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A Computer-Mediated Escape from the Closet: Exploring Identity, Community, and Disinhibited Discussion on an Internet Coming Out Advice Forum

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Abstract Research suggests that gay men and lesbians, as a product of being raised by heterosexuals in a heterosexist culture, are often shielded from information to help them cope with their stigmatized identity in their early years. Unsurprisingly, this community of individuals has been found to use the Internet more heavily than their heterosexual counterparts. This study examined an advice sub-forum on a popular set of forums designated for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) people negotiating the coming out process. Employing online disinhibition as a framework, and drawing from an identity management standpoint, a thematic analysis uncovered seven unique ways that LGBTQ people create community and craft identities in a computer-mediated context.

Keywords Computer-mediated communication · Sexuality · Self-disclosure · Identity management · LGBTQ

Introduction

For members of stigmatized groups that are not always visible, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) people, there are frequent decisions to be made about identity management. Link and Phelan propose that stigma "exists when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occur together in a power situation that allows them" (2001, p. 377). However, as Goffman (1963) noted decades ago, not all sources of social stigma are equally perceptible in society. Living with a non-visible stigmatized identity, and attempting to manage that identity without losing status, can therefore be quite an isolating experience. These individuals are consistently faced with choices, such as

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to "display or not display; tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where" (Goffman 1963, p. 42).

Due to the secretive nature of non-visible stigmatized identities, as well as the heterosexist world in which individuals are raised, the Internet has been seen as a particularly useful tool for LGBTQ individuals. Research has illustrated that sexual minorities find the Internet to be a place where they can discover and manage their stigmatized identities, as well as find a sense of community (Davison et al. 2000; McKenna and Bargh 1998). In the context of homosexuality, social networking websites and chat rooms have been pointed to as a resource for everything from gay teens at risk for suicide (Silenzio et al. 2009) to HIV/AIDS prevention messages (Rhodes 2004) to a space for marginalized queer men (e.g. obese men) to congregate and express their bodily desires (Campbell 2004).

The current study explored the seeking of identity and community on an online coming out forum for LGBTQ individuals, positioning the Internet forum as a valuable tool in the identity formation, identity management, and coming out processes. Using an online disinhibition framework, the present research aimed to examine the ways that individuals participate in discussion in an online space designed to facilitate the exploration and expression of marginalized-concealable (Frable 1993) identities. A month of posts on a coming out sub-forum were captured, analyzed, and categorized, with the goal of determining how and why users partake in disinhibited discussion in this particular type of online space. Seven themes were developed based on the data, each of which presents a distinct function of coming out forums, and aids in illuminating the importance of online queer space in the overall health and wellbeing of those who are partially or fully in the closet about their LGBTQ identities.

Despite the research indicating LGBTQ individuals' reliance on the Internet during the coming out process and beyond, very little is known about the actual conversations that happen in these spaces, nor is there data on the specific ways that individuals are using coming out forums. The present study extends collective knowledge about what it means to develop, negotiate, and/or disclose an LGBTQ identity in the age of the Internet. This paper examines how, and in what specific ways, the disinhibited setting of an online coming out advice forum impacts the online coming out process. Furthermore, the current work assesses how the disinhibited nature of an online forum contributes to identity management for LGBTQ individuals who are otherwise closeted in their online and offline lives.

By examining the disinhibited nature of identity management in these online spaces, focus is on the unique features of the Internet forum as a driving force in the discovery, management, and often times, disclosure of LGBTQ identity. Knowing about the conversation that occur may be important from both a scholarly and a practical sense; given that same-sex attracted individuals have been found to have higher rates of anxiety, mood and substance use disorders, and suicidal thoughts than their heterosexual counterparts (Cochran 2001). This line of research contributes to the literature on LGBTQ identities, as well as LGBTQ individual's use of new media, and it aids in the explication of the utility of coming out forums, which may be useful for LGBTQ organizations, mental health professionals, and other practitioners. In a world where LGBTQ people are vulnerable, the coming out

forum may provide a safe space wherein communication is supportive, informative, and possibly life-saving.

Marginalized-Concealable Identities, Identity Management, and the Internet

Frable (1993) distinguished between those with concealable marginalized identities, or those that may be hidden, and those with conspicuous, or visible, marginalized identities. A number of important differences exist between these two types of stigmatized identities. Firstly, those with covert identities are unable to find others in their environment simply by the nature of the stigma, and might therefore be lacking visible signs of others with the stigmatized identity. Secondly, individuals with hidden stigmas are more likely than those with conspicuous stigmas to hear negative comments and opinions directed at people who hold their stigma, which has a negative effect on self-esteem. Research suggests that gay and lesbian men and women, as a product of being raised by heterosexuals in a heterosexist culture, are often shielded from information to help them cope with their stigmatized identity in their early years (Meyer and Dean 1998; Williamson 2000). It is not surprising, then, that McKenna and Bargh (1998) found that virtual group involvement is significantly correlated with having a marginalized-concealable identity. That is, those with marginalized-concealable identities found more use in online newsgroups than those with visible stigmas or mainstream identities.

In an investigation of the coming out strategies employed by gay men, Hamer (2003) found that young college students most often took to the Internet to answer questions about gay identity and coming out of the closet. Chat rooms, listservs, online support groups, and personal Web pages were identified as ways that these men met others like them. It has been shown that using media featuring people who belong in the same social group can impact an individual's sense of group belonging and social identity (Hardwood 1997). The desire for community and the need for identity management are clear motivations for the use of online forums and other social spaces for LGBTQ people. In one study, three quarters of self-identified LGB participants reported using some form of media to find information during the coming out process, with the Internet being the most commonly used method of information-seeking (Bond, Hefner, and Drogos, 2009).

Younger sexual minorities, in particular, have been shown to be more reliant on online communities for social support, while older LGBTQ people are more likely to use these communities to find sexual partners (Baams et al. 2011). This is likely because of the increasingly younger age at which individuals have begun to negotiate the coming out process, as well as the fact that mobile technologies have opened up new avenues for online interaction away from prying eyes. In her work on LGBTQ rural youth, Gray found that non-urban youth are particularly reliant on the Internet as a tool for conducing queer identity work, which she defines as "the collective labor of crafting, articulating, and performing LGBT identities" (2009, p. 92). These youth utilize new media as a strategy for determining what is expected of young LGBT boys and girls, seeking out gay outlets when none exist in their offline, family-oriented and often overly conservative rural worlds (Gray 2009).

In his research on gay male social networking websites, Gudelunas found that gay men were particularly skilled in identity management. He noted that, "Gay men, who often times manage multiple identities between work, school, family, and their social life, similarly showed no hesitation with managing multiple identities online" (2012, p. 361). Men continuously expounded upon or amended their identity depending on the context, in this case the website they were using.

Identity management revolves around the ways people control access to their identities, and the type of information given about these identities (Goffman 1963). For queer people, identity management is often wrapped up with the idea of coming out of the closet—or LGBTQ people divulging their "true" sexual or gender identity. While traditional research has viewed coming out as a linear trajectory, Orne (2011) views coming out of the closet as a form of strategic outness. He posits that coming out is an ongoing journey wherein queer identity is contextually managed using a variety of strategies, with a multitude of motivations, and in a number of social contexts. In the coming out process, individuals now have multiple methods at their fingertips, including clues, direct disclosure, and speculation (Orne 2011). Queer people use these tools, as well as social distance, to decide who knows about their LGBTQ identity and what information distinct social groups in their lives should be given (Orne 2011).

In a study that contrasted the gay-specific online network Gaydar and the mainstream Facebook, Cassidy (2013) found that men presented different facets of themselves depending upon the social network at hand. This had much to do with the intended audience, and the need for privacy surrounding issues of sexuality and identity. For example, because Facebook was seen as a more authentic online space, men disclosed more of their personal identity and individual characteristics. However, Cassidy's participants—all men who have sex with men—were often less out on Facebook because of this lack of anonymity and because they did not want to rub their sexuality in the face of their friends and family. Therefore, the authenticity of this presented self may be debated. Gaydar, in this regard, fostered more outness in terms of direct disclosure of sexual orientation, as the very nature of having a profile on Gaydar assumes some level of a queer identity.

Hamer (2003) categorized gay males' "coming out" information seeking needs into three areas: self-labeling needs, needs related to the consequences as self-identifying as gay, and needs related to forming an understanding of gay identity. For participants, the fulfillment of these needs typically involved interaction with other young gay adults in an online forum. The present study extends this line of research by examining the social and psychological rationale for participation on a mediated coming out forum by approaching it with an online disinhibition theoretical framework.

Online Disinhibition Effect

The online disinhibition effect is one framework through which we are able to examine LGBTQ peoples' use of online forums as a strategic tool in the coming out process, and Suler's (2004) seminar work on this concept was used as a guiding theoretical lens. The online dishinibition effect posits that people do or say things in

cyber-settings that they would not otherwise do or say in face-to-face encounters (Suler 2004). This disinhibition that occurs may work in one of two directions: benign or toxic. Toxic online disinhibition encompasses the exhibition of rude language, harsh sanctions, threats, criminal activity, or otherwise negative behavior or communication resulting from the nature of cyberspace-based interaction (Suler 2004). Benign disinhibition, however, is a more positive effect that can occur from online communication. Benign disinhibition occurs when people share intimate thoughts or feelings, secret emotions, wishes, or fears, or engages in relatively unusual acts of kindness (Suler 2004). It is the benign disinhibition effect that the current study positions as a framework for exploring online discussions about sexual identity and disclosure, discussions that posters very clearly illustrate they are not having much of in an offline, face-to-face context. The unique factors of the Internet allow for a more disinhibited discussion of sexuality, including but not limited to increased self-disclosure and selfless time spent offering support to virtual strangers.

Suler (2004) proposes six factors contributing to online disinhibition: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, minimization of status and authority. While not all six factors will apply to each case of disinhibition, the aspects often interact and intersect (Suler 2004). In terms of coming out forums and similar forms of media, it is not impossible to imagine how all six of these factors might contribute to a more uninhibited realm for discussions of an extremely sensitive nature.

Dissociative anonymity refers to the ability of Internet users to hide, or even alter, some or all of their non-virtual identities (Suler 2004). Suler (2004) posits that this anonymity might allow users to compartmentalize the offline and online aspects of the self and, therefore, to more easily avert responsibility for their online communication. Others have noted anonymity as a key element of MSM's new media usage. For example, Gudelunas employed the uses and gratifications approach to examine gay males' use of social networking. He found that, "one of the unique gratifications of gay-specific SNSs like Grindr is the sliding scale of anonymity provided" (2012, p. 359). That anonymity is one of the main reasons coming out forums are able to succeed on the Internet is indisputable. These forums allow posters a safe space where they can reveal as much—or as little—about themselves as they feel comfortable with disclosing in a mediated public setting.

Invisibility is the next factor identified by Suler (2004), and one that relates well to the current study. In many online environments, people cannot be seen. Not only is their physical presence masked in text-based cyber avenues, but virtual presence might even be shielded in settings that allow for lurking or observation without contribution. This lack of visibility, specifically the lack of eye contact, disinhibits people. In fact, in a study on toxic online disinhibition, Lapidiot-Lefler and Barak (2012) use the term unidentifiability to discuss the ability of Internet users to remain relative unknown, even when some identifying personal details (e.g. real name) are disclosed. These authors list lack of personal information, lack of visibility, and lack of eye contact as the three contributors to online unidentifiability. Eye contact was found to be the strongest predictor of toxic online disinhibition, as evidence by "flaming" and negative communication practices, when compared with anonymity

and invisibility (Lapidiot-Lefler and Barak 2012). Flaming is a toxic communication practice that may include aggressive and hostile language, derogatory names or threats, swearing, sexually inappropriate language, or other negative comments (Dyer et al. 1995).

Online forums are particularly apt to meet the asynchronous criteria identified as one of Suler's (2004) six factors. While replies might occur in real-time in some cyber scenarios, such as video chats or even instant messages, forum posts take longer to craft and submit. Even the quickest forum reply will not be instantaneous, which might allow for the original poster to exit the online avenue before ever reading a single response to his or her comment or disclosure. As Suler (2004) notes, this creates disinhibition because it allows people to say or do something online and then wait until they are ready to experience the reaction, which might be never. The asynchronous nature of this type of technology also means that replies might take minutes, hours, days, months, or even years to come (Suler 2004), and these replies might not strike the same cord outside of the immediate present. Unlike offline settings, judgment never needs to be experienced.

Solipsistic introjection, or the merging of one's mind and the mind of the online other, leads to a lack of inhibition because of the mind's tendency to treat these others as characters in our own intrapsychic worlds (Suler 2004). When communicating with others online, people often tend to assign characteristics— voices, as well as visual—to others they cannot see, and as others become more like real characters, conversations become experienced as occurring in the imagination (Suler 2004). The imagination is a safe place, and when online communication feels as though it is being experienced in such a space, it leads individuals to do or say things they would not say in non-virtual settings (Suler 2004). In many online forums, including the one utilized in the current study, people do not use their real names, nor do they depict their actual likeness in their avatar photo. The lack of visual cues might thus create solipsistic introjection, leading to disinhibited communication. Building on the idea of solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination occurs when people feel the characters they have crafted exist in a disparate space, which allows for these perceived-to-be created characters to be left in cyberspace once a person logs off (Suler 2004). Consequences are therefore not perceptually conceived of in the same way that one would consider the consequences of face-to-face communication.

The last important factor affecting online disinhibition rests in the diminishment of status and authority. The absence of visual authority cues, such as uniforms or other forms of dress, make for a setting in which authority figures are often unperceived, even when they are present (Suler 2004). Furthermore, cyberspace is also perceived to be a more fair space where people can contribute regardless of social status (Suler 2004). With no unified authority, the Internet operates as a space with minimized authority (Suler 2004). People act as if they have no one to which they must answer in part because of this perceived lack of authority figures. While this can easily be exemplified using examples of toxic behavior or communication, the lack of status and authority can also open up spaces for openness and vulnerability that do not exist offline. Wherein some sexual minorities might not be able to, or even want to, discuss their same-sex attraction in their offline lives,

cyberspace allows for these discussions to occur in the absence of parents, teachers, employers, or any other authority figure.

Using the online disinhibition model, and the benign online disinhibition effect specifically, as a framework, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1   What are the specific ways that participants partake in coming out discussion threads in the disinhibited setting of online coming out advice forums?

RQ2   How does the disinhibited nature of an Internet forum contribute to identity management for LGBTQ individuals who are otherwise closeted in their online and offline lives?

Methods

A thematic analysis was conducted to uncover the ways in which LGBTQ people participated in online queer space. Specifically, observations were made of one specific "coming out advice" sub-forum of a larger group of forums for LGBTQ people negotiating their sexual identity. This coming out forum, *Empty Closets* (http://emptyclosets.com), is easily searchable and, as of the time this study was undertaken, had the highest ranking on Google, designating it as a likely first hit for potential seekers of such an online setting. The sub-forum was monitored for a 1-month period, in which time the researcher was in no way involved with participants. Membership was not required to access the website or to view posts on the websites, though a screen name was required to post to the forum. The researcher made no posts, and did not disclose his presence. Because all of the posts are publically accessible, forum participants recognize the unrestricted nature of their communication. As such, many forum participants include only some personal information in their profile. It was not uncommon for users to withhold their physical location, age, race, or other identifiers, and users rarely posted a personal photograph. For this reason, user details are not reported in this paper. When relevant, ages and sexual identity self-descriptions are included with quotes in order to provide a richer picture, but this could not occur in all instances. However, the lack of demographic data available goes hand-in-hand with the features that contribute to such an online space as the ideal forum for disinhibition to occur in the first place.

The specific sub-forum observed related only to coming out advice, as opposed to other sub-forums on the website that focused on issues such as being LGBTQ later in life or general chat such as current events or entertainment. A secondary sub-forum on coming out narratives was not included in the analysis, as the researcher was concerned with patterns of the coming out advice seeking and giving of forum use. All threads started within the month of August 2013 were analyzed, including original postings and follow-up responses that arrived within the month. Posts that were less than five words total were not included in the sample. A random number generator, using the 12 months preceding data collection, was applied to decide upon the month of posts to be included in the sample.

Discussion posts were read thoroughly before being stripped of personally identifiable information and copied and pasted into a word document. When copied,

only the thread title, date of posting, and posting text were carried over. Conversational threads were kept intact. The accumulating scrapbook of data consisted of 167 single-spaced pages that were read closely multiple times over. The constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was used to conduct a thematic analysis of the data. Using this method, data was first fractured (Strauss 1987) before being reorganized into categories, and interpreted in order to facilitate the development of theoretical concepts (Maxwell 1996). Categories were refined to reflect the experiences of the LGBTQ posters using the coming out forum. Punctuation was edited in occasions where a post would be unable to be understood without correction.

Results

The findings are categorized into seven thematic categories identifying the social and psychological impetus driving users to participate on the observed forum in a state of benign disinhibition: (1) storytelling, (2) identity quests, (3) validation, (4) information seeking, (5) community seeking, (6) community building, and (7) advice provision. Each of these themes is supported in this paper by exemplars. Throughout these themes, weight was given to the ways in which posters were using the online space, specifically as it related to a sense of identity and community. These themes are meant to reflect the voices of those dealing with the stigma associated with being LGBTQ, and they emphasize the unique aspects of a queer-only online space. In total, 657 posts were assigned to the theme that best fit their contents. Below is a description of each of these themes.

Storytelling

"Storytelling" posts were those that focused primarily on telling a story about developing or managing an LGBTQ identity. There were 44 storytelling posts in the sample. Stories took one of two main strategies; they centered on either an overarching coming out history relayed as an ongoing narrative, or a detailed recollection of a recent event that was memorable. The disclosure of one's LGBTQ identity was a common story shared, particularly if the individual's path was filled with obstacles. When negative, these recollections tended to take the form of vents or rants, often using strong language and rarely seeking advice so much as a place to blow off steam. Positive storytelling was understandably more celebratory in nature, and tended to express feelings such as relief, excitement, and happiness.

The positive posts represented under this umbrella were unique in that they were used to start threads, but required no follow-up from others, though they did often receive it. Positive storytelling posts did not offer advice or seek advice, but simply a place to recall a narrative or event. Some positive posts described events that were especially exciting. Said one poster, "But I didn't end my coming out spree there. I finally, finally got the guys to tell my older brother today." The emphasis placed on the word "finally" is a good exemplar of the sense of excitement a lot of positive storytellers felt. The post ends with the poster declaring, "This has probably been

one of the best weekend(s) of my life. Thanks for all the support guys!" The disclosure of an LGBTQ identity to others beyond the online forum was often presented as a liberating experience, and one that individuals felt the desire to share with their confidants on *Empty Closets*.

Another poster used the forum as a place to tell the story of coming out at work, stating, "I know the title implies that I need advice, but actually, I've already done it. I mean, I only told two people, but that's good enough for me. I don't need everyone to know yet." Others discussed triumphs in settings such as high school, college, the family home, or on social networking websites. No matter the disclosure, positive storytellers expressed upbeat emotions. After confiding in a close male friend, one lesbian felt that "coming out to him was the best because I think I needed to be open with someone outside my family." Subsequently, she observed that, "since I've been back in contact with him and confiding in him, I've been feeling a lot better about myself and not frequently doubting myself." While this poster clearly enjoyed confiding in her offline friend, she also felt the need to share this story with the forum membership to reaffirm the affirmative nature of her feelings about the situation. Clearly, sharing her story with the community she had built online was important in her processing of recent offline events.

As one might expect given the heterosexism and homophobia that persists in modern culture, not all storytellers had positive tales to share. Many of these posts took the form of vents or rants, and while venting posters recalled stories, not all were extensive retellings. These rant-type posts tended to be about recent events, such as a negative encounter or a forced outing. Wrote one man, "The past couple of days have been pure hell for me." He went on to explain that, "On Saturday I was outed at work by my coworker. This woman, a coworker who I was friends with on Facebook, started to show off my profile and pics to people at work on her iPhone." The poster goes on to engage in a page-long rant about the very recent set of events. Indicated in this post and similar posts is the lack of control over the disclosure of one's own identity to others, a reality that served to be incredibly emotionally distressful for those were outed against their will or without their permission.

Some negative storytellers did use the forum as a space to recall their entire histories, vent about their lives, and ask for general advice or commentary. One lesbian, closeted to everyone but her former fiancé, started her post with a plea: "Hey all, this'll be a bit long, but, *if you want to make someone's day,* any *well thought-out* advice would do just that for me. I'm desperate. I'm drowning here." This poster then takes users through her entire story, beginning with how she grew up and including discussion of an engagement, a queer identity formation, family information, and the poster's current dilemma. While positive storytellers used language and symbols (e.g. happy faces, explanation points) to convey positive emotions, those who recalled negative stories similarly used tools to express a more somber set of emotions.

Sometimes these stories were excessive in length, and posters often felt insecure about dumping mass baggage onto others. One closeted man started by saying, "Well I'll try not to make it a long story…but I have 47 years of heartache". It was not uncommon for storytellers to thank others for reading their lengthy post, and to end with a statement of apology. One venting storyteller ended with the following

apology: "Sorry for the long post, it's been bugging me recently but if I post it to my blog I'd have to rewrite it all to put it here for advice." Because, for many posters, the LGBTQ identity was one that was hidden in other online/offline spaces, the stories shared on *Empty Closets* made posters especially vulnerable; they were telling stories about parts of themselves that even their closest friends and family had no knowledge about.

Key to many of the storytelling posts—both positive and negative—was a focus on relationships. The stories often discussed identity and revelations about oneself, but typically juxtaposed with details about the poster's interactions (or lack thereof) with others. A final storytelling example illustrates a woman's recollection of her past history with a lesbian friend while managing feelings about her own sexuality:

> We continued on like that for a while. We had some ups and downs. I started to question who I was and what my "sexuality" really was. It was hard because the person I would have gone to, her, was the person I was experiencing it with. We did talk a lot about my feelings and where I was, and what I was going through though. And we talked about her feelings and how she wasn't over the ex, etc.

The cyber-nature of this particular setting created an avenue for users to share frustrations, triumphs, heartaches, and other tales of human emotion they cannot or do not share non-virtually.

Identity Quests

Identity quests ($n = 41$) were posts with the chief goal of conducting identity work, specifically allowing the user to exploit the forum to question their own sexual identity and to decide upon the authenticity of their LGBTQ identity. While the fluidity of sexuality and gender was often highlighted in these posts, most posters felt the need to find an appropriate label or fit within a predetermined category. Some even went so far as to quantify their feelings. One man wrote, "I've come to realize that I am bisexual with a preference of about 70 % attraction to guys and about 30 % towards women." In his quest for an authentic bisexual identity, this poster felt it necessary to attach numerical values to his desirability for each gender. Another poster noted that, "I'm becoming more sure of my sexual orientation every day. I still doubt it, and I still sometimes get extremely confused by it all. But I do feel about 95 % sure that I am, indeed, gay." Even though this particular poster expressed that she was not yet ready to label herself, she essentially did so by attaching a percentage to her sexual identity.

Masturbation habits and pornography viewing were indicated as cues for recognizing same-sex attraction. Posters offered personal details about their masturbatory fantasies and patterns to attempt to work out their feelings of attraction. Respondents often probed for this type of information, as well. Posters not only questioned their heterosexuality and/or gender, but they also sometimes questioned how their newfound same-sex attraction or gender identity altered their perceptions of self. A common sentiment was the confusion that came from managing a "straight" identity while at the same time harboring same-sex

attraction. This is not surprising, given that the disclosure of a sexual or gender minority identity is often filled with anxiety, perplexity, and discomfort (Brierley 2000; Manning 2014). One married father stated, "I don't think I can live like this any more. I know I sound ridiculously selfish. I've never had a gay encounter. I've never touched a man intimately. I've dreamt of it though."

As previously mentioned, central to the search for a queer identity was the pressure that people felt to label themselves. One woman expressed hesitancy at accepting a gay identity, but felt that it was best for the clarity of her overall coming out narrative. She stated that, "For some reason, I'm worried this is a mistake and I'm actually bi, even when I know I like women more." She goes on to discuss how she finds men attractive but feels closer to gay than bi, concluding that "labels aren't the be all and end all, but I think they'll be useful when explaining to people without much experience in the field." By "field," it is safe to assume that this poster meant people without knowledge of the inner workings of the LGBTQ community. Nonetheless, the poster seems hesitant to label herself as a lesbian, and she was not alone in her hesitancy to associate with an explicitly gay identity.

Even on the forum, this woman was not alone in her hesitation with labels. However, this hesitation often revolved more around confusion about one's sexuality rather than some sort of rebellion against societal labels. Some people engaging in identity quests felt frightened that they could be making a mistake if they openly called themselves queer. In this example, one man articulated a fear that he could be misinterpreting his same-sex feelings: "I'm also scared that if I did come out and go through hell that I would end up realizing that I prefer women, or I'd end up falling for a woman that I couldn't get because I was out as bisexual. I'm terrified that I'd end up wondering why I did that to myself." Another man fretted that, at 32, he was too old to come out as gay after identifying as straight for his whole life, asking, "Am I too late to come out and start my life as an openly gay man? I'm afraid I lost my chance of being happy by pretending to be straight for so long." In this scenario, the poster fears that his former straight identity bars him from adopting an authentic queer self, despite the fact that many on the forum are undertaking identity quests at a far more advanced age (there is even a sub-forum devoted strictly to coming out as an LGBTQ individual later in life).

Implicit in the disclosure of a queer identity was the loss of a straight identity, and this was not unrecognized by people struggling with multiple identities. For example, a closeted man experiencing same-sex love for the first time noticed that he acted differently in front of his family and straight friends than he did LGBTQ people, going so far as to communicate that, "I think I have been two people all this time." To come out, for him, would mean adopting his queer self on more of a full-time basis, which is unacceptable, despite him being in love with another man. Brekhus (2003), in his study of suburban gay men, coined the term "lifestyler" to refer to those who are fully immersed in a gay identity at all times and in all contexts, and those for whom their gayness washed over all other aspects of identity. In opposition, the "commuter" keeps his or her straight suburban and gay lives separate, turning on this gay identity in the proper space and place. It seems that, for this particular poster, the idea of having to morph into a gay lifestyler upon coming

out is what keeps him closeted; he does not view integration of his multiple facets of identity as a realistic option.

The idea of multiple identities was a recurring metaphor, and the presence of a queer self was, predictably, not always met with ease. "I find myself fighting with what I call my 'gay me' because everything I want to be exists in a world where I'm straight," wrote one 20-year-old. "For me, coming out and accepting that I'm gay means destroying my family ties, the loss of a place to live, and alienating all my friends." Since the poster is nowhere near coming out, it is impossible to know whether these consequences are real or imagined. However, the battle between this individual's "gay me" and straight ideal is an ongoing struggle, leaving this poster feeling "really lonely all the time." As such, we might view cyberspace as a necessary outlet for expressing this loneliness, one of the most intimate feelings and one that many individuals keep buried inside in face-to-face communication.

Validation

Another identified use of the forum was for validation purposes, and 40 posts fell into this thematic category. The reason for seeking validation was because the online forum was seen as a trusted place full of empathetic people, people with whom posters had formed ongoing relationships. These seems to fit Rheingold's (2000) definition of virtual communities, "social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on […] public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (p. xx). These posts sought confirmation from others on a subject on which the poster already had a strong view, but which he or she felt the virtual community could authenticate. Forum participants seeking validation used the forum to confirm that the decisions they planned to make about revealing their queer identity were solid ones. In particular, validation posts revolved around preconceived plans to come out, and predetermined people to which to come out. In some cases, they even included letters or sample texts as somewhat of a test-run coming out endeavor.

The most basic question that people asked to be validated was whether or not they should come out. However, these posts were not so much a question as a search for substantiation, or even permission, from fellow board members. One poster held uncertainty about whether he should come out to his friend, but indicated that he has already decided to come out to this person. Despite this plan to divulge his sexuality to his best friend, the poster stated the following:

> I want to come out to him and it will come as a shock to him, but I know he'll be supportive. But now when he jokes and makes hateful comments about gays it really hurts me and I wonder whether I should come out to him.

This quote alone makes it seem as though the poster was on a search for answers, however, the post begins with a statement that the poster already intends to come out to his friend, who he views as overall supportive of LGBTQ people. The poster is not seeking advice about whether he should come out to his friend, even though he might be expressing reluctance, but confirmation that he should go ahead and do what he already has premeditated.

At times, people framed validation posts as questions about how to come out. One girl, in a thread called "Coming out on Facebook?" asked if she should come out on the popular social networking site "because I can't do it obviously in person". While this was phrased as a question, she already had her mind made up that she would come out online. When another poster suggested that she perhaps come out in person, or in a more intimate manner, the original poster shot down the idea. When yet another poster suggested subtlety by joining an Ellen Degeneres or PFLAG Facebook group, the original poster again shot down this idea. Even though she framed her original post about Facebook as a question, she had no need for advice, as all she wanted was permission to go ahead with her plan.

Some validation posts weren't framed as questions, but as decisions. An example may look like this, "I'm still going to tell my older sister, and then if the subject is talked about again with my other sister I'll be completely honest and explain how it's just something I was born with, and that it's only a small part of who I am." The poster is set in his ways about the future actions he plans to take, but wants to share them with others for support and well wishes, thus validating his choices. The online forum here seemed to serve as a space for a test-run of future plans, with the actual responses from others mattering very little, if at all. People had little inhibition because they cared little about what virtual others, at least relative to individuals in their non-virtual lives.

In extreme cases, posters presented plans that included specific text or content that they wanted to share. One man told of a plan to text his mom while she was at her boyfriend's house so that he would have no choice but to follow through with coming out. He expressed this intention, and asked what others thought before offering them a glimpse at three lines of a text. He ended his post by stating, "I know I'm all talk, but I really think I'm gonna (sic) do this. Any thoughts?" Even though the poster asked for feedback, only two people responded before the text was already sent. The rest of the thread consisted of congratulations from others and updates from the original poster.

It seems that many posters were using *Empty Closets* in a way that would eventually lead to offline disclosure and enactment of a queer identity. In his work on transgender individuals' use of cyberspace, Marciano (2014) conceived of three ways cyberspace was utilized: as a preliminary sphere, as a complementary sphere, and as an alternative sphere. While some posters on *Empty Closets* might have used the forum as a complementary sphere, in which their online and offline identities complimented each other and required minimal separation, or as an alternative sphere, in which they enacted a parallel identity not afforded to them in offline space, most—and validation seekers, in particular—treated the forum as a preliminary sphere, or an opportunity to virtually practice the coming out scenario before engaging in disclosures offline.

Information Seeking

Posters using the forum to fulfill an information seeking need hunted for answers about how to manage an LGBTQ identity, particularly the disclosure of a queer identity to others. Of the total posts, 65 were classified as information seeking.

Questions centered around how to come out, when to come out, to whom to come out, where to come out, and even why to come out. Crucial to this theme is the looking for answers and the desire for norms in the coming out experience. Previous research has established that the Internet can be an especially powerful tool during the development phase of a queer identity—particularly for younger individuals (e.g. Bond et al. 2009; Gray 2009). Many posters on *Empty Closets* tended to skew younger, seeking information on dealing with school situations, parents, and financial dependence.

By far the most common use of the coming out forum was to gather information on how to come out of the closet. People wanted tips from others who had been, or were currently, in their same shoes. The Internet offered them a place to find the answers that were not readily available, or that they were not prepared to ask offline. An example of this type of post might look like this question, from a concerned but anxious to come out teenage poster, asking, "What hints should I drop around my parents to make them think or know that I'm gay? I don't think I can tell them directly because I'm way too scared and nervous to." It was not uncommon for posters to inquire about ways to hint at their sexual or gender orientation as opposed to strategies for verbally voicing their identity. As Marwick, Gray and Ananny (2014) uncovered in their study of *Glee* fans, even expressing interest in a particular form of queer-inclusive media—such as a television program—can be seen as a sign of an LGBTQ identity, or at the very least, support for the community. Posters often sought information for how to drop small hints that would only be perceptible to those with queer-inclusive sensibilities.

Often, those who wanted to connect verbally with people in their offline lives felt in need of help. There seemed to exist little resources to help these posters find the words they desired. Take the following statement, for example: "I've probably Googled 'how to come out' about thirteen thousand, three hundred and fifty six times now, and I don't know if there's any more to be said about how to come out, expect (sic) for how to word it, which I can't find any articles or message board posts about…"

Another way that posters used the form for information was to gather opinions and receive advice about coming out to particular people. Many of these inquiries were practical in nature, rather than emotional. For example, one teenager who was out to his family and many friends asked about coming out to teammates, expressing concern that he might no longer be able to play sports. Another poster asked about outing oneself to doctors. The ongoing discussion centered on sexual practices, sexual health, and mental health.

Practicality was also central to queries about coming out in specific settings. Posters often expressed the desire to come out in a certain place—for example, at school or work—but wanted information on the physical, emotional, mental, and legal repercussions that such an act would have. Fear of threat is evident in the following quote, pulled from a poster questioning whether to come out as transgender in high school:

> Obviously the solution to this is to come out to my school. But as some of you may know, it's not that simple. My fear isn't that I will be labeled a "freak" or

teased or called names. The verbal bullies aren't my fear, because I'm the quiet person and nobody really speaks to me anyway; in fact, I prefer to be alone. I think clearer and am more focused on my schoolwork. So what is my terrible fear? Physical violence. That I would be beaten up, sexually assaulted, or worse, maybe even killed.

Interestingly, this poster does not refer to coming out to *people* at school, but to the school as a whole, promoting the idea that LGBTQ people must not only come out to individuals, but also to institutions. The other important aspect of this poster's concern is the fear for his or her physical safety. Trepidation was a widespread concern for closeted LGBTQ posters, but physical violence was not as common a worry as things like disownment from parents, a loss of friends, and rumors and other forms of emotional bullying. It is possible that those who fear for their physical safety are less likely to enter an LGBTQ online space, as they may put themselves in danger's way should they be tracked to *Empty Forums* or a similar digital locale.

It was surprising that not all posters on the forum felt a need to come out of the closet. For some, they sought information not on how they should come out or to whom, but on *why* they should open the closet doors at all. In particular, this line of thinking was more pertinent to bisexuals, who felt that they could hide their same-sex attraction. For example, one man deemed coming out "a game of risk" and wrote the following:

Where I live, gay people are tolerated by older generations and more or less accepted by a certain part of the younger generation. As such, coming out to everyone is out of the question. There really is no reason anyway since I'm bisexual and don't have to date men.

Here, the bisexual poster could be seen as exercising a certain type of privilege. He can date people to whom he is attracted and still pass as "straight," avoiding the need to come out altogether. While many bisexuals would certainly disagree with this sentiment, the poster was not alone in questioning the necessity of telling others about one's bisexual identity. The online nature of the setting of disclosure allows some posters to maintain completely separate offline and online sexual identities, which indicates that they might be engaging the forum as an alternative sphere (Marciano 2014) to proclaim an identity they do not plan to ever enact offline.

Community Seeking

Posts seeking community ($n = 31$) emerged as another common theme, and one that aligns very closely with previous research on LGBTQ people and their seeking of supportive space on the Internet (e.g. Hou and Lu 2013; McKenna, Green, and Smith 2001). Those who felt a deep sense of isolation in their offline lives tended to contribute content that fell into this category. The toll of keeping a chunk on one's identity secret weighed heavily on some posters, and it was common to see threads related to the loneliness that comes from living a double life. Community seeking was also undertaken by LGBTQ people who had come out, at least partially, but

who did not feel that the people they had come out to were understanding or open-minded.

A sense of virtual community is based on many factors, including recognition of other members, identification with other members, support, and emotional attachment (Blanchard and Markus 2004). The ongoing continuity and personal nature of conversations on *Empty Closets* support the idea that this forum, for many, functioned as a community. One lonesome poster wrote, "I am a very sad person, never been in a relationship, never hugged, never kissed, something which I have longer (sic) for but all I can think is that it is because of my fear of being who I am and my secret getting out." This aloneness was all too normal on the coming out forum observed for this study. At times, negativity directed within went beyond thoughts to impact actions, evident in the following quote from a young teenager:

> Self-harm is common for me, and I have to wear certain shirts to cover my scars on my arms from serrated knives. I've even swallowed toxic things to make myself sick. Some days I can't even bring myself to eat, talk to people, or function for that matter. Now, I am not pitying myself or looking for pity, trust me. I am just looking for advice, personal stories or encouragement. I just feel like I have no one to talk to, much less someone to come out to.

As the above quote illustrates, having an outlet to discuss self-harm is perhaps the most crucial example of benign online disinhibition because spaces like this forum have the potential to save lives. While self-harm as an action is problematic itself, the ability of this poster to discuss their self-harm in a safe space without fear is evidence of benign disinhibition. It must also be noted that coming out does not solve all issues for sexual and/or gender minorities, as some posters identified. Some people who had tiptoed out of the closet felt loneliness and a lack of community, and the forum was a place for them to connect with like minds. For example, one teenager who had been forced out of the closet by a snooping mother noted that, "Coming out was a mistake. I just don't know what to do. I am not talking to my mom about the subject ever. If only they'd understand." His mom and sister did not react to his homosexuality the way he would have liked, and his post was looking for others who could empathize. This sense of virtual community seemed to be a strong draw for many of the forum's more frequent posters.

Community Building

Community building was a distinct use of the forum identified in posts from respondents to thread creators, and was a crucial component in promoting the ongoing relationships and atmosphere necessary to achieve a sense of virtual community, a term derived from the work of Blanchard and Markus (2004). A total of 193 posts fell into the category of community building, and this number would likely have been higher had posts that were under five words total been included, as many of these non-included posts contained simple "congrats" or "good luck" wishes. People who engaged in community building were cheerleaders of sorts. They confirmed decisions posters had made or planned to make about the disclosure of their identities, they tendered their congratulations on coming out milestones or

important revelations, and they welcomed people to the forum community. They rarely offered critical analysis or feedback, focusing instead on fostering a sense of virtual community filled with support and encouragement. At times, they chose to create togetherness by providing their own story, emphasizing that the original poster was not alone and that the respondent had been, or was currently, in the same boat. Using Suler's (2004) definition of benign online disinhibition, these posters might be seen as engaging in extraordinary acts of kindness, spending their online time not in pursuit of their own identity work, but encouraging that of others.

At the most basic level, community-building posts simply expressed well wishes. An example of a typical post of this nature might say something like, "I think that is awesome. Could give you a big hug. Good luck!" Both "good luck" and "hugs" were commonly used expressions. Another phrase that was used by some posters was "it gets better," a reference to a viral campaign started by sex columnist Dan Savage in which LGBTQ adults created videos to let younger queers know that life gets better. Though somewhat of an empty statement, these words seemed to be an easily accessible way to provide encouragement and hope. Lastly, congratulations were nearly ubiquitous in community building posts. For example, one respondent wrote, "That is amazing! Congratulations!! I can't believe you did it all at once, talk about going *out* with a bang! This really made me smile, great story!!" and another, "Congratulations! I admire your courage and am very please (sic) for you with your outcome!".

When posters had a distinct plan in mind, community builders offered support for what was to come. As one person noted, "If you feel comfortable, I say go for it! It sounds like you have given it some thought, and I like your idea of wanting to come out to those closest to you first! Don't forget to take a deep breath! It's going to be fine." There were instances where a community builder seemingly reiterated what an original poster wanted to hear, even if their contribution was lacking helpful scrutiny. For example, in response to a married man who has noticed an attraction to male bodies over a number of years, one community builder offered the following: "You said you had those feelings a little while back, and were you married at the time? If you weren't, then you were just wondering what it was like. If you were married, then you probably wanted something outside the box. To me, it just seems like you're straight but curious." In this response, the original poster is told exactly what he wants to hear, reassuring his heterosexuality and normalness, and giving him an "out" to examining his sexuality. In a coming out context, messages such as this one provide little assistance in identity exploration, as they do not aid the poster to consider that they may be anything other than straight. Nonetheless, they speak positively to the inclusiveness of online coming out forums, as even posters who do not claim an LGBTQ identity label are welcomed and offered advice or encouragement. The end goal seems not be on participants claiming or publicly ascribing to an LGBTQ identity, but on participants being able to feel comfortable with their same-sex desires, no matter how they choose to identify in relation to those desires. Consequently, community builders can be seen as promoting inclusion and acceptance regardless of the self-perceived or self-named identities of those seeking community.

A considerable amount of posters sought to build community by replying to posts in ways that underscored their ability to empathize with advice seekers. Unlike advice posts, these posts did not explicitly offer advice, instead focusing on the shared lived experience between posters. In a thread about cleverly hinting at ones sexuality, one poster wrote that they were "in the same boat as most people here. I can't physically bring myself to speak to my parents about it, so I want to throw them some subtle hints." This poster did not start the thread—and is, therefore, not the main advice seeker—but continues on the conversation by illustrating that he or she is in the same boat as the original poster.

Another poster wrote, "I just want you to know that I felt the same way you did before I started the coming out process," promoting her sameness with the original poster, before offering the appeasing statement that, "it is very common to question yourself more, right when you're at the point you want to come out." In a later post in the same thread, this community builder again advanced the collective when she noted, "And yeah, it's very reassuring to know that we are not alone in this journey. There are so many people in the world going through the same thing."

Advice Provision

Unlike community building posts, the ones categorized as providing advice offered constructive criticism or compassionate suggestions. Advice posts made up the bulk of posts on the forum ($n = 243$). At times, advice posts that responded to others were similar to storytelling ones in that they used personal anecdotes to get their points across. The main difference between a strict storytelling response and an advice response was the presence of judgment or counsel directed at others. This was the same factor that distinguished advice posts from some of the community building work that emphasized shared journeys. The goal here was to help others engage in the healthiest identity management possible.

The subjects of most advice posts were religion, age, identifying queer-positivity, and questions about the actual act of coming out. These posts often merged personal anecdotes with directed counsel, even including tough love when necessary. One 47-year-old man complained about never having told his father he was gay before his father died 5 years prior, but expressed an ambivalence about coming out to his mother, causing one advice giver to respond with equal parts sympathy and criticism:

> You have my sympathy. The idea of leaving the closet is scary. However, I have to disagree with you. You're not really protecting anyone's heart. You're protecting a lie. I was also protecting a lie. The lie that I was straight. You've no doubt been raised to be honest. I'm not telling you to hurt your mom. Find a way to tell her gently and with care.

Being an advice giver did not necessarily equate providing someone with all of the answers, but rather aiding people in discovering what was best for their individual situation. There is no universal method for managing a queer identity, and as one advice poster emphasized, "Honestly, there is no requirement for you to come out. It's your choice. But in my mind, coming out means you can be yourself,

and if you don't, you may be forced to hide part of your attraction, and that is hard as time goes on." In a different thread, another advice giver echoed the idea that coming out is not always the correct path, telling a teenage lesbian that, "there is no need to come out. It's not your duty to the world. It's a very personal thing. Straight people don't usually share the details about their love life either. If you are scared, the time is not right." Rather than suggest that all posters should come out of the closet offline, advice providers were careful to weigh the potential consequences of the situation as heavily as the potential benefits. This particular online community is more effective for the attention to individual circumstance; by focusing on posters' ability to safely and comfortable come out, and by not pushing them to do so when it would not be safe or comfortable, advice providers facilitate a safe space that offers feedback without the added pressure of encouraging identity disclosure as the only potential outcome.

Religion was at the forefront of many posts, particularly the idea of merging religion and queer identity, and dealing with religious individuals who posters feared were not going to be accepting. Age was an additional frequent discussion topic due to the very young age of many posters. Many forum members were in high school—even middle school—and, thus, dependent on their parents for food and shelter. Others were college students with fears that they would be cut off financially were they to come out of the closet. For younger people, the advice they were given hinged very much on their chronological maturity. One bisexual was urged to think twice about coming out, given the following warning: "Age does matter. The sad truth is that some parents will kick their children out for being anything but straight…if you are still living with them you might want to think about why you are wanting to come out to them." The ability of advice givers to focus on the larger picture rather than simply the immediate desire to come out is noteworthy. In scenarios such as this, advice providers may have been able to stop users from coming out impulsively without first considering the practical consequences, such as being kicked out of the house or ostracized from one's family.

Regardless of age, posters were cautioned to survey their settings before taking steps out of the closet. For example, one advice giver wrote, "Do you live in an area that's very supportive of LGBT people? If so, it may be best just to throw it out there all at once. However, if your area can be kind of homophobic in general, it's probably a good idea to come out in steps." Beyond simple logistical concerns, posters were encouraged to think hard about their intended confidants. "Another thing that I think is important to do before coming out to anyone is to figure out their views," noted one helpful person. "You can figure peoples' views out easily and without outing yourself, just find something that's going on with the LGBTQ (community) and try and throw it into a conversation." Tips for identifying queer-positive allies ranged from basic, such as discussing LGBTQ issues or watching a television program with queer characters, to intricate, such as creating a fake gay friend and having conversations about them.

The process of coming out requires much in the way of tips, tools, and strategies, and this was the focus of many advice posting. Some of the suggestions focused on method, for instance coming out in a letter as opposed to in person, and others

focused on strategy, such as how to frame a message, when to divulge a secret, or ways to lessen the shock of coming out to others. When a young man asked about how to come out to a friend, he was met with the following advice:

> Maybe frame it as something that has been gnawing at you for a while and you want to clear the air. He's a good friend of yours and you want him to know the whole truth about you, which includes the fact that you have an attraction to guys and girls. If you put it in a way that makes your (non-sexual) relationship with him of utmost importance, he'll feel flattered and not quite as hit by something as seemingly impulsive as "btw I'm bisexual."

This quote illustrates the ways in which posters attempt to offer advice on both (1) framing the coming out message, and (2) softening the blow for the receiver of the message. Similarly, one poster attempting to come out to his mom as a transgender man was told that, "You gotta (sic) break it to her gently so that she has time to absorb it," as a means of pacifying the situation. Further advice followed: "I'd say write down a general idea of what you want to say as a way of organizing your thoughts and not forgetting to mention important feelings."

Discussion

While the invisible nature of an LGBTQ stigmatized identity, coupled with the heterosexism that is still so prevalent in society, might be driving queer people to seek out computer-mediated discussion forums, it is clear that there are a variety of ways that sexual and gender minorities are using these online spaces. The present study suggests seven uses for coming out forums, all brought about due to a lack of inhibition fostered by cyberspace: storytelling, identity quests, validation, information seeking, community seeking, community building, and advice provision. It not only enhances our understanding of the benign online disinhibition effect, an effect that might contribute to the utility of such a space, but it also adds to a growing body of research on queer people's use of the Internet, as well as the literature on online community building, stigmatized identity management, and the uses of new technologies.

Identity is a vital component of interpersonal communication research, but the manner in which people create and manage their identities has changed with the advent of new technologies. The present study merged the interpersonal aspects of communication with the study of mediated communication in order to unearth the unique ways that queer people interact, create community, and seek and express identity online. Future research should consider examining a greater number of queer forums, which would allow for a comparison between websites and set the stage for the emergence of patterns that transcend beyond the borders of the forum under investigation. Because *Empty Closets* functions for most as a preliminary sphere, and for some as a complimentary or alternate sphere, using Marciano's (2014) categories, it might be beneficial to know if other online spaces—for example, social media applications—function in a similar capacity for those negotiating a marginalized identity and the disclosure of this identity. Researchers

might also begin to compare online and offline discussions and disclosures and the depth and type of interpersonal relationships that flourish in each of these distinct settings.

Identity quests were a novel element of this piece of work, and it is important to understand how the mediated search for identity operates for other groups of people. The coming out process naturally lends itself to identity quests, and particularly to online identity quests, as fear and concealment have been noted to be barriers to finding information (Hamer 2003). However, it would also be useful to inspect whether the identified themes hold true for other, non-queer-identified advice forums. For example, would a pro-eating disorder forum help to facilitate participant understanding and acceptance of an anorexic or bulimic identity? This is but one example of the way the identity quest theme may be applied in the future.

Additionally, further research should examine whether the posts on forums such as the one studied result in behavioral outcomes. For instance, it would be worth noting whether those who say they are going to take a step out of the closet actually choose to do so in their offline life. It is unclear whether online disinhibition resulted in lessened inhibition offline for the users of the forum studied. Therefore, there is a need for further survey or experimental research on the topic of coming out forums. There seems to be a great need for online spaces for queer people coming to terms with their same-sex feelings and negotiating their queer identity, and it would be helpful to have quantifiable data on how often people use these spaces. It would also be useful to examine the types of LGBTQ people who are involved in coming out forums, including their characteristics (e.g. gender, race, class), and to contrast communication and participation based upon these other identities.

It is possible and, given the current observations, likely, that these forums are mentally and emotionally beneficial for the people who use them, perhaps even saving lives in the process. According to the CDC (2011), lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide when compared to their straight peers. Questioning youth are three times more likely to attempt suicide. For transgender youth, the story is even more dire; while one quarter have attempted suicide, nearly half of transgender youth have considered taking their own lives (Grossman and D'Augelli 2007). Statistics such as this bolster the case for increasing the visibility and maintaining the livelihood of online queer forums.

Many participants of the forum observed in this study mentioned feeling less isolated because of the sense of community they felt online and the positive support they received that stood as a counter to their offline lives. Future work might better investigate the specific types of people who use coming out advice forums. In this study, a minimal amount of attention was paid to the individual characteristics of posters, or to the variables that made forum use attractive to participants (e.g. growing up in a religious household). More scrutiny on the actors and not the actions of said actors would be beneficial. A more expansive data set might also be useful for researchers looking to conduct future work in this area. The present study was conceived of as an exploratory piece of research, however there is much potential for scholars to analyze a more comprehensive sample of forum posts in the future.

The current study suggests that coming out forums are especially important spaces for LGBTQ people dealing with issues of identity and the associated

isolation that comes from being a closeted sexual or gender minority in a clandestine manner offline. It might be useful for LGBTQ organizations to consider integrating more online community spaces where individuals can connect, anonymously and openly, in addition to offline events and programming. In particular, those who are financially dependent on others or in opposite-sex relationships may be extremely reluctant to take steps to integrate with other LGBTQ people offline, and thus, more online spaces that merge community and social work are necessary. *Empty Closets* is a useful space, but its effectiveness might be bolstered if social workers or other professionals were available to give advice, in addition to laypeople.

Although we cannot measure the behavioral outcomes, or even the legitimacy and truthfulness, of posters' claims, this study suggests that many people are using *Empty Closets* to gather advice on coming out in face-to-face contexts, and to receive feedback on their coming out plans. Some mentioned disclosing their LGBTQ identity to others by means of text message, Facebook, or using other technology. Future work should examine the disclosure of LGBTQ identities on social media, as these disclosures are likely to be mass-directed and public declarations rather than personal conversations. Research has suggested that public status updates may at times include self-disclosure of intimate and personal information, motivated by the need for self-expression and relief (Bazavara and Choi 2014). We must begin to explore why people decide to share information about their identity in this public manner, how it impacts the identity work associated with disclosing a marginalized identity, and what effects these types of mediated disclosures have on attitudes toward the person self-disclosing.

Online forums offer much utility for LGBTQ people struggling to come out of the closet. They provide spaces for people to tell their stories—stories of hardship, of desire, of hope, and just about everything in between. They are safe havens for those seeking to understand themselves and their own sexual or gender identity, and they offer validation for the decisions of people whose lives are not always validated by mainstream society. They present an avenue for questions to be asked and information to be gathered, and they allow for those seeking community to find it. Furthermore, they allow for the building of community amongst closeted or semi-closeted queer people who might not know that they are not alone in their struggles, and they open up a setting for the bestowing of often deeply-needed advice, allowing those providing counsel a chance to feel good about their LGBTQ group membership and their ability to help others. The virtuality of these forums has fostered a sense of disinhibition that has created a safer space for sexual and gender minorities to negotiate being in—and coming out of—the closet, one click at a time.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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