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# Visibility management in school and beyond: A qualitative study of gay, lesbian, bisexual youth

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## Abstract

Grounded theory was utilized to develop a theory of gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) youths' interactions with and response to their environment. Data included in-depth interviews of 20 GLB youth. The central phenomenon that emerged from the qualitative data analysis was the strategy of *visibility management*. Visibility management refers to the dynamic, ongoing process by which GLB youth make careful, planned decisions about whether they will disclose their sexual orientation, and, if they decide to disclose, to whom and how they disclose, and how they continue to monitor the presentation of their sexual orientation in different environments. The process of visibility management is proposed as a key construct in GLB identity development. Implications are proposed for working with GLB youth and their families and for making schools safer for GLB youth.

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## 1. Introduction

The lives of gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) youth have been the focus of increased scholarship in the past several years. A growing body of quantitative literature has yielded information regarding challenges faced by GLB adolescents, including strained family relations (Waldner & Magruder, 1999), risk of contracting HIV (Grossman, 2001), peer victimization (Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001), suicide risk (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001), and substance abuse (Rotheram-Borus & Langabeer, 2001). Thanks to the efforts of these scholars, documentation of the cost of ongoing social stigma, the high prevalence of actual or feared victimization, and the resulting psychological and psychosocial consequences of growing up in a

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homophobic environment is emerging. However, the educational experiences of GLB youth, which is the context of this study is little understood.

It is hypothesized that educational experiences of GLB youth may be affected by a number of factors, including: level of homophobia in the school environment; attitudes of teachers, counsellors, and other school staff toward homosexual youth; the degree to which homosexuality is incorporated in (or ignored by) the curriculum; opportunities for GLB students to meet and share their experiences; and the level of support for sexual minority students as expressed by heterosexual students (Waldner & Magruder, 1999; D'Augelli & Grossman, 2001). However, little is known about what it means to self-identify as lesbian or gay in the school context, or how GLB youth make meaning of their experiences. Moreover, even less is known about the coping strategies that GLB youth develop to withstand the multiple challenges in the school context where rejection and victimization are pervasive (Durby, 1994; Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001).

A quantitative study by Waldner-Haugrund and Magruder (1996) found that GLB youth negotiate their identity expression around environmental stressors and resources. The authors proposed the Negotiated Identity Model. Their model posits that perceived structural factors in the lives of sexual minority youth (such as parents' religiosity, importance of school, importance of heterosexual friends) influence identity expression. However, in their conception, the construct of identity expression was narrowly and behaviourally defined as "the expression or behavioural aspect of homosexual identity (membership in gay/lesbian groups, etc.)" and was measured by a five-item scale. Thus, the study did not examine the process that GLB youth go through as they actively negotiate the challenges in their environment and work to establish their identity.

The theoretical framework of the present study maintained that the locus of a negotiated identity is not within the individual, but rather is the negotiated product of interactions between individuals and their environments. Given this perspective, the authors deemed it necessary to explore GLB youths' process of coming to negotiate their identity and cope with multiple challenges in their environment from their own point of view through a qualitative methodology. When little is known in an area, qualitative research methods are useful to build theoretical models and set the stage for follow-up quantitative work. The present study was designed to construct contextualized theory from an analysis of qualitative data collected from GLB youth. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to construct a theory of GLB youths' school experiences from the ground up.

### *1.1. Grounded theory*

In the 1960s, Glaser and Strauss developed a method of collecting and analyzing qualitative data that is now known as "grounded theory" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined a grounded theory as

one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis pertaining to that phenomenon. . . One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge. (p. 23)

For the present study, the initial phenomenon of interest was the school experience of GLB youth. Related to this central phenomenon were the phenomena of identity development and the cultural context of GLB experience. Rather than seeking to test a specific theory of GLB experience, the present study aimed to uncover, primarily through interviews, the experiences of GLB youth in order to build a theory of GLB experience and identity from the data. One unique feature of grounded theory is that the data collection continually informs the research questions and data analysis. As an investigator collects and initially codes data, original research questions evolve and new questions surface. According to [Strauss and Corbin \(1990\)](#), grounded theorists must constantly ask themselves new questions to ensure success in collecting and analyzing data. Therefore, in the present investigation, an initial list of questions acted as a starting point, and new questions arose from the emergent analysis and theory. The final product that emerged was a broad description of the phenomenon of GLB youth and their relationship with their environment, school, and beyond.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Because school-age GLB youth were the focus of the study, it was important to interview participants who were of age 18 and under. Retrospective data gathered from older informants are likely to be contaminated by memory loss, memory reconstruction, and selective recall. Therefore, it was decided that much more could be learned about the central phenomenon of school experience by interviewing participants who are still in school or very recently graduated.

The setting where participants were recruited was a non-profit agency that provides peer support and education for GLB youth in an urban area. GLB and questioning adolescents utilize the agency for counselling, workshops, guest speakers, social functions, or just to visit with friends. At the agency, GLB youth can receive information about sexual orientation, sexuality education (including HIV/AIDS education), and services for their families. All participants were recruited and interviewed by the first author, who spent time as a volunteer at the agency and requested interviews from potential participants. At the end of each interview, the youth were asked to refer friends to the study.

Participants were 20 self-identified GLB and questioning youth age 18 and younger (mean age 17.1 years): 8 males, 12 females. The majority of the participants were Caucasian; four of the males were Hispanic and two of the females were Hispanic. Participants came from nine different high schools (six urban, two suburban, and one rural). Two were recent high school graduates, whereas seven were seniors, six were juniors, three were sophomores, and two were freshmen.

All participants volunteered to be part of the study and were given a thorough explanation of their rights, as well as information regarding confidentiality and therapeutic services available to them should they want assistance. Participants signed a consent form if they were 18 and an assent form if they were under 18. With some exceptions, parents of the youth under 18 also consented to have their son or daughter participate and signed a consent form. However, some of the participants under the age of 18 who had not disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents

consented for themselves by signing an alternate consent form that was carefully reviewed with them. Prior to interviewing a minor without parental consent, the nature of the interview and the prospective participant was discussed with the director of the non-profit agency to determine whether the prospective participant would be placed at risk by being interviewed. Once it was determined that the prospective participant would not be placed at any more risk than a participant with parental consent, the minor and the first author signed the consent form and proceeded with the interview. All consent procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the authors' university.

## *2.2. Interview*

The semi-structured interview was guided by a set of questions developed to broadly assess students' experiences at school (see Appendix A). Rather than sticking to a rigid interview schedule, flexibility was allowed when interviewing participants so as to elicit the information that was most important to them. After the first interview, questions were added for future interviews to incorporate themes that had not been anticipated. Interviews always began with the question, "What is it like to be gay at school?" followed by, "Are you out at school? How out are you?" Follow-up questions addressed coping at school, decisions on who to come out to, factors influencing coming out, connections with other GLB youth at school, teachers' attitudes, school climate, dealing with the difficulties of being gay at school, and positive aspects of being GLB at school. Flexibility was central to each interview, as the first author followed the stories of the students' lives rather than adhering to a rigid schedule of questions. As students told their stories, the first author made every effort to be an active listener, follow the thoughts of the students, and maintain unconditional positive regard. Using this approach, it was not uncommon to deviate from the standard list of questions, with the result of collecting a rich body of data.

## *2.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis*

Grounded theory techniques were used for data analysis. All interviews were transcribed and analysed as they were collected. This is known as the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Initially, transcripts were read and re-read, and notes were taken as broad themes or concepts emerged. Subsets of concepts, called categories, were noted and gradually fell into the context of the broader themes. This process of developing concepts and categories, known as open and axial coding, was the first step of analysis, and was performed on an ongoing basis during the data collection phase. The next step was the development of a narrative account of the relationships between the categories, which is the product of selective coding. As hypotheses develop regarding the relationships between categories, it is necessary for the grounded theorist to determine whether his or her data support the hypotheses. This technique is known as verification (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). If the hypotheses are supported by the data, then they are verified as grounded theories. It is also important to look for data that do not support the hypotheses. These data are significant because they add to the complexity of the reality that is being described. Data that do not support the hypotheses do not necessarily render the hypotheses invalid. Rather, they demonstrate that there are exceptions to rules.

### 3. Results

Although initially developed as an exploration of the school experiences and identity of GLB youth, the study evolved into something broader. As the data emerged, it quickly became evident that participants could not talk about their school experiences without talking about their sense of self, their family, law and public policy, and cultural values. Therefore, the grounded theory that emerged from the data includes important information about school experiences, but places this information in a larger context of the whole experience of being a GLB adolescent. It was found that growing up in a cultural context that both acknowledges homosexuality and wrestles with moral and religious concerns over same-sex desire and behaviour, contemporary GLB adolescents actively engage in introspection, comparison of self to other, and internalization/rejection of cultural beliefs. Additionally, they process interactions between self-expression, social feedback, and further analysis of the relationships between self and other. In short, the utilization of coping and monitoring strategies and the development of identity are dynamic, systemic phenomena that interact with the environment.

#### 3.1. *Visibility management*

I've kinda adopted the Clintonian policy of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. I'm not one to scream it from the rooftops because I don't think school is a place where you should display yourself. But when you're at school, everyone is making out in the halls, so it's kinda weird. But if people ask, I tell. I don't lie about it and I don't brag about it—Amanda, age 18. (Williams, 1997)

The GLB youth experience is a process of actively making meaning of one's identity development, as well as balancing the pressures to hide and disclose that part of identity that involves sexual orientation. Each GLB youth faces his/her own individual constellation of family, school, and cultural environments that exert pressures on the adolescent with respect to their sexual orientation. GLB youth regard some of these pressures as positive forces that further their development, whereas other pressures are regarded as obstacles to development. They rely upon internal as well as external resources to respond to the pressures that they face.

Analysis of the data indicated that GLB youth actively monitor and modify the degree to which their sexual orientation is known by other. This strategy and process was labelled "visibility management" by the first author. Visibility management refers to the ongoing process by which GLB adolescents make careful, planned decisions about whether they will disclose their sexual orientation, and if they decide to disclose, to whom and how they disclose, and how they will monitor the presentation of their sexual orientation. While "coming out" functions as a common expression for simple disclosure of one's sexual orientation, visibility management captures the complexity of the strategic and continuous process that GLB youth employ over time. Telling someone that one is gay is an event, whereas visibility management is a *process*.

Thus, visibility management should not be confused with verbal disclosure, or coming out of the closet. While verbal disclosure is certainly an important component of visibility management, the process by which GLB youth regulate their gay identity expression entails a variety of strategies and modes of communication. For example, participants monitor and modify dress, speech, and body language to manage their visibility. They use subculture symbols, euphemisms,

humour, and references to pop culture to manage their visibility. Some change the pronouns of their boyfriends or girlfriends, while others withdraw socially at home and school. Therefore, visibility management should be conceptualized as a process involving a constellation of strategies.

Why manage visibility? As reported by the participants, there were constant and conflicting pressures to disclose and conceal or monitor sexual orientation. Derek, a 17-year-old gay participant, expressed some of this conflict by sharing his perspective:

I don't see why it's (sexual orientation) anyone's business at school. I mean high school can be a really tough time, for a lot of kids. And I don't think someone's sexual preference is anyone's business but them. That's just me personally. I don't think it's healthy to keep it bottled in for your whole life, but I think that the people you want to tell you should tell.

These pressures were both internal (i.e. generated by GLB youth who were motivated to disclose or conceal their orientation) and external (i.e. generated from individuals or forces in the environment that worked toward the disclosure or concealment of orientation). Essentially, visibility management was the outcome of interactions between the individual and his/her environment.

### *3.1.1. Dimensional phenomenon*

The data indicated that visibility management is a dimensional phenomenon, which is to say that instances of visibility management exist along a continuum. The extreme points of the continuum are most restrictive visibility management and least restrictive visibility management. Individuals who manage their visibility by disclosing their orientation to very few or no people are located near the most restrictive end of the continuum. Individuals who manage their visibility by disclosing their orientation to most people are located near the least restrictive end of the continuum. Most participants ( $N = 16$ ) placed themselves between the endpoints, although a small proportion of participants placed themselves near the extreme ends (least restrictive  $N = 3$ ; most restrictive  $N = 1$ ).

Despite the fact that participants provided their data at one temporal point, these adolescents exist in an ongoing and evolving process. Most participants were able to trace the history of their visibility management, and they chronicled the changes that occurred as they developed their identity and encountered a variety of environments over time. For the most part, individuals appear to move along the visibility management continuum from most restrictive to least restrictive as they become better prepared and more comfortable with disclosure and feedback from others. However, the process continues, and one would expect the visibility management of the participants to evolve as their identity development and environments change.

Thus, visibility management is both an individual's response to the environment and simultaneously an agent of change on the environment. It is a dimensional phenomenon, which is to say that GLB youth can be placed at various points along a dimension of visibility management, corresponding to their level of disclosure. To understand visibility management, one must understand the relationships between a number of significant factors, including social networks, internal variables (e.g. self-acceptance), cultural factors, support systems, and social feedback. Therefore, visibility management must be conceptualized as a central phenomenon that exists in reciprocal relationships with other fundamental variables.

### 3.1.2. *Continuous process of environmental assessment*

A careful look at how the individual engages in visibility management on a micro-level is useful for understanding the category on a macro-level. Participants reported that they assess their immediate environment (home, classroom, peer group) by gathering information about attitudes and actions toward gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. This is accomplished by looking, listening, and mentally recording the words and actions of others. Jaime, a 16-year-old gay student, described the way he assessed the degree to which his friends might accept him. While he had not disclosed his orientation to his parents, he felt comfortable coming out to his closest friends:

Basically, the people I tell are the ones who...everyone goes through different kinds of problems and stuff, and the friends that have had really tough times, whether it's problems with their parents or a family member has passed away or there's a big project that's due... something where you have to be totally open with a person like if they can rely on you to be there for them in their time of need, I tend to talk to tell them. As soon as I was sure I was gay I told them. If we can confide in each other with stuff like death, secrets, their own personal life, like things that are going on with them, I knew that they would still like me for who I was. That's basically when I tell people, when we have this different level of friendship. It's like a more personal, emotional thing.

GLB youth also elicit responses to gay/lesbian/bisexual stimuli by making comments about homosexuality and observing the responses. For example, a lesbian who had not yet disclosed her sexual orientation to her teacher might make a reference to a gay-themed movie and then observe the teacher's reaction. Or a gay boy might tell a homophobic joke at lunch and watch to see how his friends respond. April, a 17-year old lesbian, was not ready to come out to her friends until she "got a reading" on their attitudes. "I didn't tell any of my friends last year. I made some remarks that would hint at them, like I would tell them about all of my gay friends. I'd tell them about gay culture and see how they feel." This testing of the waters represents a first step in strategy deployment.

### 3.1.3. *The influence of social networks on disclosure and monitoring*

Once GLB youth have assessed who might be receptive or hostile to disclosure, careful decisions must be made. Prior to disclosing one's sexual orientation, GLB youth must mentally map their social networks to determine whether disclosure to a safe person might result in an unsafe person discovering that he is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This is particularly true for students who have managed their visibility by disclosing to some friends but not to their parents. Thus, deciding to whom one will disclose one's sexual orientation requires a great deal of consideration and understanding of social networks and lines of communication. Denise, a 16-year-old lesbian, articulated her dilemma with visibility management clearly:

Schools can be rough. They can be really bad for people. And so in some cases it's better to look at a wall than it is to look at somebody's fist. And to feel like hiding rather than to feel like everyone's against you . . . Kinda like a pro and con thing, like, well, I could feel like I'm lying to everybody or I could get beat up.

### 3.2. *Visibility management and identity development*

The participants in this study indicated that visibility management had important implications for GLB identity development, particularly for those adolescents who were closer to the most restrictive end of the visibility management continuum. For these students, their sexual orientation was concealed from the majority of people with whom they interacted on a daily basis. Participants who, for complex reasons, managed their visibility by pretending to be heterosexual and/or keeping their sexual orientation to themselves often experienced a feeling of dissonance between self and presented self.

What some GLB youth in the study strove for was identity authenticity, or congruence between self and presented self. Denise, an 18-year-old lesbian, explained that at times it was necessary to pass as straight to get through school, but “it’s hard because you know that it’s not you.” Rebecca, an 18-year-old bisexual student, captured the same feeling: “I think that the way (being in the closet) affects school is that you’re on such guard and stuff that *you’re not really who you are*.” Many participants were thankful for the protection from harassment and other forms of victimization that came with being not really who you are. However, there were costs. Rebecca elaborated, “You’re trying to prove that you’re not this. ... You acquire all these friends and stuff and in the back of your mind you think, ‘they’re not really my friends because if they knew who I was they would drop me’”. Not surprisingly, participants indicated that they felt comfortable at the agency because there they could be themselves. Frank, an 18-year-old gay participant, put it this way: “Places like this (the agency) are the only places where you can be completely yourself.”

#### 3.2.1. *Dynamic relationship between environment, identity, and visibility management*

The degree to which an environment is accepting of homosexuality varies considerably. Some families are more accepting than others, some schools are more accepting than others, and some communities are more accepting than others. The individual in the environment must assess the environment’s level of acceptance, which often results in the internalization of attitudes and values. Individuals who are continually exposed to hostile attitudes toward homosexuality may be more likely to develop their own negative feelings and beliefs about GLB orientations. This internalization impacts self-acceptance, particularly when environmental attitudes are strong (positive or negative). Visibility management is both a response to the environment as well as an influence on the environment, because visible gay people in the environment are part of the environment, and the absence of visible gay people in the environment can be a deafening silence.

The visibility of GLB youth is managed not only by GLB adolescents, but also by those around them. This process occurs in a cultural context that includes family, school, gay community, as well as law and public policy. GLB youth cannot be understood outside of their surroundings, and their surroundings cannot be completely understood in isolation from them. The crux of the theory is reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1986), which makes the process of understanding the central phenomena both simple and complex. Simple, because at the macro-level one can, in an abstract fashion, comprehend that individuals *are* their environment. Rather than objects affected by the world around them, they are active parts of their world. Yet at the micro-level of understanding, the complexities of daily life for GLB youth become mind boggling: social networks, hidden identity status, elaborate efforts to pretend that one is something other than what he or she is, and the realization that someone is not what they have seemed to be. These are

the trees in the forest that elucidate the true complexities of this phenomenon. Central to understanding the phenomenon of visibility management is the interaction of the individual and his/her social world and culture.

### 3.2.2. *Meaning-making: for the individual and the culture*

In many ways, the GLB youth experience is a process of meaning-making. In terms of identity development, GLB youth work hard at finding or creating meaning from their same-sex desire. At the same time, the world around them struggles to make meaning of homosexuality (a struggle that manifests itself in art, politics, and everyday discourse). But it must be emphasized again that these two parallel efforts to reach a higher level of understanding are not independent of one another. In fact, they are actively engaged with one another. GLB youth are part of the larger culture's effort to make meaning of sexual orientation. In this respect, GLB youth are part of an environment/individual milieu. The focal point of this dynamic process is visibility. When a conservative school board opted to ban *all student clubs* rather than grant permission for the forming of a gay student organization, visibility stood between the culture and the GLB students. Visibility is at the heart of the phenomenon because it bridges the individual and the world. In this respect, it is a vital link.

Thus, the environment and the individual are intimately intertwined. GLB youth are not mere victims of their environment, but rather active agents of their environment. One cannot be understood without the other. But to understand the whole, one must understand the importance of visibility, because visibility is the focal point of the process. Given the impact of visibility, it is not surprising that so much pressure is placed on sexual minorities to “keep it to themselves” and remain invisible. Visibility, when managed with minimal restrictions, disturbs the status quo, breaks the mould, and forces the culture to rethink love, intimacy, and family. In this respect, the phenomenon of the GLB experience hinges on visibility.

## 4. Discussion

In-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of GLB youth to build a grounded theory of GLB youth experience. A theory of visibility management, a dynamic process of social decision-making, selective disclosure and ongoing monitoring and self-presentation, emerged from the data. GLB youth communicated through their interviews that they actively participate in an ongoing process of meaning-making in their lives, and that their GLB experience is part of a larger context. In many respects, the results of the present study confirm [Waldner-Haugrund and Magruder's \(1996\)](#) Negotiated Identity Model, which proposed that GLB youth negotiate their identity expression (manage their visibility) around environmental stressors and resources. However, the present study goes beyond the Negotiated Identity Model by demonstrating that GLB youth not only navigate the obstacles and resources of their environment, but also are actively involved in a process of reciprocal determinism with their environment. They are simultaneously shaping their world and being shaped by their world.

In addition to the theoretical contribution of this study, practical implications for working with GLB youth are apparent. Teachers, administrators, counsellors, and other adults working with GLB youth can utilize the concept of visibility management to help students when working with them directly. They can encourage GLB youth to assess the costs and benefits of disclosure,

help them adjust to the trauma of victimization, explore issues of identity, and develop adaptive coping strategies. It may also be useful to help GLB youth identify the forces, both internal and external, that place pressure on GLB adolescents, and how visibility management functions as a mediator of those pressures. In doing so, those working with GLB youth can help them navigate their environment using the present study's findings as a map.

Mental health professionals working with GLB youth also need to be sensitive to the developmental issues and coping strategies discussed in this study. Specifically, understanding the importance of visibility management and its relationship to identity development is important when working with GLB adolescents. However, for GLB youth to feel comfortable seeking help, mental health professionals need to assess the degree to which they are prepared to work with this population. Many gays and lesbians have been harmed by homophobic counsellors, so it is not surprising that many homosexual teens are extremely cautious about disclosing their sexual orientation to professionals. When psychologists, social workers, and counsellors make a concerted effort to identify themselves as allies of GLB youth, they enable clients to disclose therapeutically so that they can seek help if they wish.

Results from the present study are very compatible with family systems theory, and therapeutic work with GLB youth and their families can be informed by the study's findings. Family members of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals experience many of the identity and visibility management issues that GLB youth experience. For example, parents often experience cognitive dissonance when their child, who they have always assumed to be heterosexual, discloses that he/she is homosexual. And family members must manage their visibility as mothers/fathers/siblings of GLB youth (e.g. Who will I tell that my son is gay? What will be the consequences of disclosure?). When appropriate, mental health professionals may use this shared experience as a means of helping family members identify with one another. It may also be helpful for therapists to remind GLB youth that acceptance by family members takes time. Just as the GLB youth might have spent years coming to terms with his/her sexual orientation, family members need time to develop acceptance when acceptance is not instantaneous.

The present study built a theory of GLB youth experience from the ground up, thereby creating a number of new research questions and possibilities for further investigation. Future research needs to examine the central phenomenon from a quantitative perspective to complement the qualitative findings. It may be useful to use path analysis to test some of the relationships that have been proposed by the present study. There is also a need for longitudinal data, as there are very few studies that have followed GLB youth over time. If at all possible, efforts should be made to study GLB youth who do not have contacts with agencies like the one described in this study, and who are isolated from any kind of "gay community." While these participants are difficult to find, it is likely that their experiences are quite different from those who have social support. Similarly, investigators should make every effort to include "questioning" youth who have yet to settle on a sexual orientation.

Further qualitative research is also warranted. It would be useful for investigators to use participant observation methods in a high school to flesh out the school experience of GLB youth in more detail. A broader and more ambitious study could investigate adolescent sexuality in school settings, encompassing gender roles, heterosexual and homosexual behaviour, cultural rites of passage (e.g. proms), and the management of visibility for adolescent sexuality in the broadest sense. Finally, future researchers may wish to consider visibility management of other differences to

make the present theory more generalizable. Socioeconomic status, adoptive status, religious identity, disability status, and HIV infection all may be aspects of the self that are actively “managed” in our society. It may be that visibility management is central to the process of existing in social networks, and that further investigation could shed some light on this phenomenon.

### **Appendix A. Interview outline**

The semi-structured interview was guided by a set of questions developed to broadly assess students’ experiences at school. Rather than sticking to a rigid interview schedule, flexibility was allowed when interviewing participants so as to elicit the information that was most important to them. After the first interview, questions were added for future interviews to incorporate themes that had not been anticipated. The following questions are representative of interviews that had incorporated emergent themes.

What is it like to be gay at your school?

Are you out at school? How out are you?

Tell me more about the closet, about advantages and disadvantages.

It seems that many students are careful about who they come out to. Tell me about the ways you manage your visibility.

What other ways do you deal with being gay/lesbian/bisexual at school?

How do you decide who to come out to?

Do you know other gay students?

How do teachers treat gay students? The subject of homosexuality?

Most students, gay and straight, experience some level of stress at school. To what extent does stress affect your ability to learn?

What kinds of things do you hear about gay people at school?

In what way are gay boys treated differently from lesbian girls?

Could you tell me some of the advantages of being gay at school?

What about the curriculum, text books, classes, etc.? How does the school treat homosexuality?

Tell me a little bit about straight kids. Are some aspects of school easier for them?

I’d like to hear a little bit more about being out at school. What makes it easier for some students to come out compared to others?

How have you dealt with some of the difficulties of being gay at school?

There are a lot of different words out there to label people’s sexual orientation. For example, gay, straight, queer. What words do you use for yourself and others?

Some people are rejecting all of the labels regarding sexual orientation. Tell me about labels and their purpose.

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