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## **The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community online: discussions of bullying and self-disclosure in YouTube videos**

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### **Abstract**

Computer-mediated communication has become a popular platform for identity construction and experimentation as well as social interaction for those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). The creation of user-generated videos has allowed content creators to share experiences on LGBT topics. With bullying becoming more common amongst LGBT youth, it is important to obtain a greater understanding of this phenomenon. In our study, we report on the analysis of 151 YouTube videos which were identified as having LGBT and bullying related content. The analysis reveals how content creators openly disclose personal information about themselves and their experiences in a non-anonymous rhetoric with an unknown public. These disclosures could indicate a desire to seek friendship, support and provide empathy.

**Keywords:** online communities; LGBT; bullying; self-disclosure.

## **1. Introduction**

Individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) have adopted computer-mediated communication (CMC) in order to connect with others who may share common interests or beliefs (Drushel 2010, Lazzara 2010). CMC facilitates the networking between individuals that may otherwise be impossible due to, but not solely limited to, social stigma or physical incapacity such as limited mobility or geographical location. YouTube has become a popular media platform for user-generated video. The combination of sound and moving image has expanded the methods by which members of the LGBT community can shape their online identity as well as meet new partners (Lazzara 2010). YouTube has also become an online space for members and supporters of the LGBT community to provide support (It Gets Better Project 2012).

### ***1.1 Community***

This study investigates the interactions of the online LGBT community as presented on the YouTube video sharing website. Community can be defined as “those things which people have in common, which bind them together, and give them a sense of belonging with one another” (Day 2006). YouTube users do not see YouTube as a place to simply broadcast content but as a community where they can communicate and interact (Rotman and Preece 2010). This interaction takes place around the shared interest of video creation. Taking the principle of a shared interest, the LGBT community can be seen as a place, physically or online, for those who identify as non-heterosexual. Various studies have examined the construction of online LGBT identities (Alexander 2002a, Alexander 2004, Heinz et al. 2002, Rak 2005), as well as websites aimed at connecting those who identify as non-heterosexual, which reinforce gender and sexuality as components of membership within the LGBT community (Heinz et al. 2002).

Social behaviour has been the focus of many investigations and discussions (Alexander 1974, McDougall 1918, Penner et al. 2005, Wang and Wang 2008, Wright and Li 2011). McDougall (1918) brought into focus the theory of prosocial behaviour. Research has since expanded and developed this to encompass a diverse range of factors including emotional, evolutionary, social and motivational mechanisms (Caporael 2001, Eisenberg 2000, Eisenberg and Miller 1987). Prosocial behaviour can be summarised as “a broad category of acts that are defined by some significant segment of society and/or one’s social group as generally beneficial to other people” (Penner et al. 2005). Those who identify as being part of the LGBT community as well as supporters, known as straight allies, who have participated in the It Gets Better Project (2012) can be perceived as exhibiting prosocial behaviour mediated through online video. Contributors are voluntarily reaching out to society with the aim of providing support to LGBT youth who are facing harassment.

### ***1.2 Online self-disclosure***

In both face-to-face and online contexts, self-disclosure can vary in its level of intimacy. For example, disclosing one’s occupation may be seen as less intimate than disclosing one’s religious affiliation (Herek 1996). Studies highlight various factors, such as anonymity and asynchronicity, which contribute to users disclosing more online than they necessarily would in a face-to-face situation (Krasnova et al. 2010, Suler 2004). Whilst some self-disclosure, for example coming-out, can put an individual at an increased risk of negative acts towards them (Herek 1996, Wells and Kline 1987), individuals still choose to make such disclosure in public online spaces (Alexander 2002b, Alexander and Losh 2010, Drushel 2010, Munt Bassett and O’Riordan 2002, Rak 2005). Additionally, research has identified three classifications as to why non-heterosexuals choose to inform others about their sexuality: improving interpersonal relationships, enhancing one’s mental and physical health, and

changing society's attitudes (Herek 1996). With the growth of social networking sites, online self-disclosure is more than just what is written in text-based dialogs. Features such as photographs allow a degree of non-verbal disclosure from which viewers can make assumptions (Kim and Dindia 2011).

### ***1.3 Bullying amongst LGBT youth***

Previous research has investigated bullying, such as physical or verbal abuse, with regards to sexual orientation (Berlan et al. 2010, Mishna et al. 2009, Pilkington and D'Augelli 1995, Swearer et al. 2008). These studies have indicated that those who identify as non-heterosexual are at a higher risk of victimisation than others. Furthermore, homophobic bullying is not exclusively targeted at those who identify as LGBT but also those perceived to be. A few studies have considered the prevalence of cyberbullying, the use of technology to mediate bullying behaviour, amongst LGBT aged 11 to 22 (Blumenfeld and Cooper 2010), and undergraduate students (Finn 2004). It was reported that almost half of respondents would not report an act of cyberbullying against them to a parent or guardian (Blumenfeld and Cooper 2010). It has also been noted that the Internet "appears to be a place where gay, bisexual or questioning teens are at greater risk than their peers" (Schrock and boyd 2011).

Those who participate in CMC can find themselves subjected to hostile behaviour, known as "flaming" which can be defined as "displaying hostility by insulting, swearing or using otherwise offensive language" (Moor 2007). Flaming has been found to be commonplace on YouTube (Moor, Heuvelman and Verleur 2010). Whilst in the majority of cases actions perceived as "flaming" seem to be intended to express disagreement or an opinion, in some cases the actions were made to intentionally offend others.

### ***1.4 Research aims***

Research has investigated bullying and CMC amongst LGBT as independent areas. However, there appears to be little research which focuses on analysing online video content in the context of LGBT bullying issues. As bullying has become more common amongst younger people, especially LGBT youth, leading in some extreme cases to suicide, it is important to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon. Such knowledge may be of benefit to society in providing stronger support for this minority group. Additionally, the LGBT community's involvement in the It Get's Better Project (2012) suggests a degree of online prosocial behaviour within this social group that can be investigated further. Therefore, our study explores how video-mediated communication has been utilised by the LGBT community and straight allies to disclose information specifically relating to LGBT bullying. The overall aim can be broken down into the following research questions:

- 1: How do contributors engage with LGBT bullying issues via online video?
- 2: What personal information do contributors choose to disclose in online video?
- 3: What role does online video play in the dissemination of information and support?

## **2. Methodology**

A grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998) methodology, used in social sciences, was adopted for this study to allow for the close analysis of content to reveal patterns and concepts, and to allow for a hypothesis to emerge from the data. This approach, as adopted by others analysing video content (Rotman and Preece 2010, Morgan et al. 2007, Xiao et al. 2004), allows greater insight and enhanced understanding of data due to there being no preconceived assumptions. Thematic analysis was employed to classify the main themes in each video; content analysis was then used to identify instances of these themes and allow for the discussion of meaning.

To allow for the prompt collection of sufficient data, video data was obtained via the YouTube Data Application Programming Interface (API) version 2.0. An API provides a set of protocols and tools to allow developers access to web-based software applications. Video contributors define keywords to describe a video's content themselves, therefore the API was configured to collect any video tagged with the keywords "Bullying" and "LGBT". These keywords were selected as they define both the social phenomenon and the sexual minority group, respectively. Moreover, whilst other keywords, such as "Bully" and "Victim", could have been used to tag videos of similar content, a keywords survey of literature relating to aggressive/bullying behaviour revealed "Bullying" to be the most common keyword used. Additionally, the acronym "LGBT" has been widely used in society for several decades and is frequently referred to in academic literature.

Two sets of data were collected, the first on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2012 and the second on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2012. The first set of data was used to develop and verify a coding scheme for the content of each video. The second set of data was collected for content analysis following the establishment of a coding scheme. In each set, data relating to 1000 videos (the maximum number of items returned by the API) was collected. The physical videos were manually downloaded from the YouTube website using the collected video identifiers to locate them. For the second set of data, user data was also collected via the API.

From the initial data collection, the first 100 videos returned by the API were selected and we focused our analysis on short videos (less than 4 minutes in duration (Google 2013)). Additionally, any duplicates and videos not in the English language were removed, resulting in 61 videos for analysis. These videos were watched multiple times and coded until saturation point. The resulting codes were then grouped into themes and an information sheet was developed. This document describes the characteristics of each code to allow researchers to easily identify the appropriate code to use. To ensure inter-coder reliability when using the

developed coding scheme, two independent researchers each coded a sample of 10 videos and Cohen's Kappa was calculated at 0.71, which is considered substantial (Landis and Koch 1977).

Following the establishment of coding agreement, a random sample of 100 videos was taken from the second data set. As we were interested in discussions of bullying and self-disclosure, 10 videos were excluded on the basis of them being music videos, short films or unavailable for viewing. As we were not comparing results between data sets, both short and long videos were included within the second data set. These videos were analysed by the first author.

### **3. Findings and discussion**

In the following sections we will analyse the general characteristics of the collected video data used for content analysis.

#### ***3.1 The videos and contributors***

YouTube videos can belong to one of several discrete categories defined by the contributor when uploading a video. Within the study sample, the most popular category was "Nonprofits & Activism" which accounts for over a third of the videos, 37% (n=33). The second highest category identified was "People & Blogs", 28% (n=25). "Comedy" and "Music" were the lowest with 2% (n=2) of all videos in each. As this data is user defined, it merely provides an indication of the content in the video. The 90 videos were uploaded by 88 unique contributors. Of those, males made up 51% (n=45), females 25% (n=22) and the remaining 24% (n=21) were unspecified. It is worth noting that the video contributor and those speaking in the video do not necessarily have to be the same person. Due to these considerations this data will not be analysed further.



### 3.2 Coding scheme

In total, sixteen codes were identified and grouped into seven categories. The coding scheme is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Coding scheme for the content of videos. Note: P# refers to the video number.

Cat.	Code	Description	Example
Experience	General experience	Comments on own experience.	'Coming out for me was not fun' (P41)
	Others' general experience	Comments on the experience of others.	'I remember a young faculty person who had been recruited from another [University], on his death bed he pleaded don't tell them why I'm dying' (P53)
	Experience of being bullied	Comments on own experience of being bullied or cyberbullied.	'I was laughed at, or I was criticised by the way I acted' (P17)
	Others' experience of being bullied	Comments on the bullying or cyberbullying experience of others.	'Two of my friends were kicked out of college for being queer' (P25)
Opinion	Self-opinion	The contributor asserts a subjective or evaluative position.	'Things will get easier, people's minds will change' (P1)
	Others' opinion	Comments on the opinions of others.	'Some say that bullying is a simple right of passage' (P2)
Beliefs	Religious beliefs	Comments on own religious beliefs.	'As a Christian' (P78)
	Others' religious beliefs	Comments on the religious beliefs of others.	'I had one very Catholic family, my mother's very much into the church' (P41)
Empathy	Empathy	Recognises the emotions of others; shows compassion	'I want anyone out there who feels different and alone to know that I know how you feel' (P1)
Exhort	Exhort	Encouraging others to do something e.g. view a website, subscribe or to think positively.	'Subscribe, share, pin me to your homepage do all the good stuff' (P76)
Information	Demographics on self	Information disclosing the name, age, location, contact details or sexual orientation of the contributor.	'My name is [first name], and I'm 30 years old and I'm gay, I live here in [name of a US State]' (P5)
	Demographics on others	Information disclosing the name, age, location, contact details or sexual orientation of others.	'I have a brother who is also gay' (P80)
	Information for others	Comments on statistics, study findings, or general information including laws/policies.	'LGBT youth from highly rejecting families are more than 8 times likely to have attempted suicide' (P17)

	Solicit information	Requests information from others, e.g. asks for advice.	'Comment down below and tell me what you think' (P76)
	Advertise	Advertises products and/or services.	'For \$20 GLSEN will provide a safe space kit' (P58)
Misc.	Other	Any content that cannot be classified by the other codes e.g. nonsense.	Montages with no fixed meaning.

### ***3.3 Distribution of codes***

Videos, particularly those with more than one contributor, were found to contain several instances of demographic information (“demographics on self” and “demographics on others”) with an average of 2.61 codes per video. A contributing factor to this are straps displaying each of the contributor’s names. Similarly, videos were found to often contain more than one instance of providing “information for others” (on average 1.94 codes per video). Therefore the data was combined to count each unique code only once per video. When comparing the number of unique codes per video with regards to the identified categories “information” was found to be most prevalent, 44% (n=221). This is followed by “experience” 22% (n=114), “opinion” 14% (n=73), “exhort” 9% (n=44), “empathy” 6% (n=31), “miscellaneous” 4% (n=18) and “beliefs” 1% (n=7).

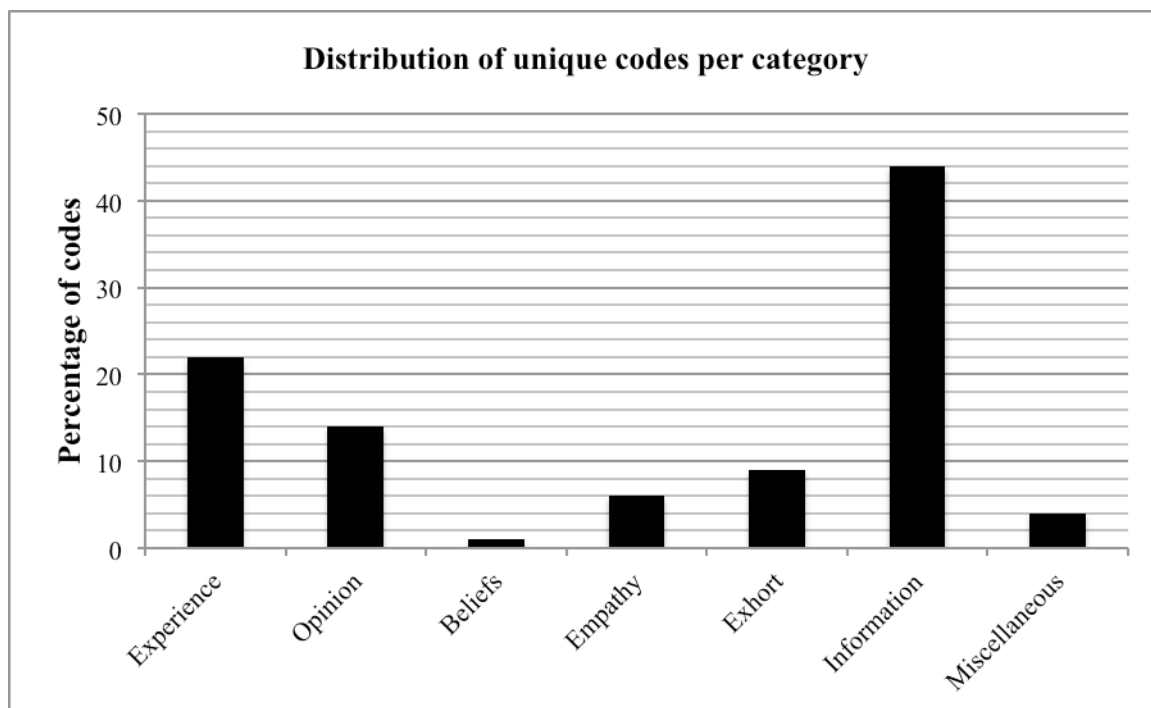


Figure 1 - The distribution of unique codes per category across the sample

### ***3.4 Disclosure of information in YouTube videos***

Unlike solely text-based communication, YouTube allows users to not only comment on videos and set up a profile, but to also physically see and identify the person they are engaging with through the use of video. These are important features which enable YouTube to provide a community space.

Over three-quarters of the videos analysed, 72% (n=65), contained demographic information on the contributor. Whilst just over a third, 38% (n=34), of videos had demographic information relating to a third person. “Demographics on self” was the second most prevalent code within the “information” category with the level of disclosure varying considerably between contributors. Some reveal only their first names whilst others provide, without hesitation, an extensive list of personal information.

Lange (2008) found contributors to publicly broadcast extensive information relating to their identities on YouTube. Similarly, our study reinforces the fact that disclosure of personal demographic information via video-mediated communication cannot be considered anonymous. Viewers can see the individual's demographic and their physical appearance.

Thus, video is more revealing than a textual disclosure of the same information. There are, however, some similarities with text-based communication. For example video communication via YouTube is also asynchronous. Additionally, whilst a video reveals more, contributors are still interacting with a group of strangers who are, or at least feel like they are, far away unlike face-to-face communication. The online disinhibition effect (Suler 2004) describes how individuals disclose more online than they would in a face-to-face situation, with a contributing factor being the ability to remain anonymous. Within our findings, however, this effect has not occurred. Contributors interacted with a largely unknown public and, counter to the effect, disclosed aspects of their personal lives and own images. They are not hiding behind text. The sample presented here suggests that the effect changes when the self becomes visually public through the medium of video. Since the contributor is visible, there is little point in concealing many demographic details. This could explain why “demographics on self” features so highly within our data set; contributors may feel they should provide a name to go with the person being seen. However, contributors can still choose to hide or reveal other aspects of their lives. For example, their experiences and opinions which will provide the viewer with a greater understanding of them as a person. When disclosing “demographics on others”, the level of detail also varied. In some cases contributors simply mentioned a first name, whereas in others they discussed a third person in more detail. In cases where only the first name of the third person was disclosed, they are able to remain predominantly anonymous to those who are not familiar with the contributor in an offline environment. However, as information provision on the third person increases, the level of anonymity decreases. In these cases the third person was often a public figure or an individual who had committed suicide and therefore their identity has usually already been made public by the media. This would imply a level of etiquette within the LGBT YouTube community. Contributors were found to be consciously discreet about the details of others not

in the public domain, thus protecting their right to privacy. However, there is no clear reason as to why this is the case other than courtesy.

Information relating to the wider areas within the context of LGBT issues (“information for others”) which includes statistical findings and laws, was found in 81% (n=73) of videos. This shows that contributors are utilising YouTube as a means of disseminating information and knowledge. However, in a handful of cases, 9% (n=8), contributors were also using YouTube to solicit information. These requests vary between a short passing comment to more detailed requests with a view of seeking responses to specific questions. Whilst contributors have been found to openly discuss a variety of information, no cases were found of contributors seeking advice. It could be that contributors just want to seek engagement through obtaining viewers’ opinions on a particular item.

Information was also disseminated through the use of “advertisement” which was present in almost half, 46% (n=41), of the analysed videos. Advertisements ranged from support helplines to online repositories of further information and were contributed by both individuals and those representing organisations.

### ***3.5 Disclosing bullying or cyberbullying experience and opinion***

Just over half, 51% (n=46), of all the videos analysed contained disclosure of traditional bullying or cyberbullying experience. Whilst not all contributors were found to disclose experiences of bullying, the tag could have been used to represent the wider context of bullying within the video. For example, the dissemination of information on support services for victims.

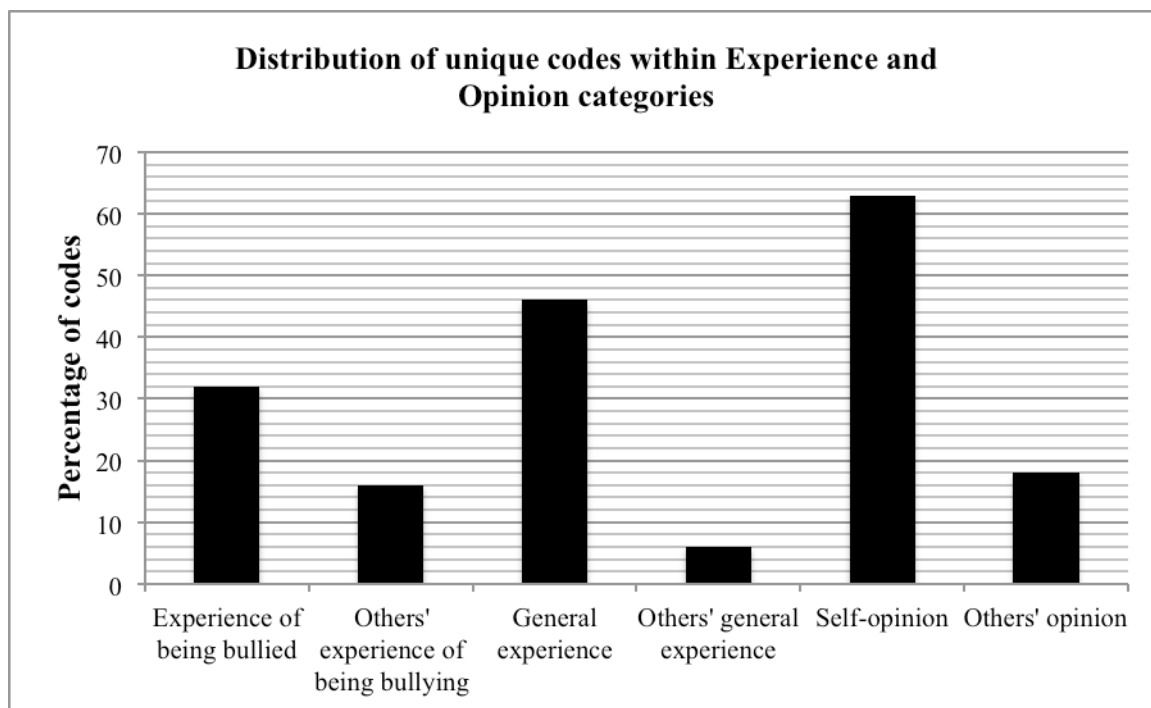


Figure 2 - The distribution of unique codes within the Experience and Opinion categories

Contributors were found to openly discuss their own experiences of bullying in 32% (n=36) of videos. There were 16% (n=18) instances of contributors describing the bullying experience of others. In the following excerpt, the contributor discusses life during their school years due to being gay, even though at the time they had not come out. This example highlights how repetition of the act plays a role in defining bullying behaviour.

*“I was pushed around a lot, slapped in the head, my books were destroyed, my locker was vandalised, my head was banged against the locker and I could look forward to that everyday.” (P15)*

The bullying experience of others was found to be more prominent when discussing those who have committed suicide. An example of such disclosure can be seen in the following discussion between a mother (M) and father (F).

*M: “[he was] called faggot, homo, queer, gay”*

*F: “well he was ordered to shoot himself by these two bullies from that class for at least two months from what the students were telling us, that’s how vicious the bullying was”*

*M: “and so he did.” (P65)*

There could be any number of reasons as to why a contributor feels the need to, or even wants to, disclose details of their own torment as well as that of others in an online community. A possible reason could be to seek solidarity, support, and engagement from viewers via commenting. Considering the perceived benefits and risks as discussed in previous research (Krasnova et al. 2010), it could be surmised that whilst the disclosures found in the present study are of a very personal nature, contributors could feel that making such statements will help to maintain their relationship within the YouTube community. Furthermore, it could allow the contributor the opportunity to form new friendships with others who have been in a similar situation. Therefore, the benefit and desire for support from another person could be a contributing factor in the decision to disclose such information.

The details outlined by contributors with regard to others’ experience of bullying and cyberbullying highlights the harsh reality that these social phenomena can have on a person. This is evidenced by the reported suicides of teenagers due to cyberbullying on social networking site *ask.fm* during 2013. The ability to remain relatively anonymous within social media makes it easier for perpetrators to target their victims with minimal consequences. The on-going humiliation of a single online act can have an equally traumatic impact on a person as a repeated offline act, due to the large potential audience witnessing the act.

This study has identified that in video-mediated communication contributors choose to explain, in a narrative format, the details of their or others' bullying victimisation. Such disclosure is interesting, as the contributor is choosing to make detailed statements of a personal experience to an unknown public audience without visible hesitation or anonymity. Video provides a personal avenue to reach out to others without having to speak to someone directly. Our study found traditional bullying experience discussed in more depth than cyberbullying experience. Narratives of traditional bullying are more personal and emotionally more powerful. Since the contributor cannot show the physical documentation, such as an online comment, they instead consciously describe the physical torment they experienced. This allows the contributor to more visibly express their emotional pain which may not be possible via text-based communication. Contributors may choose not to disclose cyberbullying experience as much for fear of being cyberbullied further.

Narratives of "general experience" were also present within 46% (n=53) of videos. Whilst the content of this code varies, the disclosure of personal experience further allows the contributor to reach out to the viewer and connect with them. Therefore, this disclosure could be an avenue to provide and seek empathy. However, this assumes that those watching the video can relate to the experience.

Disclosure of "others' general experience" featured much lower than the aforementioned "general experience" within our sample, 6% (n=7). Consequently, this method of CMC is a personal one, even though the communication method is public and widely accessible. This pattern was also found with regards to the disclosure of opinions. "Self-opinion" featured more highly within the sample than "others' opinion", 63% (n=57) and 18% (n=16) respectively. As the focus of this research study is on personal narratives it is not surprising that "self-opinion" is prevalent amongst the



videos. Opinion is another facet of the contributor's identity that they have chosen to disclose; it provides more information about that person and their attitude.

### ***3.6 Additional themes within LGBT video content***

Whilst the identified themes focus on experience, opinion and information dissemination, there were also instances surrounding beliefs, empathy and exhortation. "Empathy", the ability to understand another's feelings and show compassion, was found in 34% (n=31) of videos. It could be that contributors show empathy through the disclosure of experience, whilst viewers show empathy through the comments they leave. Contributors carrying out acts of exhortation ("exhort"), actively encouraging someone to do something, were found to feature in just under half of the videos within the sample, 49% (n=44).

Religion can be a contentious subject when related to the LGBT community. This could explain why the prevalence of "beliefs" amongst the sample was very small, 8% (n=7). Of those contributors who did disclose their "religious beliefs", 3% (n=3), the disclosure often related to finding a way to be accepted. When disclosing "others' religious beliefs", identified in 4% (n=4) of videos, comments were often brief and cursory. Due to the low prevalence of belief information within the videos it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions as to why contributors chose to disclose this information about themselves or others.

## **4. Conclusion**

The present study contributes to the literature on LGBT and bullying through the exploration of online video content. Firstly, a video content coding scheme with good inter-coder reliability has been established. Although developed with a specific sample for this

study the scheme can be used as the basis for coding schemes needed in future research of video content in this, or a similar, area. Secondly, our findings reveal how contributors talk candidly, and in detail, about themselves and their experiences, contrary to the online disinhibition effect (Suler 2004), which describes how anonymity is a contributing factor as to why individuals disclose more online than in a face-to-face situation. This is true for text-based methods, however our findings suggest the effect changes when the self becomes visually public. Furthermore, the results indicate that video disclosure disseminates more information than text-based methods. In text-based communication the viewer must process and interpret meaning, in video communication this mental processing is redundant. Viewers ascertain feeling and emotion from both the way the disclosure is spoken and associated non-verbal cues. Disassociation between the aspects of face-to-face conversation and the wider world in which the video will be published allows contributors to detach from the normalities of having a synchronous rhetoric. Contributors can have a conversation with an audience they may not be able to have in person. Essentially the video substitutes reality and becomes a confession of life.

Although some disclosures may have negative aspects, in making such statements contributors could be actively seeking a positive outcome, the forming of new connections and cyber-friendships without the boundary of physical location. The disclosure of experience allows contributors a degree of empathy with the viewer, as well as a means by which to seek empathy, they can identify and associate with each other. Furthermore, by allowing viewers to identify and relate to experiences, contributors are themselves acting prosocially.

Our findings support those of Herek (1996) who identified three broad categories as to why non-heterosexuals choose to reveal their sexual orientation to others. These categories are: improving interpersonal relationships, enhancing one's mental and physical health, and changing society's attitudes. Whilst the level of disclosure varied between contributors, our

findings suggest that for video-mediated communication a fourth category can be hypothesized: to aid and support others. The present study highlights that in some cases disclosure of sexuality, together with experience, can allow for reciprocity. Additionally, the disclosure is made to aid others without necessarily any direct benefit to those offering that support.

This study raises some interesting questions which warrant further investigation. Future work could investigate whether viewers empathise with the contributor through text-based communication; studies could analyse the comments associated to similar videos to further understand the reciprocal side of this asynchronous communication. Moreover, studies could utilise the developed coding scheme to explore the differences in bullying disclosure between individuals who identify as LGBT and those who do not. In addition, investigation into the differences in video content disclosure between gay men and lesbians could provide further useful insights into this community.

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