



“We Need To Talk”: Methods, Timing, and Motivation for Coming Out LGBTQ



ABSTRACT

The LGBTQ coming out process is a deeply personal, and often misunderstood stage of life for anyone that falls under the category of a sexual minority. Many studies have been conducted focusing on very specific sexual orientations or age ranges, but this study examines the commonalities in the coming out process between sexual orientations, age ranges, and genders. This study uses a combination of online surveys completed by self-reported sexual minorities and semi-structured interviews with the same sample. Participants for interviews were purposefully selected and recorded. Interviewees answered questions pertaining to their own coming out process and were allowed the opportunity to tell their story in their own words. Through thematic coding and analysis, findings show that the study participants have a common denominator of fear of social rejection, which in most cases could explain the long gap between self-recognition and discussing their sexual orientation with others. The findings of this study suggest that while social change is rapidly occurring, there is still room for improvement in better understanding this process. Finding common issues in the coming out process is beneficial toward reducing ignorance and discrimination of a minority group.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

For this study, I used purposive sampling to gather data from people that identify anywhere on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Because the LGBTQ+ spectrum is so diverse and because people identify so differently, information was gathered from a wide variety of sexual orientations. Both males and females were included in this study, and the age range consisted of anyone over the age of 18.

Data was collected from 7 semi-structured interviews and 30 online surveys. Because of my own inclusion on this spectrum, I know a large number of people that identify as LGBTQ+, and I utilized my own contacts to gather study participants through chain referral. Seven 30-minute interviews were conducted and coded using in vivo coding processes to find themes.

Online surveys were utilized in situations that interviews were not possible. These surveys had several of the same questions as the interviews, however, surveys were shorter in length and did not contain as much detail. An online survey site was employed to create and obtain the data, and participants were chosen by my own affiliation with them, or through a voluntary call on social media. Snowball sampling was used in gathering surveys through Facebook. It was posted as an open invitation to anyone that identified as LGBTQ+ and was over the age of 18. The link was shared to multiple Facebook pages to gather as many surveys as possible. 30 completed surveys were obtained using this method. In vivo coding was used to analyze the data from these surveys as well.

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“There was a gentleman there that I had never seen before and there was a struggle. They tied me to a chair and doused me in holy water and had the gay demon exorcised from my body. Which didn’t really work out so well.”

JR Interview Excerpt, March 11, 2015



Figure 1. Pastor Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist Church
Source: Huffingtonpost.com

Average Time Periods in Years	Lesbian (n=10)	Gay (n=3)	Bisexual (n=11)	Other (n=10)
Average Questioning Age	10.50	11.83	14.18	13.60
Average Age of First Disclose	16.75	13.83	17.09	16.15
Average Gap between Questioning and First Disclosure	6.25	2.00	2.91	2.55

Table 1. Average Time Span in Years of Beginning the Coming Out Process

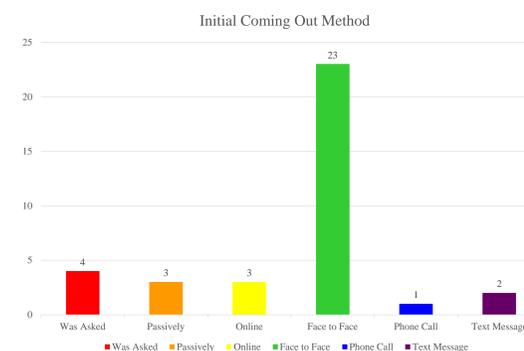


Figure 2. Initial Coming Out Method

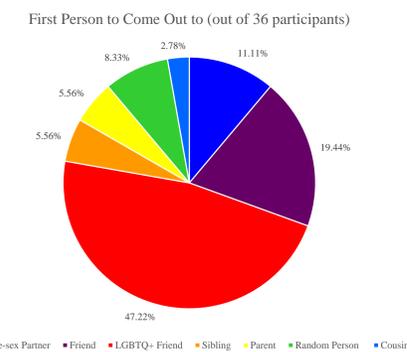


Figure 3. First Person to Come Out To



Figure 4. Gay Pride Parade, Atlanta 2014
Source: AJC.com



Figure 5. PFLAG, Atlanta Chapter
Source: PFLAGATL.org

RESULTS

While no universal themes could be found, many themes were prominent across sexual orientations, ages, and backgrounds. Fear was the most common theme, keeping some people closeted for years. One participant emphasized this fear stating that “at the time and place where I grew up, being anything that wasn’t straight was scary and bad” (AS, Survey, March 4, 2015). Results showed the average questioning age was between 12 and 13 years old, while the average age participants first discussed their sexuality was between 16 and 17. Some participants began discussing their sexuality as soon as they began questioning it, while others remained closeted for up to 13 years (Table 1).

A significant percentage of participants chose another LGBTQ+ person to initially come out to (Figure 3) citing reasons of understanding and acceptance. In this study, 23 of 36 participants chose face-to-face methods of coming out as opposed to more impersonal or passive methods (Figure 2). In recent years there has been a trend in individuals utilizing social media to come out to friends and peer groups, as observed by Szulc and Dhoest in their 2013 study, and confirmed by this research.

This research also found that the reasons that participants remained in the closet are fairly universal, but the reasons participants came out are almost entirely unique. Some participants came out before they were ready, such as AX, who claimed “my ex wife ratted me out” (Survey, March 15, 2015). Other participants came out like an explosion because of internal conflict. AC described coming out by saying “it came out of my mouth like I’d been sick for years. I purged... loudly yelling... I’M A DYKE” (Survey, March 3, 2015). Another participant even cited religious reasons for coming out admitting, “I really came out to my mom first. I was crying hysterically. I was living with my aunt and uncle who were forcing their religion on me... I told her so she would understand my rebellion against it and would make them stop forcing me to go to their meetings” (AD, Survey, March 3, 2015).

DISCUSSION

While the hypothesis of fear being a major motivating factor was supported, it is nearly impossible to establish universal conclusions. This research provides better focal points for future research, such as in-depth analyses of specific cases. The surveys gathered in this study failed to provide enough detail to analyze specific motivations, though they did provide important data about timing and methods.

“You raised a faggot! No, I didn’t. I raised a homosexual.”

VM Interview Excerpt, March 4, 2015

References

Szulc, Lukasz and Alexander Dhoest. 2013. The Internet and Sexual Identity Formation: Comparing Internet Use Before and After Coming Out. *European Journal of Communication Research* 38(4):347-365.