Developing a Resilient Sexual and Gender Minority Identity Online:

The Importance of Social Media for Youth Before Coming Out

Lika Brinkman

Master's program in Youth, Education and Society, Utrecht University

Master's thesis (201600407)

UU supervisor: Dr. Ryanne Francot

Second assessor UU: Dr. Pascale van Zantvliet

Internship supervisor: Laura Mulder MSc

17-06-2022

Abstract (English)

Sexual and Gender Minority Youth (SGMY) often undergo a period of identity concealment before first coming out, in which access to social and emotional support is limited, making the development of their SGM-identity a private process. It is known, however, that interaction is important for identity development. Simultaneously, SGMY are at risk for rejection and victimization because of this identity. This requires resilience. The current study therefore focused on how social media can offer SGMY opportunities during this period for the development of a resilient SGM-identity.

In-depth interviews were held with 12 Dutch SGMY, who had not yet come out, or had done this within the last two years. Interviews were individually open coded, and then analyzed collectively, to identify commonalities and differences. Five themes emerged, capturing the online experiences contributing to a resilient SGM-identity: (1) realization of SGM-identity, (2) gathering information, (3) finding SGM-representation, (4) finding SGM-connections, and (5) social media as an SGM-positive bubble.

The results showed that social media can serve as a bridge during the period of identity concealment, when access to support in the offline environment is more difficult. Through the above mentioned online experiences, SGMY can develop a resilient SGM-identity, as they help them cope with (the possibility of) adversity in their offline environment, and promote a positive SGM-identity.

Keywords

Social media, sexual and gender minority youth, resilience, identity, self-concept clarity, self-esteem.

Abstract (Dutch)

Seksuele en gender minderheidsjongeren (SGMJ) ondergaan vaak een periode van identiteitsverberging voordat zij voor het eerst uit de kast komen, wat de ontwikkeling van

hun SGM-identiteit een privéproces maakt. Het is echter bekend dat interactie met de omgeving belangrijk is voor de identiteitsontwikkeling. Tegelijkertijd lopen zij het risico op afwijzing en slachtofferschap vanwege deze identiteit. Dit vraagt om veerkracht. Deze studie richtte zich daarom op hoe sociale media in deze periode SGMJ mogelijkheden kan bieden voor de ontwikkeling van een veerkrachtige SGM-identiteit.

Er zijn diepte-interviews uitgevoerd met 12 Nederlandse SGMJ, die nog niet, of binnen de afgelopen twee jaar, uit de kast waren gekomen. Interviews werden afzonderlijk open gecodeerd, en vervolgens gezamenlijk geanalyseerd om overeenkomsten en verschillen te identificeren. Vijf thema's kwamen naar voren die de online ervaringen duiden die bijdragen aan een veerkrachtige SGM-identiteit: (1) realisatie van SGM-identiteit, (2) verzamelen van informatie, (3) vinden van SGM-representatie, (4) vinden van SGM-connecties, en (5) sociale media als een SGM-positieve bubbel.

De resultaten toonden aan dat sociale media als overbrugging kunnen dienen tijdens de periode van identiteitsverberging, wanneer toegang tot steun in de offline omgeving moeilijker is. Met de hierboven genoemde online ervaringen kunnen SGMJ een veerkrachtige SGM-identiteit ontwikkelen, omdat deze online ervaringen hen helpen om te gaan met (de mogelijkheid van) tegenspoed in hun offline omgeving, en ze een positieve SGM-identiteit bevorderen.

Trefwoorden

Sociale media, seksuele en gender minderheidsjongeren, veerkracht, identiteit, zelfconcept helderheid, zelfverzekerdheid.

Developing a Resilient Sexual and Gender Minority Identity Online:

The Importance of Social Media for Youth Before Coming Out

For Sexual and Gender Minority Youth (SGMY),[1] navigating adolescence can be more difficult than for non-SGMY, as they need to incorporate norm-deviating sexual and/or gender identities in addition to typical identity formation, and might fear rejection and victimization because of this (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; McInroy & Craig, 2019; Mills-Koonce et al., 2018). Disclosing their SGM-identity, 'coming out', can be seen as a key point in the identity development of these youth (Drushel, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2015; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). Although empirical data is scarce, it is believed that coming out goes together with an increase in psychological wellbeing (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015).

The risk of negative comments, rejections and violence, however, complicates the process of identity disclosure (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Mills-Koonce et al., 2018; Movisie, 2021). In the Netherlands, SGMY generally first realize their SGM-identity between the ages of 10 and 14 (40%), whereas the first time they generally disclose this part of their identity to someone else is between the ages of 18 and 24 (38%) (European Union Agency for Fundamental Right, 2021). The gap between realization and first coming out can be considered as a period of identity concealment, in which access to social and emotional support is limited (Mills-Koonce et al., 2018). This has potential consequences for developing psychopathology, including the internalization of negative societal attitudes: internalized homo- and transphobia (De Graaf et al., 2017; Mills-Koonce et al., 2018). Internalized homo- and transphobia goes together with feelings of shame and alienation, and consequently the possibility of depression and anxiety (Bockting et al., 2020; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010).

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[1] Sexual and Gender Minority Youth refers to non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender youth. Non-heterosexual people are those who identify as (among other things) homosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and asexual. Non-cisgender people are those who identify as (among other things) transgender, non-binary, and gender fluid. See https://lgbtqia.fandom.com/wiki/LGBTQIA%2B_Wiki for extensive SGM-made descriptions of SGM-identities.

A recent publication of a national survey on the attitudes towards sexual and gender diversity in the Netherlands shows that the fear of rejection and violence related to SGM-identity is not unfounded (Huijnk, 2022). The amount of people having negative views towards SGM-people is decreasing. The acceptance rate, however, has stagnated. Additionally, negative views increase regarding certain subjects, related to visible expressions of SGM-identities (Huijnk, 2022). Moreover, gender minorities are viewed less positively than sexual minorities (60% and 76% respectively). Although these numbers show a majority of positive beliefs, it also means that about three in ten people still have negative or neutral views towards SGM-people (Huijnk, 2022).

Additionally, the amount of praise the recently released Netflix TV-show *Heartstopper* has received (e.g., Jones, 2022), could indicate a lack of representation of SGM-people in traditional media (TV, movies, etc.). Research has shown the importance of having positive SGM-representation in media, as SGMY often grow up in a heteronormative society in which both implicitly, and explicitly, sexual and gender expectations are enforced on them, leaving them with feelings of incongruence with their SGM-identity (Craig et al., 2015; Mills-Koonce et al., 2018).

On social media, SGMY have found places in which they can find this representation (Craig et al., 2015). Social media are online platforms on which users can generate content and interact with one another (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Common platforms among youth are Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube (Bates et al., 2020). Although previous research has been right to highlight possible risks of social media, such as unwanted sexual behaviors and bullying (Korkmazer et al., 2020; Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). It also needs to be recognized that social media is intertwined with the daily lives of youth, thus making it interesting to study what attracts them to social media (Korkmazer et al., 2020).

Social media usage is found to have numerous positive effects on the identity development of SGMY, such as escaping from stigma and violence offline, experiencing belonging, building confidence, feeling hope, and accessing events and information (Austin et al., 2020; Craig & McInroy, 2014; DeHaan et al., 2013; McInroy & Craig, 2019). With these online experiences, SGMY can find support during the period of identity concealment (Bates et al., 2020; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Craig et al., 2015; Drushel, 2010; Fox & Ralston, 2016). Finding support is found to positively contribute to SGMY's resilience (De Lira & De Morais, 2018). Resilience can then enable SGMY to cope with minority stress, and even thrive despite it (De Lira & De Morais, 2018; Meyer, 2015). The role social media might play in developing resilience, however, has received little attention (Craig et al., 2015; De Lira & De Morais, 2018). Additionally, SGM-identity development in the context of resilience, has not been explored, although interesting insights might be gained from it. The current study will therefore focus on the contribution of social media usage by SGMY to the development of a resilient SGM-identity.

SGM-identity development

It is assumed that identity consists of two aspects: self-concept and self-esteem (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Self-concept entails the way we see ourselves. The extent to which this self-concept is clear and consistent across time reflects self-concept clarity (McIntyre et al., 2017). The way we value this self-concept is called our self-esteem (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Both self-concept clarity and a positive self-esteem are developed in relation to the environment, in which peers play an important role for adolescents (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). For this development, two communication skills are necessary: self-disclosure and self-presentation (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Self-disclosure can be understood as disclosing intimate aspects of the self with the goal of receiving information, feedback, and interaction (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). Self-

presentation entails selectively presenting the self to others (Schlenker, 1986). By disclosing aspects of themselves, and presenting themselves in certain ways, adolescents practice with ideas of who they are, and retrieve social input to help deal with their thoughts (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Schlenker, 1986).

Since 1970, several models have been developed to capture SGM-identity development (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Early SGM-identity development models focused on stages SGM-people go through, such as Cass' (1979) model: identity confusion; identity comparison; identity tolerance; identity acceptance; identity pride; identity synthesis (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; McInroy & Craig, 2019). Such models, however, do not account for the diversity within the SGM-community, as they are generally based on white, gay, cisgender men. Additionally, they depict the development as a linear process, which does not represent the fluidity of identity development (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015).

Alternative to stage models, D'Augelli's (1994) life span approach arose (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). In this approach, the social context has a central place, and the fluidity of identity is recognized. It therefore better represents adolescent identity development as a dynamic process that is never completed. Six identity processes are identified in this model, operating independently from each other and in no specific order: exiting heterosexuality; developing a personal LGB identity;[2] developing an LGB social identity; becoming an LGB offspring; developing an LGB intimacy status; entering an LGB community (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Although this is a model for identity development of sexual minorities, it is shown to reflect the process of gender minorities as well (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

Social media influence on SGM-identity development

With the recognition of social media usage as an influence on the identity development of adolescents, social media needs to be considered in developmental theories

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[2] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual identity.

for SGM-identity (McInroy & Craig, 2019). Previous models of SGM-identity development have depicted developmental milestones, such as feelings of being different and questioning one's identity, as happening before SGMY have come out, making them private processes (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). Interaction with the environment, however, is found crucial for the development of self-concept clarity and a positive self-esteem (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Social media might offer possibilities for SGMY to interact with others like them, before coming out in their offline social environment.

Anonymity, accessibility and asynchronicity are most often mentioned as affordances of social media, when explaining the use of social media by SGMY for their identity development (Austin et al., 2020; DeHaan et al., 2013; McInroy & Craig, 2019; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). These affordances give adolescents an enhanced sense of control of what, and with whom, they share information, making them feel more secure and assured on social media than in offline situations (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Anonymity enables social media users to selectively share information about themselves, to avoid being discerned as a specific individual (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Accessibility entails the easy access to information and people, as there are no space and time limits online (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Asynchronicity means that online communication is delayed, as it does not happen face-to-face, allowing time to think before communicating, to edit messages, or to delete messages afterwards (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

The existing small research base on social media usage by SGMY and identity development shows an overall positive effect on their identity development, including self-concept clarity and self-esteem (Craig & McInroy, 2014; DeHaan et al., 2013; Fox & Ralston, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2019; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). While for non-SGMY, these results are inconclusive (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). This could be explained through the

Differential Susceptibility to Media effects Model, which proposes that three conditional variables related to the individual affect their media use and its effects (Valkenburg & Peter, 2014). The combination of the SGM-identity (dispositional variable), phase of identity development (developmental variable), and the lacking social environment regarding support (social variable), could explain the more positive effects of social media usage on identity development of SGMY, compared to non-SGMY in the early stages of this research field.

Developing a resilient SGM-identity

A recent development in research can be seen in the attention for resilience in SGMY (De Lira & De Morais, 2018). The Minority Strengths Model (Perrin et al., 2020) is developed as an extension of Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Model, highlighting the importance of resilience in helping SGMY navigate hostile social environments, and buffer the relationship between minority stressors (Bruce et al., 2015; Meyer, 2015; Perrin et al., 2020). Resilience is a dynamic process, as it involves interaction between risk and protective factors, and individual and environmental systems (De Lira & De Morais, 2018). A distinction can be made between two manifestations of resilience: individual and community-based resilience (De Lira & De Morais, 2018; Meyer, 2015). Individual resilience consists of personal qualities and personality traits that a person may possess, making them more, or less, resilient. Community-based resilience also refers to an individual's ability to cope, adapt and thrive. The source of this ability, however, lies within identification with a social network, instead of being an individual quality (De Lira & De Morais, 2018; Meyer, 2015). Obstacles may lie here for SGMY during the period of identity concealment, as this often goes together with a period of isolation from others (Asakura & Craig, 2014; Wexler et al., 2009). The main focus in resilience studies in SGM-populations has been on individual resilience (De Lira & De Morais, 2018; Erhard & Ben-Ami, 2016). Meyer (2015) argues that we should step away

from this focus as it can lead to an expectation of resilience in each individual, and consequently removing or reducing social responsibility to protect disadvantaged populations.

The Minority Strengths Model (Perrin et al., 2020) highlights social support and community consciousness as positive influences on positive health behaviors and mental health, through identity pride, self-esteem, and individual resilience. This model shows that resilience positively contributes to the mental health of SGM-people, which has been found in another study as well (Bruce et al., 2015). Additionally, the community consciousness, feeling connected with the SGM-community, positively contributes to individual resilience, which can be seen as the process of community-based resilience (Perrin et al., 2020).

With the growing attention for resilience, studies have also tried to depict what contributes to resilience (De Lira & De Morais, 2018). An explorative study of media-based resilience activities by SGMY distinguished four activities that fostered resilience: coping through escapism, feeling stronger, fighting back, and finding community (Craig et al., 2015). It has already been established that social media can offer social environments in which SGMY have access to resources such as information and events, they can explore and experiment with their identity, they can engage in SGM-communities, and they can observe others' behaviors and experiences (Craig & McInroy, 2014; DeHaan et al., 2013; Fox & Ralston, 2016). These experiences, however, do not only increase the self-concept clarity and self-esteem of SGMY, but can also foster resilience (Craig et al., 2015; Riggle et al., 2008; Wexler et al., 2009). These similarities make it interesting to study identity development of SGMY through a framework of resilience.

Attaining a stable identity is often spoken of in developmental research as a goal for adolescents. Clinging too rigidly to this view, however, overlooks the fact that identity is dynamic and can change over time and in different contexts (Sieckelinck & Kaulingfreks, 2022). Based on what is known on resilience in SGMY, and their identity development, I

propose the following preliminary 'resilient SGM-identity' definition, better highlighting identity development as a dynamic process: the ability to maintain a positive SGM-identity, and find resources to do so, living in a society where that identity is seen as norm-deviating.

In this study

This study will focus on the possibilities offered by social media for SGMY in developing a resilient SGM-identity during the period of identity concealment. It is precisely in that period social media might offer opportunities that the offline environment does not. The knowledge gained on how SGMY experience social media during this period, might provide insights on how the offline environment of SGMY could better match their needs in identity development.

The concept of resilience can offer an interesting framework in understanding SGMY-identity development, given the difficulties SGMY might face in their identity development (McInroy & Craig, 2019). Existing studies on SGMY and resilience, however, have not focused on this. The overarching research question that follows from this is *how does social media usage by SGMY during the period of identity concealment contribute to the development of a resilient SGM-identity?* It is hypothesized that three affordances of social media, anonymity, asynchronicity and accessibility, offer opportunities for SGMY to increase their self-concept clarity and self-esteem, and consequentially develop a resilient SGM-identity during the period of identity concealment. This study will make use of a qualitative approach to explore resilient SGM-identity development on social media through individual narratives of SGMY.

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Method

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Methodological design

This study used semi-structured in-depth interviews, as it allowed participants to share their experiences in their own words. In total, 12 online interviews were held, in Dutch, and

had a maximum duration of 50 minutes. The number of interviews was based on whether data saturation had been reached. A topic list was used, which served as a common thread for the interviews to ensure consistency. The participants, however, led the conversation, as they are experts by experience. The topic list (in Dutch) can be found in Appendix 1.

Participants

Participants for this study ($n = 12$) were between 17 and 24 years old ($M = 20.42$, $SD = 2.47$). They identified with diverse gender and sexual identities, which is described further in Table 1. The extent to which the participants had come out to people in their offline environment ranged from one person close to them, to several friends, classmates, family members, and everyone. Educational level ranged from pre-university education ($n = 2$), to post-secondary vocational education ($n = 1$), university of applied sciences ($n = 4$), and university ($n = 5$). Participants used several social media platforms, and used social media in different ways. An overview of this can be found in Table 2.

The participants were selected on the following criteria: 1) they identify as SGMY, or are in the process of doing so, 2) they have not yet come out to people in their offline environment, or have done this within a maximum of two years ago, 3) they regularly use social media, 4) they are between 16 and 24 years old. The criteria for regular use of social media was met when participants use social media a few times a week, or more. The decision for this age-range was based on what is known on the ages of coming out and identity development. Additionally, 16 was chosen as the minimum age because parental consent for participation is not needed after this age, which is crucial considering the participants may not have come out to them yet. Furthermore, to anticipate on difficulties in reaching a sufficient number of participants for the study, it was decided to include SGMY who have already come out, but within the last two years, to increase the range of the sample. These participants were asked in retrospect about their social media usage during their period of identity concealment.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

Participant number	Gender identity	Sexual identity	Age	Educational level
1	Cisgender woman	Pansexual	20	University of applied sciences
2	Cisgender woman	Pansexual	18	University of applied sciences
3	Cisgender woman	Lesbian	23	University
5	Cisgender woman	Attracted to women (prefers no label)	23	University of applied sciences
6	Cisgender woman	Demisexual	19	University
7	Cisgender woman	Bisexual	22	University
8	Cisgender woman	Queer	24	University of applied sciences
9	Gender fluid	Bisexual	18	University
10	Non binary	Queer	18	Pre-university education
12	Transgender boy	Bisexual & asexual	17	Pre-university education
13	Non binary	Lesbian	23	University
14	Cisgender woman	Attracted to women (unsure about label)	20	Post-secondary vocational education

Note. There is no participant number '4' and '11' because these participants withdrew their application after the participant numbers were established.

Table 2

Overview of Social Media Usage

Platforms used	*x*	%
Facebook	6	50
Instagram	12	100
Pinterest	1	8.33
Reddit	2	16.66
Snapchat	7	58.33
TikTok	5	41.66
Tumblr	2	16.66
Twitter	1	8.33
YouTube	6	50
Finding SGM-content on social media		
Through actively searching for it themselves	7	58.33
Through social media algorithm	6	50
Type of SGM-related accounts followed		
Famous SGM-people	6	50
Not-specified accounts found through social media algorithm	4	33.33
SGM-organizations	1	8.33
Not-specified	1	8.33

Note. *x* = The number of participants. % = The percentage from the total number of participants (*n*=12).

Procedure

Participants were recruited in two ways. First, Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) were contacted through Instagram, (response rate = 45%). Second, Dutch SGM-related Instagram accounts, such as *Amsterdam Pride*, were approached (response rate = 39%). A complete list of targeted GSAs and Instagram accounts can be found in Appendix 2. To ensure anonymity of those interested in participating in the study, all could apply directly through Instagram or e-mail, and did not have to apply through the institution. The selection

criteria for participation were stated in the call for participation. Applicants for participation were further informed on the study through an information letter.

Reliability and validity

Reliability. Given the sensitive nature of this study, it was paramount that participants felt comfortable. Therefore, participants were offered the possibility to conduct the interview online (through MS Teams) or in person. All participants chose for an online interview. Thus, all interviews were held in similar settings, increasing the reliability. To further ensure a safe space during the interviews, I chose to disclose my queer identity to the participants. They indicated that it made them feel safe to open up during the interview, giving reason to believe it predominantly benefited the reliability of the data. Additionally, all participants received the same information on this study, which further ensured reliability.

Validity. In selecting the GSAs that were reached, they were categorized by province to achieve an even distribution of participants among the 12 provinces in the Netherlands. Furthermore, participants were selected based on sexual and gender identity and age. By doing so, a great diversity within the sample has been ensured to increase the external validity. Last, the topic list for the interviews was based on central concepts from the literature, ensuring internal validity. After the first two interviews were held, the topic list was adjusted to better match the experiences of the participants. With that, the internal validity of the measuring instrument was increased.

Ethical concerns

Due to the sensitive nature of this study, the focus of the interviews was on positive experiences of the participants. It was not the intention to ask for negative and/or traumatic experiences of the participants. This was communicated to the participants prior to the interview in the information letter. Additionally, helpful resources for them were mentioned there as well.

After the applicant agreed to participate, and it was established they met all criteria, they consented to participation in the study through an informed consent form. The participant could choose to withdraw at all times. The interview transcripts were anonymized, ensuring the privacy of the participants. Participants were also given the option to read the transcript, and propose alterations. Four participants made use of that option, and one proposed small alterations.

Data analysis

The transcripts of the interviews were coded with the qualitative analysis software NVivo. The coding was done in three phases, following Corbin's and Strauss' (1990) structured approach for analyzing qualitative data. In the open coding phase, text fragments were coded based on the theoretical conceptualizations that guide this research. Then, with axial coding the coded data was organized into a code tree with main- and subcodes. Finally, during the selective coding phase patterns and connections were unveiled which resulted in a final code tree (see Appendix 3). The code tree provides the foundation of the result section.

Results

Participants articulated multiple ways in which social media shaped their SGM-identity development process. Five themes are distinguished on how social media shaped their SGM-identity development: (1) realization of SGM-identity, (2) gathering information, (3) finding SGM-representation, (4) finding SGM-connections, and (5) social media as an SGM-positive bubble. The themes often overlapped in timing and did not necessarily take place in this specific order. In Table 3, the distribution of the themes is presented.

Table 3

Distribution of Themes

Themes	x	%
Realization of SGM-identity	45	12.61
Gathering information	65	18.21
Finding SGM-representation	77	21.57
Finding SGM-connections	112	31.37
Social media as an SMG-positive bubble	58	16.25
Total	357	100

Note. x = The number of references. % = The percentage from the total number of references.

Realization of SGM-identity

All participants described that during their childhood they have always felt different in some way, but they could not easily define why. An important difference can be observed between the realization of sexual identity and gender identity. All participants with a sexual minority (SM) identity knew of the possibility of being non-heterosexual whilst growing up. But many (six) never thought they personally could be non-heterosexual because of internalized expectations of heteronormativity:

> It was just like, "oh you're a girl, so you will probably like a boy". So then it was like, okay, that probably will happen then. And then you go look for people to like, instead of liking people because you like them. (p. 1)

On the contrary, all participants with a gender minority (GM) identity did not know of the possibility to be non-cisgender, as they experienced no representation of GM-identities in society and traditional media. Additionally, all participants with a GM-identity described how they first realized their SM-identity before realizing their GM-identity.

A difference can also be found in how participants first realized their SGM-identity. One half of the participants realized their SM-identity through having a crush on someone

they know, or through talking about love and sex with friends offline. While the other half, including all participants with a GM-identity, realized their SGM-identity through representation of SGM-people on social media: "never thought about there being option that indeed you do not have to like them [breasts].... And I think that started because of social media, that I saw that there were other options as well" (p. 13).

When asked how they think their identity development would have proceeded without social media, five participants said they most likely would not have known of their SGM-identity without social media, leaving them with a feeling of being different but not knowing why. Furthermore, half of the participants believed that the process of defining their SGM-identity accelerated because of social media.

After the first realizations of a possible SGM-identity, all participants turned to social media to confirm their suspicions. However, for some participants this step was performed with great caution, as they did not want to confirm their suspicions: "well at first …, an 'am I Gay?'-quiz, because I was like, this is not happening, this is weird. And then I did not fill in those questions honestly, because the result had to be that I am straight" (p. 12).

Gathering information

For all participants, social media offered access to information on SGM-topics, which was often not available in their offline environment (school, home, friends). The information gathered served multiple purposes. First, most participants (nine) searched for information on different SGM-identity labels and their meanings, to find words for their feelings. For those participants that did not identify with more commonly known SGM-identities (gay, lesbian, bisexual), social media especially opened up a world to them: "bisexual, well that is generally more known than pansexual. So, then I thought, yeah that must be it. But, then I found out the term pansexual and thought, maybe it's not bisexual" (p. 2). Second, information helped four participants to feel understood and less alone, because it showed that others have similar

feelings: "to feel understood, to feel seen, that you know there are more people like me" (p. 13). Third, five participants used social media to find information on practicalities, such as how to have sex with someone of the same sex, petitions for SGM-rights, and support-lines for questions. Last, four participants used social media to educate themselves on SGM-identities different from their own, to better understand and support others within the SGM-community.

Gathering information through social media was not only necessary because of a lack thereof in the offline environment, it was also a comfortable method due to the anonymity online. Seven participants articulated that anonymity offered a way to look for information without needing to explain to anyone and feel judged for it. This enabled them to find clarity on their SGM-identity and become comfortable with it, before disclosing it to anyone:

> That you can just quietly search without anyone looking over your shoulder …. That you can find options for yourself, and just cross them out again, in a safe environment, if that's not quite what it is. That you can get information about yourself, and about the world, without anyone judging it. (p. 10)

Finding SGM-representation

All participants used social media to find representation of SGM-people. Representation was found in multiple ways: SGM-organizations (e.g., *Pride Amsterdam)*, famous SGM-people and accounts (e.g., *Anne+*), blogs, memes, and not-specified accounts of SGM-people found through the social media algorithm (e.g., *for you page* on TikTok). It was often mentioned that recognizability in the stories of others gave participants words for their feelings, as information did as well: "experiences from people, or explanations about the different identities …. And that's how I kind of ended up on pansexual myself" (p. 9).

Many participants (seven), including all with a GM-identity, felt alone because they did not have that recognizability in their offline environments, due to few (openly) SGM-

people in their offline environment. Finding representation online decreased participants feelings of loneliness, it made them feel safe, and part of a family. Two participants also mentioned that recognizability in small things, such as a rainbow flag, makes them feel belonging somewhere.

Furthermore, some participants also described how recognizability normalized their identity, which increased their self-acceptance: "I think that without the internet, if the queer community was not as active on the internet, that [self-acceptance] would be less" (p. 8). Additionally, SGM-related memes and humor on social media were often mentioned (five) as content that helped normalize the identity of participants. Humor in conversation or memes made 'SGM' a less loaded topic, and part of a normal conversation, which was desired by many: "because they are joking about one thing or the other, I thought 'oh but this isn't bad at all', or 'this is okay'" (p. 5).

A last theme that arose regarding representation was that seeing happy, confident, and proud SGM-people online encouraged six participants to feel the same about their own identity and increased their confidence: "it really helps to feel comfortable in it, to get energy from it. That I can just see that they are okay with it, and really happy about it, and I want that too" (p. 10). Most of the participants (nine) could say that they are now proud of who they are. Some participants (four) specified that they are especially proud of the journey they have been on to accept their SGM-identity, albeit it not having been easy: "because it has not been the most simplest road, for certain aspects. So yeah, I am really proud of that, that I can just sit here and tell this story, but also share it with all my friends" (p. 12). Furthermore, not only did it positively contribute to participants' self-esteem, seeing positive online representation also gave hope for their future: "I see that, and it makes me so happy, then it is like, maybe I can one day also be like that" (p. 1). Being comfortable in their SGM-identity was also said

by four participants to be a factor that made it possible to disclose their identity to people in

their offline environment, and deal with the possibility of the risks involved.

Finding SGM-connections

      The reason that participants turned to social media to find connections with other

SGM-people, was because they experienced a lack thereof in their offline environment. This

made it difficult for them to talk about it at school or at home, making them feel alone, and as

if they had to hide themselves: "it is who I am. And yet, it sometimes feels like that I cannot

be that person, or cannot say what I want to say" (p. 2).

      The main method participants (eight) used to interact with other SGM-people was

through the comments under posts. Participants contacted other SGM-people to ask questions,

to share their experiences, or to get advice: "like how they found out that they were [SGM]"

(p. 14). The ease of interaction through social media was influenced by anonymity and

asynchronicity. Anonymity made participants feel safe to be themselves because they would

not be judged. It also allowed them to distance themselves from their story, making it feel safe

to share personal information: "people are really helping you personally, and maybe tell you

something personal as well. But you do not know who they are, so the combination of the

personal and the anonymous, that makes it incredibly safe" (p. 10). Those who mentioned

asynchronicity (three), described that having time to think over their words and when, and

whether, they will respond to someone, made them feel safe and in control.

      Moreover, nine participants articulated that interacting with other SGM-people

through social media made them feel validated in their identity: "getting confirmation that it is

okay how you identify, or who you are attracted to, who you are as a person, and especially

that everyone is so open minded" (p. 7). In line with that, four participants said that they felt

better understood by other SGM-people than non-SGM-people, because they have shared

experiences. Because of this, participants felt no need to know how they identify, or to define

themselves with a label: "I mean, imagine that you need to be put into a small box, and then realize that you can also be in a really big box, yeah that's just what freedom is" (p. 10). Some participants (four) felt pressured by society to have this clearly defined, even though many participants (six) stated that they personally felt no need for that. In contrast, five participants did state that finding and using a label helped them getting clarity on who they are, and consequently accepting themselves: "you can just put yourself in a box and it is done. Because then you think, okay I belong somewhere and I can move on with my life" (p. 3). After they had grown more confident, however, some participants also let go of that label because they felt more comfortable not defined in a certain box. In line with that, nine participants described that their SGM-identity has become the foundation of who they are: "it is for me personally very much something that I hold on to, and also something that I do like to express.… But, it's not the only thing that makes me, me" (p. 6).

Social media as an SGM-positive bubble

All participants stated that social media, no matter which platform used, felt like an SGM-positive bubble. They described it as a safe space where they could be their true selves, and escape for a moment the offline environment in which their true self is not always accepted:

> That I just almost assume everyone uses the correct pronouns, and knows what being non-binary means, and goes all out for 'everyone is equal' and 'trans women are women too'.… Every time I scroll through Instagram, I see stories from people I've started following. Then I think 'oh I want to fight for this too, and I also want to be open about who I am, and how I identify myself'. But then I think of the people who I will meet again tomorrow, and then I just know that I'm going to get a lot of questions, and also a lot of negativity, if I actually start being open about this. (p. 13)

Many participants (ten) experience some sort of vigilance when talking to people offline, as they always need to assess what they can and cannot say to someone. Having this safe haven online felt like a relief for most participants.

Being in this positive SGM-bubble has also made four participants feel part of the SGM-community without having to take part in events offline. Especially for those who lived in environments in which there were few SGM-people, those who were not out within their environment, and those who do not like going out and clubbing, social media offered access to this community feeling. Many participants (seven), however, described being part of the SGM-community as more of a self-identification than an active membership: "it is reassuring that it is there, and that just makes me happy, it fits" (p. 6). Moreover, six participants also saw their identification with the SGM-community as a form of activism. Identification with this community meant for them that they want to show to the world what they stand for: open-mindedness, equality, and celebrating diversity. Many (seven) participants shared that they want to stand up against hatred, and educate people in their environment on SGM-topics, not only for themselves, but also for the SGM-community:

> I always say something if someone makes a rude comment …. Because for me it feels like that that person knocks me down in some kind of way. Because, that person says something about something I am part of, and I just don't stand for that. I really want to show my confidence in that. And even if I don't say I'm pansexual at that moment, I think it is important that I don't let myself be talked down as part of a group.… I especially want to pass that on to my own family. (p. 2)

Two participants, however, also mentioned that sometimes it is important to "pick your battles" (p. 9) for their own mental wellbeing.

Almost all participants (ten) stated that they have accepted their SGM-identity. Those who had not yet fully accepted their identity, did say that they were in the process of doing so.

All participants attributed part of that self-acceptance to the positivity they found online.

Some participants (three) also articulated that now they are comfortable with their SGM-

identity, they gladly want to help other SGMY in their identity development process:

> That you can let others know you are not alone, it is completely okay. You know, the
>
> feeling you had then, that you can just help other people, and make it clear that there is
>
> an entire group available for them.… And that you can show them that it is just a lot of
>
> fun. (p. 5)

Last, many participants (six) felt less of a need to escape to social media now that they

had accepted their SGM-identity, shared this with their friends and family members offline,

and had received positive reactions from them: "Now that I have a better friend group and a

better support system in real life, I need it less" (p. 8).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to uncover how social media usage by SGMY during the

period of identity concealment can contribute to the development of a resilient SGM-identity.

In this study a preliminary definition for a resilient SGM-identity was proposed: the ability to

maintain a positive SGM-identity, and find resources to do so, living in a society where that

identity is seen as norm-deviating. The empirical results showed that social media offers

several possibilities for SGMY in developing a positive SGM-identity during the period of

identity concealment. This study adds to the body of research on SGM-identity development

through social media. This study also goes beyond it by bringing insights together with

exploring SGM-identity development through a resilience framework. How the results relate

to the development of a resilient SGM-identity will be discussed in this section, using the

above definition as a guide. The discussion will end with practical implications, strengths and

weaknesses of this study, and recommendations for future research.

Social media as a resource

Due to a lack of information, representation, and connections experienced offline, SGMY turn to social media to find labels, recognition, understanding, community, and to feel free instead of vigilant. Additionally, results show that through social media, SGMY can find places where they can be their true selves, before disclosing their SGM-identity to people in their offline environment. This finding shows that social media can offer identity development experiences during the period of identity concealment, as is shown in other studies as well (Bates et al., 2020; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Craig et al., 2015; Drushel, 2010; Fox & Ralston, 2016). This study offers new findings, however, by showing that SGMY can develop a positive SGM-identity online before sharing this information with others offline. As online experiences are not necessarily reflected offline, a focus on social media usage by SGMY provide further support for D'Augelli's (1994) model in which the fluidity of SGM-identity development is central. Furthermore, without social media, difficulties might be found in access to community – and with that community-based resilience – during the period of identity concealment, as it requires identification with a social network (Wexler et al., 2009). This study showed that with the bridging possibilities offered by social media, SGMY have access to community-based resilience before having to disclose their identity to people in their offline environment.

The possibility to have these experiences online is ensured by the social media affordance accessibility. The other affordances, anonymity and asynchronicity, provide safety and comfort in these online experiences. These findings build upon previous research (Austin et al., 2020; DeHaan et al., 2013; Fox & Ralston, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2019; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). With anonymity, SGMY can privately develop their SGM-identity and find support online, without a need for explanation or fear of judgement from people in their offline environment. This allows them to become comfortable with their identity, before

having to share it with others, thus bridging the period of identity concealment.

Asynchronicity can offer SGMY comfort in their online search as they are in control of with

whom, what, and when they share information about themselves.

Developing a positive SGM-identity

Social media can promote a positive SGM-identity in several ways, reflected in an

increase of SGM-identity acceptance, comfort and pride. In the realization and confirmation

of SGM-feelings, social media plays an important role, as feelings of being different and

incongruence due to internalized expectations of hetero- and gender-normativity are

diminished with information, representation, and connections. Additionally, the access to

information on social media can accelerate the process of self-concept clarity for SGMY.

Furthermore, representation of diverse SGM-identities on social media can be considered vital

for SGMY with less commonly known SGM-identities, because knowledge and

understanding of these identities are often more lacking in the offline environment. The above

findings are in line with previous studies, showing the importance of information,

representation, and connections for SGMY in developing self-concept clarity (Craig et al.,

2015; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Riggle et al., 2008; Wexler et al., 2009).

Building upon findings from previous research on SGM-identity development through

social media, it was found that information, representation, and connections can increase the

self-esteem of SGMY through normalization and validation of SGM-identities, diminished

feelings of loneliness, and increased feelings of pride and hope, which reflects individual

resilience (Austin et al., 2020; Bates et al., 2020; Craig & McInroy, 2014; DeHaan et al.,

2013; Fox & Ralston, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2019). Moreover, identifying with a label

enables SGMY to become more secure in their identity. The SGM-identity can then be

described as the foundation of who they are, in line with stage six of Cass' (1979) SGM-

identity development model: identity synthesis. This can eventually diminish the need to hold

strictly onto that label, which can generate a freeing feeling. The influence of input through information, representation and connections is supported by theories on developing self-concept clarity and a positive self-esteem (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Schlenker, 1986; Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017).

Coping with negativity in the offline environment

Social media can be defined as safe spaces for SGMY because they allow them to create their own SGM-positive bubble, by following accounts and finding content where diversity is celebrated. With that, SGMY can use social media as an escape to cope with negativity in the offline environment. Previous studies have also found support for using social media as an escape (Craig et al., 2015; Wexler et al., 2009). Additionally, similar to findings of Craig et al. (2015), it was found that finding community on social media, relates to wanting to fight back for this community, by educating people in the offline environment. This reflects a way of SGMY navigating the society in which their identity is seen as norm-deviating, for which willpower was found through social media. Last, an increased positive SGM-identity was found to result in SGMY wanting to share their SGM-identity with people in their offline environment, despite possible risks for negativity.

Practical implications

Two practical implications can be formulated. First, this study highlights the positive influence of social media. Although risks of social media are not to be forgotten, it is also important to emphasize the opportunities it offers. A risk-based discourse on social media in research and society leads to a misrepresentation of social media, and with that stigmatization of social media users, which is undesirable (Korkmazer et al., 2020). Especially when already stigmatized people use it as a means to attain a positive identity. Moreover, studying the opportunities of social media leads to insights in the needs of SGMY growing up in society today. Indeed, the importance of having information, representation and connections, and the

experienced lack thereof in the offline environment, shows that changes in the offline environment are needed. This could be done by incorporating more inclusive sex education in primary and high schools, in which SGM-identities, and the fluidity thereof, are represented. Additionally, more schools should have explicit safe spaces for SGMY, such as GSAs, were they can find belonging. However, it is not only the duty of schools to create more inclusive environments for SGMY, this responsibility needs to be recognized society-wide, from a local to a national level.

Strengths, weaknesses and recommendations for future research

This study has several strengths and weaknesses. To start, a diverse sample based on age, sexual-, and gender identity was included in this study. With that, voices of those that are otherwise often underrepresented in research (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015), were heard in this study, including asexual, pansexual, unlabeled, non-binary, and transgender youth. No cisgender males with a sexual minority identity participated in this study. To be more representative of SGM-people as a group, it is important to include their perspectives as well. The intention of this study, however, was not to make generalizable conclusions, but to increase understanding of developing a resilient SGM-identity through of social media.

Furthermore, no attention was paid to intersections between SGM-identities and non-SGM-identities, such as ethnicity, religion and socio-economic status. These intersections, however, might offer interesting insights and should thus be paid attention to in future research. Another recommendation is to undertake a comparison study between two age cohorts of SGMY, to see whether the influence of social media has changed over time. Indeed, many participants articulated that they see changes between themselves and their younger siblings, regarding information, representation, and connections available in the offline environment. While interesting for future research, it, even more importantly, gives

hope for future generations to know that that they will find understanding and community,

and feel free to be themselves, both online *and* offline.

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Appendix 1 – Topic list interviews

Topic 1: Informatie over participant (algemeen)

- Iets meer vertellen over jezelf

    o Hoe oud ben je

    o Zit je op school

    o Met wie ga je om, wat doe je graag, hoe ben je opgegroeid: gezin, vrienden

      (offline omgeving)

- Sociale media gebruik

    o Welke platforms

    o Wat voor soort gebruik

    o Met wie

    o Verschil tussen de platforms

Topic 2: Identiteit

- LHBTQ+ identiteit participant

    o Realisatiemoment: 'kan je mij hierin meenemen'

- Zelfconcept

    o Labels

    o Hoe belangrijk is LHBTQ+ identiteit voor participant

    o Duidelijk beeld van wie je bent

      ▪ Hoe is dit gegaan

- Zelfverzekerdheid

    o Beoordeling van zelf (positief/negatief, comfortabel, acceptatie)

    o Over de tijd, altijd al zo geweest?

- Uit de kast?

    o Waarom wel/niet

- ▪ Bewuste keuze?

  - o Reactie offline omgeving

Topic 3: Veerkrachtige identiteit

- Houding offline omgeving (voor en na uit de kast komen)

  - o Directe omgeving, ook maatschappij in het geheel

  - o Positief/negatief

  - o Zijn/waren er rolmodellen?

  - o Zijn/waren er andere LHBTQ+ mensen?

  - o GSAs?

  - o Is/was er informatie beschikbaar?

- Hoe ga je hiermee om

- Behoeften in ontwikkeling

  - o Rolmodellen

  - o Vergelijking

  - o Informatie

  - o Met anderen hierover praten

  - o Verhalen lezen

  - o Bevestiging

  - o Validering

- Identificatie met LHBT gemeenschap

- *Brug sociale media: sociale media een middel om dit te verkrijgen?*

Topic 4: Identiteitsontwikkeling in relatie tot sociale media

- Wat is fijn aan sociale media

- Wat voor gevoel geeft jou dat

  - o Gevoel van controle / veilig gevoel

- Zelfonthulling

    o Intieme aspecten delen online

    o Uit de kast komen online

    o Verhaal kunnen vertellen

    o Zorgen delen

    o Ervaringen delen

- Zelfpresentatie

    o Verschillende identiteiten 'uitproberen'

    o Duidelijkheid over wie je bent

- Positieve sociale input

    o Gelijkgezinden

    o Begrepen voelen

    o Verbindingsgevoel/gemeenschapsgevoel met anderen

    o Ontsnapping offline omgeving?

- Als uit de kast: verschil tussen nu en in de kast?

- Ook negatieve ervaringen op sociale media?

- Sociale media noodzakelijk (geweest)?

- Wat als het er niet was?

- Sociale media ook misstanden i.p.v. positieve bubbel?

Voordelen sociale media: (koppelen aan de punten hierboven)

- Anonimiteit

    o Online kent niemand jou

    o Verschuilen achter profielfoto en gebruikersnaam

    o Niemand weet waar je vandaan komt

- Asynchroniciteit

- o Tijd om na te denken

- o Berichten kunnen aanpassen/verwijderen

- Toegankelijkheid

  - o Toegankelijke informatie over verschillende identiteiten/geschiedenis/diensten

Afronding

- Identiteitsacceptatie

  - o Identiteit geaccepteerd?

  - o Trots op identiteit?

Appendix 2 – Targeted social media accounts for sample

Below in Table 4 is shown which GSA and SGM-account shared the call for participation. A total of 40 GSAs were approached, of which 18 shared the call. A total of 18 other SGM-related Instagram accounts were approached of which 7 shared the call. Those who did not share the call had various reasons (e.g., not the intention of the page or correct target group) or did not respond to my message.

Table 4

Targeted Social Media Accounts for Sample

Province	GSAs approached	Shared the call?
Groningen	1. https://www.instagram.com/gsa.noorderpoort/	Yes
	2. https://www.instagram.com/gsaharenslyceum/	No
Friesland	3. https://www.instagram.com/gsasgl/	No
	4. https://www.instagram.com/gsa_bogerman/	No
	5. https://www.instagram.com/gsa_dalton_dokkum/	Yes
Drenthe	6. https://www.instagram.com/gsa_dnv/	Yes
	7. https://www.instagram.com/gsa_stadenesch/	No
Overijssel	8. https://www.instagram.com/gsaboerhaave/	Yes
	9. https://www.instagram.com/gsatwickelhengelo/	No
Flevoland	10. https://www.instagram.com/gsa.artecollege/	No
	11. https://www.instagram.com/gsabakentrinitas/	No
Gelderland	12. https://www.instagram.com/gsa.canisiuscollege/	No
	13. https://www.instagram.com/gsa.marianum/	No
	14. https://www.instagram.com/gsa.ksgapeldoorn/	No
	15. https://www.instagram.com/gsapantarijn/	Yes

	16. https://www.instagram.com/sgn.gsa/	Yes
Utrecht	17. https://www.instagram.com/gsa_techcampus/	Yes
	18. https://www.instagram.com/hetbaarnschgsa/	Yes
	19. https://www.instagram.com/gsa_ijsselstein/	Yes
	20. https://www.instagram.com/gsa_hu/	Yes
	21. https://www.instagram.com/gsaminkema/	Yes
	22. https://www.instagram.com/gsa_unic/	No
Noord-Holland	23. https://www.instagram.com/gsa.pieternieuwlandcollege/	No No
	24. https://www.instagram.com/gsa_smc/	No
	25. https://www.instagram.com/gsa.spinoza20first/	No
	26. https://www.instagram.com/gsa.ma/	No
	27. https://www.instagram.com/gsa.arhc/	No
Zuid-Holland	28. https://www.instagram.com/gsa.rls/	Yes
	29. https://www.instagram.com/gsa.grotius/	No
	30. https://www.instagram.com/gsa_ashram/	No
	31. https://www.instagram.com/gsa_gymnasiumnovum/	Yes
Zeeland	32. https://www.instagram.com/gsabreeweg/	No
	33. https://www.instagram.com/gsa.lodewijk/	Yes
	34. https://www.instagram.com/gsakruisweg/	No
Noord-Brabant	35. https://www.instagram.com/gsacomeniuscollege/	No
	36. https://www.instagram.com/gsaoelbert/	Yes
	37. https://www.instagram.com/gsaberkenschutse/	No
	38. https://www.instagram.com/gsa_frencken/	No

| Limburg | 39. https://www.instagram.com/valuas_gsa/ | Yes |
| | 40. https://www.instagram.com/gsaroercollege/ | Yes |

Social media accounts	Shared the call?
1. https://www.instagram.com/cocnld/	No
2. https://www.instagram.com/anneplus/	No
3. https://www.instagram.com/klupkweer/	Yes
4. https://www.instagram.com/gsanetwerk/	Yes
5. https://www.instagram.com/queerdaysnl/	Yes
6. https://www.instagram.com/biplusjong/	No
7. https://www.instagram.com/expreszo.nl/	Yes
8. https://www.instagram.com/prideamsterdam/	Yes
9. https://www.instagram.com/gaykrant/	Yes
10. https://www.instagram.com/genderpraatjes/	No
11. https://www.instagram.com/jongenout/	No
12. https://www.instagram.com/stichting_pann/	No
13. https://www.instagram.com/transgendernetwerknl/	No
14. https://www.instagram.com/jongproud/	Yes
15. https://www.instagram.com/stichtingoutway/	Yes
16. https://www.instagram.com/youthpridenl/	No
17. https://www.instagram.com/hilversuminclusief/	Yes
18. https://www.instagram.com/jiphaarlemmermeer/	Yes

Appendix 3 – Code tree

Table 5

Code Tree

Name	Files	References
01. Realization of SGM identity	12	45
01. Realizing SGM-identity through representation on social media	7	10
02. Realizing SGM-identity through talking with friends offline	5	7
03. Realizing SGM-identity through a crush on someone	6	6
04. Realizing SGM-identity through representation offline	2	3
05. Doing 'am I gay'-quiz online to confirm suspicions of SGM-identity	4	4
06. Seeing signs of SGM identity at younger age looking back	3	7
07. Assumed non-SGM identity because of hetero- gender normativity	6	11
08. Development without social media	0	0
01. Might not have found out SGM-identity without social media	5	6
02. Feeling grateful for social media	4	4
03. Process of identity clarity accelerated	6	6
02. Gathering information	12	65
01. Type of information found on social media	0	0

Name	Files	References
01. Access to diverse information online	4	8
02. Information on the wrongs in the world and petitions to help	1	1
03. Information on practicalities of being SGMY	2	3
04. Information on different identities	9	12
05. Information on support groups and websites	1	1
06. Information on SGM events	1	1
02. Actively using social media to find information	9	12
03. Information helps to feel understood	4	7
04. Information on social media through informative posts	1	1
05. Positive effects of anonymity online	0	0
01. Anonymity allows for search & interaction without judgement	3	5
02. Anonymity allows for private search without needing to explain	7	13
03. Hiding SGM-identity to grow in confidence and clarity	5	12
06. Information on social media through stories and experiences of others	3	3
07. Use of labels	0	0
01. Label helps to get stability	5	5

Name	Files	References
02. Label helps to get clarity	5	7
03. Labels makes it easier to find information	2	2
08. Information and knowledge in offline environment	0	0
02. No or minimal information on SGM in home & school environment	4	4
03. Finding SGM-representation	12	76
01. Positive feelings because of representation	0	0
01. Seeing others helps to feel less alone	4	4
02. Seeing others helps to normalize and accept own identity	4	11
03. Seeing others increases confidence of identity	3	10
04. Seeing other SGM people feels safe	3	3
05. Seeing out and proud SGM people online helps to feel like they can be themselves	3	3
06. Seeing out and proud SGM people online gives hope for own future	4	4
07. Realized through social media that being SGMY is an enrichment of their live	1	3
08. Jokes and memes online help to normalize identity	5	6
02. SGM-Identity comfort and confidence help to cope with (possible) negativity	4	5

Name	Files	References
03. Very little representation of asexuality online	1	1
04. Finding comfort in SGM flags	2	2
05. Process of self-acceptance accelerated	5	7
06. Recognizing in SGM-peoples' stories and experiences on social media	0	0
01. Asking other SGM-people for their experiences	1	1
02. Reading or watching posts from SGM-people	3	8
03. Finding confirmation of SGM-feelings through experiences and stories	8	19
04. Not feeling alone through experiences and stories of SGM people	4	5
05. Feels good to recognize themselves in others	1	1
06. Accepting own identity through recognizing yourself in others	1	1
07. Representation in offline environment	0	0
01. No or minimal SGM representation offline	0	0
01. Feels lonely	5	5
02. Made it harder to accept identity	1	1
03. Representation helps to feel like you can be yourself	6	7
04. Non-SGM people cannot always understand	3	4

Name	Files	References
05. Difficult to come into contact with SGM-people	1	1
02. Negativity in news & media (traditional & social)	0	0
01. Feeling helpless and angry when seeing negative news on SGM-people in the news	2	2
02. Finding out negative associations with being SGMY through media influenced self-esteem	4	4
03. Focus on struggles related to being SGMY in traditional media	3	3
04. Finding SGM-connections	12	106
01. Asking for advice	2	3
02. Contacting other SGM(Y)	8	9
03. Importance of SGM connections both offline and online	9	20
01. It is easier to come out to other SGM people	3	3
02. Feeling better understood by SGM people than non-SGM people	4	4
03. Feeling less alone with SGM connections	2	2
01. Not feeling alone makes it easier to accept	1	1
02. Not feeling alone makes it less of a big deal	1	1
04. Having SGM connections makes environment feel safe	2	4

Name	Files	References
05. Does not matter if you are still unsure about identity with SGM people	2	2
06. SGM connections make it possible to accept identity and increase confidence	4	7
07. Talking about negativity with (SGM-)friends helps to deal with it	3	3
08. Wanted to share SGM identity formation process with a friend offline	7	9
04. Sharing stories and experiences online	1	1
05. Anonymity online	0	0
01. Did not feel the urge to make an anonymous account	1	1
02. Anonymity needed when people offline are not accepting	2	2
03. Anonymity gives control	1	1
04. Anonymity gives safety to be yourself	3	5
05. Anonymity makes it feel less personal, making it easier to talk	3	4
06. Anonymity not necessary anymore when out offline	2	3
06. Asynchronicity online	0	0
01. Having time to think before writing feels safe and gives control	3	5

Name	Files	References
02. Temporary content online allows to be more yourself	1	1
07. Use of labels	0	0
01. Feeling societal pressure to use a label, to define themselves	4	5
02. Preference for not using a label	6	8
03. After identity acceptance and coming out, letting go label	3	5
04. Finding out that you do not need to use a label	2	4
08. SGM-connections in offline environment	0	0
01. Lack of knowledge on SGM labels in offline environment	4	6
02. Ignorant or negative remarks	5	9
01. Feeling like ignorant & stereotypical remarks are part of being SGMY	2	2
02. Not-supportive parents and other family members	5	10
03. Non-SGM friends cannot fully understand their feelings	2	3
04. Finding SGMY through GSA in high school	3	3
05. No or minimal conversations at home & school environment on SGM-topics	4	6
06. Lack of understanding & wanting to understand	3	3
07. Positive reactions increase self esteem	6	7
05. Social media as an SGM-positive bubble	12	58

Name	Files	References
01. Social media feels as a safe positive bubble	8	16
02. Bubble sometimes makes you forget that offline world is different	1	3
03. SGM-community through social media	5	5
01. Social media increases community feeling	4	4
02. Community feeling more associated with offline activities than online	2	2
03. Clarity on SGM-identity would increase community feeling	1	1
04. SGM community feels like a space of happiness, freedom, home and openness	5	6
05. Feels good to help other SGMY now they are more comfortable themselves	3	5
04. Educating offline environment	4	4
05. Being in positive safe SGM bubble online compensates for negativity offline	4	5
06. Escaping to social media as a safe space	6	6
07. SGM-identity feels as activism, by standing up for the SGM-community	6	10
08. Social media less important now they are out and have more SGM connections offline	6	9

Name	Files	References
06. Identity pride and acceptance	12	51
01. Accepting SGM identity	0	0
01. No issues with SGM feelings until they found out negativity in society	1	1
02. Quick to accept SGM feelings & identity	4	4
03. Took some time to accept SGM feelings & identity	5	7
04. Accepts SGM-identity	10	13
02. Being SGMY is foundation of they are	9	9
03. Being SGMY is not all they are, it is just a part of it	3	5
04. Having confidence in general helps to feel confident in SGM-identity	2	3
05. SGM-identity pride	0	0
01. Proud on being SGMY	9	11
02. Proud on the journey they have been on to figure out SGM-identity	4	4
03. Not completely proud	2	2
07. Coming out	0	0
01. Prefers coming out in a casual way	6	10
02. Coming out still scary although they have an accepting environment	2	2

Name	Files	References
03. Only comes out when asked about it	3	4
04. Coming out became easier with time	1	1
05. Coming out makes it possible to move on	2	2
07. Scared for negative reactions and attitudes holding them back to come out	10	17
08. Wanting to come out to be their true selves with others	5	7
09. Coming out online	0	0
Coming out on social media feels less scary	1	2
Coming out online feels like eternalizing their identity	1	1
Social media offers a casual way to come out	2	4
10. Coming out to friends before family	5	5
11. First wanted to come out to family before following and liking SGM-content on social media	1	1
12. Easier to disregard negative reactions when people are less close	1	1
13. Positive attitudes on SGM in offline environment	0	0
01. Family using inclusive language growing up feels comforting	4	7
02. Moving out of parents' home into more accepting environment feels good	3	3

Name	Files	References
08. Hiding SGM-identity	0	0
01. Does not feel like hiding although not out to everyone	2	2
02. Feeling like you cannot be different than others	1	1
03. Feels bad to hide SGM-identity from offline environment	3	4
04. Avoids discussions online for own mental health	1	1
Social media usage	0	0
01. Finding SGM-content	0	0
01. Finding SGM content through social media algorithm	6	10
02. Finding SGM-content through actively searching content themselves	7	7
02. Passive or active usage	0	0
01. Posting content	4	4
02. Talking with friends	6	6
03. Watching content on social media	12	14
03. Platforms used	0	0
01. Facebook	6	6
02. Facebook, but not used often	4	4
03. Instagram	12	12
04. Pinterest	1	1
05. Reddit	2	2

Name	Files	References
06. Reddit, but not used often	1	1
07. Snapchat	7	7
08. TikTok	5	5
09. Tumblr	2	2
10. Tumblr, but not often used	1	1
11. Twitter	1	1
12. YouTube	6	6
04. Type of accounts followed	0	0
01. Artists (music, movie, tv, etc.)	4	5
02. Accounts for personal interests	9	12
03. Friends and family	12	13
04. SGM-accounts	7	7
01. Famous SGM-people	6	6
02. SGM-organizations	1	1
03. Not-specified accounts through algorithm	4	4