

LGBTQ+ Youth and the Search for Labels: Identity Exploration Online

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Approved November 2021 by the  
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2021

## ABSTRACT

In this study, the posts and interactions on a social media site for sexuality and/or gender questioning adolescents were analyzed in order to explore how online spaces contribute to identity development and exploration for this community. Fifty posts, pulled from two Reddit threads, were assessed to determine how questioning adolescents were discussing and questioning their sexual and/or gender identity. The replies of the poster to comments from others were also analyzed to further explore responses to and engagement with other members of the LGBTQ+ community. Using a thematic analysis, it was determined that questioning youth were using Reddit as a means of getting advice, help, explanation, and clarification about their identities and labels they could self-identify as. It was also determined that identities were positively impacted and informed through engagement with others through the exchange of supportive comments and advice. This data suggests that social media can provide positive and supportive safe spaces for identity development and a sense of shared community. However, the significance of the anonymity provided by social media sites is an important part of this provision. It is recommended that further research be done within this framework in order to assess how identity exploration occurs on multiple social media platforms, with an emphasis on the earlier aspects of identity formation given that the focus to date has been primarily on the specific process of coming out.

Keywords: identity exploration, social media, LGBTQ+, adolescents

For Trinity – Your wisdom, kindness, comfort, and support have kept me grounded.  
Words cannot express my gratitude.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My utmost appreciation to my committee for their grace and support. My absolute gratitude and respect to Dr. Meân for patience, wisdom, guidance, and seemingly limitless faith.

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## **LGBTQ+ Youth and the Search for Labels: Identity Exploration Online**

Identity is central to human development and overall well-being. It is what tells people who they are and often informs where they place value in things (Ciszeck, 2017). For adolescents, identity is a crucial part of growing up, and these formative years are critical times of development (Becht et al., 2016). Accordingly, much research has been done on adolescents and their developmental years. However, research that touches on development of sexual and gender identity is lacking in comparison to other avenues of research, despite acknowledgement that sexual and gender identity formation is a key component of identity development during these formative years (Zoeterman & Wright, 2014). Even more so, the research that focuses on sexual and gender identity puts incredible emphasis on the coming out process, only briefly touching on the journey that leads youth to this momentous occurrence (Crowson & Goulding, 2013; McInroy & Craig, 2020; Tyler & Abetz, 2020). This is likely because, unlike their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts, questioning and queer youth are notably ‘in the closet’ until this moment of coming out, shrouding the identity development they experience to get to this point in mystery. For queer and questioning youth, the question of how sexual and gender identity are formed, before youth even arrive at a firm label for themselves, is of peak importance. Given what has been seemingly ignored in previous research, the aim of the research reported here was explore what sorts of questions, experiences, and interactions about sexual and gender identity are produced by queer and questioning youth in a perceived safe space; that is, in anonymous social media spaces for the LGBTQ+ community.

Identity is an important facet of everyday life, and identity construction occurs heavily during adolescent years (Craig & McInroy, 2014). For queer youth, this process is made more difficult because their identity falls outside of the spectrum of heteronormativity. This provides them with less opportunity to explore their identity in safe spaces, which “facilitate stable identity development” (Bates et al., 2020, p. 61). Safe spaces for queer youth would not only allow identity exploration, but also minimize physical harm and “emotional and social risks” (Crowson & Goulding, 2013). In fact, Ciszek (2017) notes that queer youth are one of the “most significant at-risk groups” (p. 1993). In the case of most youth who are not questioning their sexual and/or gender identity, they are typically able to look to others for identities to relate to or go to others with questions (Ciszek, 2017). In contrast, queer youth often have to find answers to questions about their identities elsewhere, such as through media (Ciszek, 2017; Fox & Ralston, 2016). However, as Sloop (2009) emphasizes, the limited range of traditional media of mainstream culture stereotypes queer characters in problematic ways that are not necessarily true to life. This leaves new media, such as social media, as potential places of identity development and exploration. In particular, social media, due to its potential anonymity and reach worldwide, is considered a safe space for queer and questioning individuals to gather in community (Bates et al., 2020). In fact, one corner of the internet where queer youth flock to for information about identity, Reddit, provided the site for this study. Two threads on Reddit, r/LGBTeens and r/LGBT, were found to be an active place for queer and questioning youth to post and engage directly with others, regarding their identities.



As stated above, much of the research conducted on queer identities does not focus on the actual formation and exploration of sexual and/or gender identity. Instead, it focuses on the coming out process, which is in many ways the end state of this stage of identity construction. In doing this, research is leaving the bulk of identity work unassessed. In contrast, the focus of this study was exploring the earlier elements of the formation of identity, with the objective of uncovering information that could contribute to wider understandings about, and the development of, support needed for this community, in particular, the gaining of information that could usefully contribute to the development of a viable program to help queer and questioning youth gain relevant and useful information about non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender identities.

While there are many theories about identity formation, social interaction is central to many as most recognize that identity is a social process. Lucero (2017) emphasizes that interaction between individuals is what helps develop and solidify a person's identity due to cognitive development within social context. Based on the ideas of Berger and Luckmann (1966), Lucero (2017) argues that social interactions help to construct identity because "identity construction is a social process" (p. 117). As such, the focus on communicative elements and digital spaces has a range of substantive theoretical support, both generally and specifically in relation to the development of queer identities. However, two theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant for the research undertaken and reported below.

First, using Troiden's (1988) suggested stages for queer individuals and their identity formation, Fox and Ralston (2016) argue questioning individuals will begin to realize their difference and seek information to understand their feelings. They

acknowledge that there may be a time of turmoil during which the individual will debate, reject, or reframe their identity, but they eventually progress to self-acceptance, seek out like others, and disclose their identity (Fox & Ralston, 2016). This stage approach to queer identity development is important because it puts context to the idea of exploration and uncertainty before reaching the point of coming out. It emphasizes a potential template for identity development in which queer youth may follow and, in particular for this study, the identity exploration that is going on, specifically the idea of seeking information to understand feelings as well as potentially debating, rejecting, or reframing identity. However, in conceptualizing these stages, this approach can be seen to suggest that the developmental process is linear and unidirectional.

Second, McInroy and Craig (2020) discuss the idea, originally presented by Laukkanen (2007), that social reality has the ability to render “offline identities and physical bodies invisible” (p. 244). This is important because it showcases that individuals can embody separate identities, and, in different contexts within different relationships, yet be part of the same person. This perspective also emphasizes the importance of anonymity for identity exploration, as it allows individuals to explore their identity without being held to what they are perceived as offline, in addition to providing a way to stay unidentified for other reasons (e.g. not to be outed, endangered, etc.). Both of these perspectives demonstrate the potential significance of identity formation as a process and a process of exploration where different aspects of a person and different understandings can be developed, rehearsed, tried out, and so forth. Similarly, they acknowledge the role of community and interaction, but also the importance of anonymity for some, rendering online spaces a powerful site for contemporary adolescent

identity exploration – but especially for queer and questioning youth. Equally, these perspectives suggest engagement with others is a key element to developing one’s own identity at all stages of the process. Together, these informed the research focus on the ways in which queer and questioning youth explore and develop sexual and/or gender identities in an active, anonymous, and online space.

At the beginning of this research project, the first goal was to find places where queer adolescent identities were being actively explored and constructed. Previous research has focused on extremely public social media spaces, such as Facebook and Twitter. However, as previously noted, much of this research also emphasizes the ‘coming out’ portion of identity construction, rather than on how the identities came to be in the first place. For those not ready to be public or who remain uncertain about who they are, the lack of anonymity on Facebook is a challenge for active engagement or membership. Equally, Twitter does not readily facilitate group conversations as each response to another is a unique post rather than a comment, and each response is subsequently available to view by all followers of that user. Consequently, while these sites have been useful in previous research, they were determined to not be where questioning youth were posting or discussing issues regarding their identities.

Originally Tumblr was considered to be the potential place to delve into to discover the communities that would house identity exploration, considering that has been, until recently, a common place for those of the queer community to congregate and build community within the digital space (Bronstein, 2020). However, the mass exodus from Tumblr, due to policy change in 2018 that restricted adult content and subsequently hindered queer communities from expressing and exploring their sexualities (Bronstein,

2020), did not offer new users, especially questioning youth, much of an opportunity to question their identities or build communities that could address relevant issues, such as identity exploration and self-labeling. Fortunately, within the pages of an article on advocacy communication and social identity (Ciszek, 2017), a digital space for such identity exploration was reported. Within this article, Erica Ciszek discussed Reddit as a place of social media outreach, specifically mentioning the thread r/LGBTeens. On exploring this space, this Reddit thread was found to be a place where queer youth were interacting with others, largely focused on identity exploration. In finding this social media space to analyze interactions, data collection commenced.

### **Identity Development and Queer Youth Experiences**

Identity construction is defined in various ways across previous research. Most often, it is defined as a crucial part of a person's self-concept and development, with emphasis on where a person belongs (Bates et al., 2020; Becht et al., 2016; Ciszek, 2017; Craig & McInroy, 2014; McInroy & Craig, 2020; Zoeterman & Wright, 2014). Klimstra et al. (2010) note that identity development can also be considered as developmental changes. Additionally, Crowson and Goulding (2013) note that it is a process that is often presented as a linear construct despite many researchers suggesting otherwise. In fact, it is important to acknowledge that identity continues to develop beyond adolescent years, across the lifespan (Zoeterman & Wright, 2014), and can evolve over time, potentially more than once (Bosse & Chiodo, 2016; Kornienko et al., 2016). From the perspective of youth who do not fit into the boxes of heterosexual and cisgender, identity formation becomes more difficult and important. This is due in large part to a lack of safes spaces which "facilitate stable identity development" (Bates et al., 2020, p. 61). Safe spaces are

places where individuals can perform identity work without significant risk of physical, emotional, or social harm (Crowson & Goulding, 2013). It is established that the coming out process is healthy and necessary for queer individuals while constructing their identity (Crowson & Goulding, 2013); however, the process is acknowledged to be one that may take a longer amount of time, even lifelong as individuals may feel the need to disclose their identity to those new to their social sphere (Tyler & Abetz, 2020). Jamil et al. (2009) describe identity development as “multifaceted and complex” (p. 203), which is reflected similarly when Bosse and Chiodo (2016) discuss how sexual and gender identities do not always fit neatly into understandable boxes. Despite the conflict that individuals struggling with their sexual and/or gender identities may feel, Bates et al. (2020) emphasize that exploring these identities are normative and anticipated aspects of identity development. Beyond this, identity construction is also seen as something that cannot be done in isolation, but is created in congruence with others (Lucero, 2017; McLean & Breen, 2009) and through communication and engagement with society and other social relationships (Bergen & Braithwaite, 2009; Tyler & Abetz, 2020). This is corroborated by various researchers, through the lens of social media. Research shows that the internet and social media allow crucial opportunities for identity construction, particularly for queer individuals, through the means of engagement with other individuals and welcoming communities, safety during exploration, and exposure to identities and experiences they may not have been privy to in their day-to-day in-person lives (Bates et al., 2020; Ciszek, 2017; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Crowson & Goulding, 2013; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Fox & Warber, 2015; McInroy & Craig, 2020; Miller, 2017; Taylor et al., 2014;). McInroy and Craig (2020) emphasize that this online identity

construction is also vital for queer youth because it allows them the anonymous space to experiment with their identity without being forced to disclose prematurely or face potential disapproval from others. In summary, the research underscores the importance of identity development in an adolescent's life and places extra importance on the healthy development of sexual and/or gender identities, which are often explored and formed within online spaces.

For queer youth, it can be especially difficult to navigate identity development and general life experiences. Many scholars note that identifying as a sexual and/or gender identity that diverges from the heteronormative and cisgender expectations of society can have negative repercussions for adolescents. In particular stress, abuse, neglect, depression, suicidal ideation or suicide attempts, social distance, and stigmatization can afflict queer and questioning youth (Becht et al., 2016; Fish et al., 2020; Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Rodgers, 2017). Online spaces are seen as safe havens from personal strife and are an important aspect of social life, frequented by queer youth (Ciszek, 2017; McInroy et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2017) as it allows them to connect with others and freely express themselves. Being that queer youth face a potentially different and distinct path of identity development (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Zoeterman & Wright, 2014), they utilize social media and the internet far more often to explore and understand their identity compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. Queer youth explore their identity through connecting with others, disclosing experiences, seeking out information about various identities, coming out, exploring LGBTQ+ resources, and practicing their identity in what they deem a safe space (Byron et al., 2019; Ciszek, 2017; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019; McInroy et al., 2019;

Miller, 2017). Indeed Jamil et al. (2009) observed that, in terms of identity development, queer youth typically recognized their attractions first before attaching a label to what they were experiencing. Similarly, Bosse and Chiodo (2016) note that it is fairly common for queer youth to generate new language in order to create a label they identify with, particularly when there is no term sufficient for that identity. The queer youth experience, as shown by previous research, can certainly be filled with strife. However, research also reveals that, due to heavy online presence, LGBTQ+ adolescents are finding places to safely explore identity and connect with others.

### **Social Media and Community**

While the internet may not be new to this century, its use in identity development and queer community's construction of safe spaces has transformed what it means to be online. Researchers have identified social media as a new and safe space, beneficial for queer identity construction, particularly due to the ability of the user to control their own narrative on social media (Ciszek, 2017; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Heinz, 2009; Lengel, 2009; Lucero, 2017; McInroy & Craig, 2020; Miller, 2017; Taylor et al., 2014). In discussing the popularity of social media platforms, McInroy et al. (2019) cite Lenhart et al. (2015) to claim that Facebook was most popular platform, with Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Google+, and Tumblr following in succession. While this information is pertinent, the research used as the basis for this claim is now over five years old and there is likely some shift in the usage and popularity of these; for example, Google+ has been discontinued and Tumblr lost over 40% of traffic and activity due to policy change that prohibited adult content (Bronstein, 2020). Additionally, while social media sites are seen as places of potential identity development, anonymity is favored by

most queer users who are exploring their identity (Fox & Ralston, 2016; McConnell et al., 2018), leaving sites like Facebook less appealing because of easy identification (Bronstein, 2020; Fox & Warber, 2015; Hanckel et al., 2019). Despite this, Bates et al. (2020) note that Facebook is often the go-to place for when an individual is ready to disclose their sexual and/or gender identity. Effectively, social media is a space of seemingly limitless potential for those exploring identity, but anonymity is what is important in these spaces during identity exploration and construction, so that discovery can go undisturbed by accidental outings.

Community is regarded as an important aspect of queer life and identity construction. At the very beginning of internet focused technological advancements, the French Minitel allowed lesbians to form a community where it was impossible elsewhere (Chaplin, 2014). Technology has, therefore, positively impacted the queer community, including the ways it has brought people together despite geographical distance and other forms of social isolation so long as private internet access is available. For many queer youth, community, particularly online, is an important aspect because it not only connects them with others who are similar to them, but also provides them a safe avenue through which to explore and discuss their identity as well as ask questions of other, more experienced queer individuals (Byron et al. 2019; Ciszek, 2017; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Hanckel & Morris, 2014). Bergen and Braithwaite (2009) emphasize the need for community, particularly for those questioning their identity, with their assertion that “we need the mirror of other people’s reactions to us to gain insight to “who we are” (p. 166). This assertion focuses on the idea that without engaging with others, we do not have identities, which is why validation and support from others is absolutely necessary for



identity construction (Bergen & Braithwaite, 2009). Fox & Ralston (2016) similarly echo this sentiment, stating that queer individuals who engage with others within their community “felt less socially isolated and experienced greater self-acceptance” (p. 636). For queer individuals, especially questioning adolescents, community is a key component of identity construction and acceptance of one’s identity.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

It is evident that social media provides a vital space for queer and questioning adolescent youth to engage with community in a safe and supportive environment, to explore labels, create understanding, and even create new language (Bosse & Chiodo, 2016; Fox & Ralston, 2016). The Coordinated Management of Meaning (Pearce & Cronen, 1980) provides a useful framework within which to understand these findings. This theory states that when communicating with others, individuals create their own social worlds within this communication (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). This also aligns with the social constructionist perspective that also centralizes the tenet that meaning making happens within communication, interaction and, notably, language. Indeed, identity does not exist without interaction with others (Bergen & Braithwaite, 2009) and the collaborative construction of identities in communicative and representational action (Potter, 1996). Coordinated Management of Meaning embodies what it means to develop identity within a conversation, or in this study’s case, within a social media post. Given the unique ability of social media to provide an apparent community and bring people together, the post and the interaction via comments, separately and together provide a space with a variety of opportunities for identity construction and exploration. That is, the posts provide a clear space for the communicative construction and performance of

identity, while the conversations and interactions provide additional opportunities for collaborative identity exploration, shared meaning making, and the creation of a shared social world. Consequently, the act of posting and the interactions between poster and commenter are both highlighted within this study as important elements of the ongoing development and construction of identity and shared community.

It must be mentioned that while individuals are coming together and influencing one another through shared knowledge, they too are doing so through how they are representing their culture within these interactions. Each individual has grown up within a culture that shapes how they perceive the world, and their interactions with others will likely reflect this. López (2018) describes how Western identities often dominate the conversation while non-Western identities are likely to be seen as “outdated” (p. 1817). These types of expectations and cultural understandings will follow individuals into these interactions, so it must be noted how culture influences the knowledge that is shared. In turn, through these interactions and world building between individuals, they are establishing which cultural norms are permitted for the community and what is eventually rejected from the conversation, such as a term that is considered antiquated.

What is particularly important about Coordinated Management of Meaning is the fact that it emphasizes engagement between individuals, which is a large component of this study. When individuals post, they are actively looking to engage with others, and through responding to comments, they are then directly partaking in the world building that allows knowledge to be shared and identities to be informed. By highlighting the interactions between individuals, it is possible to understand more about what identity exploration is going on during these interactions within the safe space of social media.

Within these spaces, these individuals communicate, and their communication and interactions inform what their identity is within this space. This contributes toward the building of community as these individuals are within a space where they are presumably able to interact and engage with other members of the LGBTQ+ community. This engagement allows what is common knowledge to more experienced members of the community to be imparted upon those who are newer, thus establishing a culture and identity for the community. This suggests that questioning and queer youth attempting to learn about their sexual and/or gender identity can engage with other individuals from the LGBTQ+ community and through such engagement can learn more about their identity simply by gaining knowledge and experience from the conversation and interactions with another. Rather than simply discussing potential identities or answering questions, a person engaging with a queer or questioning youth is presenting the other with an opportunity to explore more about their identity and potential community through the means of exchanging knowledge, experiences, and cultural practices unique to the community.

### **Research Aims**

The research aimed to explore what kinds of sexual or gender identity related questions and issues were being raised and discussed in online spaces specifically identified for LGBTQ+ individuals and teenagers. While the definition of youth varies across published research, for this study the common definition of adolescence as 13 to 19 years of age was used. This does not suggest that questioning does not arise before and after these ages. However, this definition usefully aligned with one of the threads

identified for data collection denoted as “r/LGBTeens”, and another thread on Reddit was identified for the research; these threads are described in more detail below (see Method).

From these general research aims, two research questions were formulated. First, what issues, experiences, and questions were being raised in the initial posts of adolescents (referred to as postees). Second, what do postee responses to comments and on their post reveal about identity exploration and community on these sites?

## **METHOD**

Using purposive sampling, posts and associated comments that met the criteria for inclusion (see below) were compiled from Reddit threads r/LGBTeens and r/LGBT. The data were then analyzed for emergent themes using thematic analysis.

### **Sample and Data Set**

As noted above, published research in combination with active exploration of the internet identified two threads on Reddit as useful online/digital sites for the exploration of identities by questioning adolescents: r/LGBTeens and r/LGBT. Both threads had hundreds of posts, many with comments and responses to these from the author of the original post, referred to hereon as postees. Purposive sampling was implemented on these threads in order to select the data (post plus associated comments and responses) that met the criteria for the study.

Criteria for inclusion as data required the post to come from a 13-19 year old questioning youth. The post needed to include content that showed a challenge, question/questioning, or an attempt to self-define or identify the postee’s own identity. In addition, the post itself needed to have a minimum of two comments from other people and at least one response to comments from the postee. To distinguish between comment

and response, comments come from other individuals within the Reddit thread and responses come from the postee. The comments and responses were included as criteria to ensure that the data were taken from participants who were engaged in the interactional aspects of the space, rather than posting and disengaging. That is, these were used to indicate the sharing of understandings and enacted community. After the initial process of purposive sampling, data were checked again to ensure they met all criteria for inclusion.

Posts drawn from r/LGBTeens were assumed to be from queer or questioning teenagers, as not only is this thread explicitly directed at and stated as for that age range, but anyone outside of that range is requested to state their age within their profile in order to post. In fact, the r/LGBTeens thread states that advice from older LGBTQ+ individuals is welcome, but that thread exists for queer youth, rather than older individuals. However, as noted above, since the thread r/LGBT is open to anyone of any age, explicit mention of the postee's age was required as extra verification for the inclusion of a post. However, it should be acknowledged that there is no way to absolutely verify that a post came from a postee in the stated age range. Comments on posts did not require an age frame and could come from a person of any age. It should also be noted that a large majority of posts, 90%, were pulled from the thread r/LGBTeens because the thread does in fact exist as a place for queer youth to go if they are struggling with their identity, be it accepting, understanding, or any other struggle they experience.

The final data set comprised of fifty posts from the two Reddit threads (N=50). Responses 1-30 and 36-50 came from r/LGBTeens (n=45), while 31-35 were pulled from r/LGBT (n=5).

## **Data Collection**

The posts were collected across two months using six data collection points. The first collection started on February 2, 2021, the second collection occurred on March 19, 2021, the third collection occurred on April 1, 2021, the fourth collection was gathered across April 4, 2021 and April 5, 2021, the fifth collection was gathered on April 12, 2021, and the final collection concluded on April 19, 2021. The process of data collection was staggered for two reasons. First, Reddit limits post available with a focus on recent posts. Older posts did not load for public viewing which means that a limited number of current posts are available at any given time. As such, older posts are not readily available. This did not mean they were completely inaccessible, but in order to access such posts, hyperlinks were necessary, effectively rendering this potential method of collection impossible. Second, after the initial data collection, time was needed for posts to replenish and be commented on, but the new posts and/or comments needed to be recorded regularly to avoid being lost to the process just described. Data collection continued until a data set considered sufficient size for analysis was collected, i.e. fifty initial posts plus comments and responses.

At each data collection point, all posts plus comments and responses were captured by screenshot and transferred into a word document and numbered by order of collection. Comments and responses were collected in reverse chronological order as that was the standard presentation of comments on Reddit. Each post was given a unique numerical identifier. Data recorded also included: number of days ago the post was created, the approximate date of creation, the title, label of post, number of comments, upvoted percentage, and numbers of arrows up.

## **Thematic Analysis**

Once all data were collected, the posts were thematically analyzed, focusing on emergent themes. Two elements of each post were analyzed: the initial post as well as responses from the original author to comments by others. Each of the initial fifty posts were read, compiled by commonalities, and categorized a total of three times. This was done to ensure that themes that potentially fit in with multiple categories received the most appropriate label and that there were no other labels that could be assigned to the posts.

These initial posts were categorized into emergent themes (see below).

The emergent themes focus on defining how each individual of the initial posts is describing their struggle with identity. For example, uncertainty and its sub-theme identity without a name, highlight the struggle to understand one's experiences, feelings, or inability to label their identity. The theme of fear focuses on the individual's struggle to make peace with their identity due to their own issues or the potential issues of others. Finally, the self-doubt theme focuses on the struggle to consider one's experiences and feelings as valid. The data included as exemplars in the findings below are connected to the original/initial posts using unique identifiers. These identifiers use Px to denote the postee (P), followed by a number (x) to indicate the order of collection. For example, P3 would indicate the third original/initial post.

A secondary thematic analysis of the initial postee's response to comments was then undertaken. By organizing these responses into themes, the data becomes open to an assessment of the identity work that is going on for the author of the original post. Each of these elements builds on each other in order to explore some of the interactional

elements of the posts (see below). Comments from others on the original posts were not directly part of the analysis as the focus of the study was on the identity work being done by the individual who originally created the post and their engagement with others. This being said, the content is relevant to contextualize the response and, in order to maintain transparency, they are included. Data exemplars of these ‘interactional’ responses included in the findings below are denoted using a combination of similar identifiers to indicate where in the sequence they arose. Thus, Px indicates the initial post, Cx denotes a comment from another user and which number (as there were often multiple comments), and PRx identifies the postee’s response to the comment and the number their comment is in gathering order. For example, a response from postee #3 to the second comment from another user will be labeled as P3.C2.PR1 (Postee #3, comment #2, and the postee’s response which is the first response to the second comment). If they are the second response under the second comment, the label for this specific response would instead be P3.C2.PR2. When comments are included to emphasize a response, they will be displayed as Px.Cx in order to ensure clarity. The forthcoming findings will begin with the analysis of the original posts.

## **FINDINGS**

In analyzing the data collected for this study, three emergent main themes and one sub-theme were uncovered. These main themes are: uncertainty, fear, and self-doubt. The sub-theme belongs under the main theme of uncertainty and is identity with no name. Typically, when reporting data, any irregularities are reported using [sic]; however, due to the informal nature of social media and the abundance of irregularities, data will be reported as is, without this indication.



Regarding the original posts, this study produced three main themes, one sub-theme, and three secondary-themes that these posts could be categorized into. The themes of the original post are uncertainty with the sub-theme identity with no name, fear, and self-doubt. The secondary-themes are questions/statements seeking advice/help, questions/statements seeking clarity/explanations, and neither. Additionally, after analyzing the responses made by the postee in response to another comment, there are five themes that cover these responses. The themes of the postee's responses are appreciation, builds connection, accepts comment, rejects comment, and dialogue. Descriptions and defining characteristics of the main themes, secondary themes, and response themes are detailed in Table 1 which can also be found in Appendix I.

Table 1

*Theme Definitions*

Theme	Definition
<b>Main Themes</b>	
Uncertainty	Posts with clear back and forth, particularly about feelings or experiences; at times, labels were debated as well
Sub-Theme: Identity with no name	The postee knows their experiences and feelings, but are at a loss as to what they would label themselves as
Fear	Fear of committing to a label for fear of change, rejection, or incorrect labeling; at times, these individuals expressed fear over the reactions of others
Self-doubt	Insecurity about identity or feelings and/or experiences; this theme is distinct from fear and identity with no name because it is more about questioning the validity of experiences and/or feelings, and it is distinct from uncertainty because there is a common thread of denial within these posts
<b>Secondary-Themes</b>	
Seek advice/help	Seeking guidance or wisdom from others in the community or Reddit thread in order to assist in their journey of identity exploration
Seek clarity/explanation	Postees asking about particular identities, experiences, or other related topics with the intent to learn more about the topic through clarification or explanation
Neither	No discernable desired outcome, consisting of pure disclosure without a definitive purpose to seek either clarity or advice from others
<b>Response Themes</b>	
Appreciation	Responses that emphasize and show gratitude for the comments of others
Builds connections	Responses either asked questions to further the interaction or disclosed more about themselves to give context to the situation
Accepts comment	Appear to agree with the person or simply acknowledge their comment in a positive way
Rejects comment	Rejected what the comment had to say or suggestions the comment made
Dialogue	Responses that do not fit in aforementioned categories but still engage in active conversation with others

Considering the original posts are the bulk of this study, these will be discussed first. Again, there were three main themes and three secondary themes all fifty posts were categorized into (see Table 1). The main themes were uncertainty with sub-theme identity with no name, fear, and self-doubt. Uncertainty is defined as posts with clear back and forth, particularly about feelings or experiences; at times, labels were debated as well. The identity with no name theme is defined as the postee knowing their experiences and feelings, but being clueless or lost as to what they would label themselves as; these individuals demonstrate a firm understanding of their experiences and/or preferences but it has no bearing on their ability to ascertain a label for themselves. Next, fear is defined as a fear of committing to a label for fear of change, rejection, or incorrect labeling; at times, these individuals expressed fear over the reactions of others. Lastly, self-doubt is defined as insecurity about identity or feelings and/or experiences; this theme is distinct from fear and identity with no name because it is more about questioning the validity of experiences and/or feelings, and it is distinct from uncertainty because there is a common thread of denial within these posts.

The secondary themes focus on what the author of the original post is searching for (see Table 1). The most common secondary theme was seeking clarity and/or explanations. This theme was defined as postees asking about particular identities, experiences, or other related topics with the intent to learn more about the topic through clarification or explanation. The second most common secondary theme was seeking help and/or advice. This theme was defined as seeking guidance or wisdom from others in the community or Reddit thread in order to assist in their journey of identity exploration. The last secondary theme is neither. This theme was the least common. It was defined as a

post with no discernable desired outcome, consisting of pure disclosure without a definitive purpose to seek either clarity or advice from others.

The next set of data comes from analyzing the responses to comments. These responses come from the postee of the original post. These themes were appreciation, builds connections, accepts comment, rejects comment, and dialogue (see Table 1). Responses that were categorized as appreciation emphasize and show gratitude for the comments of others. The next theme of builds connections is where responses either asked questions to further the interaction or disclosed more about themselves to give context to the situation. Accepts comment responses seemed to agree with the person or simply acknowledge their comment in a positive way. The next category of rejects comment is where the postee flat out rejected what the comment had to say or suggestions the comment made. Lastly, the category of dialogue contains all other responses that do not fit in aforementioned categories but still engage in active conversation with others; some of these were in reaction to trolls (commenters intending to rile or distract) while others were simply off topic from the original post.

## **Main Themes**

### ***Uncertainty***

The first theme of uncertainty is defined as a frequent back and forth or debate about the individual's identity, particularly about feelings or experiences and frequently in regard to what label the individual should identify as. This theme was the most common among the data set. Considering the research that suggests queer or questioning youth flock to the internet to participate in identity exploration and construction, it is not

surprising that this theme is the most common of the three. The frequent back and forth debate over identity label and experience is apparent in this post from P1:

So think im thinking im bi but i cant see myself (16F) being with a guy, and i don't find guys sexually attractive. but sometimes I'll see a guy and think he kinda cute. Than on the other hand, i do want to be in a relationship with a girl and i think girls are cute but, im not really sexually attracted to them ether but i would want to be in a sexual relationship with a woman. So like am i an asexual lesbian?? Or what??

This individual is clearly debating their sexuality, focusing on their experiences and attractions. There is evidence of uncertainty about their identity alongside evident effort to work through this with their assertion "... think im thinking im bi...", so that they can find a label that properly represents their feelings. The struggle to define their experiences leads them to another label, "asexual lesbian", while their last statement of "or what??" shows that they are still at a loss as to what to identify as. Even still, by stating this as a question, their post insinuates they are looking for a definitive label to clearly define themselves.

Another individual begins their debate about their identity with a firm "Undecided strait or bi (M15)" (P5). After this initial statement, they continue grappling with their feelings, notably their sexual attraction:

I really don't know what my sexuality is like I'll look at a girl and think she's cute but in public I won't think that about a guy? But when I'm by myself I do feel attracted to both...

Clearly, this individual is questioning their sexuality, but is confused about what they are feeling for others, thus leading to the struggle with their sexuality. The distinction noted between 'public' and 'by myself' suggests the possibility that, beyond the struggle with their identity, they are also struggling with heteronormative expectations and feel as though they are unable to express this attraction in other social spaces they inhabit. The difficulty in being unable to publicly debate and/or experiment with their identity and subsequent membership of the LGBTQ+ community is apparent in their post, starkly contrasting with their clear ease of posting in what they presumably see as a safer space for such identity exploration within this forum.

While the previous postees focused on sexuality, the struggle with gender identity, experience, and feelings was also evident. P7's conflict about what exactly they are experiencing and what it means in terms of their gender is apparent in their post:

like i enjoy makeup n dressing up, but mostly i just wear baggy clothes, not to make myself less femme ig? i dont know. i used to feel quite female, and now im kinda just like...idk what i feel? i dont wanna portray myself as a male because i don't feel male or masculine but i also dont feel female anymore but i do sometimes?

This post reveals that this individual is experiencing a vivid struggle between what they want to present as, what they feel, and what they prefer, but also reveals a focus on the traditional male/female binary. Due to this, their dilemma stems from no longer feeling female, but also not wanting to be or feeling male either. The confusion and uncertainty for this individual as they navigate their gender identity is apparent with their use of numerous question marks within the post, but in doing so, they invite the thoughts and

feedback of others to assist with their confusion within a safe space as presented by the Reddit thread. Unfortunately, not all individuals are aware of what they are feeling, let alone what labels they identify as:

So I've been struggling for my sexuality for a long long time. (Can't tell if I love girls guys and theys, just guys, or just girls) It's really hard because I'm also on the asexual spectrum. I can't ever tell if I like someone, because I don't feel sexual attraction. (P41)

I have been thinking about my gender lately and I dont feel like a girl or a guy, and I also dont feel like I'm either nor none all at the same time. (P21)

These individuals are facing uncertainty about how they identify due to ongoing confusion about what they are experiencing and feeling. In their confusion, they are unable to formulate even a potential label because of a lack of surety in what they are experiencing. In presenting their experiences in a space that has others who are questioning and others who are confident in their identities and experiences, they are opening themselves up to opportunities to learn from others, potentially clearing up confusion and discovering more about their identity in the process.

While some individuals questioned experiences, feelings, and labels, other individuals seem to have a more solid hold on the labels they wish to identify as, yet there was still evidence that many were conflicted as to which represented them better. This is evident in P33's post which notes a long struggle to more precisely define their sexuality:

i (19nb) can't tell if i am a lesbian or bisexual with a strong preference towards women. i know i don't have to have it figured out now, but i

really want to be comfortable with it because i've been struggling for a long time.

A focus on precise and specific self-identification is also evident in these posts:

Okie so I have come out as bi to my friend group... But sometimes I see myself as a lesbian, cause legit the only boys I am attracted to are cartoons. I also can barely see myself with a man so I'm confuzzled am I bi with an extreme preference for women or am I a lesbian? (P17)

I have been identifying as a lesbian that Is demisexual... for a few months now, and now I've began wondering if i really am demi or if I am closer to asexual. when I see anything even remotely sexual in TV shows or on social media I dont think I have any feeling except in certain times, disgust. (P38)

In these cases, these postees are debating between two identities, attempting to overcome the conflict they feel by defining themselves as one or the other. For these individuals, their previous labels no longer fit how they see themselves and their experiences, and so, they begin to question whether or not there is a better label to suit their identity.

As one might expect within this theme, label hopping was a common narrative that postees shared. This often consisted of posts where individuals disclosed the variety of labels they either thought they might be or the labels they previously identified as. For example, P8 states:



... at first I thought I was Straight and then I thought maybe I was Bisexual then obviously jumped to possibly being Pansexual, now I think I might be Ace because now that I think about it sex just sound gross to me...

Similarly, P22 shares:

I(14F) realized I was Ace a little while ago, then I went and dug a little deeper into it, realized I was grey-romantic. I think I might be poly romantic but I haven't met any nb, intersex, gender queer people etc, to know...

Alongside the shifting between identity labels, the post from P22 also reveals the potential social isolation that can limit exploration of identity and confirmation of a label for self-categorization due to a lack of diversity within a person's social reach. Despite these limitations, the search for the correct label that will 'definitively' describe them goes on. In fact, the shift in recognition and acceptance of more diverse sexual and/or gender identities in certain parts of the culture has also shifted the ways more established labels are being used. For example, P30 notes:

What exactly do I identify as? I've like thought I was every sexuality from Straight to Bi to Pansexual and now I identify as Gay. Tbh like I'm pretty sure I'm gay but like I also use it as an umbrella term.

This theme exemplifies how complex identity formation is and how it is not a clear cut and straight-forward path, but rather is something that can take a few tries before settling on a label, particularly considering there is no limit to the ways that a person can identify. It also emphasizes that the path of identity development is not one of progressing from point A to point B, but can meander throughout various identities, feelings, and labels before an individual is comfortable enough to commit to a self-identifying label. These

posts demonstrate the struggle that goes on in order to identify as one label or another, but more importantly, it demonstrates how important it is for these individuals to have such a label to identify as. In hopping from one label to the next, unsatisfied with what they previously identified as, these individuals are revealing just how vital it is to have a label that aligns with what they feel and experience about their sexual and/or gender identities. It is significant that these individuals are still searching for something to identify as, despite the uncertainty, struggle, debate that can accompany not only a journey of understanding one's identity but also attributing a label to said identity, these individuals are still searching for the 'correct' label to self-identify as. This demonstrates that this complex process is rife with contemplation about identity and labels and can be an arduous process.

For these individuals, confliction is at an all-time high. They do not know what they feel, and they do not have many inclinations about what label they would identify as. In these posts, they can entail both a struggle of labeling and experiences or feelings. It can be seen that an overwhelming number of individuals struggling with sexuality as well as individuals who are attempting to understand their gender identity can experience the debate and struggle of assimilating experiences and feelings into a concise existence that usefully represents them as a self-identification. However, no matter what the postee is struggling with, be it their sexual and/or gender identity, experiences or labels, an internal debate is what defines the post itself.

**Sub-theme: Identity with No Name.**

The sub-theme discovered within uncertainty was identity with no name. This theme arose when the postee seems to know themselves but are clueless or lost when it

comes to labels, as they are unable to produce a label that they connect or relate to, despite having a firm understanding of their experience and preferences. This is a sub-theme of uncertainty because these individuals are largely still grappling with their identity, but are more certain about their experiences and feelings. As such, their uncertainty instead lies within how they self-identify. This is exemplified with the individual from P4, who discloses how they clearly feel, “I don't want to fully become a girl, I like being a boy, but sometimes I like to be more feminine. Does that count as a different gender?”. This individual shows that they are very confident in how they feel about being a “boy”; however, they also demonstrate that, given their desire to be more feminine, they are uncertain about what to identify as, considering they have no label in mind and are not even sure if what they are experiencing would count as a separate gender.

Another individual demonstrates a similar experience, but with their struggle with sexuality, “I... am completely lost cause when I think about my sexual orientation, I don't care about genders, but the only two relationships I've been in before are with girls, so idk how to consider myself” (P10). Again, we see a fairly confident assertion about this individual's preferences – gender matters not to them – yet, a complete inability to label themselves arises because of their preferences versus their actual dating experience. This could be for a variety of reasons, some of which can potentially be attributed to a newness to identity exploration, a newness to the queer community, or a lack of label that they feel truly fits their experiences. Another individual spoke for themselves and others:

so me and my friend were having this discussion a minute ago and none of us could figure out a word for what we're thinking. we all agreed that we feel close

to our gender we were assigned at birth but we wanted it to be separate from us. like a term that was used was “i’m a girl like a tomato is a fruit”. like i’m a lady and i wanna be fem and everything but i don’t wanna be looked at as a woman.

(P16)

What is interesting about this post is the fact that the individual is aware that they are lacking a label or term for what they are experiencing. They clearly are not struggling with their identity at this point, but are merely uncertain of what exactly their identity is to be considered, leading to a question of label, rather than identity. This could be attributed to a lack of awareness of labels, considering the variety of them or an aversion to the labels that they have explored. One individual made a particularly interesting assertion about their identity, stating that “After some thinking I realised that gender is just not important to me at all, it's feels like just a word to me. Is there a word for that kind of gender identity?” (P23). After their experiences, this postee seems fairly confident that gender is inconsequential to them; however, it is fascinating to note that they are still looking for a label to identify their gender as. Despite being fairly apathetic about gender, they still wish to define themselves by a label not yet known to them, likely due in part to an emphasis on ascribing to a label in wider-spread cultural tendencies. One interesting aspect of this category is the inclination of postees to inquire of others what their label might be, since they were unsure of one based on their experiences. One such individual stated, “I like men, both sexually and romantically but sometimes i feel romantic attraction to women but i’m never sexually attracted to a woman. what’s my sexuality?” (P39). In the same vein, another individual disclosed their experiences, before addressing others:

I do feel like a girl and know I am one, but at the same time I feel like I'm not fully one... I don't know if there's a term for this but if someone could help me out that would be great! (P47)

Both of these postees are confident about what they are experiencing, displaying little to no insecurity about their identity, but are uncertain about what to define themselves as through labeling. Instances such as these, lead to posts in which individuals seek others within the community for help with uncovering labels that aptly fit their experiences.

This is a commonality among this theme, as these individuals do not yet have the language or terms to label themselves, but anticipate that others will. Despite being at a loss for specific terms, these individuals are all fairly confident in their experiences and are simply looking for the specific label that lines up with their identity. This suggests that these individuals both desire to discover a label that aligns with their identity and expect that such a label in fact exists.

### ***Fear***

The second theme of fear is defined by postees' fear of their identity process; frequently, these posts dealt with a fear of committing to a label for fear of change, rejection, or incorrect labeling. At times, these posts dealt with worry about other's reactions. While all the posts pulled for this study grapple with identity exploration, some posts, those of the fear theme, deal with the potential repercussions of the postee's identity. For these individuals, their struggle with identifying themselves goes beyond determining what to label themselves as and dives into a state of fear about repercussions of what their identity is or may be. Many individuals who expressed fear within their posts lamented the future of their identity:

When u were questioning if u were LGBT, did you ever have the thought that if you tried to identify as bi or whatever, later might realize that you're not that and just like.... Cringe at yourself I guess? Idk if that's an irrational fear or not, but that's kinda how I feel RN. I'm probably bi, but what if I try to identify as bi and then in a few months think oh wait I guess I don't like guys. (P6)

The reason I'm hesitant is although I've never had the common crushes on girls like sapphic people have, I don't want to rule it out completely. What if in university or just sometime later on in my life I do meet a girl, enjoy dates with them and end up falling for them? (P34)

I stress that I'm making my life difficult for no reason, and that if I come out as an adult and realise later I'm straight after all, I'll have put pressure on my personal relationships for no reason. (P48)

All of these individuals are struggling with the potential future of their identity. Most worry about identifying as a label now and not still identifying as it in the future. It could be surmised that they are afraid of being wrong about who they are and are conflating their identity with their label. In doing so, they are struck with fear about committing to a label, because of any potential for it to change in the future. One individual is struck by the potential permanence of their decisions regarding their gender identity and presentation:

However to actually transition and come out I feel like I would regret it. And I'm scared of going on T or getting surgery and then regretting it and realizing I'm just cis. (P50)

This person is seemingly frozen by their fear of aligning their appearance with their gender identity. Not only do they fear the seemingly permanent transition, they also fear that they would once again not be in a body that aligns with their gender identity. This fear over their potential regret is keeping them from embracing their identity. Other individuals within this theme are focused on their identity being a cause for strife because of what others might think:

I'm also afraid of losing everyone if I came out. I'm out as lesbian rn and everyone is supportive but I know people don't see trans the same way. I'm also scared of people acting accepting but treating me differently or thinking of me differently. I just care too much about what people think I guess. (P50)

Coming out to a few friends may also help me feel less like a fake, but, though I want to come out, I'm worried that it'll get back to my parents - I don't think I can risk it. (P48)

I think my parents wouldn't be too happy for me being bisexual... i just really don't want to do the same mistake as when I "came out" to my older sister last time. (P32)

And it's worse because my big bro is Bi, and if I tell my mom I'm trans/genderfluid then she might think I'm just trying to copy him. I don't know what to do at this point. (P19)

These posts showcase just how much fear and anxiety queer youth can go through while exploring or developing their identity. Not only do they struggle with forming their identity, but they also struggle with the potential of coming out and what that sort of disclosure could cost them. These individuals demonstrate that not every individual has a safe space they can come out to and how it can impact the progress of their identity exploration. What is important to note here is that while they are currently expressing fear about who they can be open with, they are currently demonstrating their belief that the Reddit thread is in fact a safe space, simply by choosing to post. The individuals who wrap up this theme are not necessarily concerned about their label being the cause of strife, but rather, they fear their actual feelings and experiences:

Like women are hot and I'm saying that in the most respectful way possible. But when it comes to actually dating one, my brain flip flops. Sometimes I fell slightly uncomfortable with the idea... I don't want to offend or hurt anyone so I don't know the best way to go about this problem. (P9)

... ive always liked "girly" stuff like makeup and skirts ect growing up but had always tried to hide it and when i came out as pan i completely kind of tried to reset myself into a different person... (P35)



And here's where i feel like an hypocrite, I'm not sure I could be attracted sexually to nonbinary peeps and trans men ? ... I'm so confused and i feel like a bad person for not being attracted to people of my own gender... (P45)

For these individuals, their struggle is going beyond identifying as a label and encompasses their negative sentiments toward what they are feeling and experiencing. For some, they may be certain of their identity, and therein lies the issue they are dealing with – they feel negatively toward some or all aspects of their identity. Others may still be uncertain of their identity, feelings, or experiences, as similar to individuals from the first theme. However, their fear about how their potential identity will impact others is salient within their statements and distinguishes their experience from simply being uncertain about their identity. For this category, identity exploration is unfortunately at its most negative, with each individual being stricken with fear or anxiety over their actions or another's perception.

### ***Self-Doubt***

This final theme of self-doubt is defined as insecurity about their identity or even feelings or experiences. It is distinct from fear and identity with no name because it often deals with questioning experiences or feelings and is distinct from uncertainty because of an underlying tone of denial. The first individual to fall into the category of self-doubt embodies how denial works within these posts with their statement of, “I know I like other girls, but I'm not sure whether I like boys or not. I kind of have had male crushes in the past, but I'm not sure if they were truly crushes or not” (P13). This postee's last statement, questioning if their crushes were true or not, demonstrates that doubt is at the core of their struggle because they are questioning the validity of their experiences. It is

these sorts of declarations by individuals that show them to be distinct from uncertainty since their struggle with identity goes beyond a confliction of experiences or labels and results in them questioning the validity of their identity. One individual described an instance where they believed their identity would finally make sense, but was disappointed in what actually happened:

I've been thinking of myself as non-binary or genderfluid for a pretty long time now so I always thought it'd be a good feeling when people can't "guess" what my gender is or should be (confusion euphoria you could say). But when it actually happened the first time, I felt uncomfortable. ... I feel like I'm faking literally my whole identity.. (P18)

This individual, while once very confident in their identity and label, realized that what they imagined they would prefer to be seen as was not quite what they had hoped for. This results in them doubting their entire identity, upon which they have built up this idea of “confusion euphoria”, effectively putting them back at square one of identity exploration because now they question whether or not what they labeled themselves as is what their identity actually is. Another individual puts forth a question that is likely a common one, “Currently I identify as female but I’m honestly not sure anymore. ... Is there any way I can know if I’m non binary or if it’s all in my head?” (P27). This question is one many questioning individuals likely go through. When struggling with identity, it can be difficult to accept what is new or different, and this postee shows that doubt is easy to fall into. For many individuals questioning their identity, they are looking for a place to belong. This next postee is one such individual, but doubt is at the forefront of their identity exploration:

Basically, Last week I thought I was straight, but some feminine guys and a lot of non-binary people seem attractive to me. I think. The reason this is difficult to determine is because I really like the LGBTQ+ community and I would like to be a part of it... so I am constantly doubting this attraction (Thinking that it is made up because I want to be in the community) ... (P28)

For this individual, it is likely that they feel a kinship with the LGBTQ+ community, but because of that, they doubt their attractions, worried that it might be solely because they want to fit in. In this case, their affinity for the community is clouding their identity exploration by casting doubt on their feelings. In some cases, experience is what makes individuals doubt:

Last month I had my first kiss. With my best friend ➡ one day girlfriend ➡ to now ex partner and still bestfriend. We kinda kissed, kinda made out and after these kisses she was quite satisfied. Even said she finally realized she is Bisexual. As for me, I wasn't into it. Barley felt a thing other than an anxiety attack. And still do whenever I read novels and romantic descriptions in it. It just makes me really doubt am I really into girls or just forcing it.... (P40)

This postee is conflicted after an experience that they likely thought would solidify their identity, very likely as a result of their partner's satisfaction while they felt dissatisfied and uncomfortable. While there are many reasons for why someone would not like a kiss, an interaction such as this casts doubt on this individual's identity because of their aversion to it. They clearly begin to question whether or not their feelings and previous identification were genuine due to their expectations and experiences not lining up to authenticate what they identify as. Others similarly question the validity of their identity,

“And imma guy that might want to be a girl. Idk. Its all very confusing. Im a very curious person so it might just be me being curious about being a girl” (P46). This individual disclaims that they are a curious individual, undermining their identity through suggesting that their feelings may not in fact be authentic, but rather inquisitive in nature. Perhaps this is true; however, it may also be true that they are not content with their gender identity and wish to identify as something else. Simultaneously, this individual is exploring their identity and doubting the validity of it because they are more certain about their curious nature than their identity. In all the cases with the self-doubt theme, each postee questioned the validity of their experiences and authenticity of their feelings. For these individuals, it is very likely that they are either just beginning to explore their identity or are facing a hurdle in their identity exploration, thus explaining why they are experiencing such doubt about their identities.

### **Secondary Themes**

The secondary themes for this study are seeking help and/or advice, seeking clarity and/or explanations, and neither. These secondary themes highlight what the postee sought from interactions and responses.

#### ***Seeking Help and/or Advice***

Seeking help and/or advice is about the postee seeking guidance or wisdom from others in order to assist with their identity exploration. Many of these posts outright asked for help or advice. P12 directly asks “Can anyone give advice when they were confused with their sexuality?” Another, P46, discloses their situation and experience before ending the post with a distinct, “HELP PLEASE!”. Both of these examples show that within these posts, no matter the main theme, a majority of posts are looking for

assistance with their identity and/or their situation regarding their sexual and/or gender identity.

### ***Seeking Clarity and/or Explanation***

The next secondary theme, seeking clarity and/or explanation focuses on learning and understanding more about their identity or current situation. P27 directly asks "... is this normal?" within their post, seeking an explanation for their experience. Another, P45, asks others if they have gone through something similar, looking for potential illumination about what they are currently going through. These posts focus heavily on the aspect of understanding and seeking clarity for what they do not know or cannot comprehend, particularly within their own life.

### ***Neither***

Lastly, the category of neither is the category in which there is no discernable indication of desired outcome within the post and the posters merely disclose their situation without leaning toward a need for advice or explanation. Instances such as these, with P40 as an example, disclose a situation, in what can be interpreted as a post of venting. They merely state what is going on in their life, in terms of their identity, and leave it at that. They seek no knowledge or help for their situation, but simply explain it as it is. With the main two themes, it can be interpreted from the data that most who post are seeking something with their post. The majority are specifically looking for something – be it help or explanation – and in doing so, they are opening themselves up for dialogue with others about identity, ultimately hoping to learn or glean something from others' input.

## **Response Themes**

The next set of data focus on the responses from the postee. These responses are in reaction to another individual's comment. Once again, the themes are appreciation, builds connections, accepts comment, rejects comment, and dialogue.

### ***Appreciation***

The first theme for the data on responses has to do with the postees showing appreciation. This theme is fairly simple, with many of the responses consisting of a variety of thank yous – some coupled with emojis and various punctuation to express varying degrees of excitement. Some postees responded with polite thank yous to all responses, such as the responses of P1.C1.PR1 and P1.C2.PR1 who merely said “thanks” to each person who commented on their post. Alternatively, some responses of appreciation acknowledge what had been written within the comment and thanked the person for their contribution. Response P18.C1.PR1 does this through responding to the comment of “gender isn’t something that has to stay the same, it can change over time and that’s totally ok. :)” by P18.C1 by saying “Thank you for your nice words:) It’s true, gender can be fluid”. In this interaction, it may seem like not much is going on beyond a polite exchange, but the response in kind to what the other said, emphasizing they agree that gender can be fluid, is allowing the opportunity to form connections and community. Other responses remain just as simple by thanking the commenter(s) for their help. Response P46.C3.PR1 does this with “thank you for your advice :)” in response to the advice of P46.C3 who insists “You don’t have to label yourself as anything. Just have fun and be yourself :)”. For this individual, they are acknowledging the effort the other person has given by thanking them for the advice.

There is no commonality of the postees' responses accepting or rejecting the comments within this theme, but instead focuses on merely being grateful for receiving comments/advice in the first place. These responses show that the postees are thankful to the commenters for taking the time to reply to their post; however, most of the responses that fall under this theme do not go beyond being grateful. As stated before, some responses, such as P48.C2.PR1 may state how they are feeling, "this is a massive relief, thank you so much!! :)", but the appreciation is the foremost concern of the response. While some of the responses show that postees are feeling a bit better about their identity, most do not lend much information to how they are feeling about their identity beyond a gratefulness to the commenters for replying at all to their original post. In spite of leaving an open door on the discussion of identity for many of these postees, they are still demonstrating that they are attempting to explore their identity within a safe space where other individuals willingly offer advice, information, or support. These small acts of appreciation have the potential of further interactions and deeper connections simply because of a show of gratitude.

### ***Builds Connections***

The theme of builds connections is the theme that occurred most frequently for this section of analysis. This theme revolves around the postees asking questions of commenters or disclosing further about their identity or experiences. These sorts of responses came across in a multitude of ways, but always establish a link between the commenter and the postee through engaging in disclosure and discussion. For example, when asked about their preferences in order for the commenter to help them figure out a label that would best fit them, response P5.C5.PR1 revealed their romantic and sexual

preferences with a simple disclosure of “Sexually women romantically both”. They do this within this safe space of the Reddit thread in order to establish a connection with the commenter and give more context to their situation. This allows the commenter to know the postee a bit better and to potentially help them reach an identity label that feels right for them. Alternatively, response P24.C3.PR1 reacted to commenter P24.C3, who stated, “Comparing my experience with yours I can only tell you could be like me, a lesbian”, with a question about their post, wondering what went into their discovery of their label with a curious “So... what was the deciding factor in realizing you’re a lesbian?”. Another response, P40.C53.PR1 clarified part of their identity by disclosing, “I am Demi romantic so my sexual attraction is actually more stronger” to a commenter who offered a potential sexuality label for them, “You could be asexual?” (P40.C53), one that they were not sure would fit them considering their romantic preferences. Others still, such as P32.C1.PR5 and P32.C1.PR11 questioned how to accept their identity, “... how do i accept me being bisexual?” and how to eventually come out, “how was the process of coming out to your parents...?”. Within these responses, it is easy to identify the identity exploration going on between individuals. Postees are open to disclosure and desire answers for the questions they hold, particularly in regard to the comments made by others. There is an exchange of information going on between both postees and commenters. Questions are being asked by both sides, and disclosure is happening on both sides. Through these interactions, these individuals are learning about each other, and the postees are subsequently learning about themselves and their own identity. In doing so, they are contributing to the LGBTQ+ community that exists within these Reddit threads and building connections all the while. In particular, this theme aligns



with Coordinated Management of Meaning due to the disclosure and exchange of knowledge that happens within these comments and responses. By passing information from one individual to another within these conversations, these individuals are building upon what they know about their identity through the engagement with one another. While the postees do not always come to an immediate and distinct conclusion about their identity, these conversations are setting the groundwork for future discovery, disclosure, and questions about identity, particularly within this and other online queer communities. Ideally, these interactions will eventually lead the postee to an identity that they feel comfortable with.

### *Accepts Comment*

The next theme of the responses is accepts comment. These are responses from the postees that focus on agreeing with the commenter(s) and potentially taking what they are saying to heart. Response P9.C2.PR1 embodies this by mentioning they plan to pursue the identity presented by the commenter through "... watching movies or reading books with couples like that..." in order to see how their feelings line up with those experiences. This comment showcases that they are appreciative for the information and potentially eager to engage further with the possibilities of that identity. Other responses, such as P21.C1.PR1 are simpler in their agreement with the commenter, who defines a variety of gender identity labels, replying with a "hmm hmm yes yes...". While this response is simpler compared to the promise of future discovery, it does show that they agree with the comment and are content to accept the knowledge that has been shared with them. Alternatively, some responses come to a firm ground on their identity, through agreeing with the comments. Response P28.C7.PR1 states "First of all, Thank you and

everyone for commenting, Second of all: Omnisexual seems like a perfect description of my current feelings The flag is awesome Still not 100%, but idk. I'll figure it out eventually. For right now omni is a good enough label". This response acknowledges that in the future there might be more discovery involved in their identity, but they feel confident enough to claim a label put forth by the commenters. The theme of accepts comment revolves around postees' responses to comments that they agree with, either partially or wholly. This theme shows that whether the postee is only taking a portion of what a comment says or accepting the entire thing, the postee is building on their knowledge of their own identity by accepting what others have to say. Through this process, commenters are contributing to these individual's identities by offering up their knowledge to be accepted and folded into the postees' formation of identity.

### ***Rejects Comment***

In complete opposite of the previous theme of accepts comment, is this theme of rejects comment. Comparatively to other themes, this one is fairly small, with a mere four examples. However, it is important to consider this theme, as it shows that while individuals may be trying to uncover their identity through engagement with others in an exchange of information, sometimes they know enough about themselves and their identity to know that someone's comment does in fact not apply to them. Three of the four responses – P4.C4.PR1 with “hmm, I don't think that's it, but it's close. Thanks for your help though.”, P37.C2.PR1 with “... I have no way to get anything else but thanks for the advice...”, and P42.C8.PR1 with “Thanks but I don't really think I can approach a therapist now that I'm closeted.” – all acknowledged that the advice offered up was not a fit for them, but still thanked the commenter for their help. In doing so, they are

maintaining a polite connection with the commenter, leaving room for future help if necessary. The last response, P16.C1.PR1 approached the disagreeable comment a bit more bluntly, flat out telling them that they do not like the pronouns suggested by the commenter with a curt “ik i definitely don’t like he/him. something about it just bothers me. it feels off ig.”. In particular, rejection is important because it demonstrates that these individuals feel comfortable enough within this space to reject suggestions that simply do not fit them. In all of these situations, it is evident that the postees do not agree with what is being suggested. While it may seem like they are not progressing forward with their identity exploration, the opposite is true. By acknowledging what they are not comfortable with or do not identify with, they are moving one step closer to the label they desire and the identity that feels most comfortable to them.

### *Dialogue*

Lastly, is the theme of dialogue. These responses do not fall into any of the above themes and range in subject. Some responses stick to the topic of identity exploration and searching for labels, while others veer off the topic altogether. One response that embodies the idea of identity exploration is P20.C2.PR5, which discusses the idea of xenogender being appealing because they can make up whatever label they want to identify as; however, the response also laments that they might not “be able to explain it or understand it” themselves. This comment definitely dives deeper into the idea of identity exploration, but the postee stops themselves at the idea of being unable to explain their identity, thus falling short of a label. Despite this, their conversation with the commenter demonstrates that conversing with another individual from the same community has the potential to produce understandings about identity that may not be

reached individually. This draws back to the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory which states that identities are constructed through engaging with others. Within this theme, identity may not be the sole focus of the conversations that occur between postee and commenters; however, their idle chatter still involves some level of disclosure, and that disclosure is what passes knowledge between the commenter and the postee, impacting the postee's understanding of identity regardless of intentionality.

Other responses, such as P40.C54.PR1, disclose an experience the postee has been through with another person but sticks to talking about the other individual in the story, stating "I mean she was more experienced than me...", rather than focusing on themselves or their identity. Some responses do not focus on identity exploration, but rather use the opportunity to relate to the commenters. Response P42.C6.PR1 does this with an "I feel you" in response to P42.C6 who disclosed "... i don't want to come out because my brain say "if wrong then bad" and i just don't...". In these instances, rather than focusing on identity, these responses are forming community between individuals. This leaves the potential for future connection and future identity work together, but also allows the commenter and postee to connect as two individuals simply trying to fit into the same community. While not every response within the dialogue theme falls into the realm of identity exploration and discovery, each response by the postee is an intentional reaction to a commenter, building upon the community that the postee has found themselves discovering an identity within.

### **Summary of Findings**

To summarize what has been discovered within the data, three main themes plus one sub-theme, all main themes deal with the postees struggling with labeling their

identity, but they each embrace the struggle in distinct ways. For those of the uncertainty theme and sub-theme identity with no name, they focus on figuring out their identity through debating their experiences, feelings, and labels. For these postees, finding a label to align with their experiences and feelings that they can self-identify as seems to be of the most importance. Postees from the fear category face their struggle with identity by placing concern within hypothetical situations, such as realizing their identity is different, being outed, or being considered a 'bad' person for how they feel. These individuals appear to face their identity exploration with anxiety and worry. For the last of the main themes, postees who fell into the doubt theme struggled with their experiences and identity because of an assumption that what they were feeling was not completely true, thus not valid. These individuals face identity exploration with hesitancy and doubt. The secondary themes of seeking help/advice and seeking clarity/explanation tell us what purpose these postees are creating their post for. Through these themes, it is discovered that a majority of individuals are looking for guidance or assistance from others in their journey of identity exploration. Finally, the themes for responses, appreciation, builds connections, accepts comment, rejects comment, and dialogue, demonstrate that engagement between postee's responses and others' comments allows for both a construction of community and exploration of identity. Whether a postee is simply saying thank you to a comment or accepting a suggested label, they are engaging with others and partaking in community and community building. Additionally, by engaging with others concerning the discussion of identity, regardless of whether a suggested identity or label fits them, the postee is still learning more about what they do or do not identify as.

## DISCUSSION

Going back to the original research questions of this study, what kinds of sexual or gender identity related issues, experiences, and questions are raised and discussed and what do postee responses to the comments reveal about identity exploration and community, this data make very clear what sorts of questions that are being asked. For most, the question is a variation of ‘can I get some help’ or ‘what do you think I am’. However, despite most of the questions being presented in this way, this study also discovered that in many cases, disclosure is at the core of questioning identity. In fact, most of the posts analyzed took part in disclosure and presented their situation and their feelings about themselves or others before either asking about their identity – frequently with a desire to clarify – or asking for advice. This is particularly interesting because very easily, these postees could have asked a question about how someone knows they are a particular sexuality, which did happen; however, in these cases, the postee discloses information about themselves, opening themselves up for dialogue and discussion. In terms of what postees’ responses reveal, they demonstrate that through engaging with others from a shared community, they are opening themselves up to learning more about identity while simultaneously building community through engagement and interaction with others.

To put it succinctly, these data demonstrate that identity exploration is going on within these posts and responses. With each individual post, someone is pursuing a potential identity – whether they have an idea of what that identity may be or not. In doing so, they are opening themselves up to a conversation about who they are and what they feel about themselves. This is shown in the responses to the comments on their post.

Identity exploration does not simply happen when an individual posts their plea for help about their labels or request advice from others who might have experienced the same thing. Rather, the identity exploration is occurring and being reinforced in the comments and the responses that go on below these posts. Through questions, disclosure, agreements, disagreements, and more, these individuals who originally posted are exploring and uncovering, piece by piece, more of their identity. Regardless of whether or not they eventually land on a label at the end of the conversation, each moment – from the initial post to the last comment or response – is contributing toward their overall impression of their identity. These conversations and interactions will last longer than the moments it takes to write and submit a post, allowing them further opportunities to read about and engage with others in a similar position as well as other stages of identity development. By creating a post and seeking information about their identity, these individuals are participating in an effort to better understand themselves through the means of interacting with others. Their choice to not only create a post but also engage with those who comment on said post is contributing to their overall sense of self that will eventually build to a firm identity.

One of the most intriguing implications of this data comes from the uncertainty theme and is the suggestion and idea of ‘label hopping’ that occurs when an individual is trying to figure out their identity and where they fit in. As Bosse and Chiodo (2016) note, identity, particularly for youth can be fluctuating and shifting. The idea of label hopping helps support this assertion. Additionally, it must be noted that while there are some that are clearly open to trying out a variety of labels, there are others, such as those noted within the fear theme, which are quite the opposite. These individuals fear settling on a

label in case they realize later that it is not their identity. Without realizing it, these individuals fear the change in identity that Bosse and Chiodo (2016) discuss, in that identity is shifting and has the potential to change over time through discovering more about oneself or even discovering a label that aligns more with one's experiences and identity. In that, these individuals fear committing to a label out of a concern that in the future, they will realize or uncover more about their identity that contradicts what they currently self-identify as. While very much the opposite of the label hopping individuals, these fearful folk still help support the idea that an identity for youth has the potential to vary over time. Another particularly important implication from the data is the fact that it helps support the many previous studies that suggest queer youth frequently explore their identity online given the ability of certain social media spaces to be anonymous and safe for identity exploration. Just by choosing to create a post on a page such as Reddit's r/LGBTeens and r/LGBT showcases that these individuals are attempting to learn more about who they are through connecting with others who may know more.

Other themes have strong implications as well. Identity with no name contains the posts of individuals who are sure of their feelings and experiences but are uncertain of their label or what their identity might be. These individuals may be at a loss of understanding because the mainstream labels for the LGBTQ+ community – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning – do not feel as if they apply to them. In these cases, they could be striving for a unique label or something that fits them firmly compared to what some consider umbrella terms. In these cases, these posts would be supporting the idea that Bosse and Chiodo (2016) discuss, in which individuals who do not feel as if a label applies to them will often create new language to identify what they



feel. In particular, this also connects back to the social constructionist perspective that Bergen and Braithwaite (2009) discuss. This struggle for a specific label demonstrates the meaning individuals imbue language with, suggesting that by finding or creating a label that aligns with their experiences and feelings, these individuals are able to embrace their identity fully because they are able to describe such experiences and feelings succinctly.

For the theme of self-doubt, this theme implies that these individuals may just be starting to explore their identities. Compared to other posts, these individuals are far less secure in their feelings, to the point of doubting them. It is possible that they are just beginning to confront their feelings of difference and have less solid identities than others as a result; alternatively, they are possibly more limited in direct experience, access to other queer people and spaces, or a combination. Lastly, the theme of fear strongly implicates the importance of an anonymous space. For many of the individuals within this theme, they did not feel comfortable with others yet knowing about their identities and many expressed explicit concerns about how others would react, view them, etc. This suggests that through their engagement online, they view the internet as a safe space to be able to partake in identity exploration, in part due to the anonymity as well as the predominantly accepting and non-judgmental community found within this digital space. This falls in line with many researchers who assert that anonymity is vital for identity exploration as it allows individuals, particularly questioning youth, to explore multiple identities without commitment or fear of discovery.

Beyond the analysis of the main posts, the responses from the postees also reveal important implications. In particular, these responses to comments demonstrate how identity exploration goes on for individuals. Specifically, this shows up within the theme

of builds connections. This theme embodies what it means to engage with another individual and develop one's own identity. Within this theme, individuals, including the postee, are engaging in dialogue that helps inform a questioned identity. Whether it is through elaborating on experience, suggesting an identity that might fit better after considering a new instance of disclosure, or simply offering support for someone's preferred label, these moments of interactivity reveal how important it is for questioning individuals to be able to engage with others of their community. Without the opportunity to ask further questions based on a comment or disclose more about themselves to give additional context to their experience or struggle, the postee is at a loss for their developing identity, because their openings to further understand that identity are halted. Being able to engage with others who share queer or questioning identities is powerful and significant because it allows identity to be further explored with those who share similar experiences and have direct knowledge and insight. Referring back to the Coordinated Management of Meaning, as defined by Littlejohn and Foss (2009), by engaging with others from the queer community, questioning individuals are able to construct an understanding of themselves and their identity based on the knowledge and experiences of others. In doing so, their engagement with other individuals helps to formulate and confirm their identities by providing information and perspectives previously unknown to them. In these spaces, the vital the aspect of engagement with others to explore the concepts of identity formation can be observed in ways that can be usefully contrasted with the experience of conversation with heterosexual and/or cisgender allies and family who may support them but cannot offer applicable personal insight or shared experience.

In this study, it is less about what kinds of questions young people are asking about their sexual or gender identity and more about the connection they can create with others who will help them learn more about themselves. This leads into the consideration of how comments further understanding for the postee. Through the use of dialogue and discussion, many postees arrived at an identity that they seemed comfortable with. If this was not the case, they often had a direction for future investigation into that identity. In rare cases, they left the discussion without direction or an identity to claim. This study shows that dialogue and discussion do contribute positively toward the understanding of identity for the postee. While the experiences may vary and cannot be spoken for beyond the realm of these discussions, the data suggest that engaging with other people of similar community, in this case the LGBTQ+ community, can help to solidify a person's identity that is in question.

While this study did look at and cover a multitude of sexualities and gender representations, there were still limitations that were obvious from the beginning of data collection. The first of which has to do with the anonymity of a site such as Reddit. While anonymity is beneficial for those looking to explore their identities without fear of repercussion or judgment, it does limit the ability for this study to be applicable to a broader scope of individuals, since the demographics of this study are simply unknown. It is quite possible that every post pulled comes from an individual raised in a middle-class home, particularly considering that in order to explore identity safely and anonymously, a private internet connection would be necessary; these are the sorts of unknowns that make this study difficult to be applicable across a spectrum of people. This is especially true due to the consideration of the culture of Reddit. While the threads analyzed for this

study did not explicitly state that posts had to be a certain language, a vast majority of the posts were in English. This suggests individuals from a non-English speaking country must learn or translate interactions to English in order to engage. Additionally, Reddit is only one of many social media sites. There are many others that young people use, and it is quite possible, and even likely, that they are partaking in identity exploration on those sites as well. Reddit's unique format of posting a question and being able to see comments and interact with others is certainly not applicable to social media sites that do not follow this format, such as Facebook. This counts as a limitation for this study because Reddit is only one portion of the social media that young people can and are consuming, leaving other sites under-studied or simply not studied at all.

Another limitation of utilizing Reddit threads is the fact that posts were gathered over an array of times. In alignment with the study's set requirements for each post, some posts were gathered fairly quickly – within 24 hours of posting. Because this does not allow for later comments to be captured, it is likely that the full conversation of these fresher posts is not seen, potentially limiting the viewing of important interactions. On the absolute opposite end, at some point, Reddit stops loading posts. It seems that posts that were older than 2 months simply would not load, making the Reddit thread seem much shorter than it actually would be, considering that both Reddit threads were well over five years old. This occurrence had the unfortunate effect of making posts older than a few months virtually inaccessible and could possibly eliminate the potential for a longitudinal study of themes concerning identity exploration on Reddit. This also suggests there are limits for questioning young people who chose Reddit as a source of engagement and information, as it provides a relatively small window of opportunity for

development and ongoing conversation. This effectively limits community building over time that a more stable forum or social media space could provide; however, these platforms do not always allow anonymity and may potentially require vetted membership to prevent trolls and miscreants. Both of these considerations can be threats to the safety of queer and questioning youth and counterproductive for those who wish to develop their identity in a space with strong community, demonstrating that any proposed space for identity development and/or exploration must embrace elements of anonymity, community, and conversation without arbitrary timeframes of availability in order to be effective for these questioning individuals.

Despite a few limitations, particularly regarding demographics and potential longitudinal studies, the findings do show that there is value in the future studying of social media interactions of queer and questioning youth. This study very clearly demonstrates that questioning youth are going online and expressing their concerns and stressors when it comes to developing their identity and figuring out who they are. Further research on the topic could delve into specific concerns – i.e. just sexuality or just gender identity work – or focus on assessing language to understand further how questioning youth perceive their struggles with identity. Additionally, future research would not have to be simply held to analyzing the posts of Reddit, but could branch out to explore similar spaces on a variety of social media spaces. Social media spaces shift in popularity all the time and what was once trendy 10 years ago may be obsolete in the eyes of young people now; therefore, it would be pertinent to analyze social media spaces that are considered ‘popular’ among youth. It what seemed like an overnight rise, Tik Tok has gained incredible popularity, and it would be valuable to assess what kind of advice is

being passed around on a site that garners millions of viewers every day. Beyond assessing Reddit and social media in general, future research should focus more on how young people are questioning their identity and how they are arriving at their conclusions. As seen earlier, much of recent research acknowledges that identity is a nebulous concept that can change dramatically and rapidly, so it is important to understand how identity is formed in the first place and what conversations, interactions, and questions help to define said identity. It is common knowledge that ‘coming out’ is a positive and important step in identity development, but it is less known how individuals even get to that stage of ‘coming out’. By pursuing more research about identity exploration, particularly within queer individuals, the guess work and broad assumptions about identity formation can be minimized in favor of an informed and well-defined understanding of what identity development entails and necessitates.

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APPENDIX I  
DEFINITIONS OF THEMES

Theme	Definition
<b>Main Themes</b>	
Uncertainty	Posts with clear back and forth, particularly about feelings or experiences; at times, labels were debated as well
Sub-Theme: Identity with no name	The postee knows their experiences and feelings, but are at a loss as to what they would label themselves as
Fear	Fear of committing to a label for fear of change, rejection, or incorrect labeling; at times, these individuals expressed fear over the reactions of others
Self-doubt	Insecurity about identity or feelings and/or experiences; this theme is distinct from fear and identity with no name because it is more about questioning the validity of experiences and/or feelings, and it is distinct from uncertainty because there is a common thread of denial within these posts
<b>Secondary-Themes</b>	
Seek advice/help	Seeking guidance or wisdom from others in the community or Reddit thread in order to assist in their journey of identity exploration
Seek clarity/explanation	Postees asking about particular identities, experiences, or other related topics with the intent to learn more about the topic through clarification or explanation
Neither	No discernable desired outcome, consisting of pure disclosure without a definitive purpose to seek either clarity or advice from others
<b>Response Themes</b>	
Appreciation	Response that emphasize and show gratitude for the comments of others
Builds connections	Responses either asked questions to further the interaction or disclosed more about themselves to give context to the situation
Accepts comment	Appear to agree with the person or simply acknowledge their comment in a positive way
Rejects comment	Rejected what the comment had to say or suggestions the comment made
Dialogue	Responses that do not fit in aforementioned categories but still engage in active conversation with others

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Katherine Archer was born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona. She earned an Associate's in Arts and an Associate's in General Studies from Glendale Community College. At Arizona State University, she graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor's in Communication and a Bachelor's in English. After graduation, she continued to pursue her education through the Communication Studies graduate program at Arizona State University. During her time in the graduate program, she focused on advocacy through her research within the LGBTQ+ community and through her work with CommLabASU.