

Coming-Out: Gay Males' Information Seeking

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This inquiry, undertaken in New Brunswick, New Jersey, United States examines information-seeking of young gay males about coming-out, taking a social constructionist perspective on gay identity. The investigation uses data collected from critical incident technique interviews in which these young men related their information needs, information-seeking activities, and the conditions of these activities. Findings show that they typically encountered three types of information needs; these are linked to self-labeling, consequences for self-identifying as gay, and forming an understanding of a gay identity. Participants' information-seeking typically involved interacting with young gay adults through online forums. However, they also experienced a period when they did not pursue their information needs about coming-out. Conditions most strongly characterizing information-seeking were the experience of fear and the concealment of information-seeking activities. These findings are considered in association with Chatman's (1996) Theory of Information Poverty. The discussion of the findings also proposes directions for future research and provision of information.

Introduction

One's development of a gay identity is increasingly an adolescent concern. In 1979, the mean age of self-labeling as gay or lesbian was 21.1 years old. By 1996, the mean age had dropped to be 14.7 years old (Savin-Williams, 1997). For those who interact, serve, and work with young adults, this trend may resonate intuitively, because adolescence is usually regarded as a time when many grapple with life concerns linked to identity. Adolescents' dealing with a sexual identity at increasingly younger ages presents an opportunity for librarians to support information seeking about this life concern. In addition, the threat of AIDS provides another rationale for supporting gay male adolescents' information seeking about coming-out. Young adults between the ages of 15 and 24 account for about 43% of new HIV infections each day worldwide (National Institutes of Health, 2002). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2001) estimates that in the United States 60% of new infections in men are linked to homosexual sex. Hays (1996) and Gonsorick (1989) suggest that negative coming-out experiences place young men at a greater risk for HIV infection, linking self-esteem and depression related to coming-out with sexual risk-taking behaviors associated with HIV infection. These statistics emphasize how vulnerable adolescent gay males' are to HIV infection. By supporting positive information seeking experiences in connec-

tion with coming-out, librarians may view information provision as a form of AIDS prevention.

Young men in their late teens and early 20s who self-identify as gay participated in this research. Their contributions provided recollections and reflections based on their relatively recent experience with coming-out. Three general questions guided the inquiry.

1. What are information needs related to coming-out?
 2. What information seeking activities are connected to coming-out?
 3. What are the conditions of one's information seeking about coming-out?
- Pursuing these research questions emphasizes the information seeker's perspective in building an understanding of the issues and difficulties associated with young men's coming-out experience with respect to seeking information.

This research takes a social constructionist view of gay identity, which posits that coming-out is the discursive production of an identity for both oneself and others (Greenberg, 1988; Jandt & Darsey, 1981; Kitzinger, 1987; Rust, 1993). This outlook, based in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory on the social construction of reality, locates the origin of identity in the interplay between an individual and society. A gay identity emerges not only from one's experience of same-sex romantic or sexual attraction; rather, an individual constructs it by using social and cultural resources to make meaning from this experience. This perspective places information seeking near the center of identity construction, because one may navigate identity creation by pursuing information needs.

Review of Earlier Research

At a general level, library and information science literature about young gay people may be divided into two groups. The first consists of articles and chapters that promote information provision to young gay people, often giving advice about how to do this (Cart, 2002; Day, 2000; Hughes-Hassell & Hinckley, 2001). Arguments and rationales for these writers' positions are typically derived from the identity politics of the gay community. This well-meaning rhetoric is not founded in the study of gay information behavior, on which a handful of investigations have been published (Creelman & Harris, 1990; Garner, 2001; Joyce & Schrader, 1997; Stenback & Schrader, 1999; Whitt, 1993). In general, these inquiries study information behavior by exploring the information needs and sources connected to coming-out.

Creelman and Harris (1990) developed a typology of questions lesbians ask in relation to coming-out, uncovering three broad information needs: coming-out to others; coming to terms with a lesbian identity; and connecting to a lesbian community. In addition, the study examined sources used and associated barriers. Participants consulted print sources and other lesbians before friends or libraries. Barriers related to seeking information in

libraries were linked to the quality of the available resources; specifically, materials lacked relevance and were perceived as depressing or negative.

Stenback and Schrader (1999) confirmed the Creelman and Harris (1990) typology in a replication of their 1990 study. The sources most used by these women were printed materials and libraries; most helpful among these were magazines designed for gay readers, which incidentally were not accessed through libraries. Stenback and Schrader's (1999) Canadian study also found that barriers to lesbians' information seeking were linked to the quality of print materials in libraries. Findings also indicated that interactions with library staff whom lesbians' perceived as homophobic presented another barrier.

These investigations make two important contributions to our understanding of information seeking as it pertains to coming-out: the typology of questions describing information needs and findings about the information sources used. Although this research provides enlightening findings about information needs and information resources in connection with coming-out, it reveals neither the situations connected to information needs nor how decisions about resources are reached. Indeed, conditions not directly related to the use of print materials may affect the pursuit of information needs.

Whitt (1993) examined the information needs of lesbians during coming-out and their perceptions of how successfully library services met these needs. This investigation also explored how information needs about coming-out changed over time. Lesbians' initial questions had to do with coming-out, self-acceptance, and lesbianism; later, they dealt with community, relationships, and politics. Respondents rated the library as their most significant information source for coming-out, followed by gay men and friends. Consistent with earlier research, study participants were dissatisfied with library materials and staff attitudes. The women who responded to this survey also related their reluctance to seek assistance on a lesbian-related topic, anticipating that interactions with staff would lead to embarrassment. This research does not reveal the reasoning behind this perception; future study about the situations these women encounter might add to this finding. Joyce and Schrader (1997) completed a Canadian study similar to Whitt's that focused on a library's success in providing gay males with information. Respondents revealed four types of information needs in connection with coming-out: where to find community; how to understand and affirm a gay identity; where to find other gay men; and sex and health concerns. Study participants identified the library as the most significant resource during coming-out, followed by gay organizations and friends. Like other study participants, these men were dissatisfied with library collections. The investigation does not explain why the library was considered the most important resource during coming-out, despite the perceived limitations of its resources. Examining more broadly the information seeking situation linked to coming-out may provide answers to this question.

As with earlier studies, Whitt (1993) and Joyce and Schrader (1997) consider information behavior in terms of information needs and resources used. Although findings in these areas are informative, they do not explain patterns and perceptions of resources used. The focus on libraries in these studies confirms that gays often see the library as a significant resource, but a disappointing one. Although this finding is intriguing, the research does not relate it to the broader circumstances of information seeking about coming-out, leaving information seekers' responses to this situation unexplored. Additional research may show how lesbians and gay males do satisfy information needs.

Garnar (2001) surveyed gay people in Denver, Colorado about information seeking destinations, focusing on the resources used during coming-out and individuals' perceptions of these materials. Results show the local gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) community center (a partner in the study) and GLBT bookstores as top destinations for information seeking, followed by the Internet. Survey respondents indicated that they were most apt to seek assistance in explicitly gay-friendly settings, such as a GLBT bookstore or community center, and they were more likely to browse for resources in a general bookstore or to use the catalog when in a library. The investigation does not detail why information seeking activities vary across these settings.

Collectively, these studies make three contributions to our understanding of information seeking about coming-out. First, they uncover information needs that lesbians and gay males encounter in relation to coming-out, although findings are drawn mostly from studies of lesbians. This inquiry adds to these by focusing on young gay men through a different theoretical perspective. Second, earlier work describes what resources lesbians and gay males use in pursuing information needs about coming-out along with perceptions of these resources, most often citing libraries as a major—albeit disappointing—resource. To expand our understanding of such findings, this investigation explores associations between information needs, information sources used, and perceptions of those resources along with specific information seeking activities. Third, earlier inquiries identify interactions with information providers about gay-related topics as problematic. This study illuminates this type of finding by examining conditions or barriers linked to the information seeking situation, uncovering factors connected to this and other information seeking decisions.

Theoretical Perspective

Two concepts, *process* and *acceptance*, span the definitions of coming-out in earlier research. *Process* suggests a progression toward a particular result; in these coming-out definitions, this movement is toward acceptance and disclosure of a gay identity. *Acceptance* conveys acts of receiving and approving a gay identity, as if such an identity already exists within a person. Although

researchers in these areas have not directly connected their definitions of coming-out to the essentialist perspective of homosexuality and gay identity, their conceptualizations conform to this outlook, as shown in Table 1.

The essentialist view of gay identity generally regards coming-out as a stage-based progression that links same-sex romantic or sexual feelings with gayness, presuming a "gay self" as a preexisting identity (Greenberg, 1988; Kitzinger, 1987; Taylor, 2002). In models of coming-out reflecting this outlook, typical markers along this continuum are labeling oneself as gay, disclosing a gay or lesbian identity to others, and forming a same-sex romantic relationship (Savin-Williams, 1997); the definitions of coming-out summarized above imply these types of markers.

To define coming-out as processual acceptance of an inherent identity has particular consequences for studying information-seeking, because it presupposes that same-sex romantic or sexual experiences necessitate the development of this identity (Livia & Hall, 1997; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Rust, 1993; Butler, 1991; McDonald, 1982). Furthermore, it forces individuals' unique experiences into linear models that presume self-acceptance is a struggle, others' acceptance is of paramount importance, and making others aware of a gay identity is a fundamental need. In making these assumptions, this conceptualization of coming-out orients information seeking research to a particular set of people who both deal with these concerns and choose to create for themselves a gay or lesbian identity. It also assumes the function of this information seeking is to facilitate self-revelation, not to construct an understanding of one's own experience. In addition, the concept of gayness itself positions heterosexuality and homosexuality as ahistorical and supracultural identities (Foucault, 1978). Historical investigation has demonstrated that across times and cultures, people engage in same-sex romantic and sexual experiences without self-identifying as homosexual or gay (Katz, 2001; Greenberg, 1988; Foucault, 1978). In conclusion, the essentialist per-

Table 1
Overview of Coming-Out Definitions

Investigator(s)	Definition of Coming-Out
Creelman & Harris (1990)	Coming-out is a process of recognizing, understanding and accepting homosexual identity.
Whitt (1993)	Coming-out is a process of identity acceptance.
Joyce & Schrader (1997)	Coming-out is one's own acceptance (beyond awareness) of his/her own sexual identity.
Stenback & Schrader (1999)	Coming-out is a process/phase in which a person acknowledges his/her own homosexuality to oneself or others.
Garnar (2001)	Coming-out process/phase, associated with self-acceptance.

spective excludes and potentially delegitimizes people whose world view and experiences may not conform to dichotomous models of sexuality.

The second assumption of this view of gay identity is that coming-out is characterized by advancing levels of acceptance that may be associated with self-actualization (Goffman, 1963; Jandt & Darsey, 1981; Jenness, 1992; Rust, 1993). Conceivably, there are benefits to not self-identifying as gay, such as the establishment of a "protected" psychic space and the creation of a non-stigmatized "safe" social milieu where a person may construct this aspect of the self (Seidman, Meeks, & Traschen, 1999). Coming-out, as a communicative identity management technique, is circumstantially bound (Bochner, 1978; Goffman, 1963). To regard coming-out as a marker of self-acceptance in LIS research predefines the information seeking situation such that it promotes the researcher's perspective over that of the information seeker.

This challenge of essentialist premises reveals the elements of a social constructionist view of coming-out, which implies that people create identities using representation and discourse accessed through interactions with social and cultural resources, that is, information (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Kitzinger, 1987; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Taylor, 2002). This position does not deny that a person's understanding of his or her experience of same-sex romantic or sexual attraction may apply notions of *process* and *acceptance*. However, these concepts are not imposed as an underlying framework for coming-out. Consequently, a social constructionist approach orients LIS research to perceptions and behaviors as they are experienced and interpreted by the information-seeker.

Coming-out is not revelation of the true self, but a discursive, constructive activity. This means that information seeking about coming-out deals with interactions between people and information sources, between people and the producers or artifacts of social and cultural resources. To engage in coming-out is to participate in an intra- or interpersonal communicative activity, informed by interpretations, understandings, and communicative practices achieved through information-seeking. Coming-out has not a processual but a productive nature, which is associated with one's conceptualization of sexual identity as it is informed by available resources (Chauncey, 1994; Greenberg, 1998; Sedgwick, 1990). It is the interactive and productive nature of coming-out that makes it such a potentially rich area of inquiry for library and information science research.

Methodology

The study's participants were young men in their late teens and early 20s who had engaged in coming-out. Research suggests that the mid-teens to early 20s is typically a time when young gay people prepare to come-out. This age group was chosen for the study because it was perceived that they may be in a strong position to recollect details about their recent information seeking experiences (Savin-Williams, 1997). Targeting even younger adoles-

cents or teenagers might be ideal, but this would probably require parental consent and could potentially pose social risks for these minors.

The young men were recruited from a university campus. A four-week recruitment effort for study participation used two strategies: fliers were posted on bulletin boards throughout the campus and solicitations were distributed through campus GLBT with a brief oral announcement of the study. Fliers assured confidential participation and described eligible participants as young adult males who had engaged in coming-out, along with the name and contact information of the principal investigator. Eight volunteers in their late teens or early 20s agreed to engage in one-on-one interviews lasting approximately 75 minutes. Half the participants learned about the study through campus GLBT groups; the others learned about it from fliers posted on campus. As with earlier research, this sampling technique is not random, which affects the generalizability of findings.

The interview schedule was developed using Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique, a method complementary to this study's social constructionist outlook. Critical incident technique involves focusing on a defined situation, then collecting data linked to specific incidents in connection with that situation from the perspective of a person in it. In this study, definitions for both coming-out and information seeking drew from each participant's understanding of these concepts. This was operationalized by opening each interview with the question, "Please describe in your own words what coming-out means to you." A similar approach was taken to establish a definition for information seeking. The following questions were asked to solicit responses about specific incidents:

- What questions did you initially have about coming-out?
 - How did your questions change as you continued to think about coming-out?
 - How did you go about trying to find answers to these questions?
 - What was most challenging about answering these questions?
 - What, if any, barriers did you encounter when seeking answers to questions?
 - What are some of the thoughts and feelings you experienced during these experiences?
 - Please describe the resources or experiences that helped you most.
- Interviews took place in a locale chosen by the research participant, and conversations were audiotaped. The researcher transcribed the interviews and used these transcripts in analysis.

Findings

Content analysis was used to study the transcripts to detect themes and patterns in relation to participants' information needs, information seeking actions, information seeking conditions, and information sources. Three kinds of questions concerned these young men as they sought information

about coming-out: how to go about self-labeling; potential consequences for self-identifying as gay; and how to construct a fuller understanding of a gay identity. Information seeking most commonly involved communicating with other young gay adults through online mechanisms such as chat rooms and message boards. However, most study participants experienced a period when they did not pursue information needs. Conditions most strongly linked to information seeking are the experience of fear and the concealment of information seeking activities. Participants encountered fear due to concerns about fallout associated with self-identifying as gay; their concealment of their activities may be associated with this fear. In addition, the two most significant information sources identified by study participants were the Internet and television. These findings are explicated in the following sections.

Information Needs

Three types of questions capture study participants' information needs about coming-out. Labeling oneself as gay to others was the most frequently expressed concern, reflecting the decision-making involved with coming-out. For example, one participant expressed, "Probably the only thing I said was, 'Do I tell my family? Do I not tell my family?'" Speech practices for self-labeling were touched on by another participant's questions, "What do I say? How do I say it to people?" These questions about self-labeling echo the findings of Creelman and Harris (1990) and Stenback and Schrader (1999).

The second type of question deals with on the consequences of a gay self-identification. One participant wondered, "I mean, am I gonna lose my friends?" Another questioned, "Am I going to be happy?" Another reflected, "I wasn't really sure how people would look at me different. Like would they look at me differently?" The first and second question types may be associated, because projecting the consequences of self-labeling may be done in association with deciding to self-identify as gay.

The third type of question reflects a desire to gain a fuller understanding of a gay identity. For example, one participant said, "I want to know more about the gay experience, you know, what it is to be gay." Another said, "It was more like, I didn't know how [to be gay], like my idea of being gay back then was that you just like sleep with men." Because these statements suggest that being gay encompasses elements beyond the experience of same-sex attraction, they implicitly acknowledge gay identity as a social construction.

Less predominant questions that reflected information needs in connection to coming-out were: how to meet other young gay people; how to engage in same-sex sexual relations; safer sex guidelines; and questions about gay identity as it related to romantic, familial, or platonic relationships.

Information-Seeking

Participants were asked to describe the actions they undertook to seek answers to their questions about gay identity and coming-out. Most often they interacted with gay people on the Internet, using chat rooms, listservs, online support groups, and personal Web pages to meet others. Relationships formed online invariably continued offline. One participant described his experience this way, "People were just looking to talk to other people. They weren't interested in sex. We were just trying to find someone to connect to." Another noted, "You can talk to kids your own age and find people two or three towns over. You take a drive over and you have coffee or something." Participants indicated that they did consult Websites to read information about being gay, but this was a less frequent activity.

These young gay men took a variety of secondary actions to find answers to questions about coming-out and gay identity: forging relationships with peers who publicly self-identified as gay; going places to observe people presumed to be gay, such as gay neighborhoods and bars; reading print materials about coming-out or texts targeting a gay readership; and trying to conform to heterosexual norms. The frequency with which these actions were taken, though, makes it clear that interacting with others online was the choice method for information seeking.

Almost all study participants related experiencing periods when they did not pursue information needs. In reference to this, one revealed, "To be honest with you, I was too scared to." Another indicated he first considered questions about coming-out in high school, but waited until he was 24 to seek answers, explaining, "I guess it's more a fear of being caught somewhere." Another participant captured a common sentiment when saying, "I didn't really do a lot of that until I was already out and comfortable with myself.... So I was really a loner during my hardest periods." These comments demonstrate that although the young gay men in this study all did eventually seek information, their attempts to answer questions were often delayed.

Information-Seeking: Conditions

Fear and concealment, the conditions surrounding these men's attempts to answer questions about coming-out and gay identity, often presented barriers to finding information. These barriers reflect information seekers' assumptions that looking for answers to questions about coming-out and gay identity is an implicit act of coming-out. Almost all the participants expressed that they experienced fear at some point during information seeking; this may be associated with the decision not to pursue information needs. One teen expressed, "Well, you know, I was scared out of my mind." Another said, "I was really scared to. I guess I was apprehensive to approach any sort of material that would label me as gay." One teen described the fear he experienced when borrowing library materials, "Taking them out was al-

ways a big barrier for me. I'd always sweat when I'd come to the library to check out. I was just really scared of being found out when I was a kid."

The behavior corresponding to this fear was the concealment of information-seeking. The participants in this study concealed their actions by: hiding gay print materials; clearing their family computer's memory so their Internet use could not be tracked; and not disclosing their whereabouts when going to gay enclaves or meeting gay friends. They often associated negative consequences with exposure of their information-seeking. One participant stated, "Some people were kicked out of their home by their parents. So when you hear so-and-so got kicked out of his home you don't want to say 'Mom, Dad, there's something I have to tell you.'" Another described this concern in relation to other gay peers, "They're concerned about what happens when they don't have a place to go. And I've told this to a lot of people, 'If you find yourself in that situation, I've got a big floor in my room. You're more than welcome for a while.'" The scenarios described here show how the fear experienced by these young people is anchored in their concerns about the negative consequences attached to establishing a gay identity.

Another recurrent though less prevalent condition of information seeking was the perception that relevant resources were not available. As one participant put it, "In my school the closest thing to the [gay] literature section would be a book on classical Greek art or an encyclopedia on the Renaissance that has homoerotic images." Another said, "As far as literature, I can't say it helped me. We didn't have any books in my library entitled *Daddy's Room-mate* or *My Two Mommies*." Two participants perceived a total void in available resources. One recalled, "I wasn't even aware as a possibility even that there could be literature on it, much less anything that I would find where I lived." These statements show that references to the inaccessibility or non-existence of resources often had to do with print materials.

Internet use presented its own issues for the participants in this study. Several described their frustration in looking for information about coming-out and gay identity, because search statements often yielded lists of pornographic Web pages. As one put it, "If you try to search something about having to be gay in this world odds are that nine out of 10 things that pop up are not most user-friendly or ... yeah, G-rated. Or it's all provocative sex toys." Another participant echoed this when he said,

That was the hardest thing, basically finding relevant information. There were times when you'd just go out there and look for information, and you'd either get into a porn site or one that has information but not what you're looking for.

Another problem with using the Internet was that interacting with others online made them vulnerable to unwanted sexual advances. In reference to publishing personal contact information online one participant related, "The downside to that is that people can contact you, and that you get, like, 45-year-old pedophiles." A third issue discussed in relation to Internet use

was the circumstances of Internet access. One described when he sought information,

Three o'clock in the morning everybody else in the house was asleep, and I went on the computer and turned on AOL, which I didn't know how to turn the speaker volume off, and so it was rather loud. So I was afraid everyone would know I was connected.... I would just sit there and read stuff and not wake anybody up.

Another participant described privacy issues in using the Internet at school, "to work at a high school at a computer terminal in an entire room—if a rainbow flag pops up on your screen and everyone sees it. It makes it really hard to research in public." Their decisions about when and where they used the Internet to seek information about coming-out and gay identity seems clearly linked to the extent to which a place and time would enable them to conceal their online activities.

Information Sources

The analysis of information seeking activities shows how the Internet, and more specifically its capacity to support interpersonal communication, was the most heavily used resource. Considering the conditions of this information seeking situation, heavy Internet use makes sense intuitively because it supports the concealment of information seeking. When asked to comment on significant information sources, many study participants also mentioned television, but it was granted qualified approval as an information source. One participant's comment represents well the men's opinion, "The problem with having just that one show or those shows that make visible gay society is that you have plenty of other ways to be gay.... People don't see until they're older that there are other ways." The significance of television as an information source for gay identity and coming-out is consistent with findings by McKee (2000), whose study revealed that young gay men often look to media images as a resource for identity construction before coming-out. Like the Internet, television viewing supports the concealment of information seeking. Resources identified as less significant correspond to secondary information seeking activities; these are books, magazines, and gay bars.

Participants were asked to envision an ideal-type information system or source for seeking information about coming-out and gay identity. Responses contrast sharply from the types of resources used by those who were interviewed. The most common suggestion was the expansion of school curricula. One teen suggested, "Um, I think something that teachers can do is don't just gloss over people's sexuality when talking about a famous figure in history." Another asked, "Why can't you teach about homosexuality in health classes? It seems like a viable option to me." Participants also indicated a need for mentors. One person related, "So it would be good to have gay mentors. That's another thing we don't really have. We don't really have a lot of role models—gay mentors." Another interviewee described a system

in which mentors could be accessed in the school setting in a kind of safe zone. A separate series of suggestions called for hotlines gay teens could telephone to ask questions. Such hotlines exist; it seems those who made this suggestion were unaware of their existence.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that pursuing questions about coming-out and gay identity presents a series of barriers and challenges to young people faced with this decision. One way to examine this situation is through the lens of information poverty. According to Chatman's (1996) Theory of Information Poverty, the world of the information poor may be described with the following propositions.

1. The information poor see themselves as devoid of resources.
2. Outsiders contribute to information poverty, which is linked to class distinctions, by preventing information access.
3. The information poor use self-protective behaviors to conform to social norms.
4. The information poor do not trust others' ability to provide information, which leads to their self-protective behaviors of secrecy and deception.
5. The information poor do not risk exposing an information need, since they fear the negative consequences of exposure will not outweigh the benefits of accessing information.
6. The relevance of new information to daily issues influences whether new knowledge is introduced to the world of the poor. (p. 197)

Ready connections between several of these propositions and the situation of the young gay people in this study may be made. The dominant information seeking activity, using the Internet to communicate with other gay teenagers, relates to propositions one, four, and five. Internet may also be in part a by-product of the perception that there are few, if any, other available resources that will meet information needs. The fear and concealment associated with information seeking by these men relate to the third and fourth proposition, which make reference to self-protective behaviors. Their responses consistently show how concealing information seeking propelled the selection of resources and the manner of their use.

Information seeking activities most often involved online interpersonal interaction with other gays. The Internet activities such as participation in chat rooms, on listservs, and making e-mail connections via personal Web pages, were almost entirely directed toward meeting other gay teens. Other information seeking activities, such as the forming of friendships with out-of-the-closet peers at school and traveling to gay enclaves, reflected a similar goal of meeting like peers. The desire to construct an understanding of coming-out and gay identity from other gay people may also be detected in study participants' suggestion of gay mentors as an information source. These patterns reflect Chatman's fourth proposition, which indicates that the

information poor do not trust outsiders' ability to provide useful information. In the introduction of her theory, Chatman (1996) related Merton's premise that the lived experience of a social group may only be understood by group insiders, those who are members of that group. In this situation, outsiders may be defined as those who do not self-identify as gay.

The findings of this research do not provide evidence for Chatman's second and sixth propositions. With respect to proposition two, one participant related an incident involving a parent directly blocking access to gay information; however, this example does not illustrate well class distinction, which Chatman linked to socioeconomic differences. Interview responses did not relate to Chatman's sixth proposition. In spite of these two gaps, the experience of the young men in this investigation suggest that they indeed experienced information poverty when seeking information about coming-out.

Implications for Future Research

This research has three major implications for future study in this area. First, it supports investigating the information seeking of young gay people from a social constructivist perspective. The experience of information poverty by the participants in this study is related to their heterosexual group membership, and their maintaining a heterosexual identity demands the concealment of information-seeking. These young people's experience of fear in connection to information seeking is related to the perception of negative consequences attached to potential exposure; these consequences might be regarded as loss of benefits associated with heterosexual group membership. However, over the course of time, they did decide to label themselves as gay. Coming-out reflects a reassessment of the risks and benefits connected to presenting oneself as heterosexual. This change in self-identification may reflect a process of socialization into the gay community that occurs while seeking information about coming-out and gay identity. Understanding how this shift takes place is important, especially because of the condition of information poverty linked to this situation. Information poverty implies restricted access to social and cultural resources; such a limitation means that these men have fewer available resources to employ as they make meaning from their sexual experience. Exploring how gay males' pursuit of information needs about coming-out and gay identity figures into a redefinition of identity is a future direction for this research.

The second implication of this research is that investigating information seeking about coming-out is not well suited to an essentialist perspective on gay identity. The questions, information seeking activities, and conditions experienced by the participants demonstrate that encountering homosexual feelings is not accompanied by preexisting a gay identity. The experiences of these young men do show that only after a period of seeking answers to

questions about coming-out did they produce for themselves and others a gay identity.

The third implication of this investigation is that future study and development of Chatman's (1996) Theory of Information Poverty may be undertaken by studying the information seeking of men such as those who participated in this study. The discussion of findings reveals that their conditions reflect a number of information poverty propositions. Future study may focus more directly on Chatman's six propositions in an effort to explore their interrelationships and presence in connection to specific elements or circumstances in information seeking situations. Such exploration has the potential to lead to the development of a model to represent the dynamics among conditions associated with people's experience of information poverty. Construction of this type of model could eventually lead to specific, concrete recommendations for intervention in situations of information poverty.

Suggestions for Provision of Information

Professional library literature usually promotes collection development when discussing information provision to GLBT communities. However, the information poverty experienced by the young men in this study suggests that acquisition of materials is only a partial response. School libraries can play a strong role in providing information services that address the fear and concealment associated with this situation. One way to do this is by supporting anonymity for those seeking information about this life concern. Purchasing materials that deal with coming-out but requiring that users borrow these in the traditional way may defeat the purpose of having acquired them. School library media specialists may consider loaning materials about sexual identity on an honor-system basis. School libraries and other information centers might also offer self-check borrowing capabilities, so users may borrow materials without interacting with staff. Also, less expensive materials such as pamphlets or paperback books may be purchased or created and given to users to keep or made available as part of wide-reaching displays addressing a multitude of social or personal needs.

Several study participants suggested that GLBT topics be incorporated into school curricula; this proposes a way to provide information in a safe environment. A school library media specialist is in a good position to facilitate this type of curriculum expansion, because a key role is to advise curriculum development. School library media specialists may advocate integrating GLBT studies into curricula, working with faculty to identify opportunities for inclusion. By teaching all young adults about GLBT people and issues, those dealing with constructing sexual identity may receive critical information, whereas others may learn how to help create a safe and inclusive environment. Several study participants said that they would have found mentoring or peer support programs useful, reflecting a desire to seek

information from people with similar experiences. School library media specialists and public librarians might support nonacademic initiatives that meet young adult information needs, especially those dealing with life concerns, by starting mentoring programs or sponsoring youth groups for students who are dealing with sexual identity. These endeavors respond to information seekers' inclinations to construct meaning of same-sex sexual and romantic experiences by interacting with peers or role models by creating a safe space for this activity. Partnerships with GLBT organizations may provide external support and expertise for the development of these programs.

Finally, school library media specialists might consider how the Internet was used for information seeking by the men in this study as a primary means of seeking information. Library Internet-use policies often prohibit or restrict e-mail and chat room use, presumably because these are not information seeking activities. This inquiry reveals the fallibility of this assumption, showing how information seeking may rely almost exclusively on e-mail, listservs, and Internet chat rooms. Here is an opportunity for school library media specialists to review Internet-use policies to determine that definitions of "appropriate" Internet use do not disenfranchise some users by placing barriers to their information-seeking.

Conclusion

Further inquiry may pursue this study's findings about the information seeking of young gay men in relation to coming-out and the experience of information poverty. The greatest challenge of future research may be taking a social constructionist approach, because the prevailing definition of gay identity is essentialist. Compounding this difficulty is the predominant and somewhat successful use of the essentialist perspective by gays and lesbians to advance toward social and political equality.

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