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# Engagement with Master and Alternative Narratives of Gender and Sexuality Among LGBTQ+ Youth in the Digital Age

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## Abstract

Gender and sexuality are contentious political issues in the US, with a resurgence of traditional master narratives for gender following decades of advances for gender equality. To understand how today's LGBTQ+ youth navigate this narrative landscape in a polymedia context, we conducted social media tour interviews with 20 LGBTQ+ adolescents (aged 16–19), recording audiovisual data as they guided us through important posts on their top three public social media platforms. Through reflexive thematic analysis, we found that our participants were engaging with both longstanding master narratives (e.g., traditional gender roles) and contemporary alternative narratives (e.g., gender as non-binary) using three *key navigational strategies* for engaging with narratives on social media platforms: seeking and sharing information, creating queer community, and making choices about visibility and permanence. The meaning and purpose of these strategies for participants, both individually and collectively, could not be fully understood apart from

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three *key navigational contexts*: the traditional gender narrative, white liberal community context, and platform affordances. Our results demonstrate that narrative engagement for contemporary LGBTQ+ adolescents is deeply influenced by personal polymedia environments, identity intersections, and power structures shaping possibilities for individual identity expression and collective cultural transformation.

### **Keywords**

LGBTQ+ youth, master narratives, alternative narratives, social media tour, polymedia

Contemporary adolescents are approaching adulthood during an era of rapidly changing norms surrounding gender and sexuality (Cover, 2019; Risman, 2018). Conceptions of gender as binary, fixed at birth, and prescriptive of social and intimate roles have been significantly challenged by genderqueer people (e.g., Bradford et al., 2019), the millennial generation (Risman, 2018), and, increasingly, by prominent professionals in the discipline of psychology (e.g., Hyde et al., 2019). Cultural change is also reflected by growing LGBT identification in the U.S., driven by Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born in 1997 or later) (Jones, 2021); simultaneously, anti-LGBTQ+ laws have exploded across the country, particularly in relation to transgender youth (e.g., Goodman & Morris, 2022). Taken together, this cultural moment presents immense opportunities and challenges for adolescents currently exploring their gender and sexual identities.

The rise of digital communication technologies is an integral aspect of these cultural shifts, as they allow for connection across geographic and cultural barriers and the rapid creation of new norms regarding how gender and sexual identities are conceptualized, adopted, and disclosed (Cover, 2019; Kitzie, 2017). The internet has accelerated the spread of dominant ideologies across the globe, while simultaneously offering marginalized voices new platforms for challenging these dominant ideologies (Manago, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). Although the rise of the internet and social media has impacted individuals of all ages, the opportunity to access information about gender and sexual diversity and connect with similar others is increasingly available to LGBTQ+ youth at early ages, giving them a unique developmental context as compared to earlier generations. Thus, it is crucial to examine how contemporary adolescents are engaging with these

emerging discourses regarding gender and sexuality across multiple online platforms.

The current study uses a master narrative approach to understand the identity development of contemporary LGBTQ+ adolescents within a polymedia context. Master narratives are culturally sanctioned forms of meaning-making that provide a guide for beliefs, thoughts, and actions across the life course (such as monogamous, heterosexual marriage as the ideal expression of sexuality); for individuals and communities who do not fit within dominant cultural ideals, developing alternative narratives (such as those challenging heteronormativity) can help support a positive sense of identity (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2015). Polymedia refers to the way that youth move seamlessly between multiple platforms and affordances, customizing their social media environments according to their identity needs and preferences (Madianou & Miller, 2013; Manago et al., 2021), with YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok replacing Facebook as the most frequently used social media sites among teens (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). To capture this process, we adapted a go-along method from anthropology (Kusenbach, 2003) and asked adolescents to give us a tour of their three most used public social media platforms while answering questions about their experiences navigating norms around gender and sexuality.

We use the term LGBTQ+ throughout this article to refer to diverse gender and sexual identities, as this was the terminology used in participant recruitment efforts. However, studies differ in their conceptualization of gender and sexual diversity, depending on the phenomena under study (e.g., sexual identity, sexual attraction, sexual behavior); thus, when referencing previous studies, we use the terminology they have used. Additionally, although current American Psychological Association guidelines indicate all racial groups should be capitalized, we have chosen not to capitalize “white” and its derivatives, in accordance with psychological scholarship calling for greater attention to racial power structures that impact human development (e.g., Rogers et al., 2021). However, we have retained the word “Caucasian” in our demographics table to accurately document the racial identity terms provided by our participants in the open-response demographic screener.

### *Master and Alternative Narratives of Gender and Sexuality*

Contemporary narrative psychologists conceive of personal identity as a subjective, autobiographical story constructed and continually revised across the lifespan (Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 1993; McLean & Syed, 2015). In constructing this story, individuals must respond to master narratives, or culturally embedded stories that provide a guide for beliefs, thoughts, and actions within

specific life domains (McLean & Syed, 2015). Master narratives provide a framework for socially sanctioned forms of meaning-making, which each person must incorporate or reject through a process of narrative engagement that facilitates individual identity development in context (Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Hammack & Toolis, 2014). Although individuals can and do question the validity of master narratives and contribute to the development of alternative narratives, this requires challenging deep cultural assumptions about the nature of persons, groups, and what constitutes a good and meaningful life; thus, such individuals may experience profound social condemnation or exclusion (McLean & Syed, 2015).

Despite the major cultural shifts regarding gender and sexual diversity in recent decades, living openly as a LGBTQ+ person still inherently challenges master narratives of gender, sexuality, and the life course. At the broadest level, McLean et al. (2017) describe the traditional gender narrative as a set of social structures, practices, and beliefs that reflect and reinforce an understanding of men and women as inherently different and unequal, with men holding greater power across multiple domains of life. However, they also describe the emergence of alternative narratives that assert other possibilities: that men and women are equal across all life domains, or that gender equality is possible and desired, but has not yet been realized. While these narratives do not speak directly to LGBTQ+ experiences, they provide the cultural backdrop which defines LGBTQ+ lives as deviations from the norm.

Additionally, recent research has highlighted the continuing role of medical and binary narratives in shaping dominant cultural understandings of transgender and non-binary people (e.g., Bradford & Syed, 2019; Bradford et al., 2019; Hyde et al., 2019). On one level, the increasing visibility of transgender people has challenged the master narrative of cisnormativity, which defines gender as immutable and defined by birth-assigned sex (Bradford & Syed, 2019). However, the continued categorization of gender variance as a psychological disorder and the associated role of medical procedures in producing culturally legible transgender bodies (i.e., bodies that align as closely as possible with cisgender ideals for men and women) has produced an alternative narrative of transnormativity (Bradford & Syed, 2019; Johnson, 2016), which serves as the standard against which claims of transgender experience and identity are held accountable. Thus, for individuals who experience gender as non-binary and/or who do not desire medical transition procedures, it may be especially challenging to find appropriate vocabulary to define their experiences and locate similar others during their identity development process (Barsigian et al., 2020; Bradford et al., 2019), as they fail to align with both master narratives of gender and the emerging alternative narrative of transnormativity (Bradford & Syed, 2019).

Finally, in identifying cultural narratives regarding sexual minorities, Hammack et al. (2013) identified three key narratives that have been especially prominent in psychology and popular culture within the United States across the last century: same-sex attraction as a psychological disorder, same-sex attraction as stemming from inborn factors within a distinct (but value-neutral) type of human being, and same-sex attraction as holding different meanings for different people. Though these master narratives have risen to cultural prominence in the order presented, all remain present within the contemporary cultural landscape and may influence sexual minorities as they develop their personal identity narratives.

### *The Social Media Context for Identity Development*

Social media are cultural tools that can transform adolescent identity development by introducing new affordances into social life and self-presentation (Manago & McKenzie, 2022). The concept of affordances (Gibson, 1979) has been widely used to study actions that are enabled and constrained in relation to features of technological artifacts (Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Evans et al., 2017), and to describe how the design of social media affects adolescent development (Moreno & Uhls, 2019). Affordances are not the material features of technology or outcomes of technology use, nor are they entirely culturally constructed; rather, they represent the mediating process between properties of the technology and people's use of them (Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Evans et al., 2017). From this perspective, the conditions and structural positions of individuals contribute to particular opportunities and constraints of technology, which adolescents navigate in the process of cultural change, evolving the tools as much as the tools are evolving them (Manago et al., 2021).

In the early days of social media, scholars described how communication affordances (e.g., persistence, spreadability, visualness, and searchability) made self-presentation more visible and public compared to offline life. At the same time, they made self-presentation subject to "context collapse" in that communication became easily archived, duplicated, and widely shared across social contexts, sometimes visible to unknown or unintended audiences (Boyd, 2010; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). However, as the social media marketplace evolved, youth began using multiple platforms and features to scale their sociality and self-presentation along spectrums of publicness and group size (Madianou & Miller, 2013; Miller et al., 2016). For example, an adolescent may be using Twitter under a pseudonym to contribute to civic discourses and popular culture, Instagram to curate images of their lives for large audiences at varying degrees of communicative persistence (e.g.,

content posted on the profile versus on disappearing “stories”), and Snapchat to approximate the ephemerality and co-presence of intimate face-to-face interactions (e.g., see Phua et al., 2017 for norms across platforms). Within each platform, youth move between different modalities of communication (text, photo, video) to reduce or enhance the richness of audiovisual cues they convey and, thus, further customize their experiences along spectrums of anonymity and privacy (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). In contrast to dichotomies of public versus private communication, adolescents are engaging with multiple genres of communication at varying degrees in between those polarities as they alternate between platforms in polymedia environments and use various tools for self-presentation (Miller et al., 2016). Moreover, some are communicating anonymously on public facing platforms such as Twitter or Tumblr, illustrating how identity development on social media can be relatively more private while existing in large groups.

On the one hand, polymedia and scalable sociality bring us back to the ideals of the “identity playground” and the promise of technology-mediated communication offering freedom from offline identities and expectations tied to the physical body (Turkle, 1995). The constraints of any one communication medium can be overcome using another, affording greater moratorium in the process of adolescent identity development—that is, more opportunities to experiment with multiple cultural discourses and narratives and greater ability to customize communication affordances such as visualness and searchability in the process (Davis & Weinstein, 2016; Manago, 2015). On the other hand, offline constraints and expectations, particularly around gender, are often brought into polymedia environments. Social media offer asynchrony and a variety of multimedia tools to edit and curate self-presentations; and yet, many adolescents present themselves online in ways that resonate with the traditional gender narrative, engaging in self-objectification, gauging feedback, and comparing themselves to others to further embody and spread longstanding cultural ideals around femininity and masculinity (van Oosten et al., 2017).

### *LGBTQ+ Youth and Social Media*

Polymedia and scalable sociality have unique consequences for LGBTQ+ adolescents’ identity development. The ability to be private in public resonates with values for self-determination and inclusivity among LGBTQ+ social media users, which are situated within a context of longstanding and continuing oppression of self-expression and relationships that exist outside heterosexuality and a gender binary (DeVito et al., 2021). Historically, LGBTQ+ youth managed visibility and stigma in face-to-face public

settings such as school, where they often needed to hide their identity to pass as straight or cisgender, and/or find safe ways to subtly display their identity to other LGBTQ+ youth (Lasser & Wicker, 2008). More recently, Facebook's platform features and policies geared toward "default publicness" have reconstituted, even magnified this experience of surveillance, leading to some queer and trans youth of color being outed to their families, which in extreme cases, has resulted in houselessness (Cho, 2018; Rubin & McClelland, 2015). Default publicness may cause LGBTQ+ Facebook users to be hyper-vigilant about their privacy settings, friend lists, and photo tags, or to limit their self-expression on the site (Duguay, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019).

In response to default publicness, many youths migrated to platforms offering anonymity and low identity persistence in combination with communities celebrating gender and sexual diversity (DeVito et al., 2018; Hanckel et al., 2019). Platforms such as Tumblr and Twitter became alternative spaces where many LGBTQ+ individuals could express gender differently across segmented audiences to avoid stigmatization and confrontation (DeVito et al., 2018). Tumblr and Twitter afforded LGBTQ+ youth control over their personal information without compromising visibility and connection (Hanckel et al., 2019), which fostered freedom of expression and identity exploration (Kuper & Mustanski, 2014), learning and teaching (Fox & Ralston, 2016), and a sense of security, belonging, and mutual understanding (Craig et al., 2015). For instance, blogging, tagging, and labeling practices on Tumblr normalized diversity and personal choice through the creation and circulation of new identity labels and pronouns (Oakley, 2016).

Research taking a narrative approach to LGBTQ+ identity development suggests scalable sociality has been positive for diversifying gender and sexuality narratives in LGBTQ+ youth's lives and for storying the self in ways that challenge traditional gender narratives (Bates et al., 2020; Wargo, 2017). LGBTQ+ youth see themselves as autonomously using social media to construct external representations of an authentic internal self, which, by emerging adulthood, is understood as manifesting differently for various audiences, but still unified and increasingly confident in challenging master narratives about gender and sexuality not just in safe spaces but also in wider communities connecting their offline and online lives (Bates et al., 2020). These contemporary processes echo and build upon the early days of the internet, in which the flourishing of queer connections and communities in digital spaces challenged both gender and sexual normativity and the notion that only offline spaces constituted "real life" (Russell, 2013).

Of course, polymedia and scalable sociality are not panaceas for LGBTQ+ youth to transcend issues of stigma and surveillance to perform gender in ways that contest dominant paradigms (DeVito et al., 2018; Hanckel et al.,

2019). For instance, Kuper and Mustanski (2014) found that LGBTQ+ adolescents' narratives of negotiating gender and sexuality on social media reflected struggle and success rather than emancipation. LGBTQ+ individuals still contend with homophobic content online (Hanckel et al., 2019) and LGBTQ+ adolescents are more likely to be cyberbullied than their cisgender heterosexual peers (Abreu & Kenny, 2018). Youth are navigating complex digital landscapes with shifting consequences for visibility and control that can have high stakes for LGBTQ+ youth, especially those experiencing multiple intersections of oppressed identities such as those associated with race (Cho, 2018; Rubin & McClelland, 2015) or who are living in hostile offline environments (Bates et al., 2020). Specifically, the "default publicness" of prominent social media platforms such as Facebook assumes that being oneself in public is equally safe for all users (Cho, 2018). In reinforcing the racial, gender, and sexuality hierarchies of the broader culture, this publicness prompts queer youth of color to seek community on less public platforms such as Tumblr (Cho, 2018) and to question the safety of openly expressing their sexual and/or gender identities (Rubin & McClelland, 2015).

### *The Present Study*

Our study asked how LGBTQ+ adolescents are engaging with master and alternative narratives of gender and sexuality, both via social media and more broadly. Within this broad question, we also asked: How is this negotiation process mediated by the affordances of each site? How do the online and offline contexts of their lives mutually inform this negotiation process? What does this negotiation process look like at different intersections of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity?

In line with recent research on LGBTQ+ youth identity and social media (e.g., Bates et al., 2020), we approached these questions using semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to focus on what they considered most important within each interview topic. Given the importance of visual data in understanding the social media experiences of LGBTQ+ youth (Marston, 2019; Wargo, 2017) and the relative lack of visual data in existing research in this area (Marston, 2019), we conducted a social media tour focused on participants' narration of important posts, allowing for deeper analysis of the full meaning of participants' engagement with master narratives of gender and sexuality. Through incorporating participant-led, visual methods, we emphasize the importance of their lived experiences and the actual content of their social media posts related to identity exploration and expression.

## Method

### *Participants*

Twenty LGBTQ+ adolescents between the ages of 16 and 19 years old participated in our study. The majority identified as bisexual, queer, or pansexual and half were cisgender women, with the remainder being non-binary and/or transgender men and women. The majority identified as being white or multi-racial (white/Latine; white/Asian), with the remainder being Latine and Black. See Table 1 for breakdown of identities for each participant. Participants lived in various coastal communities, ranging from rural to small city environments. The dominant political culture in the region is liberal, which may influence participants' online behavior differently based on their specific identities (see Results section for further details).

### *Procedure*

IRB approval for this study was obtained prior to participant recruitment. To protect adolescents' privacy, the requirement for parental consent was waived in accordance with recommended practice for LGBTQ+ youth (Mustanski, 2011). Interviews were conducted from July - December 2019. Participants were recruited through local high school GSAs and various community events (e.g., Pride festivals), with the knowledge that they were signing up for a study on gender and sexual identity development on social media. Additionally, several participants were referred to us by previous participants. All those interested completed a demographic screener to assess eligibility; the study was open to adolescents who were 16 to 19 years old, identified as LGBTQ+, and were actively engaged on multiple social media sites. Upon expressing interest, participants were informed about the interview process, including that their device screens and voices would be recorded and how that information would be protected. Participants who chose to participate signed a detailed consent form and received a copy for their records. In accordance with IRB requirements for protecting the privacy of adolescent participants, we reviewed all interviews to ensure we had not recorded any private conversations or posts from third party individuals.

Each participant chose from several location options for conducting the interview, which included outdoor spaces, coffee shops, interviewee homes, and researcher office space. After reviewing and signing the consent form, each participant downloaded a software program that recorded their smart-phone screen throughout the interview. Interviews lasted between one and

**Table 1.** Participant Demographics.

ID	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Race/Ethnicity
1	19	Female	Bisexual	Caucasian; Hispanic
2	16	Female	Pansexual	Caucasian; white
3	19	Female	Asexual; Biromantic	Chinese; Caucasian
4	17	Nonbinary	Queer	Caucasian; white
5	18	Nonbinary	Bisexual	Caucasian; white; Jewish
6	18	Female	Homosexual	Latina; Mexican; white
7	19	Femme	Queer	Latinx; Jewish; Chicanx; Mexican; white
8	18	Female	Queer	Italian; Portuguese; Native American; white
9	17	Male	Pansexual	Mexican; Latino
10	16	Nonconforming	Queer	Mexican; Latino
11	16	Transmasculine	Bisexual/No Label	Caucasian; white
12	17	Female	Bisexual	Caucasian; white
13	17	Male (Transmale)	Straight	Caucasian; white
14	19	Female (Trans)	Pansexual	white
15	17	Female	Pansexual	white
16	17	Nonbinary Masc Aligned	Bisexual	white
17	18	Girl	Bisexual	Mexican
18	18	Male	Bisexual	Black; African American
19	17	Woman	Bisexual	Latina
20	18	Male	Bisexual	Mexican

Note. All identity labels were self-reported by participants on our eligibility screener.

three hours and most were conducted by a single interviewer. Participants received \$50 cash upon completion of the interview.

The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of four sections, all of which were included in analysis. The first two focused heavily on social media use, with the first section focusing on the broad social media landscape of each participant and the second section examining participants' posts and

experiences on each site in more depth. The third section asked participants to reflect on key life events where they negotiated the gender binary and heteronormativity (regardless of whether these events were reflected on their social media), followed by looking back to earlier posts on their longest-used site that reflected key ways of understanding and expressing themselves online. The fourth section allowed space for participants to reflect on their experiences of the interview and offer any closing thoughts to the interviewer.

*Social media tour.* This study employed social media tour methodology, in which participants guide researchers through their public social media platforms. Prior research on LGBTQ+ identity development and social media has largely employed surveys and interviews. However, these methods are often limited in that they are typically not participant-led nor grounded in each adolescent's specific online contexts, potentially missing important aspects of participants' lived experiences (Kusenbach, 2003) and/or reinforcing the power differential between an adult researcher and youth participant. Combining a semi-structured interview with the social media tour provides a holistic view of participants' perspectives of their cultural contexts (Campos-Holland et al., 2016), while also giving researchers access to significant material expressions of master and alternative narratives (e.g., social media posts) in each participant's life. This allows a deeper understanding of how LGBTQ+ youth are navigating and changing the broader narrative culture through their unique polymeia environments.

While this methodology allows for in-depth exploration and analysis of each participant's social media landscape, it also poses a challenge for protecting participants' identities when presenting results. In addition to the risk to confidentiality in sharing participant photos, direct quotes from participants' public social media posts could be used to locate participant profiles using reverse search techniques. For these reasons, we include direct quotes from participants' descriptions of their posts during the interview, while including our own descriptions of photos and text posts rather than sharing them directly.

## *Analysis*

Our broad analytic methodology was grounded in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), though some components align with narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008; see Bates et al. (2020) and Santer et al. (2022) for recent examples with LGBTQ+ youth and social media tours). Our approach was grounded in a constructionist epistemology and focused

on both semantic and latent levels of meaning. Although our analysis was primarily inductive, we also included deductive coding focused on the specific *content* of master and alternative narratives that spontaneously arose during the interviews (whereas the inductive component focused on the *processes* that adolescents used to navigate those narratives in a polymedia context). To illustrate how our deductive and inductive components come together, we have included a “participant portrait” in our results section that highlights one participant’s experience of navigating master and alternative narratives.

Another key component of our approach was directly coding audiovisual data rather than using transcription, similar to recent research employing the social media tour methodology (e.g., Santer et al., 2022). We used an open-source behavioral science software program (Datavyu, 2014), which allows for annotations tied directly to specific time points in the social media tour interview. This facilitated a more nuanced reading of each interview, as the team repeatedly listened to the actual audio of the interviews along with participants’ corresponding media posts, rather than only reviewing transcribed conversation. Analysis files were linked to the audiovisual data files and stored on a secure server only accessed by the research team.

Due to a recording error, one participant’s interview did not include video. The two interviewers present recognized this immediately after the interview, then collaborated to record detailed notes about the visual aspects of the participant’s posts. This interview was analyzed using audio data only, along with the post-interview notes.

**Deductive.** Our first phase of analysis focused on references to master and alternative narratives that arose organically in the social media tours. No interview questions referenced or asked about these narratives, either directly or indirectly, as the interview protocol was designed to elicit participants’ reflections on their identity development and meaning making as LGBTQ+ individuals both in digital spaces and more broadly. Though most of these references were in participants’ speech, we also coded for visual references in participants’ social media (e.g., posts about non-binary identity, or pronouns other than he or she listed in profile).

Importantly, we coded for any discussion or postings that related to the narratives, regardless of whether the participant endorsed them. For instance, we coded any discussions of heterosexism under the “sin” narrative, even if the participant was not expressing a personal endorsement of this ideology, such as this participant’s discussion of why she conceals her sexual identity from her parents:

. . . my dad doesn't like, you know, gay people, or like anything—anyone who's not straight, he doesn't like that. But he's not aggressive about it, but he does make it known "oh, I don't like that. That's not right." (Cisgender girl, 17, bisexual, Latina)

*Development of deductive codes.* We created a list of 13 master and alternative narratives regarding gender and sexuality based on existing research (see Table 2). These included three narratives related to gender and gender roles, drawn from existing research (McLean et al., 2017). Here the central narrative is the traditional gender narrative, with the alternative narratives equal and should be equal developing in response. Additionally, we included four narratives related to same-sex desire. Three were drawn from Hammack et al. (2013), in which same-sex desire is conceptualized as either a sickness, a type of person, or as a personally developed and defined aspect of self. As these narratives were drawn specifically from the discipline of psychology, we added an additional narrative (sin) to encompass negative understandings of same-sex desire rooted either explicitly in religion, or in broader attitudes that define same-sex desire as morally wrong, unnatural, or abnormal. Finally, six narratives related to transgender identity were adapted from Bradford and Syed (2019), who developed a broader set of narratives of cis- and transnormativity based on focus groups with transgender adults. We chose to adapt a sub-set of these narratives that promote (or challenge) three widely accepted assumptions about gender: that it is grounded in the body, fixed across the lifespan, and binary.

*Deductive coding process.* Reflexive thematic analysis considers researcher subjectivity an analytic resource, rather than a liability (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thus, we approached the first phase of deductive coding with the goal of collectively deciding on what would "count" as a reference to a master or alternative narrative for the purposes of this project, rather than with the goal of reducing bias or subjectivity in theme development. First, each coder independently reviewed the first 10% of all four sections for each interview, marking each conversational turn with a "yes" or "no" for each of the 13 narratives (except for one interview that posed temporary technical difficulties for two coders). After meeting to discuss this first phase, the remainder of each interview was assigned to one author for completion of deductive coding. These codes were used to support our development of inductive themes by noting specific points in each interview where a participant was engaging with particular master or alternative narratives, rather than serving as initial codes in the thematic analysis process.

**Table 2.** Deductive Narrative Results.

Title	Description	Count
Biology	Gender as rooted in biology. Can include both sex assigned at birth and current embodiment (e.g. discussion of gender affirming medical interventions).	72
Beyond biology	Gender as not necessarily related to biology.	12
Fixed	Gender as something fixed or stable, regardless of whether it is aligned with birth-assigned sex.	10
Fluid	Gender identity as something that can be fluid or change over time.	23
Binary	Gender as consisting of two mutually exclusive categories.	13
Non-binary	Gender identity as including more than two categories.	54
Traditional	Separate roles for men and women, with men having higher status.	33
Equal	Men and women as able to do the same things or having the same capacity for personal characteristics.	2
Should-be-equal	Sexism, or references to the traditional narrative being unjust.	73
Sin	Same-sex desire as immoral, wrong, or disgusting. Code also for sense of shame or self-consciousness.	136
Sickness	Same-sex desire as indicative of psychological disorder.	4
Species	Same-sex desire as innate, or of LGBTQ+ people as inherently different from heterosexual people. "I am who I am."	9
Subject	Sexuality as fluid, socially constructed, or as not adequately represented by mainstream categories (e.g. gay/lesbian, straight, or bisexual).	49

Note. Counts reflect the total number of narrative occurrences across all participants.

*Inductive.* Following a similar approach to recent social media tour research (Santer et al., 2022), the first three authors conducted at least four full “passes” through each audiovisual interview, building familiarity with the data and developing initial ideas for themes. During each stage, each

participant was the primary responsibility of one coder, though these rotated throughout each stage of analysis. The first pass involved an initial review of each interview, including marking time points for important structural aspects of the interview (primarily interviewer questions and movements between each major section of the interview). The second pass involved a more detailed review, with markers and summaries added for participant responses to each question. The primary focus of the third pass was deductive coding, but also included potential themes for inductive analysis. The fourth pass was solely focused on inductive coding, in which relevant excerpts were tagged and more detailed notes on potential themes were recorded for further review. Coders met 1 to 2 times per week to discuss excerpts and developing themes, with participants rotating among the coders after each participant had been reviewed once. Coders regularly met with the fifth author to refine and finalize themes during this phase.

*Positionality/Reflexivity.* The current research is part of a series of studies the last author developed with her students to expand culturally sensitive research on social media and gender/sexual development during adolescence. The research team's approach was informed by their identification with the LGBTQ+ community and 3rd/4th wave feminist understandings of gender oppression that are intersectional, include trans rights, and appreciate social media as a tool for cultural change. The first three authors kept reflexivity notes during analysis, with a focus on how their own identities and experiences informed their reactions and interpretations of each participant.

The first author is a white, queer/lesbian, non-binary person. Their perspectives on gender and sexuality are influenced by their current identities, along with their early socialization as a girl/woman in a highly conservative family and community. This may have shaped the interviews and analysis through enhanced insight into how diverse manifestations of gender oppression and family dynamics impact narrative engagement, while limiting insight into liberal gender socialization and racialized gender oppression. As an older Millennial who actively used Facebook for many years but currently uses social media sparingly, they approach youth social media culture as an observer, viewing social media platforms as important sites of narrative engagement in contemporary adolescent development. They conducted half of the interviews and led study conceptualization, design, analysis, and manuscript preparation.

The second author is a Black biracial nonbinary and bisexual individual. They have close ties with the local LGBTQ+ youth community and multiple years of activist experience, which contributed a deep and nuanced understanding of the community and school contexts for participants' identity

development. Because of this connection, they were previously acquainted with several participants. The second author did not participate in coding or discussion of those interviews and, when appropriate, informed those participants about their position on the research team and shared that they would not be engaging with that person's data. They are a member of Gen Z and were active on Tumblr and Instagram during their process of queer identity development. The second author was responsible for a large portion of the literature review, participant write-ups, analysis, and manuscript preparation.

The third author is a Latinx, cisgender, queer woman. She is an older member of Gen Z who began using social media at an early age; since then, social media has become increasingly embedded in her life, granting a strong familiarity with the sites used by participants. Her lived experiences as a queer woman informed her understanding of participants' navigation of the traditional gender narrative, although this was limited to her experiences as a cisgender woman. Her experiences as a person of color in predominantly white spaces informed the third author's analysis of how participants' race intersected with other identities, adding perspectives on how cultural values and the context of whiteness afford different experiences regarding online expression and activism. The third author contributed to participant recruitment and data collection, and also played a major role in analysis and manuscript preparation.

The fourth author is a white, cisgender, bisexual/pansexual woman. She is a Millennial who has been an active and regular user of Facebook for over a decade and has engaged with Twitter and Instagram occasionally as a viewer, but not as a contributor. The fourth author was primarily involved in the conceptualization of the study design and research question, which may reflect her online experiences and specific identity intersections. She also led participant recruitment both in-person and online, which may be reflected in the pool of participants that elected to participate.

The fifth author is a white cisgender bisexual woman. She guided students on the social media tour methodology, research questions, interview instrument, and writing. She also collaborated on interpretations of results. She views gender and sexuality as socially constructed and dynamic, a perspective that has been influenced by her experiences in an immigrant Italian Catholic family, rejecting traditional gender roles, and studying changes in gender worldviews in an indigenous community in Mexico. As a member of Gen X and a passive user of Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, the last author considers herself an observer of social media culture, learning from youth through their experiences and meaning-making.

## Results

### Deductive Results

Our deductive analysis focused on the content of master and alternative narratives for gender and sexuality discussed by participants. Brief descriptions of each narrative and frequency counts are presented in Table 2. The most referenced master narrative by far was sin, with biology and the traditional gender narrative also appearing with relative frequency. The most referenced alternative narratives were should-be-equal, non-binary, and subject.

### Inductive Results

Our second phase of analysis yielded three *key navigational strategies* used by our participants to engage with master narratives of gender and sexuality in online contexts: *seeking and sharing information*, *creating queer community*, and *choices about visibility and permanence*. These strategies align with existing research regarding LGBTQ+ youth and social media, in terms of key reasons and rewards for engaging with LGBTQ+ content online (e.g., Fox & Ralston, 2016).

However, our analysis also revealed that the meaning and purpose of these strategies for our participants, both individually and collectively, could not be understood apart from three *key navigational contexts*: the *traditional gender narrative*; *white, liberal, community context*; and *platform affordances*. We begin with an overview of each strategy and context individually, followed by a participant portrait that illustrates the interplay of these strategies and contexts.

#### *Key navigational strategies*

*Seeking and sharing information.* As widely noted in existing research (e.g., Fox & Ralston, 2016), LGBTQ+ youth often use social media to seek out information about gender and sexuality, often moving between platforms as they learn about new spaces that are more LGBTQ+ friendly. For instance, several participants spoke about learning about Tumblr via other platforms in late childhood or early adolescence, as described here:

I actually made my Tumblr account [around age 13]. . .and I wasn't out yet, and I didn't know how I identified yet. And I'm seeing people being like "I'm a trans guy," and I'm like "huh, I bet that's nice!" and then thinking "maybe I'm that!" and that website actually helped me figure out my own identity, and I know others have had a similar experience. (Non-binary, 17, bisexual, white)

For this participant and others, Tumblr served as a key developmental context for their LGBTQ+ identity. It was a place to not only acquire basic knowledge about LGBTQ+ terminology and culture, but also participate in critical discourses regarding that terminology and culture that were occurring in digital spaces during the 2010 to 2020 era.

Conversely, a few participants focused not only on sharing information, but specifically sharing information with non-LGBTQ+ audiences. These were generally participants holding significant privilege within the LGBTQ+ community, such as one participant who is a white, heterosexual, cisgender-passing transgender man, who used his Instagram as a tool for answering common questions that he received from cisgender people:

I [posted the hormone tutorial] because I have a lot of people who have questions like “how do you do it, what does it look like?” I’m like you know I’m just going to post it so I don’t have to continually copy and paste the same thing. . . (Transgender man, 17, straight, white)

For this participant, sharing information outside of the LGBTQ+ community served to amplify awareness of transgender people and their experiences, while he also acknowledged the frustration that he and other transgender people often feel in terms of the expectation that they explain themselves in relation to dominant norms about gender and bodies.

*Creating queer community.* In line with existing research (e.g., Craig et al., 2015; Fox & Ralston, 2016), our participants both sought and created a sense of community online that encompassed local relationships, online relationships, and those created through following celebrities or social media influencers. Each participant’s blend of platforms and connection types resulted in a unique constellation of online networks and communities, defined via shared symbolic expressions of gender and sexual identities; however, some distinct patterns were present across many of the interviews.

The importance of “niche” online communities was prominent for many participants, both for those who had a strong local community and those who did not. For instance, Tumblr was a key site of community for many participants, as demonstrated by this participant’s discussion of building virtual community based on liking similar trans-related posts:

Everyone ends up following each other, and it ends up being a really nice community. . . (Transgender man, 18, bisexual, Black)

A bit later, this same participant discusses the importance of a trans artist that he initially found on Tumblr, then also began following on Instagram:

He has just really nice, soft art that I really enjoy and a lot of people in the trans community enjoy. . .this is something a lot of people resonate with.

An additional aspect of community was through the expression of queer joy, through posts that challenged common narratives of needing to hide non-dominant forms of gender and sexual expression or of needing to make those expressions palatable to a wider audience. For some, this included posting photos with partners or friends that explicitly highlight queer identity. For others, this meant posting photos that challenged gender norms related to attractiveness, including the pressure to only post highly attractive photos on sites such as Instagram. One participant described a recent photo depicting a happy moment in his life, after previously discussing shame about his physical appearance and experiences of being told he would never find a partner if he transitioned:

I didn't really care that I wasn't super attractive in this. . .I didn't care about what other people thought of me. I'm happy here, I'm with my partner who loves me very much, and who respects me and my gender identity, and that's great for me. (Non-binary, 17, bisexual, white)

This and other types of expression highlight how the norms of each site may constrain queer expression, but also offer opportunities for pushing back through the centering of queer experiences and relationships. Further, the norms and affordances of different sites offer opportunities for developing different types of community, such that communities formed on one site may influence expression on another. These interconnected communities formed in a polymedia context may allow alternative narratives regarding gender and sexuality to spread far more quickly than in the pre-digital age.

*Choices about visibility and permanence.* While embracing the joys of self-expression and community connection, our participants also negotiated complex choices about their online visibility, particularly in relation to the affordance of data permanence. For instance, digital artifacts of previously held identities, both within and across sites, may display seemingly contradictory information about a person's gender or sexuality. Many contemporary LGBTQ+ youth embrace extended periods of identity exploration and/or long-term fluidity as authentic and legitimate expressions of gender and sexuality (e.g., Bates et al., 2020; Cover, 2019); however, this contradicts master

narratives of gender and sexuality as fixed and risks reinforcing the stereotype that LGBTQ+ identity exploration during adolescence is “just a phase” and only deserves respect if those identities remain stable across the lifespan.

This tension is exemplified by a participant who previously identified as transmasculine, but now identifies as a cisgender lesbian woman. To correct misunderstandings about her identity, she describes deleting previous posts that reference her as transmasculine or use he/him pronouns and posting new pictures of herself with the lesbian flag:

I specifically wore the lesbian flag because I wanted to like, make a statement of like, hey this is who I am now. Because a lot of my friends knew me as not that, not a lesbian. Around June I changed all my icons to be different versions of the lesbian flag to be like, hey guess what, I'm out. . .It was sort of like a coming out, but kind of complicated because of. . .the steps and experimenting I'd done with things. (Cisgender woman, 18, lesbian, Latina/white)

While the affordance of permanence can heighten the risk of being misunderstood in relation to one's authentic experiences of gender as changing over time, social media also offer opportunities to masspersonally declare new identifications, roles, and relationships, which may foster feelings of agency in aligning the inner with the outer during phases of identity transition (Haimson, 2018). Though this participant faced difficult choices about when, how, and for how long to keep her previous identity visible in digital spaces, gradually her self-consciousness about deleting artifacts associated with her transmasculine identity was replaced with feelings of joy in celebrating her newfound lesbian identity in visible ways.

For others, increased visibility led to negative consequences offline. Throughout our social media tour with a transfeminine participant, we learned that she took several steps to come out online, first as nonbinary and using they/them pronouns, before coming out again as using she/her. The reason behind the gradual process was to shield herself from negative interactions both online and offline, as she was aware of the risks of violence during physical transition, especially as a trans feminine person. For both participants, navigating choices about visibility and permanence offered the opportunity for gradual and nuanced growth, testing small steps and seeking encouragement as they shared their developing identities in digital spaces.

### *Key navigational contexts*

*Traditional gender narrative.* Throughout the inductive analysis phase, the interconnectedness of the 13 master and alternative narratives used in the

deductive analysis became increasingly important for understanding connections between the experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents, despite holding distinct gender and sexual identities. Specifically, we found that it was important to understand all narratives as derivations of the traditional gender narrative, whether as alternative narratives in direct response (e.g., should be equal) or as more nuanced alternative narratives deriving from the experiences of specific gendered experiences (e.g., gender as non-binary).

While on one level, the inseparability of these narratives is obvious, it did not play out that way in participants' own narratives of their gendered experiences. For instance, when asked about whether they expressed their gender on social media, some cisgender female participants responded that this was not relevant to them because they were not transgender or non-binary. Though some did discuss feminism or sexual objectification of women online, these were less frequent than might be anticipated and suggested that the common roots of distinct types of gender oppression may sometimes be overlooked in contemporary gender discourse.

This inseparability was also clear in non-binary participants' discussion of navigating transnormativity, in which some transgender people with a binary identity perceived non-binary people as outside the bounds of transgender identity and experience. This was often framed in binary, medicalized discourse, in which a clear cross-sex identification was present from early childhood and the only solution was a full medical transition, with the desire to pass as a cisgender person as a key goal. As such, these transnormative narratives speak in direct response to cisnormativity (e.g., the combined narratives of gender as biology, gender as fixed, and gender as binary), but only by challenging a small part of the gender as biology narrative (by challenging the idea that a person's biology cannot be changed) and leaving the other two intact. Of course, this transnormative narrative is the most widely understood story about what it means to be transgender; it is also a narrative that allows the gender binary (and, until recently, heteronormativity) to remain intact.

*White, liberal, community context.* In addition to navigating the multilayered context of gender narratives, the backdrop of whiteness was highly relevant, though often unspoken, for participants of all races and ethnicities, even in response to questions that specifically asked about race. In keeping with calls for greater attention to macrosystems and structural oppression in developmental research (e.g., Rogers et al., 2021), we noted several ways in which race and racism shaped our participants' experiences with gender and sexuality.

One key aspect of how whiteness shaped our participants' experiences is related to the politically liberal, predominantly white local context where the interviews took place. Most participants had lived in the local area for much or all of their lives, and many spoke of local LGBTQ+ youth organizations as critical in shaping their understanding of queer identity and culture. While these spaces provided a strong sense of support and community for many participants, especially when school environments were unsafe, some participants expressed disappointment in the racial dynamics of these organizations.

Additionally, posts regarding social justice issues were one aspect of online culture where we saw differences between participants of color and white participants, even when those posts were not directly about race. For instance, while some participants of color rarely posted about race and/or ethnicity, those who did often described their posts as forms of self-expression, pride in their identities, and solidarity with other marginalized groups. Conversely, many white participants were eager to share posts related to race and/or ethnicity, in ways that suggested a desire to appear as a "good white ally" (Patton & Bondi, 2015) and potentially performative activism (Cabrera et al., 2017) rather than a deeper commitment to enacting social change.

For multiracial participants, posting about race took on additional layers of meaning. For instance, one participant, who identified as white and Hispanic, rarely posted about her racial identity because she did not speak Spanish and was generally read as white. This aligns with existing research on the unique experiences of multiracial people, who may have a more challenging time developing a strong ethnic identity if they are frequently read as white (Syed & Azmitia, 2008). For this participant and others, this experience of passing as white paralleled a process of questioning whether they were "queer enough," particularly if they were currently in a relationship that was frequently read as heterosexual. This was especially pronounced on sites such as Instagram where visual presentation of the self is a central to participation on the platform (i.e., less audiovisual anonymity), and where visual presentations of queerness (e.g., through gender non-conforming appearance or photos of relationships that would be read as same-sex) were often unspoken requirements for constructing a queer identity.

*Platform affordances.* Throughout the interviews, individuals described how they represented themselves differently across social media apps because of differing opportunities and constraints. Opportunities and constraints were implicit and explicit, guided by the user base and the apps' interface, and held a variety of significance for youths' engagement with different master narratives. For instance, Facebook's user base (older, familial, multi-generational networks) in combination with its real name policy constituted properties of

the communication channel that amplified the impact of the traditional gender narrative and sin narrative for some adolescents, increasing the likelihood of self-censorship or disengagement on the site. Conversely, most participants who used Tumblr reported a higher level of engagement with their queer identities publicly, compared to Instagram or Facebook. The affordance of anonymity in public allowed youth to navigate alternative narratives of sexuality and gender with a renewed sense of safety and connection. On Tumblr, alternative narratives were centered due to the affordances that allowed for a proliferation of a large queer userbase and various options to enhance or reduce audiovisual cues in self-presentation.

The traditional gender narrative, particularly assumptions of heterosexuality and the pressure to display cisgender, Eurocentric beauty standards, was reinforced on the highly visual Instagram app. For example, cisgender women navigated pressures and risks regarding sexualization and objectification when posting photos of themselves, demonstrating how the narrative discourse underlies the process of making decisions about posting, rather than contested publicly and openly via text modality options on platforms like Tumblr. We also observed instances of youth gaining control over their visual self-presentation on Instagram by dialing up the ambiguities and subtleties of visual communication to experience degrees of anonymity in public. For instance, one participant used the visual affordances of Instagram to showcase idyllic moments with her girlfriend, without accompanying discourses about sexuality:

It's mostly the queer part that I like to share on Instagram. Here's a picture of my girlfriend when we were in Massachusetts. . . here's another one, we went bowling. This was for our nine months, there's another one for our three months. It's pictures of moments when we were together, not necessarily of her. (Cisgender woman, 18, white, queer)

Here, the visualness of Instagram allowed the adolescent to challenge the shame that is often imparted on queer youth and combat the sin narrative. By focusing on idyllic moments in a queer relationship through visual engagement and positive commentary, this participant and her partner were able to be comfortably private in public about the nature of their identities, a welcome change to the discourse of shame the participant described as common in offline public life.

*Participant portrait.* To illustrate how our results come together within a particular participant, we highlight several excerpts from “Alyssa,” a 19-year-old cisgender woman who is bisexual and biracial (white/Latina). Key themes

in Alyssa's story centered around navigating norms for self-sexualization online, challenging stereotypes about bisexual people, and displaying her identity in subtle ways. These themes showed up differently across social media sites because of variations in social and material affordances. On Tumblr, the actions that were enabled were political discussions about queer identity as compared to Twitter, which enabled Alyssa's participation in mainstream LGBTQ+ culture and pop culture references.

Alyssa's tour through Instagram exemplifies how affordances influence, but do not determine, adolescents' experiences online. On the one hand, Instagram affordances, including the emphasis on manicured photos and mainstream standards of gendered beauty, constrain her posts about her gender expression and sexual identity. For example:

I would say with gender something that would come up with me is that there is this expectation with social media. . . right now it's summer, so you're expecting maybe bikini pics. . . but these aren't things I usually do, nor are they things that I necessarily put on my Instagram.

Here, Alyssa described a photo she posted on Instagram, in which she is wearing a two-piece swimsuit while browsing an aisle in a drugstore. However, it is not a sexualized pose, and she described the photo as an intentional way to challenge the expectations placed on women regarding displaying their bodies online. Through this post, Alyssa was negotiating the traditional gender narrative and the sexualization of women, communicating publicly and visually to subtly challenge the dominant paradigm while still acting within its confines.

Alyssa's resistance to the traditional gender narrative on Instagram may have been partly cultivated through affordances of Tumblr for engaging anonymously in political discussions about identity in publicly queer spaces. In discussing her bisexual identity, Alyssa shared a Tumblr post talking about the word bisexual being taboo, and that many people say they "don't like labels" rather than using the word bisexual:

I think that I don't necessarily care about labels myself, but I choose to use the label bisexual because it is so often not used. . . people say bi has this inherent definition. . . that you're only attracted to cisgender men and women. . . which I don't find fits for me.

Though labels were not particularly important for Alyssa, she embraced the label bisexual to push against the stigma and erasure that bisexual people experience from both straight culture and the LGBTQ+ community.

Additionally, she challenged the necessity of newer terms such as pansexual to describe attraction that includes trans and non-binary people, stating that her experience of bisexuality has always included all genders. By defining herself using a widely known label and challenging some cultural assumptions about what that label means, she embraced the *subject narrative* of sexual identity, which challenges the traditional gender narrative. Through her experiences confidently defending and elaborating on her identity labels within sophisticated textual discourses of gender and sexuality on Tumblr, Alyssa may be cultivating a critical consciousness that spills over into how she negotiates the visual constraints of expression on Instagram.

Alyssa's engagement in public dialog about labels illustrates her navigational strategy of *creating community*, particularly within the navigational context of Tumblr's *platform affordances* as a niche, highly queer site with relative anonymity compared to her other top sites. However, for Alyssa, creating queer community was even more prominent on Twitter, which she described as "where I'm funny," and where she posts more frequently about queer experiences:

Here's me being like, a little gay [reads her twitter post] . . . Brie Larson. . . all the queer women are all about her right now. . . These are gay moments you have to read into. For straight cis people, there's so much that they don't know. . .

In this quote, Alyssa used the navigational strategies of *creating community* and making *choices about visibility*. She displayed "queer joy" in relation to both her own enthusiasm for Brie Larson and in sharing this experience with a larger community of queer women. By displaying queer joy in mainstream networked publics on Twitter, Alyssa contradicts common narratives of queerness that center on negative experiences and social rejection. Additionally, by using an indirect reference to her queerness that may be missed by those outside the community, she maneuvered partial visibility and protected herself on a mainstream public platform like Twitter. Whereas Tumblr provided her with affordances to elaborate on her bisexual identity and cultivate cultural capital in queer community, Twitter enabled her to use that knowledge and perspective to share queer symbolic resources within mainstream communication flows.

Finally, Alyssa shared a post from Tumblr where she described speaking out against a teacher who discriminated against a Black classmate, saying

[Posting this] felt like being a part of the [Black Lives Matter] conversation at the time. . . it felt like something that needed to be spoken about. . . but I was

a fifteen-year-old white girl. . . this felt like a small moment I could put out in the world and maybe someone would see it.

Throughout the interview, Alyssa discussed discomfort about claiming her biracial identity and speaking openly about racial issues because she is usually read as white. While she typically used the affordance of anonymity on Tumblr to discuss sexuality, this is also the site she uses to “test out” posting about race—in addition to this post, her Tumblr bio describes her as “barely biracial.” Thus, Alyssa’s navigation of master narratives is shaped by the affordances of each site in ways that support her overall identity development in both digital and offline spaces.

## Discussion

Our study examined how contemporary LGBTQ+ adolescents navigate master narratives of gender and sexuality during crucial periods of identity development in a polymedia context, and our analysis highlighted several key features of adolescents’ experiences. Notably, despite the recent emergence of alternative narratives (e.g., the validity of fluid gender expression; Bradford & Syed, 2019) and the sharp increase in social visibility, support, and online communities for LGBTQ+ youth, our participants were still consistently navigating long-standing master narratives of gender and sexuality (e.g., the traditional gender narrative; McLean et al., 2017; gender as binary; Bradford & Syed, 2019). Further, this occurred in a self-proclaimed liberal community and in LGBTQ+ online spaces, demonstrating the ubiquity, rigidity, and compulsory nature of master narratives (McLean & Syed, 2015).

In our deductive analysis we coded a wide range of negative perceptions of non-heterosexual identities under the sin narrative, which likely accounts for its especially high count. Additionally, all references to gendered aspects of the body and to gender inequality were coded under the biology and traditional gender narratives, respectively, reflecting the large role these narratives still play in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. Conversely, the relatively infrequent references to narratives of LGBTQ+ identities being fixed at birth (coded under the fixed and species narratives for gender and sexual identities, respectively) may reflect a pushback against common alternative narratives of gender and sexuality developed in previous generations of LGBTQ+ people (or, alternatively, an evolution of those narratives). Finally, the low counts of the sickness and equality narratives suggest that the adolescents in this study are not often confronted with narratives of mental illness as a cause of non-heterosexual experience, and that they are highly aware of gender inequality despite the progress of recent decades.

Additionally, our analysis illustrated that adolescents' narrative engagement was influenced by understandings of how their specific identities related to larger social structures and context. For example, though most of our participants were social-justice oriented teenagers from a liberal and politically active community, relatively few cisgender female participants explicitly discussed or posted about gender or feminism. When asked, some of these participants said this was because they did not identify outside of the binary, suggesting that some cisgender girls/women do not consider themselves oppressed based on gender (see also McLean et al., 2017). This was juxtaposed by participants' discussion of posts related to racial and ethnic diversity, particularly when comparing the interviews of white participants with those of color. Whereas white cisgender women did not highlight posts about gender, they did highlight their posts on race and ethnicity and discussed the importance of educating themselves about racism. Conversely, participants of color were not posting as much about their own racial and ethnic identities. This may have been due to experiences with or concern for discrimination, based on their perception of hostile on- and off-line contexts and an attempt to protect their psychological well-being (Pan et al., 2021; Tynes et al., 2019). While these patterns suggest awareness of the historical pattern of cisgender white women centering their own experiences and the importance of intersectional feminism, they may also reflect white participants' desire to be perceived as a "good" ally (Patton & Bondi, 2015), even while running the risk of falling into performative activism online (Cabrera et al., 2017).

The current study also highlights the importance of both an integrative polymedia approach to social media research and the social media tour method (see also Manago et al., 2021), as this combination grants researchers access to visual artifacts to support and enhance participants' retrospective narration during an interview, while highlighting their experiences within and between particular social media platforms across time. For instance, actually seeing specific posts related to gender and sexuality gave a nuanced, intimate picture of how Alyssa balanced the expectations for sexualization and assumptions of heterosexuality on Instagram with the more political and queer cultures of Twitter and Tumblr. If we focused on a single platform, we would only have seen one facet of her gender/sexual expression online, missing the increased affordances for fluidity and porosity (see Madianou & Miller, 2013) and opportunities for identity exploration and visibility in a polymedia context (see also Bates et al., 2020). Similarly, if we only relied on her reports of social media use without the tour, we might miss the subtleties in say, how her bathing suit photo reveals both accommodation and resistance to the expectations of female sexualization online.

Our study also has implications for practitioners who work with LGBTQ+ youth. For instance, our results echoed previous findings on the importance of social media for LGBTQ+ identity development and well-being (e.g., Bates et al., 2020; Craig et al., 2015; Fox & Ralston, 2016), suggesting that limiting access to social media may be especially harmful for LGBTQ+ youth. Additionally, our results illustrate how the traditional gender narrative (McLean et al., 2017) continues to impact how LGBTQ+ youth understand and present themselves in digital spaces, despite increasing awareness of alternative narratives (e.g., gender as non-binary; Bradford & Syed, 2019). As the traditional gender narrative increasingly reasserts itself (such as through laws restricting reproductive rights and gender-affirming care for transgender youth), it is important for practitioners to understand the complexity of choices adolescents face in navigating polymedia environments.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

First, for privacy concerns, participant recruitment and interviews were limited to the inclusion of public social media sites. Although participants sometimes discussed Finstas (fake Instagram accounts), Snapchat, or other private profiles, we could not observe them directly. Additionally, TikTok use has exploded since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). While available at the time of data collection, TikTok was infrequently used by participants in our sample. Given that social media sites are constantly shifting, future research should examine how the features and affordances of TikTok (including its powerful algorithm) and other new social media sites enable and constrain how LGBTQ+ youth engage with master and alternative narratives.

Second, though our recruitment call was open to all LGBTQ+ youth, our study includes very few participants who were assigned male at birth (AMAB). Considering that people who are socialized and read by others as male are more likely to face severe consequences for gender-nonconformity (e.g., Chavanduka et al., 2021), it is understandable that more youth from this population did not elect to participate during the initial wave of recruitment. While alternative narratives that center gender identity regardless of gender presentation and birth-assigned sex are increasingly accepted within the LGBTQ+ community, the gender inequality of the traditional gender narrative (McLean et al., 2017) as manifested in transmisogyny (Serano, 2007) may disproportionately impact youth who are perceived as boys, correctly or incorrectly. These impacts may be especially pronounced in adolescence, when many transgender and non-binary youth may be unable to access necessary transition services due to legal restrictions, family opposition, and/or

safety concerns due to peer rejection (in many cases, cisgender boys also face challenges with family and peers). Although we planned to address this imbalance through a second wave of recruitment in summer 2020, we were unable to move forward due to limitations of participant recruitment and data collection during the height of the pandemic. Thus, it is important for future work to consider the unique risks and challenges that LGBTQ+ AMAB youth face as they navigate master and alternative narratives of gender and sexuality.

## **Conclusion**

This study exemplifies the complexity of narrative engagement in a polymedia context for contemporary LGBTQ+ adolescents, demonstrating the continuing impact of gendered oppression in the US despite multiple generations of feminist and LGBTQ+ activism and the widespread circulation of multiple alternative narratives for gender and sexuality. Additionally, it challenges linear notions of social progress, binaries such as liberal v. conservative communities, and the idea of social media as a panacea for LGBTQ+ adolescents. While our findings confirm certain components of these ideas (e.g., social media as potential safe haven for identity development and community connection), they also complexify these ideas within the broader contexts of adolescents' negotiation and reformulation of both master and alternative narratives. By using methodologies that center adolescents' voices and lived experiences, our study provides a nuanced view of how members of the next generation of the LGBTQ+ community are navigating rapidly changing narratives, political climates, and social media environments as they transform both mainstream and LGBTQ+ cultures in their transition to adulthood.

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