

Identity Formation Among Lesbians
Reviewing Cass' Theory Twenty Years Later

With An Emphasis On Media Influences

by

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ABSTRACT

The current study sought to reevaluate Cass' Theory of sexual identity formation in terms of lesbian identity development over the past twenty years and how media acts as mediation in lesbian identity development. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with only nine useable transcripts analyzed for this thesis. This study is an explanatory investigation into linear stage theory, specifically Cass' theory, as well as the impact of media as a mediator during lesbian identity development. This study had three objectives 1) to gain an understanding of the theory and its components related to lesbian identity development 2) to understand the lesbian identity formation process and 3) to understand the impact and influence if any, media has had on lesbian self-reported identity development. Qualitative methods were used to obtain information and analyze the responses. Results indicate that the participants in this study believed that the coming out process was important. This study's results showed that several of the participants entered each stage of the theory, while others did not. Media had little influence on the identity development, and the participants had mixed reviews of medias portrayal of lesbians. Implications for practice and further research are discussed.

DEDICATION

For my parents- who taught me to honor the unknowable, allowed me to travel the world and be one of the million ways to be.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES.....	vi
CHAPTER 1	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	2
Cass' Theory	2
Illness Models	4
Theoretical History	7
Risks of Coming Out.....	9
Stage Theory Cross Cultrually	10
Developmental Plasticity	12
Questions and Objectives	14
CHAPTER 2	
2 METHOD	16
Sampling Strategies	16
Participants.....	17
Design	19
Procedure	19
CHAPTER 3	
3 DATA ANALYSIS	21
Qualitative Methods.....	21
Analysis.....	22

Coding & Categorization.....	23
	Page
CHAPTER 4	
4 RESULTS	24
Stage One	24
Stage Two	27
Stage	
Three.....	30
Stage Four	
.....	32
Stage Five.	
.....	33
Stage Six	
.....	35
CHAPTER 5	
5 DISCUSSION	37
Objective One	37
Objective Two.....	39
Objective Three.....	39
Implications for Social Work	41
Implications for Youth.....	42
Research Limitations	43
Conclusion	44
REFERENCES	36
APPENDIX	
A SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONS	51

B	INFORMATION LETTER	54
C	QUESTIONNAIRE	57
D	RESOURCE LIST	59

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. TABLE 1	18

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis revisits Cass' theory of Sexual identity development twenty years later to reevaluate the idea of a linear process for homosexual identity development. This thesis also examines the media as a mediator in lesbian identity development to determine if media images influence identity development. Using retrospective qualitative data obtained through recorded one on one interviews, information was collected and analyzed to assess the current validity of Cass' theory as well as to assess any impact media might have on lesbian identity development.

This research builds upon the research of Degges-White, Rice and Myers, who in 2000 published the article "Revisiting Cass' Theory of Sexual Identity Formation: A Study of Lesbian Development". Using similar data collection techniques, this thesis attempts to reexamine Cass' theory in relation to lesbian identity development, as well as introduce media images as mediation in identity development to determine the impact the images carry.

Cass' Theory

In 1979 Viviane Cass published one of the first models of homosexual identity formation and revolutionized the understanding of homosexual identity development. Cass' theory is comprised of six stages.

- Identity confusion, which is marked by recognition that person's behaviors or feelings may be defined as homosexual

- Identity comparison is noted by a tentative commitment to a homosexual identity
- Identity tolerance is defined as a point in which a person more firmly accepts his or her homosexual identity
- Identity acceptance is the stage in which positive contact is made with others in the community and a sense of community is sought out
- Identity pride is the fifth stage this stage occurs when one identifies with homosexuality as his or her main identity and the acknowledgement of social views on homosexuals
- Identity synthesis is considered to be difficult to reach for most people; when a homosexual identity is fully accepted and includes the cessation of the homosexual identity formation process (Degges-White, Rice, Myers, 2005)

These stages represent a linear model, which dominated the view of homosexual identity development. The drive for more knowledge created further research on identity development and similar linear theories were developed in the 1970's. Cass states, "The question of how people come to adopt a homosexual identity has consistently attracted the interest of modern researchers" (Cass, 1984, p. 145). Since the first publications of linear stage models of sexual identity development, researchers have critiqued and sought to enhance identity theories to increase inclusivity and better illustrate the coming out process (Degges-White, et al., 2005)

The linear process described in the stage models adopts the assumption that all individuals initially are heterosexual. People “come out” in all stages of their life, but there are numerous individuals who feel they were born homosexual, therefore never self-identifying as heterosexual. For individuals who have never self-identified as heterosexual, Cass’ theory will not apply.

Illness Models as Precursors to Linear Models

The assumption that people begin life as heterosexual, which is central to the linear state theory, is not well substantiated. The research is lacking as to how one knows if one is born hetero- or homosexual. There is research on gender identity formation, how one learns girl/feminine or boy/masculine behaviors, but that research also assumes a heterosexual path of sexual identity development.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 4th Edition Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)*, (American Psychiatric Association, 2004) contains a section on gender identity formation issues. Gender Identity Disorder (GID) was first introduced into the DSM-III, in 1980 (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). GID is defined as incongruence between biological sex assignment and gender identity, with three types, non-transsexual type, transsexual type and not otherwise specified (American Psychiatric Association, 1980).

The current DSM-IV-TR has expanded the diagnostic criteria for GID to include four major areas. Consisting of cross-gender identification, evidence of persistent discomfort about the one’s assigned gender, no concurrent psychological intersex condition and clinically significant impairment in important areas of functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Gender Identity Disorder is still in the DSM. If this thesis were being written prior to 1973, homosexuality would be considered a mental illness. The DSM had a diagnosis of Ego-dystonic homosexuality up until the DSM-III (Rubinstein, 1995). Ego-dystonic homosexuality was a replacement for homosexuality, which was removed in 1973 (Rubinstein, 1995). The characteristics of ego-dystonic homosexuality are a persistent lack of heterosexual arousal which is experienced by the patient and is interfering with initiation or maintenance of wanted heterosexual relationships, as well as persistent distress from a sustained pattern of unwanted homosexual arousal (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). Ego-dystonic homosexuality was then removed one and for all in 1986 (Rubinstein, 1995).

In 1962, Bieber published his groundbreaking study on homosexuality. Bieber's approach was that homosexuality was caused by strained familial relationships, overbearing mothers and mothers who sought intimacy from their sons, as opposed to their husbands (Coleman, 1982). Bieber and his colleagues believed that these children grew up fearing heterosexual intercourse and sought homosexual intercourse to protect women against overbearing aggressive men (Coleman, 1982). Based on Bieber's theory, treatment sought to uncover early childhood fears of heterosexuality and reduce the patient's fear of heterosexuality (Coleman, 1982).

There are numerous criticisms of Bieber's theory. The sample size was too small, and not representative of the greater homosexual population. Also, there

are individuals who grow up in households as described by Bieber who do not identify as homosexual and vice versa (Coleman, 1982).

Treatment to “cure” homosexuality included electroshock therapy and aversive therapy and systematic desensitization. Electro-shock therapy was administered while a patient viewed same sex nude photos (Coleman, 1982). Aversive therapy is less severe than electro-shock and it entails asking the patient to imagine a homosexual or a homosexual act. That thought is followed with a repulsive nauseating thought, as to equate homosexuality with repulsiveness and nausea (Coleman, 1982).

Systematic desensitization was used when there was the assumption that anxiety was a component of homosexuality (Coleman, 1982). This “cure” was used to decrease the anxiety around heterosexual images and activities (Coleman, 1982). Although there is some single case design “success” stories using these interventions, they are considered illness models and are outdated and according to Rubinstein (1995), the vast majority of psychotherapists currently would avoid trying to change the sexual orientation of gay patients.

These illness models and models that seek to change one's sexual identity are dramatically different from the linear stage model of Cass. The illness models are outdated, and with the removal of homosexuality from the DSM, have been questioned on their ethical, moral and theoretical grounds. In sum, Coleman (1984) states “we are left with the fact that homosexuality is a normal variation in sexual expression...the main difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals is their choice of sexual affection preference” (Coleman, 1983, p. 404)

Theoretical History of Linear Models

Identity, or self-concept, self-attitudes, self-representations and self-perceptions are all forms of internal identification. These are internal pictures one has regarding one's image as an individual (Cass 1984). According to Cass, homosexual identity is a form of typological identity, meaning an identity which arises out of the synthesis of the person's individual perceptions and self-images with the individual's own views of how others perceive the aspect of their selves (Cass, 1984). Essentially, what Cass pursued was to understand the process one goes through when a person realizes his or her homosexual identity. The research question raised by this line of inquiry has been what this process looks like, how it varies from individual to individual and if all homosexual people go through this process.

Historically homosexual identity formation was recorded using retrospective self-report focusing on life-stories and how people discovered and maintained their homosexual identity (Cass, 1984). The mid 1970's brought about multiple theories on homosexual identity development. Theoretical models were proposed ranging from a three stage model created by Schafer in 1976 to the four, five and six stage models of Cass (1979) and Plummer (1975) (Cass, 1984). These models were not without limitations and have been researched for effectiveness, and efficacy.

In 1994 D'Augelli created a model for lesbian-gay-bisexual (LGB) identity development. This model is six-stages: stage one- exiting heterosexual identity, stage two- developing a personal LGB identity status, stage three-

developing a LGB social identity, stage four-becoming a LGB offspring, stage five- developing a LBG intimacy status, stage six entering a LGB community (Rivers, 1994). This model seems to suggest that bisexual individuals develop in the same way as homosexual individuals. As Rivers, (1994) points out, bisexuality is fluid, and problems can arise when combining lesbian, gay and bisexual identity formation.

A major criticisms of D'Augelli's theory is that the theory assumes that the recognition of an individual's sexual orientation and acceptance of the orientation are linked and that one will ultimately lead to the other (Rivers, 1997). Another criticism of D'Augelli's theory is the existence of individuals who have always known they were LGB. The first stage of the theory is exiting heterosexual identity. What if an individual never identified as heterosexual? Although this model takes a more fluid approach, it does not provide answers for those who have always identified as LGB. Limitations of stage models such as D'Augelli's and Cass' theories come when an individual skips stages and or experiences multiple stages at once. For example, someone may not have come out as an LGB individual, but be having intimate same sex relationships and a strong social LGB identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The linear models do not provide much flexibility for development and or explain trajectories such as environment or media.

Similar to Cass' theory and other linear models, the initial assumption that people begin as heterosexual and at some point "change" is problematic for some individuals in the LGB community. It also assumes that heterosexuality is the

baseline. The feminist community has researched this notion that heterosexuality is the norm extensively. Heterosexuality as defined by Miriam (2007), is the ensemble of political, social and cultural forces that naturalize and uphold heterosexuality as a privilege, while threatening the social and existential survival of anyone who deviates from the heterosexual norm. Miriam (2007) links the heterosexual norm with heteronormativity and male supremacy. Lesbianism has been refigured by heteronormativity, as compared to the heterosexual norm, which is for the pleasure of men (Miriam, 2007). In terms of media images, “the sexual agency of lesbianism, rather than simply foreclosed by heteronormativity, is refigured in terms of men’s access to women” (Miriam, 2007, p. 213).

Risks of coming out and identity formation

The coming out process is when an individual either discovers his or her homosexual identity or evolves into a homosexual lifestyle, and the approach and manner in which the individual tells family, friends and the community. This coming out process is thought to be a highly important aspect of a homosexual identity. Especially during adolescent development, the risks can be great for a young emerging lesbian. Young lesbians can feel isolated in their schools, with their peers and in their community (Llera & Katsirebas, 2010).

Youth are not the only individuals affected in a negative way during the coming out process. Adults who come out risk employment discrimination, religious discrimination, familial discrimination as well as community discrimination (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). When an individual chooses not to come out it is referred to as “being in “the closet”. Staying in the closet creates

stress, and silence is a tool of oppression if someone feels like they cannot come out due to a fear of discrimination (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). Maintaining a closeted status forces the LGB individual to live a double life, and live in constant fear of being “outed” by someone against their will (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). With that being said, not all forms of nondisclosure are negative. For instance, if a person were to fear coming out because it was obvious that harmful consequences would follow, such as job loss, or violence, then not disclosing may be the safest thing to do for that individual in the situation (Morrow & Messinger, 2006).

Staying in the closet and living in fear creates internalized oppression, defined by Morrow and Messinger (2006) as internalizing beliefs in the negative stereotype and the harmful rhetoric created by a heterosexist society, internalizing a sense of shame about ones self worth and identity. A secret identity and strong internal oppression can put LGB people at a higher risk for depression, substance abuse, low self-esteem and suicide (Morrow & Messinger, 2006).

Stage Theory Cross Culturally

Using the experiences of Two-spirit, lesbian and gay Natives, Adams and Phillips, (2009), used Cass’ theory as a framework to examine Native homosexual identity development. The term “two-spirit” is used to refer to several Native American identities, lesbian, gay, transgender or for someone who follows all or almost all of the opposite gender roles (Adams & Phillips, 2009). The Cass theory was chosen based on its soundness of methodology and its popularity (Adams & Phillips, 2009).

According to the findings, many Native Americans felt as if the Cass theory did not represent their experiences. There can be a higher sense of acceptance and inclusion of LG and transgendered individuals on some reservations (Adams & Phillips, 2009). There is also debate on how these people came to be “two-spirit”, with some believing people are acting upon directions received from the spirit world, while others believe individuals have a special connection with the spiritual world (Adams & Phillips, 2009).

This discrepancy mirrors the current debate occurring in general research of why a person is LGB. This research cannot be extrapolated to all Native Americans, nor can the assumption that all LGB individuals live in a homophobic society, which for Native Americans as pointed out by Adams and Phillips may not be the case. “A greater degree of acceptance, combined with tribal histories, spiritual sanction and traditionally valuable roles within the community may produce an environment where children are not heavily socialized into heterosexuality” (Adams & Phillips, 2009, p. 963). The potential higher level of acceptance and more inclusive approach in some Native American communities of “two-spirit” individuals questions the applicability of linear identity development models to all cultures.

Supplemental research has shown that both homosexual men and women’s recognition of homosexual identity development comes within a somewhat fixed timeframe, which is separate from the “coming out” process (D’Augelli, 1994). This fixed timeframe can also be problematic for an individual who has always

self-identified as LGB, or for individuals who identify with their LGB orientation much later in life.

In 1984, Cass published another article on identity formation, taking 10 theories from the 1970's and reevaluating them for validity. Cass noted that the early theories lacked rigorous testing, none had multiple raters, or established interrater reliability, nor did any of the theories qualify as generalizable (Cass 1984). Cass reports some stages may be more accurate than others and calls for an expansive reshaping homosexual identity formation (Cass, 1984). In the early research there were few or no studies conducted solely on lesbian women, there also were very few studies done representing anything other than a linear model for identity development, two critical limitations of early homosexual identity formation research.

Developmental Plasticity

Other theorists (Baltes, 1987; Lerner, 1991) developed the idea of developmental plasticity, the concept that human development cannot be formed according to a set of fixed rules relating to the transition from childhood to adulthood, like the linear stage models. They instead argue that human development is a dynamic and interactive process determined not only by biology but also by environment (Rivers, 1997). This would mean that environment, community, family, politics, religion, education, and culture affect the way a person develops. This theory of developmental plasticity would allow for environmental factors to affect the experiences of emerging homosexuals during their identity formation.

Considering the environmental aspects of identity development creates a more holistic picture and allows for a greater understanding of an individual. One issue with developmental plasticity theory is that it holds no value for bisexual identity formation unless the individual eventually chooses an exclusively homosexual identity. This limitation mirrors the linear model's lack of reflexivity (Rivers, 1997). On the whole, development plasticity theory illustrates a more fluid approach to sexual identity development, contradicting the strict linear stages models of the 1970's.

Weille published "Reworking Developmental Theory: The Case of Lesbian Identity Formation" in the summer of 1993. This article summarized the linear stage theories and defined the original theories as psychoanalytic. Their analysis is "the psychoanalytic traditional views deployment as a linear process that occurs in discrete, sequential phases" (Weille, 1993, p.153). They argue that a more flexible view of identity development would lend itself to the view that development can be a flexible process. Viewing lesbian experience with a sociocultural lens will only further understanding of the influential factors of the developmental process, which is lacking within the stage model (Weille, 1993).

One reoccurring aspect of sexual identity development research is the age at which people are studied. Traditionally the theorists and researchers targeted adults, asking them to recall their youth and experiences during development. In an effort to increase the knowledge of identity development, Bilodeau and Renn (2005) looked at homosexual identity formation among lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth. Bilodeau and Renn, (2005) found that self-identification of youth

as LGB is occurring at younger rates, suggesting that upon entering college, youth have already begun or completed their coming-out process.

It is important when working with youth through their identity development period to acknowledge the developmental stage of the individual. According to Erikson, the ages of twelve to eighteen years old fall into early adolescents (Newman, Newman, Landry-Meyer, Lohman, 2003). Newman et al., (2003) characterized early adolescents as a need for peer approval, self-consciousness and rapid physical changes with relationships taking on a sexual nature as early adolescents discover sexual intimacy with their partners. The processes of this stage of development could account for experimental sexual experiences as well as confusion about sexual identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). On that same note, Bilodeau and Renn (2005) point out that intimate same gender experiences do not signal an LGB identity, as well as adolescents may identify as LGB without having had any sexual experiences. Allowing youth to define their experiences and using a multimodal approach to support youth is key and will be beneficial in providing adequate resources to questioning youth.

Questions and Objectives

This thesis seeks to answer three research questions and objectives

Question #1: Does the Cass' Theory of Lesbian Identity Formation still apply to lesbians twenty years later?

Objective #1: To gain an understanding of the theory, and its components related to lesbian identity development.

Question #2: Does self-reported lesbian identity formation follow a linear stage model?

Objective #2: To understand the lesbian identity formation process.

Question #3: Do media images of lesbians impact the self-described formation of a lesbian's identity?

Objective #3: To understand the impact and influence if any, media has had on lesbian self-reported identity development.

Chapter 2

METHOD

Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, which is defined as “nonprobability sampling in which selection of elements relies on referrals from the first individuals who are identified for participation in the study; the process of identification continues until the desired sample size is reached ” (Krysik & Finn, 2007, p. 125). Snowball sampling was chosen based on the researcher's ability to access the LGB community. Using the local community and my resources, participants were solicited through word of mouth. All participants were over the age of eighteen. There was no monetary compensation for participation, but to make participation more convenient, interviews were conducted at a location chosen by the participant.

Participants were chosen based on their self-identified lesbian identity. I required that the individual had to be openly “out” as a lesbian. I explained to participants that participating in this research would help to gain more information on lesbian identity development and the influence media had on lesbian identity development. Contact information was given to participants, with the interviewer’s information as well as the thesis committee members’ information.

Participants were contacted via telephone, and mailed electronically for scheduling interviews. They were notified the interview would be audio recorded and the interview could take between one and two hours of their time. Interviews

were scheduled over a three-week period and conducted at each individual's home. Upon completion of the interviews the tapes were stored in a locked filing cabinet in University Center, room 871. The tapes will be contained in the locked filing cabinet and destroyed by way of burning after three years. All identifying information related to the research participants has been removed and replaced with numerical identifiers.

Participants

Demographic data were collected, including age, sexual orientation, and occupation, level of schooling, number of children, marital status, political affiliation, and race. There were nine participants. Seven participants identified as Caucasian, one as Multi-racial and one as Bi-racial. All nine of the subjects were female. The mean age of the subjects was 39, the median was 31 and the range was 19-66 years old. All participants were in relationships. Six participants identified as being in a relationship, two participants identified as being married legally in another state, and one participant reported being in a civil union. Two participants had children. Six had college degrees, with one currently in college. Four participants had a post college degree, and one was currently working on a post college degree. Six participants identified as liberal, three as moderate (See table 1).

Table 1

Subject	Sex	Age	Orientation	Race	Schooling	Children	Occupation	Political	Relationship
1	F	23	Lesbian	C	C.D	No	Police Officer	M	In relationship, 3 years
2	F	27	Lesbian	C	C.D	No	Educator	L	In relationship, 2 months
3	F	28	Lesbian	C	C.D	No	Nanny	M	In relationship, 2 months
4	F	54	Lesbian	C	P.C.D	Yes	Nurse practitioner	M	Married, 19 years
5	F	51	Lesbian	C	P.C.D	Yes	Teacher	L	Married, 19 years
6	F	54	Lesbian	Multi	C.D	Yes	Retired/ Student	M	In relationship, 1 year
7	F	66	Lesbian	C	C.D	No	Golf Professional	L	Civil Union, 35 years
8	F	65	Lesbian	C	P.C.D	No	Retired Professor	L	Civil Union, 35 years
9	F	19	Lesbian	Bi	C	No	Student	L	In relationship, 2 months

Note: F= Female; C= Caucasian; C.D= College Degree; P.C.D= Post College

Degree; C= College; L= Liberal; M= Moderate

Design

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with subjects who were self identified as lesbians. Open-ended questions were asked regarding the individual's history and their coming out process and the effect media had on lesbian identity (see Appendix A). Open-ended questions allow respondents to answer in their own words as opposed to choosing an answer from a predefined response (Krysiak & Finn, 2007). This method was chosen to allow the interviewees to describe their experiences in their own words.

Open-ended questions are useful when a researcher cannot anticipate what a participant is going to say, and does not want to hinder the responses by shaping or leading the participant in any way (Krysiak & Finn, 2007). The interviews were conducted in the individual's home and although they were audio recorded the comfort of being in the individual's home allowed for a secure environment for both the researcher and the participant. The setting of the interview and the open-ended questions allowed for a discussion to be generated between the interviewer and the participant. Only nine interviews were used for the data analysis due to the unexpected destruction of one audiotape prior to transcription.

Procedure

All interviews were conducted at the participants' homes. Most participants chose to do the interview in a living room myself and the participant were present during the interview to lessen the distraction and noise, as well as to ensure the utmost comfort for the participant. Prior to the interview beginning, the information letter was handed out detailing the purpose of the study and the

participant's rights as a human subject. The information letter, (see Appendix 2), the questionnaire (see Appendix 3) and the list of available resources (see Appendix 4) were given to the participant.

Information was provided on the reason for the study, benefits to the participant, potential length of time the interview would take, additional resources as well as contact information for the thesis committee members and the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board if participants had questions regarding their rights as a human subject research participant. The list of available resources (Appendix 4) was explained to the participants in the event that any of the information discussed caused emotional distress, the list of resources both locally and nationally is available.

Participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and they could withdraw their consent at any time. Participants were not required to sign the information letter and kept that document as well as the list of resources. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to one hour each. Upon the completion of the interview participants were thanked for their time and asked if they had any follow up questions. Wellness telephone calls were made the day after each interview to ensure emotional wellbeing as well as thank the participant again and to respond to any questions that had come up after the interview. No written notes were taken during the interview process.

CHAPTER 3

DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative Methods

The chosen method of research was a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is defined as in-depth research focusing on extensive examination of a small number of subjects (Krysiak & Finn, 2007). Being that this thesis took a small number of lesbian women, and conducted semi-structured interviews, qualitative methodology was most appropriate for this thesis. This thesis sought to reevaluate Cass' theory in relation to lesbian identity development and also to examine media as a mediator in lesbian identity development. This thesis does not seek generalizability, rather it seeks to reexamine Cass' theory of homosexual identity formation twenty years later and reassess the theory's relevance with media as a mediator.

A narrative approach was used in the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data. Moen, (2006) refers to the narrative approach as a person telling a sequence of events that is significant for the narrator or the audience. Narratives capture both the context and the individual and are comprised of two basic tenants. The first is that human beings organize their experiences of their world into narratives. Second, narrative researchers maintain that the stories being told depend on the individual's past and present experiences. (Moen, 2006). Moen, (2006) describes using the narrative process in research as stories of experiences being shaped through discussions with the research subject in a dialogue.

The narrative approach to research presents both the context and the web of social relationships, the environment, cultural, social, and institutional surroundings of the participant (Moen, 2006). Narrative research carries little direction and allows the participants to elaborate freely their emotions and feelings regarding the questions being asked.

Analysis

The interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim using a word processor and tape recorder. Transcription is defined by Davidson, (2009) as translation or transformation of sound/image from recordings to text. The process is selective, meaning certain phenomena or features of talk and interaction are transcribed.

There was no identifying information included in the transcription, and participants were given a numerical identifier to ensure confidentiality. Once each interview was transcribed, the transcription was separated into each identity formation stage. The answers were compiled into six different documents with each of the nine participants' answers to the questions corresponding to the individual stage of the theory. The documents were then analyzed and coded for themes both in the development of lesbian identity and the influence of media as a mediator in lesbian identity development. During coding, themes were highlighted during the reading and rereading of the documents.

Coding and Categorization

Each document containing the specific stage answers was reviewed and re-reviewed to ensure comprehension and synthesis of common themes. Using themes from both the stage development questions and the questions surrounding the media, categories for each stage of development were noted. Within the categories, specific words were identified in relation to the media as a mediation and words related to the coming out process.

Based on the stages of Cass' theory, specific phrases were highlighted related to personal emotions, one's ability to express feelings and notions surrounding one's personal identity development story. Some of the responses regarding media were broad, and others were specific, mentioning a specific character on a television show or a specific character in a book.

Several of the questions allowed me to gain deeper insight into the participant's identity development. The questions surrounding media influence were present in each stage, thereby soliciting the impact the media had on each stage of the participants' development.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Results provided insights into the lesbian identity formation process, as well as any impact media had as a mediator in self-reported lesbian identity. The responses were broken up into sections based on Cass' stage theory. Each section represented the participants' responses. Because the participants self-identified as lesbians, they had all completed the final stage in Cass' model. In general, they were living productive successful lives as out lesbians.

Results from the scale on the questionnaire represent openness of sexuality, media influence shaping development, identification with the media as a lesbian, representation of lesbians in the media and importance of lesbians in the media. Each question carried a rating scale of 1-10 with 1 being the least and 10 being the most. For the first question, "On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being the least and 10 being the most, how open are you with your sexuality?" the lowest score was a 6 and the highest score was a 10, with a mean score of 8.5, there were three people who indicated they were at a 10, being the most open with their sexuality.

The second question dealing with rating the way media shaped their lesbian identity carried low scores. The mean score was a 3.3 with the range being from 1-8. The third question dealt with lesbian media portrayal. The range on that question was 1-7 with the mean being 5.1. The fourth question asked how well the participants felt lesbians were portrayed in the media. The mean for that question was 3.6 and the range was 1-7. The final question was based on the importance of

lesbians in the media. The range on that question was 6-10, with the mean being 8.2.

The questionnaires and rating scales were used to get a demographic snapshot of the participants, as well as use another form of data collection. There was also a strong correlation between the answers provided on the scale questions and the narrative answers given during the interviews. It was interesting to note the score participants gave themselves on the scale. The rating scale was handed out first, and gave the participants a preview of what the questions would be like as well as a gauge on the information the researcher was collecting.

Stage one: Identity Confusion

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding the beginning of their sexual identity formation. Specifically, participants were asked the age at which they could remember their first notions of same sex feelings. “11 years old, pubescent, on up through teenager years I probably had crushes but I don’t think I would have identified as a lesbian at that point” “Girl crushes around 11, messing around with girls around 15-16.” Overwhelmingly the responses on the age at which participants could recall sexual feelings towards women was 11-12, with one participant recalling feelings as young as 8 and one participant realizing feelings at 19. None of the participants could recall a time prior to 8 years old that they were aware of sexual feelings towards women. This may reflect simple human development and normal memory formation. The participants may not have been able to remember any intimate feelings towards women due to their undeveloped mental capacity and stage of development, or as prepubescent

females, they may not have yet developed sexual urges, or linked any sexual feelings with sexual orientation.

The feelings the participants had took the form of crushes on older women, neighbors, and classmates. Even the ages of 8, 11 and 12, the participants didn't associate their behavior and or feelings with a lesbian identity. "I don't think I equated it to sexuality" "I don't know that I really even understood what sexuality was gay or straight" "I think we were just young and found something that felt good and we wanted to continue on with it" We did not think there was anything wrong...we thought it was normal." "For me it was just natural, it was normal I didn't think either way about it." These comments represent the participant's initial intimate same sex experiences and the feelings associated with them.

Other participants expressed concern and fear when they felt the initial feelings. "I tried to avoid them so I could be the person my parents wanted me to be" "It was really scary, and I think I just pushed the thought out of my head, I didn't want to go there." For one participant the process was quick and easy "I met someone, a woman that I was just crazy about and she and I talked and it just kind of all became crystal clear." The actual age of expression of these feelings varied for the participants "I went to college and expressed them" "when I was in college another women indicated she was interested in me and we began an intimate relationship." These types of feelings are what are typically portrayed in the media; it is rare to see a successful, easy transition from heterosexuality to homosexuality as other participants experienced, portrayed in the media

Questions surrounding media influences in this stage regarded previously held serotypes of lesbians created by the media and how much these stereotypes influenced identity formation. “ *The L word* has been nice as a TV show that actually has lesbians portrayed in some manner” “The media came out after I was out and secure of myself so I don’t think it played a part” “I don’t remember seeing anything in the media that was different than very harsh very masculine women, very tough a lot of flannel shirts” “the only thing I recall would be the movie *The Children’s Hour*, it’s a horrible movie, a horrible image of lesbians, it’s a tragic ending, and that was the movie I saw portraying lesbians.” Media influence was not crucial in this initial stage of development. For some participants they noted media was not present, and therefore was not a resource for them. None of the participants reported seeking out media as a resource to learn how to become a lesbian, they were able to do that on their own. Again, media was not an influential source for the participants to learn their identity.

Eight out of the nine participants experienced this stage. The participant who did not experience this stage showed no signs of inner turmoil and reported a quick, easy and smooth transition into their lesbian identity.

Stage two: Identity Comparison

Questions in this stage revolved around dealing with the thoughts of potentially being a lesbian, what participants did with their thoughts, if they acted differently around anyone and or feel a disconnect between their heterosexual counterparts. Questions were also asked about specific media stereotypes of lesbians the participants had seen. Participants chose to express their emerging

feelings towards a lesbian identity in several ways. “I went to gay bars, and started seeing more women and started sleeping with women who weren’t my close friends...it was just sex because it was satisfying” “A lot of stuff changed, comfort levels, relationships with my family, relationships with friends” “everything changed, a lot of relationships changed, most of my friends stopped being my friends...for me it was freeing, I felt like I finally found the answer to what was wrong and I felt wonderful.”

Some participants tried to block their feelings. “I tried to block it, went to college majored in home economics because that is what my mother wanted me to do.” “I kept trying to resolve what at that point was not resolvable that ultimately became resolved, and I accepted it and moved on.” Those comments show some internal conflict regarding the newly emerging sexual identity. Some participants described lesbian intimate encounters as being important in this stage of development. Participants also emphasized the importance of having a space where they could feel comfortable and be more open with their sexuality.

In terms of comparing their new lesbian identity to their heterosexual counterparts, acting differently around family and friends, and feeling disconnect from their heterosexual counterparts the participants were mixed. “I would say I acted differently because I was trying to protect and conceal something that I didn’t want other people to know for fear they would think badly of me.” “I didn’t feel a disconnect, I didn’t feel my experience has ever been angst like I don’t feel like it was sinful but I think that is unusual.” “I wanted to be around my gay friends and I longed for environments where you could be a little bit freer with

who you were...I don't know who I was afraid of, but I was in constant fear.”

There was a theme of resistance to share feelings, emotions and experiences with family and friends due to fear and the risk of family judgment. The inability to fully share the participants' lives with their families created angst for some of the participants, while others were able to express their feelings openly and freely and were accepted. Coming out to ones family is a major step in the process, and for each of the participants it occurred in a different stage of development.

Therefore the coming out process of telling ones family, which according to Cass could happen in stage in the sixth stage, for the nine participants, does not align with a linear stage model, it happened sporadically in different stages based on different participants.

The participants described stereotypes regarding lesbians in the media. “Gym teachers, flat chested masculine, flannel shirts jeans short lesbian haircut, athletic, all of which I wasn't” “the player lesbian, the leader lesbian, like The L word, they pick one personality type and that is it” “butch, femme, drug addicts, you're either a butch with shaved head or you're a lipstick lesbian that wears heels and there is no stereotype in between” “butch, femme, the butch stereotype would be the crew cut and the boots, dykes on bikes” “I don't fit any of the categories, even among lesbians I found I was not accepted because I wasn't femme or butch.” The participants reported that none of these stereotypes impacted their dress or behavior. It was interesting to hear the stereotypes the participants listed. Participants felt they did not identify with any of the typical stereotypes created by the media.

None of the women self-identified as lesbians at a young age. Although they may have had same sex relations, and or attractions to women as young people, they did not equate those feelings towards being a lesbian. All of the participants noted their true lesbian experience beginning in or after college. Four of the participants expressed wanting to hide and suppress their identities. None of the participants mentioned suicidal thoughts or attempts due to discomfort surrounding their emerging lesbian identity. Each of the participants was in a relationship or having intimate relations with a woman when they accepted their lesbian identity. Therefore all nine of the participants entered and completed this stage.

Stage three: Identity Tolerance

The questions in this stage dealt with the transition from thinking one might be a lesbian to fully accepting and acknowledging ones lesbian identity, also the emotions that came with that acceptance. They also discuss media images in an attempt to see if any of the newly identified lesbians sought out media images to relate to. The time frame from thinking one might be a lesbian to fully knowing one was a lesbian was different for each participant. "I might have had a period of time in my 20's when I also dated men and I was finally like what am I doing?" "I actually thought I am probably not a lesbian that this is just what is happening in my life right now...I wasn't sure does this mean I am lesbian...it wasn't something I embraced" "I felt very guarded...I didn't accept my identity and wanted to be the norm I guess it was a struggle throughout the four years to figure out being ok with who I was or changing who I was for who I should be."

Emotions participants expressed were a mixture of positive and negative when discussing the feelings they had once they accepted their lesbian identities. “It was nice to finally come to terms with it, I felt relieved like this is what it is, this is what it comes down to.” When asked how did you feel when you first thought I am probably a lesbian, one participant answered, “Afraid, I guess wishing it were going to be a different outcome but knowing in my heart it wasn’t, a little guilty and remorseful, pretty much negative emotions.” Another answered “I was comfortable with it, but I was also scared at the same time having to tell my friends and my parents.” Family was both a support, and a point of contention for the participants in the early stages of their identity formation.

Participants were asked if they sought out media images of lesbians in an attempt to connect with a lesbian identity. Participants mentioned looking at books written by lesbian authors, attending gay and lesbian bars, watching the television show *The L Word* and *The Real L Word*, and perceiving Ellen DeGeneres as a representation of lesbians in the media. Participants did not place major emphasis on media images of lesbians shaping their development during this stage.

This stage was completed by four out of the nine participants. Several of the participants mentioned that they did not seek out any lesbians to identify with and or receive support from. Others mentioned attending gay bars and watching television shows with lesbian characters as well as gaining more lesbian friends.

Stage four: Identity Acceptance

The questions asked in this stage focused on any specific even or experience that triggered “I am a lesbian” thoughts. Coming out stories in the media were addressed in this section, and questions were asked if participants had seen a coming out story that resembled theirs. The age at which the participants accepted their lesbian identities differed as well. For some it was in their twenties, right after college, for some it was right away, the process was very quick less than a month, for another it took between three, four and five years. The participants were unable to pin point a specific event that changed their lives and opened their eyes to their identity. Several of the participants recalled the process evolving over time, spanning months and years, with no identifiable beginning or end point. Five participants noted reaching out to the LGB community, specifically lesbian bars, and other lesbians, to increase their sense of self.

Coming out in the media has been portrayed in numerous ways. For the participants, they felt as if there were no coming out stories that mirrored their experiences. Participants were able to recall coming out scenarios in the media, but none felt as if these were similar to what they went through. The words the participants used to answer the question “What feelings were associated with your acceptance” were all positive. “I finally felt like a whole person as opposed to a person with a lot of missing pieces.” “It made me feel like all of the positive things you should feel about life, everything came together.” “It made me feel warm and very comforted to know all the people I knew and it didn’t matter.” “It actually felt really good.”

Although each of the participants acknowledge that they accepted their lesbian identity, three participants did not recall any incongruence, in terms of wanting to be more with homosexuals as opposed to heterosexuals. That would indicate that those three participants, although they accepted their lesbian identity, did not pass through this phase. Coming out scenarios in the media typically are painful for the individual and involve strong feelings of hatred and family discourse. This was not the case for any of the participants in this study. Two of the participants indicated their families did not understand, but did not react in as dramatic of a manner as they had seen portrayed on television

Stage five: Identity

This stage asked participants if they regretted their new lesbian identity, what events they participated in related to gay rights and how they viewed media images now as lesbians. Several of the participants discussed wishing they were heterosexual in social situations, such as college and high school reunions. Participants also wavered back and forth regretting their lesbian identity when they told their parents they were lesbians. The political arena was another area of regret for some of the participants due to the unequal benefits hetero-and homosexual couples receive. Three of the participants went through no regret after they self-identified as lesbians.

In terms of participating in events that are associated with lesbian rights, virtually all the participants have attended a Gay Pride Festival. Gay Straight Alliance, HRC and a Lesbian, Gay Bisexual Transgendered Questioning (LGBTQ) Collation were mentioned, as were activities that promoted lesbian

rights as events that participants had attended. In terms of feelings they experienced surrounding these events, for the participants who did attend, they reported these events definitely increased their sense of self. “There is nothing better than gay pride in a big city” “its like fuel under the flames, you’re on fire for the world” “it empowers you because at least you can stand up and say who are instead of staying in the shadows.” These comments represent the positive feelings people had towards attending events regarding lesbian rights. For other participants, participating in these events were not an important part of their development and indicated never attending Pride or any events associated with lesbian rights.

Impressions of media images of lesbians were discussed in this section with questions being asked regarding the seeking out of images to represent a lesbian identity and if the lesbian media images in today’s media are a positive portrayal for younger lesbians. The participants were mixed in their responses to these questions. Several felt as if they did not search out any media image to represent their lesbian identity, while others chose characters they felt they most associate with from television shows. These associations were made after the participant had come out, and been secure in their lesbian identity.

Some participants took comfort in the fact that more and more celebrities and people in the media are coming out. In terms of positive portrayal of lesbians for young lesbians, people felt that Ellen DeGeneres was a positive portrayal. Overall the consensus was that anything is better than nothing, and that although

we have come along way in terms of media, they are getting better, but positive portrayals are still few and far between.

Three out of the nine participants exhibited characteristics to suggest that they did not adhere to this stage. They did not participate in any homosexual identity groups, nor did they struggle or waiver based on their lesbian identity. The remaining six participants did appear to complete this stage of Cass' theory.

Stage six: Identity Synthesis

This is the final stage in the theory and the questions asked dealt with current views of one's self in society, the way media views lesbians, and views of lesbians as a whole in society. Participants' answers differed ostensibly based on their stage of life. The participants with families who had been in long-term relationships described their views of themselves in society differently than the younger self-identified lesbians. "I think I'm more open people know I'm a lesbian, my family knows I'm a lesbian" "I've done my thing, I see myself as an example of what can happen if you're sure of yourself and I try to convey that message to other youngsters that it's ok to be who you are and it feels a whole lot better when you are." "I see myself as a person first and that my lesbianism is an expression of who I am, and an expression of my sexuality but the totality of me is more meaningful to me to think about than my sexual preference." "I just feel comfortable." The question "in what way do you think the media views lesbians as a whole?" was answered in several ways by the participants. "I think they view them as accepted by not." The participant felt that lesbians were portrayed in the media but could not relate to the portrayal.

The participants felt conflicted when answering the question on the media portrayal of lesbians in general. They said that the media shows lesbians both in positive and negative ways; some felt the entire queer community lacks a presence in media “I think it is very unfortunate that we are in the century we are in and still there seems to be such reluctance to accept people who they are and what they are.”

In terms of the impact of media images on the general public, participants stated “the media overall with any identity kind of generalizes it too much.” “If you don’t know any better you’re ignorant, and the media isn’t going to do anything to clear up that ignorance and consequently we have masses of the population not understanding.” An optimistic view can also be taken from the participants: “They are showing that parents are more accepting and more supportive and I think the media is really bringing that out.” The general consensus among participants was that more work needs to be done, but progress is being made.

It appears from the transcribed data that all nine of the participants successfully reached, achieved and are maintaining the sixth and final stage of sexual identity development according to Cass. This would be assumed as true due to the fact that all the participants were already self-identified lesbians, living out of the closet. Media influenced none of the six stages for the participants. The participants reported noticing media during their development, but depending on the participant’s age, media was generally not as important as a mediator. Overall it appeared that the participants, if they sought out media, did so after they self

identified as lesbian- in order people like themselves on the television rather than as influence in the development of sexual identity.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

As previously stated, Cass' theory of sexual identity development consists of six stages, Identity comparison is noted by a tentative commitment to a homosexual identity, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis (Degges-White, et al., 2005). Cass' theory from twenty years ago was examined to identify whether or not Cass' theory still had validity as a linear stage theory for lesbian identity development.

This study is an explanatory investigation into linear stage theory, specifically Cass' theory, as well as the impact of media as a mediator during lesbian identity development. This study had three objectives 1) to gain an understanding of the theory and its components related to lesbian identity development 2) to understand the lesbian identity formation process, and 3) to understand the impact and influence if any, that media has had on lesbian self-reported identity development.

Objective One

This study's results showed that several of the participants entered each stage of the theory, while others did not. Stage one, identity confusion, appeared to have 8 out of the 9 participants enter and complete the stage. Stage two, identity comparison was completed by all 9 of the participants. Stage three; identity tolerance was completed by 4 out of the 9 participants. Stage four; identity

acceptance was completed by 6 out of the 9 participants. Stage five, identity pride was completed by 6 out of the 9 participants and finally stage six was completed by all nine of the participants. There are numerous potential reasons behind participants not entering certain stages. Age seemed to play a role in identity formation. The age at which the participant began their identity formation was different for the participants. Also the speed at which the participant's identities formed played a role in entering each stage. For some participants the process took years, others identified as a lesbian and within a month were fully accepting and never looked back. Family acceptance also played a role, with participants who felt they had an accepting family entering each stage in order. None of the participants entered into the stages in any other order than originally prescribed by Cass some did skip stages, but did not jump from stage to stage.

Cass' theory of sexual identity formation provided a loose framework for the identity formation process of the nine participants. Within each stage except one, there was at least one participant who did not appear to have entered and or completed the stage. The only stage that had all nine participants was the sixth and final stage, and this is probably an artifact of the purposive sampling strategy.

A majority of the participants experienced some form of internalized oppression during their sexual identity formation process. As illustrated previously by Morrow and Messinger (2006) internalized oppression can occur during the identity formation process. Whether it was wavering back and forth wishing one wasn't a lesbian, to resistance towards telling family members due to fear and shame, each of the participants felt some form of internal discord during

their process. This feeling of internalized oppression may reoccur during a lesbian's life, and is something that cannot be ignored.

Objective Two

The second objective was to understand the lesbian identity formation process, this was achieved, and it can be concluded that the lesbian identity formation process is highly individual and personal in nature. Each participant's story was different. There were some similarities within the participants, such as the age at which they could remember first having intimate feelings towards a woman was one. Other than age, and events participated in, the participants told unique stories regarding their lesbian identity development.

Objective three

Media showed little influence on the identity development. Each of the participants went through their own unique coming out process. For some participants it was a quick process, from start to finish over a month, for others it spanned three to five years. Some participants struggled with telling family and friends they were lesbians while others came out with ease. Each participant is currently living his or her life as an out lesbian in society. The influence of media was assessed in each stage and with each stage media was not an influence in development. None of the participants sought out media as a framework for how to "be" a lesbian. For the participants it was something that evolved over time, a process. Media images of lesbians the participants were able to recall were Ellen DeGeneres and characters from the show *The L Word*. The influence of media was minimal, but media did play a role in development. Media provided emerging

lesbians with a sense of community. Depending on the age of the participant, media was books, movies, television shows and music. Participants who were older described the only media they felt was available was books, and the portrayal of lesbians was not positive within those books. The older participants described the difficulties they had in finding lesbians in the media and it was not until Ellen DeGeneres that media portrayal was positive. A younger participant described endorsing certain people and shows due to the portrayal of lesbians, such as characters from the television show *The L Word*, *The Real L Word*, Ellen DeGeneres and recording artists such as Melissa Etheridge.

Although there are currently lesbians portrayed in the general media, the participants felt as if these portrayals were not positive. There were multiple participants who felt media had come a long way, but there was still a long way to go. When discussing stereotypes created by the media, none of the participants felt they identified strongly with the typical butch femme stereotype. The participants were well aware of the stereotypes created, but only one of them self-identified as similar to a popular media character.

The media did not teach the participants how to “become” a lesbian. Each of the participants through internal realization discovered their own lesbian identity. Once the participant became aware of her lesbian identity, she then noticed and some related to lesbian characters. That is just it; the people on television, on *The L Word* are characters. All but one of the actors on *The L Word* are heterosexual. Ellen DeGeneres is a lesbian, as is Rachel Maddow, and numerous recording artists, but they are few and far between.

One of the participants during the interview said something that summed up the entire thing “this isn’t something I learned to do it’s just the way that I am.” This comment was pivotal in this research, for the researcher it felt like the participant answered all the questions they had with one simple response. How can someone learn to be a lesbian? They can’t, it is a process that evolves over time. The end result was the same for each participant, they were lesbians, the journey although important is just the beginning of a lifetime of self-acceptance and true happiness. This finding, and the findings from the other participants, in the study would indicate that identity formation is not the clearly defined linear process Cass assumed it was. It would appear from the participants that being a lesbian is an inherent trait, one that develops differently for each person, and because the identity is inherent in nature, it is not something that can be taught, it is discovered, and becomes an identity.

Implications for Social Workers

Identity formation models have come a long way from the illness models and the removal of homosexuality as a mental disorder from the *Diagnostics and Statistics Manual*. Although the progress is vast, there is still a need for greater expansion in the realm of lesbian identity formation. Looking at identity formation as an integral part of an individual’s life, as well as understanding the complexity and diversity of human beginnings.

As a social worker, working with individuals who report feelings of a potential sexual identity change, and or are currently experiencing “coming out”, it is important to let the client be the guide. Cass’ linear stage mode can be a

useful tool to show the client the process, but clinicians should keep in mind that not every client will follow a linear progression. Letting clients discuss and express their feelings and staying open minded will benefit clients during this time. Letting go of stereotypes and biases towards lesbians is crucial, because as suggested in this thesis, the process of sexual identity formation looks different for everyone. Being aware of national and local resources for lesbians is also key as to provide the client with a sense of community if they so chose. As a social worker, being an empathetic listener, providing support and guidance if needed, and being aware of resources within the community will benefit

Implications for Youth

This research looked at lesbians who already self identified as such. Further research can be done on youth sexual identity development. When working with youth and issues surrounding sexual identity, the same rules apply, empathy, support and resources. Acting as a provider of support and reassurance will also benefit youth dealing with sexual identity formation. Youth is a difficult time, and when a young woman feels she is different than her peers, numerous things in her life change. Specific issues related to youth sexual identity formation would be issues with bullying at school, potential alienation from friend groups and suicide. These issues need to be addressed in treatment to ensure safety for clients. Understanding that media is not going to be a source for younger lesbians to learn how to be a lesbian, but more of a sense of community, and a representation of their own identity in the media.

Research Limitations

It is possible that retrospective reporting of data can lead to misrepresentation of information. Participants may have a lack of memory and or change their memories of their coming out process. The sample size was small, 10 interviews were conducted, and 9 were used for as the sample, which was overwhelmingly Caucasian. The study consisted of lesbians who were already secure self identified lesbians, and there fore may have held more insight into their sexual identity as opposed to lesbians who are not fully out in the community. It is possible that the retrospective nature of the data collected could have led the participants to not recall negative things about their identity development due to their current security level within their identity.

Each of the participants was either in college, had a college degree and or a post college degree. This is not representative of the entire lesbian population. Also each participant was in a relationship at the time of the interview again this is not representative of the entire lesbian population, and could have skewed the data. The participants may have been more comfortable articulating their experiences due to their education and the ease and comfort the participants felt due to the interview being done in a location of their choosing.

The information provided from the results cannot be generalized to the public, nor can it be generalized to the greater lesbian population. Being that this was my first attempt at formulating questions, the questions were at times double barreled, unclear and repetitive. Also, some of the questions asked during the interview process could be viewed as leading questions, and therefore would

decrease the reliability if the participant felt encouraged to answer in a certain way. Another researcher did not review the data collected, therefore triangulation was not achieved and reliability was not assessed. The use of qualitative and narrative methods to client responses was successful. I was able to ask questions that participants responded with pertinent answers. Each question during the interview was asked the same way, and if participants had questions the researcher answered those.

The participant's feelings towards media influences can also not be generalized to the public or the greater lesbian population. Media can be interpreted in numerous ways, and media changes daily, therefore the responses the participants gave during their interview may look very different in years to come.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I was able to find tentative answers to the three objectives related to sexual identity development in lesbians with media as a trajectory. The use of qualitative data and the narrative approach to collection were successful. Further research can be done using similar methods for youth surrounding the sexual identity formation process. Using this information social workers can better understand the sexual identity formation process, specific to lesbians. Also social workers who are unfamiliar with media images related to lesbian identity can gain a better understand of the purpose they serve in the lesbian community, as well as the greater general population. This study can be a foundation for further research on media influences on development as well as using age as a

factor in developmental differences of lesbians. This research can also be used by social workers to help better work with emerging lesbian identity development.

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APPENDIX A
SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONS

Identity Confusion-

1. Think about the first time in your life you realized or started to realize you were or might be a lesbian.
2. What did this look like for you? What did you do with these thoughts?
Suppress them or express them?
3. At what age did these thoughts begin?
4. Looking back can you see some times when you weren't consciously aware of these thoughts, but you might have had them?
5. Can you think of any trigger, event or experience that might have caused these thoughts?
6. How if at all did media images shape the way you thought lesbians were, how they looked and acted?
Were there any media images that you related to, or did you seek any media out in attempts to connect with a lesbian identity?

Identity Comparison-

7. Once you had these thoughts you might be a lesbian did anything change in your life?
8. Did you act differently around anyone? For example family, friends, your heterosexual female friends?
9. Was there any kind of disconnect for you in terms of wanting to be around more lesbians as opposed to heterosexual people?
10. At any point during your life did you compare yourself to your heterosexual counterparts and feel different based on your emerging lesbian identity?
11. Tell me about any stereotypes you had based on media images you had seen.
What kind of emotions did these stereotypes create for you with your emerging lesbian identity?
Did they impact any of your decisions in terms of dress, or behavior?

Identity Tolerance-

12. Did you ever at one point think "I am probably a lesbian"? Did you even have this thought, or did you go straight to "I am a lesbian"?
13. When and how did you feel when you first thought "I am probably a lesbian", what did you do once you thought this?
14. Were you able to reach out to any friends or anyone in the lesbian community for support to further discover this possible new identity?
15. Did you look at any media images of lesbians in an attempt to connect with a lesbian identity?
If so, what did these images provide for you in terms of identity development?

Identity Acceptance

16. How soon after you thought "I'm probably a lesbian" came "I am a lesbian" thoughts?
17. Share with me when you first accepted/realized that you were a lesbian. What feelings were associated with that acceptance?
Was there a specific event or experience that triggered this thought/ acceptance?

18. If you ever saw a “coming out” scenario in the media did it represent what you went through during your “coming out” process?

19. When you accepted your lesbian identity how did it make you feel?

Identity Pride

21. Once you accepted your lesbian identity was there ever a time you wavered back and forth in terms of regretting or wishing you weren’t a lesbian?

22. Have you participated in any activities you feel are associated with lesbian rights? If so which activities?

Did participating in these events increase your sense of self?

23. Have you sought out any lesbian media images to represent your lesbian identity?

Was there already a preexisting media image you feel you associate with?

24. Do you feel that the lesbian media images you have seen are a positive portrayal for younger lesbians?

Identity Synthesis

24. How do you see yourself currently as a lesbian in today’s society?

25. In what way do you think the media views lesbians as a whole?

26. How do you think the images the media has created impacts the general public’s ideas and notions related to lesbian identities?

Thank you very much for your time.

APPENDIX B
INFORMATION LETTER

Identity Formation among Lesbians:
Testing Cass' Theory with an Emphasis on Media Influences

Date _____

Dear _____:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Jeffrey Lacasse, PhD in the Department of Social Work at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to evaluate lesbian sexual identity development, with specific interest on the role media plays in lesbian identity development. The Cass Theory of Sexual Identity Formation, a stage model, is the chosen theory to study lesbian sexual identity formation. I have added a media component to assess the role media plays in identity formation.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve a guided one-on-one interview, ranging in time from 1-2.5 hours. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop the interview at any time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You must be 18 years or older to participate in this study. If during your interview you reference another individual please do not use names, and reference people in general terms.

The potential benefits to the individuals who participate are that they get to learn about a model of lesbian identity. The study may also increase their self-awareness and increase their understanding of their lesbian identity. Potential benefits of the study for others are the increased research on lesbian identity formation even greater emphasis on media images and how they affect lesbian identity development. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

Your responses in this data will be anonymous while withholding any discriminating information. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

I would like to audiotape this interview. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be taped; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know. The tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in University Center, on the 8th floor in room 871; the only people to have access to these tapes will be co-investigators on this project, consisting of Hilary Haseley, Dr. Jeffrey Lacasse, or Dr. Elizabeth Segal. The tapes will be destroyed one year after the project begins.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: Dr Jeffrey Lacasse, Jeffrey.lacasse@asu.edu, or Haseley,

Hilary.haseley@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please let me know if you wish to be part of the study.

APPENDIX C
QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer each question below in the space provided

Age _____

Sexual Orientation

Lesbian _____ Heterosexual _____ Bisexual _____ Transgendered _____

Race

Caucasian _____ African American _____ Hispanic _____ Asian/Pacific

Islander _____

Bi-racial _____ Multi-racial _____

Level of schooling

High School _____ Some College _____ College Degree _____ Post

Graduate Work _____ Post Graduate Degree _____

Relationship status

In a relationship _____, if so how long _____

Single _____ Married _____ Civil Union _____ Domestic Partnership _____

Divorced _____

Do you have children?

No _____ Yes _____ if so how many _____

Occupation _____

Political affiliation

Conservative _____ Liberal _____ Moderate _____

On a scale of 1 to 10 with **1 being the least** and **10 being the most**, how open are you with your sexuality?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

On a scale of 1 to 10 with **1 being the least** and **10 being the most** how much would you rate your lesbian identity development was shaped by the media?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

On a scale of 1 to 10 with **1 being the least** and **10 being the most** how much do you feel you identify with lesbians in the media?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

On a scale of 1 to 10 with **1 being the least** and **10 being the most** how well do you feel lesbians are represented in the media?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

On a scale of 1 to 10 with **1 being the least** and **10 being the most** how important do you feel it is to have lesbian images in the media?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

APPENDIX D
RESOURCE LIS

If at any time after your participation in this study you feel you need additional support or guidance here are a list of resources both nationally and locally that specialize in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered issues.

Greater Phoenix Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce

The Greater Phoenix Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce is a non-profit organization dedicated to building strength and prosperity in the gay and gay-friendly community through networking and social activities.

P.O Box 2097 Phoenix, AZ 85001

602-225-8444

www.gpglcc.org

PFLAG, Parents Families, Friends and Lesbians and Gays Phoenix Chapter

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is a national non-profit organization with over 200,000 members and supporters and over 500 affiliates in the United States.

Meetings in North Scottsdale

[Via de Cristo United Methodist Church](#)

7430 E. Pinnacle Peak Road, Suite 134, Scottsdale.

Meetings in Phoenix

First Congregational UCC, 1407 N. Second St., Phoenix 85004-1607

<http://www.pflagphoenix.org/>

GLBT Near Me

The National GLBT Resource Database

<http://www.glbtnearme.org/>

Lambda

LAMBDA is a non-profit, gay / lesbian / bisexual / transgender agency dedicated to reducing homophobia, inequality, hate crimes, and discrimination by encouraging self-acceptance, cooperation, and non-violence.

<http://www.lambda.org/>

Human Rights Campaign (HRC)

The HRC advocates for LBGT Americans in diverse communities and educates the public on LGBT issues

