

“Labels are for clothing” : Negotiating LGBT identities within social question-answering sites

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Abstract

This study examined 300 question-“Best Answer” pairs from the LGBT thread of Yahoo! Answers to determine what information individuals find meaningful, relevant, or credible in interpreting an LGBT identity. Using a grounded approach, five main themes were identified that characterized information shared within the thread: a) defining an LGBT identity, b) romance, sex, and relationships, c) marginalizing others, d) coming out, and e) functioning as a community. Askers often solicited information regarding how to define and establish an LGBT identity, as well as how to engage in a sexual or romantic relationship. Answerers provided coming out metanarratives and framed LGBT individuals as being part of a community, providing askers with a discursive space to construct an LGBT identity for themselves. Askers and answerers also engaged in marginalization, within both heteronormative and essentialist contexts, which might affect how individuals continue or discontinue pursuing information related to an LGBT identity.

Keywords: social question-answering; LGBT; identity; grounded theory; stigma

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1 Introduction

Individuals exploring information related to a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT)¹ identity often face limited access to social services, support groups, and other community-based resources. They also may experience stigma related to identifying with elements of an LGBT identity (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). For these reasons, many individuals utilize the Internet to locate community, share resources, and “test” an LGBT identity, with opportunities for anonymity or limited visibility (Pullen, 2010).

The LGBT thread within Yahoo! Answers represents one such resource. A popular social question-answering (SQA) site, Yahoo! Answers has 200+ million users and over one billion questions asked, with approximately 90,000 new questions daily on a variety of topics (Harper, Moy, & Konstan, 2009). This large user base enables potential for diverse content and types of users sharing within the LGBT thread. Participants can ask and answer questions, although an asker cannot answer their question and answerers are limited to one answer per post. Askers also have the option to assign one “Best Answer” rating to each question they ask.

This study will examine how participants interpret an LGBT identity within a specific online community (Yahoo! Answers) based on questions asked and answers that askers find to be meaningful, relevant, or credible, as indicated by a “Best Answer” rating. This research is situated within library and information science (LIS), building upon extant studies of LGBT individuals and information practices within the SQA environment as discussed in the following literature review.

2 Literature Review

2.1 SQA sites

Studies within SQA fall into two categories: a) participant-based, which focus on motivations for use and satisfaction with the content, and b) content-based, which focus on content quality (Shah, Oh & Oh, 2009). Both types of studies have identified socio-emotional elements as being valued by SQA users. For example, within Yahoo! Answers, answerers identify elements such as altruism and empathy as

¹ Although identification-based practices for alternative sexualities and genders often include additional categories (e.g., intersex) and even arguably transcend labels (Gamson, 1995), for purposes of clarity and consistency, within this paper the term “LGBT” will be used.

motivations for participation (Oh, 2012), while askers value content that provides affective responses (Kim et al., 2007, 2008, 2009). Further, unlike “Ask a Librarian” sites in which users seek objective information or instruction (see Radford & Connaway, 2013) the type of content exchanged within SQA sites tends to be subjective. Instead, the majority of users solicit opinions, advice, and social engagement, rather than “informational” content providing a fact-based or verifiable answer (Kim et al., 2008; Choi et al., 2012).

Despite these findings, a large proportion of SQA literature limits its scope to examining this latter type of content since it lends itself to verification. Quantitative approaches examine how “objective,” textual features of content can be used to predict the likelihood of a “Best Answer” rating (e.g., Liu et al., 2011), while qualitative approaches examine how often Yahoo! Answers users provide answers judged satisfactory by experts (e.g., Worrall, et al., 2011). While these studies make significant contributions to research within SQA, particularly within the health domain, this overemphasis on informational content neglects the majority of the content within Yahoo! Answers, where information exchanged may not have a “right” or “wrong” answer. The negotiation of an LGBT identity, for example, addresses information practices and behaviors that do not conform to this fact-based model, as further discussed in the next section.

2.2 LGBT identity development

The stigmatized status of LGBT individuals displaces this group from mainstream discourses, rendering them subject to symbolic violence. This symbolic violence is manifested by the legitimacy and authority conveyed in taken for granted, fact-based information, such as the male/female taxonomy (Bourdieu, 1977). Due, perhaps to the pervasiveness of such symbolic violence, most research within SQA has not focused on groups that experience a stigmatized or marginalized social status unless this status is related to informational content (e.g., Choi et al., 2013)².

Within the field of new media studies, web-based media platforms are recognized as critical resources for LGBT identity development (Pullen, 2010). Further, new media scholars emphasize a false dichotomy between public and virtual spaces, arguing for the “recursive nature” of mediated experiences, which inform culture and vice versa, blurring the boundaries between online and offline (Beer, 2008, p. 51). Experiences of LGBT individuals within one space, therefore, influence their behaviors in the other (Hillier & Harrison, 2007).

In an offline (face-to-face) context, individuals experience significant barriers to establishing an LGBT identity, including heteronormativity in the home (Waldner & Magrader, 1999) or at school (Pacoe, 2011), and fear of negative consequences upon disclosure (Hamer, 2003). The Internet provides a means to establish communities where LGBT individuals can feel accepted, particularly when they feel marginalized in offline spaces (Bond, Hefner & Drogos, 2008). Reported motivations for Internet use closely parallel Goffman’s notion of stigma (1963/2009) and Chatman’s “small world” paradigm and theory of information poverty (1991, 1996, 2001), in that Internet use maintains anonymity, provides a connection to LGBT peers, and facilitates exposure to a new set of norms that allow establishment and reinforcement of cognition about the LGBT world (Hamer, 2003, Pullen & Cooper, 2010).

Within online contexts, individuals engage in identity testing with members of the specific communities who have “been there” and therefore possess the proper expertise to reframe, normalize, and approve of coming out strategies issued by newcomers (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Cooper, 2010). They also gain “lived experience,” by perceiving themselves in media texts (Bond, Hefner & Drogos, 2008), such as a YouTube romance between two gay males (Lazzara in Pullen & Cooper, 2010), or within the abundant “grey literature,” consisting of lesbian fan fiction and zines that can be found online (Rothbauer, 2004, p. 100). Additionally, individuals engage in autobiographical work, creating LGBT identities by sharing coming out stories (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Craig & McInroy, 2014) and practicing strategies of self-presentation and disclosure, including managing multiple identities within one social media platform, such as Facebook (Cooper & Dzara in Pullen & Cooper, 2010).

In some instances, these activities establish a shared set of sensibilities between members, who simultaneously create and adopt metanarratives (i.e., an overarching narrative that may be applied to individual narratives) of a “normal” LGBT experience (e.g., that “coming out” proceeds in a series of pre-identified steps), which often assist them in tasks such as realizing and disclosing an LGBT identity. In the

² An exception to this observation is the work of Bowler et al. (2012), which examines the use of Yahoo! Answers by teenagers with eating disorders. The authors note that this platform represents an information ecology for teenagers that transcends exchange of fact-based content to embody a larger social context around the stigma of eating disorders and youth, which can begin to be described and uncovered by how individuals ask questions formulate answers.

same vein, these narratives also reinforce the commodification and fetishization of certain elements of an LGBT identity over others. Such homogenization of the LGBT experience can render certain LGBT individuals whose own experiences do not reflect these narratives (e.g., those who identify as asexual, lesbian, non-white or residing in a rural area) as “the other,” essentially marginalizing the marginalized (Foucault, 1978; Gamson, 1995; Pullen, 2010). Internet studies, therefore, highlight a tension between the creation of a public LGBT identity within this “imagined community” (Sender, 2004, p. 5) and the inevitable differences experienced within the community, related to individual agency and offline contexts. This latter set of observations was prominent in the analysis of the dataset used for this study. The following section provides more information on this analysis and collection of data.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data collection

The researcher sourced data from a corpus of 850 question-answer pairs from the LGBT thread of Yahoo! Answers between February 23 and March 11, 2014. This period represented a typical twelve days, in which there were no extraordinary events concerning LGBT individuals. Additionally, sufficient data was obtained for this exploratory study within this time frame.

Data collection was limited to question-answer pairs in which the asker rated the answer as “Best Answer,” since these pairs represent information that provided askers with some satisfaction. The researcher used the Yahoo! Developer Console (YDC)³ to collect data, which allowed the researcher to query desired information directly. Using stratified sampling, each day the researcher visited the YDC at random times to collect the 50 most recent “Best Answer” question-answer pairs⁴.

Data was cleaned to remove duplicate question-answer pairs and duplicate (verbatim or slightly re-worded) answers. Duplicate questions with different answers were treated by the researcher as separate units for analysis and coded as *Question re-post* (10%, n=20). This cleaning narrowed the corpus to 756 unique question-answer pairs. Eliminated items were evenly distributed by date, suggesting that individuals using the LGBT thread of Yahoo! Answers asked and assigned “Best Answers” slightly more than 50 times per day during the data collection period. From these 756 question-answer pairs, 300 pairs (300 questions, 300 answers) were randomly selected to constitute the final data corpus.

3.2 Content analysis

The data was imported into the NVivo 10 qualitative research environment, allowing content to be grouped and categorized to provide supporting evidence for the themes as they emerged during analysis. The unit of analysis consisted of a question or an answer posting, an approach taken in other analyses of SQA content (see Hasler, Ruthven, & Buchanan, 2014).

Analysis followed a grounded approach, in which the researcher worked inductively to identify concepts, categories, and thematic concepts that described the questions and answers (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As the analysis progressed, the researcher noted patterns across the data to formulate a set of preliminary codes using the constant comparison method (Charmaz, 2006). Comparison enabled the researcher to refine concepts, categorize these concepts under high-level thematic categories, and identify representative or illustrative exemplars for each category/code from the data, facilitated by NVivo. In addition, NVivo provided assistance with management of revising, combining, and grouping codes, keeping this process consistent throughout coding. Initially, the researcher coded questions and answers separately; however, as coding progressed the researcher noticed overlap between the majority of codes among them and therefore the decision was made to apply the same coding scheme to both.

After coding approximately 40% of the data, the researcher began to experience saturation within the coding scheme and employed a trained coder to code 20% of the data to establish inter-coder reliability (ICR). Any themes or sub-themes that resulted in a kappa value of lower than 0.7 were discussed with the coder, revised by the researcher, and re-coded until the researcher reached 0.7 or

³ Unfortunately since June 3, 2014, the Yahoo! Answers API has been discontinued until further notice, however the original site used to source the data can be found at: <http://developer.yahoo.com/yql/console/>

⁴ Query syntax: `select * from answers.getbycategory(50) where category_id=396546301 and type="resolved"`

higher for each code within the scheme. A final agreement of 0.74 was reached, following discussion between the researcher and coder to resolve differences.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Demographics

Of the 300 questions asked and 300 “Best Answers” given, there were 131 unique askers and 225 unique answerers. The maximum frequency of “Best Answer” contributions by the same user was 7, with a minimum frequency of 1, and mean of 2.07. For askers, the maximum frequency of questions asked by the same user was 14, with a minimum frequency of 1, and mean frequency of 4.1 questions.

This descriptive data indicates that individuals are posting to the LGBT thread view the site as a community, where interactions via the practice of questioning and answering are promulgated over time, rather than once and never again. Therefore, each interaction builds on the next, providing individuals with an information-based narrative. Since individuals tended to ask more than one question within the data collection period⁵, coding was separated by unique asker to determine the thematic consistency between questions asked by one individual and “Best Answers” provided by another individual.

Of the 300 questions and 300 “Best Answers,” individuals disclosed personal information 37%⁶ of the time (n=220). Within posts, askers were more likely to disclose personal information (85%, n=185) than answerers (17%, n=35). Of those who gave personal information, most disclosed sexual orientation (39%, n=84), age (29%, n=62), and gender orientation (19%, n=40). Within sexual orientation, 12% identified as lesbian (n=26), 10% as bisexual (n=22), 9% as gay (n=18), and 7% as straight (n=15). A smaller proportion of individuals identified as transgender (6%, n=13), either as male to female (3%, n=7), female to male (3%, n=5), or transgendered, unspecified (1%, n=1).

These results must be interpreted with caution, however, given the small percentage of those who disclosed an LGBT identity. Further, coding for disclosure of personal information was only completed for those who explicitly stated it (e.g., “I am a lesbian”) to prevent misidentification. Therefore, individuals who could identify as having an LGBT identity might have posted within the LGBT thread but did not choose to reveal this information. This choice could be due to the stigma associated with claiming an LGBT label (Hillier & Harrison, 2007) or rejection of identity politics, and therefore labels, altogether (Gamson, 1995).

4.2 Analysis

From the data analyzed, five themes emerged that were found in both the answerers’ and askers’ data^{7 8} (see Table 1). Each theme is discussed below, with illustrative comments.

4.2.1 Defining an LGBT identity theme

Questions and corresponding “Best Answers” coded within this theme and sub-themes dealt with how individuals chose to define a sex-based and/or gender-based identity. Essentialism remains a core strategy for LGBT individuals, allowing individuals to define themselves or others based on a stabilized

⁵ Although the data suggests that askers make more frequent contributions than answerers, this observation should be read with caution given that only the “Best Answers” were extracted. Answerers could have been contributing more, but may not have had their answer chosen as a “Best Answer.” For example, in several instances within the data, both askers and answerers referred to other Yahoo! Answers members by their user names, suggesting that these users also contributed answers that were not selected as a “Best Answer” (e.g., “[...] [NAME], you crack me up! I can’t stop laughing! But seriously, folks... ROFL”). Refer to footnote 10 for more information regarding quoting the posts of askers and answerers.

⁶ All percentages were rounded up to the nearest whole number. For this reason some total values may exceed 100%.

⁷ Six other themes were also identified but each comprises less than 5% of the total codes applied. These themes are: a) religion, b) medical, c) sex education and health, d) fear, e) subcultures and f) political activism.

⁸ Sub-themes identified within each theme consist of 75% or more of the total frequency of codes within each theme.

identity (Gamson, 1995). This strategy adopts the notion that biological differences exist between LGBT individuals and their straight, cisgender (i.e., an individual's experiences regarding their gender correspond with their sex assigned at birth) counterparts. On a cultural level, essentialism functions as a means to establish political influence as a minority group. On the other hand, social constructionism and queer theory reflect the notion that LGBT identities are socially constructed and critically questions societal assumptions of heteronormativity (e.g., the notion of heterosexuality as a normative orientation) (Foucault, 1978; Gamson, 1995).

The majority of askers adopted an essentialist conception regarding their definition of an LGBT identity⁹. As illustrated in the examples below, askers (AS) 1 through 4 perceived an LGBT orientation as fixed, innate, and summarized by a series of behaviors including a) attraction experienced (AS1), b) behaviors exhibited (AS1, AS2, AS3), and c) physical attributes (AS4).

“am im gay or not my concerns? Im confused i dnt walk or talk gay but i like like boys a lot [...]”
(AS1)¹⁰

⁹ Although this study followed a grounded approach, most of the findings could be applied to past work within LGBT studies. These connections are made whenever possible.

¹⁰ Quotes are verbatim and have not been corrected for grammar or spelling errors. All names have been redacted and to prevent identification, quotes have been shortened in areas indicated by [...].

Theme Sub-Themes	<i>Asker</i>		<i>Answerer</i>	
	<i>Rank</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>N</i>
Defining an LGBT identity	1	108	3	81
Relating sexual orientation to attraction experienced				
Defining what is normal				
Relating LGBT identity to specific behaviors exhibited				
Relating desired gender to physical attributes				
Relationship between sex act and label				
Fluid sexual and gender preferences				
Born this way				
Defining a term				
Romance, sex, and relationships	2	78	5	51
Sex				
Romantic relationship				
Romantic interest in someone and unsure of their sexual orientation				
Importance of physical attraction				
Offering advice based on personal experience				
Offering advice based on opinion				
How to meet people				
Marginalizing others	3	69	4	56
Homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia				
Based on gender roles				
Heteronormativity				
Based on age				
Coming out	4	67	1	99
Strategies for disclosure				
Family as barrier for disclosure				
Hiding identity from others				
Normalizing LGBT identity				
It gets better				
Certainty in orientation				
Functioning as community	5	47	2	87
Soliciting opinions from a certain group				
Having no one to talk to				
Offering narrative based on personal experience				
Providing outside resources				
Humor				
Challenging asker				
Offering supportive message				

Table 1, Themes and sub-themes from “Best Answer” pairs, ranked by frequency of occurrence

Askers also sought to establish what was considered “normal” based on a specific LGBT label (AS2). This strategy represents what Goffman (1963/2009) refers to as a “virtual social identity” (p. 2),

which consists of defining the relationships between the attributes that belong to a specific identity-based category.

“What do the sexual urges feel like for a gay male? I am just wondering so that I know completely about the normal signs that I am/will experience” (AS2)

One of the largest indicators of establishing a “normal” LGBT¹¹ identity was having a sexual experience with a member of the same sex (AS3). Those who identified as LGBT and had not experienced sex tended to pathologize themselves and perceive something as being “wrong” (see Goffman, 1963/2009).

“[...] I am sexually attracted to men, but it seems like I just glaze over their bodies and nothing more. It seems so finite this attraction. I may look for a few seconds, but that's all. I was just wondering when things will get more serious.” (AS3)

In the same vein, those who had questions regarding a transgender identity often indicated the importance of possessing a physical indicator of their gender identity (AS4).

“Can I get my boobs removed completely? [...] they feel so unnatural, Im not supposed to have them. I'm not supposed to be like this. I wasnt supposed to be a girl.” (AS4)

Answerers (designated as AN) also adopted an essentialist perspective in confirming or rejecting an asker's self-perceived identity based on which practices they considered normal within the realm of a specific identity (AN5). In this fashion, answerers effectively established specific contexts in which relationships between various attributes and identity are considered permissible (relationships not considered permissible are discussed by the researcher in *Marginalizing others theme*).

“Your only gay if you want to have sex and do things with the same sex I also sometimes think other guys are good looking its al right nothing is wrong” (AN 5)

There was also a contingent of answerers that argued for a more fluid definition of identity (AN6). This group of answerers rejected the notion that identity could be or should be established based on labels and their associated normative behaviors (AN6).

“[...] Labels are for clothing. Don't worry about it.” (AN 6)

4.2.2 Romance, sex, and relationships theme

As Hillier and Harrison (2007) argue, LGBT individuals often do not have the same access to resources as their heterosexual peers regarding information related to sexual and romantic relationships specific to LGBT individuals. For this reason, they might seek out information from other resources. Content coded within this theme dealt with an expressed interest by askers and answerers in establishing either a sexual or romantic relationship with another LGBT individual.

In relation to sex, askers often inquired about the relative roles they could adopt when performing a sexual practice (AS7) or what a sexual encounter might be like (AS8).

“What is the difference between power and service in gay role? [...]” (AS7)

“ladies personal question what does a strap on really feel like? [...]” (AS8)

Some questions also coded in this sub-theme did not discuss sex specific to an LGBT identity. Instead, it appeared that the individuals who posted them perceived their sex-based question to be marginalized and therefore relevant within the LGBT thread. This small number of questions dealt with taboo themes such as pedophilia, zoophilia, and incest. The existence of subcultural content within the LGBT thread suggests a potential risk of exposure to inappropriate or undesirable content (Hamer, 2003; Staksrud & Livingstone, 2013), which could deter LGBT individuals from utilizing Yahoo! Answers as an online resource.

Regarding romance and relationships, it did not appear that askers and answerers attempted to establish romantic or sexual relationships among themselves. Instead, askers solicited romantic and relationship-based advice regarding current romantic relationships or how to meet people. Within the former sub-theme, askers sometimes re-posted their question in an attempt to solicit as many answers as possible.

¹¹ This observation did not always apply for transgender individuals, since some identify as heterosexual.

Askers who were not in a romantic relationship often specified barriers to pursuing one, namely being unsure of the sexual or gender orientation of their romantic interests. In these instances, answerers often advised the askers to proceed with caution, or in one answerer's words, to "pursue [the relationship] discreetly." This advice suggests the answerer's perception of stigma and further, fear of negative consequences for themselves and the asker, regarding disclosure of an LGBT identity in a romantic context to someone who might not be receptive to being associated with this marginalized status.

Answerers addressed questions relating to romance, sex, and relationships based on opinion and experience, often utilizing the fact that Yahoo! Answers does not have a character limit for answers, to explicate an anecdote or point. Answerers also often adopted the strategy of defining what is normal from the *Defining an LGBT identity theme* or normalizing an LGBT identity from the *Coming out theme* (see below). While providing the asker with notions of a shared experience with others and reassurance that their desires were normal, these strategies could also serve to marginalize those who did not share similar experiences (see *Marginalizing others theme*, below).

4.2.3 Marginalizing others theme

While many individuals worked to normalize specific elements of an LGBT identity, marginalization occurred, both in response to those who did not possess established stereotypes within an LGBT identity, and also as a result of the stigmatization of an LGBT identity within a heteronormative society.

Some askers used the LGBT thread to post content that framed an LGBT identity as "other" – something to be pathologized and viewed as a social perversion (AS9) (Foucault, 1978).

"Do homos ever get overwhelmed and grossed out with the homosexual culture? [...]" (AS9)

While some of these posts appeared to be intended to discredit notions of "likeness" (Craig & McInroy, 2014, p. 100) and normalcy within the community, others appeared to reflect the asker's confusion with their identity and attempts to learn more about an LGBT identity (AS10).

"I'm straight but I have have day dreams never mind day -night mares of having sex with another guy I have add so it could be that and I use to look at gay porn and it has scared me for life, can't get these thoughts out of my head and I'm not gay don't even say that it's just I try not to think about it but then I do just by trying not to any god ways to fix this?" (AS10)

Although initially, it appears that the asker marginalizes gay males by alluding to same-sex sexual acts as undesirable, it becomes apparent within the context of the post that the asker is, in fact, attempting to render members of the gay community as "other" in order to establish distance from them (Foucault, 1978). To this individual, the notion of adopting a gay identity is perceived as not socially permissible, and therefore something to be fixed.

The answerer responding to this post engaged in a more subtle form of marginalization, normalizing the asker's identity as heterosexual by attributing the asker's identified feelings to his young age (AN10).

"It's very normal at your age to question your sexuality. You could just be subconsciously curious, but that doesn't mean you'd do anything like that, it just means it's in the very far back of your mind, which you really cannot control. It'll pass in time, I'm sure." (AN10)

Answerers also normalized askers' identities as heterosexual by pathologizing a perceived LGBT identity, effectively distancing the asker from it (AN11).

"You are straight. it is ok to think a boy is handsome. that means nothing. gay means having sexual desire and you do not have that. What you DO have is OCD, and it puts these thoughts in your head over and over and over again [...] if you have these thoughts, say to yourself, this is not from me, it is from the OCD. it is not part of who I am [...]" (AN11)

Answerers also marginalized those who did not possess established stereotypes within an LGBT identity. These stereotypes included themes discussed in the *Defining an LGBT identity theme*, such as an assumption of same-sex attraction (AN11, AN12) and a fixed sexuality (AN13).

"Well, if you're not attracted to females or males in a sexual manner, then that dosen't leave you with anything really. [...] Just remember, theirs nothing wrong with being gay, whatever you are is who you should be" (AN12)

"[...] May not realize it now, but in 99.9% of the cases you will come out as 'bisexual' thinking as such and later realize you're gay." (AN13)

4.2.4 Coming out theme

This theme described content in which askers and answerers discussed subjects related to publicly disclosing an LGBT identity. Within both identity development literature and observed within online communities, coming out represents a distinct, liminal process in which an individual overcomes barriers related to the stigmatized status of an LGBT identity, emerging as well-adjusted, with an identity successfully integrated into other life contexts (Cass, 1979; Plummer, 1995). Askers and answers shared the perception of coming out as a liminal process, with askers soliciting disclosure strategies from answerers. Within these solicitations, askers often identified their families as providing significant barriers for disclosure (AS14).

“How do i come out as bisexual? I dont know anyone who is bisexual [...] i cant talk to my parents because they are homophobic and i am 15 and basically dont know what to do” (AS14)

Since many askers posted that they felt an inability to disclose their LGBT identity due to a perceived lack of individuals to talk to who would understand and accept their identity, answerers focused on normalizing an asker's coming out experience. Normalizing was achieved by relating the asker's experience to coming out metanarratives, often the answerer's own, which reflected the notion of coming out as something that could lead to self-actualization. In all of these cases, answerers portrayed an asker's dissatisfaction with their current non-disclosure as something that the asker could solve through the act of disclosure (AN15).

“I was scared to be out as trans* in high school, and after I came out [...], I was surprised to see nobody really cared, and some messaged me telling me I'm really brave for being out and proud. [...] It's tough being a teenager, but it's tougher when you're LGBT+, but things do get better. You just have to keep your chin up and be a driving force in the change if you want to see the skies clear up.” (AN15)

4.2.5 Functioning as a community theme

“Best Answer” pairs coded into this theme centered on individuals using the LGBT thread to find similarities between themselves and others. As illustrated by AS16, AS17, and AN17, askers and answerers shared and consumed personal narratives, contributing to the creation of metanarratives surrounding LGBT experiences. Askers commonly pursued consumption, soliciting narratives from pre-identified groups within the LGBT label (see also Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Craig & McInroy, 2014),

“Transgenders: When did you find out you wanted to be the oppisite sex? Did you know from birth, or when you went through puberty or so?” (AS16)

Often, askers attributed their need for information regarding establishing an LGBT identity as due to a perceived dearth in resources in their offline lives and solicited narratives from answerers to feel less alone (AS17).

“I hate being lesbian? [...] It's so lonely because I can never find someone exclusively gay like myself. [...] Has anyone else been through this? I'd love to hear stories to help me feel less lonely” (AS17)

Answers created and shared their personal narratives based on their experiences and frequently included supportive messages assuring askers of the normalcy of an LGBT identity (AN17).

“[...] while being straight may be easier, it wouldn't be nearly as fabulous! (Lesbians FTW) [...]. *hugs* Take care teddy bear! :)” (AN17)

In addition to providing askers with narratives based on personal experiences, answerers also provided the asker with links to outside resources (e.g., a link to a website with detailed information on transitioning genders, their email address).

Askers and answerers also developed shared sensibilities of an LGBT identity through the use of humor. In response to advice sought on whether or not the asker (self-identified as male, bisexual) should engage in a sexual relationship with another “hot” male, AN18 responded:

“can I join in? haha” (AN18)

While these jokes perpetuate certain stereotypes of members within the LGBT community (e.g., the sexualized nature of gay and bisexual males) they also reify shared notions of what it means to adopt a specific LGBT identity (Vazquez, 1997).

This observed interchange between askers and answerers of coming out metanarratives relates to the previous works covered in the literature review, which found the Internet to be used as a resource when the individual perceived the opportunity to establish an LGBT identity offline as not currently within the realm of possibility. The opportunity to experience the narratives of others that the asker could relate to, as well as the feelings of normalcy the asker might experience when discovering they are not alone could be very valuable in beginning to establish an LGBT identity offline.

The above themes reflect information perceived as viable by askers and answerers in constructing an LGBT identity. The relationship between these themes, and how they were used by askers and answerers, will now be furthered explored.

5 DISCUSSION

These exploratory themes reinforce many of those found within LGBT and new media research. Specifically, individuals within the LGBT thread of Yahoo! Answers appear to have similar motivations for using SQA to gather information related to LGBT identity, and the content exchanged reflects identity-based metanarratives regarding coming out and discovering “likeness” within the community (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Craig & McInroy, 2014, p. 100).

There existed a conceptual separation between the roles of asker and answerer within each theme. Askers played the role of a solicitor, engaging answerers in the sharing of their expertise regarding establishing an LGBT identity. Often askers experienced a perceived dearth of resources due to their stigmatized status and relied on answerers to both define a lived, LGBT experience, and to normalize this experience within the asker’s frame of reference (Cooper, 2010). In addition, askers and answerers also varied based on the frequency with which they utilized the five themes examined. Specifically, askers tended to solicit information relating to if they should define themselves with an LGBT identity and regarding romance, sex, and relationships. These two themes appeared to the researcher to represent more nascent formulations of an LGBT identity, in which askers wanted to know more information regarding an LGBT identity and its related elements (e.g., having a same sex relationship), without necessarily yet self-identifying as LGBT. On the other hand, answerers provided coming out metanarratives and performed community-building functions, such as normalizing an LGBT identity. In this regard, answerers were observed to perceive themselves as having already established an LGBT identity and employed these two themes to provide the asker with a discursive space where LGBT identity work was rendered possible.

Most askers and answerers espoused an essentialist perspective regarding the establishment of an LGBT identity. In other words, the ideals and normative standards relevant within the LGBT thread of Yahoo! Answers adopted the following notions: a) an LGBT identity is innate, b) individuals do not choose an LGBT identity and therefore must be regarded by society as a minority qualified to receive the same social benefits as other recognized minorities, and c) a certain set of characteristics and experiences comprise an LGBT identity. While this type of identity work has positive consequences (e.g., providing role models, resources, and reassurance for LGBT individuals), those who might identify as LGBT, but do not conform to the specific stereotypes or relate to the narratives established within each identity are marginalized. This type of marginalization can also be a visibility issue, resulting from a social emphasis on certain LGBT archetypes within politics, culture, and mainstream media, to name a few. As a result, categories such as bisexual, transgender, and asexual are either not considered or rendered as invalid or discredited in favor of the promotion of a gay or, to a lesser extent, lesbian identity. By only rendering certain elements of an LGBT identity visible both within offline and online communities, an individual’s perception of what information is relevant to them and further, their awareness of possible identity expressions, is profoundly affected.

As addressed in the *Defining an LGBT identity theme*, some answerers did address alternate social constructionist and queer perspectives regarding an LGBT identity, signifying that askers valued this information even if their initial question purported an essentialist view. This observation reflects the potential for askers to revise or at least consider revising their frame of reference regarding an LGBT identity based on the introduction of alternate perspectives. A similar observation was made regarding the marginalization of LGBT identities in general. Askers and answerers are exposed to content that appears to have the intention of “othering” them, which may deter them from using the site. On the other hand, some of this content appears to be written by individuals who may be questioning an LGBT identity for themselves, but have a frame of reference regarding this identity that does not render it as socially acceptable for them. For this reason, these individuals may engage in the strategies of simultaneously distancing themselves from an LGBT identity while also inquiring about it from others. The types of information delivered to these individuals often appears to be from answerers who share a similar frame

of reference, and therefore, attempt to normalize the asker as heterosexual by distancing them from an LGBT identity, either via pathologizing the LGBT identity or ascribing alternative sex or gender-based roles to confusion, often due to the asker's youth. For many individuals who visit this thread due to a perceived lack of other resources regarding an LGBT identity, receiving an answer that removes establishment of an LGBT identity from the realm of discursive possibility can have a consequential impact on how the individual continues, or discontinues, establishing an LGBT identity.

6 CONCLUSION

This exploratory study provided a grounded approach in examining how individuals establish an LGBT identity within the SQA site, Yahoo! Answers. This chosen site provided a unique dataset that displayed both the types of information askers wanted to know regarding an LGBT identity and the information they found meaningful, relevant, and/or credible. Findings resonated with past work on LGBT users and new media, but also uncovered a dissonance between how individuals conceive of an LGBT identity within the thread. In most cases, askers seemed to rate content as the "Best Answer" that appeared to confirm and expand on their current perspective and frame of reference regarding an LGBT identity. While this practice often had positive affective and resource-based functions, it also could lead to marginalization of certain identities through lack of visibility afforded to the perspective being reinforced.

There are several opportunities for future work building on these preliminary results using a larger data corpus collected over a longer period. Specifically, the notion of information change over time relative to the establishment of an LGBT identity could be examined. These findings suggest further research questions. How malleable is an individual's frame of reference regarding this identity to change, with the introduction of new knowledge or alternate perspectives? How might certain information narratives be helpful or harmful to individuals in different contexts? Questions like this, which link the work of LGBT and new media with a focus on information exchange, relevance, and value, can provide insight into the tension between the normative standards of the community with the autonomous experience of an individual.

7 References

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Table of Tables

Table 1, Themes and sub-themes from “Best Answer” pairs, ranked by frequency of occurrence 5