The Selection and Utility of Sexual Identity Labels in Youth

Ashley Molin

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
The Chicago School of Professional Psychology
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For the Degree of Doctor of Psychology

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Ashley Molin, MA

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Approved By:

Braden Berkey, PsyD, Chairperson
Associate Professor, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology

Pam Niesluchowski, PsyD, Member
Program Faculty Assistant Professor, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology

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Abstract

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Ashley Molin

Adolescence is a time when individuals begin to figure out who they are and how they fit into the world. One of the many areas for exploration during this time is sexual identity. Adolescents' use of self-labeling in describing their sexual identity was explored using a nationwide Internet survey. Participants were adolescents and young adults ages 18 to 22 of diverse racial and geographical backgrounds. Three hundred youth participated in the study, yielding 207 complete data sets. Quantitative data showed no relationship existed between the types of labels youth chose and their geographical location or their self-identification of being religious, spiritual, or neither. Additionally, qualitative data was analyzed to determine themes in how youth chose and made use of sexual identity labels.

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Chapter 1: Nature of the Study

Introduction

How we choose to identify our sexual orientation and gender identity is an effortless task for those whose identities fall within majority status. During adolescence, teenagers try on many different identities in an effort to figure out who they are. Erikson (1968) believed that developing a stable identity was the main challenge of adolescence. In order to better understand this struggle, Marcia (1980) identified four different identity statuses: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. In *Diffusion*, adolescents have not established a firm identity and are not making any progress towards doing so. Adolescents in *Foreclosure* have solidified their identity without engaging in any exploration. This often means that they have accepted their parents' ideas and values as their own without questioning them. *Moratorium* is a time when adolescents are actively exploring different identities but have not made any firm identity commitments. The end goal is *Identity Achievement* in which adolescents have made an informed decision about the identity they wish to adopt. Adolescents do not always move through the different identity statuses in a particular order, nor do they necessarily experience each status. Furthermore, adolescents may move in and out of different statuses at different times, for example, moving from moratorium to achievement and then back to moratorium.

In addition to general identity models, there are also specific models for the formation of sexual identity. Early developmental models for sexual identity were stage models in which individuals moved through in a fixed sequence. These models did not allow for any deviation from the prescribed developmental course. One of the most well-known was developed by Cass (1979). Her model has six consecutive stages, beginning

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with *Identity Confusion* and ending with *Identity Synthesis*. Troiden (1989) also created a

stage model for sexual identity development. In this model, individuals progress through

four identity stages, beginning with *Sensitization* and ending in *Commitment*. Although

these are two of the most widely referenced sexual identity development models, they

have received criticism because not every individual goes through all of the stages in the

prescribed order (Savin-Williams, 2005).

While the aforementioned models have been widely adopted, more

multidimensional models of sexual identity development that allow for greater flexibility

have begun to emerge. One of these models outlines six identity processes that most

sexual minority[1] individuals move through as they develop their sexual identity

(D'Augelli, 1994). Unlike Cass and Troiden's models, these processes do not occur in

any particular order and may not occur for every individual. Another model suggests that

there is a significant amount of variability within attraction, behavior, and self-

identification (Glover, Galliher, & Lamere, 2009). Each of these variables contributes to

an individual's adoption of a sexual minority identity, and no one variable can be said to

be the most important.

Models for gender identity development have also begun to emerge. These

models have developed separately from sexual identity development models because

while one's gender and sexual identity may influence one another, they are separate

constructs. Many of these models focus on gender identity development for transsexual

individuals and do not necessarily apply to *cisgendered*[2] and *genderqueer*[3] individuals.

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[1] Sexual minority refers to individuals whose sexual identities fall outside the majority, namely heterosexual.
[2] Cisgendered is a term for people whose gender assigned at birth matches their gender identity.

One example of a transgender identity development model is Transgender Emergence (Lev, 2004). This is a stage model, although the authors do acknowledge that not every individual will move sequentially through all the stages.

Given the complexity of what contributes to an individual adopting a sexual minority identity, no one model can accurately capture all of an adolescent's experiences (Glover et al., 2009).. This is an important point because this complexity can skew how researchers gather data. Because there are numerous ways of defining who qualifies as a sexual minority, there is no consistency in how subjects are selected for research on these populations. A sexual minority identity does not always mean the individual has engaged in same-sex behavior, and vice versa, any more than a heterosexual identity reflects opposite sex sexual experience (Savin-Williams, 2005). Operationally defining who is or is not a sexual minority inevitably becomes a very confusing process.

A clear understanding of sexual and gender identity is further complicated by the continual evolution of sexual and gender identity labels. Although it is likely that individuals with same sex desires have always existed, it was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century that individuals who engaged in same sex sexual behavior began to be identified and studied (Faderman, 1991). Some early terms included *uranian* (Miller, 1995) and *invert* (Faderman, 1991) which referred to the presumed inversion of the individual's gender. A German psychologist created the term *homosexuality* in the late 19th century (Pickett, 2011). Around the beginning of the 20th century, individuals began to self-identify with a same sex orientation rather than being labeled in this way by

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[3] Genderqueer is a catch-all term for individuals who fall outside of the gender binary. This may mean that they identify as both genders, neither gender, a third gender, or some combination of all of these.

others, although there was very little consensus on language use because of the lack of a clear sexual minority community (Miller, 1995). It was during this time that the term *gay* began to be more widely adopted. In the 1960s and 70s, the term *lesbian* grew to prominence as a way to differentiate between the needs of gay men and gay women (Faderman, 1991). Another common sexual identity term, *bisexuality,* was first proposed by Freud in 1925, but it gained popularity as a sexual identity term in the 1970s and 80s (Miller, 1995). More recently, the term *queer* has been reclaimed by a younger generation (Brontsema, 2004). To this day, language continues to evolve as new terms are introduced, reclaimed, or fall out of vogue.

Further confusing our understanding of sexual and gender identities is the possibility that adolescents are not choosing words to label them because they do not want to be boxed in by labels (Jayson, 2009; Savin-Williams, 2005). This movement away from established sexual identity labels may reflect the fact that youth are endorsing more fluid identity labels in greater numbers (Marech, 2004). If youth are moving away from self-labeling their sexual and gender identity, then existing models of sexual and gender identity development may become less relevant in the future. Furthermore, without sexual identity labels, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify youth who may be at a higher risk for harassment and risk-taking behavior. However, if youth are not identifying themselves with established sexual minority terms, they may not be at the same risk, as they would not be a visible part of the marginalized sexual minority community. Additionally, if youth are moving away from adopting sexual identity labels, a visible and active sexual minority community may cease to exist in the future.

It has been generally agreed upon by researchers that a gay subculture exists and that it maintains its own unique language (Leap, 2007). This suggests that sexual identity labels are important and hold weight, not only for the individuals who use them to describe and define themselves, but also for the community at large. Additionally, the relationship between culture and language is not unidirectional. Culture can create and maintain language, while language simultaneously creates and maintains culture. Because language has this much significance, it is important that psychologists understand how and why it is used.

Currently there is little research on how youth choose sexual identity labels, or if they are actually using them. It is hypothesized that youth are not moving away from established sexual identity labels, but rather are developing new and more flexible terms that they use to better capture their unique experience of sexuality and gender identity at different points in time. Context may also play an important role in what language youth choose to use, with more common terms being used outside the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) community and more specific terms being used with friends and within the community. This research will explore what, if any, language youth are currently using to describe their sexual and gender identity, what these words mean to them and for them, and how their language use may be evolving over time.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Identity Development

The main task of adolescence is to develop a stable identity. This idea was initially proposed by Erikson (1950), and it has had an important impact on the study of adolescents. Erikson created a lifespan model that outlines the developmental tasks individuals must face from birth until death. Each stage must be successfully resolved before an individual can progress to the next stage. The fifth stage in this model, *identity* versus *role confusion*, is thought to occur during adolescence. During this period, adolescents must determine who they are and who they are not. This can be a difficult time as they work to integrate many different aspects of themselves. Individuals who successfully resolve this stage will move on to the next with a firm sense of self. Those who are unable to fully integrate and understand their identity enter into *role confusion,* and may cope by withdrawing from family and friends or by immersing themselves in a crowd so they can take cues from others rather than making their own commitments or decisions.

During this time of exploration, adolescents must make many decisions regarding their identity (Erikson, 1950). Adolescents will often try on many different identities in order to determine which one fits best (Marcia, 1980). This may lead some people to believe that adolescents are indecisive and unable to make firm commitments. In actuality, this experimentation may be healthy because it allows adolescents to determine who they are by permitting them to try on different identities to see how they fit. By the end of adolescence, individuals who have reached a healthy resolution will have made firm commitments in numerous identity categories and will have discarded unfavorable

roles. Individuals who have successfully resolved their identity will have made decisions

and commitments in categories such as vocational, political, religious, relationship,

achievement, intellectual, sexual, cultural and ethnic, interests, and personality.

Marcia (1980) expanded on Erikson's idea by positing that adolescence was not

simply about identity achievement or role confusion, but rather the degree to which an

individual has explored and subsequently committed to an identity. Marcia created four

statuses to describe the possible outcomes of identity development. Individuals can move

in and out of these statuses fluidly, and may not experience every status. The first status

is *foreclosure*, wherein a commitment is made without any exploration of other options.

This is typically seen in adolescents who adopt their parents' point of view without

questioning and coming to their own conclusions. Foreclosure may also occur if an

adolescent assumes an identity that is in direct opposition to that of their parents in order

to rebel.

The next status is *identity diffusion* (Marcia, 1980). Adolescents in this status

have not made any firm commitments and are not currently exploring identities. For

some this may be due to a lack of interest, whereas for others it may occur because they

are overwhelmed by the options available to them. Identity diffusion is considered to be

one of the least complex and mature statuses, and it is often seen in younger adolescents.

Individuals in this status typically have not experienced any type of crisis. Once a crisis

is experienced, adolescents will move into *moratorium*. In this status, adolescents are

actively exploring their options, but have not made any firm commitments. Moratorium

is characterized by the greatest amount of anxiety. Once the crisis is resolved, *identity*

achievement is possible. Adolescents in this status have completed their explorations and have made firm identity commitments.

Sexual Identity Development

Both Erikson's and Marcia's models describe general identity development. There are also models for the development of specific identities, such as racial or ethnic identity, gender identity, and sexual identity. One of the first sexual identity models was developed by Cass in 1979 (See Table 1). This is a stage model of homosexuality in which each individual moves through the stages consecutively, and it was the first model to address any type of sexual identity development. When this model was proposed, there were no sexual identity development models designed for the development of a heterosexual identity. This demonstrates a focus on non-normative sexual identity rather than research taking a broader view, which suggests a significant amount of bias as all individuals have a sexual identity. Currently, there is still very little focus on how heterosexual individuals develop a sexual identity.

The first stage in Cass's model is *identity confusion*, in which individuals begin to recognize that their attractions, actions, or thoughts could be labeled as homosexual (Cass, 1979). Cass believed this stage would involve numerous intense emotions, including anxiety and fear, and that it could be resolved in one of two ways. The individual either acknowledges to him or herself that he or she is homosexual, leading to identity exploration, or denies his or her feelings, leading to identity foreclosure. Those who enter identity foreclosure do not progress any further through the stages at that time. The next stage is *identity comparison*. In this stage, individuals begin comparing their feelings with those of others and will begin to accept themselves as homosexual. When

this model was proposed, finding others to use for this comparison would have been very difficult. However, as the visibility of the LGBTQ community has increased, it is likely that comparison has become somewhat easier. Throughout this stage, individuals will evaluate their feelings on this development and attempt to determine whether these feelings are permanent, transient, or costly. Individuals complete this stage when they acknowledge their sexual identity.

Stage three is *identity tolerance*, wherein individuals begin to determine how their homosexual identity will impact other pieces of themselves (Cass, 1979). They may begin to reach out to other homosexuals and disclose their feelings to a few trusted friends. The outcomes of these experiences will help determine whether they will continue to reach out to others or begin to pull away. This stage ends when the individual admits his or her homosexual identity to themselves with certainty, even if they have not reached full acceptance of it. Individuals then progress to stage four, *identity acceptance*. In this stage there is greater acceptance of their sexual identity, and the person will begin to develop a more positive self-image. However, the individual may not have fully integrated their identity if he or she continues to present as heterosexual. They will begin to make more disclosures to others about their sexual identity, and the presumed discrepancy between the reactions of their heterosexual and homosexual friends, with heterosexual friends being more rejecting and homosexual friends demonstrating more acceptance, will propel them into stage five. This stage is called *identity pride*. Individuals in stage five divide the world into two types of people, those who are homosexual and those who are not. There will be a greater draw for the individual to associate with other homosexual individuals, which will help to provide a sense of pride,

and a withdrawal from heterosexual individuals who may not be affirming of this new identity. People in this stage often proclaim their non-heterosexual identity to the world with great pride and work to surround themselves with like-minded individuals. The final stage in Cass's model is *identity synthesis*. In this stage, individuals integrate sexual identity with the other important pieces of their identity. While they may still place importance on their sexual identity, it is no longer their defining factor. An individual in this stage will no longer feel at war with themselves or with the world around them. They are no longer defensive and once again begin to have positive interactions with heterosexual individuals.

Another early sexual identity development model was created by Troiden (1989). This is also a stage model, although Troiden allowed for more flexibility, as individuals may move back and forth between stages and may not experience every one (See Table 1). The first stage in this model is *sensitization,* which occurs before puberty. During this time, the individuals focus on differences from others. Typically, these differences are centered more on gender non-conforming behavior or gender markers than sexual identity. Often individuals will feel marginalized, and may be targeted by peers. The experience of being mocked for their difference may cause individuals to begin internalizing a negative self-concept, which may cause problems in later identity development.

The second stage is *identity confusion*, which occurs during adolescence. During this stage, individuals begin to shift their focus from their gender identity to their sexual identity. They may begin to recognize homosexual feelings and start experiencing identity conflict between who they saw themselves as before and who they are now

becoming. Troiden believed that this stage occurred around age 18 for females and 17 for males. This stage is often stressful, and in response, one of four coping strategies is typically employed. The first is *denial,* in which individuals completely ignore any homosexual feelings they may be experiencing. *Avoidance* occurs when individuals recognize their homosexual feelings but avoid situations in which they may come to light or be bothersome. The next is *repair*, in which individuals attempt to become heterosexual, by changing their behavior. *Acceptance* occurs when the homosexual identity is acknowledged. Troiden also notes that individuals in the identity confusion stage must also contend with creating a cohesive identity and developing intimate relationships with others.

The third stage in this model is *identity assumption*. Troiden (1989) believed that this stage typically occurs between 19 and 21 years of age for males and between 21 and 23 years of age for females. During this stage individuals learn how to deal with social stigma and begin to seek out other homosexual individuals with whom they can form relationships. Again, Troiden lays out four possible coping strategies for this stage. The first is when an individual *capitulates,* in which he or she accepts others' negative view of homosexuality while simultaneously acknowledging his or her membership in this group. The second is *minstralization*, in which the individual adopts exaggerated and stereotypical homosexual behaviors and mannerisms. *Passing* allows an individual to hide their sexual identity by passing as heterosexual, while still acknowledging their homosexuality to themselves and a select few close friends. Finally, the individual can engage in *group alignment,* in which they become highly involved in the LGBTQ community, often to the exclusion of forming relationships with heterosexual individuals.

In addition to struggling with assuming a non-heterosexual identity, individuals must also somehow separate from their families in a healthy and adaptive way. This may be complicated by a home environment that is not accepting of non-heterosexual sexual identities (Troiden, 1989).

The final stage in Troiden's model is *commitment,* which occurs between 21 and 24 years of age for men and between 22 and 23 years of age for women. In this stage, individuals begin to integrate their sexual identity into their overall concept of themselves. Thus, being gay simply becomes one piece of their identity. Individuals in this stage have typically experienced a committed same sex relationship and have begun identifying themselves as homosexual to heterosexual individuals. Ideally, there will be an increase in happiness and comfort with self in this stage. It is important to note that stages three and four in Troiden's model overlap for women. Troiden states that this is because women tend to experience sexual relationships within the context of a committed relationship, while men may experience sexual relationships without commitment during the identity assumption stage (Troiden, 1989).

Table 1

Sexual Identity Development Models

Cass (1979)	Troiden (1989)
Identity Confusion	Sensitization
Identity Comparison	Identity Confusion
Identity Tolerance	Identity Assumption

Identity Acceptance	Commitment
Identity Pride	
Identity Synthesis	

Although Cass (1979) and Troiden's (1989) models are different, they do have some overlap. Both models discuss an emerging awareness of difference, confusion about that difference, claiming a non-heterosexual identity, and eventual integration of this sexual identity into their overall view of themselves. These aspects also line up with Marcia's identity statuses. For example, confusion about the perceived difference and what it means for that individual would be similar to *moratorium*, and integration of sexual identity would line up with *identity achievement*. This overlap suggests that there are some universal experiences that all youth face when developing any type of identity.

There has been a significant amount of criticism of sexual identity models from many sources, especially as they have become more commonly used (Savin-Williams, 2005). Even though both Cass (1979) and Troiden (1989) have stated that their models may not be true for all people, they have still been widely adopted and employed in a prescriptive manner in attempts to help people through their coming out process. This has occurred despite the fact that while stage models of sexual identity development may be intuitive, they have not been well supported by research. Additionally, these stage models do not account for differences in age, ethnicity, or gender nor the interaction of these factors. While they may have been representative of the coming out process during the decade in which they were developed, times have changed and the models have not

evolved with the times. In the past, gay men were likely to engage in sex with other men before adopting a non-heterosexual identity. However, today youth may be more apt to adopt a non-heterosexual identity before engaging in sex with others. Furthermore, cultural factors are likely to play a large role in how individuals develop a sexual identity, yet there is no way of accounting for cultural differences in the models. One example of this is African American men who choose to live their life on the *down low* (Denizet-Lewis, 2003). These men do not disclose that they engage in sex with men and may often simultaneously be involved with women. Although many of them have integrated their sexual attraction to men into their identity, it is unlikely that they followed either of the models presented (Savin-Williams, 2005). Another example would be individuals who must find a way to integrate their religion and sexual identity or disavow one or the other (Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). This can be a very integral step for religious individuals and yet it is not adequately captured within the presented models. Without acknowledgement of these and other cultural impacts on identity development, Cass and Troiden's sexual identity development models cannot speak to every individual's experience.

As more research has been done on sexual identity, developmental models that allow for greater flexibility have begun to emerge. One of these models was developed by D'Augelli (1994) who proposed a life span model in which individuals can move in and out of categories in whichever order is most relevant to them, even skipping some categories all together (See Table 2). A benefit of this model is that it has the potential to capture the experiences of individuals with more diverse racial, ethnic, and gender experiences (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). D'Augelli's (1994) model contains six identity

processes that occur in no set order and operate independently. These processes include *exiting heterosexuality; developing a personal lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) identity*; *developing an LGB social identity*; *becoming an LGB offspring by coming out to parents*; *developing an LGB intimacy status*; and *entering an LGB community*. It is important to note that an individual may be at very different places in each of these processes at any given point in time. For example, they may have developed an identity that includes their non-heterosexual orientation (developing a personal LGB identity) and come out to their parents (becoming an LGB offspring) but may currently be single (developing an LGB intimacy status). Additionally, individuals may take steps forward or backward in each area. For instance, they may have previously been open about their sexual identity at work (developing an LGB social identity) but may choose to be less open in a new work setting.

Table 2

Sexual Identity Development Processes

D'Augelli (1994)
Exiting heterosexuality
Developing a personal LGB identity
Developing an LGB social identity
Becoming an LGB offspring
Developing an LGB intimacy status
Entering an LGB community

Gender Identity Development

Models have also been created to describe an individual's gender identity development. These models have generally focused on people who fall outside of the traditional definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman, also known as the *gender binary* (Lev, 2004). These individuals are often collectively identified as *trans**[4] because they transcend the gender binary. Similar to the sexual identity development models not addressing heterosexual identity development, gender identity development models do not encompass cisgendered identity development. Early models outlined the process of transitioning from one gender to another, rather than how the individual developed their gender identity. One of these models outlines six stages to becoming a woman and is focused on male to female transsexuals (See Table 3) (Lewins, 1995). These stages are *abiding anxiety*, *discovery*, *purging and delay*, *acceptance*, *surgical reassignment*, and *invisibility*. This model is only applicable to male to female (MtF) trans* identified individuals who are choosing to undergo surgery to change their physical gender, which is only one small portion of those who fall under the trans* umbrella.

Newer models have been developed to be used with individuals at all points of the trans* spectrum. This spectrum includes individuals who are transitioning from one gender to another, individuals who do not identify with a gender (genderqueer), or individuals who move between genders (genderfluid) (Carroll, Gilroy, & Ryan, 2002). One of these models is Transgender Emergence (See Table 3) (Lev, 2004). This model is

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[4] The * is included at the end of trans in order to denote the numerous endings that could follow it, i.e. transgender, transsexual, etc., and the other terms it is meant to encompass such as genderqueer or genderfluid for example.

applicable to all gender variant individuals, from those who choose full surgical transition to those who identify as genderqueer and do not engage in any type of body modification. The six stages of this model are not necessarily experienced sequentially; individuals may return to earlier stages as part of their natural development. The model is also meant to outline a general trajectory, and may not capture every individual's experience.

The first stage in Transgender Emergence is *awareness* (Lev, 2004). During this period, individuals begin to recognize an internal feeling of being different and may begin to realize that they are seen as different by those around them. Individuals often experience feelings of gender dysphoria, a significant discomfort with the gender they were assigned at birth. This emerging awareness may lead individuals to seek counseling to help them sort through this experience. The second stage in this model is *seeking information/reaching out*. During this stage, individuals begin to search for information about gender identity and variance. They also begin to come out as gender variant or trans* not only to themselves, but to others as well. Ideally, this coming out process will lead them to finding a transgender community from which they can receive support. For some individuals, this may be an exciting time of declaring themself and creating new connections. For others, it may be overwhelming as they work to disclose their identity to others and integrate their past into their current identity.

The third stage is *disclosure to significant others*, in which transgender individuals begin disclosing their gender identity to family and others (Lev, 2004). This can be a very difficult process as families are often slow to accept the individual's gender identity, if they accept it at all. Individuals will likely experience a significant amount of anxiety during this stage. Disclosures to partners and spouses may be difficult, especially

if this change in identity feels sudden to the partner. One of the struggles of this stage is to find a way to manage both the relief at having come out and the reactions of others to this news.

Stage four is *exploring identity and transition* (Lev, 2004). In this stage, individuals begin to search for a term that is most comfortable for them and congruent with what they feel is their gender identity. Exploration is the hallmark of this stage, with individuals trying on different gender roles, mannerisms, clothing, and other outward signs of gender. Over time, individuals will develop their own unique style that best fits who they feel they are psychologically and emotionally. This stage also includes an exploration of future transition options. Individuals will begin to make decisions about whether they wish to begin hormone therapy or start saving up for surgery. On the other hand, they may decide that they are comfortable with their bodies as they are, but that there are other changes (i.e., name) that they wish to make.

This naturally leads into stage five, *exploring transition and possible body modification* (Lev, 2004). Although not all individuals make the choice to change their body, most at least consider the possibility. During this time, individuals may begin hormones or electrolysis and may start planning for surgery. This stage can be filled with a great deal of conflict as individuals often must engage with clinicians in order to get permission to move forward with their transition (Speer & Parsons, 2006). For example, many surgeons require a diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder, which is found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Forth Edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), and an accompanying letter from the individual's therapist or counselor before the surgeon will perform any type of gender reassignment

surgery (i.e., genital reconstruction surgery, chest reconstruction, or breast augmentation). For many individuals, it can be difficult to get this permission if they do not intend to complete a full hormonal and surgical transition because some clinicians will not support a non-binary identity (Carroll et al., 2002). In large part, this is due to society viewing gender as being an either or choice between male and female, rather than a more varied and nuanced spectrum of possibilities. However, this perception is beginning to change as youth are becoming more interested in occupying this middle space between male and female that allows them to switch back and forth at will.

The final stage in this model is *integration and pride* (Lev, 2004). In this stage, the individual has resolved her gender dysphoria and ideally has found a way to integrate her previous presenting gender with her current gender identity. Some individuals will choose to lead invisible lives in which they do not discuss their transgender identity, while others will be more disclosing about their history. Regardless of the decision they have made, individuals in this stage have become comfortable with who they are and how they choose to present themselves to the world.

Table 3

Gender Identity Development Models

Lewins (1995)	Lev (2004)
Abiding Anxiety	Awareness
Discovery	Seeking Information/Reaching Out
Purging and Delay	Disclosure to Significant Others

Acceptance	Exploring Identity and Transition
Surgical Reassignment	Exploring Transition and Possible Body Modification
Invisibility	Integration and Pride

Another more expanded gender identity development model was proposed by Devor (2004). This model includes 14 stages and is meant to provide an outline for one commonly followed path (See Table 4). Similar to many other model developers, Devor highlights that not all individuals will move through every stage and those that do may move at different speeds.

Table 4

Gender Identity Development Models Continued

Devor (2004)
Abiding Anxiety
Identity Confusion About Originally Assigned Gender and Sex
Identity Comparisons About Originally Assigned Gender and Sex
Discovery of Transsexualism or Transgenderism
Identity Confusion About Transsexualism or Transgenderism
Identity Comparisons About Transsexualism or Transgenderism
Identity Tolerance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity

Delay Before Acceptance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity

Acceptance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity

Delay Before Transition

Transition

Acceptance of Post-Transition Gender and Sex Identities

Integration

Pride

**Sexual Identity Label Development
through Time**

Often an important piece of adopting a sexual or gender identity is choosing an

identity label. The most commonly used words today are lesbian, gay, and bisexual, but

these words have not always existed. Although it is likely that individuals who

experience non-heterosexual desires have been present throughout history, it was not

until the late 19th century that this behavior began to be labeled and studied (Faderman,

1991). Up until this time, sexual acts with individuals of the same sex in the Western

world were forbidden, though individuals who engaged in sexual acts with members of

the same sex were not defined by them (Foucault, 1990). One of the earliest terms used

for sexual identity, *urning*, was developed by Karl Ulrichs in the late 19th century (Miller,

1995). Ulrichs believed that homosexual individuals constituted a third sex, and he

wished to have a term that described these individuals. Another early term, *invert*, was

meant to convey the idea that homosexual individuals were experiencing a gender that

was the opposite of their physical body (Faderman, 1991). Many of the early terms placed emphasis on non-heterosexual individuals' experiences and presentations of gender, suggesting that homosexual women were male souls trapped in female bodies and vice versa (Miller, 1995). During this time these labels for same sex desires focused more on a moral or character flaw, and individuals who experienced these desires were not to be blamed for their character defects. The understanding of these desires evolved with the language used to label them.

As terms to describe non-heterosexual identities began to flourish, individuals who shared these desires began to find each other (Miller, 1995). They formed groups such as the Mattachine Society[5] and the Daughters of Bilitis[6], which then became synonyms for homosexuality (Pickett, 2011). The term *homosexuality* was coined by Karl Maria Kertbeny in 1869 as part of a campaign to abolish Prussian laws that forbade sexual acts between men (Miller, 1995). As homosexuality became more widely used, it took on a more medical meaning, leading to its later adoption by the American Psychiatric Association for use in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM-I) as a diagnostic category (Pickett, 2011). This change in terminology corresponded with a change in the understanding of same sex desires to something that could now be treated. In the first revision of the DSM (1968), homosexuality was moved from the category of sociopathic personality disorders to other non-psychotic mental disorders. However, it was not until 1973 that homosexuality was removed as a mental

[5] The name Mattachine came from a medieval-Renaissance French group made up of unmarried townsmen who always performed masked. This name was chosen because during the time when this group was founded gays were also constantly masked people.
[6] The 'Daughters of' portion of this name is meant to mimic other American social organizations (i.e. Daughters of the American Revolution) and Bilitis is the name of a fictional lesbian contemporary of Sappho. It was chosen in part because of its obscurity.

disorder completely (Pickett, 2011). The impetus for its removal came from a visible gay

rights movement that had begun to demand change. This movement is often said to have

begun with the Stonewall Riots in 1969 (Miller, 1995). The Stonewall Riots began on

the early morning of June 28th, 1969, in response to a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a

gay bar located in Greenwich Village in New York City. Though raids were common

during that time, on this particular night, the patrons of the bar chose to fight back,

leading to six consecutive nights of riots and demonstrations. More mainstream

newspapers covered the riots and, because of this, many consider these riots to be the

beginning of a more visible gay rights movement.

As the gay rights movement gained greater visibility, new language began to

emerge. People began moving away from the term homosexual because of its association

with mental disorders and began to adopt terms such as *gay* (Weeks, 2003). During this

time same sex desires began to be seen as something more socially constructed and

natural. The terms gay and homosexual were originally used to describe both men and

women. However, as time went on, women began to recognize that their non-

heterosexual experiences were different from those of men and so began to develop their

own language (Faderman, 1991). Three terms were adopted around this period to

describe women who partnered with other women: *sapphist, sapphism,* and *lesbian,*

though only the final word is still common today. Both sapphist and sapphism were

derived from the name of the Greek poet Sappho, who is believed to have written poetry

about romantic and sexual love between women. In the 1970s and 80s, individuals who

were attracted to others of the same and opposite gender began to adopt the term

bisexual, first proposed by Freud in 1905 (Miller, 1995).

Recently there has been an explosion of language as youth are developing new, more flexible terms to describe their gender and sexual identities (Marech, 2004). There has not yet been any empirical research to determine how widespread these new terms are, so it is difficult to say whether this denotes a shift away from more traditional sexual identity labels. Some of the new terms include: *ambisextrous*[7], *demisexual*[8], *genderfluid*[9], *homoflexible*[10], *heteroflexible*[11], *androsexual*[12], *gynosexual*[13], and *pansexual*[14] (Highleyman, 1997; Queers United, 2011). The term *queer*, which was originally used as a derogatory term for non-heterosexual individuals, has also been reclaimed by the current generation (Miller, 1995). These are only a few examples of the many terms that are now used by youth to describe their sexual identity. It is also interesting to note that society's view on same sex desires has in some ways come full circle, back to many individuals viewing these desires as a moral issue.

Understanding the language individuals use to label their sexual identity is important because language and culture share a symbiotic influence on each other (McDaniel, Samovar, & Porter, 2011). Specifically, sexual minority subculture is shaped by the way that language is used to describe life experiences and sexual identity (Leap, 2007). Unfortunately, we often do not have a clear definition of what these identity words mean (Christina, 1997). A good example of this is bisexuality, which is generally

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[7] Attracted to both women and men
[8] An individual who only experiences sexual attraction after they form a strong emotional attachment
[9] Individuals who move between genders
[10] An individual who primarily experiences sexual attraction to members of the same sex, but may occasionally be attracted to individuals of the opposite sex
[11] An individual who primarily experiences sexual attraction to members of the opposite sex, but may occasionally be attracted to individuals of the same sex
[12] Individuals who are primarily attracted to men
[13] Individuals who are primarily attracted to women
[14] Individuals who experience attraction to others regardless of gender

defined as "sexually attracted to individuals of both sexes" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989, p. 222). Even though this may appear to be a simple definition, how individuals live out their sexual identities is rarely simple. Different individuals who identify as bisexual may have significantly discrepant definitions of what *bisexual* means, with no one definition being the correct one (Christina, 1997). Although language is clearly important to the creation and maintenance of an identity, it is also exceedingly difficult to accurately define.

Utility of Sexual Identity Labels

It is also important to consider the utility of sexual identity labels. For some it is a politically necessary choice that is influenced by an individual's personal politics and society's response (Dobinson, 1999). One example of this is the *woman-identified-woman* of the early feminist movement (Faderman, 1991). These women chose to partner with other women despite being primarily attracted to men because having a relationship with a man was seen as deserting the cause. For these women, sexual identity became a political statement, rather than simply an attraction. Identities are also strategic because an individual inevitably disowns contradictory pieces of his or her self by claiming an identity label and must therefore choose which pieces of his or her self to honor and which to exclude (Dobinson, 1999). A woman who identifies as a lesbian but sometimes finds herself attracted to men chooses to disavow that piece of her identity by choosing "lesbian" as her label. Additionally, identities are historically situated (Foucault, 1990); that is, they are informed by general historical circumstances and personal history. When the gay rights movement first began, being a lesbian was not yet a choice, as no one had created that term yet. It is only with the continual evolution of

society and language together that current identity labels exist today. Claiming a minority sexual identity label is much more than simply identifying with whom an individual prefers to partner; it is also an invitation to become part of a particular subculture (Leap, 2007). In this way, placing a label on an individual's non-heterosexual identity may provide access to social support.

Summary

Given how complex labeling one's sexual identity can be, it is easy to see how difficult it can become to study sexuality. For example, how sexuality is defined influences how it is studied (Savin-Williams, 2006). Three potential definitions of sexual orientation have been suggested: sexual or romantic attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. *Sexual or romantic attraction* is defined as one's attraction toward a particular sex or the desire to be in a loving, sexual relationship with one or both sexes. *Sexual behavior* is defined as mutually voluntary sexual contact between two or more individuals in which arousal is experienced even if intercourse or orgasm is not. Finally, *sexual identity* is "personally selected, socially and historically bound labels attached to the perceptions and meanings individuals have about their sexuality" (Savin-Williams, 2006, p. 41). Because of the differences in definition of sexual orientation, if sexuality is to be one of the exclusion criteria for a study, the definition that is chosen greatly influences the sample that is acquired. For example, an individual who experiences romantic attraction to both sexes but has not engaged in any sexual activity and identifies as a lesbian could be either included or excluded in a study on homosexuality depending on the definition employed by the researcher. Typically, sexual or romantic attraction as the criterion for inclusion elicits the greatest number of non-heterosexual individuals,

whereas sexual identity will generally lead to a much smaller sample. This is because not all individuals who experience sexual or romantic attraction to individuals of the same gender would endorse a non-heterosexual sexual identity. These differing definitions also become important when individuals are choosing their own identity labels, and how much each of these factors influences their choice of labels may vary greatly from one person to the next.

Currently there are conflicting views as to how and if youth are choosing labels for their sexual identities. On the one hand, some individuals are arguing that adolescents are beginning to endorse more fluid sexual identities, which may be leading to their moving away from traditional sexual identity labels (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual) (Jayson, 2009; Savin-Williams, 2005). On the other hand, some research is suggesting that these traditional labels are still relevant to youth (Russell, Clarke, & Clary, 2009). For example, a study from 2009 found that the lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities are still relevant to youth today. The authors used data from The Preventing School Harassment survey, which included a forced choice self-report of sexual identity with an option to write in a sexual identity label. The majority of non-heterosexual youth (71%) endorsed traditional sexual identity labels, with 13% writing in *questioning*, 5% writing in *queer*, and 9% providing some other label.

Given the paucity of research currently available, it is difficult to hypothesize how youth may be choosing and using language to determine and describe their sexual and gender identities or if they are at all. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that youth are completely abandoning identity labels. History has shown that language evolves over time, with terms falling in and out of vogue as culture evolves (Faderman, 1991). Rather

than operating without labels, youth may simply be creating their own new language to better capture their experiences (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Thompson & Morgan, 2008). Identity labels have also previously allowed individuals access to sexual minority subculture, and it is unclear how youth now identify with and connect to this. Language use may also evolve for the individual over time as he or she becomes more completely aware of his or her own sexual and gender identities.

In summary, the only statement that can be made with certainty is that there is not much clarity around how youth select and employ sexual identity labels, or if they are using labels at all. There appears to be a belief that sexual identity language and how it is used is changing, but there is no body of research to support or refute this idea. In order to begin the process of addressing these questions, this study explores how youth select their sexual identity labels, how their use of labels may evolve over time, and how it may change in different contexts. Additionally, whether demographic factors including geographical location and religious or spiritual identity influence the type of labels youth choose were also investigated.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Method

Participants

  This study recruited young adults ages 18 to 22 to reflect on their adoption of sexual identity labels throughout their adolescence. For the purpose of this research, adolescence is defined as roughly the second decade of life, beginning around approximately age 10 and ending in the early 20s. While there are many different definitions for the start and end points of adolescence, including biological, emotional, cognitive, educational, legal, and chronological definitions (Steinberg, 2005), this particular definition was chosen because it offers the greatest possible range of experience. The age range of 18 and 22 was chosen so that participants potentially have had enough past identity development on which to reflect, while still being within the general definition of adolescence. Furthermore, individuals must have questioned their sexual identity at some point in time. This was assessed by asking participants whether they have ever questioned their sexual identity. While questioning is required, they did not have to have settled on a non-heterosexual identity, nor did they have to have their sexual identity completely defined. The purpose of this criterion was to assure that the participants had given some thought to their sexual identity and its label.

  Demographic information was collected from all participants, including age, race, geographic location, socioeconomic status, job or school status, religious affiliation, gender identity, sexual identity, and whether they live in a rural or urban area. Race was defined using the United States Census Bureau racial categories for the 2010 census. These categories are White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and Some Other Race. The

country was divided into four geographical regions to denote geographical location. This division was based on the U.S. Census Bureau's division of the U.S. into the following regions: North East[15], Midwest[16], South[17], and West[18] (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Individuals were asked to denote their highest level of education. Respondents were also asked whether they consider themselves religious, spiritual, or neither. Finally, they were asked if they live in a rural or urban area as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (United States Census Bureau, 2011). This information was gathered to help determine whether there is any relationship between each of these categories of demographic information and the type of sexual identity label youth choose.

Individuals were recruited electronically through three sources: college and university LGBTQ groups, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) groups, and Division 44 of the American Psychological Association (APA). These three groups were chosen in an attempt to recruit a diverse pool of subjects. College and university LGBTQ groups and PFLAG groups were selected because they are likely to have members who have questioned their sexual identity and fall within the required age range. Both groups were utilized in an attempt to keep from biasing the participant pool by only recruiting college students. Division 44 of the APA was contacted because its members have connections to other relevant individuals and groups that the researcher would not know. College and university LGBTQ groups were selected using the

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[15] Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont
[16] Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Wisconsin, South Dakota
[17] Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia
[18] Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Nevada, Washington, Wyoming

Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) LGBTQ Campus Group Directory. All groups that provided email addresses were contacted. PFLAG groups were also contacted by email using the email addresses provided for each group on the PFLAG website.

A request for participants was also sent out through Division 44, the Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues. In addition to asking the members to participate, the researcher asked the members to pass along the link to any potentially interested parties, thus utilizing snowball sampling. Again, all individuals who participated in the study were asked to pass along the link to others who may have been interested in participating.

Procedure

This research was conducted over the Internet through a secure online survey site (www.surveymonkey.com). Participants received a brief description of the survey and what it hoped to capture. If they were interested in participating and met the criteria, they were asked to click a link to take them to the survey. As an incentive, participants were also informed that participation in the survey would enter them in a drawing for a gift card. This provided some encouragement to participate.

When the participants reached the website, they read an informed consent that outlined who was conducting the research, what it hoped to find, and potential risks and benefits of participating. The individual was then asked to electronically give his or her consent to participate. Individuals then went through a brief screening in which they were asked their age and whether they had ever questioned their sexuality. If they met the criteria outlined above, they were then connected to the survey (See Appendix C). Demographic information was then collected. Age, geographical location, rural or urban

setting, and whether they are religious, spiritual, or neither were all forced choice

questions. This method was utilized to streamline data analysis. The questions asking for

the label the participants use for their sexual identity and gender identity labels were

open-ended questions so that participants had the freedom to identify as they chose. If

they did not meet both of the criteria to participate, they were thanked for their time and

directed away from the survey website. After completing the survey, participants were

thanked for their participation and asked to provide an email address in order to be

entered in the drawing. This information was kept separate from their survey answers in

order to protect subjects' identities. At the closing of the data collection period, all email

addresses collected were entered into a drawing to determine the winners of the gift

cards. Winners were chosen using a random number generator and were then contacted

by the email address they provided.

Data Analysis

  Quantitative analysis. In order to perform quantitative analysis, data from the

question "What word (or words) would you use to label your sexual identity? If you

prefer to remain unlabeled, please leave this question blank," was divided into two

categories: traditional sexual identity labels (gay, lesbian, bisexual, homosexual,

heterosexual, and straight) and non-traditional sexual identity labels (any other reported

label or no label). These two categories were then analyzed using a Chi-squared analysis

to determine if there were significant differences between each group based on region,

spirituality, and whether they live in a rural or urban area.

  Qualitative analysis. Qualitative data was obtained from the open-ended

questions of the survey and analyzed using the inductive thematic analysis procedure put

forth by Boyatzis (1998). Each set of responses was read and mined for potential themes. After themes were identified, the responses were re-read to confirm their existence. The themes were then condensed as much as possible while still maintaining their meaning and distinctiveness. Once condensed, themes were coded. Each code included a label, a definition for the theme, a description to help identify when the theme occurs, any specific requirements or exclusions, and examples (Boyatzis, 1998).

<center>**Chapter 4: Results**</center>

A total of 300 responses were collected before the survey was closed. Unqualified responses, including those who did not meet the selection criteria and participants who did not complete the survey, were removed before data analysis occurred.

Demographic Characteristics

A total of 207 completed responses were obtained. Of this number 164 (79.2%) identified themselves as White, 13 (6.3%) as Black, 10 (4.8%) as Asian, 8 (3.9%) as American Indian, and 12 (5.8%) as Other. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 22 years old: 29 (14%) were 18 years old, 31 (15%) were 19 years old, 50 (24.2%) were 20 years old, 55 (26.6%) were 21 years old, and 42 (20.3%) were 22 years old. Geographically, most participants were located in the Midwest or Western United States. Specifically, 67 (32.4%) lived in the Midwest, 40 (19.3%) lived in the North East, 30 (14.5%) lived in the South, and 70 (33.8%) lived in the West. Regardless of geographical location, most participants, 176 (85%), responded that they lived in an urban area, with 31 (15%) living in a rural area. A total of 183 (88.4%) participants were currently enrolled in school and 24 (11.6%) were not students at the time. Ninety-one (44%) participants identified as neither religious nor spiritual, with 32 (15.5%) stating they were religious and 84 (40.6%) identifying as spiritual.

There was a wide range of responses for both sexual and gender identity. For a complete listing of all responses, see Appendix A and Appendix B. One hundred seventeen (56.5%) participants identified as female, 47 (22.7%) identified as male, 12 (5.8%) identified as somewhere in the trans* spectrum, and 31 (15%) used some other

label or no label for their gender identity. For sexual identity, 17 (8.2%) of the sample

identified as heterosexual, 170 (82.1%) identified as non-heterosexual, and 20 (9.7%)

were unlabeled. In terms of how they labeled their identity, 135 (65.2%) used a

traditional[19] label, 53 (25.1%) used a non-traditional label, and 20 (9.7%) used no label.

Table 5

Gender and Sexual Identity

Gender Identity		Sexual Identity		Type of Label	
Female	117 (56.5%)	Heterosexual	17 (8.2%)	Traditional	135 (65.2%)
Male	47 (22.7%)	Non-Heterosexual	170 (82.1%)	Non-Traditional	53 (25.1%)
Trans*	12 (5.8%)	Unlabeled	20 (9.7%)	No Label	20 (9.7%)
Other/ No Label	31 (15%)				

Quantitative Analysis

      A Chi-squared analysis of the available data was used to determine whether a

relationship existed between where participants were located regionally within the United

States, whether they lived in a rural or urban area, whether they identified themselves as

religious, spiritual, or neither, and if they chose a traditional or non-traditional label. For

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[19] Gay, lesbian, bisexual, homosexual, heterosexual, straight

the purposes of this analysis, a traditional label was defined as the following words: gay, lesbian, bisexual, homosexual, heterosexual, and straight. Any other sexual identity label or the use of no label at all was considered a non-traditional label.

Figure 1 shows the comparison between youth with traditional and non-traditional labels by geographic location. For each geographic location, youth more frequently chose traditional sexual identity labels. A Pearsons Chi-Square analysis of this data found no significant relationship between geographic location and the type of label youth use, χ^2 (3, N=207) = 1.635, p=0.651. This indicates that a youth's geographic location does not have a significant impact on whether they choose a traditional or non-traditional label.
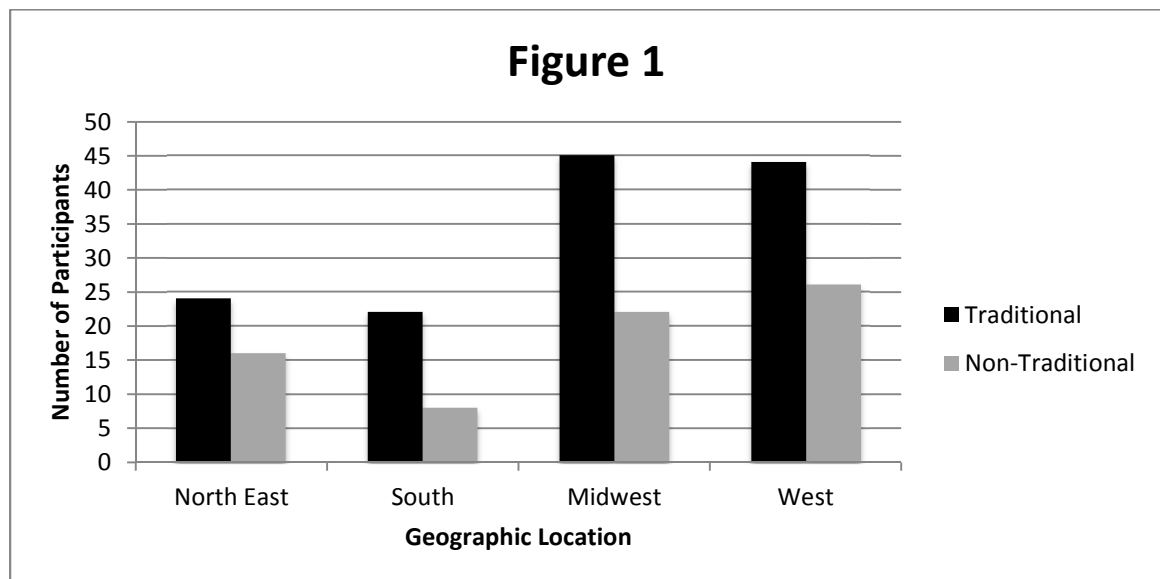

Figure 1. Geographic location. This figure compares the number of participants choosing traditional versus non-traditional labels in four geographic regions.

Youth were also found to choose traditional labels more frequently than non-traditional labels regardless of whether they were located in a rural or urban area, as demonstrated in Figure 2. The Pearsons Chi-Square analysis once again shows no significant relationship between these two variables, χ^2 (1, N=207) = 1.295, p=0.255, suggesting that living in a rural or urban geographic area does not have a significant impact on youth's selection of sexual identity labels.
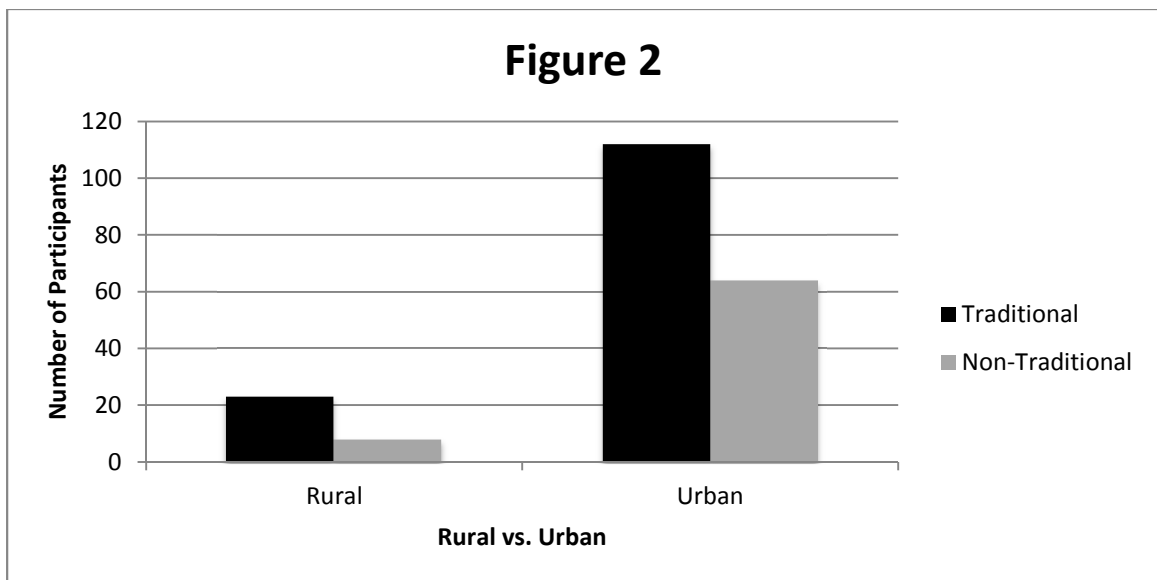
Figure 2

Figure 2. Rural vs. urban. This figure compares the number of participants choosing traditional versus non-traditional labels in rural versus urban locations.

Finally, Figure 3 displays the relationship between the type of label youth use and whether they self-identify as religious, spiritual, or neither. Once again, no significant relationship was found when the Pearsons Chi-Square analysis was run, χ^2 (2, N=207) = 5.656, p=0.059. This indicates that a youth's self-identity as being religious, spiritual, or

neither does not significantly impact the type of sexual identity label that they choose to employ.
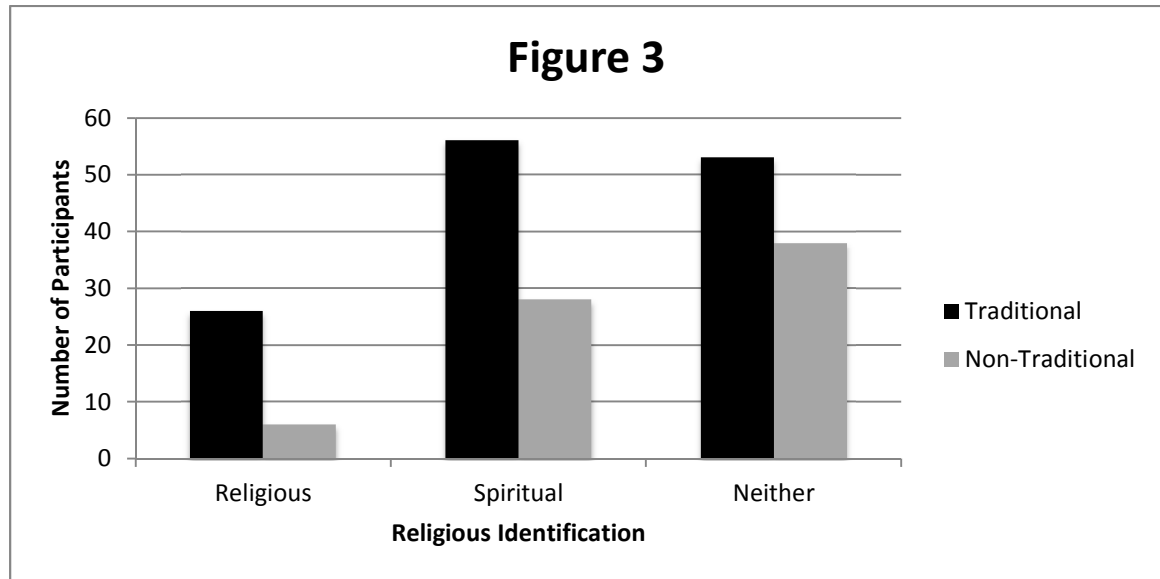
Figure 3

Figure 3. Religious identification. This figure compares participants choosing traditional versus non-traditional labels in three categories of religious identification.

Qualitative Analysis

A qualitative, thematic analysis was performed on the narrative responses participants provided for each of the short answer questions. The primary researcher and a research assistant independently completed this analysis to allow for greater validity of the themes that were discovered. Each question and its corresponding themes will be reported below.

Choosing a sexual identity label. Three main themes emerged from the thematic analysis for this question: (a) This is the word that fits best, (b) This is the word that

society places upon me, and (c) I need more fluidity than words allow. Many of the

participants stated that they chose a particular sexual identity label because it felt as

though it was the best fit for how they were feeling. For example:

> I went to a queer conference and I was introduced to this new term [pansexual] and it just fit.

> I chose the label of 'lesbian' after struggling with my sexuality most of high school, shortly after I started dating my first girlfriend. I felt strong feelings toward a female for the first time and felt comfortable with using the label. I just knew it was right for me.

Each of these individuals referred to the word they chose as "just fitting" or somehow

knowing it was "right." Many individuals expressed that the label they had chosen in

some way just perfectly matched the way that they were feeling. Within this particular

theme, two distinct subthemes emerged: (1) Having an experience of exploration and

arrival at their chosen label, and (2) Using this word without exploration because it is the

word for how I feel. In addition to participants talking about the rightness of a particular

word, they also described a period of exploring before they found the word that was right

for them.

> After I figured out that I was attracted to women as well as men, I spent a while on the internet researching nomenclature, and then labeled myself as bisexual.

> As I came into college and learned more and more about the queer community I was able to choose from an extremely wide selection of labels to give myself; the more exposure to the subject I got, the easier it was for me to find a label closest to what I identify as.

> After several years of thinking about the way I interact with people around me and about the people I've been attracted to in the past, I decided that bisexual described me better than heterosexual, lesbian, or pansexual.

The second sub theme that emerged was *Using this word without exploration because it*

is the word for how I feel. Participants whose responses fell within this theme described

their sexual identity label as a foregone conclusion. For these individuals, the word they chose was inevitable because it was the obvious word for how they feel. However, it is important to note that, unlike the second theme, these respondents did not express any dismay or frustration with the label they had been given.

> I am attracted to both males and females. The term for that is Bisexual. So I feel it's easier to identify myself by giving it the name.

> It simply fits my sexuality: lesbian is the common popular label used for women who are sexually attracted to other women. Once I realized my sexual preferences I began using this label.

> I realized in high school that I was attracted to girls, then in college, I realized that I am way more fulfilled when I'm in a relationship with a girl rather than with a boy, so I chose the label 'lesbian' to express my homosexuality.

> I am a woman and I am attracted to other women, have intimate relationships with other women, and do not feel or want attraction towards men. [Lesbian]

Each of these individuals expresses the naturalness of their sexual identity label, with some even going so far as to point out that how they feel is the definition of that term.

A smaller portion of the participants fell under the second theme, stating that the sexual identity label they use is the one that society has put upon them, rather than a label they chose for themselves. For these individuals, there was also a feeling of inevitability, but some expressed frustration at being forced into that label or any label at all.

> I strongly believe that I was socially constructed to identify as a heterosexual woman. Therefore it's impossible to name a particular way I chose to be heterosexual.

> I didn't really choose the label, society chose it for me. I'm gay and I openly identify as gay. I've always been gay. When I finally opened and said I was attracted to men, that's the label I knew society would give me. It makes me easier to understand, it binds me to a community and gives me an extra identifier. In a perfect world, I wouldn't have a label. But no matter what I do, society will always give me one.

> Society labels females who are sexually and emotionally attracted to only females as lesbians. It's a label by definition and it defines who I proudly am.

> Didn't choose the label. I am male [and] like men, therefore, society classifies me as 'gay.'

Despite the option to not identify any sexual identity label, these youth expressed the idea that they must have a label. There is no opportunity to reject a label, nor are they able to choose an appropriate or comfortable label for themselves. Rather, society hands down a word that is defined by the sexual and romantic behaviors in which they engage.

The final theme to emerge from this question is the feeling that the participant requires more fluidity than words allow. Within this main theme, two subthemes occurred: (1) I have not decided what word is best for me, and (2) I do not use a label because my identity is too fluid or cannot be contained by language. For both of these groups of participants, the language of which they were currently aware could not encompass their sexual identity. Some examples from the first subtheme include:

> It [not straight] is my current label and allows me to feel more freedom with the questioning process without the extent of uncertainty that 'questioning' gives me.

> I have never been with a woman but I find them sexually attractive – until I have and know 'for sure' I [choose] not to use a label. I am definitely attracted to men.

> For most of my life I just simply identified as heterosexual because, well, that's how society is. But as I've gotten older, and especially in recent years, I've come to question my sexuality. I've never had a significant other, so I always figured that was why I had no interest whatsoever in sex. However, as I got to know more and more people in college, that began to make less and less sense to me. Even people like me who, in their 20s, have still not had a first kiss, are interested in sex, porn, masturbation, etc. But none of that appeals to me, whatsoever. Although I have trouble picturing myself with another person in any context, when I do, what I want is not sex but just an emotional partner. And I could honestly see that happening with either a man or woman. While I am generally more attracted to men, if it really came down to it I really don't think it would matter. I don't know if I do even label myself as Asexual at this point, since I've never really been in a position to find out, if that makes sense, but I suppose it's

the closest to how I feel. That or maybe at most Demisexual, but that term tends to garner a lot of hate and misunderstanding.

Some examples from the second subtheme include:

> I still have a hard time connecting with any labels. I like the idea of being 'open.' I believe that sexuality [is] definitely a sliding scale. Although I find both men and women attractive physically, I find people most attractive based on their [personalities] and I tend to connect more with feminine personalities. There is too much stigma attached to the label 'lesbian' for me to fully identify with it. But I do not consider myself bisexual either because I am dating a woman who is the love of my life and I know that I would most likely not date a man again even if something happened between her and I.

> I prefer not to use a sexual identity label because I feel like I don't want to be constrained by it. Every label carries with it certain stereotypes and connotations, and I would prefer that people got to know me in the absence of such stereotypes. I also feel like my sexuality is subject to change, but if I choose a label then I will subconsciously try to make my behavior fit that label.

> I don't use a label because popular sexual identity labels (eg [sic], gay, lesbian) are definitive of both the sex that you're attracted to and your own sex. Because I identify as genderqueer, I'm not comfortable with using those terms.

> It [queer] allows for the most fluidity. My attractions/interests change all the time (I usually talk about being x% gay at any given time), so I go with queer because I get to stay part of the sexual minority community and get recognized as such, but I don't have to stress about the word every time my percentage fluctuates.

As is evident by the length of the quotes, many of these participants used a greater number of words to describe their sexual identity label choice than the participants who fell within the other themes for this question. Those participants whose answers fell under this theme employed more nuance in their descriptions so as to communicate their sexual identity and attraction with the greatest amount of clarity possible.

Table 6

Choosing a Sexual Identity Label

Themes
1. This is the word that fits best
Having an experience of exploration and arrival at their chosen label
Using this word without exploration because it is the word for how I feel
2. This is the word that society places upon me
3. I need more fluidity than words allow
I have not decided what word is best for me
I do not use a label because my identity is too fluid or cannot be contained by
language

Using a different sexual identity label in the past. The second open-ended question asked participants to discuss whether they had ever used a different sexual identity label in the past, and if so, what is was and why they used it. Five main themes were found during the thematic analysis of their answers: (a) No, I have never used another label, (b) Bisexuality was used as a transitional label, (c) I found a better or more accurate word for how I feel, (d) My sexual identity or the way I viewed my sexual identity changed, and (e) Though I used a label in the past, I have moved away from using a label currently. Approximately 22% of this sample stated that they had never used another identity label in the past. Most of these participants responded to the question with a simple no; however, some did provide a bit more explanation.

Not really. I expected to become attracted to the opposite sex, since that was 'normal' but when that never happened (when I failed to develop any sexual attraction to any type of body even many years after puberty) I claimed the label Asexual and have kept it since.

I personally have not used a different label, although people have tried to label me differently. I'm currently married to my spouse, and they identify as genderqueer, though they are often read as a woman. So I have had people label me as a lesbian because they perceive me to be in a relationship with a woman. I have also had people tell me that I am actually pansexual because my spouse is genderqueer. But I personally never altered my label.

Because most participants declined to provide more information, it is impossible to speculate on their reason for never considering a different label.

The second theme that emerged was that many individuals identified as bisexual for a period of time, and then categorized it as a transitional label retrospectively. Even though bisexual was a temporary label for these participants, some of them were sure to articulate their belief that bisexuality can be a stable sexual identity label for others.

I originally thought I was bisexual as the transition from straight to lesbian occurred.

Before I came to identify as a lesbian, bisexual was the closest thing to identify with myself. While I do believe bisexuality to be a completely legitimate sexual identity, I used it more as a transitional stage in coming to terms with my own sexuality.

Yes. Like most people I considered myself to be heterosexual like a majority of people I knew. When I realized that I liked girls I labeled myself as bisexual since I [assumed] I was still attracted to men. When I realized I was only attracted to women I relabeled myself as a lesbian.

Yes, I initially thought of myself as bisexual, even though any encounter I had with women felt forced. I experimented a bit before realizing I was only lying to myself about being attracted to women, in order to have some chance of complying to societal norms in the future. Once I knew this would be impossible, I labeled myself as homosexual.

Many of the participants whose responses fell within this theme also described a sense of recognizing their attraction to the same gender before they realized they did not actually experience attraction to the other gender. In this way, bisexuality became a stepping stone because the individual would notice her attraction to women while still operating under the default assumption of heterosexuality; then after some time and exploration, she would observe that her attraction to men was always an assumption rather than reality.

For a portion of the participants, their label changed because they eventually found a label that was a better fit for how they were feeling. The participants within this theme did not generally experience a change in their identity. Instead, they used a different, less fitting label until they discovered a more appropriate choice, typically through research.

> I used to use bisexual as my label until I learned about pansexuality.

> I used to think I was straight, then gay, then bi, and finally demisexual. Like I said before, my sexual attractions are few and far between, so it took a long time to sort out what I actually liked. I also wasn't aware that there were more labels than gay/straight/bi for [a while], and none of those really seemed right.

> I first thought I was Bisexual because I've been dating guys for as long as I can remember but noticed that I have had tendencies of looking at girls too, but after reading a lot of articles and watching a lot of videos, I found 'Pansexual' the most accurate of how I felt.

Within this theme many participants also talked about trying on different language to see if it fit before moving back to their previous language.

> Yes. I identified as 'queer' for [a while] because I dated a transman and did not feel the label 'lesbian' was fitting. But it is really a lot easier to say 'lesbian' than have to explain what 'queer' means and why it isn't derogatory every time.

As I said before, I identified as lesbian for a while. I really like the label queer, and used to use it a lot, but am more reluctant to do so after I took a few queer theory courses. I like the vagueness of queer (it does not imply 50/50 attraction to men/women), and love the politically active connotations of queer, but I am a strong supporter of gay marriage, so I'm not sure that it is really the right term for me.

I began dating a transgender man (transman) 7 months ago. Everyone responded to the news by saying they didn't know I was a lesbian/bisexual. It confused them that I identify as neither. My boyfriend is no more or less a man than any cisgendered man I have dated. However, because of all the questions of my sexuality I temporarily considered if I could be pansexual. Ultimately I decided I think pansexuality is the most beautiful sexuality I have heard of, but that it does not apply to me. I was simply giving in to the pressures to fit into labels with which I did not identify.

Often these individuals appear to feel uncertain about the language they were using or had felt pressure from others or the community at large to adopt a different sexual identity label.

While some individuals changed their sexual identity label because they found a better word, others changed because their view on their sexual identity changed or evolved. For these participants, their previous words became less accurate or untrue, so they adopted new language to match their changing identity.

I first came out as a 'Lesbian' before I knew what and that I was Trans* because I felt it fitted the fact that I was sexually attracted to Females. But after I came out as Trans*, I have come to realize that even though right now I am in a 'straight relationship,' I am still attracted to Males and have decided to take on the 'Bisexual' label now.

Yes, earlier in my life when I was in different life circumstances and situations. My identity has changed as I have changed as a person.

Used to use the term queer back in high school because I questioned my homosexuality and thought I was either bisexual or bicurious. Then people would ask if I dated men as well, and I would finally feel comfortable stating that I'm just a lesbian.

More specifically, many of these participants had identified as straight before coming to realize their non-heterosexual identities. Unlike the participants who used bisexual as a stepping-stone, these individuals moved more seamlessly from heterosexual to non-heterosexual.

> Straight, it changed because I only identified myself as straight because it was what I [was] brought up to believe. I didn't even know what gay/lesbian was until a certain age. By the time I reached middle school it was obvious to me that I was attracted to girls and not guys.

> Growing up I just assumed I was straight, because that's the way everyone was. It changed when I realized I wasn't interested at all in men, and instead was interested in women.

> I considered myself straight until I was 18. When I met girls living the gay lifestyle they showed me that it is possible to deal with your feelings for girls and lead a happy life. This gave me the courage to try to do the same, deviating from my 'straight' label.

Many of these individuals discussed never having questioned their heterosexual identity because everyone around them was heterosexual and that was the expectation. Indeed, it was not until they had the opportunity to meet or interact with other non-heterosexual individuals that they began to recognize the possibility of identifying in a different way.

Finally, a much smaller portion of the participants discussed moving away from their previous labels to no label at all. These individuals often stated they felt confined by the words they had previously used and being free to remain unlabeled felt more comfortable for them.

> I used to consider myself straight. Still, most of the people I am attracted to are male, but I have found myself attracted to women at points. When I found myself attracted to women and I told people about it, they would say things like, 'Wait, but I thought you were straight?' It's that kind of thing I want to avoid. As I became more educated about queer issues I decided that it was [all right] for me to not want to label myself.

When I was in the process of coming out to myself and 'figuring it out,' I found that the other LGBTQ people around me were as absolutist as perhaps a general heteronormative society and their sentiments. You were either [gay] or straight. There is really so much [discrimination] within the community itself. I first would identify myself as 'liking women,' to keep it brief in the meanwhile of figuring out my sexuality. I just wouldn't settle down with the term 'lesbian.' I knew I was also attracted to men, though women more, but I think I was afraid of coming to that acceptance because of the informal 'bullying' from the LGBTQ [community] in 'making up your mind,' etc.

I have switched between bisexual and lesbian, but honestly I don't fit perfectly into either. Labels are there so society can classify you as something. Just live life, you don't need to label something for it to be real.

These respondents often used many more words than other participants to explain why they had moved away from a label and why it was important for them to remain unlabeled at this time in their lives.

Table 7

Using a Different Sexual Identity Label in the Past

Themes
1. No, I have never used another label
2. Bisexuality was used as a transitional label
3. I found a better or more accurate word for how I feel
4. My sexual identity or the way I viewed my sexual identity changed
5. Though I used a label in the past, I have moved away from using a label currently

Using a different sexual identity label in certain circumstances. Participants were asked to discuss if they ever used a different label in certain circumstances, and if they did, why they made that choice. Four main themes were uncovered during the thematic analysis of this section: (a) No, I never use a different label, (b) I sometimes use another label for convenience or simplicity, (c) I sometimes use another label to avoid potential risk, and (d) I use a different label because I consider these words to be interchangeable. Approximately a third of the respondents (33%) reported that they never used a different sexual identity label in certain circumstances. One again, although many respondents simply replied no to this question, a few went on to explain their reasoning further.

> No. Ever since I came out to my parents, I have been open about my sexuality. Open, meaning I don't flaunt it and push it into people's faces, but as in if I was asked the question, 'Are you gay?' I wouldn't deny it.

> No, that seems hypocritical to me.

> No. I don't think I should have to hide who I am so that others will not feel uncomfortable.

> Nope. Even amongst other lgbt individuals I don't use labels. The term gay feminizes you. While I have no problem with queens and fully support them, that's not me, and not what I want people to view me as.

Only a few participants decided to provide additional information, so no subthemes could be identified.

The second theme to emerge was that some participants used a different label in certain circumstances for convenience or simplicity. Within this theme, two subthemes appeared: (1) the demographics of the audience impacted whether the individual used a different term, and (2) the individual did not want to have to explain his or her chosen

identity label. For the first subtheme, participants often referred to the age of the

individual with whom they were speaking as a reason to use a different word, though

other demographics had an impact as well.

> It depends on the age of the people I am sharing my identity with. I think if and when I come out to my parents, I will NOT refer to myself as 'queer'—to them it is pejorative speech, to me it is empowerment.

> Yes. Sometimes I use Q&A or QPOC for queer&asian [sic] or Queer person of color if I'm talking to someone who knows those terms because it is more in line with how I see myself while maintaining an umbrella term.

> With older generations (like my grandparents' age) I will more frequently say gay or lesbian because those are terms they can relate to and that they understand slightly better.

Often these participants made a firm distinction between speaking with others who are

also part of the LGBTQ community and speaking with people outside of the community,

with more traditional sexual identity terms such as gay, bisexual, and lesbian being used

with those outside of the community.

> The second subtheme of not wanting to have to explain the chosen label often

referred to wanting to make communication with the other easier.

> Sometimes I'll just say I'm bisexual because not a lot of people know what pansexuality is. If I have to explain, I do.

> Sometimes, around people who I know are not totally comfortable with homosexuality, I refer to myself as 'gay' rather than 'lesbian.' While they are essentially synonymous, gay is shorter, easier to say, and easier to hear, perhaps because it is more widely used in popular culture. 'Lesbian' on the other hand has some very specific, sometimes negative, connotations.

> Sometimes I refer to myself as straight if I don't want to confuse people or have to explain why I don't like choosing a sexual identity. I also choose 'straight/heterosexual' on surveys if they don't have an option for not identifying with a sexual identity label.

For some of these individuals, they chose other words because they did not have the desire to more fully explain their chosen identity label; for others, using a different label came from a place of wanting to make communication easier. Participants from all identities, from the more traditional to the less traditional, stated that they do sometimes use different labels for convenience, suggesting that this is not only applicable to those individuals who use less common terms.

Many participants also discussed using different labels in certain circumstances in order to avoid potential risks, which was the third theme uncovered. Two subthemes emerged: (1) the individual was not out in all contexts or spaces, and (2) he or she felt a lack of comfort with his or her surroundings and so would avoid saying anything at all about his or her sexual identity. Those who fell within the first theme often discussed not being out to some or all of their family or choosing not to be out at work.

> At home I identify as straight, because I'm not out to my family. And I [don't] plan on coming out for a while. Both of my parents come from very religious backgrounds and have been taught that being gay is wrong, disgusting and a sin. At work I identify as straight for the most part, some of my co-workers know that I'm gay but not many. I'm employed at a grocery store and a lot of my family comes in to shop and my paranoia of them finding out keeps me from being [more] open. That and you can be fired for being gay in [my state].

> I almost always identify as straight, I'm out to very few people, and almost never challenge presumptions that I'm straight.

> Sometimes I am not as open about my sexuality with my more conservative family members, some of whom I'm not yet out to. I'd prefer they not know because they are very strong-minded/opinionated and would be rude or mean to me.

These individuals chose to identify as heterosexual so they could protect their identity from others who they did not feel would understand or be welcoming. Responses in the

second subtheme more often made reference to feeling unsafe in their surroundings and

so avoiding discussing their sexual identity at all.

> I sometimes simply won't comment or use any gendered language to mask my sexuality if I don't feel comfortable, and will just let people assume what they wish.

> I have never falsely identified as straight since coming out, although I do find myself avoiding situations where people talk about relationships and sexual identity. I will go out of my way to not out myself, especially in the workplace. I fear what co-workers or upper management would think of me, so I avoid the subject. But, the older I get, the more comfortable I become with talking about sexual identity and same-sex relationships with acquaintances and classmates. I feel if those people have a negative reaction to it, I don't have to talk to them anymore, whereas at work, I can't avoid the person(s) afterwards.

> I choose not to mention my sexual orientation unless directly asked, due to a climate of hostility where I live. In case someone asked me about my orientation and I considered it prudent to hide my sexuality, I would claim to be heterosexual. If I feel safe, I do not change the label I use for my sexuality.

> Straight…because I don't want to get beat up or treated differently or discriminated against.

Though only a few participants specifically mentioned physical confrontations, many

discussed a general feeling of not being safe in their surroundings. For these individuals,

it was safer to avoid using any label at all.

> The final theme to emerge in this question was that some participants used other

words in some circumstances because they believed the words to be interchangeable.

These individuals did not refer to any particular reason for using other labels.

> I technically identify as bisexual, but I can go by/relate to queer, straight, gay, or lesbian as well.

> I will often throw around terms like 'queer' and 'gay' in conversation, but I use them synonymous with 'lesbian'. To me, queer is simply an umbrella term for 'not-straight' sexualities and gay is an umbrella for gay and lesbian.

> I'll say I'm homosexual sometimes, but rarely. No reason why, just happens.

Participants who had responses that fell within this theme suggested that for them there was more fluidity in the language that they used. Rather than choosing one identity label as the only way they were comfortable identifying, these individuals found two or more words that could encompass their sexual identity.

Table 8

Using a Different Sexual Identity Label in Certain Circumstances

Themes
1. No, I never used a different label
2. I sometimes use another label for convenience or simplicity
The demographics of the audience impacted whether the individual used a different term
The individual did not want to have to explain his or her chosen identity label
3. I sometimes use another label to avoid potential risk
The individual was not out in all contexts or spaces
The individual felt a lack of comfort with his or her surroundings and would avoid saying anything about his or her sexual identity
4. I use a different label because I consider these words to be interchangeable

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Context and Label Choice

It was hypothesized that context would have a significant impact on the labels that youth chose to describe their sexual identity. Specifically, that youth would be more likely to choose traditional labels if they lived in certain geographic areas of the country, if they lived in rural areas, and/or if they identified as religious. If they lived in urban areas and/or if they identified as spiritual or as neither spiritual nor religious, they would be more likely to choose non-traditional labels. These hypotheses were not supported by the data collected in this study. No significant relationship was found between the type of label chosen and geographic location, rural or urban location, or spiritual or religious identification. This suggests that none of these categories significantly impact the type of label that youth currently choose. However, there may be some important interactions between these contexts that could influence youth in the label choices. For example, a youth living in a rural Southern area of the country that identifies as religious may be more likely to use a traditional label, while a youth living in an urban area on the West Coast may be drawn to a more non-traditional label or vice versa. The sample obtained for this study was not large enough to be able to explore these possibilities, but it is an area that may benefit from further research.

One potential explanation for these findings is that the Internet has allowed youth from all areas of the country to have similar access to information about different sexual identity labels. Some participants specifically stated that they spent time online researching potential labels. In the past, LGBTQ people had to leave their homes to find gathering places, often bars, in order to meet others who identified in similar ways

(Miller, 1995). Because of this, gay culture and language were able to remain stable and localized. With the advent of the Internet, individuals are now able to a find community online without ever leaving the comfort of their own home. A simple search on Google of the word "gay" yields over 980,000,000 results. Youth can now easily find information on everything from how to figure out your sexual identity, to how to come out, to how to find someone to date. On some websites, there are entire discussion boards dedicated to sexual identity labels and whether they are needed at all (Experience Project, 2012).

The Internet has also provided a significant increase in the visibility of individuals from all areas of the LGBTQ community. This has increased awareness of sexual and gender minorities who typically employ traditional sexual identity labels and has also opened up the possibility of more varied language. For example, on the British television show *Skins*, Franky identifies as genderqueer, and when asked if she is gay or straight, replies, "I like people" (Riese, 2011). Additionally, Captain Jack Harkness from *Doctor Who* is openly referred to as omnisexual throughout the series (Jensen, 2009). An American example is Samantha Jones from *Sex and the City* who refers to herself both as trisexual and pansexual throughout the course of the show (Henry, 2004). All of these characters open up the possibility of a wider range of sexual identity labels for their viewing audience. As more characters like these appear on television shows, the number of individuals using non-traditional labels may continue to grow.

Relevance of Traditional Labels

Subjects chose traditional labels at a higher rate in each of the proposed categories, suggesting that these identities are still relevant to youth today. Though it is

clear that youth continue to use traditional labels, the current data does not indicate

whether or not they are moving away from them over time. The speculation that sexual

identity labels may be becoming less appealing to youth overall may also be accurate

(Jayson, 2009; Savin-Williams, 2005). Over a third of the participants chose something

other than a traditional label, with 9.7% choosing no label at all. Longitudinal data is

needed to determine the continuing trends in label choice.

The current study found that youth choose different labels for very different

reasons. Some participants chose their label out of a sense of inevitability. This was the

only label for the way they felt, and therefore it was the label they were expected to use.

Many of the youth who expressed this sense of destiny in their word choice chose

traditional labels. It is possible that the continued popularity of these specific words has

less to do with their relevance, and more to do with their continuity and long standing

nature. Because these are the words that have been used with the greatest frequency over

the greatest period of time, they begin to feel almost monolithic, as though no other word

could take their place. Perhaps, as newer more nuanced words gain popularity, the older

standard labels will be treated less like the correct or only choice to label a particular

sexual identity.

Identity Development Models and Sexual
Identity Label Choice

Given the age restriction on participation, the subjects in this study are all likely

engaged in Erikson's (1950) fifth stage of development, *identity* versus *role confusion*, or

have recently completed it. As previously mentioned, Marcia (1980) expanded this stage

to include space for exploration. Marcia developed four identity statuses: *foreclosure,*

identity diffusion, *moratorium*, and *identity achievement*. Parallels to three of these can be found in the themes that emerged from the first question on how participants chose a sexual identity label. By definition, individuals currently in identity diffusion were not included in this study because they would have not made any commitments and were not currently engaging in exploration and having questioned one's sexual identity was part of the exclusion criteria.

Participants who are currently in *foreclosure* most likely fell into either the second subtheme of the first theme, *This is the word that fits best – using this word without exploration because it is the word for how I feel*, or the second theme, *This is the word society places upon me* (For a table of the themes see Appendix D). Individuals in both of these themes talked about using their chosen word without first engaging in any exploration, which is a hallmark of foreclosure. Marcia (1980) stated that individuals in foreclosure typically make a commitment based on parental opinion, rather than on their own exploration. For individuals exhibiting a foreclosed sexual identity status, the label they are using appears to come from a different source of authority, specifically society rather than a parent. Participants in the second subtheme of the first theme may have picked up their label from the culture that surrounds them, while those in the second theme feel that society has forced this label upon them without their consent.

Those who fell in the first subtheme of the third theme, *I need more fluidity than words allow – I have not decided what word is best for me*, most closely line up with *moratorium*. In Marcia's (1980) model, *moratorium* is a time of exploration where adolescents are actively testing out different possibilities without making any firm commitments. Participants whose answers fell within this theme discussed uncertainty

about what their sexual identity might be and what label may be most appropriate for them. Some labeled it a "questioning process" or talked about exploring their attractions. While many participants chose to use a label they perceived to be the least constricting (i.e., not straight, queer), others eschewed labels altogether. If these youth continue along Marcia's developmental model, they will eventually complete their exploration and make a firm commitment to an identity, leading them into identity achievement.

The ultimate goal of Marcia's (1980) model is to reach *identity achievement*, which occurs once an adolescent has completed his or her exploration and has made a firm identity commitment. The two themes that most closely align with this status are the first subtheme of the first theme, *This is the word that fits best – having an experience of exploration and arrival at their chosen label*, and the second subtheme of the third theme, *I need more fluidity than words allow – I do not use a label because my identity is too fluid or cannot be contained by language*. Individuals in these two subthemes generally mentioned a period of exploration or trying on of other labels before landing on their chosen label. Additionally, these participants expressed at least some finality in their decision to use their particular label.

Given the ease with which these themes correspond with Marcia's (1980) identity statuses, it may be that youth move through sexual identity labeling in a parallel process to committing to occupation or ideology in Marcia's model. However, because this data is a snapshot of the participant's current outlook on his or her sexual identity labels rather than a longitudinal exploration of the labeling processing, it is difficult to say that Marcia's model is the correct or ideal parallel. Researching the potential overlap between

this model and the sexual identity labeling process may be a fruitful area for further

inquiry.

Fluidity of Sexual Identity

Participants discussed the fluidity of their sexual identities in each open-ended

question. For some of these individuals, fluidity in labels was needed because their

identity had changed over time, while for others it was because their understanding of

their identity had evolved. In the first question, the theme *I need more fluidity than*

words allow emerged. Within this main theme, two subthemes emerged: *I have not*

decided what word is best for me and *I do not use a label because my identity is too fluid*

or cannot be contained by language. Youth whose responses fell within the first

subtheme expressed uncertainty not only about their label but also about their identity.

For them, remaining unlabeled allowed them the space to more fully explore to whom

they were attracted and how they experienced that attraction. As society has begun to

move towards a more fluid understanding of sexual identity, these youth appear to have

used that to their advantage by using that fluidity for greater exploration. If this move

toward a fluid understanding of sexuality continues, youth may choose to remain

unlabeled longer as they come to better understand their own sexual identity or may not

adopt a label at all.

Youth who fell into the second subtheme discussed being unable or unwilling to

capture their sexual identity in a single word. Many of these participants specifically

addressed concerns about the negative stereotypes associated with more traditional labels.

For them, choosing one of these labels would mean that others might make assumptions

about how they enacted their sexual identity, which would be untrue or misleading. Part

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of the desire to adopt or create new labels may come from a wish to distance oneself from the baggage that comes along with more established words. By creating or adopting new language, individuals then have the opportunity to present their unique identity in the manner that feels most authentic to them.

The need for fluidity also emerged in the second question through the theme, *My sexual identity or the way I view my sexual identity has changed*. For these youth, their identities shifted and so the language they used had to change as well to accommodate that shift. Many of the youth whose responses fell into this theme stated that they previously identified as heterosexual before having an experience that led them to question that identity. This suggests that not all youth are necessarily aware of their sexual identity from a very young age; some may not have that particular realization until their teenage or young adult years. Additionally, this may suggest that an individual's sexual identity may change and evolve over time, without the previous identity necessarily being invalidated.

Finally, the need for fluidity, at least in language, also emerged in the third question through the theme *I consider these words to be interchangeable*. These participants easily used alternative words in different situations, without any identified reason for the change. While they may have a primary sexual identity label that they would typically use, they were also able to relate to other identity labels. Though their identity may feel stable and unchanging, the language that they employ in order to describe it was more malleable.

Sexual Desire on a Spectrum

Another important finding is the possibility of sexual desire existing on a spectrum. Some participants, in addition to identifying the gender or genders of the people to whom they typically experience attraction, also identified the level of sexual desire they commonly experienced by using words like asexual[20] and demisexual[21]. It is generally assumed that all individuals experience sexual attraction as a normal and healthy part of their identity. However, for these individuals, sexual attraction is not always an important part of the equation. For some participants, their level of experienced sexual attraction was their entire sexual identity (i.e., identifying solely as asexual or demisexual). For others, they differentiate between their romantic and sexual attractions (i.e., biromantic demisexual or panromantic asexual). One participant described himself as a biromantic homosexual, suggesting that he experiences sexual attraction only towards other men but romantic attraction towards both men and women.

An individual's level of sexual attraction or desire is an important piece of sexual identity that is not generally considered or discussed (Prause & Graham, 2007). When sexual attraction is studied, it is typically in relation to the object of an individual's desire, rather than the degree to which they experience that desire. In fact, experiencing no or low sexual attraction is considered a diagnosable disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Because of this, youth who grow up without experiencing any type of sexual attraction may believe that there is something wrong with them. With increased access to information on the Internet, youth may be better able to find others who feel the

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[20] Individuals who identify as asexual do not experience sexual attraction. Asexuals still experience romantic or emotional attraction and often still desire to find and form close relationships with others.
[21] Demisexuals do not experience sexual attraction unless they have formed a strong emotional connection with someone. They are sometimes said to exist between sexual and asexual individuals.

same way they do and may then be able to build their identities around these feelings. As more research is conducted on youth's experience of sex and sexuality, degree of sexual desire will be an important piece of the puzzle to include.

Application of Results

This research showed that while some youth are choosing not to use sexual identity labels or are employing newer more nuanced labels, traditional sexual identity labels remain relevant to today's youth. It is clear that youth are adopting a wider range of more diverse labels rather than moving *en masse* towards or away from a particular way of labeling. As more and more programs are developed to target sexual and gender minority youth, it is important that those implementing these programs are aware of the wide range of labels they are likely to see.

Over time the list of letters employed to represent sexual and gender minority individuals continues to grow and become more multifaceted. In order to respect everyone's identities, the standard acronym of LGBT continues to expand to the point of being unwieldy (i.e., LGBTQQIAATS[22]). As identity labels become more and more nuanced, it becomes increasingly difficult to sufficiently honor every individual's chosen identity label. The results of this research suggest that this will become even more complex and with this complexity psychologists are challenged to find language that is inclusive, respectful, and practical when working with this community. One attempt at capturing this complexity is the phrase sexual and gender minorities, which has begun to gain some traction in the literature, but has yet to be widely adopted by the general public.

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[22] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Ally, Two Spirit

This study also demonstrated that the evolution of language does not appear to be limited by any particular geographic or demographic characteristics. It is an important finding because there is often an assumption that individuals from a particular area or cultural background may be more or less likely to label their identity in a particular way. In reality, these findings reinforce the fact that therapists, and all individuals who work with this community, need to remain open to the experiences and identities of those with whom they work. Without this openness, clients may feel denied or rejected which can have a significant negative impact on the therapeutic relationship.

Limitations of the Study

One significant limitation of this study is the demographic composition of the participants. Though efforts were made the obtain the most diverse sample possible, this sample is not representative of the general population of 18 to 22 year olds in the United States. For example, the racial makeup of this sample skewed heavily towards individuals who identified as White. Because of this, racial minority voices may not be accurately or completely represented in the obtained information. Most of the study participants (85%) stated that they lived in an urban area. Larger cities may provide more support for LGBTQ individuals, regardless of other factors like geographic location. Because of this, youth may feel more supported to explore their sexual identity and try on more non-traditional labels. Additionally, with a more readily identifiable community, youth may be able to use no label and still receive appropriate support.

Furthermore, 88% of the participants stated that they were currently students. While there is no further information available about whether they are high school or college students, and whether they are attending community college or four year

universities, this is another significant skew in the data. Though efforts were made to recruit participants who were not currently enrolled in school, primarily through the use of PFLAG, a good portion of the survey distribution list was for college and university LGBTQ student groups. Youth who participate in these groups may have greater access to information and support from other likeminded peers. They may also be more motivated to conduct their own research on potential label choices as demonstrated by their motivation to participate in this type of group. Without a more representative sample these findings cannot be assumed to represent the general population.

A good portion of the bias in the demographics of the sample may be due to the fact that the survey was distributed via the Internet. While this method allowed for greater ease in data collection and a greater degree of geographic variability, it may have also created some limiters on the data. Previous research on the demographic patterns of Internet-based research has shown that participants tend to be predominantly young, well-educated, White males with middle to upper socioeconomic status living in metropolitan areas (Siah, 2005). Many of these patterns are demonstrated in the demographics collected for this study. More research with different sampling methods will be required before these findings can be said to be representative of how youth choose and use sexual identity labels in the United States today.

Suggestions for Future Research

Previous research in this area has focused mainly on sexual identity development, with little attention given to the process of choosing and using labels. Though this study has illuminated some areas of sexual identity label development, there is still a great deal more to be examined. As youth continue to come out earlier and employ a wider range of

sexual identity labels, information on how these choices impact their lives will be important in influencing how services are advertised and provided.

There are several key areas of this study that warrant further investigation. For example, a smaller sample of in-depth interviews with individuals may be able to expand upon how labels are chosen, what that process looks like, and how it impacts an individual's sexual identity. Additionally, further exploration of the experience of having no label will be important. Unfortunately, this study was not able to recruit a large enough number of individuals with no label to be able to say anything specific about this group. Since youth are choosing to remain unlabeled, it may be important to explore their reasons and reactions to this experience. Gathering information on how youth use labels to protect or define themselves may also help in understanding the experience of youth who question their sexual identity.

In addition to more focused, in-depth research, broader research with more robust demographics may also be informative. While the Internet does allow for an easily obtainable data pool, it does not generally produce generalizable results. Data collection that focuses on recruiting more individuals in rural areas, people of color, and youth who are not currently students may produce a more representative sample. Longitudinal research would also allow for better information about the development over time of youths' sexual identity labels. Furthermore, a sample including younger participants who may still be working through choosing their sexual identity labels may also be informative. This approach could also be used to explore how youth choose and use gender identity labels, which may be especially relevant as more and more youth begin to identify outside of the gender binary.

Finally, research on characteristics that may lead youth toward certain labels could also be helpful in targeting interventions for particular sexual and gender minority populations. This research did not effectively explore what influences youth to choose one particular label or one type of label over another. It may be that certain personality or temperament characteristics influence youth toward choosing more traditional, non-traditional, or no label. Knowing how these things interact may assist in directing resources and support to the youth who need it most.

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Appendix A: Sexual Identity Labels

- Asexual
- Asexual (Panromantic)
- Asexual. Anything beyond that can fluctuate, but I typically identify gay or pan outside of that
- Between straight and bi
- Bi
- Bi-sexual
- Biromantic demisexual
- Biromantic homosexual
- Bisexual
- Bisexual, preference toward women
- Demisexual
- Demisexual, bisexual
- Female
- Fluid
- Gay
- Gay – 5 Kinsey scale
- Gay (Lesiban [sic])
- Gay or Queer
- Gay, bisexual, bent
- Heterosexual
- Homoflexible
- Homosexual
- Homosexual (gay)
- I don't really know at this point
- Lesbian
- Lesbian/gay female
- Lesbian/homosexual
- Lesbian/queer
- Mostly gay
- Not straight
- Open/gay
- Panromantic pan-demisexual
- Panromantic/demisexual
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Queer or bisexual
- Queer or woman that loves women
- Queer, fluid, bisexual, polysexual
- Questioning/gay
- Straight
- Straight female
- Transgender FtM with an attraction to females
- Usually Queer. But I really don't like labels. I prefer Queer based on it's [sic] more umbrella implication of non-heteronormativity, and rather a more fluid and non-specific term, as well as its historical activist implications in the term

Appendix B: Gender Identity Labels

- (Female to) Male
- Bigender; genderqueer
- Cis female
- Cis male
- Cisgender(ed) female
- Cisgender(ed) male
- Cisgender
- Definitely not transgender, but also not exactly cisgendered, but rather somewhat genderqueer in gender identity. But mostly female identity
- Female
- Female to male transsexual
- Female with trans* experience
- Female/femme
- Female/neutral
- Female/woman
- Femme
- Gender fluid/gender variant
- Gender fluid/non-conforming female
- Genderqueer/fluid
- Gender questioning
- Genderqueer ciswoym
- I'm a guy. But kind of like a femme-boy
- Male

- Male (cisgender)
- Male (FtM)
- Male-to-female transsexual
- Male/man
- Man
- Masculine Female
- Non-binary. Beyond that, unknown; too fluid to find a label I'm fully comfortable with outside non-binary.
- Pangender
- Sex identity: Female; Gender identity: Cute badass
- Trans guy
- Trans*
- Transgender
- Transgender (MtF)
- Transmale
- Transmasucline
- Unsure
- When asked: genderqueer. When given the 2 common labels: woman
- Woman
- Woman/womyn
- Womyn

Appendix C: Survey

What is your age?

What is your race?

What is your geographic location?

What is your highest level of completed education?

Are you currently employed?

Are you currently a student?

Do you consider yourself religious, spiritual, or neither?

Do you live in a rural or urban area?

What is your sexual identity? (Please leave this question blank if you do not use a sexual identity label.)

What is your gender identity? (Please leave this question blank if you do not use a gender identity label.)

What is your sexual identity and how did you choose this label?

Have you ever used a different label for your sexual identity? If so, what was it and why did it change?

Do you ever use a different sexual identity label in certain circumstances? If so, why?

Appendix D: Themes

Choosing a sexual identity label

1. This is the word that fits best
    a. Having an experience of exploration and arrival at their chosen label
    b. Using this word without exploration because it is the word for how I feel
2. This is the word that society places upon me
3. I need more fluidity than words allow
    a. I have not decided what word is best for me
    b. I do not use a label because my identity is too fluid or cannot be contained by language

Using a different sexual identity label in the past

1. No, I have never used another label
2. Bisexuality was used as a transitional label
3. I found a better or more accurate word for how I feel
4. My sexual identity or the way I viewed my sexual identity changed
5. Though I used a label in the past, I have moved away from using a label currently

Using a different sexual identity label in certain circumstances

1. No, I never use a different label
2. I sometimes use another label for convenience or simplicity
    a. The demographics of the audience impacted whether the individual used a different term
    b. The individual did not want to have to explain his or her chosen identity label
3. I sometimes use another label to avoid potential risk
    a. The individual was not out in all contexts or spaces
    b. The individual felt a lack of comfort with his or her surroundings and would avoid saying anything about his or her sexual identity
4. I use a different label because I consider these words to be interchangeable