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Sexual Minority Adolescents and Affirming Experiences:
An Exploration of Messages "It's ok to be gay"

Section A:
Sexual Identity Development Amongst Sexual Minority Adolescents:
What Does the Extant Literature and Research Suggest Regarding
Positive Environmental Influences?
(5 500, plus 220 additional words)

Section B:
Sexual Minority Adolescents and Affirming Experiences:
An Exploration of Messages "It's ok to be gay"
(8 000)

Section C: Critical Appraisal
(2 000)

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# Summary of MRP Portfolio

**Section A**: Sexual Identity Development Amongst Sexual Minority Adolescents: What Does the Extant Literature and Research Suggest Regarding Positive Environmental Influences?

The review aims to critically evaluate literature pertaining to positive environmental influences on sexual identity development amongst sexual minority (SM) adolescents. Extant research suggests SM adolescents are at risk of adjustment difficulties; there is a dearth of research regarding positive influences on development. Positive influences include micro-system factors, such as friend and family affirmation, with limited understanding of macro-system factors.

**Section B**: Sexual Minority Adolescents and Affirming Experiences: An Exploration of Messages "It's ok to be gay"

The research utilised an ecological approach to investigate positive environmental factors, exploring SM adolescents' affirming experiences. A mixed- method design with qualitative and quantitative data was implemented: a focus group, online survey and respondent validation. Participants reported affirming messages were experienced, but were not accessible enough. Participants were actively engaged in seeking affirming messages, most commonly experienced on-line and from friends. The importance of role models, similar others and self- acceptance was recognised.

**Section C:** Critical Appraisal

In a critical appraisal of this study the author reflects on the process and learning involved, evaluating strengths, applications to clinical practice and further development.

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Emma Klinefelter

# Section A

Sexual Identity Development Amongst Sexual
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Literature and Research Suggest Regarding
Positive Environmental Influences?

5500 (plus 220 extra words)

**Abstract**

This review aimed to consider literature pertaining to sexual identity development amongst sexual minority (SM) adolescents, followed by research investigating positive influences within their social environments. Literature regarding sexual identity development, including an overview of general identity development, is reviewed. A critique and synthesis of eight identified reviews highlighted the importance of the environment in which the adolescent is developing. SM adolescents are understood to be at heightened risk of adjustment problems, thought to be a result of negative environmental influences such as discrimination.

The review identified a dearth of research into protective factors in SM adolescent development. Our knowledge of positive influences in the lives of SM adolescents is therefore limited. The review then aimed to consider nine identified individual research studies exploring positive influences on SM identity development and well- being. Findings identified positive influences at a micro-systems level, such as family and peer affirmation and support. Extending the sphere of the micro- system, a sense of social connectedness and belonging was also identified. However, research did not explore positive influences within the macro-system, or consider how SM adolescents actively seek positive influences, their perceptions of these influences and perceived effects on identity development and well- being.

**Introduction**

This review aims to consider sexual identity development amongst sexual minority (SM) adolescents and positive influences within their social environments. Literature regarding sexual identity development, including an overview of general identity development, is reviewed. In view of the breadth and depth of knowledge in these areas, this synthesises books, chapters and journal reviews. In order to consider in detail how the social environment positively influences sexual identity development and psychological well-being, specific research studies are then described, synthesised and evaluated.

**Adolescent Sexual Identity Development**

       **Adolescent Identity Development**

To allow an understanding of sexual identity development as embedded within general identity development, two influential identity theories will be briefly outlined, Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1966, 1980). Erikson initially proposed adolescence as a time of identity development, stating, "the unique developmental task of adolescence is to solidify a personal identity" (Erikson, 1968, p. 50). Erikson's theory of life span development, in which individuals proceed through a series of stages each characterised by a major crisis of conflict, continues to guide our understanding of adolescence. The crisis of 'Identity vs. Role Confusion' involves the establishment of a coherent sense of self, akin to "a sense of knowing where one is going, and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count" (Erikson, 1968, p. 165). Identity development relies on affirmation and on the way society "identifies the young person, recognizing him as somebody who had become the way he is" (Erikson, 1968, p. 159).

Marcia (1966, 1980) elaborated on Erikson's theory and proposed four identity statuses, conceptualising a series of developmental stages. These include: Identity diffusion, when the

individual has not yet made personal commitment to a set of behaviours or attitudes and does not yet feel compelled to do so, identity foreclosure, when a personal commitment to certain attitudes or behaviour is made without a struggle to consider alternatives, and moratorium, when the individual experiences a crisis of experimenting and evaluating different behaviours and attitudes. Identity achievement is synonymous with maturity when identity commitments have been made, creating a sense of personal continuity. Research demonstrates that identity development is implicated in psychological well- being (Meeus, 2011).

### Introduction and Context to Sexual Minorities

An understanding of today's adolescent as a sexual being must take into account the historic and socio- cultural context determining expressions of sexuality (Savin- Williams, 2005, 2011). The ways that social, political and cultural contexts shape individuals' understandings of sexual identities have been essential themes in scholarship (Foucault, 1978). Although society's attitudes towards SM status has slowly shifted, with significant social and political changes and increased visibility, being SM can still be regarded by some as deviant, unnatural and problematic (Rotheram- Borus & Langabeer, 2001). Diamond and Savin- Williams (2008) proposed SM sexuality violates current culturally defined sexual norms, and although in UK legislation SM individuals are now considered almost equal to heterosexuals (an exception is marriage), this has not always been the case. Prior to the 1960s Gay Rights Movement, the dominant discourse was of perversion and pathology (D'Augelli & Grossman, 2001). Homosexuality was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's list of mental disorders in 1973 (Conger, 1975), and from the World Health Organisation's list in 1992 (Department of Health, 2007).

In order to consider SM identity development in our current socio-cultural environment, eight recent reviews are included (see Appendix A.1. for more detailed search methodology). Electronic searches were undertaken from 2000 to 2012. This time frame was chosen as it avoided an outdated exploration of current socio-cultural environments. All NHS Library Review databases were utilised to ensure no previous review had been conducted. Manual searches of abstracts and references and cross-referencing were also utilised. Search terms were: 'sexuality', 'homosexual', 'non-heterosexual', 'same sex', 'sexual orientation', 'sexual minority', 'sexual identity, 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual, 'queer', 'LGB', and 'LGBQ' to capture the construct of 'sexual minority'. Searches were limited to include research reviews, literature reviews and meta-analyses, with age brackets of adolescence, young adulthood, and ages 12- 25.

The abstract of each review was manually screened and met the inclusion criteria if they reviewed research and theory regarding identity development in sexual minority adolescents and were published in English. One book, five book chapters and two review journal articles were identified. The following discussions and critiques are synthesised, with reference to source material where relevant.

### Definitions and Prevalence

Defining and measuring sexual orientation and identity can represent significant barriers to understanding the nature and complexity of sexual identity development. Diamond and Savin- Williams (2008) considered sexual orientation as "consistent enduring pattern of sexual desire for individuals of the same sex, the other sex, or both sexes" (p. 395). Various components are referred to and measured, including sexual arousal, cognitive components, behaviours and self- labelling. They proposed sexual identity as a "culturally organized conception of the self according to a sexual label, usually lesbian or gay, bisexual or

heterosexual" (p. 395). The term 'SM' is utilised to define those who experience some same sex attraction.

Research suggests SM adolescents consider attractions (sexual and romantic) to be the major element of the definition (Friedman, et al., 2004). Saewyc (2011) discussed whether SM status is seen as a consistent and enduring end of a developmental trajectory, or a fluid social construction, influenced by social and personal opportunities available. Savin- Williams (2005) considered the diversity of developmental pathways of SM adolescents, noting adolescents may or may not identify with SM status depending on timing, degree of awareness, intensity and frequency of attraction and different terminology employed.

Difficulties with the operationalisation of SM definitions have repercussions for prevalence research. As a result, rates have been found to vary between 1- 15% (Savin- Williams & Ream, 2007). This figure is dependent on measurements utilised (highest for romantic attraction component) and degree of non- heterosexuality considered (highest if 'mostly heterosexual' was included). Recent longitudinal population- based research found that an average of 10% of male youth and 20% of female youth described themselves as SM over four time points (Ott, Corliss, Wypij, Rosario & Austin, 2011).

**Sexual Minority Identity Development Theory**

Theories of SM identity development will now be considered. These began to develop in the late 1970s, attempting to describe the timing and patterns of sexual identity development (e.g. Cass, 1979). This was seen as unfolding along developmental trajectories with specific tasks to achieve universal SM milestones, including 'coming out' (in which the individual discloses SM status to others). Rotherham- Boris and Langabeer (2001) considered Marcia's (1980) operationalisation of Erikson's (1968) theory as applicable to sexual identity

development. Most SM identity theories, though not always explicitly referencing Erikson (1968) or Marcia (1980), have the general notions of identity formation and integration as implicit (e.g. Cass, 1979, Coleman, 1981, Chapman & Brannock, 1987, Fassinger & Miller, 1996, Troiden 1989).

Cass's model (1979) presupposed a pre-determined temporal sequence of six stages. 'Identity confusion' described a time of recognizing sexual feelings, action and thoughts as SM, leading to identity foreclosure (rejection of identification) or identity exploration. 'Identity comparison' involved comparing feelings and experiences with others. Through feedback the individual evaluates SM status as desirable, too costly or temporary aberration (with a consideration of bisexuality). The following stage is 'identity tolerance' when the individual gains more clarity and makes contact with others, in which affirming (or otherwise) responses affect identity acceptance. 'Identity acceptance' can be achieved, with a clearer and more positive image of themselves as SM, accompanied by more disclosure. Discrepancies between positive responses from other SM individuals and negative responses from the dominant heterosexual culture are felt, and this incongruity is dichotomized into a source of 'identity pride' towards SM culture and anger towards the dominant culture. Finally 'identity synthesis' is achieved, with an integrated sense of self with sexuality as an important but not exclusive aspect of self.

These early models have been critiqued for their assumptions of homogeneity and a rather rigid linear process. More recent critiques include the proposal that a singular developmental pathway does not exist. Diamond and Savin- Williams (2008) proposed multiple pathways of development in different domains, each sensitive to an adolescent's personal characteristics and social environments. Saewyc (2011) and Rotheram- Borus and Langabeer (2001) criticised the models for their assumption of an underlying orientation

that unfolds during adolescence and is then considered as stable and enduring- which is not supported by research (e.g. Diamond, 1998, 2003). Such theories are also limited in consideration of the wider social context and the interface of cultural, ethnic and racial, gender (biological sex), class and socioeconomic factors. Research suggests BME youth may interpret and express sexuality in markedly different ways, e.g. research with Latino, African American and Asian ethnicities suggests SM status is often considered a violation of familial cohesion and loyalty (e.g. Chan, 1989).

The models do not discuss differential paths for males and females. Diamond and Savin-Williams (2008) discussed large gender differences in development, such as males' earlier pursuit of sexual contact (Herdt & Boxer, 1993). Saewyc (2011) attended to the consideration of bisexuality. Both popular and research narratives often imply bisexuality is a transitional stage to homosexuality, and it remains under- theorised and under- investigated (Saewyc, 2011).

Research contributing to the models has been criticised for retrospective data with predominantly white middle class males who self identified as SM (Anhalt & Morris, 2003). Cohort effects may limit the usefulness of the models with 21$^{st}$ century youth as significant political and cultural changes have occurred within the last 20 years (Savin- Williams, 2005, 2011). Saewyc (2011) considered that changing societal norms and opportunities for relationships might also influence manifestation of SM. Diamond and Savin- Williams (2008) posited researchers now face the more difficult task of charting the multiple interacting factors producing diversity in developmental pathways.

**Sexual Minority Adolescents and Adjustment Difficulties**

**Overview of Adjustment Difficulties**

A great deal of research has focused on health disparities and increased risk of problems among SM adolescents (Anhalt & Morris, 2003). Higher rates of suicidal ideation and attempts have been found in comparison to heterosexual peers (Coker, Austin & Schuster, 2010), as well as higher levels of distress and depression (see Saewyc, 2011). Saewyc (2011) highlighted the consistent results despite the diversity of sampling methods, definitions of SM, regions, and time frames utilised. She concluded from a meta-analysis that there is a higher prevalence of SM youth who indicate emotional distress, depression, self- harm, suicide ideation and suicide attempts compared to heterosexual peers. Marshal, et al.'s (2008) meta-analysis found that SM adolescents are nearly three times more likely overall to report substance use than heterosexual adolescents and higher risk sexual behaviours are also identified (e.g. Goodenow, Szalacha, Robin & Westheimer, 2008). Reviews also referred to academic concerns, though research was scant (Thompson & Johnston, 2003). It is thought the social environment (including difficulties with accessing support and experiences of victimisation and discrimination) plays a role in these difficulties (Thompson & Johnston, 2003).

SM youth have been found to be significantly more likely to be targeted for victimisation and discrimination. Research indicates that anywhere from 30% to 80% of SM individuals have experienced some form of victimisation based on sexual orientation (Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001). Homophobic abuse in schools is well documented (Anhalt & Morris, 2003), with Hunt and Jensen's (2007) finding that 65% of SM students reported being bullied within the UK school system (this figure rose to 75% in faith schools). In their review, Rivers and D'Augelli (2001) recognised the experience of being 'made to feel different' as a common experience linked to victimisation. Rotheram- Borus and Langabeer (2001) discussed social sanctions

resulting in SM adolescents leading double lives, in which they hide one aspect of their identity from most social contexts. Victimisation is acknowledged to have behavioural, psychological and somatic sequelae that can heighten vulnerability and risk for health and mental health problems (Ryan and Rivers, 2003).

It is important to note however, that there may have been a biasing of findings towards recognition of problems and difficulties due to sampling frames in a number of studies, e.g. utilising SM youth who sought support from services (Thompson & Johnston, 2003). Furthermore, much of the research is cross-sectional, and therefore limited in its ability to explain why these health disparities exist (Savin- Williams, 2011).

**Overview of Theory regarding Adjustment Difficulties**

Stigma management (Goffman, 1963) is utilised as a framework for understanding adjustment difficulties, suggesting direct links between stigma experienced and increased rates of mental health problems. Family rejection is considered a significant contributor to stigma management, social exclusion and subsequent health disparities. Savin- Williams (2005) acknowledged that although youth from other minority backgrounds are raised in families and communities that are supportive of their minority status, SM youth often struggle in the context of family stigma and wider stigma.

The minority stress framework (Di Placido, 1998; Meyer, 2003) has also been utilised to provide a theoretical understanding of challenges faced by SM adolescents within their social environments. This suggests the stress experienced by SM individuals can lead to adverse mental health outcomes. The processes of minority stress include stressful external events, expectations of stressful external events, internal negative attitudes, and concealment of sexual minority identity. Stressful external events refer to experiences such

as those listed above, victimisation and rejection within social contexts. It is argued that individuals then come to expect negative events. Furthermore, negative attitudes towards one's sexual orientation are internalised from negative societal discourses, referred to as internalised homophobia. The process of concealing one's sexual orientation is thought to be a learned protection to minimise the chances of stressful external events, but creates problems regarding social inclusion and support. An ameliorating factor of identification with, and subsequent support from, the minority culture is included in the framework. It also emphasises that societal attitudes are crucial to individuals' self- acceptance.

Savin- Williams (2005, 2011) has raised criticism with our current understanding of SM adolescents. He proposed a new "post gay" generation, adolescents who no longer consider SM a central identifying status. He argued that the lack of methodological rigour to research in this area, and the personal interest of researchers in wanting to better the lives of SM youth, mean that far more attention has been called to the difficulties faced by SM adolescents rather than their strengths and resilience. He proposed the strengths of this population have gone unnoticed, and that little has been done to find out what they do to help themselves. He also concluded that in most regards SM youth are just like all other adolescents with similar developmental needs and concerns; they are not a homogenous group but vary among themselves in predictable ways.

Furthermore, the majority of reviews are North American, describing predominantly North American research (one review was co-authored in the UK and USA). Considering the importance of context in understanding the lives of SM adolescents, it is imperative research is developed to further understand the lives of UK SM adolescents. In addition, many of the reviews considered research from the 1980s and 1990s, which may now be considered 'out of date' (Savin- Williams, 2005).

**Adolescent Sexual Identity Development and Protective Environmental Influences**

As identified, the importance of strengths and protective factors promoting healthy

developmental outcomes within this population has been under-investigated. Saewyc (2011)

described protective environmental factors among the general population of adolescents as

including supportive and nurturing family relationships, supportive friends, caring other

adults, connectedness to school and religiosity (Blum, McNeely & Nonnemaker, 2002). She

acknowledged these factors could be at play for SM adolescents across different

environmental domains. Protective factors across environmental domains will now be

discussed.

It was decided to review individual research studies in order to develop a detailed

understanding of the role of protective factors in the lives of SM adolescents, and identify

areas where understanding could be enhanced. Nine research articles exploring protective

social and environmental factors were identified (see Appendix A.2. for search

methodology). Electronic searches were undertaken from 2000 to 2012 as in the previous

search. Manual searches of abstracts and references and cross-referencing were again also

utilised. Search terms were as before to capture the construct of 'sexual minority' combined

with 'protective', 'environment', 'social', 'strengths', 'coping', 'resilience', 'support',

'endurance', 'positive', 'asset' and 'well- being'. Searches were limited to empirical studies,

again with age brackets of adolescence, young adulthood, and ages 12- 25.

The abstract of each research study was manually screened and met the inclusion criteria if

it investigated protective social and environmental factors for sexual minority adolescents

and was published in English. Most research was carried out in the USA, the remaining in

Canada, Australia and Israel. A consideration of environmental factors included the micro

system (e.g. relationships with peers and family) and macro system (e.g. cultural values,

political forces). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework was used to situate this structure. Research studies were therefore loosely grouped by systematically expanding ecological micro and macro systems around the adolescent: family, peers, and the wider social environment (including other adults, role models, school, community and social connectedness).

### Family Environment

Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz and Sanchez (2010) investigated a protective factor of family acceptance in SM adolescents in the USA, hypothesising affirmation or acceptance within the family in adolescence will be associated with positive adjustment in young adulthood. 245 SM individuals between the ages of 21 and 25 were recruited from LGBT venues. The sample was equal in gender and ethnicity (white or Latino). Quantitative measures were derived from prior qualitative work exploring family acceptance, measuring the frequency of positive family reactions coded from previous interviews. Measures of adjustment and health included a self esteem and social support scale, a Centre for Epidemiological Studies-Depression scale (CESD) (Radloff, 1977) and one item each for general health, suicide ideation and behaviour. Participants were asked to complete the measure of family acceptance recalling their family when they were an adolescent, and other measures for their current self. The analysis utilised quantitative statistics, including chi square tests, ANOVAs and logistic regression analysis.

Family acceptance and affirmation were found to predict greater self- esteem, social support, and general health status, and protected against depression, substance use and suicide ideation and behaviours. Latino, immigrant, religious families and families with a lower socio-economic status were found to be less accepting, and gender (biological sex) and sexual identity were not significantly associated with family acceptance and affirmation.

Ryan, et al. (2010) concluded parents have a crucial role in promoting adolescent well-being, with lasting protective influences.

**Family and Peer Environment**

Williams, Connolly, Peplar and Craig (2005) investigated social support within family and peer contexts. They aimed to explore links between sexual orientation and adjustment, taking into account victimisation and social support. A community sample of 97 SM Canadian high school students was drawn from a larger project of both heterosexual and SM students. Participants completed measures of depressive symptomology and externalised behaviours, and social support, which explored trust, closeness and companionship with mothers and best friends. Quantitative analysis included MANOVAs and multiple regression analyses.

Results identified that SM participants had significantly higher levels of externalised behaviours and depressive symptoms than heterosexual peers, with a significant multivariate effect for SM status ($p < 0.05$). SM participants had significantly lower levels of closeness with mothers and companionship with friends ($p < 0.01$). Overall, both social support and victimisation mediated the link between SM status and psychosocial factors ($p < 0.05$). The authors concluded that depression and externalising symptoms accrue largely because of victimisation experiences and lack of support.

Shilo and Savaya (2011) investigated the effects of family and friend support on mental health among SM youth in Israel. They hypothesised perceived social support and a lack of perceived social undermining would have a significant positive correlation with well- being, and SM acceptance and disclosure. Participants were 461 self identified SM youth between 16- 23 years old, with an equal gender distribution. Sampling procedures included

questionnaires at SM youth groups and online youth forums, and snowball sampling. A 38-item measure of distress and well- being provided a global mental health index and self-acceptance, social support and social undermining were measured using items with likert scales. Correlational analysis and structural equation modelling were applied.

Family support was significantly positively correlated with wellbeing (.28) and negatively with mental health distress (-.26), and friend support was significantly correlated with self acceptance (.14), disclosure (.23), well being (.23) and mental health distress (-.16). Social acceptance was strongly associated with participants' own acceptance (.19). No gender differences were found; however, bisexual participants reported significantly lower self and social acceptance. This study acknowledged the importance of social support and acceptance, and highlighted the importance of perceptions of SM youth within social and familial settings.

Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl and Malik (2010) also investigated the role of friend and family support, utilising a matching theory of support that stipulates support is most beneficial when specifically addressing stresses at hand. They aimed to explore SM youths' perceptions of support for SM related issues and for other issues. Participants were 98 SM youth between 18- 21 years old (33% female with range of ethnicities), recruited through college groups, community organisations, study advertisements and friend referrals. Participants completed quantitative measures about support from three sources: family, friends and SM friends. A measure of sexuality stress, an emotional symptoms index, and scales assessing the perceived availability of support related and unrelated to sexuality were also completed. Single hierarchical linear regression analysis was carried out.

Family and hetero- sexual peer support for sexuality stress was found to be less available than support for other stressors (p<0.001), SM friends provided the highest levels of sexuality stress support (p<0.001). Higher levels of sexuality support related to decreased emotional distress, after controlling for gender. The final model included main effects for gender, sexuality support, sexuality stress and the interaction of sexuality stress and support, and was found to account for 15% of the variance in emotional distress. The authors concluded that in- group friendships are a powerful support.

### Wider Social Environment

Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) examined factors within and expanded beyond family and peer systems (family connectedness, teacher caring, other adult caring and school safety) as protective against suicide attempts. A national school survey with 83 731 students was carried out (41 044 males, 80.5% white). Respondents who were sexually active were included in analyses (21 927 students). SM youth were identified as those who reported SM sexual experiences. Suicide ideation and attempts, family connectedness, teacher caring, other adult caring including items for spiritual leader, community adults or other adult relatives, and school safety were measured using multiple items.

Multiple logistical regression and general linear modelling were carried out. 2255 respondents reported same sex sexual experiences (10.3%). Over half had considered suicide (56.5%), 37.4% reported a suicide attempt. SM youth reported significantly lower levels of each protective factor. Analysis indicated that SM youth had odds of suicide ideation and attempts that were 1.60- 2.63 times that of heterosexual youth, controlling for age, race and family structure. Family connectedness, adult caring and school safety were all significantly protective against ideation and attempts. SM status explained approximately 2% of variance in suicide ideation for males, and 6% for females. When all four protective

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factors were added, this increased to 12% and 14%. The authors concluded SM status only accounts for a small portion of variability in suicide ideation and attempts, if protective social factors were enhanced; suicide is expected to be considerably lower.

Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers and Bogaert (2006) also explored protective social factors across multiple domains of the intra-personal, interpersonal and environmental, comparing groups of heterosexual and SM Canadian high school students. Specifically they looked at friendship quality, family relationships, school and neighbourhood quality, utilising a survey of 7430 students (3475 males, 13- 18 years). The analysis focused on a subset of 3876 respondents who completed a sexual attraction measure, from which four groups were identified (exclusively heterosexual, EHA, mostly heterosexual, MHA, bisexual, BSA, and same sex attraction, SSA). The survey included measures of intra-personal functioning (depression, social anxiety, self esteem, daily hassles), interpersonal factors (parental relationships measured using parental warmth, knowledge and involvement, friendship quality and victimisation), and environmental factors (school climate and neighbourhood quality). Analyses included chi squared analysis, MANCOVA and ANCOVA and pair wise contrasts.

The main effect of sexual attraction group was significant for each of the intra-personal, interpersonal and environmental indices, bar friendship quality and school culture. The EHA group had most positive self reports for each developmental index, followed by MHA, then the BSA and SSA groups. The SSA group had significantly less positive results on well- being, parent relationships, victimisation and neighbourhood quality. Effect sizes between all groups ranged from 0.25 (friendship quality) to 0.71 (parent relationships). The study suggested implications in terms of promoting positive parent relationships and neighbourhood quality.

Bird, Kuhns and Garofalo (2011) carried out an investigation of role models, stipulating RM provide a mechanism for fostering resilience by exposing at risk youth to healthy and adaptive behaviour and values. They explored the accessibility of role models for SM youth and the relationship between the presence of role models and psychological distress. A convenience sample of 496 ethnically diverse 16- 24 year olds in the USA were recruited via community based sources. Participants completed computer assisted interviews measuring role models and risky sexual behaviour, drug use, alcohol binging, and psychological distress. The prevalence of role models and differences in health outcomes were determined using analysis of co-variance models. Analyses indicated 60% of participants reported having a role models (parents (8%), family members (9%), friends (8%), political/community leaders (6%), musicians (21%) and actor/entertainers (1%)). The majority of participants reported an inaccessible role models, individuals with whom the participant had no direct relationship (especially true of younger participants). No significant relationship was found between the presence of role models and psychological distress, drug use, alcohol bingeing, or risky sexual behaviour. However, participants with inaccessible role models showed increased psychological distress ($P < 0.01$) in comparison to those with accessible role models or those without. The researchers therefore concluded that inaccessible role models may not be sufficient for protecting youth from negative health outcomes, and SM youth need opportunity to build direct role models relationships.

McCallum and McLaren (2011) explored a protective factor in the larger domain of the community, investigating sense of belonging to a general community and an SM specific community as predictors of depressive symptoms amongst self identified SM adolescents in Australia. They aimed to examine the interrelationships between a sense of belonging and depressive symptoms using a direct effect, additive, moderation or mediation model. Ninety-nine participants aged 14- 18 were recruited via a SM group social event. A sense of

belonging instrument assessed levels of valued involvement and fit in a community. Depression was measured using the CESD scale (Radloff, 1977). Correlations and hierarchical regression analyses were carried out.

Support for the direct effects model was found: higher levels of belonging were associated with lower levels of depression. However, only the sense of belonging to the general community contributed significantly to the prediction of depression in regression analysis. This was found to mediate the relationship between the sense of belonging to the SM youth group and depression. It was concluded therefore that the experience of feeling valued, needed and significant within the wider community was particularly influential.

DiFulvio (2011) utilised life story methodology to explore protective factors across a range of micro system domains. She explored the theme of social connectedness; the importance of belonging where youth perceive they are cared for and empowered within their social context. The methodology was chosen to enable important expressions of identity shaped by personal, social and cultural contexts. Data collection from 22 interviews and two focus groups with 15 participants between the ages of 14 and 22 was carried out in the USA. Purposive sampling methods allowed a representation of genders, sexualities and ages.

Social connectedness emerged as a process by which participants demonstrated their resilience, connectedness to individuals and large groups. Themes of 'affirming the self', 'finding others like you' and 'moving towards action' were identified. These included a constant negotiation of 'self as different' in relation to the larger culture and coming to terms with 'otherness'. Connections to adults were seen as providing a model for dealing with adversity, and SM youth groups were used to find connection in the face of

disconnection and isolation at school or family settings, and to share the experience of being an 'other'.

**Research Synthesis**

Research suggested that social environmental factors contributed to the well- being of SM youth across different domains. Micro system factors in SM youth lives were found to protect against psychological distress and suicidality. This can be seen in the direct micro system of the family, in terms of family affirmation, acceptance and support. Extending the micro system, peer support, particularly SM peer support, contributed to well- being also. Considering a further extended micro system, protection came from relationships with other adults, accessible role models and school climate. Extending this further still, neighbourhood quality, a sense of belonging to the general community and social connectedness were also identified.

**Research Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to the reviewed research and subsequent conclusions. Although all research aimed to explore social factors, different definitions and subsequent measurements were used throughout the studies. These each constituted different aspects of social or environmental influences and no common themes of how SM adolescents access and experience these protective factors were identified. Furthermore, a lack of coherent theoretical frameworks was apparent. Some research was well grounded in adolescent identity development (e.g. Doty, et al., 2010); others were not (e.g. McCallum and McLaren, 2011).

Sampling difficulties and a subsequent lack of representative samples is a known challenge with this population.  There are a number of different ways SM status was recognised and

different inclusion criteria were used. Some studies did not describe how SM status was measured (e.g. Bird, Kuhns & Garofalo, 2011). Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) measured SM status in terms of sexual behaviour only- this neglects youth who may experience same sex attraction or identification but have not engaged in sexual behaviour. Research by Busseri, et al. (2006) considered SM on a continuum, allowing for comparisons and an understanding of differences in social protective factors based on a more sensitive consideration of SM status. The study carried out by Williams, et al. (2005) included participants who were questioning SM identity, a neglected aspect of sexual identity development (Van den Berghe, Dewaele, Cox & Vincke, 2010).

Difficulties with representative sampling affects possible generalisation to the wider population of SM youth. Some research used sampling through SM organisations (e.g. Ryan, et al., 2010), which does not allow access to participants who may not be 'out' and utilising organisations and support. Some research had a population- based sampling frame (e.g. Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006), promoting generalisability. Online recruitment is recommended in accessing a more representative sample (Savin- Williams, 2001); the usual barriers to online activity (e.g. computer literacy) are not considered relevant (Shilo & Savaya, 2011), and use is high amongst SM adolescents (Jones & Fox, 2009). An 'opt in' bias may have affected all research using purposive sampling.

A consideration of the influences of age, race, ethnicity and religion was limited in some studies (e.g. McCallum & McLaren, 2011). This is a particular problem when exploring the social context of the lives of SM youth. The research conducted in Israel (Shilo & Savaya, 2011) gave a thorough consideration to the influence of ethnicity and culture in this sample and cautioned against generalising to other cultures and times. Some research only accessed

older adolescents (e.g. Ryan, et al., 2010, Doty, et al., 2010), sometimes due to difficulties with parental consent (a potential barrier for SM youth participation).

A further limitation was the sole use of self- reports, leaving findings open to bias. It may have been helpful in research investigating family protective factors to explore parent ratings (e.g. Ryan, et al., 2010). Difficulties with measures were also apparent in a number of studies. Although most researchers discussed the validity and reliability of measures utilised, some studies relied on the use of one sole item to measure factors. For example in Bird, Kuhns and Garofalo's (2011) study, participants were asked just one question regarding RMs (which was not specific to their SM status), leading to caution regarding interpretation of findings. Although most studies used measures with adequate consideration of reliability, some measures used, e.g. the CESD scale (Radloff, 1977) in Ryan, et al.'s (2011) and McCallum and McLaren's study (2011), were not normed on adolescent populations and had low test- retest reliability. Furthermore, studies were cross- sectional in nature, so although significant associations between social protective factors and well- being were identified, it is not possible to make causal inferences.

Eight of the studies were quantitative in nature, and a strong emphasis on a quantitative understanding does not allow for a rich depth of understanding of the meaning of social protective factors through the eyes of SM youth. DiFulvio's (2011) findings provided a more nuanced understanding, but there was a limited description of analysis, and no data control techniques. Of similar importance is a limited consideration of more distal protective social factors within this population. Research has so far concentrated on SM adolescents in the micro-system, and there is a dearth of research into the ways in which SM youth experience acceptance, affirmation, social connectedness and general support from the macro-system, including factors such as cultural norms and values from politics or religion.

Furthermore, none of the identified studies was UK based. Considering the emphasis on social context, it is important to develop an understanding of social factors in UK SM youths. Lastly, no studies explored how SM youth are accessing, experiencing and utilising the social support, affirmation and belonging. It may be helpful to consider Bronfenbrenner's (1979) positioning of the individual as being impacted on, and being impacted by, their ecological environment, and explore how SM youth seek out support and affirmation across domains.

**Conclusion**

This review acknowledged adolescence as a time of identity development associated with psychological well- being, and considered how the social environment impacts this. Sexual identity development may be negatively affected by environmental factors due to the identified negative appraisals and experience of victimisation, which may explain the higher rates of adjustment difficulties and distress that have been identified in this population. There is limited understanding and appreciation of positive social influences for SM adolescents. The reviewed research suggested the role of acceptance and affirmation from family, peers and community, including accessible role models and a sense of belonging and social connectedness in SM adolescents' lives. Although important, this understanding is limited in terms of a detailed understanding of what SM adolescents themselves consider as positive social influences. Furthermore, explorations of positive social influences within the macro system have not been undertaken. In addition, research has yet to develop an appreciation of SM adolescents' own abilities to access and utilise positive environmental factors. Our understanding of these aspects of environmental influences in the lives of SM adolescents could be further developed.

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Emma Klinefelter

## Section B

# Sexual Minority Adolescents and Affirming Experiences: An Exploration of Messages "It's ok to be gay"

(8000)

**Abstract**

This research took an ecological approach to investigating protective factors in the lives of sexual minority adolescents. It aimed to investigate affirming experiences, exploring whether sexual minority 'affirming messages' (AM) are experienced, the process of experiencing AM and their perceived effects.

A mixed- method cross sectional design with three phases of qualitative and quantitative data collection was implemented. Participants lived in the UK and Ireland, aged between 16 and 24 years and identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning. Phases included a 12 participant focus group, an online survey completed by 107 participants and respondent validation with five participants.

Participants reported AM were experienced, but were not accessible enough. AM were less accessible when first considering sexual identity, a time of negative feelings. Participants were actively engaged in seeking AM, most commonly on-line and from friends and least commonly from school. The importance of role models and similar others was recognised. AM were identified to impact on self- acceptance.

Results suggested although AM are not considered accessible enough, they have a positive impact. This has implications for provision of AM within educational settings and the media. This research suggests the perceived importance of affirming experiences to sexual minority adolescents.

**Introduction**

"The unique developmental task of adolescence is to solidify a personal identity" (Erikson, 1968, p. 50). Erikson's influential theory of life span development described a series of developmental stages, each characterised by a major crisis of conflict to be resolved. The crisis of 'Identity vs. Role Confusion' in adolescence is thought to be influenced by the social environment which plays a significant role in recognizing and helping to shape identity. This includes affirming, and being affirmed by, the social environment (Erikson, 1968).

Marcia (1966, 1980) elaborated on Erikson's theory and proposed four adolescent identity statuses: identity diffusion (no personal commitments to a set of identity behaviours or values), identity foreclosure (personal commitment to certain values or behaviour made without considering alternatives), moratorium (crisis of experimenting and evaluating different values or behaviours without personal commitment) and identity achievement (identity commitments made creating a sense of personal continuity). The achievement of the identity task is understood to contribute to psychological well- being (Kroger, 2007).

Although these frameworks continue to be well utilised, they contain only limited consideration of the influence of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class and culture, and recent research suggests less of a progressive linear movement between stages, with development beyond adolescence (Kroger, Martinussen & Marcia, 2010). Current research and theory based on these frameworks endorse the significant impact of the social environment on identity development.

## Adolescent Sexual Identity Development

Sexual identity development is thought to occur alongside other aspects of identity development, capturing the development of sexual desire for the same sex, the other sex, or both. Various dimensions of sexual orientation exist including identity, attraction and arousal, behaviour and emotional preference. Diamond and Savin- Williams (2008) proposed sexual identity as "a culturally organized conception of the self usually labelled as lesbian or gay, bisexual or heterosexual" (pg. 395). 'Sexual minority' (SM) describes those who experience same sex attraction. Savin- Williams and Ream (2007) suggested prevalence rates of SM adolescents vary between 1- 15%, but are affected by difficulties with definitions and representative sampling. Recent longitudinal population- based research found that 10% of male and 20% of female youth described themselves as a SM (Ott, Corliss, Wypij, Rosario & Austin, 2011).

Rotherham- Boris and Langabeer (2001) considered identity development theories (Marcia, 1966, 1980, Erikson, 1968) as underpinning sexual identity theories (e.g. Cass, 1979, Coleman, 1981, Troiden, 1989). Mapped onto Marcia's stages, development begins with diffusion (sexual identity not considered or salient), followed by foreclosure (assume a heterosexual identity without reflection) or moratorium (process of exploring identity, behaviours and attractions), leading to identity achievement (explored and committed to sexual identity). During the process of moratorium SM adolescents actively seek social influences such as a reference group of similar others (Rotherham- Boris & Langabeer, 2001). However, similar to the underpinning theory, these models have been criticised for their assumptions of homogeneity and a rather rigid linear process. Furthermore, cohort effects of research directing the models may limit their usefulness with 21st century adolescents (Savin- Williams, 2001).

An understanding of today's adolescent as a sexual being must take into account the current socio- cultural environment influencing the expressions of sexuality. Although attitudes towards SM status have slowly shifted with social and political changes and increasing visibility, being SM can still be regarded as unnatural and problematic (Rotherham- Borus & Langabeer, 2001). Understanding the importance of the social environment on general identity development leads to questions regarding how the current social environment may impact on sexual identity development.

### SM Adolescents and Adjustment Difficulties

A great deal of research has focused on health disparities and increased risk of problems for SM adolescents (Saewyc, 2011). These include higher rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in comparison to heterosexual peers (Coker, Austin & Schuster, 2010), as well as higher levels of distress and depression (Saewyc, 2011). Although the cross sectional nature of most studies made it difficult to ascertain the causal explanatory mechanism for disparities, it is thought social influences are significant and that victimisation and discrimination in the lives of SM youth play a role. Research indicates that anywhere from 30% to 80% of SM individuals have experienced victimisation (e.g. Ryan & Rivers, 2003), which is acknowledged to have psychological sequelae that can heighten vulnerability (Ryan & Rivers, 2003). Negative social influences may inhibit SM adolescents' abilities to negotiate the task of identity development and achieve positive psychological well- being.

The minority stress framework (Di Placido, 1998, Meyer, 2003) has been utilised to provide theoretical understanding of these processes. Stressful external events (experiences of victimisation and discrimination), expectations of such events, internal negative attitudes (internalised from negative societal discourses), and concealment of SM identity are all implicated. Concealing sexual identity is thought to be a learned protection to minimise

stressful events, but creates problems accessing support. The framework suggests

identification with SM culture contributes to resilience.

**Adolescents and Resilience**

Resilience is defined as the capacity to manage life's challenges and set- backs (Moen &

Erickson, 1995). One way of contextualising these capacities and challenges is through

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework of social systems, describing successively

encompassing levels from micro systems to macro systems: from proximal variables in the

micro system such as family, to distal variables in the macro system such as cultural

environments. It considers the interactions of the individual with persons, objects and

symbols in the social environment. In adolescence resilience literature this includes the

quality of relationships with caregivers, support systems including mentors, and school

connectedness (e.g. Blum, McNeely & Nonnemaker, 2002). Regardless of this helpful

existing contextual framework, there is a paucity of research investigating resilience factors

across environmental systems in which SM adolescents develop (Saewyc, 2011).

**SM Adolescents, Resilience and Social Influences**

There is an understanding that SM adolescents are at risk of negative health outcomes and,

although important, this is an incomplete account as it does little to help us understand how

SM adolescents transcend adversity. Social influences are understood to both enhance

and/or impinge on identity development (Heaven, 2001) and research indicates how this

may impinge on development. However, there is a limited understanding of how social

influences promote resilience and lead to improved psychological well- being.

That social support from the environment is beneficial to SM adolescents can be evidenced

by research regarding the impact of micro systems of the family, and also other relationships

and social group membership. A number of studies have identified micro- system environment resilience factors such as family acceptance and affirmation, e.g. Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz and Sanchez (2010) found family affirmation was a predictor of greater self-esteem and general health status in SM adolescents, protecting against depression and suicidality. Friend and peer support has also been shown to be influential, e.g. Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl and Malik (2010) found higher levels of 'sexuality support' from peers related to decreased emotional distress.

Social group membership and social modelling have also been identified as important environmental influences. DiFulvio (2011) identified themes of social connectedness, belonging and similar others. McCallum and McLaren (2011) also explored a sense of belonging and concluded the experience of feeling valued within the community was particularly influential. Bird, Kuhns and Garofalo (2011) investigated role modelling as a mechanism for resilience, finding youth with inaccessible role models had higher levels of distress.

These studies suggest the importance of micro- system environmental influences. No research investigating macro- system environmental influences was identified.

### Research Rationale

We understand social influences to impact on aspects of identity development and associated psychological well- being. The negative influence of discrimination is understood to be linked to poor mental health and lower levels of well- being. However, despite social influences being recognised in general adolescent resilience literature, and an appreciation of social affirmation in identity development (Erikson, 1968), there is a limited understanding of positive social influences in SM adolescent literature. It is proposed that

life experiences of SM adolescents are often characterised by efforts to seek social support and affirmation of identity (D'Augelli, 2003), yet we know little about these experiences.

In the current changing societal context of increased visibility and changing attitudes towards SM, now is a pertinent time to be exploring social influences. Furthermore, research has yet to adopt an integrative ecological environmental approach to studying the lives of SM adolescents. This may allow an understanding of the potential protective influences across multiple environmental domains and provide balance to the common focus on adjustment difficulties (Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers & Bogaert, 2006).

### Research Aims and Questions

The research aimed to explore whether SM adolescents experience affirmation regarding sexual identity, the content and sources of such affirmation, and how affirmation may be perceived to affect development and well- being.

1. Do SM adolescents perceive affirming messages (AM) that it is positive and acceptable to be LGBQ (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and questioning)?

2. If SM adolescents experience AM, how actively engaged are they in seeking them out and in what ways do they do this?

3. If SM adolescents experience AM, what is the nature and source of the messages and when are they experienced?

4. What are the perceived effects on development and well- being?

**Methodology and Results**

**Design**

A mixed-method reflexive design triangulating three sources of quantitative and qualitative data was used.

**Phase One** employed a focus group to identify themes regarding experiences of affirmation and guide research. **Phase Two** utilised an online survey exploring affirming experiences. **Phase Three** employed respondent validation to characterise the main findings and provide further richness and clarity.

Methodology and findings will be reported separately for each phase after an overview of methodology consistent across phases.

**Participants**

A purposive sample of adolescents was recruited. The inclusion criteria for all phases were participants between the ages of 16-21 who identified as LGBQ and lived in the UK or Ireland. This age range allowed for an exploration of late adolescent identity development, recognised as significant (Kroger, Martinussen & Marcia, 2010), and included reflections on earlier development. The inclusion of 'questioning' youth allowed recruitment of those questioning sexual identity, who have been neglected as they are harder to reach (Van den Berghe, Dewaele, Cox & Vincke, 2010).

**Analysis**

Quantitative analysis utilised descriptive and comparison statistics. Qualitative analysis utilised thematic analysis (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006, Boyatzis, 1998), chosen as it provided a rich, detailed and complex account of data. This analysis involved an exploration of shared

themes within the narrative each participant provided on the given issue. This allowed

analysis of each participant's personal perception of affirming experiences, and

acknowledged differences between experiences, suiting a sample that, whilst being

homogeneous in SM status, may be heterogeneous in affirming experiences. Themes were

developed from across the data set as a whole; each text unit was applied to appropriate

themes and could be coded more than once. Respondent validation using thematic analysis

allowed a characterisation of main themes to assess whether these resonated with

respondents, and enabled theme prioritisation.


### Quality Control

The reliability and validity of measures and analyses were addressed via the following:

- The focus group schedule was developed through discussions and advice from five
  individuals meeting inclusion criteria and professionals working with SM
  adolescents.

- The survey and respondent validation report and questions were piloted on five
  individuals meeting inclusion criteria. Changes were made to terminology and
  structure to ensure suitability and sensitivity.

- Inter-rater reliability of thematic analysis was carried out by an independent rater.
  Across the phases, 20% of the data set was coded using coding manuals (Appendix
  B). A Cohen's kappa value of 0.76 was found indicating good reliability (Clark- Carter,
  1997)

- Response validation was interwoven into the design, allowing for a rigorous
  appraisal of themes.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was gained from a university ethics panel. Ethical concerns in relation to on-line research were considered and BPS (2007) guidelines followed. The nature of issues explored necessitated an acknowledgement of the possible uncomfortable or distressing impact of sensitive questions and information regarding appropriate support services was provided. Data were stored securely and all identifying information was removed.

**Phase One**

Phase one used a focus group to identify themes regarding experiences of AM and guide future phases.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited through a LGBQ youth support service. They were given age appropriate verbal and written information and completed a consent form (Appendix C). The focus group was held over 1.5 hours at the service premises, in a youth-friendly environment.

**Participants**

Twelve participants took part, six participants were female, six male (age range 16- 21, mean= 18.1). Two participants were Black or Minority Ethnic, the remaining were White British. Four participants identified as lesbian, five as gay and three as bisexual.

**Framing**

A well framed focus on affirming experiences and a clearly identified but flexible focus group agenda was employed (Appendix D), allowing for an in- depth exploration of a sensitive topic (Krueger & Casey, 2009). This method explicitly used group interaction to generate data,

beginning with a broad area of discussion, and moving to more specific discussion as directed by participants. It suggested a range of issues to be explored at Phase Two, and also influenced terminology and recruitment strategy.

**Results**

Thematic analysis identified differences in whether participants reported experiencing AM, some participants reported AM from a range of sources, and others reported "It doesn't exist!". Participants appeared actively engaged in seeking out AM, through online activity, attending SM youth services and accessing LGBQ literature and film.

Discussions regarding the impact of sexual identity and location led to an understanding of '*differences in access to AM*'. Participants reported on specific difficulties of accessing AM for bisexual young people and those in rural locations. The impact of location was discussed, and participants spoke of LGB individuals 'flocking' to places known for 'being LGBQ affirming'.

Sources of AM identified included: '*micro- level sources*' such as friends and family, and '*macro- level sources*' such as media (e.g. film, magazines, TV, music, comics), gay campaigns and politics. Participants also referred to youth and health services. The role of online activity in participants' lives appeared significant, and included accessing SM youth forums.

The theme of '*affirming the self*', i.e. positive messages about being gay from the self, was also recognised. Participants reported AM as arising from within themselves. One participant offered the following understanding:

> "I just think of it as an internal thing, like I don't really care what anyone else thinks, I know it sounds like a cliché, but I don't care what anyone thinks, I do what I want".

Participants also reflected on the development of this internal AM, for example:

> "When I was younger it (affirming the self) was a lot more different, cos I didn't have a lot of self-confidence".

The nature of AM was also discussed, and participants identified the importance of *'role models'* and *'similar others'*. They spoke of the significance of finding 'like minded people', 'being understood' by other LGBQ people, and described a number of role models. One participant described a role model at school:

> "It was a small grammar school so everybody knew each other. I was quite surprised to learn that he was gay. I think it was quite refreshing to see somebody who could play sports, who's quite keen on his studies, someone who's popular within the school, you know, being quite open about his sexuality, and being open not just about that but about the fact he's got a boyfriend and he had a gay life. I thought it was really really refreshing".

The significance of *'evaluating AM'* was acknowledged. Participants discussed the importance of the quality and quantity of AM. One participant spoke of the lack of both quantity and quality of LGBQ magazines:

> "I love my magazines, and I criticise Diva for not being up to the same sort of quality as you get in a straight magazine, because it's almost giving an excuse, for 'oh yeah, they're second class', like there's spelling mistakes and silly things like that."

Participants also described evaluating AM in terms of whether they esteemed the AM provision and source, e.g. the positive impact of an LGBQ role model increased when the role model was esteemed before the participant discovered they were LGBQ:

> "I always knew that Stephen Fry was gay, but two other ones I really like and look up to, are Derren Brown and Simon Amstell. They were both gay but I didn't know, I looked up to them before I knew".

The *'effects of AM'* were also identified. Participants spoke of feeling 'more comfortable' and 'safer'. It appeared important for AM to be experienced in relation to homophobia. Participants spoke of AM as countering the effects of homophobia, perhaps regulating the

negative emotional impact. One participant, after describing a homophobic experience, reported:

> "So yeah, when you hear like negative things like that, it's good to have the positive things re-enforcing too, and yeah, it sort of makes me feel more comfortable"

### Results to Inform Phases Two and Three

Participants reported using the description 'gay' as an 'umbrella term', as a method of describing those who are 'not straight', and used terminology of 'lesbian, gay and bisexual', or 'LGB'. They considered sexual orientation to be related primarily to LGBQ identity. This terminology was utilised in the survey. Participants also directed future participant recruitment strategies.

The themes identified above influenced the survey development including the range of intra- personal, micro system and macro system sources of AM, and differences in access to these sources. The significance of the process of evaluating AM led to explorations of the quality of AM, and the identified effects of AM were also further investigated.

### Phase Two

Phase Two utilised an online survey based on themes identified in Phase One with the aim of exploring affirming experiences.

### Procedure

An online research environment was chosen as it is a popular communication modality for SM youth (Jones & Fox, 2009). Internet research also provided anonymity which may be particularly important for the target population. Two sampling procedures were used. Purposive on line recruitment included advertisement and links to the survey on LGBTQ

youth service websites, LGBTQ youth social websites and social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) (see Appendix E for examples of sites). Secondly, snowball sampling was undertaken and participants were asked to relay the survey link to others meeting the inclusion criteria. Participants were provided with information and completed a consent page before completing the survey (Appendix F). The survey was online for four months in 2011.

### Measures

The survey was formatted using a mixed approach of likert scales and open and closed questions (Appendix G). Participants were asked about feelings towards SM identity, and experiences of AM (early, recent, common and influential). Questions also focused on AM availability and quality, and effects of experiencing AM. Hence, both qualitative and quantitative data were generated allowing categorisation of results.

### Results

One hundred and nine completed surveys were submitted. Two were excluded from analysis as they did not meet the inclusion criteria or were not completed. Of the 107 participants, 54 participants were female and 53 were male, including two transgender males (See Tables 1 and 2 for demographic information).

**Table 1: Table presenting sexual identity information**

| Sexual Identity | Percentage of sample (N) |
| --- | --- |
| **Participants identifying as Gay** | 46% (49: 5 females 44 males) |
| **Participants identifying as Lesbian** | 29% (31 females) |
| **Participants identifying as Bisexual** | 21% (23: 15 females 8 males) |
| **Participants identifying as Questioning** | 4% (4: 3 females<br>I male) |

**Table 2: Table presenting demographic information:**

| Demographic | Percentage of sample (N) |
|---|---|
| **Age** | |
| **16- 17 years old** | 43% (46) |
| **18- 19 years old** | 36% (39) |
| **20- 21 years old** | 21% (22) |
| **Location** | |
| **South of England** | 46% (49) |
| **North of England** | 13% (14) |
| **Midlands** | 7% (7) |
| **Scotland** | 16% (17) |
| **Wales** | 1% (1) |
| **Northern Ireland** | 1% (1) |
| **Ireland** | 17% (18) |
| **Urban location** | 68% (73) |
| **Rural location** | 32% (34) |
| **Ethnicity** | |
| **White British** | 64% (72) |
| **White Irish** | 14% (16) |
| **BME** | 22% (19) |
| **Religiosity** | |
| **Religious** | 16% (17) |
| **Not religious** | 84% (90) |
| **Education and employment** | |
| **School** | 24% (25) |
| **College** | 26% (27) |
| **University** | 36% (39) |
| **Not in education** | 14% (16) |
| **In employment** | 39% (42) |
| **Not in education or employment** | 2% (2) |

### Affirming Experiences

Just over half of participants (53%) reported they live in a society not accepting or affirming

of SM status. Forty-two percent of participants reported AM were 'there if you look for

them' and 80% reported AM were not obvious and accessible enough.

### Active Process of Accessing Affirming Experiences

At the time of first questioning sexual identity, 51% of participants reported they did not

hear or see AM. The mean age participants reported questioning was 12.6 years old (s.d. =

2.4, range 7- 19). Participants were asked about feelings at that time, which were coded and

counted as positive, negative or mixed. Mostly negative feelings were reported (70% of participants). These included worry, confusion, loneliness and fear, e.g. "Terrified, I thought I wasn't going to be able to lead a normal life. I knew I was going to get bullied heavily".

Analysis showed 79% of participants reported they were actively engaged in searching for AM in order to experience them, with just over half (52%) reporting this process as 'easy'. Qualitative data suggested "the information is there, you just need to find it". Thematic analysis supported the theme of the importance of on line activity found in Phase One:

> "I found an online LGBTQ support group, which was very positive and welcoming. It was important because nobody around me was offering any kind of support at this time"

The theme of accessing on line LGBQ role models was identified, elucidating a more detailed understanding of active online searching for AM:

> "There were so many more gay role models on the internet than there were in my real life".

Qualitative descriptions of AM highlighted differences in the process of seeking AM based on demographic variables. Participants noted it was more difficult for those who identified as bisexual, were in rural locations, religious and still at school to access AM. The intersection of religion, education, rurality and culture was perceived as creating difficulty in accessing AM particularly among Irish and Northern Irish participants. Difficulty of AM accessibility regarding transgender identities was also reported. However, statistical analysis comparing both single and additive demographic categories and the ease of seeking AM revealed no significant difference. This suggests either that such perceptions are not borne out in reality, the effect size is too small to be detected given the sample, and/or the sampling strategy did not access participants who reflected this stratification.

Qualitative analysis suggested the process of seeking AM was reported to occur alongside the process of filtering out homophobic messages. The following quote illustrates this:

> "My brother made disparaging remarks and my mum corrected his opinions saying it was okay to be gay. She cited my godparents, both of whom are women, as an example. It was shortly after this that I came out to her, the revelation about my godparents in conjunction with her outspoken beliefs of equality providing me with the courage to do so".

### The Source and Content of Affirming Experiences

Participants reported whether they experienced AM from a range of sources. Frequency analysis indicated AM were most likely to come from the following: friends, on-line, LGBQ organisations and communities and youth organisations (Table 3). AM were also reported from media, such as magazines and newspapers, TV, film, music and books or comics. They were least likely from religion, school, neighbourhood and community and politics (Table 4).

**Table 3: Table showing most common sources of AM**

| Rank | Number of participants | Source of Affirming Message | Example of AM |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 94 (88%) | Friends | 'The ones that know are extremely supportive, the ones that don't rarely say bad stuff' |
| 2 | 93 (87%) | On line | 'On the 'It Gets Better Project' recently, I watched some inspirational videos that told you it's ok to be gay' |
| 2 | 93 (87%) | LGBQ Organisations and community | 'My experiences in LGBQ groups have been fantastic. They are always super welcoming and happy to accept you as you are' |
| 4 | 80 (75%) | Youth Organisations | 'In Scouts, I expected a negative reaction when I came out but everyone was so positive'. |

**Table 4: Table showing least common sources of AM**

| Rank | Number of participants | Source of Affirming Message | Example |
|---|---|---|---|
| **16** | 46 (43%) | Politics | 'The recent banning of aid to countries where homosexuality is illegal' |
| **17** | 44 (41%) | Neighbourhood and community | 'Walking down the street arm in arm. The only comments we got were we looked good together' |
| **18** | 38 (36%) | School | 'My Catholic all girls school is allowing me to put a gay rights angle on an anti-discrimination workshop, it was the first time I realised my school was behind me' |
| **19** | 13 (12%) | Religions | 'Most people who have a faith are fine- it's just really boring to publish 'Christian says it's normal to be gay' as a headline'. |

Participants were asked to report the five most influential sources of AM; data were then ranked with appropriate weighting given to each reported source (e.g., source rated most influential was given a score of '5', next source given '4', etc). 'School' was found to be the *most influential* source, despite being one of the *least common*. An example of an influential AM within school was noted as:

> "At school, when my form tutor and his partner adopted a baby he took time off for paternity leave. Everyone knows he's gay but no one cares – he's the best teacher we have".

'School' was followed by 'On Line', 'TV', 'Family', 'Media', 'Friends' and 'Public Places' (e.g. campaign posters on buses) in rank order of influence (see Table 5).

**Table 5: Table identifying sources of influential AM**

| Rank | Source | TOTAL number of participants reporting source (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | School | 53 (50%) |
| **2** | On Line | 46 (43%) |
| **3** | TV | 41 (38%) |
| **4** | Family | 36 (34%) |
| **5** | Media | 33 (31%) |
| **6** | Friends | 31 (29%) |
| **7** | Public Places | 27 (25%) |
| **8** | Press | 18 (17%) |

Themes regarding AM content included *'acceptance from friends and family* and *'similar others'* and *'role models',* involving *'personal stories of success and struggles'. 'AM from the self'* and *'AM evaluation'* were also recognised as themes.

*'Acceptance from friends and family'* was often referred to. Participants spoke of the importance of friends and family responding positively to disclosures of sexual identity, reassuring participants of 'love regardless of who you love'. Acceptance from parents, siblings and close friends were reported, such as:

> "My mother sat me down at 17 and assured me … she would love me unconditionally. That was a huge relief".

The impact of *'family values'* was also identified, with participants reporting family environments accepting of sexual minorities. This acceptance appeared through the presence of gay family members or discussions of difference and equality from a young age:

> "My mum and dad raised me to believe it was OK to be gay, so I always knew it was".

Themes of *'similar others'* and *'role models'* were also identified. Participants spoke of seeking out similar others, those who also identified as LGBQ, through accessing forums online and attending SM organisations. Examples of AM of similar others in media, music and print were also noted. The impact of accessing similar others is articulated by these quotes:

> "The programme 'Growing up gay' made me confident enough to finally come out, I saw for the first time other people like me".

> "I wasn't exactly looking for the answer to "is it ok to be gay" as much as finding other people who were like me.  Straight friends are all good, but sometimes I needed someone who I could talk to about how I felt and them knowing exactly".

*'Role models'* were identified both within individual lives and the wider culture, ranging from friends to teachers to celebrities. It seemed accessing role models had the impact of allowing participants to hear *'personal stories of success and struggles'*. For example, participants cited lesbian musicians Tegan and Sara discussing their experiences of homophobia; they were seen as overcoming adversity and succeeding. Savage's (2010) 'It Gets Better' internet campaign (30 000 videos conveying messages that 'It Gets Better' to young people) was also acknowledged within this theme, allowing participants to feel both understood and hopeful. The presence of role models seemed to influence how participants' considered their futures, providing 'real life' examples of what life may be like as an older LGBQ individual:

> "I like gay church 'cos I get to see lots of different grown ups who are gay, but living their lives just like normal. They have kids, they have jobs, they have family. I can see what it might be like to be 30 and have a long- term partner".

The process of *'affirming the self'* was acknowledged again as a theme. Many participants spoke of the importance of 'being myself', ''loving my difference' and often utilised 'gay anthems', such as Lady Gaga's 'Born this Way'.

AM were again identified as being *'evaluated'*. Participants reported AM were considered in terms of credibility, accessibility and effect, in line with persuasion literature (e.g. Sternthal, Phillips & Dholakia, 1978). The importance of AM being 'frequent', 'relevant', truthful' and 'meaningful' was recognised.

### Affirming Experiences Across Adolescent Development

When participants were questioning their sexual identity they reported a high need for AM, although just over half reported they could not access any. Many of these participants reported feelings similar to the following quote:

> "I went on the internet when I was questioning. I was a young teenager with insomnia and so sat up one night looking up information about homosexuality to try and come to terms with my sexuality. Problem is... you really have to look for it. If you're in denial, you won't see them and hence will just continue denying it and seeing it as wrong".

A time gap between questioning sexual identity and access to AM was noted. The average age for seeking AM was 14.7 years (s.d. 1.99), over two years after the average age of initially questioning sexual identity.

> "I didn't see or hear any messages saying it's ok to be gay, until about 3 years later when I left school".

Participants were asked to consider their feelings towards their sexual identity at different ages (10- 21 years) and the source of the positive feelings (whether positive feelings came from an internal source, within themselves, or from an external source, the world around them), with options of 'positive feelings from within', 'positive feelings from outside world', 'positive feelings from both', or 'negative feelings' at each age. Positive feelings towards sexual identity were found to increase with age; this trend can be seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Chart showing positive and negative feelings towards sexual identity across different ages**
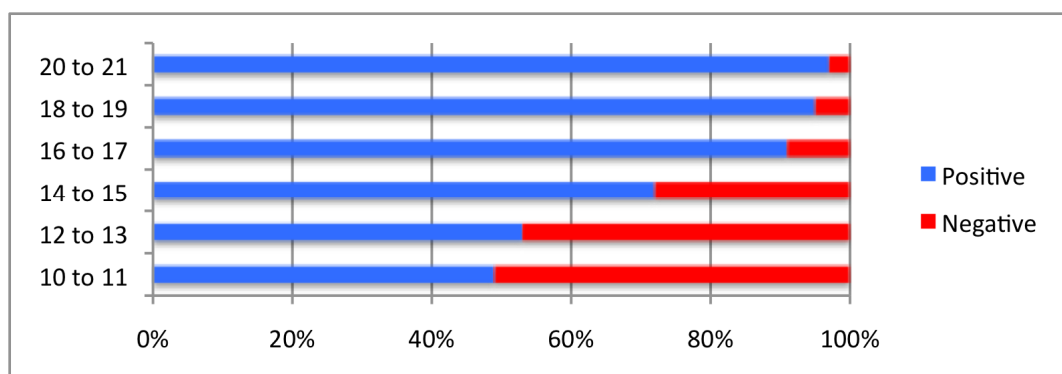


It was found that positive feelings towards sexual identity came consistently more from participants' internal worlds than from the external world across each of the age ranges (see Figure 2). This may relate to the above theme of *'Affirming the self'* and an identified early

lack of AM from the external world. The sense of positivity from the internal world remained

constant across the ages (31- 35%). Positivity from the external world also remained

relatively stable, but lower (8- 18%). As negative feelings gradually decreased, the sense of

positivity from an interaction of both internal and external world increased from 4% to 53%.

**Figure 2: Chart showing percentages of sources of positive and negative feelings towards**

**sexual identity across different ages**
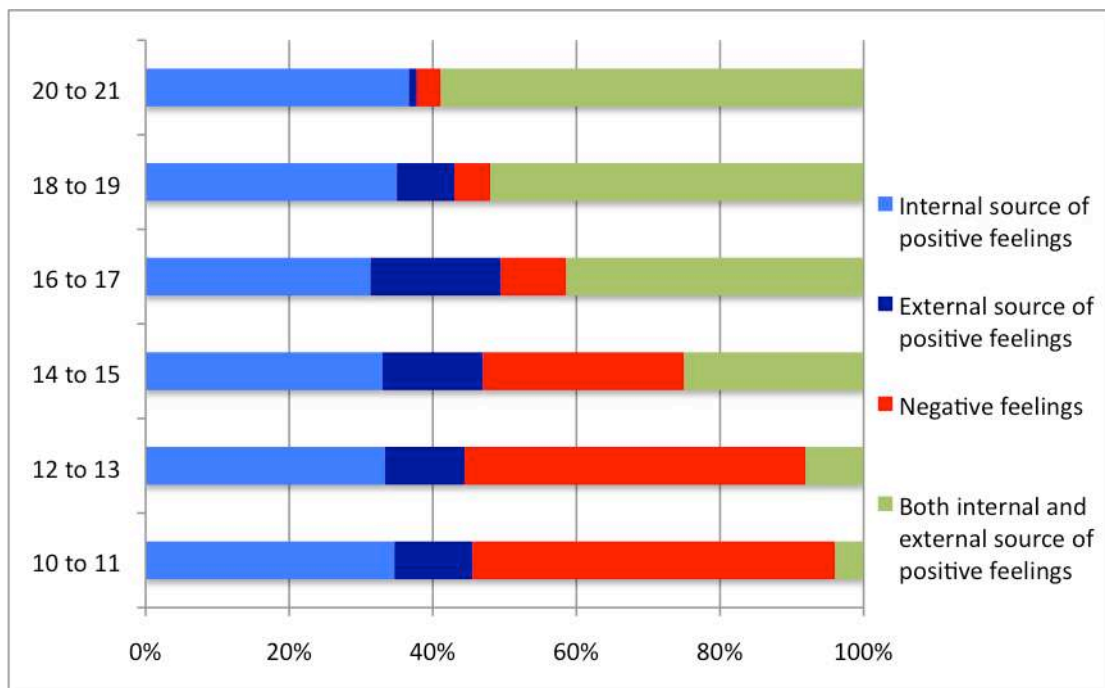


### Effect of Affirming Experiences

84% of participants reported AM have a 'very big' or 'big' effect on them. The following

themes arose from thematic analysis:

- *'Effect on world- view'*: Increased feelings of safety and comfort in the world.

- *'Effect on self- view':* Increased feelings of self- acceptance and self- confidence.

Participants also reported AM affected behaviour and life decisions. Seventy-four

participants reported AM availability would affect decisions about where to live and 70

participants reported it would influence where to access education.

**Phase Three**

Phase Three employed respondent validation to characterise the main findings from previous phases, and provide further richness and clarity.

**Procedure**

Participants were a subset of Phase Two participants who self selected via an invitation for further participation at the end of the survey and emailed the researcher. They were provided with an accessible short report of the findings (Appendix H). Participants completed a consent form (Appendix I), a demographics questionnaire (Appendix J) in order to situate the sample and an email survey (Appendix K).

**Measure**

An email survey was conducted giving opportunity to comment on the main findings and respond to specific further questions regarding the process of seeking AM alongside experiencing homophobia, and evaluating AM. These questions were developed as a result of the Phase Two analysis, in which these processes were recognised as important but were not clearly understood.

**Results**

Five participants took part in respondent validation: two male and three female participants (age range 16- 21 years). Participants were representative of the Phase Two sample in terms of sexual identity, ethnicity, education and employment, location and religion (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Table showing participant demographic information**

| Participant | Gender | Age | Ethnicity | Sexual Identity |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | F | 20 | BME | Bisexual |
| 2 | F | 18 | WB | Lesbian |
| 3 | M | 16 | WB | Gay |
| 4 | F | 21 | WB | Lesbian |
| 5 | M | 17 | WB | Gay |

### Affirming Experiences

Participants reported agreement with the finding AM were 'there if you look for them' but were not obvious and accessible enough. A 16-year-old gay male reported:

> "This (report) seems accurate: society is becoming increasingly accepting of LGBQ people, but it is nonetheless a struggle to find "AM" outside organisations explicitly dedicated to providing them".

### Active Process of Accessing Affirming Experiences

Participants provided support for the finding that SM adolescents are actively seeking AM, acknowledging the "many sources (of AM) via internet, websites, social networking and YouTube about people's stories, celebrities, etc". The school environment was again referred to as creating difficulties in accessing AM:

> "If you live in a particularly homophobic area/ household/ culture, and school is the only place you might be able to access AM, it's probably not going to happen. Schools still seem to have the mindset that Section 28 applies".

The importance of online activity was noted by four of five participants, especially by a 16-year-old participant at school and a 17-year-old participant in a rural location. Both benefits and limitations were acknowledged:

> "I definitely had to find AM, I live in the middle of nowhere, if I didn't have the internet I'd be in difficulty. But sometimes it's even difficult on the internet, sometimes I end up on sites which aren't what I want, and make me think that being a gay man means I should just be interested in sex and nothing else".

> "The internet is good, but sometimes it's better to actually know someone in real life I think. I feel like I've got a life on line with my on line friends, with lots of AM, but in my real life it's not like that".

### Source and Content of Affirming Experiences

Participants provided further richness to themes such as *'similar others'* and *'role models'* and *'personal stories of success and struggles',* reporting:

> "The story of Kurt Hummel in the hit TV show Glee gives an overwhelming positive message about the troubles of being gay in a secondary school… Of course, Glee is

not the perfect portrayal, but it's the best quality message about homosexuality that most of us have got".

The theme of *'Affirming the self'* was also considered and further understanding was developed, as articulated by a 21 year old describing moving from internalised homophobia to self affirmation:

> "Nobody can tell me what I can or can't be. I live with the self- assurance that I've done nothing wrong, and therefore nobody can tell me I can't carry on doing what I'm doing. I study hard, I volunteer in the community, I have good relationships, I'm kind and respectful of strangers: What's my crime? And I carry this around in my heart as my beacon and that is that… I believe the first step is to fully accept who you are and be completely 100% ok with it, and before you do that, you have to admit that you're not ok with it. You have to call yourself out on it, really, ask yourself: Oi, you? What's your problem? And then you begin to realise that you are who you are."

The importance of timing of access to AM was further acknowledged.  One participant articulated this clearly:

> "If I had had more AM when I was first questioning, I don't think it would have taken me so long to come to terms with it"

### Effect of Affirming Experiences

Participant narratives regarding the finding that AM positively affect feelings and attitudes towards self and others, and influence life decisions, were provided. One male participant described this:

> "In my experience, being told that being gay is okay massively helped me. It allowed me to confront my emotions head on rather than attempt to avoid them altogether, and helped me in my coming out process in the knowledge that people would probably accept me for who I was".

### Evaluating Affirming Experiences

Further exploration of the *'evaluating AM'* process was also carried out, with participants describing examples.  Analysis identified themes of evaluating AM on account of the

*'relevance'* of the AM to the individual, linked to the importance of *'stories of success and struggles'*. One male participant articulated evaluating an AM:

> "The story was close to home and relevant, and gave me faith in being able to succeed in a particular situation".

### Homophobia and Affirming Experiences

Participants were asked to consider the identified experience of homophobia and link to AM, and provide examples from their lives. The interlinked nature was described by a 16-year-old gay participant:

> "During the time when I was not out, and was not in search of AM, homophobic slurs in the corridors between lessons would get me down quite quickly, and I would often find myself unable to concentrate and in some cases even reduced to tears. Once I had been exposed to some indication that being gay was totally normal, fairly common, and even natural, my reactions slowly improved. I could hold my head high, ignoring disparaging remarks altogether".

Each participant spoke of either *'ignoring'*, *'sharing'* or *'rationalising'* homophobic messages:

> "Whenever I feel down about a particular instance of homophobia that I've experienced, I find that sharing it with a group of like-minded people helps to ease the burden: as they say, a problem shared is a problem solved".

The process of rationalising homophobic messages was complex and appeared to involve a rationalisation of homophobia as a problem located within others.

> "I know inside my heart of hearts that they're wrong and it's their own problem".

In understanding and making meaning of homophobia as a problem located within others, it allowed participants to provide self AM. A lesbian, who described being estranged from her religious family on account of their homophobia wrote:

> "BUT WHAT CAN I DO? Can I help that I like women? No. Can they help that they are homophobic bigots? Probably. So who is the one that needs to deal with the problem?"

**Discussion**

      **Research and Theory Implications**

It has been proposed that sexual identity development is characterised by efforts to seek identity affirmation (D'Augelli, 2003). Results regarding an exploration of this process were drawn from a triangulation approach and suggested AM are actively sought by SM youths and are perceived to impact on views of the self and world. However, AM are not considered accessible enough.

Participants reported AM were experienced less when they were initially questioning their sexual identity, at this time they were less actively engaged in seeking AM. Findings suggested that younger adolescents feel more negatively about their sexual identity, with positive feelings arising mainly from an internal source (*'affirming the self'*). Participants reported AM were later actively sought from a range of *micro and macro system* sources.

The conceptualisation of the adolescent as "an active agent in and on its environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 634) is relevant here as it recognises SM adolescents identify a need and engage in actively searching for AM and hence, at some level, recognise the prophylactic nature of gathering such information. As development occurs, participants steadily felt more positive about their sexual identity, with these positive feelings originating from an interaction between internal and external sources. The strategy of seeking AM, and AM existence and accessibility therefore seems important, and the internalisation of the AM content. Drawing on an understanding of schema theory (e.g. Bartlett, 1932), which describes schemata as organised mental frameworks of thought or behaviour, it is possible to consider the SM adolescent as motivated to access new positive SM information as this is most fitting with their existing schema. Positive information from an external source is incorporated into the existing schema, assimilating affirmation from others as well as the

self. Swann (1990) discussed self- verification as the process by which individuals confirm beliefs about the self, driving a tendency to actively seek out and retain feedback consistent with a preferred positive sense of identity.

It therefore seemed participants were accessing and assimilating AM, developing an integrated positive identity, with the effect of *'self- acceptance'*. This process appears fitting within general models of adolescent identity development (Erikson, 1968, Marcia, 1966, 1980), and suggests the significant role of affirming experiences in the lives of SM adolescents.

The content of AM identified themes such as *'role models'* and *'similar others'*, with *'stories of struggles and success'*, and *'acceptance from friends and family'*. It seemed affirming parents, peers and role models could expose youth to positive norms and behaviours to support their developing regard of sexual identity. Findings suggested role models and similar others were utilised to consider futures and possible selves (Marcus & Nurius, 1986), assimilating new positive information into existing schematas. *'Stories of struggles and success'* emphasised the importance of recognising the challenges faced as well as possible achievements. The theme of *'similar others'* can be understood in terms of the importance of group membership and belonging in identity development. Social Identity Theory emphasises the importance of membership in groups of similar others (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), especially those with marginalised identities. In adolescence identification with a similar peer group is important; as adolescents search to understand themselves, they need others to mirror and affirm identity (Kroger, 2007).

*'Acceptance from friends and family'* follows previous research with general and SM adolescent populations that family affirmation is protective in development (e.g. Eisenberg

& Resnick, 2006). The theme of *'shared family values'* suggests that some adolescents have developed positive schemata regarding SM status within the family micro system. However, it is worth acknowledging that while youth who experience racism or other kinds of discrimination can often access family support, some SM youth may lack this opportunity (Savin- Williams, 1989).

The importance of *'online activity'* in accessing AM was acknowledged, and current SM youth may have different affirming experiences to older counterparts. For people of different minorities there is significant potential for the internet to reduce barriers associated with geography, age and identity concealment (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). The finding regarding perceived effects of variables such as rurality, religion, schooling and bisexual identity on access to AM may be relevant here. Online activity may be particularly important for adolescents who live rurally, are religious, are at school, and identify as bisexual. The internet can provide a safe anonymous place for important developmental tasks, providing opportunity for presenting identity possibilities without heightened risk of discrimination ('dress rehearsal', Hillier & Harrison, 2007). However, limitations of online AM were identified in the findings, e.g. the lack of proximity of role models online. This may relate to Bird, Kuhns and Garofalo's (2011) finding that SM youth role models were inaccessible.

A significant finding across all three phases related to the education environment. Although school was identified as one of the most influential sources of AM, it was also among the least common. As one participant in Phase Three reported:

> "Absolutely no AM came from my school- a fact I find rather disgraceful."

This is similar to previous research with SM youth in UK schools identifying negative pupil reactions and school responses (Robinson, 2010, Hunt & Jensen, 2007), suggesting a consideration of AM provision in school environments may be beneficial.

**Study Limitations**

There are a number of methodological limitations to be recognised. Due to the ecological focus of the research, generalisation to other regions, cultures and times is cautioned. Furthermore, in relation to difficulties with SM definitions, these findings cannot be generalised to all youth with same sex attraction experiences, only those identifying as SM. It has been acknowledged a SM representative sample is extremely hard to attain (Sell, 2007). Purposive sampling allowed recruitment of youth who actively seek SM youth services, and those who may only identify as SM online, promoting a more representative sample. However, an 'opt in' bias may have been present as participants who chose to take part may be more vocal or opinionated. The use of a triangulation approach attempted to minimise potential biases.

A relatively small sample size was utilised and due to the cross sectional nature of the design, no causality regarding the experience of AM can be inferred. Longitudinal research is needed to determine temporality and better understand how SM adolescents are affected by AM and develop over time in relation to their environments.

Inevitable bias using thematic analysis is acknowledged, and the impact of the primary researcher being a lesbian with an interest in SM youth support and advocacy is recognised. Interpretive bias was minimised by establishing good inter-rater coding reliability and respondent validation.

**Study Implications**

This study explored AM in multiple environmental systems. Identified AM within the macro system suggest a focus on societal interventions, including increased provision of AM. Interventions aimed at promoting access to similar others and role models would appear beneficial, for example in school environments and communities.

AM in health, education and social services should be considered. The finding of a lack of AM within the school environment has implications. Recent research and government policy has focused on homophobic bullying in schools (e.g. Department for Education and Skills, 2000, DfES, 2004a, DfES, 2004b, Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2007). However, these findings suggest the importance of AM provision as an additional education and research focus. There is very limited research on interventions with SM youth (Blake, Ledsky, Lehman, Goodenow, Sawyer & Hack, 2001), and an intervention based on provision of AM within the school curriculum or environments could be fruitful.

It may also be helpful for professionals to direct SM adolescents in strategies of actively seeking AM, whether this be online, through signposting and access to services, or within the family or school environment. Findings suggested the experience of AM was particularly helpful as it provided resilience to experiences of homophobia. When professionals are aware of homophobia, it may be important to support the adolescent in actively seeking AM.

Implications regarding the timing, content and accessibility of AM are important to consider, and the role of media and online activity may be pertinent here. When SM adolescents begin questioning their sexual identity, they are not yet engaged in actively seeking AM. The provision of easily accessible AM therefore seems important. Research into SM portrayal in

youth TV indicated low visibility with negative portrayals (Stonewall, 2010). Available AM for SM youth at a young age online and through media would appear beneficial. Furthermore, findings suggested SM youth are actively evaluating AM, and identified themes of *'credible, frequent, truthful and relevant AM'* could be utilised to direct AM campaigns and media presence. The impact of the 'It Gets Better Campaign' (akin to *'stories of struggles and success'*), especially with powerful figures such as Barak Obama, is noteworthy.

Lastly, little has been published regarding the needs and experiences of transgender youth (Ryan & Rivers, 2003), and although two participants identified as transgender, this was not reported in depth. The unique AM experiences for transgender youth should be explored.

**Conclusion**

Sexual minority adolescents in current UK and Irish society actively seek out and experience AM regarding sexual identity. AM are experienced from intra-personal, micro- system and macro- system sources but are not considered accessible enough. AM appear to influence the development of a positive sense of sexual identity and may provide a defence against experiences of homophobia. This suggests increasing provision and access to AM could be helpful for a population with elevated health risks, through online activity and media, and within the school environment.

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# Section C

# Critical Appraisal

## (2000)

This paper provides a critical appraisal of the research reported in Section B exploring affirming experiences for SM adolescents. It is structured by four questions.

**Research skills and abilities**

**What research skills have you learnt and what research abilities have you developed from undertaking this project, and what do you think you need to further learn?**

Initially I was motivated to carry out an MRP with a service user focus or in line with a participatory action approach. Through negotiations with my supervisor, SM youth and members of the LGBQ community in the planning stages, I gained a more sensitive appreciation of potential difficulties. This related to the role of power in research. I have learnt to consider the relative weight of user involvement and respondent validation, and in this, have developed an appreciation of the value of researcher interpretation and recognition of the power responsibilities of a researcher. I acknowledged there was a risk of my research skills and authority being abdicated, or at least eroded, through my focus on user and participant opinions (Riessman, 1993). In future, I would like to use this appreciation to learn skills in working within a participatory action framework.

Alongside this appreciation of power my abilities in a qualitative research paradigm developed, especially in relation to sensitivity to context in research and awareness of the socio-cultural setting of research with SM youth. It was important to develop skills in awareness of the social context of the relationships between myself as a researcher, and the participants. Although I was more aware of this in the 'real world' setting of an SM youth organisation in Phase One, there was also the social context of 'cyber world' in later phases. An aspect of the relationship was a shared experience of identifying with a SM status, and it was important to consider the potential impact of sharing this with participants. It was decided this was worthwhile in Phase One, with the aim of promoting an environment in

which participants were comfortable sharing their experience of being a minority. The social context of the relationship was also apparent in Phase Two, a small number of participants commented the process of completing the survey was akin to an affirming experience in itself, with comments such as 'thanks for recognising us and taking our opinions seriously'.

My abilities in considering the complexities of qualitative analysis as an aspect of mixed methodology have also been developed in terms of promoting rigour, transparency and coherence and the quality assurance checks integrated in the research design were important. My consideration of the impact and importance of the research has also been a learning curve and I am committed to disseminating the research as much as possible. Yardley (1997) proposed research as inherently political, considering how all actions serve some social context and have some social effects.

Conducting online research has its own challenges and I have developed my knowledge and abilities in this research arena. Gaiser and Schreiner (2009) identified difficulties in relation to public vs. private spaces, filtering participants to meet the inclusion criterion, ownership of material, anonymity, online information traces, and distressing online disclosures. It was also important to consider ethics in relation to online research with youth. SM youth are known for high levels of internet use (Jones & Fox, 2009), and are in many ways more adept in their online activity than I am. However, there were risks involved in their internet use and behaviour in terms of privacy and confidentiality, and it was important to remind SM youth not to provide identifying information (which was often a risk on facebook) and ensure they protected their privacy if on a shared computer. It was anticipated some participants would not be 'out' in their 'real worlds', but may be 'out' online. Developing my skills in online research, and furthering my understanding of social networking and online forums may allow more rigorous research with this population in the future. For example,

carrying out focus groups utilising online SM youth forums would be a useful skill to learn as it would potentially access different participants to those attending an LGBQ youth organisation.

I have also learnt the importance of acknowledging and challenging my own assumptions and biases. I realised in the initial stages I needed to position myself as a researcher alongside somewhat controversial dimensions, and spent time considering the interface between a focus on stress and a focus on resilience. I became keen to explore resilience in SM youth but had neglected to consider how this continues to locate the focus of the problem/resilience in the individual. My bias would now be to acknowledge the ways in which society impacts on the problems/resilience of the individual. On an individual determinism vs. social responsibility continuum (Meyer, 2003), I prefer to consider my social responsibility for social oppression rather than support an individual deficits based lens.

Finally, I have learnt from the overall process just how much time and work is necessary for analysing and reporting, and I am now aware of just how much data and analysis does not make it into final write ups. My skills in the process of distilling the findings over and over have been advanced, as have my abilities to consider the breadth and depth of information across three phases of data collection, and decide what is of most importance to drill down into and explore further in the next phase. These skills would be developed further when I next undertake research.

**Research improvements**

**If you were able to do this project again, what would you do differently and why?**

In retrospect, it may have been possible to access a more representative sample by utilising more general online sites visited by adolescents of different sexual identities. In advertising

on general youth sites as well as SM youth sites, and implementing a range of measurements for SM status, a more representative sample could have been obtained. Originally I thought it may be difficult to access participants and so focused on SM sites only. In addition to this, I anticipated it would be difficult to access a suitable number of transgender youth to warrant inclusion in the research. Although I consider this adolescent experience different enough to necessitate a separate research study, there were two transgender participants who completed the survey who also identified as a SM. The intersectional aspect of these developing identities would be interesting to explore, and, in retrospect, I may have included a 'LGBTQ' inclusion criterion.

I may have also applied for ethical approval justifying the importance of waiving parental consent. For the current design, it was decided all participants would be of an age ensuring they could consent to their participation. The requirement of parental consent may exclude a number of SM youth from participating, due to challenges of being 'out' to parents. Waiving parental consent would allow an exploration of AM experiences for younger SM youth, since school experiences were regarded as so important ('most influential source of AM'). This would avoid any retrospective bias and allow for an understanding of AM for younger SM adolescents.

I would also consider how best to access the richer narrative data from Phase Three, and would consider carrying out a focus group for respondent validation instead of individual participation. This might allow for more discussion of the balance between participant meaning and researcher interpretation (Nutt Williams & Morrow, 2009), promoting the integrity of the data further.

In order to ease survey data analysis and the long process of distilling the findings, I would frame questions in such a way as to allow me a clearer approach in the analysis phase. I found managing the wealth of information pulled together from across different questions challenging, and this is an aspect of survey research I will take forward into my career. Survey research is a well- utilised and accessible way in which to carry out research within the NHS and this experience will stand me in good stead.

**Personal clinical implications**

**Clinically, as a consequence of doing this study, would you do anything differently & why?**

The ecological nature of this research lends itself to an emphasis on systemic and community psychology. Promoting an appreciation of a wider ecological perspective when hopefully working in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) has become more important to me, and I place more importance on community interventions. Although justifying psychological input at an early intervention community level may be challenging in the current financial context, this research suggests the importance of the provision of AM across micro and macro systems.

A focus on a deficits- based and medicalised approach to distress in CAMHS does not allow for wider systems thinking and an engagement in the complexities of the impact of ecological systems, the experience of minority stress, and the potential resilience in the individual adolescent and ecological system around them. As a consequence of the research I hope I have developed a more sophisticated understanding of this. I consider therefore that clinical psychologists could play a role in promoting individual access to AM (through promoting this as a coping strategy in individual therapy sessions) and wider provision of AM (with families, within schools, community development organisations and statutory health services). Clinical psychologists, with their triad of knowledge and skills in research, well-

being and attitude change, would also be well placed to take on a role in policy development and advocacy. This could allow for more provision of AM at a macro systems level as well as within micro- systems.

**Future research**

**If you were to undertake further research in this area what would that research project seek to answer and how would you go about doing it?**

I would be interested in engaging in participatory action research, working with SM youth and LGBQ organisations considering how best to develop the provision of AM. This research suggests how SM youth go about accessing AM, where it can be accessed, the nature and evaluation of AM and the benefits and influences of experiencing AM. However, it did not explore how SM youth think it could be promoted. Within an action framework would be the potential for an affirming experience of participating in the research, and other options created and negotiated with SM youth and organisations.

This research suggests a focus on affirming experiences in the education system could be a fruitful synergy. A participatory action framework could be utilised with both SM youth and education stakeholders to consider how best to develop this understanding. An intervention design could be utilised, developing AM within the school curriculum and climate and measuring potential effects. This provision would need to be operationalized and measured in a way that was robust and credible, which could be done within this framework. Potential effects of an AM provision in an education setting could be measured in terms of the identified effects of AM in this research, increased feelings of safety and comfort in the world, and feelings of self- confidence and self- acceptance. In order to ensure measures were reliable and valid, it may be helpful to utilise general measures of safety and self- esteem, and consider how best to adapt them for this population.

A further potential research question to be considered within a participatory action framework could explore the influence of the macro- system in terms of our current socio-political climate. A question regarding the impact of current gay marriage political discussions on SM youth could be asked, with research findings being utilised in a political action framework by SM youth.

I am also interested in considering further both the qualitative and quantitative results regarding intersectionality and access to AM. It might be useful to consider the use of an online research environment bearing in mind the potential difficulties of accessing participants who are less able to access AM. Emerging research opportunities such as social networking spaces could provide ways to explore this further, and the possibility of an online focus group would allow for an exploration for perceptions about others' access to AM as identified in the Section B discussion.

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# Section D

# Appendices of Supporting Material

## Appendix A: Section A Search methodology

## A.1. Sexual Identity Development

**Search terms:**
Sexual Identit*  OR
Sexual Orientation
Sexual Minorit*
Homosexual*
Non hetero-sexual*
Same sex attraction
Gay
Lesbian
Bisexual*
Queer
Questioning
LGB
LGBQ

Results limited to: Research reviews, literature reviews, meta-analyses, with age brackets (adolescence, young adulthood, 12- 25).

## A.2. Protective Environmental Influences

**Search terms:**

| Sexual Identit*  OR | Combined with Boolean | Protective OR |
|---|---|---|
| Sexual Orientation | AND | Environment* |
| Sexual Minorit* | | Social |
| Homosexual* | | Strengths |
| Non hetero-sexual* | | Coping |
| Same sex attraction | | Resilience |
| Gay | | Support* |
| Lesbian | | Endurance |
| Bisexual* | | Positive |
| Queer | | Asset* |
| Questioning | | Well- being |
| LGB | | |
| LGBQ | | |

Results limited to: Age brackets (adolescence, young adulthood, 12- 25).

Electronic searches were undertaken using Medline, CINAHL and PsycINFO from 2000 to 2012. This time frame was chosen as it captured a suitable number of research articles and avoided an outdated exploration. All NHS Library Review databases were utilised to ensure no previous review had been conducted. Manual searches of abstracts and references and cross-referencing were also utilised.

## Appendix B: Section B Coding manuals
## Appendix B.1. Coding Manuel Phase One

| Code Name | Code Description | Code Example (line no.) |
|---|---|---|
| AM experience | Theme identifying the consideration of whether AM exist in our time and society | - That society wouldn't exist (83)<br>- It doesn't exist! (84)<br>- It does exist, surely here is exactly where it exists (85)<br>- See themes/quotes describing content/source of AM below |
| Engagement in seeking AM | Theme considering the active engagement in seeking AM through on line activity, attending SM youth services and accessing LGBQ literature and film. | - Yes, I went and looked, my college group is very good for that sort of thing (223)<br>- I kind of looked for websites and stuff (260)<br>- You have to go and look for it (299)<br>- I actively went and found lesbian and bisexual, lesbian and gay fiction in the library because I know, a friend of mine had shown me a book that she'd got from the library and I was like 'ooh, I'll go and have a look and the library has a section of lesbian and gay literature, which I think is really good, and it's, you know… they're not, shunning it away into a dark cupboard. It's out there and easy to find. (490) |
| Sources of AM Micro | Micro- level sources of AM such as friends and family, participants also referred to sources such as youth and health services. | - When I speak to my friends who define themselves as straight but they're like totally open with my sexuality (47)<br>- My friends were really cool with it so, it's all good (80)<br>- It's very accepting here, and my family was, is, I've got an uncle who's homosexual so, umm, it's quite (..), from my growing up, it's been quite accepted (86)<br>- You can get leaflets at youth centres as well, like help centres, and they help you with every scenario, and that's where I found one, a leaflet for *(Youth service)* was at the student health centre and it was just, they've got leaflets just in case you need help with housing or, the leaflet then said it's a safe place, and it said, if you're unsure as well, which I think is good (320)<br>- Umm, I guess, to be honest, I, probably during when I was growing up, I probably did need a confidence boost at that time, and I went to *(Youth service)* (382)<br>- I've only been to *(Youth service)* this is my second time, but it's surprising how much this has affected me, because like, I live in *(Big Southern Town)* now, but I'm originally from *(Smaller Town)* in *(Rural South West area)*, and they have like no support whatsoever for anyone who's anything other than straight in *(Rural South West area)*, because they're like really kind of anti, I was brought up and everyone was kind of anti-gay (557) |

| | | - The NHS, lesbian screen test adverts (612) |
|---|---|---|
| Sources of AM Macro | Theme identifying macro level sources such as film, magazines, TV, music, comics, gay campaigns and politics. | - I can't think, off the top of my head, I probably, my favourite author, one of my favourite authors, Sarah Waters, she's openly lesbian, I know that through her novels (423)<br>- I also find quite a positive message in films, umm, (..) I know gay films are kind of generally stereotyped but the fact that they still exist, and also they send the message that it is ok to be gay, for example, Beautiful Thing, umm, good example because it's about two boys growing up in London, sort of on council estate, and yet they still find love, like regardless of everyone else, regardless of family, of friends, school, college, parents, community, they're still with each other and it's still a positive image (268)<br>- Also, TV, BBC3's Lip Service, and a while ago, I know it's quite few years ago now, but Channel 4's Sugar Rush (276)<br>- I saw it on just regular TV shows like umm, Friends and umm, Seinfeld, and I know they're just normal but it just made it seem normal, it's like, oh they just happen to like girls, they just like girls like I like girls (281)<br>- I found umm, a comic line, the Young Avengers, where two of the characters are gay and in a relationship and it's just not, no one really cares, which I think is a much better thing (501)<br>- I can't remember off the top of my head, any politicians who've come out and said 'oh I'm gay', or 'oh I'm gay friendly' but it would make a difference (512) |
| On line activity | Theme describing the influential role of on-line activity in the lives of participants, including accessing SM youth forums and the limitations to on line activity. | - I kind of looked for websites and stuff (260)<br>- Message boards, forums on line (261)<br>- Queer Youth Alliance (SM youth forum) and stuff (263)<br>- Probably on line if that was the case (living in a rural area), and that carries it's own sort of dangers in a way, I always, I don't do on line things because I don't know, I just, I get scared in a way but I know that, it's, (..) that there are ways to keep yourself safe but, I just don't, I'd just rather talk to people in person. (317) |
| Affirming the self | Theme highlighting positive messages about being gay from the self. Participants reported AM as likely to come from within themselves and identified the | - I just think of it as an internal thing, like I don't really care what anyone else thinks, I know it sounds like a cliché, but I don't care what anyone thinks, I do what I want (63)<br>- When I was younger it (affirming the self) was a lot more different, cos I didn't have a lot of self-confidence. (67)<br>It was sort of, one day, I was 'yes!!', 'this is me, take |

| | development of this. | it or leave it' (79) |
|---|---|---|
| Differences in access to AM | This theme relates to demographic and other variables perceived to be affecting access to AM. Participants reported on the specific difficulties of accessing AM for bisexual young people and for those in rural locations. The impact of location was discussed, and participants spoke of LGB individuals 'flocking' to places known for 'being LGBQ affirming'. | - There wouldn't be as many gay people as there would be in *(City known for LGB community)*, and that's because everyone goes to *(City known for LGB community)*, because it's known as like gay central (136)<br>- We really do, yeah, I think we flock. There's a gay central and we flock (162)<br>- We flock because of what we've been talking about, because of the ' it's ok to be gay' stuff (164)<br>- But I see how some people might feel very isolated, say if you lived in like the countryside or something. Mmmm (..). And didn't know anybody of that sort, everybody was sort of (..) in a very straight, very straight world. (312)<br>- I can't think of anyone who's openly bi (425)<br>- I feel like there's some kind of stigma about being bisexual, like it's an issue (427)<br>- Being bi- I feel like I'm, I don't know, like I'd like some role models, so that you can, I don't know, even if it's just in your own head, so that you can see there's someone else like me, who agrees with me, and it's not pretend (429) |
| Role models | This theme identifies the perceived importance of role models. Participants described a number of 'role models', including teachers, older peers and celebrities, the quality of the role model and why it was important to them. | - It was a small grammar school so everybody knew each other. I was quite surprised to learn that he was gay. I think it was quite refreshing to see somebody who could play sports, who's quite keen on his studies, someone who's popular within the school, you know, being quite open about his sexuality, and being open not just about that but about the fact he's got a boyfriend and he had a gay life. I thought it was really really refreshing (360)<br>- Gay group at school… The staff that I know are gay, or lesbian or bisexual or whatever, apart from in our gay group, nobody else knows sort of thing (249)<br>- With the celebrity role model thing, you know, I felt like there are quite a few who aren't, you know over the top, like, Stephen Fry, Derren Brown… (386)<br>- The thing about Stephen Fry is that he's somebody who's actually very mainstream, everybody likes him, and everyone knows he's gay and is quite fine with it, but not just that, but the fact that he had mental health issues, and urh, it kind of just brings it down to earth, you know, he's somebody just like you or me who potentially can get very depressed or very sad, being able to relate to that was, I think that as a young gay person you can sort of forget, I mean, (..) when you're coming to terms with sexuality that's quite a daunting period, and that can be quite upsetting, and people who you an relate to, people who had the same issues, the same worries, I mean I |

| | | thought that was really quite refreshing (396) |
|---|---|---|
| | | - I always knew that Stephen Fry was gay, but two other ones I really like and look up to, are Derren Brown and Simon Amstell. They were both gay but I didn't know, I looked up to them before I knew (408) |
| | | - Before I thought about Mary Queen of Shops 'oh yeah, she's a really cool girl, woman, whatever' and then I find out that she is lesbian, I thought 'wow, that's awesome', do you know what I mean (417) |
| | | - I feel like I'm, I don't know, like I'd like some role models, so that you can, I don't know, even if it's just in your own head, so that you can see there's someone else like me, who agrees with me, and it's not pretend (429) |
| Similar others | This theme describes the importance of similar others, individuals also identifying as LGBQ, in the lives of participants. 'Like-minded people' were identified through gay organisations and peer groups and allowed participants to feel understood. | - They haven't experienced what I'm experiencing, but umm, being on a course in *(City)*, and being around other people who all accept, they all accept being gay or bi, and call themselves bi, so it's a very good environment (90) |
| | | - Yeah, gay group *(laughing)*, we call it pride, we just call it gay club or gay group *(laughing)*, and I don't know, that just kind of helped me as well (230) |
| | | - I agree with *(participant)*, all it takes is to meet one person that's like- minded and it goes from there. (310) |
| | | - You know, if you need to discuss something, you know, you've got people that are like- minded there to discuss it with, or it might not even be issues, it could just be a good natter (541) |
| | | - It's really good to be able to break away from that *(homophobia)*, and come here and find people who understand when I say 'oh, she's really gorgeous', and I mean it as in 'I like her, like her', rather than saying 'she's gorgeous, I wish I could be her' (564) |
| Affirmation and acceptance from friends and family | Affirmation and acceptance from friends and family was identified as a micro level source but was described with more frequency and detail and was therefore identified as a separate theme. | - When I speak to my friends who define themselves as straight but they're like totally open with my sexuality (47) |
| | | - My friends were really cool with it so, it's all really good (80) |
| | | - It's very accepting here, and my family was, is, I've got an uncle who's homosexual so, umm, it's quite (..), from my growing up, it's been quite accepted (86) |
| Evaluating AM | The process of 'evaluating AM' was acknowledged in this theme. Participants discussed the importance of the quality and quantity | - I love my magazines, and I criticise Diva for not being up to the same sort of quality as you get in a straight magazine, because it's almost giving an excuse, for 'oh yeah, they're second class', like there's spelling mistakes and silly things like that (99) |
| | | - I always knew that Stephen Fry was gay, but two other ones I really like and look up to, are Derren |

| | | Brown and Simon Amstell. They were both gay but I didn't know, I looked up to them before I knew. (408) |
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| | of the nature of AM. Participants described evaluating AM in terms of the normality, positivity, subtlety and whether they esteemed the provision and source of the AM (e.g. in terms of role models). | - Before I thought about Mary Queen of Shops 'oh yeah, she's a really cool girl, woman, whatever' and then I find out that she is lesbian, I thought 'wow, that's awesome', do you know what I mean. (417)<br><br>- I saw it on just regular TV shows like umm, Friends and umm, Seinfeld, and I know they're just normal but it just made it seem normal, it's like, oh they just happen to like girls, they just like girls like I like girls (281)<br><br>- I think in that kind of thing, I prefer it in any kind of media where it's not dealt with at all, it's present, but it doesn't bother with… I'm really into like superheroes stuff, so I found a book which is about a gay superhero so I thought, you know 'great, I'll enjoy this' (497)<br><br>- Yeah, it's not treated as anything out of the ordinary, it's just treated as completely normal, which I prefer (505)<br><br>- I think that like, at my college there's posters for a group that says 'do you need support, are you being bullied because you're LGBT?' and I think it would be nicer if they had a poster which is just, you know, 'we're all LGBT, would you like to come and have, play games and have a chat, and have a cup of tea, and get together once a week or something, but you know… (547) |
| Effects of AM | This theme encapsulated the perceived effects of AM. Participants spoke of feeling 'more comfortable' and 'safer'. It also appeared important for AM to be experienced in relation to experiences of homophobia. Participants spoke of AM as countering the effects of homophobia, perhaps normalising and regulating the negative emotional impact. | - So yeah, when you hear like negative things like that, it's good to have the positive things re-enforcing too, and yeah, it sort of makes me feel more comfortable (593)<br><br>- I think you have to be careful walking around at night holding hands, and that kind of stuff, and in an ideal it's ok to be gay world, you'd feel free (172)<br><br>- Yeah, you wouldn't worry about it at all (173)<br><br>- Paranoia would go out the window, because if you think about it, yeah, you're walking down the street and I mean, I can walk not holding hands and feel ok, as soon as like, you link hands, like your radar's set higher, seeing who's looking at you, you know, who might say something, who might actually physically attack you, it's just too much to deal with when you, just the simple task of holding hands when walking down the road (174)<br><br>- It would be nice if they *(politicians)* did *(provide AM)*, it would be nice if it was accepted so you could feel safe, and you could feel like it's not going to go backwards in any way (516)<br><br>- I think sort of knowing, or having the influences, particularly from the media because that controls |

| | | everything, umm, because that re-enforces that message, it sort of makes me feel more comfortable in myself (578) |
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| Terminology informing phases two and three | Participants reported they used terminology of 'lesbian, gay and bisexual', or 'LGB'. They considered sexual orientation to be related primarily to LGBQ identity. Some participants reported using the description 'gay' as an 'umbrella term', as a method of describing those who are 'not straight'. | - Gay (3)<br>- Yeah, gay, bi, whatever you talk, you know (..) it's individual (5)<br>- Gay (7)<br>- Gay (8)<br>- LGBQ (9)<br>- I usually say gay as a kind of blanket, I don't know about everyone else. I usually say gay for anyone, because it's (.), even though I'm bi, I'd say gay anyway (10)<br>- It's all about identity isn't it, how we choose to identify ourselves, we are gay because we are not straight, kind of thing (454) |
| Information to direct recruitment in phases two and three | Participants encouraged the research to utilise a range of on line sites, emphasising the use of facebook in particular. | - Maybe try and get universities or colleges to put it on their moodles (665).<br>- Use youth services sites, university/college sites (677)<br>- I don't know about social sites, I'd use facebook (678)<br>- If you're aiming to get a lot of young people then facebook and twitter (680)<br>- Facebook. You're there (681) |

**Appendix B.2.**
**Coding Manuel Phase Two**

| Code Name | Code Description | Code Example (line no.) |
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| Feelings at time of questioning sexual identity | Theme regarding participant feelings identified at the time of starting to question sexual identity/ orientation. Responses were coded and counted as positive, negative or mixed. Mostly negative feelings were reported: worry, confusion, loneliness and fear, and a sense of being 'wrong'. Some positive feelings were identified, often in relation to excitement. Mixed responses included both positive and negative feelings. | Negative:<br>- Terrified, I thought I wasn't going to be able to lead a normal life. I knew I was going to get bullied heavily (21, 54)<br>- I felt horrifically alone. I thought there was something wrong with me (21, 6)<br>- Scared, nervous, worried that I would be alone (21, 8)<br>- Scared, confused, disgusted, ashamed- like it was a bad thing (21, 13)<br>- Confused. Alone. Frightened. (21, 24)<br>Positive:<br>- Quite comforted and relieved that I was normal (21, 2)<br>- When I FINALLY realised I was excited as now I had a new side of myself to explore (21, 21)<br>Mixed:<br>- Strange, embarrassed, yet excited (21, 14)<br>- Every day I woke up feeling wrong and sick but it was a little bit exciting knowing I had a secret and was different (21, 33) |
| Engagement in actively seeking AM | Findings from Phase One suggested participants actively searched for AM. Qualitative data from Phase Two also suggested a similar theme, with a sense of "the information is there, you just need to find it". Participants again reported the importance of the internet in the process of seeking AM but also raised some concern with online activity. A number of participants reported accessing on line forums to connect with similar others and finding LGBQ role models. | - It's limited, you have to look for it, but it is there (17, 102)<br>- Only there if you go looking for it (17, 108)<br>- I found an online LGBTQ support group, which was very positive and welcoming. It was important because nobody around me was offering any kind of support at this time (22, 68)<br>- I didn't know who to talk to so I googled gay youth forum… which has been a lifeline ever since (22, 27)<br>- The information's there, you just need to find it (17, 3)<br>- I immediately starting reading up and saw numerous positive messages on the help websites all of which helped me calm down (22, 15)<br>- There is easier access to messages online (27, 71)<br>- I typed in lesbian celebrities and went from there. I searched for gay films and TV too (27, 14)<br>- Online though it depends where you are online, sometimes good, sometimes bad (18. 17)<br>- Internet has info both for and against (18, 46)<br>- Magazines, films, books, though you have to |

| | | find specific ones with the message. It's not mainstream at all! (18, 18) |
| | | - BGIOK website, found it on a google search for 'is it ok to be gay' when I was questioning my sexuality. It comforted me, helped me meet like minded friends and ultimately accept myself (20, 37) |
| | | - I never got the message unless I searched for youth groups and help and support from the internet and helplines (20, 62) |
| | | - I went on the internet when I was questioning. I was a young teenager with insomnia and so sat up one night looking up information about homosexuality to try and come to terms with my sexuality. Problem is... you really have to look for it. If you're in denial, you won't see them and hence will just continue denying it and seeing it as wrong (20, 50) |
| Differences in seeking and access to AM | This theme, also identified in Phase One but expanded here, related to demographic and other variables perceived to be affecting access to AM. Participants reported on perceived specific difficulties based on different sexual identities, locations, religions and educational settings. Participants noted it was more difficult to access AM for those who identified as bisexual, those in rural locations, religious individuals, and those still at school. The intersection of religion, education, rurality and culture was noted as creating difficulty in accessing AM particularly among Irish and Northern Irish participants. | - Messages suggest it's ok to be homosexual but not bisexual, there's just not enough information (17, 19) |
| | | - LGBT is not taught in any schools in Northern Ireland, regardless of age or religion (18, 23) |
| | | - I think rural communities where religion is important are especially closed off (18, 26) |
| | | - Politics in Ireland are notoriously right wing and heavily influenced by the teachings of the catholic church… Politics and religion never seem openly welcoming of homosexuality (18, 6) |
| | | - My sister told me that people were a lot more accepting of gay people in Dublin. This makes me hopeful about the future since I live in a village (20, 17) |
| | | - I lived in a small village with not much access to LGBTQ+ stuff (22, 7) |
| | | - School seemed very anti- LGBT, no help at all, LGBT awareness taught in sex education was taught very poorly by a teacher who obviously didn't understand (18, 20) |
| | | - It gets better after school and when you move to the city (38, 11) |
| | | - People are so much less judgemental when you're out of school and it makes me feel better and comfortable (38, 54) |
| Accessing AM, filtering out homophobia | The theme of accessing AM in relation to the experience of homophobia was developed here, and noted in Phase One. The process of seeking AM was | - My brother made disparaging remarks and my mum corrected his opinions saying it was okay to the gay. She cited my godparents, both of whom are women, as an example. It was shortly after this that I came out to her, the revelation about my godparents in conjunction with her |

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| | reported to occur alongside the process of filtering out homophobic messages. This was then explored further in Phase Three. | outspoken beliefs of equality providing me with the courage to do so (20, 26)<br>- I remember my sister saying 'I'll love you no matter how you love', she's been an incredible support for me when I face homophobia (20, 57)<br>- Always see those who have prejudice as those who need inspiration, go find other people like you (38, 24) |
| Source of AM | Friends (1st most common source). Friends were identified as providing AM directly and indirectly to participants (observed or interacted with). | - My closest friends were talking before I came out about how they were accepting of it. This was important to me because it made me feel safe and confident (20, 51)<br>- The ones that know are extremely supportive, the ones that don't rarely say bad stuff (18, 58)<br>- My friend who, shortly after I had come out, told me someone's sexuality simply doesn't matter to him and shouldn't matter to anyone (19, 6)<br>- Friend openly having a discussion in the park, a gay couple were also there and they kept on saying how cute they were (19, 21)<br>- My friends supported me 100%. They told me it didn't matter who I loved, they would always be there for me (19, 28)<br>- I came out to my new friends at college and they were completely cool with it (19, 67) |
| Source of AM | On line (1st most common source). Online activity was noted as a theme, particularly the presence of LGBQ youth forums and support sites, and the 'It Gets Better' campaign. | - On the 'It Gets Better Project' recently, I watched some inspirational videos that told you it's ok to be gay (19, 61)<br>- The internet is very influential. My favourite forum sites were places where we discussed which celebrities were gay (27, 21)<br>- I didn't know who to talk to so I googled gay youth forum… which has been a lifeline ever since (22, 27)<br>- Watching a sort of web series thing on youtube by the bgiok website (19, 64)<br>- The majority of it's ok to be gay messages come from other gay teens online (20, 65)<br>- My online activity includes a lot of queer people and discussions of queer characters (18, 41)<br>- The it gets better videos in which the world and celebrities reached out a supporting hand to show that its' ok to be lgbtq and we're not alone (20, 11) |
| Source of AM | LGBQ Organisations and community (3rd most common source). This theme ranged from small LGBQ centres, events and | - The LGBT communities, they make you feel like you are not alone with what you are feeling and there are lots more people like you (20, 72)<br>- My experiences in LGBQ groups have been fantastic. They are always super welcoming and |

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| | groups to national advocacy and rights organisations and campaigns, such as Stonewall's 'Some People are Gay. Get Over It' campaign. | happy to accept you as you are'<br>- LGBQ organisations are very good at getting the message out there (17, 35)<br>- There needs to be lots more spread about towns and villages like the short lived Stonewall campaign for longer periods of time and covering far wider areas (17, 101)<br>- Gay pride- it was a great day celebrating being comfortable with your sexuality (19, 81)<br>- The lgbt society at university (19, 86)<br>- A bus going past, it had 'some people are gay, get over it' written across the whole side of the bus. I felt so liberated, especially because it was so big and prominent and not just cornered off into a gay publication but actually out there for all to see (20, 78)<br>- A teacher giving a session on diversity. She also had a sticker on her laptop saying 'some people are gay, get over it' (20, 44) |
| Source of AM | Youth Organisations (4th most common source), including LGBQ specific youth services and general youth organisations and centres. | - In Scouts, I expected a negative reaction when I came out but everyone was so positive (20, 39)<br>- LGBT+ youth group, positive images for young people and help and support (20, 14)<br>- When I was at a local youth centre and someone used the term 'fag', one of the youth workers explained that everyone has the right to be gay or straight (20, 48)<br>- When I saw the sign for the LGBT group in my area and I realised there was support for people like me in the West of Ireland. I felt like I could meet people my own age who were feeling the same way (20, 3) |
| Source of AM | Media. This theme was included as media was referred to a great deal across all the questions. Media sources related to print (newspapers, magazines, books etc), music, and visual media such as TV. | - Thanks to pro gay messages in the media, young people are more willing to accept homosexuality even if they don't understand it (17, 66)<br>Print:<br>- Magazines, films, books, though you have to find specific ones with the message. It's not mainstream at all! (18, 18)<br>- On the guardian, there was a video of a gang of protestors protesting a London pub who's management asked a pair of gay men to leave (19, 93)<br>- Reading pinknews, their articles always give the message (19 104)<br>TV:<br>- Glee never fails to make me feel good about myself whenever I watch it ☺ (19, 64)<br>- 13 from House is bisexual and they don't feteshize it and they treat it realistically and |

| | | debunk some common myths (20, 32)<br>- Eastenders this week, finally seen something on tv where Christian tells Ben it's ok and it's not a choice. Never seen any thing like that before (19, 100)<br>- Gay storylines on soaps are good for raising awareness (18, 49)<br>Music:<br>- Certain mainstream artists like Gaga do make it obvious that it's ok to be gay, but generally most mainstream music (and society in general) emphasise the heterocentric world we live in (18, 86) |
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| Source of AM | Politics (16th most common source). Political figures and government policy and actions were noted as occasionally providing AM. | - The recent banning of aid to countries where homosexuality is illegal (18, 95)<br>- Barack Obama's It Gets Better video moved me to tears, just because for the first time in history, someone powerful who people look up to to make a difference was showing that he cared about us (20, 74)<br>- The possibility of government legalising gay marriage next year (19, 47)<br>- Politicians bring forward the proposals for voluntary gay marriage (18, 37)<br>- At lgbt pride when the flag was raised above city chambers in Glasgow, this seemed significant as the flag on the chambers is taken very seriously by government (20, 30) |
| Source of AM | Neighbourhood and community (17th most common source). AM in the local community were sometimes reported, often in relation to national campaigns, such as Stonewall's 'Some People are Gay. Get Over It' campaign. | - A bus going past, it had 'some people are gay, get over it' written across the whole side of the bus. I felt so liberated, especially because it was so big and prominent and not just cornered off into a gay publication but actually out there for all to see (20, 78)<br>- I was walking down the street arm in arm. The only comments we got were that we looked good together. It felt good (19, 103)<br>- Stonewall billboard poster (19, 14)<br>- High profile 'some people are gay, get over it' Stonewall campaign in my school and neighbourhood (18, 14)<br>- The way I walk into town means I go past the police station and every time I look up and see the banner on the side reading 'homophobia and transphobia, don't stand for it' (19, 49) |
| Source of AM | School (18th most common source). Some participants noted AM from the school environment, which were noted as most influential. However, many | - My Catholic all girls school is allowing me to put a gay rights angle on an anti-discrimination workshop, it was the first time I realised my school was behind me (19, 42)<br>- A teacher giving a session on diversity. She also had a sticker on her laptop saying some people |

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| | participants strongly noted AM provision in school was non existent or minimal | are gay, get over it (20, 44)<br>- A fellow student said 'that's so gay' when he meant something was bad or stupid. My teacher told him he was wrong to say it and that it was offensive (19, 77)<br>- My school is just amazing at anti homophobia and LGBTQ education (18, 102)<br>- At school, when my form tutor and his partner adopted a baby he took time off for paternity leave. Everyone knows he's gay but no one cares, he's the best teacher we have (19, 35)<br>- My PE teacher (who was my first gay crush) not getting offended when people asked if she was a lesbian. Quite sad that someone not getting completed offended is a good moment for me, but I guess that's the state of things just now (22, 21) |
| Source of AM | Religions (19th most common source). Although a small minority of participants provided examples of AM from religion (church and family), many participants noted the perceived homophobic content of religious teachings. | - Most people who have a faith are fine- it's just really boring to publish 'Christian says it's normal to be gay' as a headline (18, 54)<br>- My church seems to be fine with LGBQs (18, 30)<br>- I go to gay church, this helps a lot (18, 36)<br>- My mother is a vicar and couldn't bat an eyelid who I go out with as long as they're human and over 16 (18, 54) |
| Acceptance from friends and family | Participants spoke of the importance of friends and family responding positively to disclosures of sexual identity, reassuring participants of 'love regardless of who you love'. Acceptance from parents, siblings and close friends were all reported. AM seemed to come from direct affirmation or an indirect witnessing of affirmation. Family acceptance often related to openly gay family members or family friends. | - My mother sat me down at 17 and assured me … she would love me unconditionally. That was a huge relief to hear and put me more at ease (20, 5)<br>- When I came out to my sister a year ago, she hugged me and told me it was ok and she still lived me (20, 14)<br>- My parents telling me about my openly gay uncle (20, 20)<br>- Family and friends young and old have accepted me for who I am (18, 83)<br>- Coming out to friends and family who were all extremely open about it (19, 26)<br>- From my mum, she told me that she still loves me and that she is ok with me being gay, it's took her about 3 years to say that (20, 56)<br>- My friends and family are very accepting (18, 86)<br>- A close friend at school stuck up for a mutual gay friend when her boyfriend was being homophobic, they subsequently broke up (19, 11)<br>- My mum is really supportive and accepting (18, 52) |

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| | | - My grandmother mentioned a gay couple who owned a pub she went to and said she didn't have a problem with them being gay (20, 42)<br>- My family and parents who were totally accepting of my older brother coming out and affirming of my partners too, whether they're male or female (20, 43)<br>- Coming out to my dad, he acted like it was no big deal (20, 53) |
| Family values | The impact of '*family values'* was also identified as a theme, with participants reporting family environments accepting of sexual minorities. This acceptance appeared through the presence of gay family members or discussions of difference, equality and rights from a young age. | - My mum and dad raised me to believe it was OK to be gay, so I always knew it was (20, 77)<br>- I was brought up around a lot of LGBT people so it was always seen as perfectly normal and acceptable in our house (20, 61)<br>- My mum and her friends were always very pro gay (20, 36)<br>- I have very liberal parents and have lived in Brighton my whole life so I have always known it's ok to be gay (22, 48)<br>- I was brought up knowing that it was ok and I was loved by my mother and father no matter if I was gay or bi (22, 19) |
| Similar others | This theme was identified and developed further from Phase One. Participants spoke of seeking out similar others, those who also identified as LGBQ, through accessing forums online, or attending SM organisations. Examples of AM in relation to similar others in the media, music and print were also noted. | - The majority of it's ok to be gay messages come from other gay teens online (20, 65)<br>- The programme 'Growing up gay' made me confident enough to finally come out, I saw for the first time other people like me (20, 33)<br>- I was a little scared so I found the LGBT Scotland youth forum where lots of other online users were going through the same thing and people were saying it's ok to be gay. It was important as it helped me feel better about myself (20, 49)<br>- I wasn't exactly looking for the answer to "is it ok to be gay" as much as finding other people who were like me. Straight friends are all good, but sometimes I needed someone who I could talk to about how I felt and them knowing exactly (27, 8)<br>- It helped at youth group when I knew where I could go for support, to meet new people and to generally have fun with people who have been through similar experiences (20, 6)<br>- BGIOK website, found it on a google search for 'is it ok to be gay' when I was questioning my sexuality. It comforted me, helped me meet like minded friends and ultimately accept myself (20, 37)<br>- When I saw that two of my lecturers were lesbian and getting married to one another I think it was the first time I'd seen a successful |

| | | happy couple in real life what was gay. I really like both of them and it was almost like figures of authority were sort of similar to me. It really sent the tone of acceptance in the classroom (20, 81)<br>- When I saw the sign for the LGBT group in my area and I realised there was support for people like me in the West of Ireland. I felt like I could meet people my own age who were feeling the same way (20, 3) |
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| Role models | 'Role models' was also a theme identified and developed from Phase One. Role models were identified both within individual lives and the wider culture, ranging from friends to teachers to celebrities. The presence of role models also seemed to influence the ways in which participants' thought about their futures, as a 'real life' example of what life may be like as an older LGBQ individual. | - I like gay church 'cos I get to see lots of different grown ups who are gay, but living their lives just like normal. They have kids, they have jobs, they have family. I can see what it might be like to be 30 and have a long- term partner (20, 28)<br>- An older student at our school who I really look up to is openly lesbian and she was a real role model. She is a lovely person and just happened to be gay (22, 38)<br>- I had a pe teacher role model who was quite openly gay and she made it very clear that being gay was ok (22, 14)<br>- When first listening to Tegan & Sara music, and watching interviews on youtube, and coming to understand they were living a positive normal life while being gay. Made me feel a bit better about the idea that I might be gay (22, 2)<br>- From an older gay student I asked advice from, who wrote a 1500 word message on facebook to help me out- it was hugely useful (20, 28)<br>- When I saw that two of my lecturers were lesbian and getting married to one another I think it was the first time I'd seen a successful happy couple in real life what was gay. I really like both of them and it was almost like figures of authority were sort of similar to me. It really sent the tone of acceptance in the classroom (20, 81) |
| Stories of success and struggles | The theme of stories of success and struggles describes the process of accessing role models and the impact of this as allowing participants to hear both 'personal stories of success' and 'personal stories of struggles'. This appeared to acknowledge difficulties and also provide inspiration and hope. The | - Tegan & Sara interview about the homophobia they experience in their line of work (19, 8)<br>- Messages need to be from someone who has experienced it. People can say 'I understand' all they like, but unless they have been in a situation where they were scared, lonely, depressed and suicidal, it means nothing. It needs to be based on personal experience (31, 8)<br>- When first listening to Tegan & Sara music, and watching interviews on youtube, and coming to understand they were living a positive normal |

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| | 'It Gets Better' internet campaign (30 000 videos conveying messages that 'It Gets Better' to young people) was acknowledged within this theme. | life while being gay. Made me feel a bit better about the idea that I might be gay (22, 2)<br>- We need examples of people who've hurt themselves, or just telling others they had a hard time but got over it (31, 69)<br>- Messages saying what famous LGBT people have accomplished, whether it be in music or science or something else (31, 10)<br>- The person behind the message should be talking from experience so the reader cab identify and relate to it, realising there are other people like them, it is ok even though it's hard and they are not alone (31, 48) |
| Affirming the self | This theme was explored further and developed from Phase Two. Many participants spoke of the importance of 'being myself', ''loving my difference' and often utilised 'gay anthems', such as Lady Gaga's 'Born this Way'. | 'I had decided myself it was ok to be gay as unfortunately I don't remember any good gay messages, I wasn't going to let anyone dictate what my life would be like (22, 8)<br>- Coming out and telling myself it's ok to be gay was more of an internal thing for me, generally I don't care what others think of me (35, 50)<br>- Embrace your sexuality and don't let anyone tell you otherwise- you were born this way! (38, 22)<br>- Be yourself, you're beautiful the way you are and don't need to change for anyone. I'm confident and proud (38, 72)<br>- Do not conform, be your own person and don't follow the crowd (35, 82) |
| Evaluating AM | AM were identified as being 'evaluated' within Phase Two also. Participants reported AM were considered in terms of credibility, accessibility and effect, in line with literature regarding messages and persuasion. The importance of influential AM being 'frequent', 'relevant', 'truthful' and 'meaningful' was recognised. | - Barack Obama's It Gets Better video moved me to tears, just because for the first time in history, someone powerful who people look up to to make a difference was showing that he cared about us (20, 74)<br>- Messages need to relate to me, be truthful, inspiring, reassuring and supportive (31, 7)<br>- Messages need to be often, need to be sincere and need to be truthful (31, 95)<br>- Messages need to be from someone who has experienced it. People can say 'I understand' all they like, but unless they have been in a situation where they were scared, lonely, depressed and suicidal, it means nothing. It needs to be based on personal experience (31, 8)<br>- They have to be relevant to you and deeply moving (31, 37)<br>- Need to be easy to find (31, 46)<br>- We need examples of people who've hurt themselves, or just telling others they had a hard time but got over it (31, 69)<br>- The person behind the message should be |

| | | talking from experience so the reader cab identify and relate to it, realising there are other people like them, it is ok even though it is hard and they are not alone (31, 48) |
|---|---|---|
| | | - When Skins ran the storyline of a teenage lesbian but treated her the same as any other character and didn't bring into focus she was gay (20, 14)<br>- Honest, repeated and true (31, 1)<br>- During Hilary Clinton's speech on bullying in America, don't even know why I thought about it, just seemed like a heart felt truthful speech (20, 47)<br>- Messages saying what famous LGBT people have accomplished, whether it be in music or science or something else (31, 10)<br>- Accessible and from a trustworthy source (31, 51)<br>- Publically available with a big effect on young people and bullies (31, 55) |
| AM across development | The process of seeking and experiencing AM, and the effect of AM was noted as changing through adolescent development. Initially AM experiences were seen as difficult to access. A time gap between first questioning sexual orientation or identity and experiencing AM was noted. Over time, participants reported AM are more integrated. | - I went on the internet when I was questioning. I was a young teenager with insomnia and so sat up one night looking up information about homosexuality to try and come to terms with my sexuality. Problem is... you really have to look for it. If you're in denial, you won't see them and hence will just continue denying it and seeing it as wrong (20, 50)<br>- I didn't see or hear any messages saying it's ok to be gay, until about 3 years later when I left school (22, 9)<br>- Seeing or hearing messages now, at my stage, just gives me a little hope or boost, but now it's not as important as it would have been a few years ago, when it was very hard to find (35, 95)<br>- There aren't enough messages and the ones that are there are often inaccessible or not visible enough to those who need them (17, 92) |
| Effects of AM | The theme of perceived effects of AM was expanded further in Phase Two to include:<br>- 'Effect on world- view': Increased feelings of safety and comfort in the world.<br>- 'Effect on self- view': Increased feelings of self-acceptance and self-confidence. | - I was a little scared so I found the LGBT Scotland youth forum where lots of other online users were going through the same thing and people were saying it's ok to be gay. It was important as it helped me feel better about myself (20, 49)<br>- It makes me feel more confident and included, not an outcast or alien. It makes me feel a more confident member of society. It is nice to be considered and acknowledged and to feel that I count (35, 61)<br>- It makes me feel more confident and safe as you start to believe society is coming round, and |

| | | optimistic about being equal in society's eyes (35, 6) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | | - Makes me feel more comfortable and safe and not be discriminated against (35, 23) |
| | | - The message gave me comfort and made me realise I am not alone (22, 65) |
| | | - Makes you feel more positive about yourself, giving you a feeling of acceptance from wider society and from yourself. This can give confidence and ultimately lead to people living happier lives as an out person (35, 75) |
| | | - It has an effect as it means I am accepted for who I am, and I don't have to hide the real me or feel ashamed (35, 41) |
| | | - BGIOK website, found it on a google search for 'is it ok to be gay' when I was questioning my sexuality. It comforted me, helped me meet like minded friends and ultimately accept myself (20, 37) |
| | | - My closest friends were talking before I came out about how they were accepting of it. This was important to me because it made me feel safe and confident (20, 51) |
| | | - When I saw that two of my lecturers were lesbian and getting married to one another I think it was the first time I'd seen a successful happy couple in real life what was gay. I really like both of them and it was almost like figures of authority were sort of similar to me. It really sent the tone of acceptance in the classroom (20, 81) |

## Appendix B.3.
## Coding Manuel Phase Three

| Code Name | Code Description | Code Example (line no.) |
|---|---|---|
| Accessibility of AM | Theme highlighting the participant agreement with the finding that affirming messages were 'there if you look for them' but were not obvious and accessible enough. | - This (Phase Two report) seems accurate: society is becoming increasingly accepting of LGBQ people, but it is nonetheless a struggle to find "affirming messages" outside organisations explicitly dedicated to providing them. |
| Actively engaged in seeking AM | Participants provided support for the finding that SM adolescents are actively engaged in seeking AM, acknowledging the micro and macro sources, including the internet. Differences in access to AM continued to be noted, with participants highlighting difficulties within school environments once more. | - Many sources (of AM) via internet, websites, social networking and YouTube about people's stories, celebrities, etc.<br>- If you live in a particularly homophobic area/ household/ culture, and school is the only place you might be able to access AM, it's probably not going to happen. Schools still seem to have the mindset that Section 28 applies. |
| Online activity | Participants highlighted the importance of online activity, giving examples from their own experiences. The importance of online activity in relation to being at school and living rurally was reported. Both benefits and limitations of online use were acknowledged- ease of access, and draw back of virtual reality. | - I definitely had to find AM, I live in the middle of nowhere, if I didn't have the internet I'd be in difficulty. But sometimes it's even difficult on the internet, sometimes I end up on sites which aren't what I want, and make me think that being a gay man means I should just be interested in sex and nothing else.<br>- The internet is good, but sometimes it's better to actually know someone in real life I think. I feel like I've got a life on line with my on line friends, with lots of AM, but in my real life it's not like that". |
| Similar others and role models and 'personal stories of success and stories of struggles'. | Participants strongly agreed with these findings, providing rich narratives of their own experiences of similar others, e.g. relatives within their families and role models in the media, linking these to witnessing struggles and success. | - The story of Kurt Hummel in the hit TV show Glee gives an overwhelming positive message about the troubles of being gay in a secondary school… Of course, Glee is not the perfect portrayal, but it's the best quality message about homosexuality that most of us have got. |
| Affirming the self | Descriptions of affirming the self were rich and detailed, and showed a process of development. Some participants described a consistent sense of self-affirmation; others described | - Nobody can tell me what I can or can't be. I live with the self- assurance that I've done nothing wrong, and therefore nobody can tell me I can't carry on doing what I'm doing. I study hard, I volunteer in the community, I have good relationships, I'm kind and respectful of strangers: |

| | | this developing over time. Self- affirmation beliefs were held strong in the face of homophobic experiences. | What's my crime? And I carry this around in my heart as my beacon and that is that… I believe the first step is to fully accept who you are and be completely 100% ok with it, and before you do that, you have to admit that you're not ok with it. You have to call yourself out on it, really, ask yourself: Oi, you? What's your problem? And then you begin to realise that you are who you are. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Developmental | | Participants reflected on their development in relation to experiences of AM, noting the inaccessibility of AM when they were younger, a time when they felt in would have been more helpful. | - If I had had more AM when I was first questioning, I don't think it would have taken me so long to come to terms with it" |
| Effect of AM | | Participant narratives regarding the finding that AM have a positive effect on feelings and attitudes towards self and others and influence life decisions were provided. Self- acceptance appeared a key perceived effect. | - In my experience, being told that being gay is okay massively helped me. It allowed me to confront my emotions head on rather than attempt to avoid them altogether, and helped me in my coming out process in the knowledge that people would probably accept me for who I was. |
| Evaluating AM | | Participants provided examples of how they evaluate messages, with themes of evaluating AM on account of the *'relevance'* of the AM to the individual, linked to the importance of *'similar others'* and *'stories of success and struggles'*. | - The story was close to home and relevant, and gave me faith in being able to succeed in a particular situation. |
| Filtering out homophobia, accessing AM | | Participants were asked to consider the experience of homophobia and AM as identified in previous findings, and provide examples from their own lives. Examples included how the experience of homophobia would then be followed by attempts to access AM, in turn experiencing AM allowed participants to minimise potential negative effects of homophobia. | - During the time when I was not out, and was not in search of AM, homophobic slurs in the corridors between lessons would get me down quite quickly, and I would often find myself unable to concentrate and in some cases even reduced to tears. Once I had been exposed to some indication that being gay was totally normal, fairly common, and even natural, my reactions slowly improved. I could hold my head high, ignoring disparaging remarks altogether. |
| Managing homophobia | | Each participant spoke of either *'ignoring'*, *'sharing'* or | - Whenever I feel down about a particular instance of homophobia that I've |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | *'rationalising'* homophobic messages. The process of rationalising homophobic messages was complex and appeared to involve a justification of self-AM and a rationalisation of homophobia as a problem located within others. In understanding and making meaning of homophobia as a problem located within others, it allowed participants to provide self AM. | experienced, I find that sharing it with a group of like-minded people helps to ease the burden: as they say, a problem shared is a problem solved".<br><br>- I know inside my heart of hearts that they're wrong and it's their own problem".<br><br>- BUT WHAT CAN I DO? Can I help that I like women? No. Can they help that they are homophobic bigots? Probably. So who is the one that needs to deal with the problem? |

**Appendix C**
**Section B Phase 1 information and consent forms**

**Information sheet**

Who I am and why I'm coming to                    ?
My name is                    , I am carrying out research exploring experiences of young people identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Queer/Questioning. This is part of my training to be a Clinical Psychologist and is sponsored by the Department of Applied Psychology at Canterbury Christ Church University.

I used to work with the young people of            , a LGBTQ project in            and they inspired me to do this project. I would like to explore LGBQ young people's experiences regarding messages of 'It's ok to be gay'.

What is this research?
The focus group at                is about your experiences of messages of 'It's ok to be gay'. It is a discussion group in which I listen to your thoughts and experiences. The group will take place for 1½ hours. There will be 8-12 LGBQ young people in the group who you may know from            already.

The rest of the research includes more LGBQ young people completing an internet survey, then telling me what they think of the findings. All people who take part in this study will be between 16 and 21 years old, living in the UK or Ireland, and identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Queer/Questioning.

Why should you bother?
Do you want to help other LGBQ young people growing up in a pretty straight world? I will publish and present the research findings for people working with LGBQ young people and psychologists to help support young LGBQ people. (If you would like to read the research findings please email me).

The information bit…
a. Your participation in the focus group is your own choice and if you do not want to participate or to stay until the end you are free to leave. If you decide after taking part in the group that you no longer want to be included, I will delete all your contributions to the conversation. The focus group will be audiotaped.
b. When I write up the focus group I will ensure anonymity by deleting any names or identifiable information.
c. The focus group write up will be stored securely, destroyed after 10 years, and no one, aside from the group, will be aware of your individual responses.
d. What you say will be confidential for the research, but if            staff or me are worried that you or anyone else is at risk of harm we will talk to you and may need to talk to someone to help.
e. There is a consent form to sign to inform you have read and understood these things. There will also be opportunity to ask questions before we start.
f. If you have any questions or queries, please email me. If you have any concerns or complaints, please contact Research Director            (email            ).

Thank you…
If you decide to attend, what you say in the group will be greatly valued and I hope it will provide information on how best to support young LGBQ people in the future. Thank you!


Trainee Clinical Psychologist, Canterbury Christ Church University
Email

**Consent Form**

Title of Project: Sexual minority youth and affirming experiences: an exploration of the message "it's ok to be gay".

Name of Researcher:

Contact Details:

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw or leave at any time, without giving any reason and without this affecting the support I receive from          . ☐

3. I understand that any personal information I provide will be kept strictly confidential, unless the researcher or                staff are worried about me or anyone else being harmed. All information will be made anonymous in the research and destroyed after 10 years. ☐

4. I am aware, if I find the group emotionally difficult, I can speak with the          staff during or after the group. ☐

5. I agree to take part in the above study ☐

Name of participant ……………………………………………………

Signed ………………………………          Date ………………………………

Name of researcher ……………………………………………………

Signed ………………………………          Date ………………………………

          Copies:          1 for participant
                    1 for researcher

**Appendix D**
**Section B Phase 1 focus group schedule**

2 hours including 25 minute break.
12 participants.


1: Introduction to researcher and research. Information, consent form, ground-rules: Safe Space Agreement (10 mins)
2: Ice breaker exercise (10 mins)
3: What does 'It's ok to be gay' mean: societal view (10 mins)
4: My experience of 'It's ok to be gay': personal view (30 mins)
Break (25)
5: What next: effect, impact, consequence. If not. (15 mins)
6: Survey development and internet space (10 mins)
7: Questions, follow up, thoughts, advice, reflections (10 mins)
8: Youth work activity

Clearly identified agenda will aim to provide both structure and flexibility as appropriate. Focus group will begin with wide focus and move towards a more specific focus, will be led by participant discussion (specific questions below if necessary). Focus group will be recorded using two tape recorders and an          member of staff will note down anonymised speakers at intervals to aid the transcription process. A 'one person speaking at a time' will be encouraged, and a tool such as passing a 'speaking token' may be introduced to allow for clear communication and transcription.


Potential flexible questions:
**What does 'It's ok to be gay' mean: societal view**
What does gay mean to you?
What does it's ok to be gay mean to you?
What would a society be like where everyone knows it's ok to be gay?
How would people know that the society thought it was ok to be gay?

**Experiences of 'It's ok to be gay': personal view**
Where might people get the message it's ok to be gay?
How might be people look for it?
If people didn't look out for it, would they get the message?
Have you looked for it?
How did you do this?
Where did you look?
Where did you find messages?
Tell me about them
How do you think your age affected everything that you're raised? Ethnicity? Culture? Religion? Schooling/education/employment? Area you live in? Friends? Family?

**Exploring effect, impact, consequences of AM**
How do you think these messages affected:
- The way you saw yourself as a person?
- The way you saw yourself as an LGBQ person?
- Your identity/your image/your sense of who you are?

- The way you felt about yourself?
- Your mood?
- Your well- being?
- Your confidence/ your self esteem?

**Directing research strategy and terminology**
- Advice for me about the next stages in my research
- Advice on questions to ask
- Advice about how to ask questions: your language/messages
- Advice for me on where to put up the link to the research survey
- Where would I find you online/how would I get your attention/why would you want to complete the survey

## Appendix E
This has been removed from electronic copy

**Appendix F**
**Section B Phase 2 information and consent forms**

Information Sheet
Dear LGBQ young person,

*Who I am and why I'm here?*
My name is              , I am carrying out research exploring experiences of young people identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Questioning. This is part of my training to be a Clinical Psychologist and is sponsored by the Department of Applied Psychology at Canterbury Christ Church University and supervised by                  .

I used to work with young people in an LGBTQ community project and they inspired me to do this research. I would like to explore LGBQ young people's experiences regarding messages of 'It is ok to be gay'. When I say 'gay' I use it to describe anyone who identifies as 'not straight' or LGBQ.

*What is this research?*
There is a lot of research suggesting LGBQ young people have negative experiences but very little research exploring positive ones. It's important to focus on positive experiences too in order to figure out what can help LGBQ young people. Please complete this survey about your experiences of messages that 'It's ok to be gay'. It's been done with the help of LGBQ young people. It asks you things about whether you heard these messages, who from, where from, etc. I will analyse the responses, and then see what LGBQ young people think of the findings. All people who take part in this study will be between 16 and 21 years old, living in the UK or Ireland, and identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Questioning.

*Why should you bother?*
Do you want to help other LGBQ young people growing up in a pretty straight world? This research aims to publish findings about the message 'It's ok to be gay' and the effect it has in order to help LGBQ young people growing up. I will share the research findings with professionals working with LGBQ young people. I'm happy to share the findings with you, please contact me on the email address below.

*Information…*
a. Your participation in this survey is your own choice and if you do not want to complete it you can stop at any time by closing the survey window. Once you have pressed the 'submit' button your survey is submitted to the research and it will not be possible to retrieve your individual responses.
b. The research will not identify you personally in any way and no one, aside from me, will be aware of your individual responses.
c. Please do not write your name or contact details, identifiable information will be deleted. Remember about safe internet use, all data leaves traces on the internet and you don't want personal information floating about.
d. All information will be stored securely and confidentially, then destroyed after 10 years.
e. Filling in the survey may raise some difficult feelings or thoughts, there is contact information below for organisations giving support and guidance in case you want them.
f. If you feel worried about being on an internet page with the words 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual' on it, why don't you have a pop up page you can bring up if anyone comes over. Also remember to delete your 'Internet History' if you want to delete the record of this site from the computer you are using.

g. If you have any questions or queries, please contact me on my email address. If you have any concerns or complaints, please contact Research Director on email.

h. There is a consent page to tick to record you have read and understood these things.

*Thank you…*
What you say in the survey will be greatly valued and I hope it will provide information on how best to support young LGBQ people in the future. Thank you!


Trainee Clinical Psychologist, Canterbury Christ Church University

**Consent page**

**Title of Project:** Sexual minority youth and affirming experiences: an exploration of the message "it's ok to be gay".

**Name of Researcher:**

**Contact Details:**

Please indicate that you give consent to the following:

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the ☐
above study.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to
withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. ☐

3. I understand that any personal information I provide will be kept strictly
confidential. All information will be made anonymous in the research and destroyed after 10
years. ☐

4. I am aware contact details and links to support organisations
are provided if I find participating in the research raises any concerns. ☐

5. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

**Contact details and links to support organisations**

In the UK & Northern Ireland

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Samaritans | 08457 90 90 90 | https://samaritans.org/ |
| Childline | 0800 1111 | http://www.childline.org.uk/ |
| Queer Youth Network | - | http://www.queeryouth.org.uk |
| Lesbian and Gay Switchboard | 020 7837 7324 | http://www.llgs.org.uk |

In Ireland

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Samaritans | 1850 60 90 90 | https://samaritans.org/ |
| Childline | 1800 666 666 | http://www.childline.ie |
| BeLonG To | 01 670 6223 | http://www.belongto.org/ |

## Appendix G
## Section B Phase 2 survey

* Please indicate that you give consent to take part:

○ Yes

○ No

I am...

○ Female                              ○ Male

I am...

○ 16          ○ 17          ○ 18          ○ 19          ○ 20          ○ 21

I live in...

○ England- North                     ○ England- Midlands

○ England- South                     ○ Ireland

○ Northern Ireland                   ○ Scotland

○ Wales

○ You specify...

[                                                                    ]

I live in...

○ Urban area

○ Rural area

○ You specify

[                                                                    ]

I am...

☐ White British        ☐ White Irish        ☐ Black British        ☐ Black Irish

☐ Asian British        ☐ Asian Irish        ☐ Western European        ☐ Southern European

☐ Eastern European        ☐ Middle Eastern        ☐ Caribbean        ☐ Indian

☐ Pakistani        ☐ Sri Lankan        ☐ African        ☐ Chinese

☐ East Asian        ☐ Latin American        ☐ North American        ☐ Mixed

☐
Traveller/Gypsy/Romany

You specify

```
                                                              
```

I consider myself…

◯ Gay　　　◯ Lesbian　　　◯ Bisexual　　　◯ Questioning

You specify

```
                                                              
```

How old were you when you started considering you might be L, G, B or Q?

```
                                                              
```

I am…

◯ Religious

◯ Not religious

◯ You specify your religion

```
                                                              
```

I am studying...

☐ At school

☐ At college

☐ At university

☐ Not studying

You specify

```
                                                              
```

I am working…

☐ Full time

☐ Part time

☐ Not working

You specify

```
[                                                        ]
```

I have...

☐ GCSEs/Junior Cert                    ☐ HNCs/HNDs

☐ FETACs                               ☐ HATACs

☐ NVQs/BTECs                           ☐ A Levels/IBD/Leaving Cert/LCA

☐ Undergraduate Degree

You specify

```
[                                                        ]
```

I live with…

☐ Family

☐ Friends

☐ Girlfriend/boyfriend

☐ No one else

You specify

```
[                                                        ]
```

In your experience do you think today's society in the UK and Ireland accepts that "It's ok to be gay"?

○ Strongly Agree

○ Agree

○ Neutral

○ Disagree

○ Strongly Disagree

In your experience do you think that messages that 'it's ok to be gay' are...

○ Obvious & accessible

○ Sometimes there

○ There if you look for them

○ Occasionally there

○ Never there

In the UK and Ireland today do you think messages that 'it's ok to be gay' are obvious and accessible enough?

○ Strongly Agree

○ Agree

○ Neutral

○ Disagree

○ Strongly Disagree

If you had to give one sentence about messages that 'it's ok to be gay' in the UK and Ireland in today's society, what would you say?

In your experience, have you seen or hear messages that "it's ok to be gay" in:

| | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always | Don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Friends** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Family** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Neighbourhood and Community** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **School** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **College** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **University** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Work** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **On line** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **TV** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Film** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Magazines and Newspapers** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Books and Comics** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Music and Arts** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Youth Organisations** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Health Organisations** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **LGBQ Organisations** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **LGBQ Community** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Politics** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Religions** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

Please give important examples

Describe the most recent experience that sticks in your mind of when you saw or heard or noticed a message that "it's ok to be gay"
(Please think about where, who, what...)

Describe up to two other experiences in your life that stick in your mind when you saw or heard or noticed a message that "it's ok to be gay"
(Please think about who, where, what, when, how come it was important to you...)

When you first considered you might be L, G, B or Q, how did you feel?

When you first considered you might be L, G, B or Q, do you remember an experience when you saw or heard or noticed a message that "it's ok to be gay"?
(Please think about what, who, when, where, how come it was important to you at the time...)

When do you think is the most important age to see or hear messages that "it's ok to be gay"?

☐ Younger than 10

☐ 10- 11

☐ 12- 13

☐ 14- 15

☐ 16- 17

☐ 18- 19

☐ 20- 21

How come?

When you have felt positive about being L, G, B or Q at different ages, did this feeling come from inside yourself or from the outside world?
(Please answer for each age up to your current age)

| | **Mostly positive from inside myself** | **Equally positive from inside myself and outside world** | **Mostly positive from outside world** | **Never felt positive** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **10-11** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **12-13** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **14-15** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **16-17** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **18-19** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **20-21** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

Has there been a time in your life when you searched for messages that "it's ok to be gay"?
(like actively seeking out LGBQ media, friends, organisations...)

○ Strongly Agree

○ Agree

○ Neutral

○ Disagree

○ Strongly Disagree

How old were you when you started doing this?

[                                                                ]

Where did you search for messages that "it's ok to be gay"?

How easy or difficult was it to find messages that "it's ok to be gay"?

○ Very Easy

○ Easy

○ Neutral

○ Difficult

○ Very Difficult

In your opinion, do you think you have to search for messages that "it's ok to be gay" to see, hear or notice them?

◯ Strongly Agree

◯ Agree

◯ Neutral

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly Disagree

In your opinion what are the 5 most influential places for messages that "it's ok to be gay"? (Number 1 as most influential)

For a message to be influential, what does it need to be like?

In your opinion, do you think seeing, hearing or noticing messages that "it's ok to be gay" depends on whether you consider yourself L, G, B or Q?

In your opinion, do you think seeing, hearing or noticing messages that "it's ok to be gay" depends on whether you are male or female?

Would you make decisions about the following based on whether you see or hear messages that "it's ok to be gay" there?

|  | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Where you choose to go to school, college or university?** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Where you choose to work?** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Where you choose to live?** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **Where you choose to socialise?** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

In your experience does seeing or hearing messages that "it's ok to be gay" have an effect on you?

How much effect do messages that "it's ok to be gay" have on you?

○ Very big

○ Big

○ Neither big nor small

○ Small

○ Very small

If you had one message to give about being an LGBQ young person in the UK and Ireland in today's society, what would you say?

Any further opinions?

**Appendix H**
**Section B Phase 3 report**

**Question 1:** Do LGBQ youth perceive messages that it is healthy and acceptable to be LGBQ?
**Answer:** LGBQ youth do perceive messages that being LGBQ is ok, but these affirming messages (AM) are not accessible enough. Nearly half of people reported they live in a society accepting of LGBQ people (47%) but only 20% of people reported that AM were obvious and accessible enough.


**Question 2:** Do LGBQ youth actively or passively experience affirming messages?
**Answer:** LGBQ youth are actively engaged in seeking AM. Overall, 79% of people reported they had to actively search for AM, half found this process of actively seeking out AM 'easy' or 'very easy'.


**Question 3:** How do LGBQ youth seek out AM?
**Answer:** The average age for searching for AM was 14.7 years. People most commonly sought out AM on-line; using google, youtube and LGBQ youth forums and advice sites (such as GYC, GYN, BGIOK). The process of seeking AM was perceived as affected by different sexual identities, locations, religions, and places of education.


**Question 4:** What are AM like, when are they important and where do they come from?
**Answers:** a. Sources of AM
AM were most likely to come from the following places: LGBQ organisations and communities, friends, on-line and youth organisations. They were least likely to come from school, religion, politics, and neighbourhood and community. AM were also reported from print and visual media and popular culture, such as magazines and newspapers, TV, film, music and books or comics.
        b. Timing of AM
Generally, AM were reported to be lacking when participants were younger and considering whether they were LGBQ. It also seemed AM was important when homophobia was experienced.
        c. Nature of AM
People identified 'school' as the most influential place for AM, yet AM were uncommon in schools. Themes of AM included hearing 'personal stories of experiences of success of LGBQ people, and experience of struggles', 'the importance of finding LGBQ role models and other people like me', 'acceptance from friends and family' and 'AM from figures of influence and politics'. It was also important that AM were 'frequent', 'truthful', 'relevant' and 'meaningful'.


**Question 5:** What is the effect of AM?
**Answer:** AM have a large effect on attitudes and life choices.
84% reported that affirming experiences have a 'very big' or 'big' effect.
Participants reported AM lead to increased feelings of comfort, reassurance and safety in the world, and increased feelings of acceptance and confidence. AM had an effect on life choices, about where to live, about social life, about where to access education and jobs.

## Appendix I
## Section B Phase 3 recruitment, email information and consent form

**Recruitment**
Information Sheet recruiting participation in future research in Phase Two survey:

Would you like to be involved more in this research?
Would you like to tell me your views about the research findings to help other young LGBQ people?
Would you like to tell me more about your personal experiences to help other young LGBQ people?

I am looking for a number of young LGBQ people to contribute further to this research. After I have analysed the findings from this survey I would like to know what young LGBQ people think of them. I would also like to know more about personal experiences in relation to the findings.

If you are interested in taking part in this:
1. Please send me an email to the address below. If you are worried about using your personal email address to get LGBQ related information, why not set up a separate email address and email me from that?
2. I will contact you via email and ask you to tick a consent form and send it back to me.
3. I will send you a report of the findings so far for you to read through.
4. We will set up an Instant Messenger conversation at a convenient time for you in which I will ask you about your views of the research and hear more about how your experiences relate to the findings.
5. Your participation in this research will be separate to your survey completion and will also be confidential. Selection of participants for this research will be based on demographic responses in the survey to best represent a range of LGBQ young people.

I hope to hear from you soon. Thank you!

Trainee Clinical Psychologist, Canterbury Christ Church University

**Email**

Dear…
Thank you so much for volunteering to take part in this research. As I've said, the research is going really well and lots of young people completed the survey, saying some really interesting things. The surveys have been analysed and I'm left with three questions I'd really like your help with. I've also included a summary of the analysis for you to read, if you have any thoughts or opinions please do leave a comment. It might be helpful to read the summary before answering the main three questions I have for you.

There are two things to do first, one is to ask you to read through the information and give your consent to take part if you still wish to do so. The second is to ask you to complete the basic questions about yourself, like your age etc. I know I asked you these questions in the survey, but I don't know which answers are yours for confidentiality reasons so I need to ask you to complete it again.

Everything is included in the email, so just write in your responses and hit reply. Thank you again, can I ask you to get back to me in the next couple of weeks?

Again, thank you very much, your input is really valuable. I look forward to hearing your thoughts.


Trainee Clinical Psychologist, Canterbury Christ Church University

**Information Sheet**

Dear                    ,

Thank you for volunteering to contribute more to this research. As you know, I am currently carrying out research exploring experiences of young people identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Queer/Questioning. This is part of my training to be a Clinical Psychologist and is sponsored by the Department of Applied Psychology at Canterbury Christ Church University and supervised by                    .

This research aims to publish findings about the message 'It's ok to be gay' and the effect it has to help LGBQ young people growing up. I will share the research findings with people working with LGBQ young people and with psychologists. I'm happy to share these with you, please contact me on the email address to request a final report.

I am interested in your views and experiences in relation to the findings so far!...
I have attached a report of the findings and some extra questions for you to answer. Before you do this, please read this sheet, complete the basic questions form and tick the consent form. Then please send me the basic questions form, the consent form, your opinions about the report and your thoughts on the three questions.

*The information bit…*
a. Your participation in this is your own choice and if you do not want to be included in the research you can withdraw at any time. Please try to let me know via email if you no longer want to take part.
b. The research will not identify you personally in any way and no one, aside from me, will be aware of your individual responses.
c. All information will be stored securely and confidentially.
d. If taking part in this research raises some difficult feelings or thoughts, I have provided information and links to organisations giving support and guidance in case you want them.
e. If you have any questions or queries, please contact me on my email address. If you have any concerns or complaints, please contact concerns or complaints, please contact Research Director                              on                              .

*Thank you…*
What you say will be greatly valued and I hope it will provide information on how best to support young LGBQ people in the future. Thank you!

Trainee Clinical Psychologist, Canterbury Christ Church University

**Consent Form**

**Title of Project:** Sexual minority youth and affirming experiences: an exploration of the message "it's ok to be gay".

**Name of Researcher:**

**Contact Details:**

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. ☐

3. I understand that any personal information I provide will be kept strictly confidential. All information will be made anonymous in the research and destroyed after 10 years. ☐

4. I am aware contact details and links to support organisations are provided if I find completing the survey brings up difficult emotions ☐

5. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

**Contact details and links to support organisations**

In the UK & Northern Ireland

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Samaritans | 08457 90 90 90 | https://samaritans.org/ |
| Childline | 0800 1111 | http://www.childline.org.uk/ |
| Queer Youth Network | - | http://www.queeryouth.org.uk |
| Lesbian and Gay Switchboard | 020 7837 7324 | http://www.llgs.org.uk |

In Ireland

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Samaritans | 1850 60 90 90 | https://samaritans.org/ |
| Childline | 1800 666 666 | http://www.childline.ie |
| BeLonG To | 01 670 6223 | http://www.belongto.org/ |

**Appendix J**
**Section B Phase 3 questionnaire**

I am…
Please tick, highlight or delete      Female     ☐
     Male     ☐

I am…
Please tick    16   ☐      19   ☐
               17   ☐      20   ☐
               18   ☐      21   ☐

I live in…
Please tick      England- North    ☐
               England- Midlands    ☐
               England- South    ☐
               Ireland    ☐
               Northern Ireland    ☐
               Scotland    ☐
               Wales    ☐
               You specify    ☐ _____

I am…
Please tick

     White British    ☐    White Irish    ☐
     Black British    ☐    Black Irish    ☐
     Asian British    ☐    Asian Irish    ☐
     West European    ☐    Southern European    ☐
     Eastern European ☐    Middle Eastern    ☐
     Caribbean    ☐    Indian    ☐
     Pakistani    ☐    Sri Lankan    ☐
     African    ☐    Chinese    ☐
     East Asian    ☐    Latin American    ☐
     North American    ☐    Mixed background    ☐
     You specify    ☐ _____

I consider myself…
Please tick    Gay ☐      Lesbian ☐      Bisexual ☐
               Questioning ☐      You specify ☐ _____

I am…
Religious    ☐    You specify your religion_____
Not religious    ☐

I am studying…
Please tick    At school    ☐
               At college    ☐
               At university    ☐
               Not studying    ☐
               You specify    ☐ _____

I am working…      Please tick    Yes    ☐        No    ☐

**Appendix K**
**Section B Phase 3 survey**

Comment boxes included in Phase 2 Report, followed by the following questions:

1. Lots of people said there were messages of homophobia around them, suggesting it's not ok to be gay, how do you manage this?

| Answer: |
| --- |
| |

2. When you hear homophobia, what do you do to make yourself feel better?

| Answer: |
| --- |
| |

3. Lots of people spoke of their positive experiences of messages that 'it's ok to be gay', such as gay teachers, conversations with supportive friends, the TV programme Glee, or musicians Tegan & Sara or Lady Gaga. It seemed really important these messages were relevant and good quality. How do you evaluate messages as being relevant and good quality?
(Tip: Think of recent/best 'it's ok to be gay' message and tell me in as much detail as possible how you decided it was relevant and good quality)

| Answer: |
| --- |
| |

## Appendix L

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**Appendix M**

**Research report for participants**

**cc. Ethics Approval panel**

Dear LGBQ Young Person,

I am writing to you as you kindly took part in my research some time 2010- 2012 and asked

me to send you a Research Report. The research went really well and lots of LGBQ young

people had lots of interesting things to say, all of which was appreciated. The research has

now been analysed and reported, and will be submitted to a journal, presented at a

conference and discussed with LGBQ youth organisations and LGBQ campaigners- taking

part in this research will hopefully make a difference! Here is a short report for LGBQ young

people. Please do contact me if you would like further information.

**Research Title:** Sexual Minority Adolescents and Affirming Experiences: An Exploration of

Messages "It's ok to be gay" for LGBQ Youth

**Research Aim:** To investigate protective factors in the lives of LGBQ young people, looking

at 'affirming experiences or messages'- times when young people have seen or heard

messages that it is healthy and fine to be gay. To explore whether LGBQ young people

experience 'affirming messages' (AM), when, where from, how and what the AM are, and

how young people think AM affect them.

**Research Method:** A mixed- method (different ways of collecting data) design with three

phases of qualitative and quantitative data collection was used. Participants lived in the UK

and Ireland, aged between 16 and 24 years and identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or

questioning. Twelve participants took part in a focus group, 107 participants completed an online survey and then five participants reported on what they thought of the results so far. Data was analysed using statistical tests and thematic analysis.

**Research Results:**

**Do AM exist?**

**Answer:** LGBQ youth do perceive messages that being LGBQ is ok, but these are not accessible enough. Nearly half of people reported they live in a society accepting of LGBQ people (47%) but only 20% of people reported that AM were obvious and accessible enough.

**Are AM actively or passively experienced?**

**Answer:** LGBQ youth are actively engaged in seeking AM. Overall, 79% of people reported they had to actively search for AM, half found this process of actively seeking out AM 'easy' or 'very easy'.

**How do LGBQ youth seek AM?**

**Answer:** The average age for searching for AM was 14.7 years, most commonly sought out on-line; using google, youtube and LGBQ youth forums and advice sites (such as GYC, GYN, BGIOK).

**What are AM like and where do they come from?**

**Answers:** AM were most likely to come from the following places: LGBQ organisations and communities, friends, on-line and youth organisations. They were least likely to come from school, religion, politics, and neighbourhood and community. AM were also reported from print and visual media and popular culture.

'School' was the most influential place for AM, yet AM were uncommon in schools. Themes included hearing 'personal stories of experiences of success of LGBQ people, and experience of struggles', 'the importance of finding LGBQ role models and other people like me' and 'acceptance from friends and family'. It was also important that AM were 'frequent', 'truthful', 'relevant' and 'meaningful'.

**What are the effects?**

**Answer:** 84% reported that affirming experiences have a 'very big' or 'big' effect. Participants reported AM lead to increased feelings of comfort, reassurance and safety in the world, and increased feelings of acceptance and confidence, participants reported AM also seemed to make experiences of homophobia more manageable.  AM had an effect on life choices, about where to live, about social life, about where to access education and jobs.

**Research Conclusions:** Results suggested although AM are not considered accessible enough, LGBQ youth think they have a positive impact. It appears helpful for more AM to be included within educational settings and the media.

**Research Conclusion for Ethics Panel:** Sexual minority adolescents in current UK and Irish society actively seek out and experience AM regarding sexual identity. AM are experienced from intra-personal, micro- system and macro- system sources but are not considered accessible enough. AM appear to influence the development of a positive sense of sexual identity and may provide a defence against experiences of homophobia. This suggests increasing provision and access to AM could be helpful for a population with elevated health risks, through online activity and media, and within the school environment.

## Appendix N

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