GROWING UP GAY: THE EXPERIENCES OF RURAL YOUTH IN NORTH DAKOTA AND

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**Title**

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The Supervisory Committee certifies that this ***disquisition*** complies with North Dakota State University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at how gay adults experienced their youth in rural North Dakota or Minnesota. The purpose of the study was to discover if gay youth experienced their environment differently from their urban peers and if the internet or television affected their experiences. The study recruited ten participants ages 22-30 for a qualitative study that used thematic analysis as its method. The study found that among the participants the use of gay slurs evolved over time, television and internet did not appear to influence how the participants experienced their environment, and lastly, many of the participants displayed behavior that they believed was not normative behavior for their gender.

# DEDICATION

Dedicated to my family: Mike, Monica, Erin, Erika, Ryan, Madison, and Hunter.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth have a difficult time in childhood and those living in a rural environment, including gay adults, face special challenges. LGBT youth commit suicide more often, are at risk for being harassed in school, and engage in dangerous behavior more often than their heterosexual peers (Hubbard, 2010; Lebson, 2002; Rivers & Carragher, 2003; Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2008). Rural LGBT youth are also more likely to suffer psychological problems than their urban LGBT peers (Poon & Saewyc, 2009). Rural LGBT adults and youth are more isolated and have fewer opportunities to interact with peers and have less access to support networks than their urban peers (Boulden, 2001; Connoly & Leedy, 2006; Friedlander, 2011; Poon & Saewyc, 2009).

Rural youth by virtue of living in a rural environment, are geographically isolated from large LGBT communities which tend to exist in large urban areas and live in an area that tends to be conservative in nature and not accepting of gay and lesbians (Hamilton, 2006; New York Times, 2008). Existing literature on rural gay and lesbian adults paints a mixed picture of the experiences they encounter in a rural environment (Boulden, 2001; Connolly & Leedy, 2006; Oswald & Culton, 2003; Schubotz & McNamee 2009). Rural gay adults have freedoms which can lesson negative aspects of living in a rural environment, such as the ability to temporarily leave their rural home and drive to an urban center to be part of a gay community but gay rural youth have fewer options to limit negative aspects that they may experience. The purpose of this paper is to explore how gay rural youth experience their rural environment, both in a general way and in connection to the use of the internet and viewing of popular culture which has seen a rise of gay characters since the 1980s (Armstrong, 2010; Associated Press, 2010; Friedlander, 2011). This study furthers the research of gay youth by examining in depth how gay rural youth

experience their environment. Through the use of interviews with adults recalling their youth spent in a rural area, a phenomenological analysis will be used to analyze transcribed interviews to better understand how gay youth experienced their rural environment.

Much of the information that exists paints a negative picture of LGBT youth (Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Child Welfare League of America & Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2006; Grossman & Kerner, 1998; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Lebson, 2002; Lock & Steiner, 1999; Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010; Rivers & Carragher, 2003; Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2008). If the life of an urban gay youth is full of negative experiences then it is possible that the life of a rural gay youth is potentially as full of negative experiences since rural communities lack concentrated amount of gay people that large cities often possess. While rural communities will inevitably lack the gay friendly resources of urban communities because of their small size, there is internet access and television although dial-up internet, broadband internet, and cable television are limited because of the rural location of these communities. Internet access allows isolated youth who are interested to gather information and connect with other gay youth and television shows with gay characters may contribute positively to the development of rural gay youth. These two factors along with reasons rural gay adults have given for staying a in a rural area may come together in unexpected ways that will contradict the negative picture that studies paint about gay youth and their problems with drug addiction or being the victims of bullies. Exploring these issues will allow for a greater understanding of gay youth.

The reason LGBT youth often engage in negative behavior is because they live in a heternormative society, heternormative being that which "presumes and privileges heterosexuality and monitors 'proper' and accepted gender identities through regulation of

2

sexual arrangements (Wickens & Sandlin, 2010, p.653). This means that gay and lesbian youth have difficulty accepting their sexuality because they live in a heterosexist society (Swim, Johnston, & Pearson, 2009) which is defined as "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community. It operates principally by rendering homosexuality invisible and, when this fails, by trivializing, repressing, or stigmatizing it" (Herek, 1990, p.316).

It should be noted that this paper defines rural as a city with less than 50,000 people and is not adjacent to a city with more than 50,000 people. Youth is broadly defined as the time between birth and either turning 18 years of age or graduating from high school. Youth is defined in this way because many people turn eighteen years of age during their senior year in high school and for many people graduation from high school is the symbolic end of their childhood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review will begin with a look at studies conducted about LGBT youth in urban areas. Studies on urban LGBT youth show that these youth have a higher incidence of mental illness, drug addiction, attempted suicides, and suicide ideation (Lebson, 2002; Rivers & Carragher, 2003; Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2008). The reason for the higher incidences of negative behaviors for LGBT youth is heterosexism. Heterosexism is the "process that systematically privileges heterosexuality relative to homosexuality, based on the assumption that heterosexuality, as well as heterosexual power and privilege are the norm and the ideal" (Chesir-Teran, 2003, p.267). Heterosexism has been shown to contribute to the negative behaviors of LGBT youth (Chesir-Teran, 2003; Chesir-Teran, & Hughes, 2009; Ferfolja, 2007; Swim, Johnston, & Pearson, 2009). The literature review will progress to what it is like to live in a rural area as a gay adult. Studies about gay adults in a rural environment has been included because understanding how gay adults experience a rural environment may allow further understanding of how gay youth experience a rural environment. The literature review will continue with a section about the internet, mass media, and gay youth identity and conclude with a definition of "rural."

Gay Life in Urban Areas

Gay youth have a difficult time in urban settings despite the fact that large urban settings often have large LGBT populations and the high schools they attend increasingly have gay support groups called gay-straight alliances (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2007; Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2011). Studies show that gay youth suffer at the hands of their heterosexual peers in the form of verbal and physical harassment (Macdonald & Cooper, 1998; Nicholas & Howard, 1998; Suicide Prevention Resource Center,

4

2008). Gay youth are more likely to suffer from mental illness as a result of being harassed (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Grossman & Kerner, 1998). Gay youth are more likely to be homeless than heterosexual youth, engage in unprotected sex, and often have support networks comprised of non-family members (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Maguen & Armistead, 2000; Nesmith, Burton & Cosgrove, 1999; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006) The reason for this behavior is that the youths' sexuality is not validated by those around them because of heternormativity, the idea that the only acceptable sexual behavior is heterosexual behavior (Chesir-Teran, 2003; Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002) . In general, studies indicate that the life of gay urban youth is more difficult because of their sexuality. So even though gay urban youth live in an area with a higher number of LGBT people than a rural area, they still engage in negative behaviors.

Being a gay youth in an urban area is difficult. A large percentage of urban LGBT youth have heard disparaging remarks about their sexuality, have been verbally and physically harassed, and even though urban areas offer more resources for gay youth such as gay-straight alliances, this population is still likely to be harassed by their peers (Blackburn and McCready, 2009; Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2007; Lebson, 2002; Rivers & Carragher, 2003; Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2008). Gay youth who are harassed or hear negative comments about their sexuality are more likely than those who are not harassed to suffer from mental illness (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, Azrael, 2009; Mustanski, Garofalo, and Emerson, 2010) and be part of a sexual assault as either a victim or perpetrator (Lock and Steiner, 1999).

Urban gay youth are being bullied, committing suicide, and having suicidal thoughts at a greater rate than their heterosexual peers (Lock and Steiner, 1999; Mustanski, Garofalo, and

Emerson, 2010). Living in an urban area with their resources such as libraries that carry LGBT magazines or clinics devoted to LGBT health issues, and increased likelihood of a high school gay-straight alliance does not seem to guarantee a peaceful existence. If gay urban youth are faring poorly, then it is possible if not likely that rural gay youth with their lack of access to gay friendly resources are faring equally as poor.

Gay youth in both urban and rural areas experiment with drugs at an increased frequency over their heterosexual peers (Rivers and Carragher, 2003) and in a state like North Dakota that has one of the highest rates of underage drinking, it would seem likely that gay rural youth are at the very least abusing alcohol if not other drugs (MacPherson, 2009). A 1998 study found that in one state 60% of gay or lesbian high school students had smoked cigarettes and 48% had done so before the age of thirteen compared to 23% for their heterosexual peers who started before the age of thirteen (Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, DuRant, 1998). While the study by Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, and DuRant (1998) is dated, recent studies have confirmed this trend. Other studies have found similar results such as finding that gay and lesbian youth were more likely to smoke cigarettes (Ryan, Wortley, Easton, Pederson, and Greenwood, 2001), engage in risky behavior (Rivers and Carragher, 2003), and that LGBT youth were 190%-400% more likely than their heterosexual peers to use drugs (Marshal et al. 2008). One study found that 30% to 50% of gay rural youth abused drugs (Poon & Saewyc, 2009). Drug abuse coupled with being gay and a potential lack of family support (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002) due to the conservative climate of their surroundings (Hamilton, 2006; New York Times, 2008) could lead to homelessness of some rural gay youth.

Drug abuse and lack of family support often goes hand in hand with homelessness. Homeless gay teenagers left home for the same reasons as their heterosexual peers but left home

in greater numbers (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002). They were also more likely to have abused drugs, engaged in unprotected sex, suffer from mental illness, and been the victim of sexual and physical assault (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, Cauce, 2002; Rew, Whittaker, Taylor-Seehafer, & Smith, 2005; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006). It is unknown if rural gay youth leave home in the same numbers or for the same reasons as urban gay youth or if they even leave home but if gay urban youth leave home then it is likely that homelessness is a real possibility for gay rural youth. This does not mean that rural youth will necessarily be homeless in their rural community, only that if they have similar experiences to their urban counterparts, then they could also be homeless.

The increased threat of being homeless is not the only concern gay youth face. They are also at a greater risk for contracting HIV or engaging in unprotected sex (Rew, Whittaker, Taylor-Seehafer, & Smith, 2005; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006). Living in a rural environment would seem to make it more difficult to have gay sexual experiences for youth because gay people make up so little of the population but through the use of the internet gay rural youth may be engaging in negative sexual behavior such as meeting people from the internet to have a sexual encounter and this would contribute to how they experience their environment.

Gay youth are at an increased risk for HIV infection because they engage in sexually risky behavior (Maguen & Armistead, 2000). Only 30% of gay youth talked to their partner about HIV while 60% of their heterosexual males talked to their partner about HIV (Maguen & Armistead, 2000). If urban centers with their gay resources are failing to reach gay youth then what is happening in rural areas with gay youth? Through the use of the internet, gay rural youth could be meeting others from the internet by having them drive to their community or meeting others from nearby small towns and engaging in as much sex as urban gay youth and couple this

with a lack of free public clinics that many urban centers possess and this could be a potentially bad situation that causes gay youth to experience their environment in a negative way. These numbers might be different if gay youth had support networks and people they trusted to discuss problems or concerns in their lives.

The support network or lack thereof for gay teens contributes to homelessness and is often comprised of friends and not family (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, Cauce, 2002; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006). A qualitative study of gay youth ages 14-22 by Nesmith, Burton and Cosgrove (1999) looked at the support networks of gay youth using open ended questions and content analysis and found that for the participants, the majority of their support networks were comprised of non-family members. In a qualitative study of gay young adults, Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds (2002) found that non-family members were more supportive than family members.

Older studies have found that gay youth felt uncertain about their friendships because of their sexual identity, many gay youth were afraid of losing friends because of their sexual identity, and in a 1988 study by Martin and Hetrick, 95% of participants said they felt estranged from their friends (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1990). While the number of estrangements from friends have likely gone down in the face of growing acceptance of LGBT rights, it is unlikely these issues have completely vanished, especially in rural areas where conservative and anti-LGBT views still reign (Hamilton, 2006; New York Times, 2008) If gay youth rely on support networks that are distinct from their family then this may be troublesome for gay youth in rural North Dakota and Minnesota as the number of peers that could potentially make up their support network is limited by the size of the school, size of the rural area, and the remoteness of the rural area.

The literature on gay youth is mostly centered on urban gay youth. A consequence of this focus is that gay rural youth are an understudied topic. The literature shows that gay urban youth are more likely to suffer mental health problems, engage in a litany of negative behavior, be homeless, and have support networks comprised of non-family members. This population is often in locations that have gay support services yet these problems persist. Gay youth in urban areas experience their environments rather poorly. It is unknown how gay youth in rural areas experience their environment but if their experiences are similar to urban gay youth, then their experiences are likely negative.

Gay Life in Rural Areas

Literature about what it is like to grow up gay in a rural setting is sparse although there is some literature on what it is like to live in a rural area as a gay adult. According to Oswald and Culton (2003), the "prevailing wisdom appears to be that 'rural' and 'gay' are incompatible. This notion has been upheld by omission within academia" (p.72).

According to a study by Moses and Buchner (1980), gay rural life is "characterized by conservatives, traditionalism, religious fundamentalism, isolation of atypical or deviant members, resistance to change, high visibility, lack of confidentiality, and a tendency to view problems as personal rather than system based" (p.173). The Moses and Buchner study is 30 years old but it likely still relevant as America is generally considered politically right of center (Hamilton, 2006; New York Times, 2008). If rural areas are like Moses and Buchner describe then it seems likely that gay youth in rural areas are in trouble like the preceding studies have found and suggested. This quote is also apt as it was published in 1980, the earliest year participants in this study were born. This quote suggests that for some of the participants, this is the world in which they spent some of their childhood.

Literature on gay rural adults focuses on why they live in an area that may not support an openly gay population like an urban center can and how these gay adults maintain or create a gay identity while living in an area that does not always encourage or allow them to be open with their sexuality. While these studies deal with gay adults they paint a picture of what it is like to live in a rural area and this is of importance when discussing gay rural youth.

Even though gay youth have no say in where they live by virtue of being a minor they must still live in an area where they are not allowed to freely express their sexuality while still trying to forge a gay identity in somewhat secrecy. Thirty years ago or even twenty years ago, before the internet and the proliferation of gay television characters, experiencing a rural environment in a positive way for a gay youth may have been unlikely if not nearly impossible and necessitated a move to an urban center after becoming an adult, but with the internet becoming widespread, it seems very possible that a young person who is coming to grips with their sexual identity may find joy in an environment that is typically conservative by nature and remote by geography (Hamilton, 2006; New York Times, 2008).

In a study similar to this one Cody and Welch (1997) interviewed gay adults ages 21-62 about what it was like to grow up in a rural environment as a youth and to live in a rural environment as an adult. Eighty percent of respondents liked living in a rural setting and eighty percent of participants had problems with living in a rural setting because "there is a lack of a visible gay community and few opportunities to meet similar others, constantly reinforced and magnified an already existing sense of aloneness, difference, and isolation" (Cody & Welch, 1997, p.61).

Even though Cody and Welch (1997) found loneliness to be a problem, rural gay adults have found a way to cope and to live somewhat honest lives in a rural environment. A 2003

study by Oswald and Culton showed that rural gay adults create private lives that emphasize "relationships within closed support networks" and that these networks may include "biological, legal, and chosen kin as well as friends and neighbors" (p.72). This is similar to Nesmith, Burton and Cosgrove (1999) who saw the same phenomenon but with gay youth in an urban environment. Nesmith, Burton and Cosgrove (1999) did a qualitative study of gay youth and young adults in Seattle in which non-family members were perceived to be more supportive than family members. The previously mentioned studies on homelessness found that family problems are a large reason why gay teenagers become homeless.

Those who cannot create private support networks may suffer from "intense isolation," "loneliness" and "may use the internet" (Oswald & Culton, 2003, p.72). Oswald and Culton (2003) discovered that one of the biggest problems for rural gays was a lack of resources for gay and lesbians and being "disconnected from the [gay] community" (p.74). If gay adults do not feel connected to the gay community then it is likely that gay rural youth do not feel connected to the gay community. North Dakota ranks near the bottom in state population so the internet likely affects how gay rural youth experience their environment in that they may have slow dial-up connections which prevents viewing of many internet pages, connections only in public places which again can prevent one from accessing gay related information, or no internet connection at all. In a 2009 study it was found that the internet was used by rural gay young adults to find information about their sexuality (Schubotz & McNamee, 2009). It was also discovered that these young adults were not comfortable expressing their sexuality because of their rural location Schubotz & McNamee, 2009).

The lack of a gay community and feelings of connectedness that gay rural adults seem to feel may have caused gay men in a 1995 study in North Dakota to meet each other at highway

rest stops and to rent post office boxes "hours from home" in order to receive gay related information through the mail (Kramer, 1995). The Kramer study is of interest because it shows what rural gay people have had do to make a connection to the gay community or each other. While no other studies about meeting at rural rest stops for anonymous sex were found it is reasonable to think that the results of the Kramer (1995) study were not an isolated phenomenon, especially with the rise of the internet and the ease in which communication occurs over the internet.

Isolation need not be a harbinger for risky behavior. While in some cases it has likely contributed to people engaging in risky behavior, the isolation that those living in rural areas experience can be a selling point to people who choose to live in these areas (Boulden, 2001; Connolly & Leedy, 2006). Two studies conducted in Wyoming, one by Connolly and Leedy (2006) and the other by Boulden (2001) talk about isolation but also contentment derived from living in a rural area. Connolly and Leedy (2006) found that discrimination against LGBT people increased the more rural an area was while the opportunity to form connections with other gay or lesbian adults decreased. North Dakota is near the bottom of the list of populated states so it is likely that rural gay youth in North Dakota experience similar problems (United States Census Bureau, 2000). Boulden (2001) conducted a small study of gay male adults in Wyoming and found that while the men were isolated from other gay adults they were happy even though they lived a life of "don't ask, don't tell" regarding their sexuality.

The research on rural areas and gay people tend to focus on gay adults and not youth. The research that exists on gays and rural areas all have traits of self-censoring, in that the adults do not feel free to be openly gay. Another thread that ties most of them together is that the adults, despite the difficulties of being gay in a conservative environment, like the lifestyle of rural

living. Based on the literature reviewed for gay rural adults, gay youth may be experiencing

isolation but also some contentment from living in the rural area.

<div align="center">Internet, Mass Media, and Gay Youth Identity</div>

The internet and mass media play a role in identity formation of gay youth (Harper,

Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009). Whether or not this population watches television on a regular

basis or not, it is likely they have been exposed to gay television characters who have seen an

increase in their numbers (Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2007; Netzley, 2010, Armstrong,

2011). Gay fictional teens on television have particularly increased (Armstrong, 2011) and these

characters are possible role models for gay youth and potentially affect their identity formation.

The internet is used to access television shows scripted as well as to explore one's

sexuality. For some people this means gathering information about the gay community and

making online friendships but for others it entails meeting people they have met online for

anonymous sex offline (Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil 2009). Gay youth and gay adults who

do meet people from the internet tend to engage in risky sexual behavior that puts them at an

increased risk for being infected with HIV (Benotsch,  Kalichman, & Cage, 2002; Garofalo,

Herrick, Mustanski, & Donenberg, 2007). Understanding how gay rural teens experience the

internet and popular culture is useful because it lays the groundwork for future studies, studies

that could steer help or resources towards the needs of gay rural youth.

Gay youth who grow up without positive images of gay people can be starved for any

sort of representation. An Australian study found that when gay youths saw images of fictional

gay people or real gay people on television it made them feel good and the feeling was so

pronounced that the memory stayed with them (McKee, 2000). The adults were happy to see a

gay person represented in the media in a positive way and used that image to feel less alone and

stigmatized (McKee, 2000). This study is important because it suggests gay youth are in need of affirmation of their sexuality. Gay youth who live in a rural area may not get the affirmation they require from the people in their life to develop in a healthy manner. Mass media in America has a lot of gay characters and gay teen characters for gay youth to identify with and presumably use in such a way as to build a positive identity but again, if a house does not have the internet or cable television, these images will not be able to help (Armstrong, 2011).

Fisher, Hill, Grube, and Gruber (2007) performed a content analysis on television seasons in 2001 and 2002 and found that only movies and comedy/variety shows had a "substantial" amount of gay content and that cable television was more likely than network television to air gay content. The difference in how much gay content aired on broadcast television versus cable television speaks to differences in how a gay youth experienced their environment. Another content analysis by Netzley (2010) found that of 98 episodes of television analyzed from the 2005 season, 5.6% of the characters analyzed were gay and 1.9% were bisexual. These studies are important because they speak to how often gay characters are portrayed on television and where on television they are portrayed. If a household does not have a television then these shows might as well not even exist since they cannot be seen in the household containing the gay youth. Fisher, Hill, Grube, and Gruber (2007) and Netzley (2010) studies show that gay characters exist on television and McKee (2000) shows that these characters are likely being noticed and remembered by gay youth. The only thing better than positive mentions of gay adults on television would be positive gay teenage role models on television of which there are more than there ever has been.

Armstrong (2011) in a periodical piece reviewed the history of gay teenage characters on television. Armstrong (2011) wrote that the first gay teenager on network television made his

14

appearance in 1992 in a soap opera and then on primetime in 1994. By 2010 there have been several teen centered shows with gay characters (Armstrong, 2011). The number of gay characters and their portrayal is important because there will be a range in the behavior of these characters and this range allows for more gay youth to see themselves in the character and thus identify with a positive portrayal. This periodical piece is of importance because it lists the popular media in which gay youth were characters.

Gay television characters started appearing on American television in 1971 when the Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) aired a British drama that contained a gay character (Wyatt, 2011). The 1970s had a few shows with adult gay characters and those that did tended to limit them to reoccurring characters whose length of story lines varied although two shows, "Barney Miller" and "Soap" did have permanent gay characters (Wyatt, 2011). The 1980s saw the expansion of gay characters into more permanent roles and into shows that lasted many seasons such as "Dynasty," "St. Elsewhere," "Rosanne," and "The Tracy Ullman Show" (Wyatt, 2011). Gay characters showed up in many other shows throughout the 1980s but always as adults (Wyatt, 2011). Gay teenagers did not have a character they could relate to until 1994's "My So Called Life" when a gay teenage character was kicked out of his house for being gay (Armstrong, 2011; Wyatt, 2011).

Even though gay teenage primetime television characters did not appear until 1994, gay characters have been showing up on television since 1970 with increasing frequency. Participants for this study born in 1980 who watched television likely saw gay characters or story lines in multi-season shows like "L.A. Law," "Golden Girls," "Fame," "In Living Color," and "Hill Street Blues" (Armstrong, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). The 1990s and the 2000s saw even more shows with gay characters and for the first time television shows starring gay characters such as

15

"Will and Grace" and "Ellen" which aired on network television and "Queer as Folk" and "The L Word" which aired on premium cable television (Wyatt, 2011). The increased frequency of gay television characters means that study participants had a greater chance of seeing positive or realistic portrayal of a gay person. As one study showed, the positive portrayal of gay people matters to gay youth who are starved for positive representations of their sexuality in an area that is not necessarily welcome to their sexuality (McKee, 2000).

It is possible that the participants experienced their environment differently based on their age. That is why it is important to understand the history of gay television characters because those who spent much of their youth in the 1980s versus those who had much of their youth in the 1990s and 2000s may experience being gay in a rural environment differently based on their viewing of characters that portrayed LGBT people in a positive light.

While television offers a host of gay television characters, the internet offers a much larger supply of information. Youth who spend a lot of time on the internet are more depressed and gay youth and adults who meet people online from the internet are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior (Garofalo, Herrick, Mustanski, & Donenberg, 2007).

A 2006 study showed that 64% of gay male youth surveyed had used the internet to find a romantic or sexual partner, 70% of the people who had met a person offline from the internet have had a sexual encounter with that person they met from the internet, and 47% of those who met someone for sex from the internet did not use a condom (Garofalo, Herrick, Mustanski, & Donenberg, 2007). Gay male youth engaged in risky behavior through the use of the internet although whether the internet or something else led to the risky sexual behavior is not made clear. The risky behavior was coupled with other risky behavior such as drug use and prostitution

(Garofalo, Herrick, Mustanski, & Donenberg, 2007). Some negative behaviors have irreversible consequences, such as contracting a sexual transmitted disease.

Elford et al. (2001) showed that a rise in STD rates in London in 2001 in gay men were associated with meeting people from the internet for sex. Benotsch, Kalichman, and Cage (2002) showed gay men in Atlanta, Georgia who had sex with men from the internet were more likely to engage in methamphetamine use and have more sexual partners within 6 months when compared to gay men who did not meet men from the internet for sex.

Which youth are more likely to engage in sex with someone they met online may be predicted by how much sexually explicit content they view on the internet. Peter and Valkenburg (2008) studied Dutch heterosexual youth ages 13-20 and found that youth who had frequent exposure to sexually explicit material online had a "more positive attitude toward uncommitted sexual exploration" and sexual uncertainty. This is of importance because rural areas by their very nature offer less to do than an urban area. Gay rural youth may spend more time on the internet because of boredom and this extra time could be used to view pornography. While the study did not link an increase of STDs or HIV to sex with people met from the internet, it did show that those who did engage with sex with people met online were more likely to engage in risky behavior like drug use and multiple sex partners. North Dakota is number one in the United States for binge drinking with 32% of the population ages 12 and older admitting to binge drinking within 30 days of the survey and 40% of youth ages 12-20 admitting to having at least one drink within 30 days of the survey (MacPherson, 2009). This means the youth and young adults of North Dakota are engaging in risky behavior through the use of alcohol.

Even though there is a segment of the gay youth population that engages in sex with people they have met from the internet, many youth go online and do not to engage in offline

17

anonymous sex but instead use the internet to explore their sexual identity (Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009). Harper, Bruce, Serrano, and Jamil (2009) conducted a qualitative study using in-depth interviews of gay and bisexual youth ages 15-20 in and around the Chicago area and found that gay youth use the internet in a variety of ways to build their gay identity. The authors identified 6 ways in which the participants used the internet to help build their sexual identity: Increase self-awareness of sexual identity, learn about the gay community, communicate with other gay people, meet other gay people, "finding comfort with and accepting sexual identity," and "facilitating the coming-out process" (Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009, p.310). This article is of importance because they also used in-depth interviews, found that gay youth use the internet to build their sexual identity, and shared a similar goal of this paper which is to understand how the internet, as well as mass media affects the experience of growing up in a rural environment. Rural gay youth might use the internet in a different way or in a similar way to build their sexual identity. If urban gay youth use the internet to help build a positive gay identity but rural gay youth do not, it would be helpful to understand why or if gay rural youth are able to build a positive gay identity without the use of the internet it would be helpful to others to know how they do it so this information could be adapted to help gay people who do not have internet access.

<div align="center">Definitions</div>

Rural

The United States defines rural as a location having a population less than 50,000 people (U.S Census, 2010).  "Rural' encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area" (U.S. Census, 2010). A location with less than 50,000 people but more than 2,500 people is known as an urban cluster but the U.S. Census said that all locations with

less than 50,000 people can be referred to as rural (U.S. Census, 2010). An area with more than 50,000 people is an urban area (U.S. Census, 2010). This definition is similar to the Canadian's government which also defines rural as a location with less than 50,000 people (du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, & Clemenson, 2002). For the purpose of this paper a rural area cannot be adjacent to an urban area. For example, a participant raised in a town of 30,000 people qualified for the study because the town is not near an urban area.

Discovering how gay rural youth experience their environment should be understood because studies that do exist paint a picture that is full of negative behaviors. This paper is seeking to understand what is occurring by asking how gay rural youth are experiencing their environment. Future studies can then look at why negative behaviors are occurring and what can be done to address the negative behaviors.

The sparse nature of studies that involve gay rural youth is problematic because it is unknown what kind of life gay youth live and how they experience their environment. It is known that urban gay youth have an increased chance for HIV infection, homelessness, mental health issues, and drug use but urban is not rural and this study seeks to understand what kind of life rural gay youth have and if they face the same problems as their urban peers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the review of literature, the following research question is proposed to explore the nature of growing up gay in a rural area.

RQ1: How did gay and lesbian youth experience in rural North Dakota or Minnesota?

RQ2: How did media visibility of LGBT characters inform their experience of growing up gay in rural North Dakota or Minnesota?

RQ3: How did using the internet inform their experience of growing up gay in rural North Dakota or Minnesota?

METHODS

The methods section begins with a description of why this study is a qualitative research project and how this is a communication project. It then progresses internet and youth and why this age group was chosen to be studied, then it moves onto the research design which describes the phenomenological method that is driving the project. How the data is collected and analyzed is discussed under the headings "Interview process and transcription" and "Data Collection and Analysis." The section ends with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval which discusses how IRB approval was obtained.

Qualitative Research

The project has been conceived of as a qualitative project because I am interested in how individuals interpret and assign meaning to various events in their lives. A qualitative method has been chosen because this type of method is almost exclusively inductive and inductive methods do not usually test a hypothesis but instead seek to answer broad questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). A qualitative study then best answers these types of broad questions ((Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

This qualitative study uses open ended interview questions to allow for a variety of responses and allow a participant to answer in a way they feel is best. The variety of answers provides descriptions that are rich in data and can be analyzed using an inductive method. This paper is using the Husserl brand of phenomenological method to analyze the data. The phenomenological method is a qualitative method used to inductively analyze qualitative data. Purposeful sampling will be used for this project. Qualitative studies through purposeful sampling thus seek out participants who fit the needs of the study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). People are recruited because they "have had experiences, or possess knowledge…that [is]

21

important to the research questions" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p.121). Participants were recruited through advertisements listed through email lists of various groups (see "Data Collection and Analysis"). Interested parties were asked if they identified as lesbian or gay and if they spent 8 of their 12 school age years in a rural location as defined by this paper.

<center>Communication Research Project</center>

The participants' experiences occur in the context of a community, family, and peers. Cultures and values are communicated to the participants and the type of values and culture that is communicated is being addressed through the research questions and the interview questions. Some of the experiences of the participants are negative and occur in the form of gay related name-calling or religious values that do not condone homosexuality. These negative values are communicated to the participant and how it affects the participants speaks directly to the point of this paper: How do rural gay and lesbian youth in North Dakota or Minnesota experience being gay? The use of television and internet is another way communication occurs in that the participants may have sought out positive images of gay culture through the internet or television. This also speaks to how rural gay youth in North Dakota or Minnesota experience being gay. The participants communicate to their community through non-verbal and verbal language. A participant who exhibits atypical gender behaviors is communicating something about their self that may have resulted in bullying. Participants also may have chosen to communicate their sexuality in different ways, sometimes through self-disclosure, sometimes through denial, and sometimes through gender "appropriate" behavior such as dating a member of the opposite sex. All of these are forms of communication and speak to how gay youth experience rural North Dakota and Minnesota.

<center>22</center>

Internet and Youth

This paper is studying people who were born in or after the year 1980. Those born in and around 1980 came to sexual maturity around the time the internet became widespread in the mid-1990s. The widespread nature of the internet for this paper is being marked by when internet companies like Prodigy and American Online became popular. In 1993 AOL began to send out the promotional discs and by 1996 they had six million customers (Web Hosting Report, 2010). By 1992 Prodigy had 1.75 million users (Funding Universe, n.d.).

The internet likely had an impact on some gay youth when it first emerged but how gay rural youth experienced the internet is uncertain.  It is not unknown if gay rural youth used the internet to meet other gay youth, if they used it for informational purposes, or it they used it at all. A small unpublished pilot study that I conducted (2010) involving participants from rural North Dakota or Minnesota about how gay youth experienced being gay in a rural setting showed that usage of the internet for communication or informational needs varied across ages.

Bea, Dwight, and Artie, all 19 years old used the internet to meet other gay youth and gather information on their sexuality (Schloesser, 2010). Bea and Artie said that they did not use the internet for these purposes until their junior or senior year in high school while Dwight began to use the internet for these purposes in middle school (Schloesser, 2010). Older participants like Tommy, 25, Sam, 30, and Dexter, 28, did not use the internet to meet people. Tommy used the internet to view sexually explicit material while Sam and Dexter used the internet to gather general information about homosexuality (Schloesser, 2010). With the exception of Dwight, all the above mentioned participants used the internet for these purposes in high school. Dexter, 20 years old, did not use the internet to gather information regarding his sexuality. Joel, 30 years old, and Ned, 26 years old, did not use the internet at all until after high school (Schloesser,

2010). Tommy, Bea, Dwight, and Artie had the internet at home while Sam and Dexter only had access to the internet at school. Joel and Ned both had internet at their high school but for different reasons did not use the internet.

The pilot study shows that gay rural youth did use the internet to seek out information regarding their sexuality and that it was primarily used to gather information regarding their sexuality and not to meet people or engage in online conversations. The information from the pilot study is useful because it suggests that when gay rural youth used the internet for purposes of seeking information about their sexuality, they used it primarily to gather information regarding their sexuality.

The arrival of the internet to a rural area meant that gay rural youth could connect to other gay people without moving to an urban center. It also meant that the feelings that drive rural gay youth to engage in negative behavior such as drug use, suicide ideation, or unprotected sex might be negated by the ability to connect with others.

The percentage of people with internet in their homes more than doubled in both North Dakota and Minnesota between 1998 and 2003 (United States Department of Commerce, 2003). As of 2007, 82% of all Americans used broadband to access the internet but as of 2011 only 62% of rural households nationwide used broadband to access the internet and in the states of North Dakota and Minnesota, that number is much lower (Cauley, 2009; Severson, 2011).

According to a 2007 study by the Department of Agriculture, 57% of rural households in the Midwest use the internet but only 33% of have broadband. North Dakota and Minnesota are worse than the Midwest average when it comes to rural people using broadband (United States Department of Agriculture, 2009). As of 2007, 42% of all farms in North Dakota had access to the internet but only 28% of that number was using broadband (United States Department of

Agriculture, 2009). In Minnesota 37% of all farms have access to the internet and 12% use broadband (United States Department of Agriculture, 2009). According to the Agriculture Census, 5 of the top 50 agricultural counties in the United States with the most high speed internet are in North Dakota and one of the top 50 are in Minnesota (United States Department of Agriculture, 2009). Even though North Dakota has these counties, as a state it is still below the Midwest average for rural broadband connections. This information is useful to know because it shows that rural areas have access to broadband, although it is limited. Broadband is important because it allows information to be quickly downloaded and viewed. Access to gay related information can possibly ease the stress of being a gay youth in a rural environment. The ease of stress could possibly lead to gay youth engaging in less negative behavior but until it is discovered how gay youth experience their rural environment it cannot be known if the internet has had an impact on their experiences.

How or if usage of the internet differed depending on the mode of connection could be important because the amount of time it takes to download information to the computer varies between dial-up and broadband. If a youth has access to computer that uses a dial-up connection, they may choose to look at gay related information differently from those who have a broadband connection based on the time constraints inherent in dial-up connections.

Research Design

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis looks for themes. A theme is an important piece of data that relates to the research question and "represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). A theme can be based on the number of times an idea

appears in the data or if "it captures something important in relation to the overall research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). This means that a theme can be dependent on frequency of appearances in the data or if the researcher believes that a piece of data will illuminate or answer a research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) wrote that a researcher must be flexible when determining a theme.

Thematic analysis identifies themes using either an inductive method where themes are "strongly linked to the data" or a deductive method that is "driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83-84). This paper uses the inductive method for analysis. This method of analysis codes the data without trying to fit the data into the researcher's "analytic preconceptions" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.83).

Coding for themes is not a linear process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding is a recursive process that involves going back and forth between the data and analysis to adjust and refine the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The recursive process is demonstrated through the six phases of coding. The six phases of thematic analysis are: "familiarizing yourself with your data.", "generating initial codes," "searching for themes," "reviewing themes," "defining and naming themes" and "producing the report" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87-93).

Phase 1 is "Familiarizing yourself with your data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87). This involves becoming familiar with the data. The researcher, if necessary, transcribes the data, and reads the data several times looking for meanings and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher does not take extensive notes during this phase. The purpose of this phase is to become familiar with the data and to begin to think about what is in the data.

Phase 2 is "Generating initial codes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.88). Codes are a basic unit of information that can be analyzed in a meaningful fashion (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

26

Researchers code for as many potential themes as possible since at this point researchers do not yet know what will be of interest later during analysis.

Phase 3 is "Searching for themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.89). This phase involves sorting the codes into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is when analysis begins and the researcher begins to build "overarching" themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.89). The researcher begins to think about the relationship between codes, between themes, and between different levels of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 4 is "Reviewing themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.91). This is when potential themes have emerged and the researcher begins to refine the themes. Some themes may be combined with other themes because of similarities, some may be discarded for lack of data, and other themes might be divided because the data is too diverse (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes are judged by internal homogeneity and external homogeneity. This means that data within themes should be consistent and there should be clear lines of demarcation between themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 5 is "Defining and naming themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.92). Themes are refined and defined during this phase. This means that what the theme is about is identified and "determining what aspect" of the data the theme captures (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). In phase 5, themes should be describable in a few sentences. Themes that cannot be simply described need further refinement.

Phase 6 is "Producing the report" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.93). This phase involves finishing the report. It starts with "fully worked-out themes" and progresses to writing the report. The point of the write-up for thematic analysis is to explain the data in a way that convinces the reader of the "merit and validity" of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.93).

The data in this research paper was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis has six phases that progress from identifying specific and meaningful units of information as codes to condensing these codes into broad themes with each theme containing similar codes.

Interview Process and Transcription

Interviews are conducted using a low structure format. This format produces highly individualized interviews and allows participants to take the interview "in whatever direction he or she wants" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p.103). Interviews that use a low structure format do not have an order in which the questions are asked (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The study uses follow-up probes to ensure that topics are fully explored.

Low structure format will be used for this research project because it allows people to "explore" their views of reality (Hesse-Biber & Liber, 2011). Low structure format entails that the researcher asks "very few but broad questions" (Hesse-Biber & Liber, 2011, p.103). This is congruent with the needs of a phenomenological method which seeks to understand how one experiences or perceives their reality. This format best answers the research questions because it allows participants to explore their memories in a way that is not structured by the researcher. This will allow for free association that will cause each interview to be highly individualistic. The individualistic answers are the truth for each participant and what all the interviews from the participants have in common is the essence and that is what is being sought.

Transcriptions are verbatim. This will include verbal pauses, pauses, and emotion. Verbal pauses include but are not limited to words such as "um," "uh," and "like" that are used between thoughts. Pauses over two seconds in length will be recorded in parenthesis. Emotional changes such as anger or sadness are recorded by hand along with the counter number on an analog tape

recorder so that the emotions can be entered into the transcript at the correct time. Emotional changes are based on interpretations of the researcher and are noted in the analysis.

<center>Data Collection and Analysis</center>

Participants must self-identify as gay or lesbian and have spent 8 of their 12 years of primary education in either North Dakota or Minnesota and have resided in an area of 50,000 inhabitants or less for the same amount of time. This study is interested in study participants who grew up in a rural area as well as the upper Midwest, which for the purpose of this study consists of North Dakota and Minnesota. Participants must also be 18-30 years of age as this study is interested in people who came of age with the internet. Participants must be at least 18 years of age because the researcher is interested in how gay adults in a rural environment experienced their youth and people who are under 17 years of age or younger are still experiencing their youth.

Participants were recruited through community based LGBT groups. Data collection occurs through purposeful and snowball sampling as well as recruited through personal contacts. People who assist in recruiting through snowball sampling and personal contacts verbally pass along the researcher's contact information and a short description of the study.

Interviews consist of three open ended questions and appropriate follow up questions that probe the participant for more information. Follow up questions are used to further enrich the topic and are asked until the topic has been sufficiently explored. The questions asked are:

1.Talk about media representations of GLBT characters or issues from the news that you remember from growing up in a rural environment and how they made you feel at the time. Try to remember as many instances from your childhood as well as your teenage years.

<center>29</center>

2. Discuss your experiences with technology such as cable television and the internet. Discuss how you may or may not have used these technologies and why or why not you may have used these technologies in relation to being a gay or lesbian youth and being a youth in general. Discuss what time of information you may have accessed in relation to being a gay or lesbian youth. Talk about your feelings that you may have had when using these technologies for gay or lesbian related purposes.

3. Describe how it felt to grow up gay or lesbian in a rural environment. Think about growing up gay in your hometown. What comes to mind? If necessary, start with experiences that stand out in your memory as a place to begin.

The research questions are general in nature so that they meet the requirement of bracketing. They ask about an area of interest but do not lead the participants towards a preconceived notion. They are also general enough in nature to encourage a variety of responses. The varieties of answers are analyzed for commonalities and these commonalities are the essence of how the participants experienced their environment.

Data Analysis

Each interview was read twice before coding began. During each read through I circled passages that I felt might be important. Initial coding began in the margins of each printed transcript. I transferred the codes to a word document on my computer. I grouped the codes into initial themes. As more interviews occurred and were transcribed, they were initially coded in the same way. The initial themes of the interviews were compared to each other and as codes and initial themes emerged in subsequent interviews, previous transcripts were again analyzed to look for codes that showed up in later interviews. When the last interview was transcribed and analyzed potential themes were compared across the data set. Themes were given a word

document and supporting data was listed. Themes were analyzed for clarity, simplicity, internal homogeneity and external homogeneity. The last step was to summarize each theme using a couple of sentences. Once each theme was able to be clearly and simply summarized, the analysis was written.

<center>IRB Approval</center>

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval has been granted by North Dakota State University (NDSU) and the University of North Dakota (UND). The IRB approval for NDSU covers multiple recruiting sites and methods while the UND approval only covers one recruitment method and one site. Recruiting also occurs at Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSUM). IRB approval was sought but the IRB of MSUM decided that formal IRB approval was not needed and that recruiting could occur as long as it occurred under the supervision of a professor and it was limited to one site.

Approval has been granted by the IRB of NDSU to recruit from the Gay Straight Alliance of NDSU, the Gay Straight Alliance of Minnesota State University of Moorhead, Pride Colletive Community Center, Equality Diversity Center, The Fargo Forum, Valley Midweek Market Place, personal contacts, and the students who take Communication 110. UND granted approval to recruit from The Ten Percent Society. MSUM allowed recruiting to occur from the Gay Straight Alliance.

An email describing the study is sent to the email lists through intermediaries at Gay Straight Alliance of NDSU, Ten Percent Society of UND, Gay Straight Alliance of MSUM, Pride Colletive Community Center, and Equality Diversity Center. This prevents the researcher from having access to the email lists of these organizations. Ads are posted in the daily

<center>31</center>

newspaper Fargo Forum, the twice weekly circular Valley Midweek Marketplace, and the internet based classified site Craigslist.

Recruitment through personal contacts is done on an informal basis. Friends of the researcher approach people they know and who they think might be interested in the study and pass along the researcher's email address and phone number and verbally tell interested people a short summary about the research project.

Interviews with students from NDSU, UND, and MSUM occur in a private room at the main library of that school or in their home. Interviews are restricted to these two locations so that participants will feel comfortable discussing their memories without fear of being overheard.

IRB protocol was amended in August of 2011 to allow participants to be compensated for their participation.  Six out of ten participants received compensation. Participants received ten dollars at the end of the interview for their particpation. Approval for compensation was sought because of difficulty with recruiting.

Recruiting for this study was slow. Recruiting for the pilot study was also slow. Compensation was offereed to encourage participation and to ensure the study was finished in a timely manner.

<div align="center">Biographies of Participants</div>

Bob is thirty years old. He grew up in a town of six thousand people. He had internet access through a recource in the community. He had access to television in his home but he did not have cable in the home. He self identified as gay before his eighteenth birthday.

Mark is thirty years old. He grew up in a community of seven thousand people. He did not have access to the internet until after he turned eighteen years of age. He had two televisions

in his house but did not have cable. Mark was aware of same-sex attractions before he turned eighteen yeas of age but did not self identify as gay until after his eighteenth birthday.

Zack is twenty-eight years old. He grew up in a town of six thousand people. He had internet access at school. He had television in his home but he did not have cable. Zack self identified as gay before he turned eighteen years of age.

Pam is twenty-two years old. She grew up in a town of fourteen thousand people. She had internet access at home and had cable television in her home. She suspected that she had same sex attractions before she turned eighteen years of age but did not self identify as a lesbian until after she turned eighteen years of age.

Tom is twenty-six years old. He grew up in a town of two thousand people. He had internet access in home. He had television in his home but he did not have cable. He self identified as gay before he turned eighteen years of age.

Andy is twenty-six years old. He grew up in a town of four thousand people. He had internet access in his home and he had cable television in his home. He was aware that his sexuality was developing differently than his peers but he was unsure of what the difference was until after he turned eighteen years of age.

Sue is twenty-eight years old. She grew up in a town of thirty thousand people. She had internet access in her home. She had television in her home but not cable television. She was aware of same sex feelings before turning eighteen years of age but she did not identify as a lesbian until after she turned eighteen years of age.

Simon is twenty-four years old. He grew up in a town of six thousand five hundred people. He had access to the internet at school. He had cable television in his home. He self identified as gay before he turned eighteen years of age.

Alex is thirty years old. He grew up in a town of one thousand people. He had internet access at his school. He had television in his home but did not have cable. He was aware of same sex feelings before he turned eighteen years of age. He self identified as gay after he turned eighteen years of age.

Jordan is twenty-nine years old. She grew up in a town of seven thousand people. She had internet access in her home and had cable television in her home. She was aware of same sex feelings before turning eighteen years of age but she did not identify as a lesbian until after she turned eighteen years of age.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the youth of gay or lesbian adults who grew up in rural North Dakota and Minnesota. This study looked at how these adults experienced their childhoods in a general way, in relation to television, and in relation to the internet. Results are from 10 interviews with participants ages 22-30. Seven were male and three were female. Interviews occurred between July and October of 2011. All interviews occurred in a private room at the main library of North Dakota State University and all interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. The researcher contacted all participants via electronic mail after analysis of their interviews was finished to ascertain if the themes matched what participants intended to say. All participants agreed that the analysis was accurate to their voices. All participants were from a rural area as defined by this study.

Analysis of the interviews showed four salient themes. The themes identified by the research are "Gender nonconformity," "Gay slurs: The prevalence of homophobic language," "Gay television content and its role in identity formation" and "Lack of internet use."

Gender nonconformity" discusses participants' experiences with exhibiting behavior that was not normatively consistent for their traditional gender roles. "Gay slurs: The prevalence of homophobic language" discusses participants' experiences with anti-gay harassment. "Gay television content and its role in identity formation" discusses how the participants did not internalize gay content in popular culture or the news. "Lack of internet use" discusses how the participants experienced the internet.

The results section will begin with the research questions as headings and salient themes listed beneath them that best answer the question at hand. Themes are discussed and participants are quoted to illustrate the themes. The names of the participants have been changed to protect

their identity. A discussion section will follow the themes. The discussion will contextualize the themes with previous research and discuss the findings in relation to the research questions and how these questions are answered. A conclusion section will sum up the findings of the paper.

RQ1: How Is Being a Gay Child Experienced in Rural North Dakota or Minnesota?

Gender nonconformity

Eight of the ten participants felt that they exhibited behavior as a youth that was not typical of their gender. Initially, this behavior included their appearance (e.g., preference for clothes), what they played with (e.g., playing with girl toys), and their mannerism when they interacted with others. As the participants became teenagers the behaviors still centered around how they dressed but now also included their social circle, their mannerisms, and if they were dating.

As students matured, they often became more aware of their gender nonconformity behaviors. Participants became aware of their behavior through self awareness or observations made by others. All of the participants who exhibited behavior that was gender atypical were aware of their behavior before they graduated high school; however, the effect on the participants differed. but the effect it had on the participants differed.

Gender nonconformity leads to change in behavior. Four of the participants understood that they were exhibiting behavior different from their gender and they changed their behavior upon this realization.

Pam's response about her choice in men's clothing is typical of the participants' responses in that their behavior was not normative, whether it be in regards to toys, clothing, or behavior, "Those were just the clothes I liked…it's what I liked to wear and felt comfortable with." As Pam grew she became aware of her behavior and this awareness caused her anxiety, "I

36

always felt like, super uncomfortable about [looking like a boy], like I liked the way I dressed but I was always worried that when I went into a bathroom people would think I was a boy."

Pam's awareness of her difference caused her anxiety. Her awareness caused her to contemplate changing her behavior and while it is uncertain if her awareness caused her to change her external behavior, her anxiety is a change to her perception of self and ease of interacting with others and that only arose because she became aware of her gender nonconformity.

Comments about gender nonconformity also meant something to Mark and Bob because their behavior was equally as non normative with respect to their gender as Pam's behavior but in these two cases it was their voices and mannerisms, not dress that set them apart from their peers. In the case of these two particpants finding out they had what is described as a "girly" tone of voice by Bob and a "valley girl" tone of voice and talk by Mark, confirmed that they were different from their peers.

Bob said about his behavior, tone and talk:

I had no idea what people were talking about [referring to comments made by peers] like with my mannerisms and stuff. I had no idea until I heard my voice on a playback on a…tape recorder. I heard my voice; it was "Wow, I sound like a girl."

Mark used the term "Valley Girl" to describe his own tone of voice:

I remember being in a car with [someone] and he had said something about "not that fag," and I was like "what, what does he mean?" (in a valley girl/effeminate voice). Saying it like that, and then as soon as I said that, something clicked in my head.

The experiences of Bob and Mark demonstrate that comments made by peers about behavior that that is not typical of one's gender can trigger awareness that one is different from

37

their peers. This awareness made them think about what made them different and they each had to decide what to do with this information. Pam, Bob, and Mark were aware of their differences and this caused them to react and change their behavior.

Although gender nonconformity influenced many of the participants, there were four participants who did not report negative effects. Thus, these participants did not consciously change their behavior based on their awareness of nonconformity.

Simon's comment is typical of the four participants' who did not change their behavior upon understanding that a behavior they exhibited was gender nonconforming. Simon played with things he enjoyed and the fact that he was doing something not typical of his gender held no meaning for him.

Simon said:

> I liked dolls and playing house and wearing my mom's heels. It was fun, it was pretend, but my mother tried to get me interested in blocks or Legos but that stuff was boring. It was pieces of wood painted different colors. I wanted to play house, there was drama there.

When asked if this behavior meant anything to him at the time he replied:

> My sisters were Tom Boys and wore dresses so I didn't see what I did as being different because it wasn't different, I mean how could it be? [My sisters] played with everything. It didn't matter if it was a boy toy or a girl toy just as long as it was a toy.

Jordan's comments echo Simon's in that she displayed behavior as a child that is not typical of her gender. Her awareness also echoes Simon's in that this knowledge was not significant to her, "Me and my brothers and their friends set up a [wrestling] tournament every summer. It was me and a bunch of boys…I was the only girl who wrestled." Asked if she

thought her behavior was different from her peers she replied "Uh, I guess I'd say no. I don't think I ever thought about it. I was obviously the only girl there so I knew I was in the minority." She continued:

> I enjoyed wrestling but at the same time I knew it was play with the boys or play by myself but, (Jordan pauses for two seconds) I also didn't want to play anything else. They were doing what I wanted to do, that's the stuff I liked doing.

> Simon and Jordan's comments are typical of all eight participants in that they spoke of behavior that came intuitively but would be considered gender nonconforming. Their experiences differ from some of the particpants in that some of the particpants were aware of their behavior and attempted to change their behavior to match their idea of how their gender should behave.

Gay Slurs: The prevalence of Homophobic Language

All ten of the participants heard anti-gay remarks as a youth in a rural area and all ten participants remember being the recipient of some gay slurs. The remarks were in the form of name calling by peers in school. Participants remember hearing the word "faggot" or other comments that disparaged gay people throughout their childhood. The participants were the receivers of the comments or they overheard the comments as a peer received the anti-gay comments. It is not known how often participants heard anti-gay remarks as not all participants spoke to the frequency of verbal harassment. Those participants who did talk about the frequency of verbal harassment experienced a variety of experiences. Of the five participants who spoke about the frequency of harassment, some, like Simon, Mark, and Andy experienced more harassment while others like Sue and Jordan experienced infrequent verbal harassment.

The participants who said they experienced frequent verbal harassment were men. Simon said "I was always being called a faggot or a gaywad or whatever." Mark said "Fag was just a word that was always thrown around. When you are a little kid, little kids throw that word around all the time and they don't even understand it." Andy said "I was teased a lot." Women were harassed less frequently. Sue said with regards to how often she received verbal harassment directly "Sometimes, but not very often." Jordan said "They were [verbal insults] every once and awhile but it wasn't necessarily something that was constant." Thus, males generally received more verbal harassment than females.

Participants felt that in elementary school, the anti-gay remarks were used as a common insult, in that they were not used in an anti-gay way (i.e., the words were used as putdowns unrelated to one's sexual orientation). Mark's response articulates this point well as he describes the use of the word "fag" during his elementary school years, "Fag was just a word that was always thrown around. Little kids throw it around all the time and they don't even understand it. It doesn't really [mean] towards a gay person, it's just used as a negative word."

Mark's comment illustrates that anti-gay words were used in a general way in elementary school and that the use of these words was prevelant. Mark's comment is an example of children using a word because they know it is bad even though they are not aware of the meaning of the word.

Andy recalls a similar experience that supports Mark's illustration. Andy said, "I heard the word 'fag' a lot but it wasn't used that way and pretty much everyone got called a fag at least once. After puberty that word became more real." When asked what he meant by "more real," he replied, "It made sense. It was 'Oh, fag means gay.' Suddenly the word meant something." He continued by saying, "[Fag] wasn't used as much [in high school], not everyone got called a fag

because now it meant something, not to mention kids knew a lot more words." As the youth got older, the remarks primarily became anti-gay, although usage of anti-gay insults in a common or general way did not completely stop by the time the participants entered high school.

The two comments from Mark and Andy reflect what is typical of all ten particpants in that they all heard anti-gay remarks as elementary school aged youth but felt that during this time period is was not gay specific. Particpants felt that the words took on their commonlly accepted meaning as children entered junior high and high school. This is paticularly illustrated by Andy's words and his comment that the anti-gay words "became more real." Andy said that as he aged, the word "became more real," as in the word became better understood. He observed that the word decreased in usage from elementary school to high school, a fact he attributed to the word being properly understood.

Alex's comments also show that in high school anti-gay words took on their correct meaning but like in elementary school these insults were also used to insult in a general way, "Faggot' was pretty common at my high school. I used that word…everyone used that word." When asked if he knew what that word meant at the time he said, "We knew what that word was but, like, it didn't matter if it was used right. Everyone used it and it was like the worst thing you could be." Alex was asked if he thought that the word was ever used correctly and he said, "Yeah, I mean it had to have been, I mean stuff in the locker room, people were calling each other fag there. I kinda doubt that word [in those instances] wasn't used the right way"[laughs].

Bob confirms Alex's quote in that anti-gay terms were used correctly and that the usage of the words evolved throughout childhood, "[Harassment] evolved into like 'Oh, you like to fuck guys.' It was just later it became very sexual and very dirty…it was definitely that first and

then that association later tagged on." Bob added that anti-gay name-calling changed between elementary school and high school, "[name-calling] evolved to faggot and all that stuff later on."

All participants were the recipients of anti-gay words but felt that during their elementary school years it was not specific to their sexual identity and that it was used as a general insult. Participants felt that the usage of anti-gay terms evolved from a general insult to primarily a specific insult as they aged into junior high and high school.

RQ2: How did media visibility inform their experience of growing up gay in rural North Dakota or Minnesota?

Gay Television Content and its Role in Identity Formation

Participants primarily discussed television as the type of media that informed their experiences. Participants did not interpret gay television characters and news stories as a beacon of hope or in any other positive light. They were incidental at the time to the experience of the participants. The participants viewed gay content on television but it was not a revelation or an event that had a great impact on them.

All respondents remember seeing gay content on television, gay content meaning gay characters as well as storylines about LGBT people or affection between LGBT characters.

Responses to gay television content were neutral or mixed - reflective meaning that the content did not affect the youth or the content caused the youth to think about what they had viewed. All participants had a neutral response to gay content while four participants had both a mixed - reflective and neutral response to gay content.

Neutral response. Jordan is an example of this type of response. She said, "I remember the lesbian kiss on 'L.A. Law' and the hype around it, and then I saw the kiss and even at that young age I was like 'And?' All this hype for nothing? 'What's the big deal?'"

Jordan's response to "L.A. Law" (20th Century Fox Television, 1994) is typical of a neutral response in that when participants viewed television with gay content they did not see it as special. Participants did not see themselve in the characters and viewed the content as inconsequential.

Andy also had neutral responses to gay television content. Andy said, "It stood out because it was different but that was it. As a kid, to me, I saw them as characters. I no more identified with the gay characters than the straight characters."

Andy's response echoes Jordan's response in that when he viewed gay content on television he had no reaction. His response to gay content on television is typical of the participants in that many of them had neutral responses to the content and viewed the content as incidental or unimportant.

Sue also had a neutral response to viewing gay content on television. Sue's response illustrates that poorly written shows caused her and some of the other participants to turn off shows with gay characters. Sue and some of the participants did not have a response to the sexuality of the character; they had a response to the quality of writing of the show. Sue said this about her experience with the television sit-com Ellen:

Ellen was awful. She was a lesbian but she still had to work and put out a show and the show she put out sucked. Before, when she was straight, her show was funny but afterwards it became about her lifestyle. I didn't care, I was a kid, I wanted to be entertained. I liked her quirky, weird coffee shop type characters she had before she came out. After she came out they left and it became more about her and gay this and gay that. It took over the show.

When asked if "Ellen" meant anything to her as a lesbian, she said, "It meant nothing. Not even on my radar. That stuff [sexuality] wasn't part of my life."

Sue disliked "Ellen" (Black-Marlens Company, Touchstone Television, 1998) because she felt the writing got worse after the main character came out as a lesbian. Sue was okay with watching a show featuring a lesbian lead character but she was unhappy because she felt the show was no longer entertaining. Sue's response is neutral because it did not cause her to question her own sexuality. Sue was okay with a lesbian character but she disliked the new storylines because of her belief that the writing got worse after the character became a lesbian.

Mixed - reflective and neutral responses. Some of the respondents had mixed – reflective and neutral reactions to gay content on television. Zack and Mark both had mixed - reflective and neutral responses. Their mixed - reflective responses caused them to examine or think about their sexuality. Mixed - reflective responses differ from neutral responses in that mixed - reflective responses caused participants to think about what they had viewed.

Zack had a mixed - reflective and neutral response to gay content on television. A neutral response that Zack had to gay content was towards the television show "Ellen," "I didn't watch ["Ellen"] much because I didn't find the show entertaining. Where I found "Will and Grace" entertaining, I was watching that on a regular basis." Zack went onto to talk about a mixed - reflective reponse to gay content on television by saying this about about "Will and Grace,"

> I saw more of Jack as gay and representative…I didn't see myself in Jack. That was one thing that kept me from coming out and becoming okay with my sexuality… because that's what I thought gay was and that's not what I wanted to be or saw myself as.

> Zack had a mixed – reflective and neutral reponse to gay content on television. His

neutral response is that he did not watch a paticular television show with a gay character because

44

he did not find it entertaining while he did watch another show with a gay character because he did find it entertaining. He had a mixed - reflective reaction to "Will and Grace" (Komut Entertainment et al., 2006) because of how an actor portrayed a gay character. He was not able to accept that label himself because he did not see himself in that character. The character of "Jack" caused him to think about his sexuality and if he should identify as gay. The thoughts and feelings that "Jack" caused indicate a mixed - reflective reponse to gay content on television.

Mark also had mixed – reflective and neutral response to viewing gay content on television. Since neutral responses have been covered in this section, Mark's neutral response is not included.

Mark recalls his memories of watching the television comedy "Rosanne" (Wind Dancer Productions, Carsey-Werner Company, Paramount Television, 1997) and its gay characters, "[It] made me more curious. I don't think it made me more or less accepting. It made me want to see more of that, that's one reason I loved that show, it made me want to see more."

Mark's response to "Roseanne" (Wind Dancer Productions, Carsey-Werner Company, Paramount Television, 1997) is a mixed - reflective response because the characters made him think about what he was seeing and he decided that what he was seeing was interesting enough to justify further viewing.

All participants had a neutral response to the gay content on television and four of these participants had a mixed-reflexive reaction. Jordan, Andy, Zach, and Mark's response is typical of the respondents in that gay content caused a neutral response. Jordan, Andy, Zach, and Mark viewed gay content as neutral meaning that the content did not cause the participants to think about their own sexuality. Zack, Mark, and two other participants also had mixed feelings about some of the gay content they viewed on television. Their responses are typical of the four

participants who remembered that gay content on television caused them to think about their own sexuality.

RQ3: How Did Technology Inform Their Experience of Growing Up Gay in Rural North Dakota or Minnesota?

Lack of internet use

While the internet is available in rural areas, seven participants did not use the internet to access gay related information during their youth. The reasons participants did not use the internet for this purpose are varied. The reasons why the internet was not utilized to look up gay related information was because particpants were not interested in seeking out gay related information or were afraid their web searches would be discovered.

Did not identify. Sue, Andy, and Jordan did not use the internet to access gay related content because they did not identify as gay until after high school. These respondents reported being aware of same sex feelings during their youth but they chose not to identify as gay until after they left high school. Sue and Andy's comments about why they did not use the internet to access gay content during their youth illustrates this point.

Sue said, "[In high school] I was busy with church and other stuff….I didn't like boys but I didn't think I was a lesbian, I just wasn't interested yet." Sue's comment illustrates that because she did not acknowledge her same sex attractions she did not feel a need to consume information relating to gay culture. Andy echoed a similar comment about not identifying with being gay. Andy said, "I wasn't gay back then so I didn't have a reason to look up gay information. I mostly used the internet for video games and getting [cheat] codes so I could beat up on my friends." Again, both participants experienced same sex feelings during this time but they were not comfortable with acknowledging those feelings.

46

Sue and Andy's comments reflect their use of the internet. They did not use the internet to seek out gay content because they did not identify as gay. Sue and Andy felt that they did not look up gay information because it was not relevant to their life. Sue and Andy did use the internet but only for topics they thought were interesting.

Uninterested. Simon said he identified as a gay as a teenager but did not feel the need to look for information about his sexuality because, "There wasn't anything that was going to change my sexuality. I was gay, end of story. No amount of information was going to change anything."  When asked if he used the internet to connect with gay people he said, "You know, again, same thing, talking about it wasn't going to make me more accepting of it or change it. I was gay, that was it. Reading about or talking about just seemed pointless." His comment reflects his reason for not using the internet to seek out gay related information.  Simon did not use the internet to seek out gay related information because he did not feel that gay content from the internet was relevant to his life.

Fear of discovery. Alex did not seek out information because he was afraid of his sexuality being discovered. Alex illustrated this point when he said, "The only internet was at school and it was monitored….the web browser kept track of searches and I couldn't access the internet unless I entered my school i.d. so that stopped me from exploring all these questions I had."

Pam also did not use the internet in high school for the same reason. She said, "I was too scared to even look for [gay content], even though I had my own laptop and it would have been fine." Alex and Pam's quotes illustrate that fear of being discovered discouraged them from looking at gay content on the internet.

47

The particpants' lack of internet use with regards to seeking out gay related information is varied. Some of the participants did not access gay content because they did not see themselves as gay or lesbian. One participant did not access the internet for gay content because he did not feel a need to find information regarding his sexuality while other participants did not feel they could look up information regarding gay sexuality for fear of their searches being discovered.

DISCUSSION

The research looked at how gay and lesbian adults experienced their youth in rural North Dakota and Minnesota and how they experienced their youth in conjunction with the internet and popular culture. The study found four themes: "Gender nonconformity," "Gay slurs: The prevalence of homophobic language," "Gay television content and its role in identity formation," and "Lack of internet use." Two themes, "Gay slurs: The prevalence of homophobic language" and "Lack of internet use," contributes to existing literature by shedding new light into how gay slurs are experienced as a youth in a rural setting and how the internet is experienced in a rural area. The other two themes, "Gay television content and its role in identity formation" and "Gender nonconformity," support the pre-existing literature on the topics of identity formation and gay television content, and gender behavior. How these themes support pre-existing literature will be discussed later in this section.

All participants of the study recalled hearing anti-gay remarks throughout their youth. Participants remembered hearing the word "fag" used prevalently to insult children while in school but have few if any recollections of hearing these words outside of school or spoken by adults. Participants' answers about the pervasiveness of the word "fag" or "faggot" suggests that the word is deeply embedded in culture. Whether or not this culture is the culture that exists outside of high school or the culture that exists within school is unknown but comments suggests that youth used these words without always understanding their meaning. If these gay slurs are used often and incorrectly then this suggests that a culture of homophobia exists, the usage of gay slurs is somewhat exclusive to the school setting, and that these slurs are being passed down child to child and not adult to child.

The use of gay slurs seems to have changed with age. Participants indicated that the use of gay slurs changed as they got older. Participants said the words became more specific to gay people and less general. This indicates a possible connection between the onset of puberty and sexual desire that accompanies puberty and the meaning of the word "fag." This makes sense as young children often mimic what older people say without understanding the meaning or context of the words. This could be why participants felt that the use of slurs was general in nature when they were young children. As children became aware of sexual attraction it is likely that they changed the usage of the word to reflect their understanding of the word. This would explain why particpants felt gay slurs were often used less frequently in junior high and high school.

The changing of gay slurs from a general insult in elementary school to gay specific in junior high or high school, coupled with most particpants not hearing these words outside of school suggests that the act of using gay slurs is passed down from older youth to younger youth. Two particpants, Mark and Bob, recall hearing anti-gay words outside of school. Mark heard it at sporting events "If you sucked at sports you were gay," the implication being that he heard anti-gay remarks at these events and Bob said he received anti-gay harrassment from adults in the community, "[They] rolled down [their] windows [and said] 'Faggot!" The other eight particpants either did not speak directly to hearing anti-gay words outside of school or they directly said it did not occur.

It is likely that these words are learned from older siblings or other youth outside of school. It is unlikely that the participants learned these words from adults. Instances do exist in the memories of some particpants where adults openly dissapproved of gay and lesbians but they are few and the language used was less crude than the slurs the particpants remember hearing spoken by their peers.

50

Future studies may want to look at how often youth hear gay slurs in the home and if they come from older siblings or elsewhere in the family. Locating when a youth first learns how to use a gay slur is important because stopping that behavior before it becomes a habit will spare other youth the negative emotions that anti-gay harassment can generate.

It is unknown if the rural aspect of the participants' lives was a factor in how they experienced gay slurs. The number of participants who heard gay slurs is consistent with studies of urban youth but the idea that the use and meaning of gay slurs changes over time is new. It is unknown if the rural aspect of the participants' lives contributed to the finding on the changing nature of gay slurs (Blackburn & McCready, 2009; GLSEN, 2011; Rivers & Carragher, 2003).

Youth who hear or are the recipients of anti-gay harassment often display non-normative gender behavior (GLSEN, 2011). Gender nonconformity, also known as "atypical gender behavior," should not be confused with "gender identity disorder." Gender identity disorder is common in children and depending on the source, it can mean anything as mild as a child playing with toys of the opposite gender to having a feeling of being in the body of the wrong sex (Gottschalk, 2003). Studies have shown that boys with a high degree of gender nonconformity will be gay when they become adults (Baily, Gygax, Linsenmeier, & Rieger, 2008; Green, 1987) so it is not surprising that some participants felt they exhibited a high degree of gender nonconformity. Gender nonconformity is harmless to mild while gender identity disorder is a diagnosable illness that involves the preoccupation of a child to be the opposite gender (Gottschalk, 2003). This study only found that the participants exhibited behavior that was mild and likely to be called gender nonconformity not gender identity disorder.

The theme of gender nonconformity supports preexisting literature and does not appear to be dependent on the rural aspect of the study. Gay and lesbians, whether they live in a rural or

urban environment, seem prone to displaying behavior that is contrary to normative gender roles. One could have speculated that based on the more conservative traditions of the rural area (as established in the literature review), gay youth might have been more likely to hide their gender nonconformity behavior but based on the remarks of the participants, this did not happen.

This information is relevant to the study because the participants who displayed a high amount of gender nonconformity did not use the internet for research. This seems contrary to what one would expect since three of the participants realized in their youth that they were either gay or different from their peers and one participant was aware enough of her gender nonconformity that she thought about it as a youth.

Most of the participants in this study did not use the internet to seek out gay related content. Of the seven that did not use the internet, three did not use it because they did not identify as gay or lesbian. One did not feel a need to augment his sexuality with additional information. One did not have access to the internet, and two did not use the internet because they were afraid of being caught looking up gay related information.

It is unknown if the rural location of where the participants lived affected this theme. The reasons why participants declined to use the internet for gay related research are diverse. It is likely that urban youth have the same diverse reasons for declining to use the internet. A likely explanation as to why so few used the internet to access gay related information is their age. Five participants were ages 26-30 years old so it is likely that their first encounter with the internet was at school or other public setting. If more of the participants had been younger or with a computer of their own, this result may have been different.

This result sheds new light on the internet habits of gay youth by suggesting that gay youth with access to the internet do not always use the internet to seek out gay content. Most

research up to this point has looked at the type of gay related information the youth were seeking, not if they were seeking the information. Further studies may want to look at what, if anything is preventing youth from seeking out gay related information. The participants in this study gave a variety of reasons for not seeking out information.

The last theme discussed is the television viewing habits of the participants. Qualitative studies have shown that gay youth value gay characters and tend to remember gay characters (McKee, 2000). This study showed that participants did remember gay characters from television but unlike the McKee study, the participants did not feel a connection to the characters (2000). It is not surprising that participants remembered gay characters since 99% of children live in a household with at least one television and of that number, 42% "almost always" have on the television (Gitlin, 2001). The prevalence of televisions and the fact that the television is "almost always" on means that there is a higher chance that a television show with gay content will be viewed (Gitlin, 2001).

Some participants had a mixed - reflective response to gay characters in that the viewing of these characters caused them to react in some way. One possible explanation for the responses is that those with a mixed - reflective response to gay characters were aware on some level of their sexuality as opposed to those who had neutral responses to gay characters. It is also possible that the quality of writing or portrayal of a gay character influenced how a participant reacted. Further research could study the difference in responses to understand why a difference exists.

Part of the reason as to why some participants may have had mixed - reflective responses to gay characters but did not identify with them is that the characters are not necessarily relatable beyond the commonality of their sexuality. Evans (2006) said that while there is a lot of positive

gay content of television, "Current images could still be improved upon. [Some shows] are still quite stereotypical, especially when characters are very effeminate, engaging in negative behavior (i.e. promiscuous sex and drug use) or are simply used as comic relief" (pg. 11).

It is likely that the youth who saw these characters did not identify with them and that contributed to their mixed - reflective response. Participants may have had a positive response to the characters if they had seen portrayals of gay and lesbians that were positive or relied less on stereotypes. This is supported by a quote from Zack that was used earlier in the paper, "I saw more of Jack as gay and representative…I didn't see myself in Jack. That was one thing that kept me from coming out and becoming okay with my sexuality… because that's what I thought gay was and that's not what I wanted to be or saw myself as."

The mixed feelings that participants had support the data of Evans (2006) who interviewed gay youth about their television viewing habits. The participants in Evans' study also had mixed responses to gay content. Their responses centered on being happy that there were gay television characters but they were unhappy with what they felt were negative behaviors of the characters such as drug use and stereotypical behaviors (Evans, 2006).

It is surprising that no participants identified with the gay television characters and that some had a mixed response to the gay content. One participant knew of his same-sex feelings but did not identify as gay and when he viewed a gay television character, he viewed that character critically, the character being the cause of thoughts about himself and his sexuality. This supports Evans' (2006) work. While this participant did not identify as gay at the time he did acknowledge his same sex feelings and the fact that he claims not to have identified with a gay character possibly warrants a future study to understand his viewpoint. It is likely that he did not identify with the gay character because he could not relate to or see himself in the character.

Future studies may want to look at why participants who did not identify as gay had mixed responses to gay television characters. This may enable the writing or programming of shows that allow for better identification with the characters. Until further studies are conducted it cannot be said why participants who did not identify as gay had a mixed - reflective response to gay television content.

As to why some of the participants had a neutral response to gay characters, again, this is unknown. One possible reason for the neutral responses to the gay content is that it may have become commonplace to see gay characters on television and is thus not as special as it once was and possibly does not generate conversations within the home about gay people, gay rights, or related issues. Another possibility is that in order for gay characters to be meaningful or valued to a gay person, one has to be aware of their potential same sex attraction or they have to identify as gay. If one does not identify as gay then gay characters are just characters, their sexuality being as important as any other trait.

The rural aspect of the participants' lives did not affect this theme. The feelings the participants felt towards gay content does not appear to be a product of their rural environment. The recollected experiences of the participants are similar to those found by Evans (2006) whose participants came from an urban area. There is nothing to suggest that living in a rural environment affected how the participants experienced gay content on television.

## Limitations

Memories of events may differ from how the events were actually experienced so how an event is recalled may be different from how it was initially experienced. The researcher accepts that data is only as good as the memory of the person recalling the events and must accept that the recalled experiences are as close to if not exactly how an event occurred.

CONCLUSION

This study looked at how gay adults experienced their youth in rural North Dakota and Minnesota. The purpose of the study was to understand how gay youth experienced their rural environment and if television and the internet influenced their experiences.

The answer is that that gay youth in these rural environments had a typical youth. They exhibited gender nonconformity but studies have shown that is common in children who turn out to be gay later in life so in a study of gay people this is not a surprising finding. Television and internet appeared to have little impact on how they experienced their environment since most did not use the internet to access gay related content and most did not watch television for gay content or feel an impact from gay television characters. Even though the internet was not important to the participants, the finding that some gay youth did not use the internet to seek out gay content adds to the literature on gay youth and internet usage.

How the participants experienced anti-gay harassment differs from urban youth and some studies on rural youth and appears to shed new light on the topic. Participants remember hearing anti-gay harassment and according to other studies, hearing or witnessing anti-gay harassment is common but results show that participants felt that the meaning of the anti-gay words changed over time. How the participants experienced the changing definition of the anti-gay words is a finding that contributes to the literature on LGBT studies.

The rural aspect of this study did not produce themes specific to living in a rural location. The point of this study was to find out how gay youth experienced their rural environment and while the study has produced four themes, they do not specifically pertain to the rural aspect of the youth. The findings of this study suggest that for the participants of this study living in a rural area was not a contributing factor to how they experienced their sexuality.

This study sought to understand how gay youth in North Dakota and Minnesota experienced their rural environment so that a greater understanding of gay youth could be obtained with the hope that information could assist gay youth in need since studies show gay youth in rural environment are a greater risk for engaging in negative behavior. The results from this study show that the experiences of gay youth in rural North Dakota and Minnesota are similar to urban youth and that living in a rural area was not a contributing factor in how the participants experienced their sexuality.

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