egalitarian model of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008). The peer debriefer reviewed the proposal along with semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C) and analyses of interview results. The debriefer did not view any identifying information or raw data that tied participants to the study. Examination of the study by the peer debriefer and ultimately by the researcher's thesis committee contributed to the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p 129).

Once data from interviews were collected, the researcher began the process of coding transcripts of the interviews. Open coding was conducted on the responses from the interviews, and the data was divided into segments and analyzed for categories or themes. The researcher made comparisons and differentiated between responses. Characteristics for each emerging theme were reviewed, and axial coding was used to make connections between the emerging categories and themes as part of the process of synthesizing the data. The researcher explored the context of the study that might influence the phenomenon as well as other conditions outside the study that could potentially impact the resulting data. The self-reflective journal was completed by the researcher to identify any perspectives or bias on the part of the researcher that may have impacted the results. Selective coding was used to "put together a storyline" and form a description of the phenomenon, e.g., the role of social media in identity development of trans individuals. Results from these analyses formed the basis for a greater phenomenological

understanding of the experiences of transgender individuals as they pertain to identity

development and social media (Merriam, 1995).

This methodology is consistent with Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008), the collection

and analysis of thick narrative data provided in the form of interviews allows for authentically

capturing the experience and meaning of the participant. Open coding synthesizes the data

collected in a manner that also honors the experience and meaning of the individual without

questioning the validity of responses. This synthesis also is beneficial in that it allows for the

general narrative data to be unified into specific data and then back to general. More general

ideas can be gained from the analysis of data in this manner, without compromising the integrity

or validity of the individual participant's narratives. The use of member-checking also falls in

line with Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) and contributes to the trustworthiness of the

study because it allows participants to be active members of the research study by confirming

their experiences are reflected accurately by the researcher.

Ethical Considerations

For the purposes of this study, only individuals over the age of 18 were interviewed, and

therefore, parental permission was not required for participation. For each of the interviews, the

researcher provided the interviewee with an informed consent form (see Appendix B). The

researcher reviewed the informed consent form with the participants. The researcher also

provided a copy of that form to the interview participants and advised them that they will not

disclose the names or personal identification information of the individuals. Participant-selected

code names were used when analyzing, synthesizing and publishing any data associated with this

study. There was/is the possibility that someone reading the study who knows the participant

well might be able to guess the identity of the participant. The researcher disclosed this possibility as well as listed it in the informed consent form. The researcher encoded the responses so as to decrease the chances of information being linked back to any particular participant. Identifying information such as signed consent forms were stored in a locked, secure location with the primary investigator for a period of no greater than three years after the completion of the study. The identifying information will then be destroyed. In line with an action-oriented research approach, the final analysis of the data has been made available to the general public through journal publication as well as publication on the internet. The final analysis has been shared to the community organizations that provide services and/or have contact with area transgender community members in order to make them available to individuals within those organizations as well as to the community members they serve.

The overall direct benefit for the participants was mainly gaining a greater understanding of the influences on identity development for trans individuals, e.g., themselves. The research hopes to contribute to a growing body of work that expands on the experiences of trans individuals. It is the goal of the researcher that this work will increase awareness and understanding among the community at large which, in turn, would improve the relationships between trans participants and service providers; an increase in information regarding trans communities would lead to a higher level of interactive support for trans individuals.

Trustworthiness

Interviewees responses based on their experiences are valid in and of themselves from a phenomenological approach. For the purposes of this study, triangulation took place between the analysis of prior literature and research; the analysis of the participants' responses; the

researcher's observations and the review of the subsequent analysis from the peer debriefer. The use of a peer debriefer also aided in establishing trustworthiness of this study. During the course of the interview process, member checks were completed to confirm the information recorded by the researcher as accurate and "ringing true" to the responses given by the interviewees (Vogt, 2005). This was accomplished by providing participants with transcriptions of their recorded interview and allowing for additions, changes or clarifications to the information they provide. Additional interviews were also offered to participants if the participants felt further clarification was necessary.

Limitations

Limitations to this research include time, location, researcher identification, and access to the internet/electronic devices. The research was conducted over a limited period of time. During the course of the study there might have been times when many students, which comprise a great deal of the population of the LGBTQ+ community, would not be available; this could have impacted the research sample. There could have also be significant changes that occurred outside this timeframe that affected the results of the interviews. Those who participated in the study may have been more likely to be connected already to some sort of direct social support or community. Participants were selected based upon availability; this may have produced localized results in terms of influencing variables (such as race, ethnicity, geographical location, socio-economic status etc.). The fact that the researcher identifies with the LGBTQ+ community and has taken part in several events may have influenced the perceptions of the participants as well as those of the researcher, which may have also influenced the outcome of the study.

Summary

      In-depth interview questions were used to capture the essence of the experiences of the study participants. Data from the interviews addressed several categories such as access and/or use of social media and the participants' perception of support. Through the use of triangulation, the study produced insight into the self-perceived role of social media on the identity development of trans individuals.

FINDINGS

This study sought to explore the role of technology/the internet, specifically social media, in the identity development of trans individuals. Prior literature identifies "positive social experiences [that] breed self-confidence, security and skills in communication" as key factors in the positive identity development of trans individuals (Bockting & Coleman, 2007). This study sought to expand the understanding of the role of social media in providing any of those positive social experiences that contribute to the positive identity development of trans individuals. Additionally, the potential negative aspects of social media such as feelings of increased isolation, bullying and transphobia were explored.

Data Analysis

The study consisted of one individual semi-structured interview that was conducted with each participant. Participants selected a code name for themselves and this code name was used as their identifier throughout the course of the study. The stored interview recordings were date/time stamped and labeled with the participants chosen code name. The signed and dated Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B) along with the date stamped recordings tied the participants to their code name as the researcher could confirm the identity of the participant based on a comparison of dates between the recording and the signed Informed Consent. These articles will be erased and/or destroyed within a period of no more than three years after the completion of the study. As part of the member checking process, each of the five participants was provided with a transcribed copy of their interview for review and responded to the researcher with approval and/or requests to change, add or retract information before approving

the transcription. Participant code names were used throughout the transcript and any identifying information was removed from the data at this point. Each interview transcript was approved by the participant. The researcher then used open, axial and selective coding to organize the data into general themes and sub-themes. The proposal and organized data at this point were given to an independent peer debriefer to review the protocol as well as the subsequent analysis and formation of themes by the researcher. Feedback from the peer debriefer was reviewed and incorporated into the final results. Finally, a review of the results and feedback from the peer debriefer was conducted by the researcher and their committee chair.

The participants for the study were self-identified trans individuals ranging in age from 26 to 52 years of age. The participants expressed coming from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Most participants, 4 out of 5, were born in the immediate or surrounding area and all reported living a majority of their lives in the current area where the study took place. One participant identified as Black, one identified with a strong Native American heritage and three identified as White, Slavic or Caucasian. Three participants identified as male/man/trans man and two identified as female/woman/trans woman. The participants were selected through convenience sampling. The criteria for participation in the study were that the individual self-identify as trans and was at least 18 years of age at the time of the interview and not under legal guardianship. Each participant acknowledged fitting the criteria for the study both verbally and through the review and signing of the informed consent form.

The core components of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) as well as D'Augelli's model of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity Development were used as the theoretical framework to structure the interview questions for the semi-structured interviews as well as to inform the analysis of subsequent data gathered. Among its core components Queer Theory

(Butler & Byrne, 2008) lists self-identification/direction, a challenge of the binary through subversion of authority which leads to construction of new meaning that accounts for intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990) and gives voice to marginalized identities (Butler & Byrne, 2008; Brown, 2012). As a result, participant's responses to the interview questions, their self-identification and direction, are believed to reflect the core components of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008). The themes that emerged from the transcription of the participant interviews are believed to reflect those core components as well by extension. The themes are aligned with the core components of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) as well as with D'Augelli's model of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity Development in which D'Augelli posits six stages of identity development: (1) Exiting traditional identity; (2) Developing a personal identity; (3) Developing a social identity; (4) Becoming an "offspring"; (5) Developing an intimacy identity and; (6) Joining a community (D'Augelli 1994).

Research Questions

This study used a phenomenological approach to answer questions surrounding the experiences and perceptions of trans individuals regarding the use of social media as it pertained to their identity development. The specific questions posed by this study were: (1) What are the experiences of trans individuals when using social media? (2) How do trans individuals perceive the experiences of accessing and using social media as they pertain to their identity development? (2a) What are the experiences of trans individuals who use social media when it comes to perceptions of social support?

Themes

Three overarching themes were developed from the data through analysis, coding, peer review and discussion of the data: (a) Social Support; (b) Negative Interactions and Microaggressions; and (c) Access. Participants' experiences with social media, perceptions of social support, experiences surrounding negative interactions and microaggressions and access are reflections of both Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) and D'Augelli's model of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity Development (D'Augelli, 1994).

Sub-themes were also identified through the data analysis process. In the theme of Social Support, visibility and coming out were identified as sub-themes. In the theme of Negative Interactions and Microaggressions, experiences of direct experiences as well as indirect experiences were identified as sub-themes. These sub-themes were further broken down in order to capture the fullness of the experiences described by the participants. Under the sub-theme of direct experiences, the sub-themes of direct negativity and pressure to conform were identified. Perception and external expectations were identified as sub-themes under the sub-theme of indirect experiences. In the theme of Access, frequency and social media resources were identified as sub-themes.

Social Support. Social support, as defined in chapter one is, **"the allocation of** psychological and tangible resources with the intention of providing assistance to recipients in order to cope with stress" (Cohen, 2004, p.676). More specifically, "social support means having friends and other people, including family, to turn to in times of need or crisis to give you a broader focus and positive self-image" (Towey, 2016, para.1). All but one participant stated strongly that they did not or do not feel they have always had social support. When asked about current sources of social support, participants listed various sources including their spouses and

significant others, the local LGBTQ+ center, parents, church communities and Facebook.

Wonder Woman discussed how social support has been beneficial stating: **"**But otherwise I

would say Facebook, online because I've got a lot of people on there that I've helped, that have

helped me. It's just really important to me." When it came to social support specifically related

to social media, two distinct sub-themes emerged: visibility and coming out.

<u>Visibility</u>. Visibility or being able to see or be seen was a profound finding expressed by

all participants. Feelings of isolation, of being the only one or not having anyone like you were

described in the context that participants remembered the first time they were able to see and/or

connect with another trans individual. Nearly all recounted the time when they learned "I'm not

the only one." Overall, participants described this aspect of visibility as providing great relief,

increasing feelings of assurance and well-being. Frank Castle, Wonder Woman and Sean all

spoke specifically about how the internet and social media provided them with the opportunity to

see others who were like them and how this affected their identity development and self-image.

Frank Castle said:

> Yeah cause like I said when I found those Facebook groups and stuff it was like
> another reassurance that I'm not alone, there are other people out there like me.
> Once I saw these other people living their lives as who they are, like it made me
> feel more comfortable about saying this is who I am. I didn't have to hide from
> the public eye about who I am or what I want with my life. And so I think that
> they've had a big part in me fully accepting like this is me and that's okay.

Wonder Woman also recalled the impact of realizing "I'm not the only person":

> When the computer come along, I mean I was able to instantly chat with
> somebody. That was amazing. I was able to make friends. I was able to talk to
> people and you know, exchange ideas- tell them you know this is the problem I'm
> having and they might have a solution, they might have ideas or they might not.
> That was a huge help for me. I realized, like I said, I'm not the only person in the
> world that feels this way.

Sean was able to build upon statements that related to previous participants in saying that

social media provided experiences and connections he might not have had otherwise:

> I think it (social media) certainly as a means of, it's helpful to know I'm not the only one and a lot of that has come through connections I've made through social media…Like for instance specifically on the trans guys who have babies kind of thing. That wasn't something I was going to run into in (current location).

Coming Out. Coming out is defined in this study as "the process in which a person first

acknowledges, accepts and appreciates their sexual orientation or gender identity and begins to

share that with others" (Human Rights Campaign, 2017). The complexity of this process can lead

to a wide range of experiences and emotional responses. It can also be perceived as an on-going

process where individuals may feel as though they need to or choose to come out continually to

people and communities as they navigate through life, new relationships, locations and

situations. This process could expand exponentially if the individual takes into account all the

relationships that take place or segue to online/social media forums. Several participants in this

study talked about how they used social media as a part of their coming out process. For those

participants who spoke about coming out on social media, they expressed viewing social media

as a tool, one they could use to reach numerous people all at once and somewhat control their

level of vulnerability and interaction with people afterward. This seemingly ties back to the

theme of visibility mentioned earlier. Individuals may feel they can make larger strides in terms

of numbers and visibility with less investment of time and potential vulnerability. This also

speaks to the evolution of social stigma as it surrounds gender identity. Whereas historically

people may have not come out to others as trans, we now see people making broad statements,

announcements, to large numbers of people via social media.

In this study, three participants specifically spoke about social media and its role in their

coming out process. Sean spoke about the response he received when coming out on social

media: "I came out on social media on Coming Out day as trans. I got nothing but support in the comments." Sterling Archer recalled that he came out on social media to determine his level of social support: "When I came out as trans I made a very public statement because I wanted to know, and why not with social media because we can't be face to face." Frank Castle described how he used YouTube as a form of social media to connect with others and their experiences in coming out: "I mentioned depression and anxiety and stuff like that, especially like coming out and all that stuff. On YouTube there are just like thousands and thousands of people with their coming out stories and coming out videos and stuff like that."

On a related contextual note, these experiences expressed by participants, surrounding visibility and coming out were largely framed by this idea that all participants did not necessarily want to be visible as trans at all times in their everyday lives. Wonder Woman expressly spoke about the potential of invisibility: "I mean 99.9 percent of transgender people their whole goal is to go through daily life and to never be outed or to be what we call clocked." While participants acknowledged there was importance in identifying as trans in terms of visibility and connection, some participants also acknowledged that outside of that they would not necessarily identify themselves as trans some or all of the time. Frank, Sean and Aeon specifically spoke on this in relation to their identity. Sean said: "I identify as a man, as a trans man if I need to. I would prefer to be thought of as just a guy, but I understand there's importance in representation for trans people. But it's like if I'm only given two options, I'm going to check male." Frank Castle described his experiences with the general public and how they perceive him: "But in the general public eye most people automatically assume I'm a male which obviously fits right into where I want to be. So I don't ever make it a public thing." Aeon's experiences in most places and with workplace or other interactions also confirmed the experiences of the previous participants: "I

can usually go into most places or even a work force, like a team and they don't know." These statements speak to the potential complexity of visibility for trans people. On the one hand, it may feel very important to see others, to have visibility and that this may be an enormously significant source of positive identity development. Yet, on the other hand, it is possible that one's ultimate personal goal in transitioning is to no longer be questioned or readily visible and identified by others as trans. In this regard, social media is particularly situated to provide benefit to trans individuals by allowing a space where one could potentially connect with community and others without necessarily identifying or being identified with that group outside of social media settings.

Overall, the theme of social support with its sub-themes of visibility and coming out align themselves with the core components of D'Augelli's Model of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity Development in that visibility is essentially foundational to developing a social identity, becoming an "offspring" and joining a community. A person cannot join a community they cannot see, nor can they find a mentor or develop their own identity/social identity in the context of community without being able to identify and experience it in social context. Coming out is by definition an exiting of traditional identity and developing a personal identity. Both visibility and coming out can arguably lead to the development of an individual's intimacy identity, influencing who they see themselves to be in relation to others and who they express themselves to be intimately.

Negative Interactions and Microaggressions. Microaggressions have been defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and

insults (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, et.al., 2007, p. 271). The theme of negative interactions and microaggressions was identified as a part of participants' described experiences when using social media. While microaggressions were observed and/or felt by participants who used social media, participants also had other forms of negative interactions such as direct threats and other instances of intolerance that fell outside the "subtle and unconscious" scope of microaggression. Participants described these aspects of social media as coming with a sort of pile on effect, where layers of exposure to microaggressions, negative interactions, and even exposure to general news articles potentially altered participants overall mood and general self- perception. Wonder Woman summarized to describe the totality of her experiences with the negative aspects of social media and how they ultimately affected her:

> That negativity through social media was getting to me. I thought I had my depression under control and my anxiety issues after going to therapy for four years, being on medications and then having it all come back on me drove me right back into it and I'm fighting it again. Just all that negativity came back and put me into a depressive state.

In order to capture a more in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, the overall theme of negative interactions and microaggressions was divided into the sub-themes of direct and indirect experiences. This better situated the theme to capture both a broader understanding of the participants' experiences as well as attend to the finer points and specific aspects of those experiences.

Direct Experiences. These experiences were identified as instances and situations where participants were directly involved in interactions on social media. While there were other experiences where participants reported observing interactions between others or seeing negative posts and articles on social media, the sub-theme of direct experiences attempts to capture those experiences where the participants were engaged directly in social media interactions. The sub-

theme is further defined by the categories direct negativity and pressure to conform in order to more clearly capture the specific experiences described by participants.

    Direct Negativity. In this category, participants described experiences where they had been directly involved in negative interactions with other individuals when using social media. These interactions included instances of threats, denial of access to spaces, attempts to "convert" participants or have them deny their identity as trans, as well as instances where participants felt randomly singled out and berated on the basis of their gender identity. Wonder Woman talked about direct negative interactions she has had with people online and via social media: "I've had threats online. I've had people come tell me they're going to find out where I live and come hunt me up. I've been kicked out of groups because they're classically masculine." Frank Castle also recalled a direct negative experience he had on Facebook Messenger with a stranger where he felt he was randomly singled out: "I did have one lady that I don't even know. I don't even know how she knew me or what but she messaged me in my Facebook inbox and was like 'What are you? What are you?' and just kept going on and on…That was really weird and out of the blue and seemed really random."

    These experiences were not exclusive to non-affirming LGBTQ+ groups and spaces. Participants reported that some of the direct negative interactions they experienced happened within LGBTQ+ and specifically trans affirming social media groups. Sean talked about an experience he had within the queer community on Facebook where he spoke up about a queer community member using slurs and derogatory language toward the trans community and some individuals: "So I got in trouble for posting on Facebook and still nobody has ever said or acknowledged the guy that dropped the trans slur and derogatory comments toward Caitlyn

Jenner. That was just; it was just frustrating that that was what happened within the queer community."

Pressure to Conform. Participants went further in their descriptions of experiences surrounding direct negativity or negative interactions to describe instances where a feeling of pressure to conform to certain standards, assumptions and stereotypes was expressed within their own communities. The pressure described by participants was both physical and psychosocial. In essence in order to be considered trans by one's own community you needed to follow a certain path in terms of physical transition and you were assumed to hold certain political and social perspectives. Participants described instances where they themselves or others in the trans community had deviated from these assumptions and stereotypes and had felt backlash or pressure to conform. Aeon describes an instance where there was backlash for disagreeing with a certain perspective within a trans-affirming Facebook group: "Oh yeah I've been called a Nazi. I was told I must still have male privilege if I can't accept that trans men have it. Which the way it was worded kind of felt like they were saying that I was a man." Aeon goes on to describe a kind of broader experience regarding the assumption of certain social and political perspectives assumed to be held by all members of the trans community and how the repercussions of deviation can be seen on social media:

> So there's this kind of, it's not a mob mentality because that would be too severe of an analogy, but there's this assumed cohesiveness on any topic when you match the demographic of someone else. So one trans person is probably under the idea that all trans people should not vote for Trump. I know several trans women and men who voted for Trump and some of them still support him. That wouldn't go over well publicly. Caitlyn Jenner did that publicly and it backlashed pretty heavily and social media was a catalyst of that as well.

Sterling Archer also described feeling pressured. He expressed experiencing pressure to have certain aspects of his identity and transition take priority over others and feeling that

his identity was called into question on the basis of how others perceived his priorities:

> And especially on social media…There's just this pressure, and again it just kind of goes back to, that transgender needs to be your priority identity. So it's kind of like again that pressure of you know well you're not really…I don't know if they're saying you're not really trans but just 'Why wouldn't you? Why aren't you taking this more seriously?'

Sterling Archer followed up his experience of pressure in ideology and identity, by describing another kind of pressure he had felt within affirming spaces and with peers. He described what he felt to be physical pressures and stereotypical assumptions surrounding surgical and physical aspects of transition: "Its (social media) affected me more with my physical appearance than with anything else. I feel pressure, like I see and have a few other transgender male friends, they're all getting their chest surgeries and they're, you know, and they're all like 'When are you getting yours?'"

Indirect Experiences. In terms of indirect negative experiences and microaggressions, participants described experiences using social media where they witnessed, heard about or observed negative interactions and microaggressions. Participants also described experiences and feelings surrounding exposure to news stories and articles on social media. This is where the participants most clearly described the sort of pile-on effect they potentially experienced through social media usage. The experience where layers of interactions, observations and news related items on social media all contributed to the participants' overall perception and feelings of negativity. Sterling Archer specifically reflected upon the effect he perceives social media has had on him overall:

> Yeah it's (social media) definitely affected me. I would say it's had, oh man, it's probably about 60/40 and it's probably I would say mostly negative. Because I mean it's great for interacting with people, so there's that aspect of it. But there's the aspect of just the fear. It kind of keeps the anxieties that already naturally occur alive for me.

To capture fully the breadth of the participants' indirect experiences regarding negativity, the sub-theme was broken down into the categories of perception and external expectations.

  Perception. This category emerged under the broader sub-theme of indirect negative experiences in that during the course of the study participants spoke about their general feelings regarding certain aspects of social media they perceived as negative. These feelings did not necessarily stem from any source specifically and could even come from trans-affirming sources. The general feeling was expressed as kind of dread, an underlying fear or hesitation that was caused or exacerbated by the continual exposure to certain aspects of social media. As Sterling Archer describes, he did not necessarily have to have direct negative interactions to experience negative feelings when using social media: "I see a whole lot of negativity but I don't get it. Just like bathroom bans and you know Trump's attempt to ban trans people in the military." Sterling specifically recalls a period surrounding the death of an area trans teen and how the repeated viewing of things like this affected him, even when they came from affirming sources: "Like when that trans teen was murdered and it was going back and forth where the police were calling it, it wasn't a hate crime and yes it was. I think people pursuing those social injustices to make that better, that's definitely needed, but man seeing it is just brutal sometimes and it just scares the crap out of me." Aeon expanded on the category by describing a perception of the potential of a trans person to open up themselves up to discrimination, danger and violence through the use social media:

> While I don't think anyone's going to get murdered from what they post on social media, it's happened. I mean what's her name (area trans teen who was murdered), you could argue that she went on social media. That's a very extreme example that I would not blame on social media, but harassment, job loss, any of those things are much harder to get information on…I would just caution people to be more careful with how they're living their lives on social media.

External Expectations. Participants' descriptions of their experiences exposed another category under the sub-theme of indirect experiences: expectation of negativity. Participants' expressed an expectation that they would encounter negative interactions and microaggressions when using social media. Aeon specifically spoke to this expectation: "If I were to receive harassment for being trans its likely to be online in some form." Sean also confirmed expectations of negativity directed toward the trans community and trans individuals when viewing comments by the general public on social media: "I expect there to be hateful comments in the general public like (local news station's) comments or something like that." This expectation was largely described as something that occurred outside of the participants' social media circles. Participants described their contacts and friends on social media as their "bubble." They expressed that they did not think interactions with the people/their friends on social media necessarily equated to the overall attitudes of people on social media. Several described instances where they "inserted" themselves into public threads and in those settings expected negative interactions. Sterling Archer speaks to his expectations and how outside those situations he does not expect the same negativity:

> Um I've had a couple (negative interactions) but it's because I've inserted myself in it. So for example somebody will post something about the bathroom ban when all of that was going on. I would make a comment, actually one was fairly recently…Um and I got some things back. You know which I was kind of prepared for, but outside of those situations, I don't really, I haven't really experienced much (negative interactions).

 Though participants' experiences with social media included negative interactions and microaggressions, each participant still continued to use social media. This would suggest that by and large the participants' perceptions of the positives of social media usage outweighed the negatives for the participants in this study.

The experiences participants described in terms of negative interactions and microaggressions also fit into the framework of D'Augelli's Model of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity development in that these experiences may likely accompany the stages of exiting traditional identity, developing a personal identity, developing a social identity and joining a community. These experiences may also influence individuals to find a mentor and become an "offspring" gaining insight into their identity development through one-on-one interactions rather than through initially joining a community and being out.

Access. The theme of Access in this study attempts to capture several factors regarding social media usage by participants. More specifically, the sub-themes of frequency and social media resources looked to capture how frequently the participants accessed and used social media; what platforms were used; what did participants use those platforms for specifically; and what were their experiences surrounding accessing social media? Overwhelmingly participants listed Facebook as the platform they accessed and used most frequently. They also listed Instagram, Twitter, SnapChat and YouTube as platforms of significance.

Frequency**.** In terms of frequency, the researcher had anticipated that potentially participants might not have the ability to regularly access social media, that age or socioeconomic status might play a role in the use and/or frequency of use of social media. For participants in this study that was not found to be the case. Limitations to usage were more so framed in the expression by participants that frequent usage of social media was a negative thing, something they should work on discontinuing or cutting down. Frank Castle, Sean and Wonder Woman spoke to the frequency of use and type of social media platforms they used when accessing or using social media. When asked how often he accesses social media, Frank Castle

said: "Every day. Every day. I mean I was on Facebook while waiting for you to show up. I watch YouTube videos probably every day, at least every other day, but Facebook is like a constant. I just can't put it down." Wonder Woman also acknowledged frequent use of social media and that it was a daily priority for her morning routine: "When I get up in the morning, my two things that I do, I drink my coffee and I go on Facebook." Sean directly expressed his feeling that his frequent use of social media was "way too much" and potentially something he viewed negatively at times: "I'm on Facebook way too much. Um like every 10 minutes or something I'm on Facebook and it's ridiculous." Again, the initial expectation from the researcher was that use and access might be limited by socioeconomic or geographical location/availability of service issues; participants reported frequent use of and access to social media. The main factor they reported as limiting their use was the perception that frequent use was not necessarily a good thing and that they felt they should try to cut down on their usage of social media.

Social Media Resources. Along with looking at the frequency of use, the category of social media resources looked at the reasons participants described for accessing and using social media. Several participants said they used social media to find resources related to specifically "trans stuff". Everything from finding trans friendly physicians, psychiatrists, therapists, to where to go to get hormones and processes for name changes. Participants also reported using social media to connect to other community resources such as support groups and the local LGBTQ+ center. Wonder Woman described the process she went through to create a Facebook group that cataloged these resources for area trans community members and remains an active source of information referenced even by other participants in this study:

> Trying to find resources in (current location), physicians, psychiatrists, therapists
> um even places to shop that were accepting of trans people is difficult. So I mean
> I fought for everything. Nobody handed it to me. I found everybody was
> struggling with it and I thought 'You know even if we build this little community

up, even online, and we all start sharing "this is the resources I have", "this is the resources you have", if we pool it all together we could make it easier.' That Facebook group blew up from like less than a hundred people to over 500 people in just a few months' time.

Sean also said that he used social media for conversations and resources "surrounding trans stuff":

 I use groups on Facebook, private groups or secret groups or whatever for a lot of the conversations for things specifically surrounding trans stuff. There's some groups that are more like resource groups. There are pages that put out news about what kind of law changes are happening and local community stuff like doctors to go see. That's definitely things I have used. A local Facebook group has a resource list of doctors that are trans friendly.

Frank Castle specifically listed YouTube as a form of social media that was a great source of information for him: "YouTube is a great source and Facebook if you know where to look, is a decent place to find support and information and stuff like that." Though participants were generally aware these resource groups and support groups existed on social media, several participants spoke to the visibility and accessibility of these resources. "If you know where to look" as Frank Castle said above, became a common thread among participants who described their process for finding trans community and resources both online using social media and in their community. As Frank Castle said:

 Outside social media I think it's a little harder to find those support groups and stuff. And it's like LGBT people are really, it's almost underground. Like there are plenty of support groups and stuff like that around. There are plenty of support groups, plenty of hotlines, plenty of that stuff around but it's not out in the air. It's on social media. If you look around it's on social media. But without social media I wouldn't have known most of these places existed. So I think that's a good first step if you want to find something tangible. Cause like I said, I'm not a huge sharing person so I don't go to groups or stuff like that but it's good to know it's there if I need it. Social media helped me with that.

Sterling Archer expressed some frustration surround the difficulty he experienced finding trans resources and groups at times. He also acknowledges the perceived reasoning behind the guarded nature of those resources and groups: "Um but you know those things, and rightfully so, are so blocked and guarded and hidden that it's hard to find them sometimes." So while participants all agreed they felt there were resources on social media for trans people and that these resources could in some cases connect them to other in person resources within their community, they all also acknowledged that these resources could potentially be difficult to find and access due to the guarded nature of the groups and resources.

The theme of Access, with the sub-themes of frequency and social media resources, speaks to the developing of a social and personal identity as well as joining a community as described by D'Augelli's Model of Gay Lesbian and Bisexual Identity Development. Participants used social media to access trans resources and community. They also created social identities for themselves online. The frequency of use though sometimes viewed as negative, speaks to the importance of feeling connected. In terms of becoming an "offspring" participants were able to access people as mentors through social media. They also described accessing groups and resources that were created by other members of the community (mentors) that helped them in terms of their own identity development as well as with access to necessary services and community resources.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to explore the role of social media in the identity development of trans individuals. The study was designed to uncover specific elements of social media usage and resources as they relate to the identity development of trans individuals. The findings of the study may provide insight into the experiences of trans individuals' identity development that have not previously been focused on in current literature.

Through data analysis, three themes were discovered (social support, negative experiences and microaggressions, and access). The themes coincide with the theoretical framework of Queer Theory (Butler & Byrne, 2008) and phenomenology. They were derived from the experiences of the participants using social media as described in their own responses. Thus the participants were able to create their own meaning through self-definition of their experiences. The use of a third party independent peer debriefer also helped to ensure that it was the participants' voices that were heard in the deriving of the major themes rather than that of the researcher.

The responses of the participants in this study spoke to their experiences when using social media and how those experiences were perceived to inform their identity development. Participants' acknowledgment of their use of social media fell in line with the previous studies conducted by the Pew Foundation (2016) and GLSEN (2013) in that all participants reported using social media, specifically Facebook. Participants also largely reported accessing social media several times throughout the day. They joined and participated in groups related to their trans identities; viewed videos and connected with people using YouTube; became visible by coming out; they offered advice; found community, connection and cultivated resources to provide to others all through the use of social media.

It is also important to acknowledge the negative aspects of social media expressed by participants of this study as these aspects also exist within the experience of the participants. Aspects such as the pressure to conform, exposure to direct and indirect negativity and news articles were expressed as potentially creating a pile-on effect for participants when using social media. This effect coupled with the constant availability and access, proved difficult to escape at times for participants. It is also worth noting that largely these aspects, though potentially different in their implementation and the experience of them between communities, are reportedly present to some degree across the board by people using social media. Cyberbullying and pressure to conform are not unique to the trans community. However, it is possible that specific vulnerabilities may be present within certain communities that may make their members particularly susceptible to this type of negativity. For example, the reported instances of threats, bullying, negative responses and microaggressions received via social media could have potentially exacerbated the feelings of isolation expressed by the participants in this study. Indeed, the perceived positives of social media usage did not always outweigh the perceived negatives for participants in this study. However, it is interesting to note that regardless of their overall perception of their experiences surrounding social media usage, all participants still reported currently using social media in one form or another.

This speaks to participants' perception of social media itself and how they view its role in their own identity development. Overall participants perceived social media as a somewhat neutral tool and as such, it is one that may be influenced by the individuals own perspective or outlook. As Wonder Woman put it: "it (social media) can be a huge positive. It can be a huge negative. A lot depends on the mindset of the person as they go in. If you go looking for problems, you're going to find problems." Though the participants used and continue to use

social media as a tool it is not universal in the role that it played for all participants when navigating aspects of their identity. Aeon lists it as a tool used for certain aspects: "Social media was a tool that was used for certain aspects of it, but it wasn't a necessity for transition." However, all participants in the study acknowledged that social media had played a role in their identity development as trans individuals. Sterling Archer summed it up by saying: "It definitely has a role in identity development. Positive, negative, helpful, scary."

Limitations

The results of this study attempt to bridge a gap in the understanding of trans individuals' experiences and development. By adding to the body of work currently focused on trans individuals' experiences and development, this study looked to provide insight into key factors in order to enhance the understanding of both the trans community and its advocates in their approaches to positive identity development and development models for trans people. There are however limitations to this study that may have influenced the results and their interpretation by the researcher.

The number and make up of participants could be one such factor that influenced the results of this study. The study consisted of interviews from five participants. Convenience sampling was used to identify the participants. Both the use of convenience sampling as well as small participant numbers could potentially have impacted the results of this study.

All participants also came from a similar geographical area. It is possible that their experiences may be related to this aspect of their identity and would not necessarily translate to individuals who live outside the participants' geographical area. For instance nearly all participants recalled the recent murder of an area trans teen. This may have impacted their

perception and subsequently responses to the interview questions whereas it may not have played

a role in perception for those outside of the geographical area. There may also be differences in

terms of availability of resources such as local LGBTQ+ centers and visibility of trans

community members that impacted the experiences and perspectives of the participants based on

their geographical location.

The intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990) of participants' identities is another factor that

likely influenced participants' experiences, descriptions and subsequently the findings of this

study. Factors such as race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religious/spiritual background

and current religious/spiritual identity, among others, should be taken into account in order to

understand each participant as a whole. In this study, socioeconomic limitations were described

by at least one participant of the study as a barrier to accessing resources and support within the

community. Several participants described experiences surrounding their religious background

and upbringing that contributed to feelings of isolation and shame. These experiences also

limited the participants' confidence that they could find support and community, or others like

them. Conversely, some participants described their spiritual/faith-based communities as major

sources of support. In terms of race and ethnic identity, it is also likely that these aspects of the

participants' identity influenced their experiences and perceptions, limiting or influencing their

ability to find and access support and community. So ultimately what must also be considered for

the purposes of this study is how each of these aspects of the participants' identities may

influence the experiences and perceptions, even their experiences surrounding their trans

identities.

Though all participants self-identified as trans, non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid,

agender, two-spirit and other gender identities were not represented in the this study. To date, the

term trans has been used as an umbrella for the plethora of gender identities that fall outside the traditional cis-gender binary. The results of this study may be limited by the fact that not all of these identities and experiences were represented. Thus this study may not reflect the experiences and perceptions of trans people of all genders.

Finally, the positionality of the researcher may have had an impact on the results of the study and the interpretation of those findings. The researcher who conducted and interpreted the findings is a member of the local LGBTQ+ community. Although the researcher used a peer debriefer to bracket researcher bias, the degree influence of these biases cannot be determined. While there may have been benefit in terms of greater level of comfort for participants to describe their experiences with the researcher, there may also be disadvantages to the depth of response by participants. They may have assumed the researcher understood certain experiences or situations and thus not verbalized them directly. In contrast as a result of the researcher's identity as a White person and the perception of the researcher's socioeconomic status by participants, responses by some participants may have felt more guarded or the fullness of their experiences may have been lessened. Again, the degree of influence of these biases cannot be determined.

In terms of the implementation of the study, over time the researcher became more comfortable with the interview protocol and process. As a result, the researcher was able to refine the interview questions with each participant throughout the interview period. Each participant aided the researcher in providing more clarity for the questions of the interview protocol. The researcher was able to refine word usage and allow for opportunities for participants to provide additional information outside the interview protocol.

Implications

The goal of this study was to increase understanding of the experiences of trans individuals identity development and to understand the role, if any, of social media in that development. This study provided an opportunity for trans individuals to talk about their use of social media and their perception of its role in their identity development. Social support is identified as a key factor in identity development and so this study looked at whether social media usage and interactions translated into any form of social support that enhanced positive identity development for the participants. Findings indicate that this study did provide insight and increased the understanding of the role of social media in the identity development of trans individuals.

This study identified the overwhelming need for visibility for trans individuals in terms of identity development. Trans people and their experiences are too often pathologized, specifically when it comes to identity development. This does little to allow for the exploration of positive experiences that influence positive and/or "healthy" /non-pathologized identity development in trans individuals. The enmeshment of pathology and social stigma leaves many trans people feeling isolated, alone, like there's something "wrong with me". Visibility of other trans people, their stories and experiences can have a tremendous influence on the self-esteem, self-image and identity development of trans individuals. The significance of this influence is expressed by the participants of this study that despite any negative interactions, microaggressions, or overall feelings of negativity toward social media, the participants continued to use social media to connect with others: To see and be seen.

Further research is necessary to gain a greater understanding of the factors that can influence positive identity development in trans individuals. This study contributes to a growing

body of research regarding trans identities and experiences. This increase in visibility is necessary to continue to lead to removing the pathology surrounding trans identities and identity development. Great strides are already being taken, such as the World Health Organization's decision to no longer classify being transgender as mental health disorder. It is important to continue these avenues of research in order work toward alleviating stigma and to create more sound foundations of health for trans people.

Personal Reflections

Perhaps one of most profound things I gained from this research was a greater understanding of the complexity of visibility for many trans people. Participants regularly recounted the first time they discovered that they aren't the only one, and much like the trans teen I encountered in the campaign phone bank office years ago, it was an earth shifting revelation. So in a way, that definitely answered my question about whether social media provided any support that led to positive experiences and identity development. Yet there was also a sense from some participants of not necessarily wanting to identify or be identified as trans in some instances. As Wonder Woman put it: "I mean 99.9 percent of transgender people their whole goal is to go through daily life and to never be outed or to be what we call clocked." So I wonder how that factors in with feelings of isolation.

As I moved through the process of completing this research I gained more insight into the resources that were available in my own community. I had knowledge of a great deal of the resources prior to this research from my own social media usage. What I did learn from participants' responses was that it was possible many people in my community might not be aware of these resources and avenues for connection. In one particular instance outside of this

study I was able to identify and share resources with another person who had been struggling to find support and to know where to go to get the necessary treatment she needed. So personally, I think this study has had an impact on my own perspective as a future mental health practitioner in understanding the connection of social media to community and resources for individuals.

Recommendations

This study, though limited, does seem to indicate that social media has a role in identity development for trans individuals. Perhaps the most significant role it has is in providing visibility and community for trans people. The high rates of suicide, suicide attempts and self-harm reported among members of the trans community may be attributed as symptoms of social stigma, feelings of isolation and the result of a culture of pathology which tells the trans individual "there's something wrong with me." Social media, as described by participants, provided them with connection and the ability to see others who are "like me" which they reported alleviated a considerable amount of distress.

Mental health practitioners would do well to make themselves aware of the role social media plays in the formation of identity and specifically for those individuals who are questioning or identify as transgender. Participants in this study indicated that at times it can be difficult to find or access specific resources due to social stigma which can cause resources to be guarded or hidden, "underground." Practitioners need to be aware of the various resources available both in their community as well as online through social media as these may be lifelines for their clients.

In the course of their practice mental health practitioners may advise trans individuals to "go online" to find community and resources. While that remains a viable option for many

people it is important for those individuals and the practitioners who work with them to understand the broad range of experiences trans individuals and their practitioners might have when using social media and online resources. Further research is needed to understand the identity development processes for trans individuals and to identify and create positive identity development models. It is necessary as mental health practitioners and others continue to work with trans clients and the trans community, that they are cognizant of the potential experiences surrounding social media usage as well and how they could ultimately impact their client, their identity development and the trans community at large.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Missouri State IRB Approval

To:
Taryne Mingo
Counseling Ldrshp & Special Ed

RE: Notice of IRB Approval
Submission Type: Initial
Study #: IRB-FY2018-333
Study Title: Exploring the Role of Social Media in the Identity Development of Trans* Identified Individuals
Decision: Approved

Approval Date: Nov 5, 2017
Expiration Date: Nov 5, 2018

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the period indicated.

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Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:
PI: Taryne Mingo
Co-PI:
Primary Contact: Rebecca Doss
Other Investigators: Rebecca Doss

Appendix B: Missouri State University Consent Form

<div align="center">

MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY CONSENT FORM

Exploring the Role of Social Media on the Identity Development of Trans Individuals
</div>

Researcher's Statement

I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigators: Dr. Taryne M. Mingo, Primary Investigator
Department of Counseling, Leadership and Special Education
tmingo@missouristate.edu
417-836-8526

B Doss, Student Co-Investigator
Department of Counseling, Leadership and Special Education
Doss123@live.missouristate.edu
417-986-4590

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceived role social media may play in the identity development among self-identified trans individuals.

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to …

- Participate in a one-time, audio-recorded interview with the primary researcher (B Doss) ranging from thirty minutes to an hour.
- Participants will be expected to review the transcriptions of their interview as created by the primary researcher for feedback. The primary researcher will provide participants the transcriptions in person or via email, fax, or postal service.
- Overall, participants can expect to contribute a maximum of two hours of their time toward this study.
- Participants will be asked to talk about their experiences as a trans individual with social media, and the potential perceived role those experiences played in individual identity development.
- Participants may be asked questions such as "As a Trans individual, tell me about your experiences with social media as they relate to social support?"

Risks and discomforts

- There may be psychological risks associated with this study, such as feelings of stress when discussing their experiences as Trans individuals as well as feelings of stress when accessing social support and/or potentially social media.

- There may also be social risks associated with this study, such as participants becoming more sensitive about their experiences with identity development after their interview with the primary researcher.
- Participants will be informed of psychological and social risks prior to the study, and that they may discontinue participation at any time during the interview and after the interview has concluded.

Benefits
- Providing a safe space for Trans individuals to discuss their experiences with social media as they relate to identity development that may not have been addressed until this study was provided.
- Benefits from this study include discovering new ways to address the needs of Trans community members, and finding new ways counselors can advocate on behalf of this population.

Audio/Video Recording
This research study requires the audio taping of interviews and transcriptions of each interview in order to analyze the content presented by the participant after the interview has concluded. The tapes will be reviewed by the primary researcher, B Doss, graduate student, Missouri State University, and can be contacted at 417-986-4590 or Doss123@live.missouristate.edu. All tapes will be destroyed upon completion of the study in May 2018.

If you understand that this interview will be audio-recorded, please provide initials below

＿I understand my interview will be audio-recorded.

Privacy/Confidentiality
Upon completion of the interviews, participants' identifiable information will be removed after the participant has had an opportunity to review the interview transcription, and replaced with new identifiers that disguise the identity of the participant. There is the possibility that even with the removal of all personal identifiable information someone who knows the participant well could potentially identify the participant by analyzing the results of the study. Participants have the option to discontinue participation in the study at any time. This includes a retraction of the information provided during the interview including the days after the interview has concluded up until publication.
Individually-identifiable information from the tapes is confidential; however additional exceptions to confidentiality are:
1. You inform me in writing to discuss your situation with someone else.
2. It is determined that you are a threat to yourself or others.
3. I am ordered by a court to disclose information.
4. There is indication of child abuse that I am legally required to report.

Taking part is voluntary
Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose to not participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. In addition, your

decision to participate or stop participation in this study will have no impact on your grade of standing within your counselor education program.

 If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

If you have questions
The main researcher conducting this study is B Doss, a graduate student at Missouri State University. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact B Doss at Doss123@live.missouristate.edu or at 417-986-4590. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Director at 417-836-4132 or researchadministration@missouristate.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Participant Background	Interview Questions	Queer Theory Core Principles	D'Augelli Identity Development Stage
Question	**Tell me about yourself**	Intersectionality/Self Identification	2,3
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	How old are you?	Intersectionality/Self Identification	2,3
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Where were you born?	Intersectionality/Self Identification	2,3
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Are you single, in a relationship, married, separated, or divorced?	Intersectionality/Self Identification/Challenging the Binary	2,3,5
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Are you currently employed?	Intersectionality/Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority	2,3
	If yes, are you part-time or full-time?		
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	What is your approximate income? About how much money would you say you make? (specify yearly, hourly, etc.)	Intersectionality/Self-Identification/Subverting Authority	2,3
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	How many people are supported by that income?	Intersectionality/Self-Identification/Subverting Authority	2,3,5

Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	How would you describe your family make up? Do you have children?	Intersectionality/Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	2,3,5
Identity			
	Tell me about your identity. How do you identify?	Intersectionality/Self Identification/Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,2,3
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	How do you identify in terms of gender identity?	Intersectionality/Self Identification/Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,2,3
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	How do you identify in terms of racial and/or ethnic, cultural background?	Intersectionality/Self Identification/Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	2,3
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	How else do you identify? What other identities do you feel make you, you?	Intersectionality/Self Identification/Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,2,3
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	When did you start thinking about potentially being trans* identified?	Intersectionality/Self Identification/Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,2
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Do you identify publicly as trans*? (are you "out"?)	Intersectionality/Self Identification/Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,3,5,6

Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	If so, are there any particular circumstances or situations where you do not openly identify as trans*?	Intersectionality/Self Identification/Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,2,3,5,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	What did you (do you) do?/What resources did you use to gather information and support?	Intersectionality/Self Identification/Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,2,3,4,5,6
Access to Social Support	**Tell me about support. Your social support/suppor t network**	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority	3,4,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Did you/Do you feel you had social support?	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	3,4,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	If so, where did you find that support? How did you access it? (Where do you)	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	3,4,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Do you feel like anything hindered (or hinders) your ability to build and access social support?	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	3,4,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	How has it been for you to establish and access social support? Would you say difficult? Or relatively easy?	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	3,4,6

Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Do you feel you currently have access to social support?	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	3,4,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Where do you find the greatest amount of social support? How do you access social support?	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	3,4,6
Impact of Social Media	**Social Media, tell me about your experience with that**	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,2,3,4, 5,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Do you think the internet-specifically access to social media- had an impact on your identity development as a trans* identified individual?	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,2,3,4, 5,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	If yes, How so? How did it impact you?	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Have you ever used social media in order to establish or gain social support?	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	3,4,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Do you currently use social media to gain or access social support? How so? In what ways?	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	3,4,6

Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Do you think social media provides you personally with social support?	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	3,4,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	If yes, please describe how social media provides social support.	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	
Potential Negative Aspects	**Negative experiences gathering information/su pport/using social media…tell me about any experiences you might have had.**	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,2,3,4,5,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Have you ever either directly or indirectly, experienced bullying or negative responses to trans identified individuals when using social media?	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,2,3,4,5,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	If yes, how often would you say you either directly or indirectly experienced bullying or negative responses towards trans* identified individuals	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	

	when using social media?		
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	Have you had other experiences that you feel impacted you negatively, outside of bullying, when using social media?	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,2,3,4,5,6
Potential Follow-up question/ clarification	In your experience, have you found that a majority of people on social media are or are not generally supportive of trans* identified individuals?	Identification of effects of power constructs/outsider perspective	1,2,3,5,6
Overall Perspective	**Is there anything else you would like to tell me? Any additional information I need to have?**	Challenging the Binary/Subverting Authority/Constructing New Meaning	1,2,3,4,5,6

Appendix D: Student Researcher Self-Reflective Journal

Researcher: **Date:**   **Event:**

Notes/Observations:

Reflections on Research Questions:
What are/were my experiences prior to the interview (setting it up), during the interview and afterward?

What are/were my reactions to the information provided by the participant?

What are/were my reactions to the participants themselves?

What take-aways do I have from the interview?

What, if any, perspective or bias on my part shifted during the interviews?

What else would I like to mention about the interview and/or the research process as a whole?