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# Social Media and Safe Spaces: A Mixed Methods Study on Identity Formation for LGBTQ+ Albertans

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Social Media and Safe Spaces: A Mixed Methods Study on Identity Formation for LGBTQ+ Albertans

by

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A THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

Within literature pertaining to race and LGBTQ2IA+ identities, much of our current research is situated within a universalized hegemony of placing Whiteness, heterosexuality, and cisgender as the default, both in terms of daily experiences and conceptions of safety. The purpose of this research is to develop a more holistic understanding of LGBTQ2IA+ life as conceptualized in locations without visible role models or communities, in order to create better inclusion and representation within LGBTQ2IA+ resources in Alberta. This inclusivity must be separate from that of the ideations of metronormativity, wherein the existence of LGBTQ2IA+ lives outside cities with large LGBTQ2IA+ populations like New York, are erased. The research details the importance of community and representation, the role of technology as an identity construction site, and a specific focus on trans and POC identities as experienced simultaneously, rather than additive. Through research conducted online with an embedded mixed methods survey containing open and closed ended questions, key questions arise in regard to how sexuality, gender, and geographical location intersect to produce specific experiences online and offline for LGBTQ2IA+ Albertans. Understanding how identity is developed through online platforms for individuals that are geographically isolated, and the ways in which homophobia, transphobia, and racism are uniquely experienced in a more rural Canadian setting, highlight the need for better visibility, openness, and education regarding identity and the importance of a community that has practical and genuine applications of inclusivity.

**PREFACE**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Lindsey Kokaritis. The surveys and interviews reported within this research were covered by Ethics Certificate ID REB19-0824, issued by the University of Calgary Conjoint Research Ethics Board for the project “A Mixed Methods Study of Identity Formation for LGBTQ+ Albertans” on August 8, 2019.

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**DEDICATION**

For my mother, who has always encouraged me to follow my passions, and for the wonderful individuals of the LGBTQ2IA+ community in Alberta for sharing their time, stories, and bravery with me.

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## **BACKGROUND**

Metronormative theories posit that 62% of research conducted on LGBTQ2IA+ lives have taken place in large metropolitan cities with large LGBTQ2IA+ populations. As such, researchers have little in the way of current understandings towards LGBTQ2IA+ lives outside of major metropolitan cities, like New York or Los Angeles (Stone, 2018). Using these large cities as a universal standard of experience erases the existence of LGBTQ2IA+ individuals in other 'ordinary' cities. Due to the cost of living within these cities, the experience of a middle to upper class cisgender White gay man is established as the universal experience. A lack of research on experiences and perceptions contributes to the ways in which safe spaces for LGBTQ2IA+ individuals who are not White or cisgender, or identify in other ways beyond male and gay, are constructed; often safety in these terms is formulated in ways that do not represent safety for all individuals. This lack of research also places Calgary, and Alberta as a whole, in the position of being nebulously welcoming or unwelcoming, as having large LGBTQ2IA+ populations or not, and ultimately contributes to perceptions of intolerance or homophobia.

In addition, as intersectional feminist theory posits, often movements based on civil rights equate Blackness to 'maleness', and feminist activism to 'Whiteness'. In this way, the experiences of individuals living with simultaneous identities of being LGBTQ2IA+ and being POC are doubly silenced within their own communities. In the US in 2017, there were 29 murders of trans individuals, a record high. In 2018, there were 22 reported murders. 82% of the murder cases reported in 2018 were women of colour, (Human Rights Commission, 2018), yet, there is no established database to record trans individuals of colour's encounters with police brutality, or specific programs to address heightened threats to these individuals in

the United States or in Canada (Méndez, 2017). Previous research discussing the topics of Black Lives Matter (BLM) as a facet of intersectionality within a civil rights movement often leaves out discussions of LGBTQ2IA+ lives. BLM activists themselves have pushed for a comprehensive database on Black women's experiences with police, noting the importance of creating a platform of visibility for all Black experiences. However, there is some discussion as to whether non cisgender Black experiences are included within the movements focuses as well (Hoston, 2018). These factors taken together describe a particular invisibility within a marginalized group, that has little research to help structure change. As such, it is important to attempt to facilitate an inclusive environment within LGBTQ2IA+ spaces as well as create a more accessible platform for POC voices within the community.

To understand the ways in which identity is constructed uniquely within Alberta as an LGBTQ2IA+ individual, as well as the multitude of experiences and diverse perspectives, a mixed methods approach is required. Qualitative data is best suited for understanding firsthand accounts and feelings towards resources such as LGBTQ2IA+ centers and support groups, to gather information on whether these encounters are mostly positive, and why or why not. Quantitative data will allow demographics on Alberta's LGBTQ2IA+ populations, time spent online, as well as the importance of LGBTQ2IA+ identities within their own self construction. Together, these methods allow for a comparison to understand which experiences are had by which individuals, how identity is formed in Alberta to create a unique LGBTQ2IA+ life outside of metropolitan studies, and how these experiences can be better integrated within resources to create a more inclusive community. Conducting a survey with closed and open-ended questions pertaining to demographics and experiences with

LGBTQ2IA+ resources and online communities helps lay the foundations for future studies to create more inclusive environments.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to facilitate a more in-depth understanding of day-to-day experiences for LGBTQ2IA+ Albertans, highlighting how intersecting aspects of race and gender identity influence perceptions, in terms of how identity is formed using online resources, as experienced by these individuals. The goal of conducting this research is to emphasize the importance of developing community, and how identity can be positively constructed for LGBTQ2IA+ individuals outside of metropolitan locations. Through collecting demographic information alongside personal accounts, I highlight the divergent experiences of the LGBTQ2IA+ community online and offline in order to create visibility for those excluded within LGBTQ2IA+ safe spaces and resources.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND WORLDVIEWS**

The theoretical foundations of my project center on metronormativity theories, queer theory, as well as elements of critical race theory. I also utilize social justice rationales, elements of standpoint epistemology, and transformative design within my design, alongside grounded theory. While this is a large number of theoretical frameworks, the goal of grounded theory is to develop a cohesive understanding and new conceptual theory where there is not one currently. In addition, the data shapes the framing of the research as it develops. With complex and interlocking factors affecting experiences in relation to identity, multiple theories focused on each element is necessary.

For this project, my research focus details a variety of lived experiences, and allows for an open angle on other experiences not specifically highlighted. As the objective is to follow the central concerns and experiences of the LGBTQ2IA+ community in Alberta, creating a theoretical background that allowed for the most variety and potential coverage of multiplicative identities was thought to be necessary. To incorporate the widest range of lived experience, an intersectional feminist lens was required. Intersectionality research includes aspects of race, class, and gender as a forefront in considering the multiplicity of lenses within experiences. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) coined the term within her discussion of the ways feminist movements often focus on strictly gender and ignore issues of race, and the way Black movements often focus on men and exclude perspectives of Black women (1245). Often, research on gender and race are treated as additive, which ignores the individually lived experiences in which individuals deal with a multiplicity of identities (Crenshaw 1991:1244). Ignoring differences within a group can contribute to a lack of social cohesion within said group, which in the case of an LGBTQ2IA+ safe space or community, can cause fissures (Crenshaw 1991:1242). Intersectional theory utilizes an understanding of gender, race, and class as being relational and interlocking, rather than unique individual experiences that can be viewed separately as well as all together. Experiences of Black lesbian women, for example, are not able to be separated into categories of race, sexuality, and gender, as their experiences are viewed through the dimensions of these identities simultaneously.

As a theory, intersectionality aims to lift voices of individuals who experience systemic oppression on a multitude of levels simultaneously. However, in practice, particularly being a White researcher in a heavily conservative dominated province, the application of theory appears differently. The access points I hold as a White individual

within LGBTQ2IA+ spaces, even as a member of the community myself, is inherently different than others; even my ability to feel comfortable being out is shaped by my experiences as a White Calgarian. As such, due to snowball sampling limitations as well, there is a distinct leaning towards specific viewpoints within my research. Namely, a larger representation of White people, as they are the populations most commonly interacting within the spaces my flyers, tweets, and word of mouth information was hosted. Many comments obtained via the online survey utilized in this research serve to further highlight the difficulties of locationality within this study, in that many of the POC respondents noted a lack of community support, the combined dangers of racism alongside homophobia, and a general fear of visibly interacting with LGBTQ2IA+ content as a result. In addition, basing my project online somewhat centers respondents within a more middle to upper class demographic in most cases, as access to internet and spaces such as Twitter are prerequisites for responding. Ultimately, taken into consideration, while intersectionality was the overall goal grounded theory required that data shape the theories and discussion. Intersectionality would be best suited for projects that analyzed systems that impact a variety of identities in a multiplicative setting; although the theory was utilized in the initial framing of this project, the lack of connection to POC populations removed it as a central theory.

For the purposes of this research, it is important to note that while there is a diverse population present, there is also an emphasized perception of community spheres in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ that ultimately divides many Albertans from existing within the same spaces, or in any public space at all. The practical application of intersectional feminism in this context becomes a practice of critiquing positions of dominance, utilizing the voices that we are able to obtain. Using an understanding of how identities are experienced as simultaneous

and can be excluded on a basis of more than one front, this research applies intersectional thinking to critique the mainly White dominant voice present within a community that promotes itself on a basis of inclusion and intersectional conceptions of safety. In other words, I am utilizing intersectional feminist thought to analyse what areas of identity are not fully represented, how they can be more welcomed and highlighted, as well as critiquing understandings of 'normal' and 'inclusive' as developed by a primarily White community. Intersectional feminism is often listed as a central area of importance within LGBTQ2IA+ spaces, and therefore including this theory within my research as a through line, allows for critique regarding how it is lacking.

Due to intersections of structural oppression, trans women of colour face the most danger in day to day existence, particularly those who are sex workers or working class. Class is also an important facet to discuss, particularly in reference to the digital divide. Rapp et al. (2010) describe through their case study of the Dunbar village that impoverished community members "may have critical information that would be useful in terms of impacting change, but they often lack Internet access" (256). Furthermore, studies have determined that poor communities of color on average have a noticeably lower level of access to online resources (Martin and Robinson 2007). This indicates that in terms of class and race intersections, there is a decrease in ability to form identity or resist day to day oppressions. Intersectionality places class as a critical factor for discussion as well, which through the nature of my research primarily as centered online, creates a heavier focus on those with consistent access to internet. My research also does not include questions relating to income, however, including an intersectional perspective, much like in the case of race, allows for a critical dialogue to form in terms of who is able to access these spaces. Who is able to find

information online, develop community, and moderate the ability to be seen or invisible from certain groups? Utilizing an intersectional framework allows questions regarding who safe spaces and LGBTQ2IA+ support groups are built for, both online and in physical form, that are not necessarily placed at the focus of discussion otherwise.

In addition, when critiquing systems of power and inequality, it is also necessary to fully critique the role of Whiteness. Critical race theory is necessary for analyzing systems of oppression and puts forward a conceptualization of race as a social construct, and that people of colour have first-hand knowledge towards unequal structures of power tied to racism (Delgado 1990). Critical race theory is used in this research in conjuncture with grounded theory and social justice rationales to focus on themes that arise within qualitative responses, in order to call attention to oppressive and unequal forms of power. It is important to build knowledge within the communities and for the communities, and to refer constantly to the question of 'who this knowledge benefits'. In a sense, my research is guided by a form of standpoint epistemology, which, as redefined by Harding (1992), includes understanding how knowledge is 'socially situated' (353). In other words, an awareness of one's own location in relation to knowledge; removing the understanding of the self as the 'default' and the idea of looking down upon subjects to obtain objectivity. As bell hooks writes, "theory is not inherently healing, liberator, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end" (1991:2). The ways in which we gain knowledge is as important as the knowledge we gain.

Presenting theories regarding the lived experiences of individuals requires consulting with these individuals and including my own Whiteness within the conceptions of systemic racism, to avoid construction of myself as the invisible, or as objective, and thereby

disembodied (Haraway 1988:576). As Haraway (1988) argues, “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (583). As I myself am White, a central goal of this project was to develop criticisms and perceptions of what creates inclusion as told by those who have felt excluded, primarily through interviews. As few voices of colour were obtained, using theories of critical race directs analysis towards an emphasis on removing the ‘default’, which includes perceptions of community, safety, and inclusivity developed by those in positions of systemic power. In addition, the theory argues that the marginalized are positioned to better critique systems of power, and thereby knowledge should be built with these perspectives. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) describe, social justice rationales and transformative designs within grounded theory contexts, not only allow the data to guide research, but also seek to avoid any action that may further silence the oppressed community being studied (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). I will also further describe my focus on these elements within the design portion of this proposal.

Metronormativity is also an important aspect of why this research is focused on Alberta specifically, as it describes an “assumption that queer subjects have to move to a “place of tolerance” and away from their current home in order to come out and thrive” (Stone 2018:3). This ideology dually constructs non-metropolitan, or cities without the title of a ‘large LGBTQ2IA+ population’ as inherently homophobic or transphobic. The theory was discussed in depth by Stone (2018), who wrote that the location of research is imperative to understanding the complexities of gay and trans experiences. Researching so-called ‘gay friendly cities’ as compared to ‘ordinary cities’ can result in a misconstrued understanding of day-to-day lives as uniformly conforming to White, upper to middle class, and cisgender (Stone 2018:3). As Stone writes, this then implies a level of ‘mimicry’ or ‘exceptionality’ to



queer individuals living elsewhere to the typical locations of studies (Stone 2018:3). In the words of Stone (2018), the ways in which research “privilege[es] the forms of queer life that emerge in ‘great cities’” (7) indicates a lack of understanding towards queer life academically. Cities such as New York have high costs of living, meaning a lack of research on other locations also erases experiences of lower, working class or impoverished individuals, who are the most vulnerable. Utilizing metronormativity, this research can develop not only a clearer picture of what being LGBTQ2IA+ in Alberta is like and how it differs from heavily studied locations such as New York, it also allows for a sense of visibility. There are LGBTQ2IA+ individuals living within Alberta who have clear understandings of identity and friend groups, as well as community, as much as there are those who do not. In addition, there are LGBTQ2IA+ individuals in Alberta who are not male, cisgender, or White, and developing an academic picture that somewhat shifts the centralized location of ‘normal’ to a more wholistic conception of fluidity and expression can foster more inclusivity in and of itself.

As this research also seeks to focus on identities beyond this understanding of ‘ordinary’ equating cisgender, the inclusion of queer theory is a necessary component to challenge ideas of gender and gender performance. As explained by Judith Butler (2004), as scholars it is imperative that we “separate sexuality from gender, so that to have a gender does not presuppose that one engages sexual practice in any particular way, and to engage in a given sexual practice”, and furthermore that “gender is not reducible to hierarchical heterosexuality” (54). In terms of analyzing gender identity, queer theory is necessary for discussing identity outside of the binary and oppressive frameworks of heterosexuality. An individual's understanding of gender and how they engage with that gender is subject to

context to that individual alone, and thereby cannot be categorized and should not be, especially as within the restrictive mentalities of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’. This framework allows the research to be developed with those participating and frames the way my response options are created as well.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *Identity*

Cornell and Hartmann (2007) defined identity construction sites as a place of simultaneous interaction, as occurring in any part of society with any social relations (170). These sites are where individuals make claims, define the self and the other, compete, reproduce or ignore identities; the six sites described include “politics, labour markets, residential space, social institutions, culture, and daily experience” (Cornell and Hartmann 2007:170). These sites do not work independently and are often interlinked in various ways; the labour markets are tied with residential space as jobs often require nearby location, the ability to travel without much cost, and so on. Politics intersect with daily experience in that policies made regarding one identity group carries repercussions from a national level to a personal level. These construction sites are linked by geography, however; politics from one nation affect individuals within that nation, physical location impacts the ability to engage in shared culture and daily experiences. In our modern society, the globalized field, with so much technology readily available to engage in from any physical location, identity construction has also extended beyond the physical components of Cornell and Hartmann’s (2007) conception of identity arenas. While facets such as culture and daily experience arise

within media, they become transformed by the landscape they are placed in. In this way, the interconnectedness the authors describe is present, these construction sites still at play, but we must also include the internet as a unique factor within this web to truly understand how identity is reinforced, claimed, defined, and reproduced in modern society.

Through armoring, anxiety, and affirmation online, an individual can develop a sense of self that is specifically chosen and crafted, a sense of community through validation and support, and a shared sense of oppression that frames boundaries and a sense of daily experience (Martin 2017). Armoring refers to the practice of maintaining parameters of safety online, who has access to posts as an example, or curating one's feed to only engage in specific content. This practice allows individuals to express thoughts, a practice referred to as 'venting', without fear of negative response (Martin 2017). Anxiety refers to the daily shared experience aspect online, in that racism is inescapable even within curated online spheres, such as the fact that scrolling through one's feed on Twitter often involves several instances of shared news pertaining to police brutality against an unarmed Black man (Martin 2017). Affirmation, on a positive note, refers to the process of asserting one's own identity in a positive light. Martin (2017) describes the internet phenomenon of #BlackIsBeautiful, a social media movement aimed at challenging racialized beauty standards and finding self-love within a larger community. Social media allows for resistance of assigned identities from the majority in terms of redefining the self and others, and a place for creating an asserted positive identity, much like other identity construction sites.

### *Race*

Much of the literature available on racism within the United States and Canada falls under a similar problem of focusing on race as though Black men's experiences are the

universal standard. Hegemonizing experiences, as is common within literature focused on racism, can be harmful to a sense of solidarity or community, and hinder progress. The ways in which Black issues are represented echoes earlier intersectional issues, in that Black solidarity focuses on race while “assigning gender and sexuality a secondary status as crosscutting issues” (Collins 2004:16). Heterosexism is a system of oppression that functions to the detriment of heterosexual and LGBTQ2IA+ Black individuals, and yet is often left out of discussions on race, as sexuality is assumed to mean ‘heterosexuality’ (Collins 2004:88).

Current initiatives and focusing on one aspect of race, such as *My Brother’s Keeper* put forward by the Obama administration, according to Méndez (2016), “fails to address that the life expectancy for Black Trans Women is 35 years of age, it fails to address the sets of conditions that criminalize Black queer, gender-non-conforming, and trans youth of colour for carrying condoms, profiling them as sex workers, and funneling them into the police system”(101). Méndez (2016) states that transwomen, particularly transwomen of colour are seen as ‘less feminine or vulnerable’ and describes instances wherein police assaulted young Black transwomen because they were less likely to have “anyone care” (103). Reports on violence towards trans individuals rarely discussed within media, transphobia or homophobia is only used as an explanation approximately within 6 per cent of cases, however many focused on personal sexual encounters wherein the attacker felt ‘tricked’ into a homosexual relationship by a “gender deceiver” (Schilt & Westbrook 2009:452). This indicates an internalized homophobia, one that is hidden by the media and put forwards as if justified; these reactions are frequent particularly for transwomen who are working poor or sex workers, compounding a level of invisibility.

Racist pseudo-theology often refers to biological justifications, or conceptions of ‘pure race’ despite the lack of consistent physical features amongst any one group (Memmi 2000); however, when biology is obfuscated, when anonymity is involved, how then does racism present itself? If racism persists online despite the lack of face-to-face encounters, it can be argued that racism takes on different formats online as well as understanding of racism, and so too does identity construction and resistance. Scholars have argued that racial signifiers and symbolism continue online, stating that: “The bodies of others may remain hidden and inaccessible, but this if anything gives references to such bodies even more social importance” (Gray 2018:64). In other words, anonymity is not as freeing for those who exist within marginalized bodies online, as the erasure of the physical appearance to which internal schemas occur leads to hyper awareness of one's race and ethnicity in relation to the anonymous ‘other’ assumed to be White. In the concept of double consciousness, even within the online realm there persists an understanding of the Black self as perceived by White society (Du Bois 1996). Delving deeper into the ways that racial oppression presents itself when an individual's physicality is hidden may “yield further insights into the working of the social processes by which identity understandings are created, maintained and/or changed” (Martin 2017:64). Daily experiences based on internal prejudice and stereotypes do not exist within a vacuum, as society has become linked through technology, as online lives “occur within digital spaces that are embedded in the larger racialized systems that guide and constrain social life more generally” (Martin 2017:186).

The equalizing impact of the internet has been linked to empowerment within Black women movements online; particularly, through the ability to reach out to a larger community and unify voices. Black feminism has found its roots online and developed further discussions

pertaining to “how women have understood their oppressed status, recognized the gendered and raced nature of the digital divide, and made sense of their realities and experiences” (Gray, 2018:285). Campaigns to spread awareness have taken place via e-mail to mobilize voices in protest, and to utilize direct action when the majority population was not taking an effective stance (Rapp et al. 2010). The online sphere has also seen a growing number of Black women online, constructing their own definitions of a ‘safe space’ for having their “subjugated beliefs and perspectives heard by dominant groups” (Rapp et al. 2010:255). Carney (2016) posits that much of the discourses online involving All Lives Matter, a group mainly supported by White, young women, versus Black Lives Matter is ignited due to the sudden voice given to Black youth and Black women. The creation and mobilization of Black women’s voices online extend beyond simply discussing daily experiences but can also lead to a call to action that threatens the hierarchical racist system and causes resistance and push back.

Online communication in this way can be called a “counterspace” to resist and renegotiate boundaries and popular discourses, and to create sanctuary to escape the larger more hostile climate (Martin 2017:17). The internet, as Du Bois (1996) outlined through the conception of double consciousness, allows for a resistance to the narrative of being spoken for. Equalizing impacts online do not erase racial structures or systems, but they allow for the chance to create one's own narrative, an important facet of agency within identity construction. In a Foucauldian understanding, the construction of the self relies on others, as we cultivate identity through interactions and shared culture among other sites, according to Cornell and Hartmann (2007).

In the context of the internet, Black constructions of solidarity are said to be based on three key methods: “information seeking, information receiving, and information sending” (Martin 2017:230). Social media-based movements like Black Lives Matter, utilize hashtags for these processes in many ways. “Framing” with hashtags, which refers to the way that issues are defined by activists to engage with audiences, provides access to engaging in definitions in a way that does not depend on figure head or influential individual (Ince, Rojas, and Davis 2017). Hashtags also allow for collection of information easily accessible to the public, a format of grouping ideas or opinions together to sort through at individual leisure (Ince et al. 2107). Hashtags inherently provide an opportunity for information receiving, sending, and seeking simultaneously. In addition, social media sites such as Twitter focus on individuals creating their own content which can be shared and discussed by a larger audience, ultimately allowing for a larger feeling of unity along with community (Ince et al. 2017).

Carney (2016) describes the Twitter hashtags and how ‘signs and myths’ within public spheres are constructed and navigated by Black youth engaging in discourse. Myths and signs in this sense represent language, meaning making, and impression management, wherein myths represent “meta-level signifiers” designed to leave an immediate impression (Carney 2016:187). Social media is considered a ‘weak’ sphere, wherein discourse is debated, and opinions are formed, but a ‘strong’ sphere in how this discourse is then applied to real world politics (Carney 2016:185). Signs and myths are the ways in which youth online battle against misinformation and half-truths and are dually also impacted by the specific framing of ideologies that are meant to take away positive identity formation as well. In this way, the information picked up online transcends to day to day realities for how individuals view topics, share information, and formulate opinions.

### *Safe Spaces*

This hegemonic framing issue of centering on one narrative also present within the LGBTQ2IA+ community, when ‘safe spaces’ are conceptualized to be formatted to the perception of gay, White, cisgender men as the standard or default. Issues such as language or assumed universalized perspectives hedge out other poignant voices and fail to consider heterosexism and racism within intersections of identity (Fox & Ore 2017:631). Intentions to embrace one identity in this way, silence and oppress others unintentionally (Fox & Ore 2017:631). As Audre Lorde (2015) describes for example, Black lesbians are constantly encouraged to pick some aspect of who they are and present it as the “meaningful whole, eclipsing and denying other parts of the self” (120). The ways in which “constructions of gayness as central and all other identities as marginal,” (Fox & Ore 2017:632) misunderstand the complex facets of creating solidarity, and work against the problems a community belonging was initially set forwards to resolve. These conceptions limit Black lesbian experiences through strictly White lesbian understandings and universalize an ‘anti-LGBT bias’ as an event everyone experiences in the same ways, or overrepresents the issue as a central concern in every individual’s day to day lives (Fox & Ore 2017:633). One facet of discussion that is brushed aside through these arguments, however, is the trans community's perspective. Often trans individuals do not feel unified under ‘gender-isms’ as the universalization erases the unique experiences of being trans versus cisgender.

Erlick (2018) discusses the experience of being trans and growing up in a rural neighborhood without role models to dispense information on gender identity, and the value of social media to gain a sense of belonging and self-empowerment. Erlick (2018) poses these important questions: “how does one know their identity when they think they are the only one



with it? How does one find others who similarly identify” (73)? The positives of social media connections mean resources such as crowdfunding exist for trans individuals to obtain surgeries, or clothing, or general day to day support, and the level of outreach has increased due to social media pervasiveness (Erlick 2018:77). The pervasiveness of social media functions as a source of empowerment for Black women as well, as it incites “new forms of knowledge and consciousness” (Brown et al. 2017:1833) in the ways in which platforms such as Twitter encourage interpersonal connection and discussion and have open access to threads of perspectives and information.

In terms of online experiences, Gray (2018) has described the ways in which lesbian women of colour sometimes face exclusion from racialized communities, in that some “are so singular and become toxic if you deviate from the racial or lingual identity”, and that “the private chat of Xbox Live gives her the ability to explore her identities safely with others who value each aspect” (290). The online sphere not only allows connectivity in this sense, but a space to positively reinforce identity and explore what each aspect means in contexts with each other. While social hierarchies and systems of oppression are not escapable online, communities are developed within the cracks nonetheless (Gray 2018). Understanding how these communities form, and the ways in which identity construction holds different meaning for different individuals would be an important facet of understanding identity. The internet is a pervasive aspect of daily experience, and as such, represents an important and unique realm for identity construction and social networking. Few scholarly articles exist presently that focus on how identity is formed online and the importance of this space for LGBTQ2IA+ individuals of colour who are isolated geographically from role models and vibrant diverse communities.

*LGBTQ2IA+ Identities and Intersections:*

It is important to note the use of the acronym LGBTQ2IA+ within this research, as a politicized term; previous research such as Inselman's (2017) study on trans identities in a university campus setting suggest the importance of notable inclusion of identities. The open-ended section of gender and sexuality questions within my survey allowed for this variety, but it is deemed important to many less visible members of the community to be fully and entirely included. Issues of 'gatekeeping' wherein asexual and aromantic individuals are often unwelcomed, intersex individuals are lumped in with trans labels, and Two Spirit identities being ignored by White members of the community, create a need for labels that fully and visibly include those who can easily be edged out otherwise. There are and continues to be debates surrounding the proper acronym, but as this research is centered around inclusivity and developing a more welcoming community mindset, utilizing an acronym that encapsulates as many of these identities was required.

Intersectional feminist theory, as posed as central within BLM describes how, frequently, research on gender and race treat these identities as additive, which ignores the lived experiences of possessing multiple identities simultaneously (Crenshaw 1991:1244). Intersectional theory utilizes an understanding of gender, race, and class as being relational and interlocking, rather than treating these factors as mutually exclusive. The experience of being a Black lesbian, for example, cannot be translated as 'Black experiences', 'women's experience', and 'lesbian experience', as these identities are inherently funneled through each other. Crenshaw (1991) also described the ways feminist movements often focus on strictly gender and ignore issues of race, and the way Black movements often focus on men and exclude perspectives of Black women (1245). Ignoring differences within a group can

contribute to a lack of social cohesion within said group (Crenshaw 1991:1242). In this way, it is important to consider not only the Black women who are utilizing the internet to create identity, but also the ways in which other marginalized voices within the Black community are able to create community.

As this research also seeks to focus on trans and LGBTQ2IA+ identities, the inclusion of queer theory is a necessary component to challenge ideas of gender and gender performance. As explained by Judith Butler (2004) as scholars it is imperative that we “separate sexuality from gender, so that to have a gender does not presuppose that one engages sexual practice in any particular way, and to engage in a given sexual practice”, and furthermore that “gender is not reducible to hierarchical heterosexuality” (54). Queer theory is necessary for discussing identity outside of binaries and the limiting frameworks of heterosexuality. An individual's understanding of gender and how they engage with that gender is subject to context to that individual alone, and thereby cannot be categorized and should not be, especially as within the restrictive mentalities of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’.

Literature on the topic of Black LGBTQ2IA+ identity formation within offline social encounters is limited; much of the research focuses on LGBTQ2IA+ individuals who live in cities with labels of being ‘accepting’ or of having a gay neighborhood. In fact, 62% of all studies on LGBTQ2IA+ life take place in so called gay metropolis’ such as New York or San Francisco (Stone 2018). Metronormativity, a theory utilized by Stone (2018), refers to this ongoing assumption towards LGBTQ2IA+ life. Metronormativity constructs lived experiences of LGBTQ2IA+ individuals in rural or ‘ordinary cities’ (cities without large LGBTQ2IA+ populations and history) as one of needing to ‘move to the big city’ to fully develop and express identity. This mentality ignores the existence of LGBTQ2IA+ lives

within these smaller populations, treats ‘ordinary cities’ as inherently homophobic or lacking diverse and unique identity, and ultimately silences voices that should be represented more fully. Metronormativity also constructs the ‘gay’ experience around a conceptualization of White, male, cisgender lifestyles as the default or normal.

Cities such as New York have high costs of living, meaning a lack of research on other locations also erases experiences of lower, working class or impoverished individuals, who are the most vulnerable. Due to intersections of structural oppression, trans women of colour face the most danger in day to day existence, particularly those who are sex workers or lower class. In addition, studies show that MSM (men who have sex with men) and trans women who are Black or Latino and poor “bear a disproportionate burden of HIV compared to other subgroups of MSM” (Patel et al. 2016:395). Class is also an important facet to discuss, particularly in reference to the digital divide. Rapp et al. (2010) describe through their case study of the Dunbar village, that impoverished community members “may have critical information that would be useful in terms of impacting change, but they often lack Internet access” (256). Furthermore, studies have determined that poor communities of colour on average have a noticeably lower level of access to online resources (Martin and Robinson 2007). This indicates that in terms of class and race intersections, there is a decrease in ability to form identity or resist day to day oppressions. Increasing ease of access towards technology might allow for unique experiences in terms of class, and unique perspectives that are only beginning to emerge, for those who most need support and a voice.

The Human Rights Commission noted that there were 29 murders of trans women in 2017, and that there is a clear trend towards violence against trans women of colour. (HRC 2018). The idea of ‘passing’ as a necessary requirement of being trans creates a context, in

which trans individuals are forced to fulfill a role of ‘duping’ the ‘true owners’ of a gender in order to be recognized (Pfeffer, Rogalin, and Gee 2016). Combined with masculinity perceptions that create homosexuality as a failure to meet arbitrary dichotomous standards of what ‘manliness’ means, can result in a multiplicity of masculinity that is equivalent to ‘incompetent’ or as “masculinity but devoid of power” (Pascoe 2005:332). This fear of losing one’s power and masculine status creates a ‘one drop rule’ in relation to homosexuality; when transwomen are said to have ‘duped’ a straight, cisgender man, the necessary requirement to avoid this incompetence or homosexuality, is a masculine display of violence (Pascoe 2005). Due to these influencing factors regarding gender and sexuality related norms, it becomes clear that the schemas relating to gender and race are working simultaneously to create and reinforce boundaries for identity that are inherently dangerous for these individuals. Yet, many resources pertaining to LGBTQ2IA+ issues do not discuss areas of racism intersections, and research on racism has little in the way of LGBTQ2IA+ identities.

In addition to the scarce information on these individuals, there is also very little available or known about how identity is constructed online, or how that changes depending on the individual (Martin 2017:26). At present, what we are able to discern is pieced together from a variety of identities and perspectives. Pertaining to Du Bois’ (1996) theory on double consciousness, this process of creating an understanding from a variety of separate experiences serves to only enhance this conception of being spoken for, but constantly visible. As Audre Lorde and Clark (2007) describe, Black lesbians are constantly encouraged to pick some aspect of who they are and present it as the “meaningful whole, eclipsing and denying other parts of the self” (120). Even groups meant for cultivating positivity online for

Black individuals have the tendency to vilify any focus on other facets of identity (Gray 2018:290).

Metronormativity means there is little research on identity construction for LGBTQ2IA+ individuals living in cities without visible role models; the research available indicates in these instances, the use of the internet and social media becomes vital for information, identity construction, and inclusion within a community who have shared experiences. In other words, the internet becomes a proxy for facilitating the arenas of identity construction outlined by Cornell and Hartmann (2007). Erlick (2018) poses these important questions: “how does one know their identity when they think they are the only one with it? How does one find others who similarly identify” (73)? Social media connections mean resources such as crowdfunding, donations, commissions for artwork and so on, exist for trans individuals to obtain surgeries, clothing and necessary items such as binders or hormone treatments, or general day to day support. (Erlick 2018). The level of outreach has increased due to social media pervasiveness; transactivism, or online protests and resistances to transphobia, have become a staple for being an out trans individual due to this access (Erlick 2018). Transwomen have delved into the tech industry to escape the microaggressions and oppressive structures and found solace in the separation from identity to physical selves (Erlick 2018). However, these experiences are limited by the ways in which race and class also intersect at these points; oftentimes, the transwomen who are able to work within the tech industry are white and middle to upper class.

Black lesbians online have also stated that what it means to construct an identity online may in fact be wholly different than offline; but that ultimately, blending into anonymity is not possible for minority groups. As Gray (2018) explains “Early Internet scholars theorized

that virtual environments would provide an outlet to exist beyond the parameters of the body. This liberatory potential of the Internet had extreme lure; however, this lure existed in a realm of assumed Whiteness as the Internet was traditionally a domain of the privileged” (283). These habits of centering safety around assumed Whiteness are present offline as well in LGBTQ2IA+ ‘safe spaces’. These conceptions of safety are centered around safety as perceived by gay, White, cisgendered men, and treat these identities as the standard or default and ultimately fail to consider heterosexism, transphobia, and racism within intersections of identity (Fox, Catherine and Tracy Ore 2010). In addition, studies show that trans people of colour on university campuses are more likely to report a negative experience within peer groups or LGBTQ2IA+ resources (Inselman 2017:78-79). These practices limit Black lesbian experiences through strictly White lesbian understandings and universalize an ‘anti-LGBT bias’ as an event everyone experiences in the same ways, or overrepresents the issue as a central concern in every individual’s day to day lives (Fox & Ore 2017:633). In the same way, constructions of anonymity and safety online carry different meanings and parameters for different individuals. Social media can also be used to form social connections within the offline world, as in with dating apps.

Dating apps, while new, are ingrained within normalized socializing behavior for many Millennials, but are found to be particularly important for LGBTQ2IA+ communities. Surveys conducted in the United States indicate that men who have sexual encounters with men (MSM), and trans women “are more likely to use social media to seek sexual and/or romantic partners when compared to their heterosexual counterparts” (Patel et al. 2016:389). Using social media sites to find sexual partners can be called ‘risk engaging behaviour’ due to the unknown variables between presentation of self-online versus offline,

and the merging of private and public spheres in potentially unsupervised spaces (Patel et al. 2016). Trans experiences within gay dating apps indicate a certain amount of self-presentation, constructed identity, and boundaries even within the larger LGBTQ2IA+ community. It is not uncommon to see transphobic, racist, or body shaming ideologies represented within an individual's dating app bio. In addition, violence or harassment within physical encounters is rampant due to a variety of transphobic ideologies (Pascoe 2005). MSM, trans individuals, and visible minorities are more likely to utilize apps, potentially due to the realities of offline inequalities and the struggle in geographically isolated areas with small LGBTQ2IA+ populations to find community. The experiences of White MSM in these spaces are also different due to transphobia and racism than that of trans individuals, or visible minorities, and even more so, trans people of colour. To engage in the sometimes-necessary act of utilizing a dating app to find a partner becomes less casual for these individuals and represents a level of risk inherently that may not be present for heterosexual individuals or cisgender White men.

The online community becomes a place of self-discovery for some, and a constant pressure of 'otherness' for marginalized within the margins. Queer men are especially grateful for the room to express identity online, particularly when they are not out offline, but the intersecting factors of racism, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia, leave this creative freedom somewhat out of reach for most (Gray 2018). Ultimately, despite the awareness and community online, for these individuals, there is a lack of control to cause offline change. There are, however, a few positives and advantages. Gray (2018) outlines "the ability to create and control digital spaces largely unregulated or occupied by privileged bodies. These spaces have the potential to foster the development of a group standpoint, negating the impact of



dominant ideology” (285). This ability to create space ultimately means creating a shared identity, important for lessening the negative impact of continuous assertions of identities posed by the larger ‘privileged bodies’ that equate these identity markers with lesser statuses. Anonymity has power for cis-identifying women, or cis men, due to normalization and assumptions of being the ‘default’ (Gray 2018). Within a study by Gray (2018) “for the women who adopted transgressive identities, this same privilege was not extended to them. As one narrator put it, “ain’t no closets in the ghetto and none online—at least not for me” (287).

*Dangers of Online Identity:*

Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have become deeply ingrained to the point of blurring these lines of online versus offline realities. Along with constant access, over 6 billion hours of video are watched each month on YouTube and millions of users subscribe to new content every day (Agarwal and Sureka 2015). Due to this reach, YouTube is equally used for positive affirmation framing, as it is used as a platform for many hate and extremist groups to promote rhetoric and gain followers due to the shareability of the videos (Agarwal and Sureka 2015). In addition, studies have shown that hate promoting users upload videos intentionally targeting specific audiences, such as young, White, heterosexual, ‘gamer’ boys (Agarwal and Sureka 2015). In recent news, racial based terrorism in New Zealand has been connected to social media and blogging platforms, as the shooter cited 4Chan and YouTube as arenas of radicalization. In this way, identity can be constructed both positively and negatively online depending on the cultural factors, social influences, and the content an individual is surrounded by online.

Identity construction within assigned identities for Black and LGBTQ2IA+ individuals also carries specific risks towards their own self-construction. As Alexander (2010) described, positive identity framing for ethnic groups or minorities can be an embrace of the status placed upon them, such as with Pride or the Women's March. At the Women's March, a facet of resistance included 'pussy hats', in order to assert pride in the socially demonized reproductive organ, as well as reclaim and reframe identities towards that of empowerment. However, some identity labels are unable to be reclaimed with positive influence in the same ways. Alexander (2010) describes the label of 'gangster' and criminality thrust upon impoverished Black and Latinx communities; reclaiming pride within this status is ultimately self-defeating. Becoming proud of incarceration or assumed criminality creates a perpetuating system rather than a resistance. In terms of trans experiences, there is also little room for positive reframing within misgendering and assumptions of being sexual predators. Identity assertion within unequal positions of power carries multiple layers of complexities that Black LGBTQ2IA+ individuals grapple with in day to day experiences, both offline and online.

In addition, the online spaces themselves represent a duality of resistance and safety, along with a perception of being trapped within the system. As Linscott (2017) argues, every institution is a White institution, and Twitter, while an equalizing platform to some degree, also benefits from systems of domination and oppression. Afro-pessimism, a theory first coined by Mbembe (2008), centers around the concept that White lives, police, property, and public safety are all deemed by society to be more important than the lives of Black people. The theory details the ways in which Black individuals often feel as though they are waging an unwinnable war against the entire fabric and organization of society, and in particular, capitalist constructions that benefit from these concepts, as there is no democratic way to

“vote away the afterlife of slavery” (Linscott 2017:115). Linscott (2017) dubs this awareness as a sense of ‘the fox guarding the henhouse’ in that police can also track protests and conversations just as easily through the hashtags.

### *Summary of Literature*

It is not a large leap to posit that the aspect of identity construction for someone who is Black and trans may mean an entirely different series of encounters, armoring, or shared anxiety, then a white cisgender gay person. For this reason, studying how individuals understand identity in the online modern world has shifted from our previous understanding of identity construction. The increase of technology in our lives, particularly for Millennials and Generation Z, shows that social media is not separate from our day to day lives. If technology has become such a crucial aspect of interaction, self-creation, and identity formation, it is equally as crucial to understand how race, gender, and sexuality are explored simultaneously within these facets. Brock (2018) writes that “academic and public discourses about underrepresented groups’ ICT [Information Communication Technologies] use are inextricable from the larger cloth of cultural (not technical) beliefs about the deficiencies of underrepresented groups when compared to the ‘norm’: White, middle class, Christian, heterosexual, patriarchal men” (1014). The treatment of minority groups reflects the way research is conducted. White cisgender men are treated as the default, on and offline, and minority groups continue to be equally as underrepresented within research based on cultural assumptions and a tendency to ‘speak on behalf of’ these groups. Identity construction for individuals living in cities without visible representation is understudied and

underrepresented, as research continues to posit that LGBTQ2IA+ lives only take on meaning in large cities, among other assumptions.

Ultimately, the intersections of these experiences are lacking, and leave a large gap in academia's representation of experiences, along with a community misunderstanding. It is important to rid ourselves of these conceptions of 'normality' as White, cisgender, middle class, and heterosexual men, to cease the process of treating other identities as exceptional. Through this, paternalistic representations of culture online and offline serve to silence marginalized voices further, and foster feelings of Afro-pessimism. Understanding the ways that the online sphere differentiates struggles or creates loopholes for identity formation in between the cracks of these systems of oppression, allows for deeper understanding of how individuals can resist boundaries, line alongside them, and assert a unique identity within the assigned position the majority populations have placed upon them.

Future research should utilize an understanding of resisting metronormativity and focus on studying experiences not as a generalizable universal truth, but as a series of threads that tie into an overall picture. Research is required towards identity construction online, how individuals utilize the information available to develop the self and should contain more intersectionality in terms of identities. In addition, a focus on class as it pertains to internet-based identity construction would be beneficial in understanding individual perspectives and would help create better policy changes and recommendations for resources and support groups in the future. Creating community within LGBTQ2IA+ spaces must be framed in an intersectional understanding, as well as civil rights communities should include LGBTQ2IA+ perspectives in order to truly represent the margins of the margins, and to create a platform for their voices to be heard.

## DESIGN

Bryman (2006) wrote that is important to outline the rationale for mixed method designs, so as to keep in mind combining qualitative and quantitative methods must suit the research goals, and not simply due to a misconception as mixed methods as more advanced. The justifications for utilizing mixed method designs must center on the goals of the project itself aligning with the strengths of the design (Morgan 2017). Mixed methods research focuses on integrating the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods, but as such also hosts its own unique weaknesses (Morgan 2017). Bryman (2006) describes his scheme with five justifications for combining quantitative and qualitative research: Triangulation, Complementarity, Development, Initiation, Expansion. My research aims would fall under complementarity, as I am utilizing both methods to best explain an ongoing issue in terms of invisibility and identity in such a way that neither method separately would be able to fully explain. To this end Greene et al (1989) describe complementarity as research where “qualitative and quantitative methods are used to measure overlapping but also different facets of a phenomenon, yielding an enriched, elaborated understanding of that phenomenon” (258). Morgan (2017) further explains complementarity as a goal intended to obtain more complete ideas by using quantitative and qualitative methods to get complementary results about a phenomenon. In this case, the phenomenon being the experiences of LGBTQ2IA+ Albertans online. Qualitative data with this study is the core method, the supplementary concurrent quantitative demographic data back up and contextualize accounts for a complete picture of this phenomenon than simply quotes or demographics on their own.

I am utilizing demographic quantitative data and frequency scales to corroborate with qualitative statements and perspectives. The objective of including both sets of data is to

contextualize the qualitative core method; allowing for a deeper and more elaborate understanding of the population studied in terms of demographic data. As I am seeking to highlight the unique experiences of LGBTQ2IA+ Albertans, obtaining demographic information as linked with the qualitative voices allows for direct comparisons between race and ethnicities, gender identities, sexuality and so on, in terms of use of social media, access to resources, and involvement within the offline community. I hypothesize that gender identities outside of binary conceptions, visible minority status, and sexuality, impacts an individual's reliance on social media for community, and perceptions of inclusion within offline LGBTQ2IA+ spaces.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) believe it is important to outline philosophical histories when conducting sociological research, as they are the foundation of research, which can be distilled into worldviews. These worldviews outline the value of different aspects of research and methodology and guide the ways in which a researcher sets out to solve an identified research problem (Creswell and Plano Clark). Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) describe the pragmatist worldview, which emphasizes the consequences of actions and to focus on specific real-world practice concerns. Morgan (2017) describes pragmatism as linking purposes and procedures at every step, finding a match between the purposes that motivate your research and the procedures you use to reach that goal. These goals fall in line with the previously mentioned theoretical frameworks I am utilizing within this project, in terms of continuous comparison across themes, and keeping constant note of who the research is benefitting. In addition, Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) mention worldviews such as the participatory worldview, wherein a researcher focuses on empowerment, political issues, and ultimately focuses on positive change. In the intention of developing research that best serves

the LGBTQ2IA+ community in Alberta, and in particular POC trans individuals, the objective is to develop policies to create empowerment and inclusion; thereby, utilizing both worldviews would allow for the greatest success. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) highlight the ways in which worldviews are not mutually exclusive and can be combined. Methods such as pre-testing within the community and follow up interviews, seek to create a corroborative and collaborative approach wherein participants are more functionally co-researchers. In addition, due to constraints of time limitations, pragmatism is necessary so that real world applications are feasible for a single researcher to conduct and analyze the research.

Transformative designs are said to utilize theories that translate the purpose of research towards change and social justice as well as empowerment for a specific marginalized community (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Morgan (2017) also described social justice rationales as an argument for using mixed methods to uncover and challenge oppression in society or using a mixed method design guided by a social justice perspective. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) write transformative designs are not so much a set design, and can utilize methods from other designs like embedded, convergent, or sequential. This design is specifically intended to avoid further silencing oppressed voices within a marginalized group. To this end, much like standpoint epistemology, I aim to alter the intention and direction of research towards bettering a community, within the community, rather than on behalf of it. To further this goal, I am using grounded theory for my qualitative research analytical design, in that I am seeking to create a theory for Albertan LGBTQ2IA+ lives, that focuses on identity formation unique to cities outside of the typical research scope. In this way, I am developing theories within, or grounded within experiences of individuals involved in the process of this identity formation and allowing these experiences to guide my research

(Creswell 2013). To do so, a focus on constant comparison to data, rigorous note taking, and thematic grouping of qualitative data is required. For a visual representation of each stage, see Appendix A.

## **METHODS**

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) outline typologies within designs for research, including the convergent parallel design, the explanatory sequential design, the exploratory sequential design, the embedded design, the transformative design, and the multiphase design. These typologies outline the timing of each method, the priority of each strand, and the stage at which integration occurs. Although, there is contestation on whether transformative designs represent a design or fall along with rationales and theoretical frameworks, and so for this research I will be following the rationale ideology. Transformative designs place emphasis on the ultimate goals of the research and on empowering the participants, which can be implemented within other designs as theoretical framing (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). I utilize an embedded concurrent mixed method design for this research, involving a questionnaire with open-ended and close-ended questions, and a follow up qualitative portion focusing on semi-structured interviews (for a full list of questions see Appendices B and C). In this way, quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, with priority placed on the qualitative strand. The aspect of follow up interviews also includes elements of a multiphase design; however, the interviews serve the purpose of solving any discrepancies and overcoming potential nonresponse biases more so than a primary data collection stage.



The setting for my research focuses on Alberta LGBTQ2IA+ individuals and primarily utilizes online communities and social media networks. The sampling process was non-random snowball sampling, as I utilized the ability of LGBTQ2IA+ individuals to pass information and the survey along to their peers through social media and word of mouth. A drawback of this sampling method means it is difficult to find saturation, which is an aspect grounded theory focuses on achieving, there is also a risk of nonresponse bias, as the survey may not be spread to all diverse group types. To decide the number of participants (N) for this study without focusing on saturation, I focused on a time limit approach, to which I hypothesized and found that one month was fairly suitable for an initial run, as by the end of October engagement had dropped off significantly (for a full description of time frame planning, see Appendix D). As it is an embedded design the N for qualitative and quantitative were similar, although there was a number of respondents who skipped the majority of open-ended questions, with a completion rate of about 56%. For the follow up interview portions, I obtained six responses generated from the survey itself utilizing an option to leave an email address, which exceeded my initial goal, in order to be able to derive some comparison between identities and experiences. Data collection was obtained through the survey links posted on Facebook groups, primarily ones situated on activism, or LGBTQ2IA+ identities with an emphasis on trans experiences, circulated on Twitter. I also had flyers posted at the Women's Resource Center and the Q Center at the University of Calgary and utilized the Sociology emailing list to help share the survey link to different age brackets and backgrounds.

The inclusion criteria for this aspect of the study, and the overall questionnaire, are that individuals must be 18+, identify as LGBTQ2IA+, live within Alberta, and must have access to internet due to limitations of design and relevance to concept.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In developing these research questions, I have endeavored to follow Onwuegbuzie's (2006) description of creating quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method research questions. Mixed method research questions are outlined as embedding both qualitative and quantitative aspects, which can be collected concurrently, as with my research (Onwuegbuzie 2006). As quantitative information influences the qualitative data, in that identity will and does, in my hypothesis, influence the experiences individuals have on and offline, a casual comparative development model as outlined by Onwuegbuzie (2006) will be used.

*Quantitative Research Question* – Which facets of identity within Alberta are most represented and accessible online?

*Qualitative Research Questions* – What are the day to day experiences of LGBTQ2IA+ individuals in Alberta? How are these experiences translated online through social media platforms?

*Mixed Methods Research Question*- What is the relationship between various intersectional identity facets such as gender and sexuality, and inclusion in experiences with LGBTQ2IA+ resources and communities? How are LGBTQ2IA+ identities in Alberta formulated and reinforced by utilizing social media?

## MEASURES

*Quantitative Measures:* This masters project involves an embedded questionnaire, with a follow up qualitative interview portion. Within the questionnaire there were a series of closed answer questions pertaining to demographic information, such as race and ethnicity; pronouns— specified by previous research as necessary in capturing identity (Inselman, 2017); age (18-23, 24-29, 30-39, 40+) in order to identify generational data in terms of Generation Z, younger Millennials, older Millennials, and Generation X, as research indicates the influence of social media is more prevalent with Millennials or younger groups; gender identity (transwoman (MTF), transman (FTM), non-binary, two-spirit, genderfluid, cisgender, intersex, gender non-conforming, demigender, etc.); and sexuality (heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, demisexual, aromantic, etc.). For a full list of terms along with definitions as supplied by Rainbow Road, see Appendix E. Many of these questions allow the opportunity to select more than one option as identity can be fluid and changeable for individuals. The demographic category also included location in terms of population size of surrounding areas in order to upkeep anonymity. I also utilized measures to quantify frequency of usage of social media platforms, pertaining to hours spent online in general and specifically on social media in order to figure out the cruciality of social media in identity development and community. Finally, I asked “How much do you agree with the following statement: “being LGBTQ2IA+ is an important part of my identity”, which allowed for responses utilizing a five-point Likert-scale. All the data for my research was captured firsthand, as archival data within Alberta specific focus on LGBTQ2IA+ populations is

severely limited and may be inaccurate due to risks of ‘outing’, and the general hidden nature of this population.

*Qualitative Measures:* Qualitative data was also collected within the survey through open-ended questions. These questions included an ability to add in alternate sexualities or identities, and open-ended questions pertaining to perceptions of inclusion in Alberta, experiences with resources, use of social media for identity in terms of education or positive identity construction (Facebook groups, forums, blogging platforms, Twitter) in relation to community and inclusion. Questions asked whether individuals felt as though, in accessing Facebook groups centered on LGBTQ2IA+ discussion, they were able to speak up or disagree safely, whether individuals were able to access educational materials regarding LGBTQ2IA+ identities online or which they wished were available, whether or not social media aided in creating community and how, whether individuals considered themselves more open or out online opposed to in day to day life, and why individuals did access LGBTQ2IA+ resources or why they did not. The last section of questions allowed for individual explanations of negative and positive experiences online, experiences using LGBTQ2IA+ centered dating apps, and voice chat features in anonymous spaces such as gaming, as research indicated that intragroup exclusion was prevalent within dating app spaces and voice chat features were considered limiting for trans individuals in specific for engaging in social spaces.

In addition, within the interview section of my research, I allowed for a semi-structured set up that intended to follow the participants line of thought and specific emphasis. However, specific questions that were asked related to how individuals learned of LGBTQ2IA+ identities growing up, what resources were most beneficial to understanding their own identities, something that an individual might have read or heard said about their

identity that has stayed with them positively or otherwise, an experience wherein an individual might have felt unwelcome in an LGBTQ2IA+ space or witnessed someone else being excluded, whether Alberta allowed for self expression and safety, how respondents felt about accessibility of resources on LGBTQ2IA+ issues and what might allow these spaces to be more accessible, and finally, how well the respondents felt their own identity was represented within the LGBTQ2IA+ community in Alberta.

## **ANALYSIS AND INTEGRATION**

Integration within this design takes place within the analysis stage; integration is present in that both data sets will be used to corroborate each other. The quantitative data was analyzed to contextualize the qualitative information, in order to give quotes further meaning. Through embedded designs, collection of both sets of data can occur at any stage, which is useful when there are different questions to be answered. In this case the different questions relate to who is experiencing different circumstances and what those circumstances culminate and represent for the individuals themselves.

*Quantitative Analysis:* To address my quantitative research question on who makes up Alberta's LGBTQ2IA+ population, I utilized descriptive statistics. The data was transformed into percentages of demographics, of who attends cultural events and accesses resources, and use of social media in terms of frequency. As the quantitative portion is not the core element of this research, expertise is not required within this method (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011), as only enough information to serve the purpose of developing percentages of demographic information and themes is relevant. Due to this, analysis was only on the basis of descriptively comparing percentages for the different measured factors.

*Qualitative Analysis:* In the interest of addressing my research questions towards experiences in day to day life, and the translation of these experiences online, I engaged in a content analysis of the written quotations in order to categorize the data into themes. Themes I discovered relate to Albertan experiences, labelling, anonymity and shields, inclusion/exclusion, and lack of visibility, which will be discussed more in depth later within this paper. As a facet of grounded theory, there was also constant comparison of themes as they were developing, with the data gathered. These themes helped truncate the experiences of individuals into positive, negative, or neutral perspectives on various issues, as well as which resources and websites were accessed and the reasons why or why not.

*Mixed Methods Analysis:* I used a joint display of themes-by-statistics in order to place the determined themes alongside the statistics, as well as direct quotations. The themes mentioned above, for example, are categorized, and quotes both positive and negative are listed within my research alongside these themes. Underneath, a statistical percentage of demographic responses both positively and negatively will be displayed. This allows the quotes to be contextualized by the amounts of identifying individuals in certain groups.

## **VALIDITY**

*Quantitative validity* is obtained within my measurement development within the pre-testing portion, and through utilizing previous literature that has been tested and utilized by multiple researchers. In addition, reliability can be better assured through the facet of cross analyzing with my qualitative data, combined with the follow up qualitative interviews to allow for stronger confidence in findings. While there is the potential for non-response bias, the comparisons between demographic information highlight areas for future research to narrow in on specific cases. Generalizability is not the end goal within this research, rather,

the goal is to develop a theoretical basis for which to understand unique experiences in identity formation.

*Qualitative validity* is ensured through the aspects of grounded theory pertaining to constant comparison with notes and themes, as well as constant reference to the textual data. I took care in refining my research questions as the data directed me, which allowed for a more focused thread of conversation within these interviews as well as the ability to lessen potential discrepancies in terms of types of experiences and the issues individuals feel are centrally important between data sets. Language used within research is important for avoiding a lack of response, or a reaction of extremes (only always or never responses). In this way, terminology was explained and simplified, and reflected terms that are frequently used within the community through the open-ended portion of the survey wherein respondents could add in identities and pronouns as desired. In addition, constant memo use of developing themes and processes ensures reliability, and accuracy was determined through multiple readings of qualitative written responses.

*Mixed method validity* requires researcher reflexivity in terms of potential biases and knowledge positioning in research, or “what I know and how I know it” (Patton 2002:64). I aim to keep inline in terms of bias and with standpoint epistemology in situating myself within the knowledge so as to avoid treating my own view as invisible or disconnected (Harding 1992). In this way, it is important to note that as a member of the LGBTQ2IA+ community, I am intimately aware of microaggressions that are present within Calgary and Alberta in terms of language and interactions online. I identify as bisexual myself, and somewhere within the spectrum outside of cisgender identities. However, as a White middle-class individual, my experiences do not represent that of the whole, and it is important to note that the centrality of

the internet for my own identity construction may not be central for others. I have not experienced transphobia, or negative encounters regarding gender expression and identity, microaggressions towards these expressions, or violence due to my gender identity. In addition, I also benefit from a system that privileges gender conforming dress and behavior, as I am never misgendered or asked invasive questions regarding my genitalia. I also experience privilege based on race, as a White middle-class individual, and have never experienced racism, systemic oppression based on race, racial profiling, or hyper sexualization or hyper criminalization due to prejudiced and socially created stereotyping. I acknowledge the complex arena I am entering within this research in terms of gender identity, race, and sexuality which contains a long history of oppression and exploitation in various and harmful ways. My goal as mentioned previously, is not to speak for or on behalf of these individuals, but to build a working theory alongside and with them.

The facet of hosting this survey within an online platform (SurveyMonkey) serves a dual purpose in this vein, so as to lower the risks related to accessing this ‘hidden’ population of trans and LGBTQ+ populations, and to present the questionnaire at their leisure so that individuals feel more able to discuss personal experiences. These individuals are considered hidden since not all LGBTQ2IA+ individuals are openly ‘out’ to friends and family, and many trans individuals live in ‘stealth’. If an individual is able to ‘pass’ or be perceived in line with their gender identity, they may choose to not discuss their gender identity with those around them and can be considered ‘stealth’ within some communities. Within my research, I place a central importance on who this research is intended for, with an awareness of who it will be benefiting- primarily, my aim was and is, working with individuals to build research that best serves the LGBTQ2IA+ community and the people of colour within this community.



## **ETHICAL CONCERNS**

Due to the facet of this population being a ‘hidden’ population, outing can be a concern. To address this, all data is entirely anonymized and no information from individuals will be kept on file. For follow up interviews, individuals completed a consent form, provided pseudonyms of their own choosing, and no personal information is kept outside of the initial e-mail which was provided of their own volition within the anonymous survey, and the quotes which are anonymized. The incentive for participation of a \$25 Amazon gift card was based on email provided and drawn through a random number generator after all willing participants were categorically placed in a numbered list. There is also an option to not leave an email, in order to opt out of this draw. This gift card was either e-mailed via online code to the e-mail address provided. Questions pertaining to community inclusion and experiences may cause some emotional responses, however, I did not encounter a scenario wherein there was undue distress or interviews had to be paused or dropped.

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

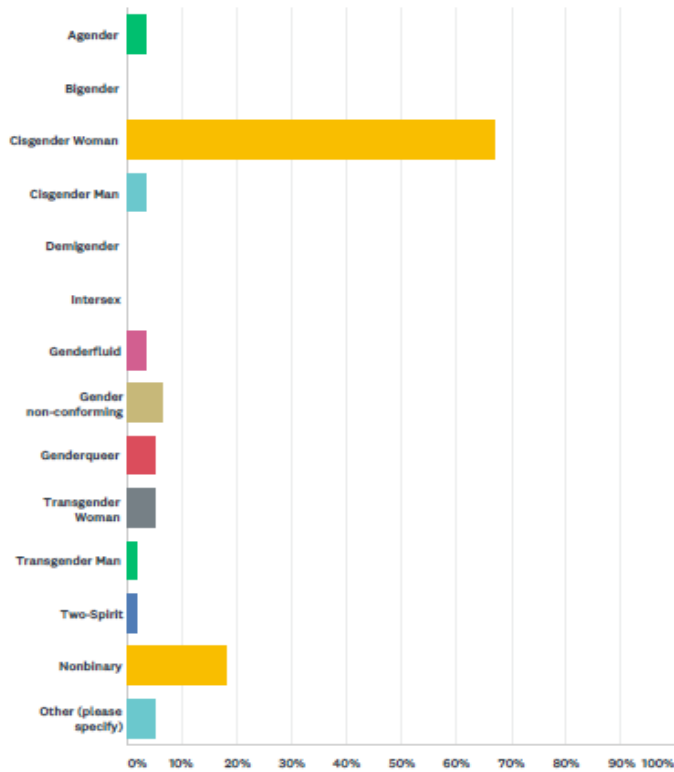
### **Quantitative Findings**

#### *Gender Identity and Sexuality*

The majority of respondents identified as cisgender women, however taken cumulatively, there were many respondents who self identified under the umbrella term of ‘trans’, (49.19%). This percentage shows that there is in fact a large diversity of gender identity experiences within Alberta’s LGBTQ2IA+community that extend beyond cisnormative understandings. In addition, a vast majority of the respondents also identified as bisexual, rather than gay or lesbian. Many identified as asexual (24.59%), the umbrella term of ‘queer’ (24.59%), or as pansexual (16.39%) in addition, which places the array of identities in a somewhat less studied area. The majority of bisexual respondents were also cisgender and self identified as White. A question regarding pronouns served the purpose of properly referring to respondents appropriately when discussing quotes, and therefore was not compiled as a graph response. In terms of romantic/sexual identity, the 7 respondents who wrote in ‘other’ described themselves as a variation of asexual/biromantic or panromantic, or fluid. A few individuals (2) described their pronouns as ‘it/its’ as well. As pronouns do not indicate gender identity, including the results for this question would functionally serve no beneficial purpose in this research.

Q5 What is your gender Identity? (Check all that apply)

Answered: 61 Skipped: 7

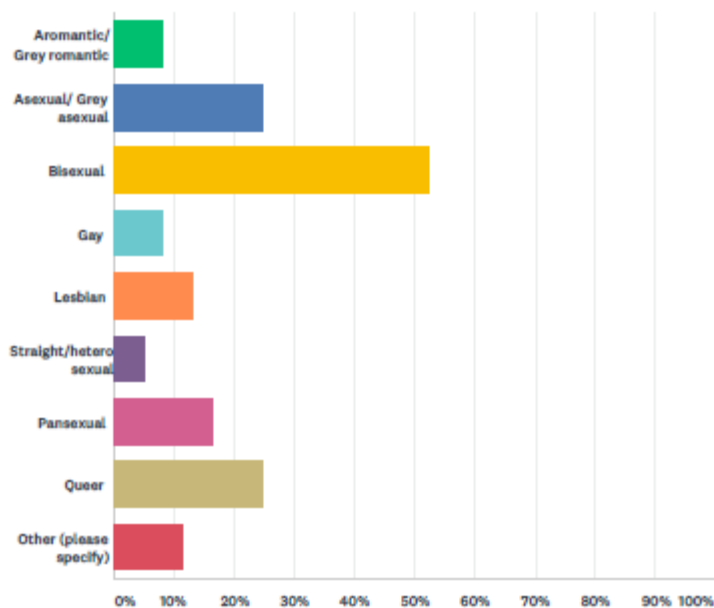


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Agender	3.28%	2
Bigender	0.00%	0
Cisgender Woman	67.21%	41
Cisgender Man	3.28%	2
Demigender	0.00%	0
Intersex	0.00%	0
Genderfluid	3.28%	2
Gender non-conforming	6.56%	4
Genderqueer	4.92%	3
Transgender Woman	4.92%	3
Transgender Man	1.64%	1
Two-Spirit	1.64%	1

Figure 1: Gender Identity (For a full list of Figures, see Appendix F)

### Q7 What is your sexual/romantic orientation? (Check all that apply)

Answered: 61 Skipped: 7



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Aromantic/ Grey romantic	8.20% 5
Asexual/ Grey asexual	24.59% 15
Bisexual	52.46% 32
Gay	8.20% 5
Lesbian	13.11% 8
Straight/heterosexual	4.92% 3
Pansexual	16.39% 10
Queer	24.59% 15
Other (please specify)	11.48% 7
Total Respondents: 61	

Figure 2: Sexuality/Romantic Identity

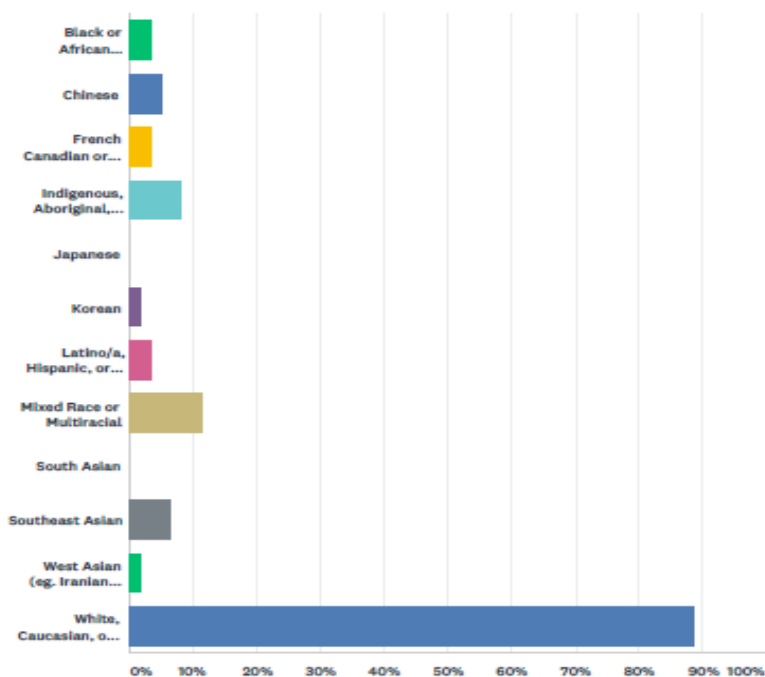
### Race, Ethnicity and Location

Overall, I was unable to reach the POC communities, and the largest response by a large margin was self identified White individuals (88.53%). However, there is an interesting spread of identities represented within this survey, with 13.12% of respondents identifying as Asian, 8.2% as Indigenous, and 12% as Mixed race. This would indicate that with access to

different ethnic communities, there would be a larger response within a few of these categories, and that the population of LGBTQ2IA+ individuals in Alberta is not entirely comprised of White members. The large number of White respondents could be indicative of my inability to break into other circles rather than speaking on behalf of a direct representation of the community. With snowball sampling, many of the individuals that retweeted the circulated twitter post may have only been followed by other White LGBTQ2IA+ Albertans, but it is evident that there is a diverse population outside of the scope of this project. In addition, few respondents reported that they currently lived in locations outside of the city, although as I will discuss later, many mentioned within qualitative follow up questions having been raised in such an environment and moving into the city at a later time. The lack of responses from rural areas also is an area that likely would influence responses overall, perhaps a further study would benefit from distinction of whether individuals were raised in a rural area or a city location.

### Q4 What is your race/ethnicity? (Check all that apply):

Answered: 61 Skipped: 7

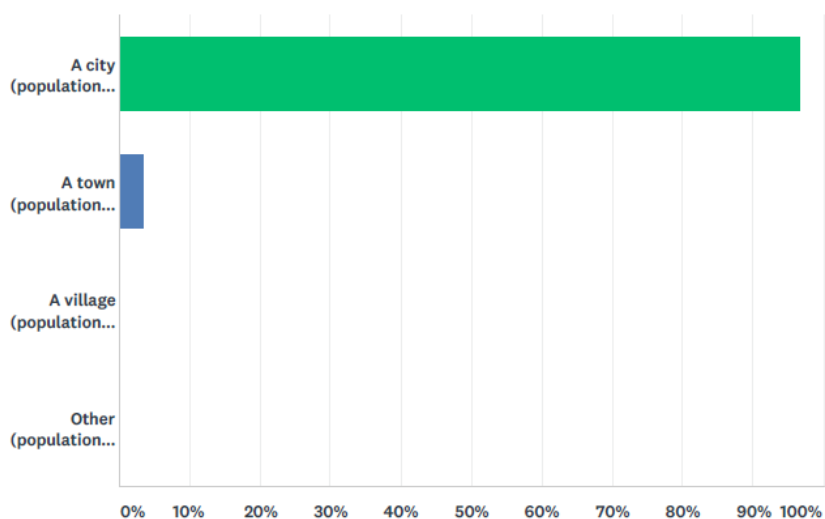


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Black or African Canadian	3.28%	2
Chinese	4.92%	3
French Canadian or Québécois	3.28%	2
Indigenous, Aboriginal, Inuit, Métis, or First Nation	8.20%	5
Japanese	0.00%	0
Korean	1.64%	1
Latino/a, Hispanic, or Latin Canadian	3.28%	2
Mixed Race or Multiracial	11.48%	7
South Asian	0.00%	0
Southeast Asian	6.56%	4
West Asian (eg. Iranian, Afghan, etc.)	1.64%	1
White, Caucasian, or European Canadian	88.52%	54
Total Respondents: 61		

Figure 3: Race and Ethnicity

## Q9 Which of the following best describes where you live in Alberta?

Answered: 61 Skipped: 7



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
A city (population greater than 10,000)	96.72%	59
A town (population less than 10,000 but greater than 1,000)	3.28%	2
A village (population less than 1,000 but greater than 300)	0.00%	0
Other (population less than 300)	0.00%	0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>61</b>

Figure 4: Location in Alberta

### *Internet Use and Age*

Typically, the data shows that most time spent online is on social media sites, of around 4-5 hours or 2-3 hours in general. In addition, the vast majority of respondents were between 18-29, or in other words Generation Z and the younger end of the Millennial generation, which is typically marked as 24-39-year-old individuals. The categories are typical with expectations, as these age ranges are exposed to more discussions regarding sexuality through access to the internet and broadened vocabulary and were raised with the internet and social media within day to day lives. As sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and

YouTube were developed in the early 2000's, many individuals within the Generation Z range would likely have grown up with these platforms as commonplace and have expertise in navigating and curating their newsfeeds and timelines. I was able to reach two older respondents who indicated they spent 0-1 hours on the internet and 2-3 hours on social media, indicating that internet use was more common with younger populations.

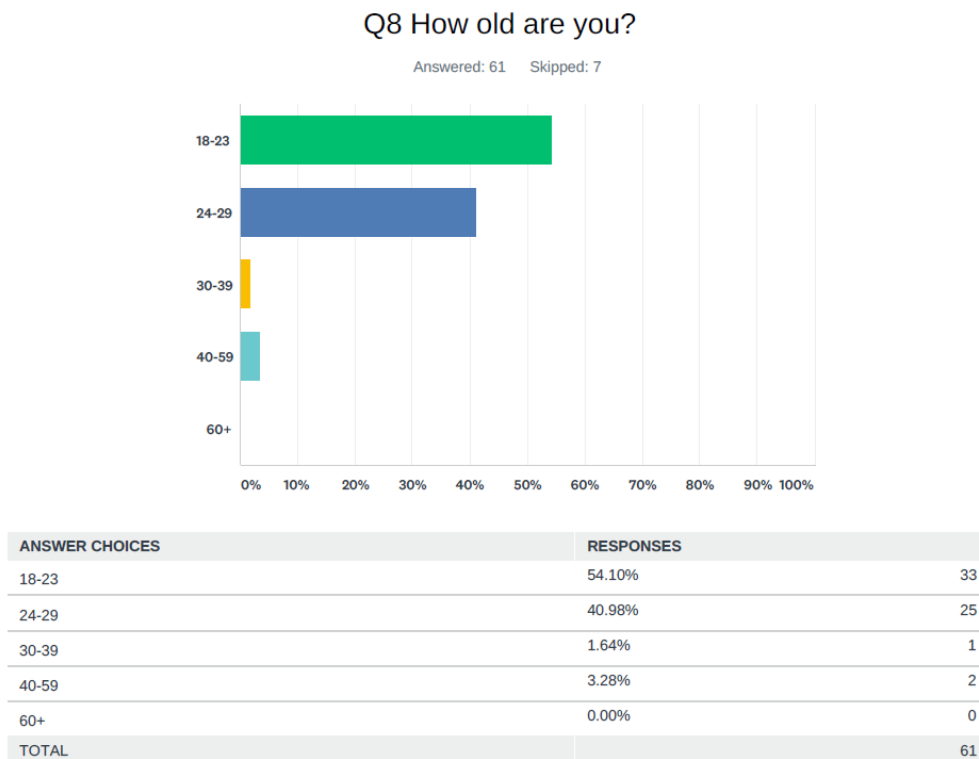
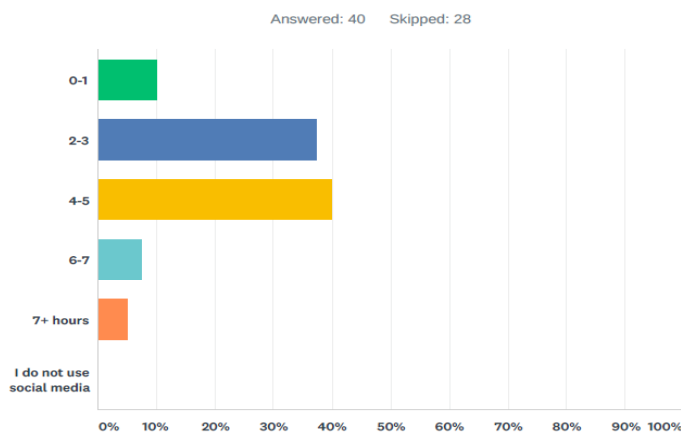


Figure 5: Age



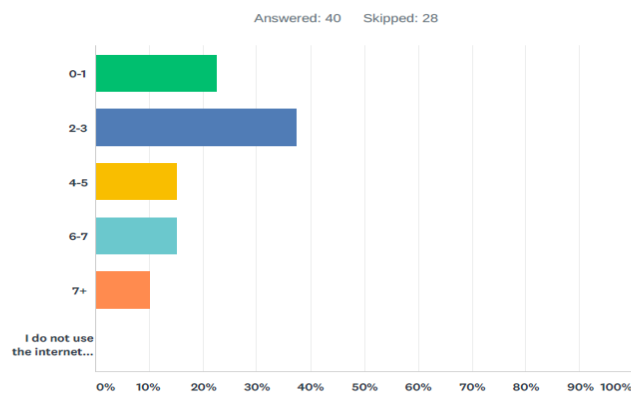
### Q11 How many hours in a day do you spend browsing social media on average?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
0-1	10.00% 4
2-3	37.50% 15
4-5	40.00% 16
6-7	7.50% 3
7+ hours	5.00% 2
I do not use social media	0.00% 0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>40</b>

Figure 6: Social Media Use

### Q12 How many hours in a day on average do you spend using the internet, not on social media sites?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
0-1	22.50% 9
2-3	37.50% 15
4-5	15.00% 6
6-7	15.00% 6
7+	10.00% 4
I do not use the internet daily, on average.	0.00% 0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>40</b>

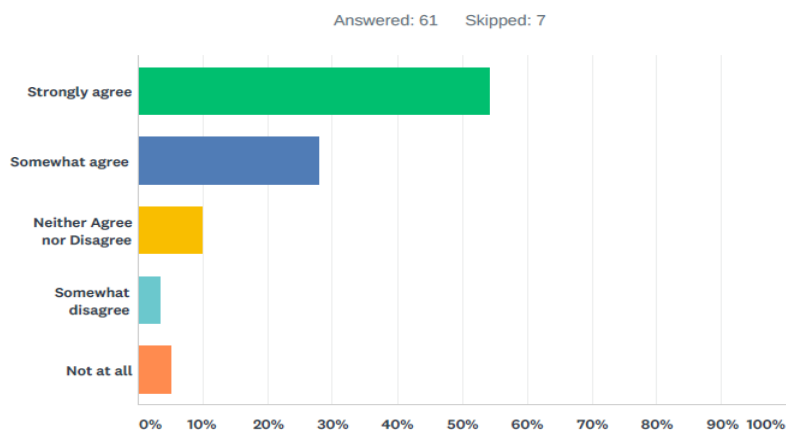
Figure 7: Internet Use

### *Identity*

Many respondents were adamantly vocal about LGBTQ2IA+ identities being an important aspect of their day to day lives, as 81.97% ranked themselves within the agree to strongly agree categories. The few that did not identify with the statement of (18.03% with 9.84% as neither agree nor disagree and 4.92% as strongly disagree), were largely White, cisgender, and bisexual (one identified as POC). It is interesting to note that a majority (54%) of respondents who categorized themselves as 'strongly agree' were non cisgender, in that they either identified as trans, nonbinary, or gender fluid/gender queer. In addition, the average respondent reported using the internet about 2-3 hours in day, but 4-5 hours was more common for time spent on social media in general. Overall, individuals felt strongly that social media was an important part of day to day life and that being LGBTQ2IA+ was a large and important part of their identity, indicating that there was some benefit to spending time on social media. In relation to identity formation, community spaces can serve to facilitate interaction one may not have in day to day experiences, from which identity and boundaries are built and reinforced. However, further research was necessary to correlate these findings

and develop a sense of potential causation.

Q10 How much do you agree with the following statement: “being LGBTQ2IA+ is an important part of my identity”.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Strongly agree	54.10% 33
Somewhat agree	27.87% 17
Neither Agree nor Disagree	9.84% 6
Somewhat disagree	3.28% 2
Not at all	4.92% 3
TOTAL	61

Figure 8: LGBTQ2IA+ Identity

## Qualitative Findings

Within the qualitative questions on the survey portion, I had asked questions regarding internet experiences and feelings of safety, day to day encounters, experiences of harassment or exclusion, or witnessed events of either, internet sites utilized in relation to LGBTQ2IA+ identities, and their perceptions of support groups accessibility. Many (approximately 20) individuals chose to skip these questions or write that these were non-applicable as they did not interact with LGBTQ2IA+ communities in general, offline or online. It was noted by many of these respondents that questions regarding community interactions were non applicable, as they were not out, nor did they feel comfortable interacting with these

communities. Those who had responded however, highlighted experiences of exclusion or frustration at a lack of full inclusion within these spaces.

Within the interview section of my research, I asked participants questions regarding experiences of harassment online or in day to day lives within Alberta, accessibility of support groups, comfort in expressing identity while living in Alberta, and important resources for obtaining information regarding identity. Questions pertaining to harassment focused on LGBTQ2IA+ community spaces as well as non-LGBTQ2IA+spaces. In addition, respondents were asked if they had heard comments in regard to their identity that had left a lasting impact, which was emphasized could be positive or negative.

As I conducted semi-structured interviews based on responses from the survey as well, the following section will include both areas of response. As a result of these findings, I was able to develop codes and themes on areas of discussion presented, of which the majority deal with a lack of inclusion and safety within Alberta and within LGBTQ2IA+ spaces, and a perception of protection online.

#### *LGBTQ2IA+ Spaces as Non-Inclusive*

The community in Alberta appears to suffer from the same ‘exclusivity’ issues as Q centers and other physical resources as described within Stone’s work on metronormativity and LGBTQ2IA+ spaces. As ‘safety’ as a concept is developed on the experiences of cisgender White gay able-bodied men, this narrative serves to inherently exclude other individuals. While many respondents were fairly optimistic, or could remark about no particular experience of harassment, the vast majority of surveyed respondents had not interacted with LGBTQ2IA+ communities either online or offline (approximately 23% of

quotes within the online survey portion included ‘N/A’ or mentions of explicitly never having interacted with such groups). While this is the result of multiplicative factors in daily experiences and identity, the general perception of these communities can be accurately summed up by Kay, an interviewed respondent’s comments on Alberta’s LGBTQ2IA+ community; “I think we’ve come leaps and bounds absolutely, but I mean. There’s not only two letters in this acronym, right?”

Questions pertaining to harassment brought lack of inclusivity to the forefront, as many respondents discussed a variety of issues within the communities, they participated in. Racism and biphobia were particularly prevalent in these discussions. Many of the discussions regarding these topics varied from discussions of Alberta in general or specific communities, but served to create an overall thematic issue regarding LGBTQ2IA+ communities engaging in ‘gatekeeping’ or limiting mentalities within members of their own community, that ultimately left individuals feeling uncomfortable or left out of discussions. As Kay described further:

“...you know, just because you’re LGBT2Q+ doesn’t mean that you can’t be a racist and vice versa.”

In an interesting development, a large number of responses relating to racism or specific exclusionary attitudes centered on the White and cisgender population of the community, due to ingrained behaviours and attitudes within LGBTQ2IA+ settings, as well as online. The compounding issues of racism, transphobia, and misogyny often played a central role in comments from participants in this vein. Max, a bisexual woman of colour, detailed this experience:

“Sometimes there’s like a little bit of racist language that like- I mean this is like a thing that I kind of find with a lot of white gay men kind of thing? Especially around like- Black gay men get a lot of racism, kind of used against them- there’s a lot of racial stereotypes and oversexualization of like Black bodies and stuff like that? I would say that’s like the most common form of racism- sort of an unwelcome energy?”

Along with this sense of ‘unwelcome energy’ in self promoted diverse spaces, the actual make up of the communities serves to play into this discomfort. Respondents remarked that while some efforts were made to be inclusive, there were particular demographics that were more welcome than others or could find comfort more easily. One of the anonymous responses described a scenario at the University of Calgary wherein exclusion was more prominently felt:

“I guess when I started uni I went to the Q Centre to make friends, but found it not inviting. As a queer but femme WOC, I found the space to be targeted more on white gay people.”

In specific, there was an issue regarding the language used within these spaces, as well as a general commentary on who was able to access these support networks. Misogyny, lesbophobia, acephobia, transphobia, as well as other discriminatory mindsets, can develop a stronghold within communities if they are treated as standard, or if the narrative put forward suggests a preference to one way of speaking over another. A few interviewees and online respondents described instances of misogynistic language, transphobic statements, or lesbophobic discussion within Q centers and online discussions, regularly enough that they often stopped interacting in these spaces all together. Anne, who had attended a few support group types of settings, discussed this:

“Well, specifically with ‘the community’ so to speak, in Calgary. It’s... especially in person, more so than online, it’s really dominated by ... cis white gay men, let’s just- let’s just say it. Cis white gay guys who talk in a very particular way and talk in a very overtly sexual way, and... in the circles where I was interacting with these people, there’s a sense of disgust around the female body is what I experienced. So especially in those circles, I felt like I couldn’t discuss myself or any sort of female attraction because they’d be- like, they wouldn’t say anything necessarily but there’s this kind of... for a lack of a better term ‘disgust’. It- it’s kind of- they make it playful? But it’s still played as disgust while someone’s speaking about it? And I’m just like ‘okay, bud. This is supposed to be gay inclusive you know, like lesbians included. And when a lesbian is speaking maybe if you could not be making a face while she’s talking? Like it’s really rude?’ So.”

Of those respondents who noted a sense of feeling unwelcome within LGBTQ2IA+ spaces, whether online or in person, many them (approximately 56%) highlighted ‘white cis gays’ as the primary source of exclusion. Whether through actual exclusive action, through subtle but unwelcoming language, or through the simple problem of one group dominating a space over others, exclusivity was consistently linked to White cisgender gay Albertans, particularly in terms of an unwillingness to listen to outside perspectives or experiences.

“As I am queer with they/them pronouns, yes. Many cis gay men are very exclusive- and many many cis and white queers were incredibly horrible in regards to the protests we had during the Edmonton pride parade two years ago. I also received harassment in regards to questioning pride events popping up in our city last year that had no interest in addressing the issues brought up by the protests that year, or questioning events run by people known to be racist/etc in the community.” – Anonymous response online

There is an inherent difference, a divide of sorts, within these communities in terms of ‘inclusion’ and ‘comfort’ in many senses. There’s a perception of resistance present that disallows conversations regarding change, and a divide defined between ‘gay’ as relating to White individuals, and the rest of the community. An interviewee going by the name of Lio, outlined this separation in terms of a disconnect:

“My workplace is doing some sort of like party. And my manager was like ‘oh I want it to be really gay. Like I want this to be a gay fucking party.’ And the person who I was talking to about it they were like ‘well, I want it to be inclusive!’ And I was like ‘interesting, so there’s like a difference’. There’s a difference between being like ‘I want this to be a gay party’ compared to ‘I want this to be an inclusive party’ ....The person who I was talking to who wanted it to be inclusive identifies as [non-binary], so. I don’t know like I feel like there can be a disconnect between LGB and T.”

### *Albertan Experience*

Taking into consideration the contexts of lived experiences in Alberta, there are a few distinctions that arose. Namely, between rural and urban areas, and perceptions of Alberta versus the rest of the country. Within these distinctions, there are a few separate narratives that would benefit from thorough investigation and discussion.

The rural-urban divide remained consistent, in that those who had experienced rural Alberta as a member of the LGBTQ2IA+ community felt a distinct level of homophobia, mainly present through a lack of conversation or visibility, and an oppressive feeling of isolation. One older respondent described growing up in a small town in Alberta, and initially only learning about what gay identities were through a moralized context by her town. She



remarked, “I think back when I was growing up in the small industrial town I was in, it was considered such a horrible thing [to be gay].” She also described an experience in which an individual moved into town from a more urban area in the US and had an earring in one ear. At the time, this was considered emblematic of being gay, and there were rumors regarding this man’s sexuality enough that it was common knowledge, even if not directly spoken of. One day, as she described, two other men dragged him into the center of town in front of a crowd, and ripped the earring out, shouting “take a look at this fag”. The interviewee noted that it was likely on the lower end of things that could have happened, implying some knowledge of worse events for the crime of being gay, whether in her own experience or from others, but that the image stuck with her even years later. This story serves two purposes; one, in highlighting the intensity of homophobia present within Alberta and Canada short years ago, and two, the distinction perceived between rural and urban settings as presumably, the individual had been able to be out within his previous city.

The respondent also went on to highlight that, “Having been all throughout Canada, I don’t think that Alberta’s any more closeminded, at least in the cities that I’ve lived in. But I think there’s a big difference between rural and urban. So, when I was in the small towns that I’ve lived in there’s no way that you’re going to leave any kind of- anything to second guessing, right? Because you’ll get your ass kicked.”

However, interestingly enough, the majority of respondents I interviewed who had not lived elsewhere, felt as though that level of unsafety was still present and perhaps more of a concern than most other locations in Canada. Multiple factors appeared to play into this perception; the Conservative leaning political stance of the majority of the population, as based on recent election results, and the sense of isolation from any ‘real’ accepting urban

area, were primary contexts. The Conservative majority was particularly emphasized as a justification for uncertainty, as many described Jason Kenney's most recent platform in running for Premier, where he moved to roll back on GSA support within schools, as evidence of homophobia. The majority vote being in support of Jason Kenney led to a strong concern that the majority of Albertans either were openly homophobic, or at least did not place the protection of LGBTQ2IA+ kids as important towards dissuading their vote.

"...in respect to Alberta as a whole. No, it's not fucking safe here! Duh! I thought a really long time before I came out to my coworkers, like a long time. And even then, they're super woke and great but you know they mess up from time to time and perpetrate some stereotypes. And, you know, I don't come out to everyone that I meet, like. Not at all. Probably out to like five people at work, and I'm not out to like all of the doctors that I work with. Probably never will because I don't want to have that conversation. Like, it would be a total guessing game as to whether they're like one of the 70% of people that voted Conservative in this province! Like, that's just the shitty reality that we live in where it's just like. Oh, you know, 70% of people don't give a shit about anyone who's not White, who's not like able bodied and who's not a man!" - Max

### *Veneer of Inclusivity*

This perception of other locations as more welcoming was also multiplied by a feeling of 'pretend inclusion', both within LGBTQ2IA+ spaces, as well as day to day living in Alberta. There appeared to be a sort of underlying concern, a doublespeak relating acceptance that was only surface deep. One respondent emphasized this concern even within a University of Calgary setting, in that she felt a desire to ask other openly LGBTQ2IA+ individuals on campus, whether students or staff, if they were enjoying their time with the university, or if

there was a sense of distaste from the university itself that made them unsafe. There was a desire to see if the ‘walking on eggshells’ perception was commonplace, as though Alberta and by extension, the University of Calgary itself, was more dedicated to appearing inclusive and welcoming, than actually practicing these perspectives.

“In Alberta? It’s... you know, if you don’t fit in your expected category, people aren’t going to- like I don’t feel as though I’m going to get attacked, unless I’m you know, alone in a very specific place very visibly gay, then you know, maybe. [laughs] I don’t necessarily feel unsafe, but there’s this general feeling of unwelcome-ness. If I hold hands with my girlfriend in public, people stare. In a way that’s... not friendly. You know? Or... or ‘oh! Well I never’ you know! [laughs] That sort of-that sort of attitude. Surprise and ‘oh! I... I guess they’re gay!’ But it’s all like very, it’s all very undertone there’s just this overarching Conservative sense that ‘well! It’s alright that some folks are like that, but you know, we just don’t like talking about that too much.’” -Ann

Within LGBTQ2IA+ spaces in Alberta, there was a continued perception of a ‘correct’ form of gay that would be accepted. This exclusion was not an active move in many cases, as most respondents could not name a specific instance of harassment or exclusion, but a passive sort of dismissal regarding unwanted topics or experiences. One interviewee who went by Lio, described her bisexuality in the context of a lack of approval or enthusiasm. She described having had a boyfriend in the past and attempting to introduce him to her friends within the LGBTQ2IA+ friend groups in Calgary she’d been a part of, in that “like no one would ever say anything. They’re like ‘oh we don’t- we still want to be inclusive! So were not going to say anything, but we’re just not going to meet any of your boyfriends. Or even if we do well, we don’t really care about them that much’.”

Individuals described the community and Alberta with a sense of discomfort, often noting that while they would not necessarily face physical harm for living openly, there would be social pressure and judgement. A subtle regulation that ultimately made living openly difficult, left respondents feeling as though they were looking over their shoulder, waiting for the other shoe to drop and the verbal or physical harassment to begin. This sense of unwelcomeness pervaded LGBTQ2IA+ community spaces as well, limiting and often creating hard barriers between accessing resources or community events such as Pride, and ultimately serving the purpose of reframing one's own identity as 'not enough' or 'incorrect'. This limits the ability for individuals to create daily interactions with those that share traits and identities, leaving boundaries and affirmations of identity under question.

#### *Lack of Visibility/Community*

Beginning the interview portion of this research, I had begun to develop a perception of the LGBTQ2IA+ community within Alberta as fractured. While there certainly was a population, there was a lack of desire to form a cohesive community, whether because of resentment from prior harassment or exclusion, or due to limiting factors, such as accessibility. However, through the interview portion, an interesting picture began to develop that reframed this lack of community not as an aspect of choice, but rather a lack of information.

Respondents felt as though there was a gap, a lack of solidarity and voice within Alberta that created a pervasive feeling of being 'bereft', as. One interview respondent who chose the pseudonym of Ann described, "...like I've only experienced the community in Calgary, um. To a lesser extent, Airdrie, in that I don't think there is one?" There is a missing sense of unity present, where individuals acknowledge the presence of other LGBTQ2IA+

individuals living nearby, and even interact occasionally at Twisted or Pride, but feel as though there is no tether that creates cohesive ‘identity’ or community. However, when digging deeper into what would need to change to access the resources that did exist, a different framing of this issue began to develop.

There was a desire, as emphasized by one interviewee, to have smaller sections of identity as their own groups, alongside a general lack of advertising if such things existed, “Again, like I- I have no idea if there’s even any ace groups in Calgary or Alberta for that matter. Or even or bisexual or biromantic people support groups in general.” Alongside the interesting emphasis on bisexual or ace groups, there was a general implication that the knowledge of these groups was not far reaching. That perhaps, much like the effects of this snowball sample-based research, there was a limitation to how far circulation of events was able to travel, or perhaps that community was only seen as existing for Albertans under the guise of friend groups.

While respondents were aware of large scale events such as Pride, spaces such as the Q Center at University of Calgary, or Twisted, the one gay nightclub in Calgary, there appeared to be a blank space in terms of knowledge surrounding other resources or support networks, or even clubs directed towards women or trans individuals. Whether these groups existed or not, there was a prevalent desire for them expressed by respondents, a desire to find a community of like-minded individuals where safety would be enforced. However, there appeared to be no attempt at discovering or creating these spaces presented by respondents themselves. Max described this feeling:

“I mean if you know any other lesbian like, women queer spaces let me know but I don’t know about any of them. And like, so one of my roommates she’s bi too for like context, and

she's like 'there's specific bars I won't like go up and like hit on a woman or talk to a woman, or like. There's definitely bars where I won't go with my girlfriend for sure.' But I'm like 'where are these bars where you can hit on a woman? In what way can you hit on a woman in public?' Like, take me there! I would love that. Because I just assume that like, everyone around me is straight. Everyone always." -Max

All in all, there is a silence that is seemingly commonplace within Alberta regarding these spaces and regarding attempts to create identity in a physical location. Ultimately, the ability to access spaces in Alberta relies on prior community connections or knowledge regarding where they are held or whether they exist. In addition, many LGBTQ2IA+ Albertans are not out or openly express their identities, and a discretionary space is a key priority. KP told me:

"I feel like a lot of that is down to like your own research. I feel like there is not a lot of like, advertisement. So I guess that would be like- like knowing that these places exist and that they're safe to go to would be more helpful."

Outside of community spaces, there is a lack of visibility and advertisement on the part of the province itself, leading many to feel as though the aforementioned veneer of inclusion truly is a performative and occasional happenstance that correlates primarily with big media events such as Pride where marketing is easily viable. While there are support groups or community resources, the province itself does little in the way of spreading information effectively or advocating for certain rights and protections. A feeling that was emphasized with the Jason Kenney elections, given the platform he ran on regarding rolling back on GSA protections in schools for kids. When I asked Kay whether she felt safe expressing her identity in Alberta, she said:

“No, no absolutely not! No. No, I feel like, um, I feel like it’s really silent about the support that it could give. There’s... I feel like, I feel like the city [Calgary] and the Province will boast about their support for mental health and getting the help you need but it never specifies that you know, this is also for LGBTQ+, right? So, no. If- if you were to ask me ‘do you think your province supports this community?’ It’s an overwhelming no.”

### *Labelling, Performativity, and ‘Not Being Gay Enough’*

Within interviews, it was common to hear statements of feeling as though Pride or community events were not the respondents’ ‘space’, given their sexuality, or that they did not feel comfortable publicly speaking to certain topics due to how they presented. This constant push back from respondents was an attempt in many ways to make room for those who ‘needed it more’, or who fit some preconceived notion of ‘properly gay’. As mentioned by one survey respondent “Queer positivity online gave me the strength to come out and get over my imposter syndrome (to some extent, I mean I still feel not queer enough).” This perception of ‘being queer enough’ was referenced frequently as a justification for lack of involvement, and as a feeling of embarrassment or shame in others. In addition, aspects such as biphobia, transphobia, or acephobia pervade spaces meant to welcome individuals.

Pride was a topic discussed by more than one respondent, as a place that felt ‘not theirs’, implying a group that was more welcome or would be more accepted. The idea of one identity being more preferred in an LGBTQ2IA+ space, whether due to domination by cisgender White gay men, or an understanding of intersectionality as compounding oppressions upon one group more than others- an acknowledgement of cisgender privilege or

White privilege primarily- this stepping back mentality was extremely common. Lio detailed exclusion in that:

“There’s definitely like a lot of exclusion for the ace community in-in general? I know that’s one of the big reasons why I hadn’t gone to Pride and still have not gone to Pride. Just because, you know, before I was in a relationship with my partner I mostly identified as a heteromantic asexual. Um. And, like. I think at a certain level I knew that Pride wasn’t my space?” – Lio

This unwelcome perspective was seen within online spaces as well, preventing many from fully engaging with community settings, but often in a more specific and labelling manner. With the inclusion of facets such as Twitter profiles, Tumblr ‘bios’ wherein individuals often list identity features such as sexuality, mental disorders, gender, pronouns and so on, along with a sense that someone can only chime in to certain conversations if they announce their identity beforehand, lead the ability to explore and fluctuate slightly, if not completely, hampered. Ann, who had dealt with exclusion within the asexual community itself for having unique experiences, also explained inherent difficulties with labels in the context of sexuality conflicting with gender identity:

“When you’re in an early stage of discovering your identity, you can’t change your mind. Because then people pull up stuff, the receipts so to speak and they’re like ‘oh well you said you’re- you’re a woman who loved women, but now you’ve found out you’re not a woman anymore so you lied to us’ and it’s like ‘no I didn’t lie to you, I was-‘ or there’s this idea that you were being predatory somehow, like. No. They just went through a – people change, dude! With time! There’s this- I don’t understand why there’s this idea on the internet that’s like everything is static you must stand by the thing you said nine years ago” -Ann



There is a sense within these spaces, that others must reinforce and assign identity to others, whether based on a notion of ‘helping and educating’ or otherwise, there are strict rules on what certain identities must look and act like in some circles that respondents found intimidating. In this system there is a resistance to exploration, of trying certain labels or identities on and seeing what feels right. If you are to say that you are a lesbian woman, but realize that your gender identity has shifted, there can be a pressure to refer to yourself with a different sexuality label. If you are a straight woman, and fall into a relationship with another woman, you can find yourself being pressured into referring to yourself as bisexual in some circles, or as a lesbian in others, regardless of prior attraction or self expression. As KP noted in their experience on Twitter, “I’m not necessarily going to say ‘I’m nonbinary’ there because then I’ve said a thing that now someone is going to come back and say ‘well that doesn’t match up with the fact that you say you’re nonbinary’.” There’s a feeling of needing to ‘prove’ oneself as being gay, as having to dress and act and speak in a certain way to align with certain categories, even as a nonbinary individual and therefore inherently outside of categorical understandings of gender. This feeling of needing a concrete label and having to defend it was commonplace within the respondent’s experiences online. When Ann was asked what would need to change to allow them to feel more comfortable accessing support groups or Pride, or the community in general, they said;

“.... I would have to live, hopefully in the future, when the ideas about human sexuality, the ideas about your gender even weren’t so... concrete. Where there isn’t this idea of ‘oh you have to have a label for yourself to go into these spaces to say these things and that you have to say things a certain way, you have to look at your relationships a certain way.’ Because I feel like, there’s this idea that there is the you know, ‘the gay lifestyle’ or, there’s this idea of

what being gay is like? And, it's. It's not inclusive of ace people, it's definitely not inclusive of anyone who doesn't have a concrete gender identity, or anyone who's outside of the spectrum or. Or betwixt, so to speak, between"

Rather than developing a cohesive understanding of grey areas and a spectrum, many communities online have developed a sense of needing to pick one label. With those who identify outside of binary gender conceptions, and who fluctuate (namely gender nonconforming, genderfluid, demi girl or boy, or genderqueer individuals), the need to state what they are in concrete terms inherently and simultaneously conflicts with their own identities. There's a need to find a specific combination of terms to correctly align yourself with, which while some may find comfort in, others feel limits and frustrates their experiences interacting with the community. There's been like a big push to get- 'oh this is what I am' you know, like I need a specific name for like who I am and what I feel, and I feel like online is so confrontational? And if you're saying what you're experiencing is attached to a name and an identity, and its different from how they feel about that identity? Then there can be a little bit of .....friction there?" -KP

"They were one of my best friends absolutely and I came to them for a lot because when I was in... even before I was in a serious relationship I would come to them and- at first I thought, like, what if I'm ace? Because of just other things, or I'm like 'oh no, what if I'm bi or something like that?' Like obviously coming to them for help and they're like 'oh no, no, no. You're straight. Like you can appreciate what a woman looks like, but no you're straight'. And that's when- I think that, that kind of really stunted me and I backpedalled hard because I'm like 'oh, okay. I trust you.' Kind of thing. So I guess that stuck with me for a long time,

because they kind of... I came to them, obviously looking for wisdom, and I took it and kind of being where I am now I'm like 'they were wrong!' [laughs]" - Kay

"Honestly, I feel really- it was easier going to Pride when I thought I was straight, kind of thing? Just because it still feels weird to own queerness as something that I am, I don't know. Especially like, being a bi person, I feel like I have to really over emphasize queerness in order to be accepted. Like, do I look gay enough to be here? Like... and. If I'm with the right partner- maybe with a partner I don't feel gay enough so just like... there's quite a bit of performativity sometimes in queer spaces that kind of freaks me out, so." – Max

"I think in general just having people base an opinion on how I look like, or ... I guess just how I look like isn't necessarily my favorite? And, I think about things like coloring my hair, some people are going to have an opinion on that and if they don't, in a space with other LGBT people and I don't... I feel like I'm not showcasing it enough sometimes?" -KP

### *Anonymity and Shields*

Practices to retain a feeling of safety, to create a 'safe space' where one can drop guards against discussing 'taboo' subjects are regularly cited as essential aspects of online interaction, namely the ability to 'block' or 'unfollow', as well as anonymity. Many discussions of community building on these platforms utilize aspects of these to develop strength and create a sense of 'us'. One respondent, Kay, described this protective bubble feeling as the ability to see a harmful post potentially spreading misinformation, scrolling through replies, and noting all of the replies describing the inaccuracies. She emphasized that this immediate shutting down of harmful untruths left her feeling 'protected', even if on

occasion these responses could go overboard, and that the communities online of LGBTQ2IA+ individuals were “very strong”.

However, the use of anonymity and ability to shut out unwanted commentary leaves many to feel as though the online interactions are a certain level of ‘unreal’. This divide of lived experiences appeared in relation to websites such as Tumblr or Twitter regularly, in that many felt there was an aspect of anonymity available that was not found offline. One interviewee responded that they felt online to be a useful space for ‘dabbling’ with identity, in that one could log in and interact with communities presenting as a boy, log into a different account and interact while presenting as a girl, in the aims of figuring out what felt better, or if neither of them fit entirely. The respondent noted this was effective in their own self discovery in understanding their own gender fluidity but felt as though this level of anonymity was fading more recently.

“It’s easier for people, at least it’s easier for me to be honest online. Like it’s that idea of having that sort of shield or, you can make up a username, you can make up an avatar for yourself. Um. And you can just kind of become, whatever especially for a person who’s not uh, gender – gender non conforming? I could just go online and say I’m a dude, I could just go online and say I’m a girl.” -Ann

This need to develop identity within the safety of anonymity or of selected followers is particularly relevant in an Albertan setting, where the common perception of respondents centered on a feeling of ‘being pressured’, or of walking a thin line between being judged and being unsafe.

“It's easier to curate a bubble online. To seek out people who are like you in a larger radius, like Alberta is just- it's again, very Conservative, people habitually in public even if they present a different way in private? When they go out in public, there's that kind of pressure.”

-KP

### *Value of the Internet*

Internet access is posited as being a central area of information gathering and community formation for those who do not live in metropolitan areas, or who are perhaps living under ‘stealth’ (Erlick 2018). Within these contexts, having access to immediate information, forum posts, and engaging in ‘online activism’ are treated as essential elements of identity formation online. This research attempted to discern whether these were important factors for Albertans, as well as extra helpful facets individuals highlighted regarding social media and identity.

In the interviews, respondents were asked about where they had first learned about LGBTQ2IA+ identities; a large number of respondents (5 of the 6 interviews and many surveyed individuals) discussed the internet or media in general as being hugely impacting in discovering terminology, and even as their first experience with LGBTQ2IA+ content. Outside of introducing individuals to gay people as real existing individuals, which many had not experienced prior, the internet and social media sites such as Tumblr allowed for a vocabulary to be formulated that helped many individuals identify their specific experiences and to feel ‘less alone’.

Being able to interact with communities online and play around with presentations of identities is particularly helped by the information available online. The internet as a source of

information was mentioned by nearly every respondent both in interviews and surveys, as the primary positive feature. Those who did not interact with LGBTQ2IA+ communities online or offline still commented on sites such as Tumblr as being crucial in being able to determine one's own queerness. In addition, this information was also presented as almost an offensive tactic, and as a method of protective support. One interviewee, who identified as a trans woman, discussed how she felt the internet in terms of more recent contexts has been fighting back against misconceptions and perpetuated stereotypes. She noted that, "They [Planned Parenthood] were really amazing at cutting through a lot of the intentional deception that's on the internet." This was particularly important for her as a method of combatting the perception that gender confirming surgeries were negative, or the notion of high frequencies of 'sex change regret' within trans individuals, as statistically Planned Parenthood was able to show graphics and academic research to the contrary. These statistics assist in lessening the spread of misinformation and provide comfort for trans individuals who are thinking of obtaining surgery, in that they show the vast majority (approximately 99% on some studies), remark and improvement in life satisfaction after surgery.

In addition, the internet provided freedom and a sense of protection within informative contexts. The ability to cultivate community and followers, to be private or anonymous was important to many as an aspect of being able to discuss information and identities without negative backlash. Kay, a bisexual woman, remarked that, "It's the only place my parents don't follow me in terms of social media, so there's a lot of freedom there. And then, um. I think its where a lot of... information sharing happens. And not as much tearing down."

As media representation for many was still low, and as day to day lives prevented expression or exploration, outspoken activists online and individuals' access to these

platforms was also crucial. Being able to witness individuals who are open, confident, and happy, who also related to certain struggles or had similar backstories, was influential for Albertans in terms of being able to build a sense of identity. Max, a POC respondent who struggled with culture and queerness noted a difficulty with feeling confident or proud of her identity within family structures that were very homophobic and unwelcoming. She remarked however, the importance of knowing it was possible for some to overcome these barriers; “But then, I don’t know I look at a lot of queer activists that I see online and. Just living in their bodies, living in their skin, specifically like Black and Brown activists and I’m just like... ‘wow! You’re doing it. Like you’re doing it and you have like Conservative parents too or you have Brown parents and a Brown family and like you’re able to live so fully in this identity.’” -Max

Having optimistic knowledge, or the awareness that some were able to be out and proud regardless of obstacles, was inspiring for Max and others who spoke highly of Youtubers and individuals who posted LGBTQ2IA+ content on platforms like TikTok. It provided a sense of normalcy, a window into a reality that many had not experienced due to a lack of media representation, or due to fear of rejection from family and community.

Having visible representation is essential for identity development, as it provides a feeling of ‘not being alone’ in many ways, as well as access to further information that academic literature or articles may not be able to capture. As Alberta was remarked as not having a large LGBTQ2IA+ community from many respondents, or at least not any well advertised community gathering places, respondents utilized internet forums and community discussions with others in less isolated geographic locations to develop this heightened sense of community.

“On discussion forum threads, I have come across people who have transitioned in Toronto, and they have been quite supportive and helpful in personal terms. That is, they are quite comfortable with issues related to coming out. They have a larger trans community, so their insights are valuable” - Robyn

Whether or not it is entirely accurate to say that there is statistically a larger trans community in other cities, the ‘comfort’ of discussions was highlighted. The ability to “have someone to talk to” as one interviewee expressed, was a necessity for many to develop confidence and their own sense of comfort. Identity formation is often related to the ability to interact in day to day experiences with individuals with similar experiences, which many were not able to have within Alberta. The internet however, allowed for not only information sharing, but access to familiarity that is able to combat the perceived sense of ‘wrongness’ ingrained into individuals due to systemic transphobia, racism, and homophobia. One anonymous survey comment wrote,

“Internet and social media have definitely helped “normalize” queerness and diversity, and if it weren’t for Tumblr back in the early 2010s, I personally might not have even realized I was queer myself. Having spaces online in which we can create our own circles of following/community/topics, however we want to define it, helps tremendously to “normalize” these things to ourselves and “practice living” our truths before facing the real world.”

This concept of ‘practicing living truths’ before ‘facing the real world’ raises an interesting conversation. Potentially, this means that individuals do not see the online realm as being an aspect of the ‘real world’, but rather an experimental anonymous space completely separate from their day to day lives. However, the ‘truth’ of their identities remains constant in



either realm. Normalizing experiences in the face of ingrained and internalized homophobia is an important practice of resistance that is utilized in developing conceptions of identity and boundaries (Martin 2017) Ultimately, the internet's ability to provide a 'bubble', or the process of selecting who can view content, creates a space where individuals can "practice their truths", to gain knowledge, confidence, and determination they can then bring into the offline situations wherein homophobia or transphobia may be more commonplace and difficult to combat whilst isolated.

### *Media Representation*

As there is a lack of representation in day to day life for many Albertan LGBTQ2IA+ individuals, respondents often referred to various media outlets as examples of what their identity could be, or where they learned positive representation from. Modern TV or movie examples are limited, and left many respondents frustrated. While gay men are becoming more available in media such as Modern Family, which was posited as potentially the first place one respondent had heard of gay couples in general, or lesbians such as Ellen DeGeneres, there are many other identities that struggle to see themselves within any media. This was placed as important for many, as it is a way of seeing how individuals can embrace aspects of their identity and live happy and fulfilling lives, find family, and succeed. An interviewee, a nonbinary respondent, described this issue as an area for education particularly for youth, and of self acceptance; "I'm talking in a media sense. Because I think that's really important. Because, again, kind of going back to when this was even introduced to myself as an idea, like there could be different genders or sexualities, I think a lot of it comes down to media." In families who are not well versed in these topics, or potentially even homophobic, having concepts introduced within media as normal parts of every day life can be beneficial

for creating that sense of community and belonging needed for identity creation, even when there is no physical community to have daily encounters with.

Individuals who were asexual felt as though there was rarely any representation at all, and the few that were present showed an unhealthy, or incorrect representation at times. Ann described watching an episode of House with an asexual couple and recalled this as the first time they had ever seen asexuality within TV media. However, the representation was based in dangerous stereotypes, as penultimately it was shown that when medically treated for an ailment, one partner's sex drive returned and the other revealed they had been 'pretending to be asexual' the entire time. Ann expressed distaste at this reveal and laughed about the implications while simultaneously denoting the dangerous misconception the entire scene pushed for those who were asexual; "like it's. 'Dr. House has to give me a shot, so I stop hating sex so much,' and you know. Or, I sit in the corner and eat sandwiches." They mentioned that Jughead was an exciting development to be announced as openly asexual within the comics but was disappointed it was not developed or explored more thoroughly. Ultimately noting that while it was nice to see representation like Jughead available, more nuanced depictions including identities such as 'demisexual' wherein individuals only feel sexual attraction under specific circumstances (namely when romantic feelings and emotional connections have developed), would be beneficial towards those attempting to place themselves within the narrative.

## Mixed Methods Findings

When taking demographics and qualitative experiences together, an interesting picture can be painted in terms of who's experiences are being recorded within this study. For example, in coding, I categorized a few pertinent themes that developed in relation to experiences of exclusion or harassment such as racism, transphobia, lesbophobia, acephobia or biphobia. When analyzing the respondent's demographics in each subcategory, I was able to determine a few common trends.

Within discussions of racism, all but one of the respondents were POC. Respondents ethnicities ranged from Black and Latino, Indigenous, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Mixed Race, and Hispanic. The comments made by these individuals ranged in terms of focus, whether on Alberta as a whole as 'not very accepting', or specifically LGBTQ2IA+ spaces housing racism within community settings, as mentioned in previous discussion. In terms of transphobia, there were three respondents who discussed this as a prevalent issue who were cisgender, whereas the other six respondents identified with a range of gender identities such as nonbinary, questioning, genderfluid, or as transgender. The cisgender respondents primarily discussed friends who had experienced transphobia in Albertan contexts as was also highlighted in earlier contexts, or experiences encountering transphobia on Tinder.

"...people on Tinder can be transphobic/homophobic/racist/sexist, which makes dating hard. I usually report those profiles. I've had cis men call me the T slur to try to manipulate me into sending naked photos to convince them I'm cis."

Acephobia and biphobia were only brought up and discussed by individuals who also identified with these identities, or in reference to an individual who was bisexual as well. This

indicated not that these experiences were irrelevant or of less importance, but perhaps that individuals within the community who did not identify as asexual or bisexual had not noticed instances of exclusion for these individuals.

Lesbophobia, however, was discussed mainly by individuals who identified as either pansexual or biphobia, as highlighted by Ann:

“There’s this perception that if you’re a woman who loves women that your relationship has to, by nature be like very pure and ‘oh, we’re just holding hands and... we’re soft’ you know ‘soft lesbians’ and you know. Stuff like that, and that there’s this kind of like- I know that a lot of women who love women in a sexual way want to express their sexuality specifically? But I’m like ‘as an ace person, I really can’t participate in that’. And also, if I start talking about it, I don’t want to contribute to the soft only perception?”

This respondent, a panromantic asexual genderfluid individual, discussed the difficulty in trying to find a place within the community while simultaneously grappling with concerns of perpetuating narratives that exclude ‘sexual women’ or ideas of lesbians as being only ‘cute’ and infantilized. The paradox presented within this comment is one that is expressed and emphasized through multiple aspects of respondent’s quotes, particularly through struggles of attempting to decide ‘who has it worse’ or who ‘needs this community more’. Many respondents also tended to refer to the spaces mentioned, whether LGBTQ2IA+ discussions online or community meetings offline, whether Pride events or simply adding a term to their about bio on Twitter, as ‘someone else’s space’. They often indicated within interviews that others would require these interactions more or would be able to connect more meaningfully as a result of aspects of their identity.

“They’re not my issues. Like, necessarily. I don’t think I would add... anything of value? Aside from like, being a supporter of, kind of thing, right? Cause a lot of them deal with issues that... if I were to add to, like, being a white person, I obviously do not have it as bad as like POC individuals, or trans individuals, like that’s way worse. And... like I think its- for me personally, I think it’s a lot more important that I support them by retweeting and kind of like being supportive and being knowledgeable about those issues, but I mean. I don’t really want to be *in* that space? Either, too.” -Kay

This struggle between aspects of identity is also heavily discussed in the context of culture, race, and sexuality or gender expression. Many individuals expressed frustrations with attempting to fit experiences of culture within LGBTQ2IA+ community perceptions and self identity, particularly while living in a province perceived as being Conservative and unwelcoming. Max explained difficulties in addressing internalized homophobia alongside cultural contexts and understanding, in that navigating race or culture alongside LGBTQ2IA+ identity is often tangled:

“I mean I think there’s like an aspect of culture there that doesn’t get talked about where it’s like. You know, the country that my parents are from, homosexuality is still illegal there. So, I’m just like ‘okay!’ I almost need to be like more patient with it? Recognizing that like, they didn’t grow up around gay people like they don’t know gay people now.... But you know? They feel like they’ve never met a gay person, and they- I don’t know. They have a lot of stereotypes in their mind. So, yeah. I feel like just not understanding that cultural aspect of how do you navigate queerness with race with identity and stuff like that.”

The difficulty with navigating culture and racism in addition to identity is expressed in terms of safety by and large, by a perception of ones own ethnic community being resistant to

LGBTQ2IA+ identities if not openly homophobic, as well as the White Albertans within their day to day life. Intersectional multiplicative experiences of identity ultimately formulate an experience of layered opportunity for harassment for many and result in a withdrawal from self expression in offline, day to day experiences. As expressed by one anonymous survey participant, and an interviewee:

“In Edmonton, however, I do think that because I know many people from my ethnic community are dispersed everywhere, I am more hesitant to attend and explore queer spaces in the city, because my culture is extremely homophobic, I fear ostracism of me and my family will occur. And as of yet, I have not found any spaces in Edmonton that is safe for queer people that are not out yet to the whole world, for safety reasons.”

“Again, in wanting to avoid sometimes having to explain myself, if I just look like, you know a standard cis dude in the eyes of many then I just have to deal with the fact that I’m not white. Like, that part I can’t change but I can change how I present myself.” – KP

In the context of this research, it was important to attempt to discern whether or not these individuals felt a reprieve within online communities, to have an opportunity to express all aspects of identity as a wholistic picture. By and large, however, while the respondents indicated a sense of gaining knowledge, of protection and shielding from offline realities, many also noted that they did not feel as though they were able to fully express themselves online either. This resistance was primarily a result of the ‘labelling’ concern, a need to fit into a specific and rigidly defined category, and a prevailing sense of needing to defend this identity to the anonymous gatekeeping masses online. Lio described a co-worker’s experience as limiting, with the addition of homophobia in a familial sense, alongside racism present in day to day experiences:

“I think particularly I have, like, one person who I work with who was telling me about how they also think that they’re ace, they think that they’re pretty open to whoever – whichever that they kind of want to date? But they- they would never talk about it. They would never like, tell anyone about it. And they are POC, and so, they had just like- ‘oh like, my family would never like, get that, you know?’ So, um- and I imagine like vice versa that’s probably also a thing where you know like... like. I- I imagine that there’s a lot of exclusion from the LGBTQ2+ community with regards to POC.”

Along with issues of labelling or needing to have a concrete term for one’s identity, there is a prevailing sense of Pride or other LGBTQ2IA+ events or discussions as being not their space, as being for someone else primarily. Namely, gay or lesbians at Pride who meet this interpreted standard of being ‘gay enough’. In addition, many White respondents were intimately aware of converging factors that left POC respondents potentially needing a sense of community more strongly, but the POC respondents themselves were not interacting with these groups either.

Interestingly, the White cisgender respondents, when asked about a lack of participation in LGBTQ2IA+ spaces often cited POC non cisgender individuals as ‘needing the space more’, in an attempt to acknowledge positions of power potentially that could lead their presence to be unwelcoming for others. However, when talking to the POC respondents, they appeared to not be utilizing these spaces either due to a perception of it being predominantly White and cisgender regardless. Ultimately, individuals who could benefit from a stronger sense of community in a physical place are avoiding the communities out of a sense of either respect for others or from a sense of exclusion, which would serve to further fracture a visible sense of community for any LGBTQ2IA+ members in Alberta. If no one

feels as though the space is truly theirs, who then is accessing these resources? Who is the LGBTQ2IA+ community in Alberta?

## **DISCUSSION**

The question posed by this research centers on who is easily reached within the Albertan LGBTQ2IA+ community, how they are able to create identity and community, and identifying their unique experiences outside of metronormative and White cisgender male contexts. While following a grounded theory approach in allowing data to move the conversation along in different trends, another question appeared regarding an issue of exclusion within the community. Namely, how would we redevelop LGBTQ2IA+ spaces to be inclusive? How do we redefine safety to mean safety for all the identities encapsulated within the community rather than a select group? The results of this research indicate by and large that there is a prevalent sense of invisibility, of there being no cohesive community from which to derive experiences from. White, cisgender, gay men were represented in spaces like University of Calgary's Q Center and at Twisted according to respondents, but they often commented that these places felt largely exclusionary for varying reasons. In addition, there was a niche that many wanted to be filled in terms of community meetings for asexual individuals, or bisexuals, or 'bars where girls could hit on girls'. Factors such as ableism, in that loud music prevented autistic members of the community from entering bars or clubs, racism and transphobia, misogyny, or rigid conceptions of sexuality, mean that many vulnerable members of Alberta's LGBTQ2IA+ community are not able or fully comfortable in accessing resources available.



In addition, interestingly, while individuals continuously made allowances for other more vulnerable members of the community in terms of intersecting factors of oppression, these individuals themselves still commonly felt as though they were not ‘trans enough’ or ‘gay enough’ to be allowed to speak freely in these spaces. As KP mentioned, “I very much just kind of look like your standard cis dude, you know. I think... you know if I said something it could be easily misinterpreted as me stepping into territory that I don’t know anything about.” The sense of ‘performing’ queerness as a standard metric of whether an individual could speak to a specific issue or voice an experience that may differ, was very common. In addition, there is a sense of awareness of the levels of privilege one holds whether in being White or cisgender, or an assumption of ‘straight passing privilege’ that prevented many from fully feeling as though their presence would be required. It was as though individuals felt that by their inclusion within the community spaces, inherently and as a result, an individual who was non cisgender or POC or could not ‘pass’ as straight would be unwelcomed. Potentially as if there was a limited number of seats, and the privileged within the community wanted to ensure those spaces went to those who were more vulnerable by the multiplicative factors of their identity.

Interestingly, and in addition, individuals who were POC or non cisgender, still made the same allowances. One respondent who wished to remain anonymous, who was non cisgender and a POC, commented on feeling a pressure to present a specific way, or a fear that they would be challenged on their identity in some way. They emphasized that they had never felt excluded from the LGBTQ2IA+ community because of any specific example of racism, but that their identity as nonbinary would potentially create another layer of tension outside of these spaces. And within LGBTQ2IA+ spaces, not presenting as ‘openly nonbinary’ – namely

referring to a presumption that nonbinary individuals must be androgynous or look a certain way to be perceived as performing ‘no gender’ correctly, a paradox in itself – would limit their ability to be welcomed as a ‘presumably cisgender’ masculine individual. They specifically emphasized a frustration with this constant need to have modifiers or explanations attached to their person as a way of either mitigating assumptions or even as a prerequisite to being included in the first place.

From this, then, how do we develop a ‘safe space’? How do we create a sense of inclusion where explanations are not required? The individuals within this research themselves seemed unsure, positing a creation of a less strict sense of gender in a far-off world, or a release from the need to have set labels. Lio described wanting an LGBTQ2IA+ space that was created by a non- White, non- cisgender person who could inherently build this feeling into the space itself. Many described a desire for it to be meaningfully safe, a place where others they trusted could advocate for, a place where there would be productive information and learning. In all, there was an emphasis from the participants on the need for there to be more highlighting the Q in LGBTQ2IA+, or in other words, the umbrella conceptions. A presumption of being somewhere in the community rather than any specific set meaning, and no further questions to isolate groups. In addition, there was a desire for multiple smaller groups, such as a biromantic ace group. Contradictory in some ways, it would appear, but perhaps this would be the best method to rebuild a sense of self before being able to confidently unite as a cumulative whole.

There is a perception around Albertan communities of Conservatism and homophobia, of LGBTQ2IA+ spaces as being non-welcoming that is interestingly a mix of experiences or friends’ experiences, as well as perceptions that are not based in evidenced truth. In studies

involving critical race theory, particularly located in the US, the term ‘colorblind’ often is utilized to discuss the ways that the legal system categorizes race as an irrelevant factor, thereby serving the end of perpetuating systemic racism while simultaneously preventing any form of criticism or recourse. Colorblind racism refers specifically to instances of anti-Blackness, and to the ways in which legal structures ignore race and in doing so ultimately empower police to commit acts of increasing racism. It also refers to the ways that society constructs itself as being ‘post-racial’ in order to erase experiences of lived racism or microaggressions. In many ways, colorblind racism is a way of refusing to acknowledge an issue of oppression and in doing so, constructing additional layers of oppression for racialized individuals. Colorblind racism, as a product of colonialism, is ingrained within Canadian culture as much as it is within the US.

There appears to be a veneer within many LGBTQ2IA+ experiences in Alberta, perhaps as an offshoot of the Canadian utopia image that refuses to acknowledge racism, homophobia, or transphobia as common occurrences. There is a perception of Alberta that while someone being assaulted due to their gender or sexuality might not occur (although it has in many cases), there is a general feeling of being unwelcome present at all times. One respondent who had lived all over Canada, remarked that “Alberta was not any more homophobic” than anywhere else she had lived, and yet also discussed a specific difference between rural areas and city areas in Alberta. Regardless, individuals living in Alberta have a perception of locations such as Vancouver or Toronto as being ‘more accepting’ as a result. This shows that Albertans struggle with perceptions of homophobia even within the people living here; connecting back to metronormativity, this serves to functionally demonstrate how depictions of non-metropolitan areas as homophobic play into perceptions and ideas of

rejection regardless of personal experiences. One respondent who had lived in Alberta her whole life expressed the perception that, “A person from Vancouver BC isn’t going to have the same sort of problems with holding hands with their significant other in public like I will in Alberta, or Calgary.” She had never lived in Vancouver and had admitted she herself was new to the LGBTQ2IA+ community or being open with identity in general, but expressed this viewpoint casually, as though it were a given that the LGBTQ2IA+ community in Alberta would largely agree with.

In addition, this internalized viewpoint has intersected with the perceptions of LGBTQ2IA+ spaces as being for a specific type of LGBTQ2IA+ person, as someone who is ‘gay enough’, namely someone who is not bisexual or pansexual, and someone who is vocal and open about their identity. Many individuals interviewed had not had specific encounters with homophobia or biphobia themselves but carried a fear of experiencing it due to some ingrained perception. Max described this feeling:

“I mean like, I feel like there’s a lot of like, layers of like biphobia that I’m just like, projecting? So, it’s almost like, I’m just like scared to go into those places because I’m very nervous of being rejected sort of thing?”

The nervousness of being rejected may in part be due to the constant perception of Alberta as being ‘unsafe’ in the spoke of veneer, or almost surface level lip service manner way it presents its inclusivity and diversity as a whole. One older respondent described Alberta as not being any more homophobic than anywhere else; does this speak of a lack of homophobia in Alberta or a worldwide persistent homophobia that is ultimately inescapable? If it is the former, it would be interesting to note that with respondents both online and in person, if there was no mention of harassment experienced it was due

almost always to a lack of participation or of being out. In addition, there was a resistance by many to be expressly open about one's identity because of a perceived danger. Would this sense of danger exist if Alberta was truly less homophobic? Perhaps, as media and news stories do highlight many negative cases worldwide, however there are current and strictly Albertan examples that could corroborate a perception of homophobia being close to home as well, such as the Jason Kenney 2019 electoral platform on rolling back GSA protections. Also, the individual that posited Alberta as not 'any less homophobic', went on to describe an instance of assault against an openly gay individual that occurred here, as well as a discomfort on forum boards towards trans identities.

Previous research pertaining to Black youth online and experiences of identity formation refer to a Triple A Framework (Martin, 2017), wherein individuals interacting online are exposed to different stages of reinforcement and boundary definition. These stages consist of armoring, anxiety inducing qualities, and affirmation; armoring can be seen in choosing who one follows, what content they repost and where, and the community sense of protectiveness or rallying, anxiety inducing as the constant receiving of global news with aspects of microaggressions, or in the case of Martin's research (2017), police brutality cases, and affirmation as the positive retweets or reblogs regarding self-love. While the original study focused particularly on Black experiences online, these stages are relevant towards LGBTQ2IA+ and intersections of minority identities as well, in that the pressure to be 'up to date' with the latest distressing harassment case or event leads to a perception of online communities as being 'shielding' for some. Within this study, a sense of protection within replies to harmful Twitter posts, or anonymity in general remained a primary reason and justification for individuals to continue seeking community online. In addition, knowledge

was often framed as this affirming practice. Positive experiences with services that provide information that is difficult to obtain otherwise, serve the dual objective of attaching a sense of defense to misinformation that is commonly spread, as well as an affirmation of identity or a sense of being validated in experiences. Armoring in this way is deemed as “armor against stereotypes” (Martin 2017:18), as much as it is validating.

In addition, this affirmation process is particularly relevant in discussions of media that were frequent within interviewee responses. Individuals often are said to turn to online resources to find aspects of identity that are commonly missing in media, whether in terms of race or ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, disability or so on. This search for representation takes place in many forms, typically through TV or movies, which many highlighted (i.e. Ellen DeGeneres, Modern Family, or Rosa Diaz from Brooklyn 99), but also in YouTuber videos speaking on personal experiences, TikToks or short videos, and more recently, podcasts. As podcasts are a mostly unregulated form of entertainment, typically kickstarted by ‘indie’ creators, they are growing more and more popular within LGBTQ2IA+ circles for multiple reasons. The radio drama genre, in particular, allows for a certain level of affirmation in that the voices are often not described in terms of ethnicity or appearance which allows for listener interpretation, and to some level, projection. In addition, the new creators of these genres are commonly LGBTQ2IA+ supporters themselves, and have taken a hard stance in a few cases in announcing same sex partnerships (Magnus Archives, King Falls AM, Welcome to Nightvale, etc.), nonbinary identities (Penumbra Podcast), and other intersections of identity that are not common within popular media.

However, outside of mainstream media, many felt as though they were able to find representation and connection in more independent formats such as YouTube videos, or more

recently, podcasts. As these formats are not controlled or reliant upon stock holders nor are they likely to receive critic backlash, the independent creator sphere has begun to become more and more relevant and essential in developing important community ties alongside education and representation on a variety of identity aspects. Respondents discussed being able to discover the ‘affirmation’ aspect of identity within TikTok’s of gay couples, or of openly gay individuals talking or making jokes about their experiences, through YouTuber essay format videos detailing the process of coming out, or of figuring out their own identity, or even addressing issues of exclusion within the community itself. One survey respondent described the combatting against biphobia in that, “Many lesbian vloggers, such as Shannon Beveridge, have come out to spread awareness of biphobia and that this is a real problem within the community, which I find great.”

Ann, who had spoken about frustrations on finding different forms of identities such as asexuality, highlighted a specific audio drama podcast called the Magnus Archives.

“The main, sort of narrator of the Magnus Archives is asexual, and I appreciated that dearly I feel like that’s. A much better- I’m like, that- that was- can we have more of this? Sort of ace? Because I identify with this sort of ace, like that’s the sort of ace I identify with.”

The Magnus Archives, Penumbra Podcast, The Adventure Zone, King Falls AM, and many others are all ‘audio drama’ formatted podcasts, in other words, script based and voice acted adventures not unlike radio dramas that frequented the airwaves years prior. These podcasts are created by independent creators, often with little production teams or equipment to start, are easily accessible on a variety of platforms, and all emphasize a variety of LGBTQ2IA+ identities. Asexuality, bisexuality, gay men and women, nonbinary main characters, trans reoccurring characters who are not treated as jokes or dismissed; all of these

traits are represented and then some within these new podcast formats. It is not surprising, then, that respondents discussed podcasts as a facet of representation they felt was sorely missing within mainstream media. The ability to find a specific type of representation, a character that matches one's own identity and perhaps shares personality traits in common or life experiences that are relatable, is crucial in developing a positive self mindset regarding one's own identity.

The rise of podcasts in terms of identity formation is important, as podcasts are available on a variety of platforms such as Spotify, YouTube, or Apple Stores, and becoming more and more popular as a creative outlet. Creating a podcast is not inherently expensive, nor does it require access to industry nor dependent on geographic location, and thereby represents an access point into creating the representation many LGBTQ2IA+ individuals seek to affirm aspects of identity they may not receive in day to day life or news updates.

Overall, in following a grounded theory approach, the intention of including intersectional frameworks had to be dropped to better address the populations captured within my study. Intersectionality requires a discussion of the frameworks and power structures that impact individuals in a multiplicative way and receiving such a high percentage of White respondents limits this analysis. Utilizing critical race theory allows for criticism of these structures at play as demonstrated by the interviewees of colour, but these also were limited due to a perception of "not being the most POC person of colour" as Max said, therefore indicating that her experiences would not fully capture the whole. I was able to discern that there is an exclusion towards POC members of the LGBTQ2IA+ community, and that spaces for LGBTQ2IA+ individuals are predominantly dominated by White individuals which extends to online spheres. The internet realm is usually posited as a freeing space for



individuals of colour in that they are given an equal platform to explain their own experiences, direct conversations, and develop armoring techniques, but this study did not fully align with these ideas. While the idea of creating ones bubble is prevalent, individuals of colour often were not able to find the same strength in community, either due to a lack of people of colour represented in LGBTQ2IA+ spaces, or due to a lack of LGBTQ2IA+ acceptance or representation within ones own ethnic community.

### **LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Snowball sampling inherently carries a risk of some level of non-response bias due to inability to reach all communities via this method. As such, some perspectives and identities may not be fully represented. In an effort to combat this possibility, I took careful note of the differences in perspectives within demographics in order to make comments for future research potentials. As my primary access point to the community resides through my social networks, the ability to access LGBTQ2IA+ individuals of colour and in particular Black trans individuals has been shown to be limited. However, utilizing an intersectional and critical race approach within this research allows discussion to represent an angle of critique, to highlight the lived experiences that were obtained and discuss why there is a lack of accessibility for marginalized communities. In addition, through this research and these theoretical frameworks, it is shown that much of the LGBTQ2IA+ community is lacking a cohesive identity where all feel they can speak and take part in. Further study into the separate circles of these communities, and more time to fully access gatekeepers and community support networks to discuss pressing issues from Black, Indigenous, and POC would allow for a more in-depth discussion as to what can be done to create solidarity.

As a master's student, I am also limited by the short time frame of my research. Class and ableism are also important facets of intersectional identity and play a large role in LGBTQ2IA+ experiences and safety; in addition, the digital divide means that not all lower-class individuals have as much frequent access to areas of community building online and positive identity reinforcement. As there is a potential lack of access for these individuals, it is likely their accounts will not be as fully represented. A study with more time to focus on socio-economic factors and disability within this context would be useful for highlighting the interlocking factors involved within identity construction and day to day experiences. A study that places disability at the forefront is required and would likely house unique experiences pertaining to online identity, as well as a study that focuses on class disparity. Not much of the results I obtained focused at length on issues of lack of access to online communities, beyond disinterest or feeling unwelcome. It is possible that, as one individual noted growing up in a rural household, the internet for many is the only access to information regarding identity many have, therefore no access may mean a lack of solid identity or the ability to express aspects of identity in any meaningful way. How these individuals are able to create identity and find community would be an important area of study as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

The importance of visibility and inclusion within safe spaces and one's own community allows for positive identity construction, and visible role models or community leaders in which to better develop self-image and confidence. LGBTQ2IA+ lives, particularly

in Canada, are understudied, as such there is little research detailing intersectional aspects in conjuncture with sexuality and little ability to put forward a unique culture and identity for Albertans who are LGBTQ2IA+. In this way, experiences are either erased or are universalized to that of a gay, White, cisgender, male that may not represent a large portion of other individuals. In a city without a large LGBTQ2IA+ population and who represents a fairly conservative viewpoint such as Calgary or Edmonton, where individuals are geographically isolated from larger, more visible communities, the ways in which LGBTQ2IA+, trans and POC individuals in particular, experience day to day life is unexplored.

The ways in which these individuals create identity, educate themselves on the nuances of identity, and find or create community are also areas of little research. The aim of this project is to discover the importance of internet for these individuals, in terms of how they find inclusivity and experience exclusivity within Albertan based social media, in order to develop an understanding of how to facilitate better access and diversity in LGBTQ2IA+ spaces in Alberta. Online community interaction and involvement can give insights towards inclusion in offline spaces. Individuals may not be able to escape the hierarchies of oppression even within online spaces, but they are able to express and reinvent aspects of their identities in ways that are wholly unique and not necessarily directly translatable to the offline realm. The goal of this project is to highlight the diverse identities and experiences within Alberta, and the ways in which these identities are created, represented or misrepresented, visible or invisible, to facilitate inclusivity in the future.

Ultimately, this research discerned that there is a lack of community present in Alberta, and that many feel as though they are unaware of resources they could physically

access. In addition, many feel uncomfortable attending in person events due to perceived threats from Albertans in general, as well as a sense of unwelcomeness within the LGBTQ2IA+ communities based on aspects of their identity. As LGBTQ2IA+ spaces are often created around safety as perceived by White and cisgender people, many respondents noted a feeling of exclusion. However, some were highly aware of their own positions of privilege in an intersectional sense and did not wish to detract from the safety of those who may need community more. This develops an interesting viewpoint, wherein nonbinary, asexual, gender non conforming, bisexual, or individuals who do not present their identity visibly, feel as though they are ‘not gay enough’ or ‘not transgender enough’ to be welcomed into these LGBTQ2IA+ spaces. Combined with perceptions of rigidity in labelling online, the picture that forms is one of keeping to one’s individual friend group and being consistently uncertain of one’s place within a larger community. Individuals were able to formulate identities and belonging via social media through curating feeds and followers, and access useful informative sites whether through reading Twitter threads or forum discussions but felt as though there was a persistent exclusion from larger LGBTQ2IA+ gatherings. This leads many to keep to their individual circles of specific sexualities or romantic orientations or ethnic groups online as well, which are additionally scrutinized on occasion and placed into specific boxes.

Many respondents desired more flexibility, less labelling, and a community that was built by POC and trans individuals that recreated conceptions of safety. Other discussions included ableism and overly sexualized spaces that were not welcoming to some, indicating overall there is a greater need for a variety of spaces outside of the local gay bar. The overlaying sense of danger within day to day experiences lead many to online spaces, such as

podcasts or private accounts, wherein there is access to these varieties of curated discussions and representation not seen in popular media, something that researchers and LGBTQ2IA+ activists could potentially utilize in physical settings as well.

The placement of this study in Alberta adds to the construction of LGBTQ2IA+ identities in sociological research outside of areas that are the majority focus, and in addition, can be generalized to a certain extent to other ‘ordinary cities’. The uniqueness attributed to Alberta stems from the lengthy history of Conservative government, focus and perspectives on oil industries and agriculture with less on cultural celebrations or diversity, but this is not a unique experience even within a Canadian setting. Saskatchewan has a similar Conservative history, and a heightened focus on agriculture, and a history of racism and anti-Indigenous incidents. At the time of writing this thesis, there were two hate crimes against LGBTQ2IA+ individuals in Calgary, just within the last month. The perspective of homophobia being prevalent in Alberta was solidified in many individuals minds at this time, along with a heightened sense of being unsafe. Developing more platforms for LGBTQ2IA+ Albertans in these times is centrally important towards understanding the feeling of precarity for Canadian LGBTQ2IA+ individuals, and for individuals outside of metropolitan areas. Understanding that these individuals are present in multiple locations and understanding the specific barriers that prevent physical community development, allows for growth and future progress towards creating safety, identity, solidarity, and inclusivity for everyone. While Alberta is not inherently unique, studying the specific contexts for the lack of visible communities within allows for a discussion on the meaning of safety and ‘who’s space’ these LGBTQ2IA+ locations are being built for, that can be applicable and beneficial for many other cities and locations.

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## APPENDIX A

Phase	Procedure	Product/Outputs
<p>Develop Model and Instrument using prior studies &amp; pretesting</p> <p>Qual data collection, analysis, results</p> <p>Quant data collection, analysis, results</p> <p>Mixing Quantitative data enhances qualitative results</p> <p>Interpretation Primary emphasis on qualitative</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature Review</li> <li>• Set out hypothesis for quant portion from this data</li> <li>• Identify relevant themes through lit review</li> <li>• Non-random sampling by snowball sampling (n= 1 month)</li> <li>• Online embedded survey</li> <li>• Open-ended and closed questions for demographics and experiences in Alberta</li> <li>• Using themes to find relevant concepts and coding</li> <li>• Descriptive analysis and comparison to qual coded themes</li> <li>• Summarize findings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Question formation</li> <li>• Constructing online survey instruments</li> <li>• Quotes from qual questions</li> <li>• Coded text and identified themes regarding experiences, resources, access, visibility</li> <li>• Item scores, descriptive statics</li> <li>• Cross comparison of data</li> <li>• QUAL data categorized within demographic quant data to analyze unique experiences and identities</li> <li>• Discussion of results and links</li> <li>• Implications for study focusing on resources and inclusion, representation</li> <li>• Further research outlines</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX B

### Survey Questions

#### Demographic Information:

The following questions pertain to your identity in relation to race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender, pronoun use, and age. This information will be anonymized. The data will be used to determine a general understanding of the LGBTQ2IA+ population demographics within Alberta, and to contextualize experiences within certain identities.

Please select as many options as you feel best describes your identity.

1. What is your race/ethnicity? (Check all that apply):
  - Black or African Canadian
  - Chinese
  - Filipino
  - French Canadian or Québécois
  - Indigenous, Aboriginal, Inuit, Métis, or First Nation
  - Japanese
  - Korean
  - Latino/a, Latin American, or Hispanic
  - Mixed race or Multiracial
  - South Asian
  - Southeast Asian
  - West Asian (e.g. Iranian, Afghan, etc.)
  - White or European Canadian

- Other (please specify):

2. What is your gender Identity? (Check all that apply)

- Agender
- Bigender
- Cisgender
- Demigender
- Intersex
- Genderfluid
- Gender nonconforming
- Genderqueer
- trans woman
- trans man
- Two-spirit
- Nonbinary
- Other (please specify):

3. What pronouns do you prefer? (Check all that apply)

- She/her
- He/Him
- They/them
- Other (please specify):

4. What is your sexual/romantic orientation? (Check all that apply)

- Aromantic/ Grey romantic
- Asexual/ Grey asexual

- Bi
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Straight/heterosexual
- Pan
- Queer

5. How old are you?

- 18-23
- 24-29
- 30-39
- 40+

6. How much do you agree with the following statement: “being LGBTQ2IA+ is an important part of my identity”.

- not at all
- somewhat disagree
- somewhat agree
- strongly agree.

Any additional comments:

Social Media:

The following questions relate to the use of social media/internet within day to day life. There is one multiple choice response followed by open long answer questions. These questions are

aimed at developing an understanding of the relationship between the online realm and LGBTQ2IA+ identity formation/community building.

7. How often do you use social media/the internet?
  - Rarely
  - Sometimes
  - Fairly often
  - Almost always
8. Follow up: which sites do you frequent the most? Please explain:
9. What educational materials did/do you access online, relating to gender/sexuality? Are you aware of any resources online that you did not use?
10. Which resources do you wish were more available offline?
11. Has the internet/social media been beneficial towards finding a sense of community or belonging, or allowed you to make friends with similar experiences? Why or why not?
12. Would you consider yourself more 'out' or open about your identity online than offline? If so, what aspects of the internet/social media do you find are helpful towards this? If not, what aspects of these spaces prevents this?
13. If you use the internet frequently, do you participate in LGBTQ2IA+ centered groups within these spaces? Why or why not?

Experiences and Identity:

The following questions focus on experiences within online spaces. The aim of these questions is to understand how individual identity might influence unique experiences online. These are all open-ended long answer questions.

14. How comfortable are you in voicing a concern or opinion within LGBTQ2IA+ groups online? What might prevent you from doing so, or encourage you to do so?
15. Within non-LGBTQ2IA+ centered groups online, how comfortable/uncomfortable might you feel in voicing a concern or an opinion, and why?
16. Do you play video games utilizing a voice chat? What are your experiences with this feature?
17. Have you used Tinder or any of the LGBTQ+ focused dating apps in the past year? What aspects of these apps do you find positive or negative?
18. Please describe any NEGATIVE experiences you have had online relating to your identity.
19. Please describe any POSITIVE experiences you have had online relating to your identity.
20. Is there anything else relating to your gender identity, sexuality, race/ethnicity, or other aspects of your identity as experienced on social media that you would like to share?

## APPENDIX C

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

#### Interview Questions

[This is a semi structured interview, the questions will change and shift focus due to the respondents answers]

#### IDENTITY

1. When you were growing up, how did you learn about LGBTQ+ identities?
2. What has been the most beneficial to you in understanding your own identity?
3. Can you describe something you read or heard in regards to your identity that sticks with you (could be positive or negative)?

#### INCLUSIVITY

4. Have you ever felt unwelcomed within LGBTQ2IA+ groups, online or offline?
5. Has there been a time when someone else was not welcomed that you witnessed?
6. Does living in Alberta allow you to express your identity/ are there support groups you have utilized here?
7. How accessible do you think LGBTQ2IA+ support groups in Alberta are? What would allow them to be more accessible to you?

How well do you think you are represented with

8. In your own community?



## APPENDIX D

### Proposed Rough Timetable for Project

Month	Action Plan	Details
<i>Phase 1a &amp; 1b: Prewriting &amp; Administrative Tasks</i>		
May-September	Background literature research. Refining research questions.	Submission to Ethics and Proposal in May, summer break for further development of background information and gaps present.
September-October	Work on write up for questions to ensure quality. Set up Online Survey.	Refining research questions and survey. End of October should have Survey Monkey access with survey hosted.
<i>Phase 2: Data Collection</i>		
October- November	Survey goes live. Promote survey to Alberta's LGBTQ2IA+ Facebook groups and other platforms, post information available at the Q center, and anonymous randomized \$25 Amazon gift card incentive.	The N for this project is based on a time frame of one month. During this time, the survey will be posted on Facebook groups and shared on Twitter and forum boards.
<i>Phase 3a &amp; 3b: Data Analysis and Follow up Interviews</i>		
November-December	Selection of winner for gift card. Initial analysis of survey data and development of interview questions. Analysis to determine percentages and themes and outline discrepancies or further research questions.	The information received within the survey will allow for better focusing of interview questions to better follow a grounded theory approach. Descriptive Analysis of Quantitative data, Thematic coding for Qualitative.
December- February	Obtaining Interviews and conducting semi-structured interviews with participants who indicated interest via survey. (N=5)	Interviews intended to obtain further detail for validation and verification of results, looking to obtain a variety of identities for comparisons.
March-April	Analysis at a mixed methods stage integrating both results.	Generation of a joint display. of themes by statistics to emphasize qualitative data.
May-June	Write up.	

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Further Definitions:**

#### **\*information aided and supplemented by Alberta trans and the Rainbow Pages**

**Asexual:** A person who does not experience sexual attraction; can be used as an umbrella term for the ‘grey asexuality’ spectrum, which refers to a variety of identities which range from being sex repulsed, sexual ambiguity, to occasionally experiencing sexual attraction in different circumstances. Individuals who are asexual frequently do experience romantic and emotional attraction.

**Aromantic:** A person who does not experience romantic attraction, can be used as an umbrella term. See above. Individuals who are aromantic frequently do experience sexual attraction, however some individuals are both asexual and aromantic.

**Cisgender:** an individual whose assigned gender at birth matches their gender identity, and who’s gender identity has remained stable.

**Bisexuality:** an individual who is romantically, emotionally, and sexually attracted to two or more genders.

**Demigender:** An individual who identifies as two or more genders, or only occasionally identifies with a particular gender identity.

**Demisexuality:** an individual who falls under the ‘gray asexuality’ spectrum and only experiences sexual attraction when a strong emotional attraction is present, or very rarely if ever.

Genderfluid/Genderqueer: an individual whose gender identity fluctuates, can identify more femininely on occasion, or more masculine, alternates preferred pronouns or uses all or a mix of different pronouns, typically. Can also refer to an individual who is questioning their gender identity.

Gender Identity: refers to an individual's perception of gender as extending beyond the physical, to encompass how one feels and thinks and expresses themselves and their gender. Separate from biological sex.

Gender Non-Conforming: for the context of this research, the term refers to an individual whose dress or behaviour falls outside of the ascribed traits assumed to be inherently 'male' or 'female' by dominant heteronormative society. These individuals may identify as cisgender or otherwise.

Heteronormative: A sociological theory referring to the ways in which heterosexuality is considered as a default; this concept ultimately orders gender dichotomies as well as sexuality.

Intersex: Individuals who were born with a variety of birth conditions ranging from physical sexual reproductive organ conditions, chromosomal, or other biological features that are currently in the process of understanding. It is important to note that many intersex individuals are medically assigned a gender at birth, but not all intersex individuals identify as trans. The medical practice of assigning a gender is a highly contested topic within intersex communities.

Microaggressions: instances of discriminatory thoughts or behaviours considered subtle or subconscious that have emotionally damaging impacts.

Non-binary: refers to individuals who identify as a gender outside of the gender dichotomy of male and female, both genders, neither gender, and/or all genders.

Outing/ Coming Out: Many individuals who are LGBTQ2IA+ do not openly express their identities in all social scenarios. Discussing details of one's identity is referred to as 'being out' or 'coming out'. Being 'out' is a continuous process and carries a particular weight due to fears regarding homophobia and transphobia.

Pansexuality: A person who is romantically, sexually, and emotionally attracted to individuals of all genders. Gender signifiers or identity are not determinants of attraction.

Preferred Pronouns: pronouns such as he/his or they/them that an individual can associate with a gender identity that reflect most closely to an individual's gender expression or gender identity. These may vary or change and are fluid.

trans: In the context of this research, transgender is used as an umbrella term to encompass transwomen, transmen, and other non binary gender identities. Transgender can refer to an individual who is male-to-female, female-to-male, or genderqueer, gender neutral or gender free individuals. Some trans individuals receive gender reassignment surgery so that their biological features match their internal gender identity, while others do not undergo surgery. Both are fully and completely the gender they identify as regardless of surgery.

Transphobia: For the context of this research, I will be focusing on transphobia as it pertains to hate filled language and discriminatory acts, words, or behaviours, based on an individual's disapproval or hatred towards another based on gender identity or expression.

Two-spirit: North American Indigenous cultural terminology that encompasses sexuality as well as gender identity; refers to an Indigenous person who identifies as having both a male and female spirit.

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