Sexual Identity Label Adoption and Disclosure Narratives of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer (GLBQ) College Students of Color: An Intersectional Grounded Theory Study

Dissertation

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By

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This qualitative study used interview and focus group data from 13 gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer (GLBQ), and other non-heterosexual students of color to add to the extant literature on the intersections of race, sexuality, gender, and other social identity categories in higher education. Using a grounded theory methodology supplemented by intersectionality as its theoretical framework, this dissertation study offers a number of findings that increase our understanding of the ways in which GLBQ college students of color understand, navigate, negotiate, and enact sexual identity label adoption and sexuality disclosure possibilities. The first set of findings explore sexual identity label adoption. In their discussion of label adoption considerations, participants describe sexual identity labels as possessing a utilitarian function; that is, operating as a tool rather than just a descriptor of their sexuality. To this end, there were five findings that emerged regarding sexual identity label adoption; collectively they include the following considerations: (a) a willingness to adopt a sexual identity label, (b) the nature of the adoption process being less than straightforward, (c) need to adopt alternate sexual identity labels to be able to share that identity, (d) the influence of sexual identity development and label adoption of one’s
understanding of race, and (e) association between access to diverse array of sexual identity labels and one’s academic and social involvement. Findings related to sexuality disclosure primarily focused on three areas: motivation for disclosure, impetus to conceal or not vocalize one’s sexuality and sexual identity, and additional factors that influence disclosure. In addition to findings, implications for research, policy, and theory are considered.
Dedication

While I have often heard that you cannot choose your family, I have come to realize that that is only partially true. It is true that one cannot determine the people to whom he is biologically related; however, over the course of my 28 years of life, I have come to realize that I am given the opportunity daily to determine how I engage with my biological family and the degree to which I negotiate borders with friends and come to invite them into my extended family. As I have been blessed with a loving, supportive, and humorous biological and extended family, I dedicate this dissertation not to a particular person, but instead to the notion of family generally and to my biological and extended family specifically.
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No academic endeavor is ever done alone. While the dissertation is often referred to as an intellectual exercise of one, I believe it is more the product of the community that encourages, supports, and provides feedback to the study’s author. Indeed, my dissertation study—and doctoral process—was the result of a community of family, friends, and colleagues supporting me through the process and offering opportunities for dialogue and external process to refine my thinking about the study generally and its methods, analysis, findings, and implications. Below I include brief acknowledgments that attempt to recognize the individuals and diversity of groups that contributed to this study and my ability to complete it.

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ix
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Vita

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underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities (pp. 91-100). New York, NY: Routledge.


Fields of Study

Major Field: Education: Educational Policy & Leadership

Specialization: Higher Education and Student Affairs

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Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii
Dedication ......................................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................................. v
Vita ...................................................................................................................................................... xi
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................. xiv
List of Tables ....................................................................................................................................... xx
Chapter 1: Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 1
   Purpose of the Study ....................................................................................................................... 8
   Research Questions ....................................................................................................................... 10
   Significance of the Study .............................................................................................................. 11
      Significance for Practice ............................................................................................................ 11
      Significance for Research ......................................................................................................... 13
      Significance for Theory ............................................................................................................. 14
   Delimitations .................................................................................................................................. 15
   Organization of the Study ............................................................................................................. 17
   List of Terms .................................................................................................................................. 18
Chapter 2: Literature Review .......................................................................................................... 22
   Sexuality and Deviance ................................................................................................................. 23
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homosexuality as Mental Illness</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexuality as Crime</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexuality as Stigma</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empirical Investigations of Sexuality in Higher Education</strong></td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Identity Development Models</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cass’s homosexual identity formation</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troiden’s model of gay identity acquisition</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D’Augelli’s model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fassinger’s sexual minority identity formation model</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality and Disclosure</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming out</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inviting in</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multiple and Intersecting identities</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersections of Race and Sexuality</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial and sexual minority students in higher education</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intersectionality as Theoretical Framework</strong></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins of Intersectionality</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Tenets of Intersectionality</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-essentialism</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity categories are multiple, intersecting and mutually constitutive.</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power and context provide meaning</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privilege and marginalization exist simultaneously</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Amber ......................................................................................................................... 73
Bri ................................................................................................................................. 74
Deon ............................................................................................................................... 74
Dong ............................................................................................................................... 75
DQ ................................................................................................................................. 75
Keon ................................................................................................................................. 76
Louis ............................................................................................................................... 77
Luna ................................................................................................................................. 77
Martez ............................................................................................................................. 78
Michelle ............................................................................................................................ 78

Sexual Identity Label Adoption ....................................................................................... 81
Willing to Adopt Sexual Identity Label ......................................................................... 82
Sexual Identity Label Adoption Was Not Often Straightforward ................................. 86
Identified Alternate Sexual Identity Labels .................................................................. 89
Paralleled Racial Identity Development ........................................................................ 91
Social and Academic Involvement Influenced Access to Labels ................................. 95

Sexuality Disclosure .................................................................................................... 99
Motivations for Disclosure ............................................................................................ 99
Sharing the intimate – inviting others in. ....................................................................... 100
Desiring to live authentically. ....................................................................................... 103
Intentionally challenging heteronormativity. ............................................................... 105
Asserting control. .......................................................................................................... 106
Table 1. Study Participants’ Demographic Characteristics

79
Chapter 1: Introduction


Who are they? One could say... Ocean is a Grammy-winning R&B/hip-hop artist, singer, and songwriter (Kennedy, 2013; Owens, 2013). Roberts is a former college basketball standout turned ESPN sports broadcaster turned Good Morning America anchor turned cancer survivor and national inspiration (Duke, 2013; Roberts, 2013; Robin Roberts, 2015). Collins is a now-retired thirteen-year veteran of the NBA (Collins, 2014; Schwartz, 2014). Rodriguez is an actress known for her role in The Fast and the Furious franchise and screenwriter (Rodriguez, 2013; Vilkomerson, 2013). Chapman is a Shippensburg University student and long jump All-American (Chapman, 2014). Raven-Symoné is an actress, Disney star, and singer-performer extraordinaire (Hernandez, 2013). Bryant is a former Purdue athlete and undrafted NFL wide receiver (Burnley, 2013; Buzinski, 2013; Miller, 2014). Griner is a Baylor University basketball star and record holder, WNBA number one draft pick, and Phoenix Mercury starting center (Kotloff, 2013). Patterson is a former University of Maryland football player.
turned wrestling coach (Kasinitz, 2014). Sam is a former Mizzou football standout, SEC co-defensive player of the year, and NFL draftee (Connelly, 2014; Corsello, 2014; Miller, 2014). Gordon is a University of Massachusetts-Amherst basketball player (Fagan, 2014; Gardner, 2014; Zeigler, 2014).

But who else are they? What is another reason you might know their names? Ocean revealed through a Tumblr post that has first love was male (Ocean, 2012; Owens, 2013; Powers, 2012). In a note of gratitude on Facebook, Roberts revealed her life partner of 10+ years was a woman (Duke, 2013). In a *Sports Illustrated* cover story, Collins revealed he is gay and later became the first openly gay active NBA player (Collins, 2014; Schwartz, 2014). After seven years of denying stories about her sexuality, Rodriguez told a magazine that she was indeed bisexual (Rodriguez, 2013; Vilkomerson, 2013). After an email over winter break to his teammates sharing that he was gay, Chapman shared his story with OutSports.com (Chapman, 2014). In a tweet that read “I can finally get married. Yay government! So proud of you,” Raven-Symoné revealed to the world that she had a girlfriend (Hernandez, 2013). After a bad breakup, Bryant was outed by his former cheerleader boyfriend and is known for “almost” being the first out NFL player (Burnley, 2013; Buzinski, 2013; Miller, 2014). Griner wrote a memoir revealing that she was a lesbian and that her Baylor coaching staff told her she couldn’t be public about it (Kotloff, 2013). While a Division I football player, Patterson used the Internet to search for other gay athletes like
him before transferring schools and coming out years later (Kasinitz, 2014). After completing his senior season, Sam revealed in ESPN’s “Outside the Lines” that he was gay, making him the first openly gay Division I football player and eventually first openly gay NFL draftee (Connelly, 2014; Corsello, 2014; Miller, 2014). And, after sitting for an ESPN interview, Gordon became the first openly gay Division I athlete to play a collegiate game (Fagan, 2014; Gardner, 2014; Zeigler, 2014).

Whether you know their names, are familiar with their accomplishments, or even care to look them up, all 11 individuals named above share some things in common. It is not that they are all famous or history makers. It is not that they all made intentional decisions to share bits of their personal lives with the country. And it is not that their disclosures of sexual identities, whether intentional or provoked, all made national news. In fact, while some garnered national media attention, others’ disclosures were taken as obvious or not seen as worth covering by the media at large (Borden, 2014). However, there are at least three things that connect them; they: (a) all identify as people of color, (b) have sexualities that can be described as non-normative, or other than exclusively heterosexual, and (c) provide examples of finding freedom by accepting self for who one is (Gardner, 2014; Zeigler, 2014). From the media attention provided to the less identity-laden disclosures of Frank Ocean, Robin Roberts, and Raven-Symoné, to cover stories documenting declarations of one’s sexual identity, as
was the case with Michael Sam and Derrick Gordon (Connelly, 2014; Fagan, 2014), it appears there is an interest in hearing the stories of individuals who identify as racial and sexual minorities; that is gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer (GLBQ), and non-heterosexual people of color.

With the recent disclosures of non-exclusively heterosexual sexual identities by a number of current college students and recent college graduates, one might assume that every GLBQ college student of color has adopted a sexual identity label and is ready to share their identity with the world – or at least with others in their families, on their sports teams, and across their college campuses. However, this is not the case. When you examine the stories of Gordon, Griner, and Sam, you quickly learn that even though they have become the “face” of college-educated GLBQ students of color, they all struggled with accepting their sexual identities and subsequently finding the right words and time to disclose them to others (Connelly, 2014; Goodman, 2014; Kotloff, 2013). That very idea of naming and disclosing one’s sexuality is the focus of this dissertation study. Specifically, this dissertation examines the language and narratives that surround the process and experience of sexual identity label adoption and disclosure of GLBQ college students of color.

With this in mind, I briefly review the literature that informs our understanding of GLBQ college students of color and sexual identity label adoption and disclosure. This literature can be grouped into two primary areas:
(a) multiple identities and their intersections and (b) sexual identity development among GLBQ college students of color.

Social identities are “aspects of the self that have political significance in a given society and that one shares with a significant number of others in that society so as to result in a sense of shared fate” (Hames-García, 2011, p. 5). Given the study’s focus, some examples of social identities include gender, race, and sexuality. With the understanding that social identities can bring together an infinite number of individuals, there has been much research examining how individuals develop particular identities. Whether looking at Hardiman and Jackson’s (1997) social identity development theory, or Cross’s (1971) theory of nigrescence, there have been a number of theories and models that purport to articulate the process by which one develops a particular social identity. By and large, most research on social identity development could be described as singular in focus; that is, investigating how individuals developed their racial identity without concern for one’s gender or sexuality. However, following a prolonged period of research on singular social identity categories, scholars began to argue that to truly understand the lived experiences of individuals and groups, especially as student populations have continued to grow ever diverse, it was necessary to examine how students developed across multiple social identities (Jones & Abes, 2013; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003).
As early as the late 1980s, scholars—often social workers (e.g., Icard, 1986; Loiacano, 1989)—began to conduct studies related to multiple social identities; however, such research came later to higher education. One of the earliest considerations of multiple identities within the higher education literature is found in the multidimensional identity model (Reynolds & Pope, 1991), which stemmed from a study designed to examine the experiences of individuals from multiple marginalized social identities. Specifically, the multidimensional identity model articulated how individuals experienced multiple oppressions and the strategies they adopt when they belong to more than one oppressed group. More recently, higher education scholars have begun to describe social identities as multiple and intersecting (Jones & McEwen, 2000). That is to suggest that not only are individuals developing multiple identities simultaneously (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003), but that those identities are not developing or being experienced in isolation from one another. Instead, an individual's multiple identities are all always present, constantly interacting and shaping one's understanding of and experience with and across identities (Hames-García, 2011).

In addition to research that has looked at the multiplicity and intersection of social identities, it also is necessary to examine literature on sexual identity development and GLBQ college students of color. Following the removal of homosexuality as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association in
1973, scholars began to consider how sexuality shaped individuals’ lived experiences. In fact, scholars have been investigating the experiences of gay college students for more than three decades (e.g., Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), particularly focusing on how mostly White samples developed gay or lesbian sexual identities. After a critique of older theories as too reliant on practically all-white male samples by Fassinger and colleagues (Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), scholars have more recently turned attention to the ways in which sexual identities shape the lived experiences for a growing number of racially diverse student populations (Narui, 2010; Patton & Simmons, 2008; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010; Strayhorn, Glover, Kitchen & Williams, 2013; Strayhorn & Scott, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013a, 2013b). Specifically, scholars have worked to understand the experiences of students who occupy marginalized racial and sexual identities, such as gay, lesbian and bisexual Black men and women (e.g., Patton & Simmons, 2008; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010; Strayhorn, Glover, Kitchen & Williams, 2013; Strayhorn & Scott, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013a, 2013b). Scholars have even conducted studies that investigate identity disclosure for various groups of racial and sexual minorities, including Black gay and bisexual men in college (Patton, 2011) and gay, lesbian, and bisexual Asian/American college students (Narui, 2010, 2011). In an investigation of Black gay and bisexual men at a historically Black college,
Patton found that these students frequently prioritized social identities, suggesting that their sexuality was never as salient an identity as their race. Further, Black gay and bisexual men in Patton’s study offered that there was an appropriate “time and place” for disclosing one’s sexual identity and that in no circumstance did it need not be broadcast to the masses (p. 86). Similarly, Narui (2011) found that Asian/American students strategically managed sexuality discourse, disclosing non-heterosexual identity in spaces that promoted, or at least supported, their individual agency and/or were more receptive to individuals of diverse sexualities.

While scholarship on GLBQ college students of color, has begun to consider multiple social identities, their intersections, and how these identity intersections influence students’ academic and social experiences, few, if any, studies have focused intentionally on GLBQ college students of color and the language of their sexual identity adoption and disclosure processes. Specifically, no studies have intentionally focused on the ways in which GLBQ college students of color use language and narratives to discuss the process by which they come to name and disclose their sexual identities.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this dissertation study is to investigate the ways in which language and narratives are used in sexual identity label adoption and sexuality disclosure among GLBQ college students of color. This dissertation has three
objectives related to its purpose; specifically the study seeks to (a) document the language and narratives used by GLBQ and non-heterosexual college students of color to discuss their adoption or refusal of a sexual identity label, (b) uncover how GLBQ college students of color articulate their sexual identity disclosure decisions and motivations, and (c) detail the factors that GLBQ college students of color consider in their sexual identity label adoption, modification, and disclosure decisions.

Study participants were (a) traditionally college-aged (i.e., 18-24 years old), (b) identified their sexuality as something other than exclusively heterosexual (e.g., bisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, queer, same-gender loving), whether in behavior, desire, or adopted sexual identity label, (c) people of color (i.e., Black/African American, Latina/o or Hispanic, Asian Pacific Islander, and/or American Indian/Native American), and (d) currently enrolled at or recently graduated (within past 3 years) from an accredited degree-granting 4-year institution of higher education.

Given my perspective that research participants are co-producers of knowledge (Charmaz, 2006, 2014), understand themselves and their lived experiences through the lenses of their various, intersecting social identities within larger social structures of power and oppression, and that their reflective sharing is in part an analytical reimagining of their lived experiences, I employ a constructivist grounded theory methodology coupled with intersectionality as a
guiding theoretical framework. Grounded theory is a method of conducting qualitative research in which the researcher generates conceptual frameworks or theories out of the data (Charmaz, 2006). That is, the researcher employs an analytic process in which s/he moves back and forth between data collection and analysis, using progress in analysis to inform continued data collection. The analysis process often makes use of the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which calls for continued comparisons between data, codes, categories, and concepts. Particularly salient in grounded theory research is the nature of category construction that is emergent from the data, challenging researchers to identify and set aside their preconceived notions of a particular phenomenon.

**Research Questions**

Given the purpose of this dissertation study, the follow research questions are considered:

1. How do GLBQ college students of color articulate and describe their process of adopting or resisting a sexual identity label(s)?
2. What language, words, or narratives do GLBQ college students of color use when articulating their decision to disclose their sexual identity?
3. What do GLBQ college students of color report as their motivation(s) for disclosing or not disclosing their sexual identity to others?
Significance of the Study

This dissertation study holds significance for practice, research, and theory. Each area is considered below.

Significance for Practice

The present study had significance for the practice of several campus constituencies. One group that might benefit from the results of this study is college counseling and consultation center staff members. The results of this study provide counseling professionals with insight into how some GLBQ college students of color think about sexual identity labels, their adoption, and subsequent possibilities for disclosure, if adopted. Beyond recognizing reasons why these students may choose to adopt or not adopt a sexual identity label, this dissertation study illuminates factors—that is, people, places, and things—that may hinder or support the adoption of sexual identity labels by GLBQ college students of color and their willingness to disclose such identities. Counselors might also benefit from a greater understanding of GLBQ college students of color’s motivations for disclosure. They might use these results to help GLBQ college students of color identify healthy and less healthy reasons for desiring to disclose one’s sexual behaviors, desires, and/or identity to others.

A second group that might benefit from the results of this study is LGBTQ center staff members. The results of this study provide staffers of LGBTQ centers with information regarding the ways in which the intersections of social identities
influence the sexual identity label adoption and disclosure decisions of GLBQ college students of color. LGBTQ center staff members might use these results to develop more effective programming that responds to the unique needs and “discursive preferences” of GLBQ college students of color as additional sources of support. LGBTQ center staff may use these results to develop strategies to foster safe learning spaces that can be used to introduce GLBQ college students of color to the vast array of potential identity labels and subsequently support them in their decision to adopt or refuse a sexual identity label.

A third group that might benefit from study results is mono- (e.g., Black, Latino) and multicultural center staff members. Similarly to staff of LGBTQ centers, this study provides cultural center staff with insight into how identity intersections influence the lived experiences of GLBQ college students of color as well as their willingness to adopt sexual identity labels and disclose their sexuality and any corresponding labels. Mono- and multicultural center staff members might use these results to create more inclusive spaces and programming that provide GLBQ college student of color opportunities to more critically engage their understandings of identity intersections, attending to the concern of some GLBQ college students of color that their non-heterosexual identity hinders their participation in such cultural spaces.
Significance for Research

The present study also had significance for future research. For example, this study explored how social identities and contexts influence the willingness of GLBQ college students of color to adopt sexual identity labels. Future studies might investigate the benefits and challenges of adopting largely accessible, mainstream non-heterosexual sexual identity labels versus those of less familiarity for particular populations of GLBQ college students of color. That is, how might the introduction of a larger array of possible sexual identity labels influence the ways in which GLBQ college students of color experience identity development? Future theorists might take up this question by assessing how the individuals who have adopted more common sexual identity labels are different and similar to those individuals with less common sexual identity labels on a number of identity development scales, including racial, gender, and sexual identity development, to name a few.

Also this study focused on how GLBQ college students of color make identity label adoption decisions. Future studies might consider the ways in which adopted identity labels differ from noted sexual behaviors and desires of students of color who identify as heterosexual and GLBQ. As some participants might find it easier to disclose sexual behaviors than adopt and disclose a sexual identity label other than exclusively heterosexual, researchers might consider how such decisions impact students’ self-construct and academic success. Qualitative
researchers might explore this question by conducting interviews that specifically inquire about students’ preferred labels and sexual behaviors as well as how their self-construct is influenced by the congruence of label and behaviors. Quantitative researchers might employ a survey that measures a student’s sexual identity congruence (e.g., Kinsey Scale), self-construct, and academic success, including GPA and sense of belonging, among others.

**Significance for Theory**

Finally, the present study had significance for future theory. To date, literature on GLBQ students in college has largely focused on White, male student samples. The present study offered insight into the influence of various social factors on the experiences of GLBQ college students of color. Data might be used to extend existing theories about the heterogeneity in experiences among GLBQ students in college.

Much of the literature on identity disclosure has framed the process of coming out as critical to student success and wellbeing (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). The present study presented findings that complicate the assumption that GLBQ college students of color must and should adopt sexual identity labels that are subsequently disclosed to others. Findings might be used to construct a theoretical model that is more sensitive to how multiple marginalized identities intersect to shape the
ways in which GLBQ college students of color understand identity adoption and disclosure possibilities and their importance for academic success and wellbeing.

Furthermore, much of the extant literature has focused on the meaning GLBQ students make of their identity label, suggesting one nearly encompassing disclosure or “coming out” experience (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). The present study offered insight into the ways in which GLBQ college students of color make meaning of the identity disclosure process and use that meaning making to guide future opportunities for disclosure. The data might be used to re-conceptualize our understanding of sexual identity label adoption and disclosure processes as reciprocal, and perhaps unending.

**Delimitations**

In all research efforts, there are a number of delimitations—that is, researcher-imposed limitations—made in advance of conducting the study. The present study had at least five delimitations. The first delimitation dealt with the sample. Given that one must see their sexual identities, whether in behavior, desire, or label, included in a study that uses familiar sexual identity nomenclature, it is possible as Meyer (1995) argued, that study participants were further along their process of accepting their non-heterosexual identity than individuals who saw study invitations and would have been eligible to participate in the study, but did not. This may potentially limit observation of the full spectrum
of sexualities that could inform how GLBQ college students of color negotiate sexual identity label adoption and disclosure processes.

The second delimitation also is focused on the sample. Although discussions of sexually marginalized populations often include "T" for transgender, the current study did not intentionally examine the experiences that transpeople of color have with sexual identity label adoption and disclosure to avoid the regular conflation of sexuality with gender identity and expression. That is, invitation materials did not include reference to "T" or transpeople. However, if a trans-identified person had volunteered for the study, s/he/z would not have necessarily been prevented from participating.

The third delimitation involved the methodology. Given the decision to utilize a grounded theory methodology informed by intersectionality through interviews, the findings are largely context-dependent and as such this study makes no claims toward generalizability of these findings for GLBQ college students of color more broadly. However, this inability to generalize findings does not limit the potential influence of this dissertation’s findings for work with GLBQ college students of color.

The fourth delimitation also concerns methodological decisions; specifically, data for this dissertation study came from extant interviews conducted in advance of this dissertation’s particular focus on sexual identity labels and intersectionality. Although, previously conducted interviews were done
without the specific consideration of this dissertation study, they were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol the included questions that invited participants to discuss issues of sexual identity labeling as well as identity intersections. Further, the researchers who conducted the interviews did regularly debrief and discuss insights from previous interviews before conducting interviews with additional participants.

The fifth delimitation centers on the literature referenced. Given the intentional incorporation of intersectionality and its focus on calling the experiences of largely marginalized populations to the fore (Strayhorn, 2013), literature regarding the experiences of heterosexual students of color and white GLBQ populations is deliberately limited. Although they inform the literature on GLBQ college students of color, the literature review in the next chapter is more focused on the research from multiple disciplines informing my understanding of GLBQ people of color, namely as students within the American higher education enterprise.

**Organization of the Study**

The present study is organized into five chapters. The first chapter introduced the study topic, research questions, and study significance. Chapter Two reviews literature relevant to the study and intersectionality as theoretical framework. The third chapter describes the study methodology, applies intersectionality, and shares sampling techniques and procedures used to collect
and analyze the data. The fourth chapter details the results of the study, providing particular focus to how level of analysis contributes to our understanding and theorization about the ways in which GLBQ college students of color make sense of their various social identities when adopting sexual identity labels as well as disclosing their sexuality to others. The fifth and final chapter offers the emergent-grounded theory, provides a discussion of this theoretical model, and highlights potential implications for practice, research, and theory.

**List of Terms**

Below, I have included a list of terms and brief definitions as used in this dissertation study. Definitions have been adapted and modified from the following sources, except where noted.

Asexual: sexual identity label adopted by and/or used to describe someone who does not presently have sexual attractions for nor engage in sexual behaviors with others.

Bisexual: sexual identity label adopted by and/or used to describe someone who is attracted to both males and females, regardless of current relational status and sexual activities.

Coming Out: term often used to encapsulate the process the of personally acknowledging and accepting oneself as non-heterosexual as well as disclosing one’s sexuality to others.
Ethnicity: “a dynamic set of historically derived and institutionalized ideas and practices that allows people to identify or be identified with groupings of people on the basis of presumed (and usually claimed) commonalities including language, history, nation or region of origins, customs, ways of being, religion, names, physical appearance and/or genealogy, or ancestry” (Moya & Markus as cited in Markus, 2008, p. 654).

Gay: sexual identity label used to describe a male who has desires for, engages in sexual behaviors with, or identifies as a male attracted to men; general term often used to describe all non-heterosexual people.

GLBQ: gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer; primary acronym used in this study to represent sexual minority identities; does not include T for transgendered to avoid conflation of sexual identity and gender identity.

Heterosexual: sexual identity label adopted by and/or used to describe someone who is attracted to people of the opposite sex.

Homosexual: sexual identity label adopted by and/or used to describe someone who is attracted to people of the same sex; more frequently seen as a clinical term.

Identity disclosure: the process of revealing a sexual minority identity to others.

Intersecting identities: notion that identities are not singular nor isolated, but instead are all present and consistently interacting.
Lesbian: sexual identity label adopted by and/or used to describe a woman who is sexually attracted to, has sexual desires for, engages in sexual activities with, and/or identifies as a women attracted to other women.

LGBT: lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

Pansexual: sexual identity adopted by and/or used to describe a person attracted to all or many genders.

Person of color: someone who identifies as a racial/ethnic minority, including but not limited to, Black/African American, Latina/o or Hispanic, Asian Pacific Islander, and/or American Indian/Native American.

Queer: term used to highlight the fluidity and diversity of gender and sexual orientation and, further, to reclaim the term “queer” which has historically been used as a derogatory term for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

Race: “a dynamic set of historically derived and institutionalized ideas and practices that (1) sorts people into ethnic groups according to perceived physical and behavioral human characteristics; (2) associates differential value, power, and privilege with these characteristics and establishes a social status ranking among different groups” (Moya & Markus as cited in Markus, 2008, p. 654).

Racialization: the process by which social relations are used to structure, define and construct differentiated social groups, or races (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Miles, 1989)
Sexual behavior: one’s sexual activity; often has been used as a component of sexuality, but does determine if someone is GLBQ.

Sexual desire: one’s sexual fantasy and thoughts, although not necessarily acted upon.

Sexual identity: label that people adopt to signify to others who they are as a sexual being

Sexual minority: term used to describe individuals who are not exclusively heterosexual

Sexual orientation: term used when referring to an individual's physical and/or emotional attraction to the same and/or opposite gender.

Sexuality: overarching category that is comprised of one’s sexual behaviors, desires, and identity.

Social identity: “aspects of the self that have political significance in a given society and that one shares with a significant number of others in that society so as to result in a sense of shared fate” (Hames-García, 2011, p. 5).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In *Discovering Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss (1967) articulate that one of the central tenets of grounded theory is a delayed literature review that only explores the extant literature after the analysis has been done and the grounded theory has begun to take shape. This idea has often been translated to mean that researchers are blank slates, who bring no understanding of the phenomenon of interest to the construction of their research process and analysis; however, scholars have argued that this is a misreading of Glaser and Strauss’s original intent (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In fact, beyond their joint work, both Strauss (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and Glaser (1978) have acknowledged in separate texts that as researchers no one is a blank slate and that all researchers bring with them particular experiences and understandings, and potential familiarity with relevant literature, that informs their, and at times blinds during, research conceptualization and implementation. It is here that grounded theory practitioners are cautioned to avoid forcing new research into preexisting categories and theories (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, this chapter was initially used to explore my familiarity with extant literature and how that literature had shaped this dissertation study’s research questions:
1. How do GLBQ college students of color articulate and describe their process of adopting or resisting a sexual identity label(s)?

2. What language, words, or narratives do GLBQ college students of color use when articulating their decision to disclose their sexual identity?

3. What do GLBQ college students of color report as their motivation(s) for disclosing or not disclosing their sexual identity to others?

To address those questions, this literature review is organized into three substantive areas: (a) sexuality and deviance, (b) empirical investigations of sexuality and sexual identity development in higher education, and (c) multiple and intersecting identities. Following the review of relevant literature this chapter turns to intersectionality as the theoretical framework.

**Sexuality and Deviance**

After just a cursory read of much of the early literature on sexuality, it would become clear that non-heterosexuality, often written as homosexuality regardless of variance in self-identification and attraction, was understood as deviating from a normal, morally acceptable sexuality (i.e., heterosexuality). While the discourse on homosexuality definitely contributed to its understanding as a deviant sexuality (Burke, 1994; McIntosh, 1968), the deviance of homosexuality was institutionalized by the mental health profession and judicial system. Each system’s role in the articulation of homosexuality as deviant is explored below, as well as how homosexuality’s labeling as deviant and
identification as mental illness and crime created a social stigma that largely persists today.

**Homosexuality as Mental Illness**

The labeling of homosexuality is at least in part due to its classification as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association and American Psychological Association; this can be seen as researchers thought the idea of "normal" homosexuals was an oxymoron (Hooker, 1993; Milar, 2011). Although there were attempts to cure homosexuality well before 1952, it was not until that year, when the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-I) was published, that homosexuality deemed a mental illness—a sociopathic personality disturbance, in fact (Drescher, 2010). Subsequently, in 1968 with DSM-II, homosexuality was reclassified as a sexual deviation. By the 1973 convention of the American Psychiatric Association, there had been several protests, frequent presentations of evidence challenging homosexuality’s classification as mental illness, and even a commission that found that homosexuality, potentially along with other sexual deviations, did not fit the association’s definition of mental disorder (Drescher, 2010; Spitzer, 1981). At the same meeting where the Nomenclature Committee presented their determination that homosexuality did not fit its definition of mental disorder, there was a symposium entitled, “Should Homosexuality Be in the APA Nomenclature?”
Marmor’s (1973) paper took up the idea of deviant behavior versus psychopathology, in which he offered:

It is my conviction that we do not have the right to label behavior that is deviant from that currently favored by the majority as evidence per se of psychopathology. And, as a matter of fact, we do not do so except where we are reflecting our culture’s bias toward a particular kind of deviance. (*italics* in original, p. 1208)

Like Marmor, Gold (1973) argued against homosexuality’s classification as mental disorder, stating:

I have come to an unshakable conclusion: the illness theory of homosexuality is a pack of lies, concocted out of the myths of a patriarchal society for a political purpose. Psychiatry—dedicated to making sick people well—has been the cornerstone of a system of oppression that makes gay people sick. (p. 1211)

Following the activities above, the association’s board of trustees voted to remove homosexuality from the DSM in December 1973, a decision subsequently ratified by the full association at its 1974 meeting (Drescher, 2010; Spitzer, 1981). Although homosexuality, per se, was removed as a mental disorder, in its place the American Psychiatric Association added sexual orientation disturbance for “individuals whose sexual interests are directed primarily toward people of the same sex and who are either disturbed by, in
conflict with, or wish to change their sexual orientation” (Spitzer, 1981, p. 210). This fight within U.S. psychiatry and psychology along with various interactions that pointed to the dysfunctionality of individuals who identified as homosexual continued to stigmatize. Unfortunately, classification as a mental illness was the not only institutionalized means for reinforcing homosexuality’s deviance; the criminality of homosexuality is considered next.

Homosexuality as Crime

Beyond its status as a diagnosable mental illness, homosexuality was treated as a crime until far more recently. Within the last half century, all 50 states had anti-sodomy laws (“Supreme Court Strikes,” 2003). In fact, Illinois was the first state to repeal its anti-sodomy law in 1962; between 1970 and 2001, all but 14 states repealed their anti-sodomy laws. Those 14 states included Texas, which was the site that prompted the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that effective deemed all anti-sodomy laws unconstitutional. In Lawrence v. Texas (2003), the court took up a challenge by John Geddes Lawrence and Tyron Garner, who were arrested when Harris County police officers entered Lawrence’s apartment and found them engaging in a sex act. Harris County police officers charged Lawrence and Garner under a Texas statute that said “A person commits an offense if he engaged in deviate sexual intercourse with another individual of the same sex,” where deviate sexual intercourse was defined as “any contact between any part of the genitals of one person and the mouth or anus of another
person or the penetration of the genitals or the anus of another person with an object.” Needless to say, Lawrence and Garner were found guilty. In their ultimate decision, the U.S. Supreme Court considered if state statutes designed to prohibit specific sex acts were subject to the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Court ultimately ruled that consensual sex acts between adults were protected liberties. Although the U.S. Supreme Court deemed anti-sodomy laws unconstitutional in 2003, there are still 12 laws on the books (Langlios, 2014). The persistence of such laws, even after the Supreme Court ruling speaks to the continued view that being homosexual is indeed a crime.

**Homosexuality as Stigma**

Given the history of (homo)sexuality in the U.S., it is no surprise that homosexuality, or non-heterosexuality, is subject to stigma (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Spitzer, 1973). Through the various discourses of homosexuality as deviance, mental illness or disorder, and crime, the stigma of homosexuality is increased, “substantiated,” and works to move those who experience feelings of homosexuality to seek treatment to “cure” their disorder or to attempt to pass as heterosexual (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). As homosexuality was declassified as a mental illness, research continued to explore homosexuality and its adoption as an identity. This research is considered next.
Empirical Investigations of Sexuality in Higher Education

While criminality and mental illness classifications have worked to perpetuate homosexuality as deviant and consequently produced a continued stigma, there is also an empirical body of research that informs our current understandings of sexuality, particularly non-heterosexuality, in higher education. Sexuality literature is largely split into two bodies: (a) sexual identity development models and (b) discussions of sexuality and disclosure. This section of the literature review is organized accordingly.

Sexual Identity Development Models

Since the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental illness with its removal from the DSM, many psychologists and sexuality scholars have studied the ways in which non-heterosexuals negotiate sexual identity and sexual orientation. Although not the only researchers to investigate gay or homosexual identity development, there are at least four scholars who have largely influenced higher education and student affairs practitioners’ understanding of non-heterosexuality; they include Vivienne Cass, Richard Troiden, Anthony D’Augelli, and Ruth Fassinger. Each is considered below.

Cass’s homosexual identity formation. As one of the earliest empirically based models to consider “how an individual acquires a homosexual identity” (italics in original, p. 219), Cass (1979) offers a six-stage model that relies on two overarching assumptions: “(a) that identity is acquired through a
developmental process; and (b) that locus for stability of, and change in, behavior lies in the interaction process that occurs between individuals and their environments.” According to Cass, the six stages one must progress “through in order to acquire an identity of ‘homosexual’ fully integrated within the individual’s overall concept of self” (p. 220) are: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. Cass asserts these six stages provide the individual an active role in their acquisition of a homosexual identity; as the model is based on homosexual men and women, Cass notes potential differences in approach to the various stages by gender. In Stage 1: Identity Confusion, individuals begin to see homosexuality as relevant to them and their behaviors; here Cass asserts that the homosexual identity acquisition process does not begin simply by being faced with information about homosexuality. The task of Stage 2: Identity Comparison focuses on moving beyond perceived social isolation that stems from the potential of having a homosexual rather than heterosexual identity. Cass asserts that those in stage two typically still present as heterosexual in public. In State 3: Identity Tolerance, Cass found that individuals have a heightened level of commitment to their homosexual identity, which includes decisions to interact with other homosexuals who appear to have positive perceptions of the homosexuality. The next stage, identity acceptance, is marked by continued interactions with homosexuals, which Cass noted allows the individual “to feel the impact of those features of the
subcultures that validate and ‘normalize’ homosexuality as an identity and way of life” (p. 231). This moves one from tolerance to acceptance of their homosexuality, but may decrease interactions with heterosexuals to avoid potential conflicts about identity. In Stage 5: Identity Pride, the individuals is aware of the incongruence between one’s own self concept as homosexual and the larger rejection of homosexuality as a legitimate sexual identity. Cass suggested that a homosexual individual “uses strategies to devalue the importance of heterosexual others to self, and to revalue homosexual others more positively” (p. 232). In the sixth and final stage, Identity Synthesis, homosexual individuals begin to see some heterosexuals as accepting and supportive, which allows for a balance of interactions with heterosexuals and homosexuals. Ultimately, in this final stage one’s “personal and public sexual identities become synthesized into one image of self” (p. 235).

**Troiden’s model of gay identity acquisition.** With his model of gay identity acquisition, Troiden (1979) was also a contemporary of Cass. Based on interviews with 150 White gay men from New York City, Suffolk County, New York, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, Troiden forwarded a four-stage model, including sensitization, dissociation and significance, coming out, and commitment. After consideration of the work of Cass (1979, 1984) and others, Troiden revised his model of homosexual identity formation to include the following four stages: sensitization, identity confusion, identity assumption, and
commitment. Stages two and three are renamed and specifically incorporate Troiden’s learnings since his “Becoming Homosexual: A Model of Gay Identity Acquisition” (Troiden, 1979). What is unclear is if the revisions stem solely from his readings of others’ models of homosexual identity development or if new interviews (or review of previous interviews) also were considered.

The first stage, sensitization, occurs before puberty, where people have “childhood experiences [that] sensitize lesbians and gay males to subsequent self-definitions as homosexual” (Troiden, 1989, p. 50). This stage highlights feeling of marginality and perceived differences from their same-sex peers.

The second stage, identity confusion, is marked by “inner turmoil and uncertainty surrounding their ambiguous sexual status” (p. 53). Troiden noted at least four factors that contribute to identity confusion: “(a) altered perceptions of self; (b) the experience of heterosexual and homosexual arousal and behavior; (c) the stigma surrounding homosexuality; and (d) inaccurate knowledge about homosexuals and homosexuality” (p. 53).

In the third stage, identity assumption, “the homosexual identity becomes both a self-identity and a presented identity, at least to other homosexuals” (p. 59). In this stage, Troiden combines his “coming out” with Cass’s (1979) identity tolerance and acceptance, noting that the particular individual moving through the stages of homosexual identity formation also has increased contact with
others who identify as homosexual, engage in sexual experimentation, and begin to explore the homosexual subculture.

In the fourth and final stage, commitment, there is “self-acceptance and comfort with the homosexual identity role,” (p. 63), which consists of internal and external dimensions, such as shift in perceptions of homosexuality as valid, satisfaction with homosexual identity, same-sex love relationships, and disclosure of homosexual identity to heterosexuals, among others. Troiden suggested that individuals who make it to the fourth stage understand homosexuality as a way of life.

Although often referenced among the literature for homosexual identity development models, Troiden’s articulation of this identity seems to differ from other researchers. Specifically, he uplifted the notion of choice, as asked “How do male homosexuals who choose homosexuality as a way of life recall having acquired their gay identities? (Troiden, 1979, p. 288). While Cass and Troiden represent much of the research conducted during the mid-to-late 1970s and 1980s, several researchers joined them in the 1990s; the first of which was Anthony D’Augelli, whose model is discussed next.

**D’Augelli’s model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development.** Unlike Cass (1979, 1984) and Troiden (1979), D’Augelli (1994) offered a model of sexual orientation development that considers various social contexts across the life span (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005) and is comprised of interactive processes
rather than stages. D'Augelli argued that in their development of sexual orientation, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people face “the social invisibility of the defining characteristic and the social and legal penalties attached to its overt expression” (italics in the original, p. 314). He goes on to suggest that non-heterosexual individuals move through six interactive processes, which include: (a) exiting of heterosexual identity, (b) developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity status, (c) developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity, (d) becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring, (e) developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status, and (f) entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community. Particularly unique in D’Augelli’s model is the ability for individuals to develop in one of the six processes to a greater extent than in others (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Each processes is briefly explained below.

The first process D’Augelli (1994) highlighted is exiting heterosexual identity, which he argued is concerned with “personal and social recognition that one’s sexual orientation is not heterosexual” (p. 325). This begins with the first instance of disclosure to another person and, more or less, continues until one is “consistently publicly identified with a non-heterosexual label” (D’Augelli, 1994, p. 325). In addition to exiting heterosexual identity, one develops a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity status. This process focuses on one’s thoughts, feelings, and desires as non-heterosexual; D’Augelli suggested this process provides attention to “myths of non-heterosexuality” (p. 325).
A third process discussed is developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity, which “involves creating a large and varied set of people who know of the person’s sexual orientation and are available to provide social support” (p. 326). Deemed a lifelong process, D’Augelli highlighted the need for an affirmative network of people; he goes further to uplift the importance of affirmation when he wrote, “Tolerance is indeed harmful in this regard, in that it subtly reinforces societal interest in lesbian, gay, and bisexual invisibility” (p. 326). Becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring is the fourth process noted. This process is generally focused on the lesbian, gay, bisexual person being reintegrated into their familial unit following an expected disruption upon disclosure.

The fifth process is developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status, where focus is given to development of a committed relationship, noting that “[t]he psychological complexities of same-sex dyadic relationships are made much more problematic by the invisibility of lesbian and gay couples in our cultural imagery” (p. 327). This is perhaps more true in 1994 than today. The sixth process is entering a lesbian-gay-bisexual community, which “involves the development of commitments to political and social action” (p. 327). D’Augelli used this process to remind readers that not all people progress through all six processes, and sexual orientation development does not occur in a predetermined order of steps, as he noted that some will view sexual orientation as private and never engage such commitments. Although more theoretical
exercise than empirical based model, D'Augelli appropriately considers social conditions in his rendering of sexual identity formation. And his concluding remarks reminds of the complicated relations of homosexuality with stigma and mental illness; he said, “In 1974, a young man who felt attracted to other men would label himself homosexual; the label was equivalent to self-diagnosis of mental illness” (p. 328).

Fassinger's sexual minority identity formation model. Perhaps the most recent articulation, Fassinger and colleagues (Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) present a model of sexual minority identity formation. Fassinger intentionally critiqued already existing models of sexual orientation/identity and suggested that her model is more closely related to models of racial/ethnic and gender identity development (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Fassinger particularly critiqued existing sexual identity models’ conflation of “personal and social development trajectories” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 519) and their overall simplification of development into linear models. Although articulated in separate publications for lesbians (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) and gay men (Fassinger & Miller, 1996), the model of sexual minority formation is the same. Specifically, there is development of individual sexual identity and group membership identity across four phases: (a) awareness, (b) exploration, (c) deepening/commitment, and (d) internalization/synthesis. Phases are preferred to stages “because of the greater flexibility implied” and although arranged as a
sequence, development is conceptualized as a continuous and circular process (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 522). Although the individual and group identity developments are noted as separate and distinct, Fassinger and colleagues highlight that the branches are "reciprocal and perhaps mutually catalytic" but "not necessarily simultaneous" (Fassinger & Miller, 1996, p. 59); that is development, or setback, in one phase of the individual sexual identity development can cause the individual to further develop or regress along their group membership identity development. Each side of the model is discussed across the four phases next.

In the case of individual sexual identity development, the first phase, awareness, is focused on feelings and thoughts of difference while also potentially questioning generally held assumptions that all people, including self, are heterosexual. In phase two, exploration, there is an active investigation of questions raised during the awareness phase and potential exploration of sexual feelings. In the third phase of individual sexual identity development, deepening/commitment, gay men and lesbians experience a deeper self-knowledge that results in a crystallization of sexuality choices. In the fourth and final phase of individual sexual identity development, internalization/synthesis, there is an incorporation of love and desire of same sex partners into one's overall identity.

In parallel with the individual sexual identity developed explored above, Fassinger and colleagues also explored group membership identity development.
Group membership identity development also began with an *awareness* phase, in which one comes to realize that heterosexuality is not the only expression of sexuality and therefore lesbians and gays must exist. In the second phase, *exploration*, lesbians and gay men begin to seek information about gay men and lesbians as groups of people. It is also in this phase that one begins to question if she or he could belong to such a group of people. The third phase, *deepening/commitment*, “involves a deepening awareness of the unique value and oppression of the lesbian/gay community” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 525). The final phase of group membership identity development is *internalization/synthesis*, in which the “gay or lesbian individual has fully internalized his or her identity as a member of an oppressed group into the overall self-concept” (Fassinger & Miller, 1996, p. 59). It is in this phase, where one is able “to maintain one’s sense of self as gay or lesbian across contexts” and perhaps she or he has already begun to disclose her or his sexual identity to others (Fassinger & Miller, 1996, p. 59). Although Fassinger and colleagues make an explicit point to include a broader racial diversity of participants and even call attention to the ways in which the sexual minority identity formation model is more similar to racial/ethnic identity models in its articulation than extant sexual identity development models, little additional consideration is given to the ways in which sexual identity development might differ across racial groups as
well as its influence on individuals’ understanding of their other social identities, such as race, ethnicity, and gender.

**Sexuality and Disclosure**

As noted in the models of sexual identity development above, many theorists of non-heterosexual identity development include considerations of sexual identity disclosure as a part of a healthy identity development (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Rosales & Gates, 2012; Wells & Kline, 1987). In fact, Wells and Kline say “Prerequisite to the emergence of a positive homosexual identity is the communication of one’s sexual orientation to significant others” (p. 191). It is interesting that in their discussion of the role of social forces in disclosure of sexual orientation, Wells and Kline note participants gender, educational attainment and age, without consideration of race/ethnicity; although not explicit, the lack of attention to race many suggest all participants were White, preventing consideration of the racial implications for sexual orientation disclosure. However, regardless of the consideration of sexual orientation/identity disclosure, there is strong agreement of labeling this process as “coming out.” More recently, the idea of coming out has been juxtaposed to the metaphor of “inviting in” (Moore, 2011).

**Coming out.** Coming out is the most common description used when individuals first self-identify as or disclose to themselves or others that they are homosexual, or non-heterosexual. In a study investigating gay/lesbian and
bisexual people’s adaptation to sexual orientation stigma, Balsam and Mohr (2007) suggest:

   Sexual minority individuals often have the option of concealing their stigmatized status. Thus, one behavioral measure of an LGB [lesbian, gay, and bisexual] individual’s adaptation to stigma is the extent to which sexual orientation is disclosed to others. (p. 307)

Similarly, in their investigation of the costs and benefits for people with stigmatized identity disclosing those identities, Corrigan and Matthews (2003) explicitly link sexual identity disclosure to the notion of “coming out of the closet” (p. 235). In addition, Rosales and Gates (2012) suggested that disclosure, or coming out, is an important social process that reflects the level to which sexual minorities feel heterosexist norms and homophobia continue to exist. They further state “Whether sexual minorities choose to come out might depend on the salience of homophobia” (¶1). And so it would seem that much of the literature to date about coming out, unfortunately looks at the fear of disclosure as resulting from hostile social environments (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Ragins, Singh & Cornwell, 2007).

**Inviting in.** While there is large use of the coming out paradigm to articulate sexual identity disclosure, Moore (2011) asks two significant questions:

   Do the “coming out” and “closet” paradigms influence our imagination of ourselves as spectacle and/or as deviant bodies in
need of acceptance? Are LGBTQ individuals symbolized as the presumed “other” in the “coming out”/“closet” paradigm whose sense of self and identity and behaviors are always defined in relation to the normative heterosexual? (p. 2)

It is with these questions in mind, that one must question if the coming out paradigm is a reinforcement of heteronormativity. Moore further uses an argument by Ross, in which coming out is situated in a raceless, or White queer space. As an alternative to this way of articulating sexual identity disclosure, Moore offered, “inviting in,” a concept modified from “coming in” as forwarded by Sekneh. Moore suggests that his inviting in is more person-centered, while coming out is a politically motivated action. And so, Moore suggests that inviting in, like Sekneh’s “coming in,”

…functions as a means of hospitable sharing, a choice to disclose to those with whom we may feel safe disclosing to, a choice to disclose when we feel ready to do so, and an opportunity to subvert heteronormativity by refusing to other ourselves, that is, to self-disclose as a means of compliance with the unspoken demand placed on all non-straight identified individuals to name ourselves as sexual minorities out of fear of being named “straight” (p. 6)

with the exception that Moore finds coming in to suggest direction. In his articulation of inviting in, Moore highlights an important consideration that has
only been mentioned superficially to this point, the intersections of race and sexuality. This topic is explored in the next section of this chapter.

**Multiple and Intersecting identities**

Research examining social identities initially positioned identity development as occurring along one axis of identity at a time (e.g., Cass, 1979, 1984; D’Augelli, 1994; Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). However, as student populations continued to grow more and more diverse, researchers began to question if examinations of singular identity categories provided sufficient insight into development (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Copper, 2003). To this end, scholars began to theorize and research multiple identities. Whether looking at the multidimensional identity model (Reynolds & Pope, 1991) or the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000), there has been increased attention to understanding how students experience, negotiate, and make meaning of multiple social identities simultaneously and across varied contexts. This idea of multiple, intersecting social identities, or multiplicity (Hames-García, 2011), is examined below across race and sexuality.

**Intersections of Race and Sexuality**

Whether considering the model as proposed by Troiden (1979) from all white participants, or Fassinger and colleagues’ intentional move to highlight the role of racial/ethnic identity development models (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) and racially/ethnically diverse participants (Fassinger & Miller, 1996) in the
development of their model of sexual minority identity development, it is clear that the intersection of race and sexuality (i.e., sexual desire, sexual behavior, and sexual identity) is critical to contextually understanding individuals’ experiences with non-heterosexuality. In fact, in a recent review of literature of LGBT and queer research in higher education, Renn (2010) noted the paucity of rigorous research that was appropriately attentive to issues of race and ethnicity in our understanding of sexuality in higher education. Fortunately, just as Renn articulated this dearth in the literature, several scholars began to tackle such issues. This work is considered next.

**Racial and sexual minority students in higher education.** While issues of race/ethnicity and sexuality have had important uptake over the last several decades, the intentional considerations of the ways in which race/ethnicity and sexuality intersect to shape college students’ understanding of self and their academic and/or social experiences is far more recent. By and large, the literature that currently exists comes from several scholars, each primarily focused on non-heterosexuality within a particular racial/ethnic group. For example, Strayhorn and colleagues, in published research, have largely looked at Black gay and bisexual men in college (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Strayhorn, Tillman-Kelly, Kitchen, & Glover, 2013), while Patton has looked at Black gay and bisexual men as well as Black lesbians in historically Black college and university (HBCU) contexts
(Patton, 2011; Patton & Simmons, 2008). Although Patton and Strayhorn have worked with similar student populations within similar education contexts, there studies highlight the diversity of experiences for individuals who share similar identity intersections. For example, Strayhorn and colleagues found that Black gay men often made college selection decisions with considerations of their desire to live “out” as gay men (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010). However, Patton (2011) found that Black gay and bisexual men at one historically Black college were less inclined to live “out,” suggesting that study participants often prioritized social identities—Black over gay—and were inclined to moderate their disclosure decisions based upon identification of appropriate places and time.

Additionally, Narui (2010, 2011) explored the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) Asian/American college students and their identity construction and disclosure. She found that GLB Asian/American college students were similar to other racial and sexual minorities in that they worked to manage sexuality discourse. Narui (2011) argued that study participants exercised agency when deciding under what circumstances they would disclose or not disclose their sexuality.

And even more recently, Strayhorn (2014) has explored the experiences of Korean gay men in college. Like previous research on Black gay men (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008, 2010), Strayhorn found that all
participants made college enrollment decisions, at least in part, with consideration of their desire to live “out” as gay men in college. Also, he found that study participants experienced racism in the gay community and homophobia in communities of color, especially Korean communities.

As noted above, there has been increased attention to identity intersections. One framework used to make sense of this idea for racial and social minorities' has been intersectionality (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Intersectionality as a theoretical framework is examined next.

**Intersectionality as Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by intersectionality as its theoretical framework. To better understand the contribution of intersectionality to this dissertation investigation, this section documents: (a) origins of intersectionality, (b) primary tenets of intersectionality, and (c) intersectionality as operationalized by Anthias (2013) and Núñez (2014).

**Origins of Intersectionality**

Although coined by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality has a history that extends back several generations of Black feminist scholars. In her now seminal work, Crenshaw eludes to her predecessors. Whether considering the contributions of Thornton Dill (1983), hooks (1984), or Beale (1970), Crenshaw begins by acknowledging that the understanding of people, particularly Black women and other women of color, as
intersectional beings is not new. In fact, whether considering double jeopardy (Beale, 1970) or multiple jeopardy and multiple consciousness (King, 1988), intersectionality calls our attention to the ways in which race, class, and gender as social categories interact with each other and larger systems of power and privilege across place, space, and time (Thornton Dill, 1983; Yuval-Davis, 2006). However, even at the time of “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” scholars also called attention to other social identity categories, such as sexuality (The Combahee River Collective, 1995), which influenced the lives of Black women.

**Primary Tenets of Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is not a singular theoretical framework with a singular name to which all agree on identical tenets and utility (Strayhorn, 2013). To this end, Anthias (2013) argued “that ‘intersectionality’ does not refer to a unitary framework but a range of positions, and that essentially it is a heuristic device for understanding boundaries and hierarchies of social life” (p. 4). At the most basic level, intersectionality is a critical theoretical perspective that seeks to complicate our understandings of individual identity, social categories of identity, and systems of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Hancock, 2007; Smooth, 2013). That is, as a theoretical framework, intersectionality calls the researcher to attend to individual and group identity, “emphasizing the tendency to essentialize group identities and the need to
understand the considerable intragroup differences that exist, which emanate primarily from shifting historical, political, cultural, and social contexts in which identities are embedded” (Jones & Abes, 2013). Further, intersectionality serves as a tool that allows researchers to recognize the ways in which identity and social categories interact with larger systems of marginalization and privilege to shape the lived experiences of individuals and groups (Hulko, 2009; Smooth, 2013).

Specifically, intersectionality as utilized in this dissertation study adheres to the following six tenets: (a) to avoid essentialism by uplifting the variation inherent within all social identity categories (Anthias, 2013); (b) to acknowledge and theorize about social identity categories as multiple, intersecting, and mutually constitutive rather than as singular and independent (Smooth, 2013); (c) to recognize the ways in which power and context provide meaning to social categories, but also shift understandings of such categories across time and place (Hulko, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006); (d) to accept the simultaneous existence of privileged and marginalized social identities in the same individual (Hill Collins, 1990); (e) to raise a social justice imperative, that is to focus on research and theorization that changes the material conditions of marginalized individuals and groups (Crenshaw, 1989), and (f) to make explicit that the interaction and salience of specific social identity categories is open for investigation (Dhamoon, 2011). Each tenet is explained in more detail below.
Anti-essentialism. Since its naming, intersectionality has called attention to the ways in which assuming that all individuals of one identity category share the same experience fails to truly account for all experiences and tends to create secondary marginalization. Specifically, Crenshaw (1989) argued that Black women can experience discrimination in at least four ways: like Black men, like White women, double discrimination that combines race and sex discrimination, and uniquely as Black women. It is with this discussion of how Black women are often overlooked in antidiscrimination law that Crenshaw first brings anti-essentialism to the fore. And so it is through this first tenet that we provide a “corrective to essentialising identity constructs that homogenise social categories” (Anthias, 2013, p. 3).

Identity categories are multiple, intersecting and mutually constitutive. Prior to intersectionality, much research interrogated the lived experiences of marginalized populations along a single axis of marginalization, often treating disparate identities as parallel (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). Intersectionality intentionally challenges this theoretical understanding, instead forwarding an approach that sees identity categories, like race, gender, and sexuality, as multiple and intersecting (Smooth, 2013). Additionally, such categories are also understood as constitutive (Hames-García, 2011). That is, “Each informs the other and taken together, they produce a way of experiencing the world as sometimes oppressed and marginalized and
sometimes privileged and advantaged depending on the context” (Smooth, 2013, p. 21).

**Power and context provide meaning.** Like many critical theories, intersectionality calls attention to the import of power and how it works. However, intersectionality also calls scholars to the importance of socio-historical context by arguing that power must be understood as dynamic and shifting (Hulko, 2009). Specifically, Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that the social and political meanings of categories change over time and through out history, particularly when considering individual and societal levels.

**Privilege and marginalization exist simultaneously.** This fourth tenet of intersectionality asserts that all individuals are intersectional beings with multiple identities through which they can experience both privilege and marginalization. That is, while marginalized along one axis of power, an individual can at the same time experience privilege along another axis. “Intersectionality focuses on power across categories and in relation to one another understanding that power is not equal across categories” (Smooth, 2013, p. 23). And, so as Hill Collins (1990) argued, no one is ever purely the victim or oppressor in her discussion of the matrix of domination, it is clear all experience privilege and marginalization although at differing levels.

**Raise a social justice imperative.** Arguably the most important tenet of intersectionality, and its unifying feature with other critical theories, is its concern
for improving the material conditions of the marginalized population(s) at the center of any intersectional investigation. Much like Crenshaw’s (1989) desire for the law to “see” Black women on their own merit and experiences rather than just through the lens of their race (as Black men) or sex (as White women), intersectionality has always been focused on “institutional change designed to remedy the effects of inequality produced by interlocking systems of oppression” (Smooth, 2013, p. 24).

**Categories’ relations are under investigation.** Lastly, intersectionality forwards that identity categories do not always intersect and interact in the same ways at all times and across all context (Anthias, 2013; Hancock, 2007). Hulko (2009) offered, “The ways in which identities intersect and oppressions interlock are fluid and varied because the meanings that are ascribed to identity categories and the power afforded or denied to specific social groups are based on the sociocultural context in which these social processes occur” (p. 52). It is also through this tenet that one realizes that intersectionality is not only concerned with race, class, and gender as social categories (Dhamoon, 2011), but provides space to examine whatever categories are particularly salient and relevant to the specific investigation.

**Intersectionality Operationalized**

Beyond the call for intersectionality scholars to make explicit the tenets that comprise intersectionality as employed in any study, there has also been
productive discourse around the need to acknowledge how levels of analysis extend and complicate our understanding of intersectionality and its usefulness in research (Smooth, 2013; Winker & Degele, 2011). In her pursuit of an intersectionality that considers the individual level of identity, the contextual arenas through which identity meaning is influenced, and how the processes and outcomes unravel across time, Anthias (2013) “propose[d] a theoretical framing that attends to different levels of analysis in terms of what is being referred to (social categories or concrete social relations); societal arenas of investigation; and historicity (processes and outcomes)” (p. 3). In consideration of what is being referred to, Anthias offers three levels of abstraction, which move from (a) conceptions of the various realms through which social life is organized, or “social ontologies” (p. 6); to (b) the use of social categories in discursive practices to establish identity boundaries and hierarchies that allocate value; and to (c) “concrete social relations,” where Anthias asserts “social relations of hierarchy and inequality are embodied” (p. 9).

In addition to concern for what is being referred to, Anthias turns intersectional scholars’ attention to the issue of context, which she addressed with societal arenas of investigation. Anthias specifically offers four such arenas that, although not actually separate, offer a heuristic tool to organize issues of focus. The four arenas are organizational (structural position), representational (discourses), intersubjective (practices), and experiential (narratives).
The final area of analysis is historicity, which “entails looking at processes and outcomes and is crucial because the social divisions appear differently in terms of this distinction.” Anthias (2013) uses duration of time as a distinguishing feature of processes and outcomes; that is outcomes occur at a particular time, while processes occur in patterns over time. Through her explication of historicity, Anthias argues for the necessity to be “sensitive to the relationships between social categories, rather than presuppose them” (p. 14), which is congruent with the sixth tenet noted above. Anthias’s call for exploration of the social categories is consistent with the writings of Hancock (2007), and part of the reason I found her theorizing most helpful in my current investigation.

**Intersectionality operationalized in educational research.** Making use of the theoretical framing proposed by Anthias (2013), Núñez (2014) introduced a multilevel model of intersectionality to educational research. Specifically, Núñez posited that intersectionality scholars in education can access greater analytic precision inherent in intersectionality by distinguishing between different levels of analysis: (a) social categories and relations, (b) multiple arenas of influence, and (c) historicity. Núñez offers an articulation of each level within an educational research context. The first level, social categories and relations, seeks to make sense of Anthias’s three levels of abstractions: social ontologies, social categories as categories of discursive practice in the making of boundaries and hierarchies, and concrete social relations. Núñez argued that at the first level of
analysis, the researcher and intersectional research focuses on defining which social categories matter and articulating the ways in which they relate to one another.

Second, to avoid singular focus on the individual level of analysis, multiple arenas of influence is offered to provide opportunities to analyze the practices within specific domains “that contribute to inequality across social categories” (Núñez, 2014, p. 88); these domains retain the names and descriptions developed by Anthias (2013).

The third and final level of analysis in Núñez’s application of Anthias’s model of intersectionality to educational research, historicity, is concerned with “locating social categories, associated concrete relations, and arenas of practice within a broader temporal and spatial context” (p. 89). This final level of analysis pays attention to “broader interlocking systems” (p. 89), called for by other intersectional scholars (e.g., Hancock, 2007; Hulko, 2009; Smooth 2013; Strayhorn, 2013).

Conclusion

Since the declassification of homosexuality as mental illness over 30 years ago, sexuality research and scholarship has come a long way. Not only have we shifted from investigations of homosexuality and deviance to sexuality as an identity that one develops, scholarship also has begun to consider the ways in which one’s other social identities (e.g., race, class, gender) shape one’s
understanding and articulation of his/her/hir sexuality. However, even with our current sexual identity development models and discussions of “coming out” versus “inviting in,” we have little, if any, empirical research that seeks to examine the ways in which racial/ethnic and sexual minorities in college come to adopt a preferred sexual identity label as well as negotiate the who, when, where, how, and why of sexuality disclosure. With grounded theory methodology, informed by intersectionality as its theoretical frame, this is precisely the focus of this dissertation research study. The next chapter explores this dissertation study’s methodology, sampling procedures, and data collection and analysis in detail.
Chapter 3: Methodology

There are many methodological approaches that may prove useful in my particular investigation of the ways in which gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer (GLBQ), and non-heterosexual college students of color contemplate and make decisions to adopt or not adopt sexual identity labels and disclose or not disclose their sexual behaviors, desires, and identities to others. However, guided by an interest in understanding how power and systems work to shape individuals’ understanding of their various identities and how those understandings ultimately influence identity adoption and disclosure decisions and processes, I intentionally employ a grounded theory methodology, intersectionality as my theoretical frame, and interviews as my primary method of data collection.

This dissertation’s purpose was to investigate the language used by GLBQ college students of color to describe their sexual identity label adoption and disclosure experiences and motivations. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do GLBQ college students of color articulate and describe their process of adopting or resisting a sexual identity label(s)?
2. What language, words, or narratives do GLBQ college students of color use when articulating their decision to disclose their sexual identity?
3. What do GLBQ college students of color report as their motivation(s) for disclosing or not disclosing their sexual identity to others?

This chapter, which describes the methodological approach for this study, is organized into seven sections: ground theory as methodology, congruence of methodology and theoretical framework, sample selection, instrumentation, data collection, accuracy of data, and data analysis.

**Defining Grounded Theory**

As a methodological approach, grounded theory originated in sociology. Glaser and Strauss (1967) collaborated on a sociological investigation of dying in a hospital setting. The systematic analytical treatment of data resulted in a new methodological approach they introduced in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Grounded theory is a methodological approach that seeks to develop or generate a theory or “abstract theoretical understanding of studied experience” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 4). Merriam (2009) adds that grounded theory is distinguished from other qualitative methodologies as it seeks the development of substantive theory, which “has as its referent specific, everyday-world situations” (p. 30).

Much of the discussion surrounding grounded theory calls attention to the conflict around implementation of grounded theory and the subsequent split between Glaser and Strauss (Heath & Cowley, 2004; Walker & Myrick, 2006),
but even with this discussion it becomes possible to identify some central tenets or characteristics of grounded theory. In fact, most grounded theory scholars agree that there are at least four major characteristics of grounded theory: (a) theoretical sampling, (b) the constant comparison method, (c) a core category, and (d) use of memos (Charmaz, 2006; Merriam, 2009; Walker & Myrick, 2006).

First, theoretical sampling’s purpose is to “obtain data to help you explicate your categories. …theoretical sampling pertains only to conceptual and theoretical development; it is not about representing a population or increasing the statistical generalizability of your results” (italics in the original; Charmaz, 2006, pp. 100-101). That is, theoretical sampling does not seek to find additional participants to make the sample more representative of a particular demographic, but instead seeks additional information as necessary to clarify or explain further a particular conceptual or theoretical point.

Second, grounded theory, like many qualitative methodologies, employs the constant comparison method, which is an analytical approach that requires “comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 30). The constant comparison method allows similar dimensions or categories to be grouped together that enable the identification of patterns in the data.

Third, to move toward grounded theory’s aim of producing substantive theory, a core category is required. The core category represents the “central
conceptual element” of a theory, which connects with other categories, properties, and hypotheses (Merriam, 2009, p. 31). Properties and categories are conceptual elements of the emerging substantive theory; properties ultimately serve to define categories. Properties are dimensions of the specific category. Hypotheses are tentative articulations of the links between categories and properties.

Fourth and finally, memos act as conceptual and analytical opportunities for the researcher or analyst to track thinking about categories, properties, and relationships among them. Specifically, memos are used to capture researcher thoughts and questions from the interview as well as his/her analysis of data, serving as a tool for documenting and exploring potential themes.

On average, grounded theory researchers agree that the analytic approach includes a set of coding phases with memos. While there is agreement that the coding process is started early and continues until the end of data analysis, there is less agreement about the specific steps of coding. For instance, Glaser argued for a two-step coding process, while Strauss invoked three steps (Walker & Myrick, 2006). While the number of coding steps or phases differs, Strauss and Glaser each invoke similar attributes of the process but disagree on the mechanics and order of the approaches.

In the Glaser approach, there are two major steps: substantive coding and theoretical coding. Glaser’s substantive coding, which “is concerned with
producing categories and their properties” (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 550), consists of two parts: open coding and selective coding. In open coding, the researcher conducts an initial review of data, particularly working to construct categories. Whether word-by-word or line-by-line, initial coding helps to keep the researcher close to the data (Charmaz, 2006; Merriam, 2009; Walker & Myrick, 2006). In addition to open coding, Glaser’s substantive coding is comprised of selective coding, a step in which the researcher engages in a delimitation of the coding process around a central category, as defined above. After substantive coding, Glaser calls for theoretical coding, which he argued is used to “conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory” (Glaser, 1978, p. 72). Therefore, it has been argued, “Glaser’s method is to fracture and select in substantive coding, then relate and integrate in theoretical coding” (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 556).

In the case of Strauss and colleagues, there is a three phase coding process, which consists of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Although two of the coding steps share names with Glaser’s version of grounded theory, their emphases are different. According to Strauss, open coding calls for the development of categories and explication of their properties and dimensions. Walker and Myrick (2006) argued that dimensionalization “breaks the data down and assists in the development of relationships among categories” (p. 552). This disagreement between Strauss and Glaser rests in the timing of such a process;
Glaser posited it should come after open coding. The second phase of Strauss’s grounded theory is axial coding; the goal of this phase is to reassemble the fractured data in new ways “by making connections between a category and its subcategories” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 97). Researchers specifically works to understand the relationship between their categories and subcategories, or properties. According to Strauss, the third phase is selective sampling, which charges the researcher “with the task of integrating data around a central theme, hypothesis, or story to generate a theory (Walker & Myrick, p. 556). “Strauss’s method is [to] fracture in open coding, relate and integrate in axial coding, and then select and integrate in selective coding” (Walker & Myrick, p. 556).

So, while many stress the disagreements between Strauss and Glaser it is possible to assert that they generally agree on what the process includes, while disagreeing about the specific order and depth to which processes are pursued. For this dissertation study, I employed the two-phase process as articulated by Glaser, as I found the approach more consistent with my engagement of the data and understanding of my theoretical frame.

**A Constructivist Grounded Theory**

In addition to the conversation surrounding Glaser and Strauss’s split and their approaches to grounded theory as a methodology, Charmaz (2006) highlights two variations of grounded theory research framing: constructivist grounded theory (CGT) and objectivist grounded theory (OGT). CGT differs from
OGT as it centers interpretation and context. CGT acknowledges that any theory produced from a research study is the result of the researcher’s interpretation and that such an interpretation, and the particular data utilized, is extremely context-dependent. Therefore, CGT calls researchers to acknowledge that data, its collection, and any resultant theories are contextually situated in a particular time, place, culture, and/or situation. In opposition to this context-laden approach, scholars whom make use of OGT tend to suggest that context and the subject position of researchers matter to a lesser degree to the gathering and interpretation of data than researchers making use of the constructivist approach. Additionally, scholars using OGT are more likely to suggest that researchers discover meaning rather than allow it to emerge explicitly from the data. Although she provides a discussion of the two grounded theory varieties, Charmaz notes that there is fluidity across implementation and conceptualization of CGT and OGT. For this study, I employed the constructivist grounded theory.

**Congruence of Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

In addition to the constructivist grounded theory methodology noted above, I employ intersectionality as a complementary theoretical framework. Although scholars have noted that grounded theory’s requisite concern for the production of new theories or conceptual hypotheses tend to provide attention to examining phenomena in new ways (Charmaz, 2006), it does not necessarily ensure that a grounded theory investigation of sexual identity adoption and
disclosure considerations, decisions, and processes of GLBQ college students of color would provide the appropriate focus on the ways in which social identity categories and the systems of power, privilege, and oppression within which they are situated influence the phenomenon under study. That is, it might be the case that a grounded theory investigation could sufficiently analyze the ways in which GLBQ college students of color negotiate sexual identity adoption and disclosure without attention to power and privilege or marginalization and oppression. This is in part the reason I have chosen to incorporate intersectionality as a supplement to grounded theory methodology. Considerations in merging intersectionality and grounded theory are below.

**Considerations in Merging Intersectionality and Grounded Theory**

Intersectionality and CGT are two potential research approaches; therefore, one must consider what it means to employ CGT methodology informed by intersectionality, taking note of potential points of agreement and conflict. For this dissertation study, a CGT approach, informed by intersectionality, seeks to add the tenets of intersectionality to the conceptualization and enactment of grounded theory methods of data collection and analysis. Specifically, intersectionality and CGT operate as generally complementary. CGT’s attention to context and its relevance to data collection and interpretation as well as its perspective that collective understandings of phenomenon emerge from the data provides space to enact the six goals of
intersectionality (i.e., anti-essentialism; multiple, intersecting and mutually constitutive social identity categories; role of power and context in meaning making; coexistence of privilege and marginalization; social justice imperative; investigation of relationships between categories) and its concern for three levels of analysis (i.e., social categories and relations, multiple arenas of influence, and historicity).

One point of contention, however, may lie in the degree to which CGT inherently allows the researcher to pay attention to how various identity categories interact and prove salient for participants. Specifically, with grounded theory’s call to avoid imposing particular perspectives on the data (e.g., importance of social categories), intersectionality’s focus on social categories and systems of oppression seems counter to this idea, at least in part. However, with the inclusion of the sixth tenet of intersectionality (i.e., study begins with relationship between categories under investigation), this contention may at least be minimized.

**Sample Selection**

As this dissertation focuses on sexual identity label adoption and disclosure practices of GLBQ college students of color, study participants were selected using criterion sampling. Specifically, participants qualified for the study based upon four specified criteria (Creswell, 2007; Charmaz, 2006); they were: (a) traditionally college-aged (18-24 years old), (b) non-heterosexual (e.g.,
bisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, queer, women who have sex with women) by identity label or sexual behavior and desire, (c) people of color (i.e., Black/African American, Latina/o or Hispanic, Asian Pacific Islander, and/or American Indian/Native American; includes individuals that identify as multiracial), and (d) currently enrolled at or recently graduated (within past 3 years) from an accredited degree-granting institution of higher education. Recognizing that not all individuals who have desires and intimate contact with individuals of the same gender adopt non-heterosexual identity labels, the second eligibility criterion was left broad to include individuals who adopt non-heterosexual identity labels as well as those who identify as straight or heterosexual, but acknowledge same sex sexual desires and/or behaviors.

**Instrumentation**

There were three instruments used in this dissertation study: (a) participant demographic questionnaire, (b) interview protocol, and (c) analytic memos. First, the participant demographic questionnaire asked for the following information, in advance of the first interview: name and preferred pseudonym, age, sex/gender, year in school, academic major(s) and minor(s), racial/ethnic identities, and parental educational attainment. Demographic questionnaire is Appendix A.

In addition to the demographic questionnaire, this dissertation study utilized interviews guided by a semi-structured interview protocol. The interview
protocol was designed to elicit information from participants about their upbringing as well as their academic and social experiences in college. Therefore, the interview protocol offered specific questions that invited participants to discuss their (a) background, including family structure and upbringing, (b) sexuality, preferred sexual identity label, and comfort with sexual identity disclosure, (c) academic and social experiences with considerations of race and sexuality, (d) experiences living on campus, (e) campus involvement, (f) experiences with harassment, assault, and bullying as well as their feelings about the campus climate for diverse students, and (g) romantic experiences in college. Full interview protocol is found in Appendix B. While the present study sought to investigate the sexual identity adoption and sexuality disclosure processes of GLBQ students of color in college, the interview and demographic questionnaire provide insight into the contextual considerations that influenced participants’ understanding of themselves, with particular respect to sexual and racial identities.

Finally, analytic memos were used to assist in note taking, analysis, and constitution of categories, their properties, and relationships between them. Although, “memo” may sound formal, Charmaz (2014) argues memo allow you to “stop and analyze your ideas about the codes in any – and every – way that occurs to you during the moment” (p. 162). An iterative process, memo-writing
occurred throughout the data analysis process, beginning with initial review of interview and transcripts through the final writing of the emergent model/theory.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected using the instruments noted above. In addition to the demographic questionnaire and analytic memos, data come from interviews and a focus group conducted over the past three years. Interviews ranged from 30 to 92 minutes, averaging 55 minutes, while the focus group was 115 minutes. Collectively, interviews and focus group accounted for just hour 10 hours of recorded contact with study participants. Interviews and the focus group were digitally recorded and later professionally transcribed. The semi-structured design of the interview provided the opportunity to collect similar data from each participant, while also allowing sufficient conversational freedom to focus on sexual identity label adoption and disclosure without foreclosing an organic discussion and reflection of participants’ experiences with each and other relevant topics, as identified by study participants and the researcher (Charmaz, 2014). Follow-up probes allowed me to seek clarification, elicit additional information, or understand ambiguous terms were utilized.

Additionally, notes were taken during the interviews reflective of initial thoughts for follow-up as well as to document participants’ non-verbal cues in response to particular questions and during their responses. These notes were
used to develop the beginnings of analytic memos utilized during the data analysis process discussed below.

**Accuracy of the Data**

Accuracy of the data collected is ensured in several ways. First, study participants were included in the analysis process; although levels of involvement varied, participants contributed to the analytic process in the following ways: reviewed their transcripts; engaged in code and theme development; engaged in additional conversations to either clarify points or delve deeper into a topics related to sexual identity adoption and/or disclosure. Second, I engaged in what Charmaz (2006) calls “theoretical sampling,” which she suggests is emergent and “purposeful sampling according to categories that one develops from one’s analysis and these theoretical categories are not based on quotas; they’re based on theoretical concerns” (p. 101). During theoretical sampling phase, I engaged in an intentional process to further develop and uncover the properties and dimensions of emergent categories, primarily with study participants and research team members. Third, the construction of analytic memos provided space to posit potential relationships between categories, properties and dimensions, while also serving as a tool to craft numerous articulations of the phenomenon under investigation and share with members of the research team for feedback and intellectual pushing.
Data Analysis Procedures

In alignment with the grounded theory approach, data analysis utilized the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006; Walker & Myrick, 2006), which consists of two overarching phases: substantive coding and theoretical coding. Given the decision to use extant interviews, I began data analysis by listening to interviews and drafting initial analytic memos to document initial thoughts about the interview and what was shared related to sexual identity label adoption and disclosure before moving into substantive coding. In the substantive coding phase, I began by reading and re-reading transcripts, also known as open coding (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). Second, I reviewed these codes and categories by reading across transcripts to note similarities and differences. There was a particular interest in examining how codes that appeared across multiple transcripts were similar and different.

Following the substantive coding process, I began theoretical coding. In this phase, I specifically sought to employ intersectionality’s three levels of analysis to identify possible relationships between the categories that had emerged in the previous process.

Positioning the Researcher

In this dissertation study, I employ CGT as my methodological approach and intersectionality as a complementary theoretical framework. According to CGT, any theory produced from this study is, at least in part, the result of my
interpretation as researcher (Charmaz, 2006). When combined with intersectionality’s tenet that power and context provide meaning to experience, I believe it is important for me to acknowledge that like this study’s participants, I have multiple, intersecting, and mutually constitutive identities that shape the way I see and interpret data as well as articulate findings. It is with these ideas in mind that I position myself as the researcher.

Academically, I first began to engage in academic writing and research that considered issues of race, sexuality, and other social identities nearly six years ago during my master’s program at Indiana University. Since that time, I completed a thesis that looked at the impact of the Black Church and college on Black gay male collegians’ identity development (Tillman-Kelly, 2011); co-authored several conference papers, journal articles, and book chapters that also considered the experiences of GLBQ college students of color; and completed a graduate interdisciplinary specialization in sexual studies that all inform this study. However, it is not just my academic pursuits that inform this dissertation.

In addition to my academic experiences, those noted above and those not, my life experiences also inform my position as a researcher. As of today, I am 28 years old. For 25 of those years, I have been a student. For nearly as long, I have known that I am—and am seen by others as—male and black. It has been at least 20 years since I first realized that I was different than male peers. At least 20 years since I can remember “liking” the girl that most boys said was the girl
we should all like. It has been nearly 16 years, since I first told a male classmate that I did not like the girl he said I liked, because I did not like girls. And, more than 12 years have elapsed since I first called myself gay, since I first adopted my own sexual identity label. Today I identify as a Black gay man. But I am not just Black, gay, and male. I am also Christian. And I’m a graduate student and emerging education researcher. Today, I’m a Black gay male Christian graduate student, who is becoming an education researcher. While this is not all of my social identities, they do represent identities that are particularly salient for me.

But what does that have to do with this study? It is my understanding of those identities and their intersections that in many ways shaped how I interacted with and were read by participants, how I engaged the data, and how I made sense of the findings in the final two chapters. As someone with a complicated history with sexual identity label adoption and disclosure, I was immensely intrigued by the ways in which participants navigated identity, negotiated its influence in the various arenas of their life and ultimately shared their stories through interviews and focus groups. While I cannot suggest that I was aware of every instance in which my own experiences colored the lenses through which I conducted the iterative process known as the constant comparison method nor how someone without my life experiences might articulate the findings differently, I can say that I tried to be particularly careful with noting experiences, places, things, and people with who I interacted at various points in the data analysis and
reporting phase of this study. This was important to me because it allowed me space to process my own experiences negotiating the broader world while also extensively examining the ways in which those experiences allowed me to engage and re-engage this dissertation study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation study employed interviews as its primary data collection method guided by a grounded theory methodology, which was informed by intersectionality. As Charmaz (2006) noted, grounded theory and interviews seek to be open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted, when brought together with intersectionality, this methodological approach provides ample opportunity to engage GLBQ students of color in conversations that can uncover the ways in which they employ language to make sense of and decisions about their sexuality, sexual identity label adoption, and disclosure to others in consideration of their many intersecting and mutually constitutive social identities.
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this dissertation study was to investigate the ways in which words, language, and narratives were used in sexual identity label adoption and sexuality disclosure among GLBQ college students of color. This study was guided by three research questions:

4. How do GLBQ college students of color articulate and describe their process of adopting or resisting a sexual identity label(s)?
5. What language, words, or narratives do GLBQ college students of color use when articulating their decision to disclose their sexual identity?
6. What do GLBQ college students of color report as their motivation(s) for disclosing or not disclosing their sexual identity to others?

In this fourth chapter, study findings are presented. First, this chapter begins with brief descriptions of the 13 study participants, using information from their demographic questionnaires, their spoken experience during the interview or focus group, and a bit of my interpretation of what factors they held up as most salient to their understanding of self, the various identities, and what those two things had to do with the focus of this study. Second, findings related to sexual identity label adoption are shared; there are five primary findings highlighted here. This section is followed by findings about the ways in which sexuality...
disclosure is understood, articulated, and negotiated by GLBQ college students of color. Finally, a brief conclusion reviewing the contents of this chapter is provided.

**Study Participants**

Results of this study are based on a constant comparative analysis of transcripts from nine one-on-one interviews and a focus group. All interviews and the focus group were conducted between September 2012 and November 2013. In general, participants identified predominantly as Black/African American, male, gay, and college seniors. Table 1 summarizes key demographic information about the study sample. Next, brief vignettes are presented for each participant.

**Adrian**

Adrian was a 21 year old, senior majoring in consumer and family financial services with minors in fashion and retail at a large, public Midwestern university. He identified as a Black male of African-American descent, who preferred gay or homosexual to describe his sexual identity. With regard to his sexuality, he described himself as “extremely out” and quite vocal about his gay identity and the fact that he dated guys. Adrian, who was out in college and to many members of his immediate and extended family, had not disclosed his sexual identity to his father. This decision to not disclose was in part, out of respect for his mother, who requested that he not tell his father until later in life.
Andi

At the time of her participation, Andi, 18, was in her second semester of college majoring in film studies. Originally from Texas, Andi identified as a Mexican American, panromantic asexual woman, who often used bisexual when back home or amongst people unfamiliar with asexuality and/or panromantism. Upon discussing her unintentional disclosure of her sexuality to her mother, Andi shared that while her parents have always been generally accepting, she had no intention of sharing her sexuality with her grandparents who were very religious.

Anthony

A third year transfer student majoring in dance from New York City, Anthony, 22, identified as a Black American during the interview and on the demographic questionnaire—crossing out African in the African American ethnicity option under Black. Additionally, he shared that he identified as gay and didn’t “mind the box” associated with the label, but did raise that prior to living in New York City he would have identified as “just homosexual;” it was his teenage years spent in New York that he learned about the culture and shared experiences of the LGBT community that caused him to move beyond the clinical term homosexual to adopting gay as a preferred label to name his sexuality.

Amber

Amber was a 21-year-old college junior majoring in choral music education with a psychology minor at a large public research university in the Midwest. Amber identified as multiracial and although she marked bisexual on
her demographic questionnaire she was adamant during her interview about rejecting sexual identity labels, refusing to be defined by meanings others assigned to particular labels. Amber also offered that she found that disclosure of one’s sexuality called for extreme bravery.

**Bri**

A biracial woman of African American and Dominican heritage from Washington, DC, Bri, 21, participated in the focus group. At the time of her participation, Bri was finishing her final year of college with a degree in nursing. Bri’s primary sexual identity label is pansexual to which she had recently been introduced; however, she noted that she still frequently used bisexual, especially when interacting with individuals who demonstrated little knowledge of the LGBTQ community. This was primarily to avoid having to explain pansexuality to others.

**Deon**

At the time of his interview, Deon, 21, was a senior double majoring in geography and Spanish with double minors in Portuguese and international studies. Deon identified as a biracial—Black and White—queer identified male, who “would identify as a gay male” in “mainstream discussions.” Deon said he first disclosed his feelings about his sexuality to his mom at 15; since that time, he came to associate one aspect of authentic leadership with being transparent to others about his sexuality, noting that he was “out to everybody on campus,” offering “how can I lead student organizations and not be out?”
Dong

At the time of his interview, Dong, 23, was a 5th year senior majoring in comparative studies with a concentration in comparative and American ethnic studies and a minor in Asian American studies. Dong was a Korean international student from Seoul, South Korea, who identified as gay and queer. He first shared his sexuality with his dad in middle school sharing that he liked his male best friend, and had later more intimate conversations with his father about his sexual behaviors during high school. While his father took it hard, he was encouraged by the fact that his father did not show disappointment but instead sought out information from other gay individuals. Dong also shared his sexuality with his sister while in high school, but has not yet disclosed to his mother because he is unsure of how she would respond given a history of saying homophobic things at various times; he preferred to wait to share his sexuality with his mom until a time at which she inquired directly of him about his sexuality. Dong was the only participant to explicitly note consideration of his ability to live out on campus when applying to college, sharing, “I only applied to colleges that were LGBT-friendly. If the institution was listed in this national list, it has to mean something. They at least have to have some space [for LGBT people].”

DQ

When DQ was interviewed, he was an 18-year-old freshman majoring in political science with a social work minor at a midsize research university in the Midwest. An African American male, DQ identified as gay, although he said that
he was unaware of any other way to describe his sexuality. Adopted by an older conservative, Black family, DQ graduated from high school early and moved to Arizona to work on the campaign of Kyrsten Sinema, now the first openly bisexual member of Congress. He found that Arizona and then college provided him opportunities to live more openly about his sexuality, although he said he does not “wear [his sexuality] on his sleeve.” While DQ provided some detail about the ways in which sexuality influenced his understand of self and how he experienced college, he said he had practically no experiences in college that caused him to think about his race or racial identity.

**Keon**

At the time of his interview, Keon was in his final semester of undergraduate studies, majoring in English with an art history minor at a small private liberal arts university in the Midwest. A 21 year old African American male, Keon said that he identified “as gay, mainly, because [his] main sexual preference is men, if not exclusive.” He shared that during college he moved from having no sexual identity to truly embracing his gay identity. He was also in a long distance relationship with his best friend and former roommate, whom Keon described as a white guy from a hick town in Ohio, who had previously identified as straight and was in a long-term heterosexual relationship when they started dating.
Louis

Louis, 22, had recently graduated from a private, research university in the Midwest with a degree in anthropology and a public health minor. An African American male, Louis identified as gay, although he shared that he frequently used queer as a synonymous term. Throughout his interview, Louis spoke of the difficulty he experienced with self-acceptance because of his gay identity. Over the course of his collegiate career, Louis experienced at least three changes: he (a) grew from a desire to control his sexual identity disclosure to greater and greater frustration with others assuming he was straight, (b) moved from an out individual to a member of a larger LGBT community, and (c) developed a pride for his Black identity that he had not experienced previously.

Luna

At the time of her interview, Luna was an 18-year-old college freshman majoring in psychology with a minor in dance. Because of her attendance at a Christian school, during her elementary and middle school years, and its teaching about sexuality, Luna struggled to accept her sexuality, particularly because her school provided few opportunities to question teachings on sexuality. She moved from identifying as “just straight” to “heterosexual with lesbian tendencies,” before finally embracing her bisexual identity. Luna recalled her first instance of disclosing that she was not exclusively heterosexual was when she was professing her sin to a classmate, as required by her school.
Martez

Martez, a 21-year-old senior social work major at a large public research university, identified as a Black gay man. He learned early that being gay “was not normal” and should be kept quiet. As a result, he felt generally isolated from others and suffered from depression. Upon first coming out at age 16, Martez sought out opportunities for acceptance, including participation in the Ballroom scene during college. Generally out, except to a lesser degree in the workplace, Martez began to engage in research and activism around the LGBTQ community. In discussing this involvement, Martez’s discussion of his sexual identity shifted from gay to queer. In turning to queer, he articulated this as more of a political identity that allowed for fluidity in one’s sexuality.

Michelle

Michelle, 22, was an African American woman who generally preferred lesbian, as her sexual identity label, although she shared that “I’m between bisexual and lesbian sometimes but I identify with lesbian most.” At the time of her participation, Michelle was in her fourth year of college majoring in Music with minors in French and sexuality studies. Out to her immediate family, Michelle shared that her sister is bisexual and that she believed her uncle was gay, but has never spoken to him about it. Additionally, she said she was often mistaken as straight on campus. She also was heavily involved in a student organization for queer students of color and allies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Year in School</th>
<th>Major (Minor)</th>
<th>Sexual Identity Label(s)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Interview Type and Date</th>
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<td>Adrian</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Consumer and Family Financial Services (Fashion and Retail)</td>
<td>Gay, Homosexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>One-on-One, February 2013</td>
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<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Film Studies</td>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino – Mexican American</td>
<td>Focus Group, February 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Dance</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black – Black American</td>
<td>Focus Group, February 2013</td>
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<td>Bisexual, “I am who I am,” “I date whoever I’m attracted to”</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White, Black – African American, Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>One-on-One, April 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Nursing</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
<td>Geography, Spanish (Portuguese, International Studies)</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black – African American, White</td>
<td>One-on-One, April 2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Study Participants’ Demographic Characteristics. (continued)
<table>
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<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Year in School</th>
<th>Major (Minor)</th>
<th>Sexual Identity Label</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Interview Type and Date</th>
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<td>Asian/Pacific Islander - Korean</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>One-on-One, January 2013</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Black – African American</td>
<td>One-on-One, April 2013</td>
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<td>Louis</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Black – African American</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Black – African American</td>
<td>One-on-One, November 2013</td>
</tr>
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<td>Social Work</td>
<td>Gay, Queer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black – African American</td>
<td>One-on-One, November 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Music (French, Sexuality Studies)</td>
<td>Lesbian, Bisexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black – African American</td>
<td>Focus Group, February 2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sexual Identity Label Adoption

A primary focus of this dissertation study was to gain a better understanding of how GLBQ college students of color articulated and recalled their process of sexual identity label adoption. Question four of the demographic questionnaire asked all study participants to indicate their sexual orientation. All participants either selected a provided identity label or wrote in an alternative label in the space provided. While all participants noted a label for their sexual orientation on the demographic questionnaire, two participants explicitly discussed their hesitancy with adopting and disclosing sexual identity labels. In addition to looking at sexual identity label adoption for individual participants, it is important to note that there was a trend that emerged for participants by gender. Of the eight participants that were male, all of them identified as gay with three also using the term queer and one calling himself homosexual in addition to gay. When looking at women, however, the labels adopted were more diverse. Female participants identified as asexual, bisexual, lesbian, and pansexual. And during her interview, Amber distanced herself from the bisexual label she selected on her demographic questionnaire; instead resisting a label all together.

In addition to a general sense of the extent to which participants adopted sexual identity labels, there are several findings about the process of sexual identity label adoption that emerged during the phases of constant comparison within and across transcripts, interview notes, and analytic memos. Findings about the process of sexual identity label adoption illuminate an unexpected
finding, which is that GLBQ college students of color in this study understood sexual identity labels as tools to communicate with others. Specifically, study participants described the utilitarian functioning of sexual identity labels. This idea is further underscored through five findings related to the process of sexual identity label adoption for GLBQ college students of color; they include: (a) most participants were willing to adopt and identify with at least one sexual identity label; (b) label adoption for GLBQ college students of color was often not straightforward, but instead complex, ongoing, and dependent upon access to appropriate nomenclature; (c) while participants sought to find a label that fully represented their understanding of their sexuality, many also identified less-than-ideal labels to use in instances of disclosure when someone was unable to understand their preferred sexual identity label; (d) some participants’ exploration of sexual identity possibilities paralleled an exploration of their racial identity and its meaning, and (e) social and academic involvement and commitments related to participants’ access to a broad array of sexual identity labels and their discussion about why a particular label was appropriate for them. Each finding is explained in more detail below.

**Willing to Adopt Sexual Identity Label**

There are a number of ways to determine one’s willingness to do something; in the case of one’s willingness to adopt a sexual identity label for GLBQ college students of color in this study, there were at least two ways. First, would be to consider the category study participants checked on their
demographic questionnaire. Second was to review the narratives shared about one’s sexual identity label adoption and comfort during the interviews. Each is considered here. Upon review of completed demographic questionnaires, all participants either selected or wrote in a sexual identity label when asked to indicate their sexual orientation. This remained generally consistent while participants were being interviewed, whether via one-on-one interview or focus group. That is, most frequently, the label selected on one’s demographic questionnaire matched the words used when describing their sexual orientation during the interviews. For example, having selected gay on his demographic questionnaire, Anthony said, “I consider myself gay. I think that’s very straightforward for me, I don’t mind the box” and DQ shared, “Gay, I, I, I don’t know of any other way to describe it.” There were also instances when individuals selected one label on demographic questionnaire, but spoke of using that label plus at least one other. An example of this was Deon, who only selected gay on his demographic questionnaire, but said, “I guess in mainstream discussions I would identify as a gay male. Some other times I would identify myself as a queer male… It depends on the context.” In a similar way, Louis discussed his use of gay and queer, sharing:

Well, I bounce between gay and queer, just because, I use them honestly as synonyms…it really depends on what day…More people understand gay than queer, especially people who aren’t in
the LGBT-queer arena, so I just identify as gay. My sexual, personal attraction is towards men mostly.

Although queer represents a label Louis did not mark on the demographic questionnaire, his explanation would affirm his primary marking of gay.

There are two exceptions to note however. While both Amber and Dong marked sexual identity labels on the demographic questionnaire, each raised concerns about the actual adoption of such labels, although differently. First, Amber selected bisexual on her demographic questionnaire, but during the interview she was adamantly against adopting a sexual identity label for herself as well as being against assigning sexual identity labels to others. She shared:

For me, I don’t like to put a label on myself, I understand that some people find identifying with something makes them feel better, but for me, I am who I am and that’s all it is… I don’t identify with it [bisexuality] because I feel like it has a certain meaning that not a textbook meaning but a relative meaning that everyone else thinks too. So, I like people and that’s it unless someone asks me or if I mention I dated girls before. They will say, “oh are you bisexual?” and I say, “I date whoever I’m attracted to.

While Amber acknowledged that others could describe her dating patterns as an example of bisexuality, she suggested that she had agency to not feel obligated to live by others’ preferences for identity labels.
Second, there is Dong, who was the only participant to select more than one sexual identity label on his demographic questionnaire; he chose both gay and queer. During his interview, he explicitly discussed his concern about sexual identity labels and their inability to really capture who he was as a person and sexual being, thus impeding his consistent adoption of them. Dong shared:

I just don’t like to say what I am because it sounds like that is the whole me and I’m not something, I’m am Dong, that’s who I am. It’s kind of corny in LGBT rhetoric, I guess but I don’t like labels like many other people do. I say gay to make the conversation easier sometimes, especially with straight people who don’t have enough understanding or contact with the LGBT community… If I have to say my sexual orientation, I would say that I practice same sex sexual relationships or would say I’m queer because I study queer theory and I believe in it and like believe that sexuality is flexible and fluid and all. When I talk about it, it would be much more than just saying gay.

Although Amber attempted to fully separate herself from sexual identity labels and Dong explained how he used labels generally for the ease of communicating with others regardless of his own discomfort with them, it was possible to assert that student participants, by and large, did not all desire to adopt sexual identity labels, but were at least willing to adopt them for use in conversation, if not as a personal means for articulating their understanding of their own sexuality.
Sexual Identity Label Adoption Was Not Often Straightforward

While most participants suggested a willingness to adopt a sexual identity label, most agreed that the adoption process was anything but straightforward. In fact, participants suggested that their individual label adoption process was complex, ongoing, and dependent upon their access to appropriate identity label possibilities. For example, when discussing the use of gay as his preferred sexual identity label, Adrian shared that while he though gay was the most appropriate label, he was still unfamiliar with lots of terms. Adrian shared:

I would identify with gay or homosexual. I would say that I identity with that over others because I just feel like, I mean, I just feel like gay means that you’re attracted to men, I’m not bisexual, I only like men…. I don’t really understand a lot of the [terms] like queers and like, I don’t understand all those and I don’t really, it’s not that I don’t want to, but I’m not into the culture that like a term for all those certain things matter as much. You know, like how people have like certain pronouns that they go by and stuff like that.

It is in this further explanation, that Adrian suggests that while he knew there were other terms that might fit his understanding of his sexuality, he was less willing to gain a full understanding of what they meant since he did know a couple terms, i.e., gay, bisexual, of which at least one sufficiently captured what he wanted to share about his sexuality.
In another example, Bri discussed how learning of additional sexualities near the end of her collegiate experience caused her to further evaluate her sexual identity label of choice. Bri shared that she was recently introduced to pansexuality, saying:

I know I had my share in dating all kinds of different types of people. I recently learned about pansexuality, which is basically someone who has sexual interest in anyone who is either the same sex as them, the opposite sex, it could be a transgender person, a queer person, or whatever. …previously I would say bisexual but I couldn’t say like some people [I’ve dated] would go under that... so I guess I would say I'm pansexual but it would be hard to explain to normal people who already don’t know what it is so like just to make it easy I'll just tell them I’m bisexual. [Interviewer: but you feel more comfortable with pansexual?] I say pansexual when I don’t have to explain it, yeah.

Here Bri demonstrated how she had previously relied on the term (bisexual) closest to what she knew her sexuality to be, but since learning of pansexuality, she has started to adopt it usage, as long as it did not prove too complicated for others to understand. By allowing her sexuality lexicon to be expanded to include and then adopt pansexuality, Bri demonstrated that sexual identity label adoption could be ongoing and reoccurring.
While Bri and Adrian offered opportunities to interrogate the role access to possible sexuality labels played in the ability of GLBQ college students of color to identify, adopt and embrace sexual identity labels, Luna provided an example of how complex and ongoing the process of sexual identity label adoption can be. Luna reflected on a roughly five-year period through which she questioned her sexuality and continued to contemplate if she was using the best label for her. Luna offered:

I identify as bisexual and it took a long time for me to get to that, to even be able to accept that term. I was in middle school around the time my sister passed away, 13 and I went to a Christian school, it was a struggle. Of course I couldn’t be out openly seeking for help [about my sexuality]. It just wasn’t appropriate but one time I identified myself as just straight and said I’m gonna get rid of this whatever, and no that didn’t happen. Then I identified as heterosexual with lesbian tendencies. And I’m like Luna that doesn’t make sense, you like boys and girls and I guess I was just thinking the best term for me would be bisexual but even now I’m thinking coming out and being okay with your sexuality is an ongoing process and even now I still question if that’s the right term for me because I don’t think I fit in that box, most of my relationships have been with men, but I know I am still very attracted to women, so it’s like I’m still trying to figure out how to
categorize myself, but I’m gonna say bisexual is the best term for me.

Luna started and ended her response stating that she was bisexual. However, the reflective assurance with which she began the response was less visible by the end. She began, “I identify as bisexual and it took a long time for me to get to that, to even be able to accept the term.” Taken alone, this statement would suggest that after much effort on identifying the right sexual identity label, Luna had finally found it—bisexual—and was consequently living her life accordingly. However, after recounting her negotiation with herself about how she would be able to tolerate her own labeling of her sexuality, Luna asserted “the best term for me would be bisexual,” but that “being okay with your sexuality is an ongoing process.” So much of an ongoing process that some five years after her initial wrestling with her sexuality and its corresponding identity label, she continued, with less confidence in her voice, that “even now, I still question if that’s the right term for me… I’m still trying to figure out how to categorize myself,” and finally concludes, “but I’m going to say bisexual is the best term for me.” Luna, Bri and Adrian all provided voice to the notion that non-heterosexual identity label adoption was anything but straightforward.

Identified Alternate Sexual Identity Labels

In addition to finding that GLBQ college students of color are generally willing to adopt at least one sexual identity label and that their adoption experiences have been long, complex, and ongoing, if not regularly revolving,
GLBQ college students of color often identified alternate sexual identity labels, when they believed their preferred sexuality would be difficult to explain, understand, or unlikely to be accepted by others. So while they would use their preferred sexual identity label amongst individuals they assumed sufficiently knowledgeable about the LGBTQ community, they grappled with the use of more mainstream—read familiar—sexual identity labels that offered the opportunity to at least be partially understood, as far as sexuality is concerned.

One example of this is Dong; he shared:

I think with straight people I would say “I’m gay” ‘cause it’s easier. …in general I just [use] gay when I have to say [something]. If it’s in more like casual conversations, then I would say gay. But I have some scholarly conversations with some people and then I would more likely say queer, just to people who have non-normative sexual practices, those sort of things, I would say queer.

Similarly, Louis shared:

I bounce back and forth between gay and queer, just because I use them honestly as synonyms….it really depends on what day for all intents and purposes. More people understand gay than queer especially people who aren’t in the LGBT queer arena so I just identify as gay. My sexual personal attraction is towards men mostly.
Both Louis and Dong assert that they not only had thought about alternative sexual identity labels, but had also given consideration to which situations would require them to deploy those alternatives; both noting that gay is more widely understood and accepted than queer. Louis and Dong’s consideration of alternate sexual identity labels uplift the idea that GLBQ college students of color saw sexual identity labels as utilitarian; that is, sexual identity labels are not simply words used to describe one’s identity, but instead that sexual identity labels operate as tools to be utilized to communicate with others. Further, Dong’s articulation of label use reinforcing the idea that the connection between labels and identities is not simple; in fact, it is far more nuanced.

**Paralleled Racial Identity Development**

While much of this section has focused on how GLBQ college students of color came to identify with and adopt particular sexual identity labels, several participants revealed that in searching for the right sexual identity label, they found fresh perspectives on their racial identities. Some Black participants articulated new abilities to define and embrace their racial identities in concert with their sexual identities; this idea represented new ways of identifying one’s self not experienced prior to adopting their current sexual identity labels.

When asked about his social experiences in college, Keon spoke of having difficulty finding where he fit within his institution. As he put it, he started college seeking out Black community on campus, but perceived other Black
students as particularly focused on being social, which prevented him from establishing meaningful friendships. He shared:

I started out obviously hanging out with Black people, which was ok, but you know it didn’t really work out, because like I said, I’m not very social. ...And so I kind of retreated from hanging out with anybody and I found friends who were, White and not gay, you know, and hung out with them for the rest of my time here. I did associate briefly with some of the gay students on campus, but again that got old quickly again because I’m not very social.

Keon seemed to suggest that others’ expectations that he engage campus populations that represented his minority racial and sexual identities caused difficulty finding his place on campus. He went further to say, “I’m not actively involved like everybody else, where being a Black student is my identity.” It is here that Keon articulated a difference between himself and most other Black students. However, as luck would have, Keon also experienced dissonance in white, straight communities. He especially pointed out that being black and gay in predominantly white straight spaces, like bars near campus, caused him to experience great anxiety. It was in reflecting on those experiences that Keon began to think more intentionally about the intersection of race and sexuality in his life. With an intentional consideration of the beginning and end of his collegiate experience, Keon shared:
I thought that it was like two totally different experiences. Like on the front end of my college career and like coming toward the end. Like, like I said, when I first came, I thought I had to be categorized like right off the bat, and that didn’t really work out, just because I didn’t have a chance to socialize and figure out who I was, beyond the things I can’t control, like race and sexuality. But you go through that period of finding friends and kinda figuring out who you are and then coming out actually kinda means something I think. You can actually like embrace being Black with a kinda attitude behind it.

Although Keon spoke extensively during his interview about not fitting into the Black student population at his school, he still realized that for him coming out with regards to his sexuality, offered his a new opportunity to engage and define his racial identity as a gay Black man.

Martez also offered insight into how life in college brought him to similar conclusions about race and sexuality. Initially, when asked how often he thought about race and sexuality in college, he suggested that they were of disparate importance to his everyday life. Specifically noting that he had been Black all of his life and as a result his more recently coming out to himself and others preceding and through high school placed sexuality in heightened importance. He said that when he arrived on campus he attempted to seek out all the LGBTQ organizations, or as he put it “every organization and table with a rainbow,”
possible. He went on to share that college caused him to vocally and openly combat the stigma associated with sexuality, initially ignoring his race. He said:

The issues and the stigma related around sexual orientation were, I would say, something that I have managed to overcome substantially and I think that because I came out at such a young age, whereas race I think my freshman and sophomore years I tried to dismiss the fact that I was African American. You want to really believe that you know we live in a perfect world where race, gender, and sexuality and all those things don’t matter but then something happens and you realize oh it does matter.

It was after this realization that race still matters, that although he felt more closely aware of and tied to his sexuality, he knew he was definitely still a racialized person. And perhaps it is this understanding that pushed Martez to develop community with queer people of color on his campus and beyond.

Additionally, Louis offered an example of how one could grow in his acceptance, embrace, and visible display of sexual and racial identities. Louis shared:

I actually became more sort of proud of my black identity being a minority in my undergraduate experience because I really had to be strong in who I was and really inform people like your stereotypes or your conceptions of certain people are completely skewed...
became acutely aware of myself being a black male. First and foremost before anything else that’s what people see me as.

He acknowledged that while growing in his ability to embrace his racial identity, he also found himself more comfortable with his sexual orientation and his willingness for others to see his sexuality as one of his primary identities. Louis posited:

…as I got more involved my sexual orientation became my life because I was involved in a lot of these activities and because I was so visible toward the end of my college career. A lot of people knew I was gay. It just became more of a visual part of my identity.

It is through these comments that Louis—like other participants—found that even while he saw college as primarily providing him space to grow in his understanding of his sexuality, the freedom to do that also offered him a chance to reconnect with his racial identity, allowing him to embrace it unlike previously.

**Social and Academic Involvement Influenced Access to Labels**

Finally, study participants had varying degrees of access to a broad array of possible sexual identity labels. While this could be expected for any set of participants, this was an interesting finding as those participants who spoke more confidently about their exploration of sexual identity labels and rationale for adopting them also more frequently discussed involvement in campus clubs and organizations focused on issues of (racialized) sexuality, academic programs and
majors that focused on race, sexuality, or social justice, and participation in activism on and off campus than their peers not involved in such activities.

For example, Keon, who was primarily involved in spaces dominated by straight, White men, spoke more generally about his preference for gay as his sexual identity, saying, “I identify as gay, mainly, because my main sexual preference is men, if not exclusive. I’ve been out for a year and before that, obviously, I didn’t really identify as anything.” Similarly, Amber who primarily participated in music-oriented activities, could not fully articulate if her resistance to labels was that they were restrictive and limiting of one’s ability to appreciate the diversity amongst individuals adopting the same identity label, or if she simply had not come across an identity label that encapsulated her understanding of her own sexuality. She posited, “I feel like there is no one way, in my opinion, to define a gay person or a straight person or all the other ways after. I feel like there is no one definition of what a gay person is, so I don’t like to make up decisions for other people and definitely don’t like to make it for myself.” Unlike Keon and Amber, Adrian spoke directly to his unfamiliarity with sexual identity labels, initially saying that he was not into gay culture. When asked what he meant, he responded:

Yeah, not the gay culture, more like the research behind it. Not the culture, more the research, that’s what I meant, the research of it, because it kind of just confuses me. I’ve tried to get into, but it confuses me (laughing). So I just stick to gay (laughing).
Adrian suggested he had access to a deeper understanding of non-heterosexual sexual identity labels, but that the research, or academic understanding, were too much for him to digest.

In contrast, in his discussion of using gay and queer as synonyms, Louis, a diversity trainer and facilitator of his campus’s coming out group, offered a response that demonstrates his familiarity with the history and communities associated with the labels he had adopted. First, speaking to the Kinsey Scale and his more frequent use of gay, he said, “I don’t really view myself as a strict six [exclusively homosexual]… more people understand gay than queer, especially people who aren’t in the LGBT-queer arena, so I just identity as gay.”

But then when pressed on this idea, he went further, sharing:

I view them personally as synonyms; I know a lot of people don’t.

There is a lot of debate about what queer means and the whole reclaiming of that word. And I know a lot of people who would be more queer than I, so honestly if I had to choose one over the other, I would just say gay because I think that describes me more often than not.

Louis is not the only participant, who demonstrated a closer tie to the academic and social exploration of sexuality. Although only a college freshman and not yet a member of any student organizations, Andi, who vividly recalled instances of classism, ableism, and even nationalism in her Texas, hometown, displayed a deft ability to articulate her sexuality. She shared:
I identify as asexual, where basically I don’t have any interest in having sex with anyone and since I’m asexual, I also identify as panromantic, meaning I find myself capable of a romantic relationship with anyone regardless of what they identify as. But when I’m back home, since it’s so far down into Texas, so many of the people are from Mexico and they have like strong religious upbringing, I either don’t really mention my sexuality or I just say that I’m bisexual since that’s easier for people to understand.

Here Andi showed the clarity in identification she has. However, being intimately involved in organizations focused on racial identity and/or sexuality did not leave all participants easily able to articulate their sexuality. The best example for this idea was Michelle, who was heavily involved in her campus’s queer student of color organization in which she held several executive leadership positions. Michelle shared, “For me, it seems like [I] identify most with lesbian, so I feel like I’m between bisexual and lesbian sometimes but I identify with lesbian most.” Michelle articulated an uncertainty of appropriate match, but when asked, “Have you ever actually went for dating another sex?” by another focus group participant, Bri, Michele responded, “Not really… I was thinking sexual attraction versus romantic attraction and emotional attraction. Including all of those I feel in between bisexual and lesbian, but identify as lesbian.” Michelle’s familiarity with what others say should guide one’s naming of their sexual identity had her conflicted, or unsure of her rationale.
As study participants reflected on their processes for the adoption sexual identity labels, they offered at least five important considerations: (a) even if GLBQ college students of color preferred to not adopt a label, they were generally willing to do so for the ease of others; (b) sexual identity label adoption was anything but straightforward; (c) most participants identified less-than-ideal labels to use in instances of disclosure when someone was unable to understand their preferred sexual identity label; (d) some participants’ exploration of sexual identity possibilities paralleled a re-exploration of their racial identity and its meaning, and (e) participants with greater involvement in organizations and academic experiences related to sexuality often had a greater ability to articulate their preferred label and their reasoning behind it than their less involved peers.

Sexuality Disclosure

This study’s second primary interest focused on sexuality disclosure. The findings from this study as they relate to disclosure can be categorized into three primary areas: (a) motivations for disclosure, (b) impetus to conceal, and (c) the act of disclosure. Each area is considered below.

Motivations for Disclosure

Before trying to understand the who, what, and how of sexual identity disclosure, it was important to investigate what drives GLBQ college students of color to desire to disclose their sexuality to others, even at risk of rejection or isolation. In this section of the sexuality disclosure findings, participants spoke to past motivations that guided disclosure as well as current considerations for
potential future instances of disclosure to people of varying importance. The five most prominent motivations influencing disclosure decisions shared by study participants included: (a) sharing the intimate – inviting others in; (b) desiring to live authentically; (c) intentionally challenging heteronormativity; and (d) asserting control.

**Sharing the intimate – inviting others in.** In their considerations of sexual identity disclosure to others, participants suggested that by disclosing they were offering others an intimate look into a part of their life that was previously unshared. Deon offered that while there’s a risk to disclosure – a risk of being rejected, of not having your offer accepted – there was still possibility for deepening a relationship by being vulnerable and inviting others into a private aspect of your life. Deon did well at capturing the sentiment that many participants shared regarding their previous experiences with disclosure, when he said, “You risk, you are out there. People actually get a better glimpse of who you are. So it’s your most private dimensions of your being.”

While this idea of seeing opportunities for disclosure as invitations to others is often shared reflectively, Adrian suggested that his interest in sharing his sexuality with his father—at some future date—was also primarily driven by the intimacy that could result; in this instance between father and son. After sharing that his mother had encouraged him not to disclose to sexual identity to his dad, Adrian added:
At the end of the day, that's my father. I just feel like he should know certain things about me, you know what I'm saying? Because I feel like your sexuality is a huge part of you and that determines who you're gonna fall in love with, who you're gonna start a family with and I just feel like at the end of the day he's still my dad and he should know those things and he shouldn't be in some fairy tale land, I, I feel like my dad knows I'm gay, but he should, if he doesn't. He shouldn't be in some fairy tale view of how my life's going to end up, cause I feel like that's where my mom still kind of is, like she still expects me to marry a woman and stuff; she's crazy. But I kind of just feel like he deserves that and then also my dad has prostate cancer, so umm, even though we don't get along, like I just feel like I want to let him know that before something happens. He hasn't been seeking treatment so if he passes away I just feel like for me I need to tell him. Like that's just, I don't know. I don't really know how to explain it. There's like no huge incentive because he will probably be upset and I don't know if that'll you know make him even more sick or whatever the case may be, but for my, for me I need to tell him. I still love my dad even though we have problems. My mom doesn't really understand my view of it so.

In this outpouring of why he desired to share his sexuality with his father, Adrian spoke to the benefits that could arise, the benefits that he desired to share with
his father that would require him to get a full sense of who Adrian was, including
his sexuality. Although Adrian heavily considered the potential consequences of
inviting his father into this aspect of his life, Adrian helped illuminate the true
dynamics of intimacy; while not always positive, intimacy does require honesty,
openness, and vulnerability.

While not necessarily the result of an invitation from Louis to his family to
discuss sexuality, he reflected on how his family's willingness to engage in
conversation around topics of sexuality changed their ability to communicate,
their ability to connect. When thinking about his experiences with his parents and
aunt pre-college, Louis shared “…before then [college graduation] I didn’t want to
talk about it and they didn’t want to talk about it so we just left it at that.”
However, he noticed a dramatic shift at his college graduation, which occurred
shortly after his home state of North Carolina banned same sex marriage. He
recalled:

So coming out to my family I never really – I don't have like a
coming out story its really interesting how my family kind of found
out about my sexual preference, something that I probably won't
get into but my family knew I was gay but this thing was not talked
about at all – my mom said if you ever bring home a friend
whatever friend means – clearly not my best friend – like a romantic
friend – they knew but now its become more of a – I was actually
really amazed at graduation my mom, my aunt and my dad would
just openly talk about LBGT issues, this was immediately after North Carolina banned same sex marriage and so they would talk to me about the legislation, they would ask me what part of LBGT do you identify with and I don't even know how they learned about LBGT. So they are becoming more open in talking about those issues. My aunt just recently bought me an Obama pen that has a rainbow on it so they are understanding now and its becoming more of a discussion.

As his family grew in their interest in and willingness to discuss sexuality generally, and Louis’s sexuality specifically, Louis experienced a shift in his ability to communicate with and develop community among his family members. While different than the experiences of Adrian and Deon, Louis’s example still uplifted the idea that sexual identity disclosure and genuine willingness to engage in conversations of sexuality, while potentially spaces of vulnerability, uniquely positioned GLBQ college students of color to share personal intimacy with others.

**Desiring to live authentically.** Associated with the previous point of the desire for intimacy driving participants’ sexuality disclosure, many of the study’s GLBQ college students of color also saw identity disclosure as a prerequisite for the ability to live authentically. Some participants thought that by leaving their sexuality unacknowledged, unspoken, or denied inhibited their ability to truly live authentically. This can be seen in at least two ways. First, some participants
found it difficult to be effective in their various campus roles without being authentic and open about their sexuality. For example, Deon shared, “I am out to everybody on campus. For me it’s how can I lead student organizations and not be out? That’s my opinion about myself.” Here Deon argued that if leadership requires authenticity, then not being open and honest about his sexuality, even if it is seen as personal, inhibited his effectiveness.

In addition to authenticity being important for campus leadership, participants also shared that disclosure was essential to living their best life and encouraging other GLBQ college students of color to do the same. DQ recalled being really burdened by the need to remember who knew about his sexuality and who did not and to recall what behavior and narratives were appropriate for whom. He said:

It kind of got tiring trying to live two different lives. And who you’re around and then try to figure out how you were going to balance it and if you’re around people from opposite ends of the life and whatnot and also being so involved in politics. People I worked with, if you just look at them, you could tell it hadn’t affected their careers.

Although burdened for some time with the fact of juggling two divergent lives, it was not until DQ left his home state, moved to Arizona, and saw that when others chose to live authentically that that did not prevent from having meaningful, rewarding careers, even in the messy world of politics.
Related to DQ’s struggle with feelings of inconsistency and inauthenticity, Adrian felt his inability to disclose his sexuality to his father challenged his ability to encourage other GLBQ youth and college students of color to live out by disclosing their sexuality to others. He shared:

I feel like it will feel like a weight off my shoulder. Even though I am out, I feel like I’m not fully out because my dad doesn't know. I always have to worry about, I don’t worry about it but it’s just like when I’m at home I still have to, to watch what I say… and it’s hard for me to say, “oh I’m out and I don’t understand how people still in the closet when they’re like 30” and all this other stuff, which isn’t for me to say, but how can I even preach on that if I’m technically still not out to my father, you know? So, it’s how can I want an “out” boyfriend or something like that if I’m not fully [out]…I wanna be fully out.

Adrian’s final point of being “fully out” brings the idea of authenticity together. If one is to be truly authentic, he must be consistent in who he was.

**Intentionally challenging heteronormativity.** Study participants’ interest in disclosure was also motivated by a desire to intentionally challenge heteronormativity. One approach that seems subtler than perhaps it was came from Dong’s backpack. Dong shared that his academic experiences in cultural, ethnic and queer studies helped him see even small gestures, such as a badge on a backpack, as opportunities to challenge assertions that everyone is or
should be heterosexual. The badge on his backpack read, “I won’t assume you’re gay if you won’t assume I’m straight.” Not only did this seek to counter heteronormative assumptions that everyone is at one point or another straight and decide to be gay, but it also proclaimed his identity in a visible, yet subtle way.

In another attempt to disrupt heteronormativity, Louis shared that he desired to incorporate a more visible display of his sexuality given his frequent experiences with being misread as straight. Louis shared:

I don’t think I fit people’s stereotypes of being a gay male, so I think for me one of the frustrations that I share with my queer roommates was the fact that people don’t visibility read me as gay more often than not. For me that really hurts when people say or assume that I’m straight a lot and that whole coming out thing to everybody just really takes some getting used to.

In response, Louis then began to more intentionally select opportunities and clubs that associated him with non-heteronormativity, saying, “because I was so visible toward the end of my college career, a lot of people know I was gay. It just became more of a visual part of my identity,” suggesting more intentional shift of marking himself as gay.

**Asserting control.** In addition to challenging heteronormativity, participants also found disclosure as an opportunity to assert control in
relationships with others as well as in other areas of their life. For example, Martez desired to remove the burden of sexuality’s secrecy from his life. He said:

I felt the need to come out of the closet because I felt kind of trapped and I think that is due to the fact that sexuality is often times assumed in our society you know and I felt that adversely affected me.

For Martez, without “coming out” and being free to disclose his gay identity to others he could never really feel in control of his life. Similarly, Keon felt that as long as he did not share his sexual identity, he would always be hiding from someone, in some shape or fashion. While Martez spoke specifically to external disclosure, Keon also saw control occurring by admitting to himself that he was gay, which allowed him to be himself around others without regard for their thoughts or concerns about his various identities, especially sexuality. He reflected, “I didn’t feel like I had to hide anything anymore or have to be weird around other people. …it was kinda like a burden was lifted, I guess. I mean you just don’t feel bad about it anymore once you’ve kinda accepted it.”

While Martez and Keon spoke from places of feeling burdened by their lack of disclosure as motivation to disclosure, Amber found that her ultimate test of disclosure and control rested with her mother. She mentioned briefly that she attempted to let her mother know that she had recently begun joining organizations focused on sexuality and wanted to do more with them and others, but her mother said she should be more concerned with issues of race and
gender. To her mother’s comments, Amber retorted, “I like girls” at which point her mother became silent. When asked if she would return to the conversation, Amber pondered:

I don’t know because I think the goal for me wasn't to let her know but to let myself know I was brave enough to tell her because our relationship it’s like, it used to be very mother and daughter and now I feel like its friends who hang out. We have so much fun when we hang out but when it comes to anything else – she hadn't been there for me especially while I've been in school so it wasn't to inform her it was just like now everyone knows, I have no problem telling anybody.

Although Amber said her purpose was not necessarily to disclose to her mom, she showed that in her mind, at least, her mother was the one person to whom she had to disclose to truly assert control over her sexuality and the role it played in her life.

By and large, participants identified one of the above five motivations as guiding much of their previous disclosure activity and the primary reasons they had additional people they wanted to tell. However, the GLBQ college students of color did not only focus on motivations to disclose their sexuality; they also shared reasons they had not chosen to share their sexuality with others. Three such considerations are presented below.
Impetus to Conceal or Not Vocalize

While there are five motivations GLBQ college students of color frequently cited as reasons they decide to disclosed their sexuality to others, participants also noted at least three reasons that encouraged them to conceal, or not vocalize, their non-heterosexuality from others. Specifically, they noted (a) fear of rejection, (b) loss of control, and (c) assumption that their sexuality was readily visible to and understood by others.

Fear of rejection. While many participants suggested that they were motivated to disclose their sexuality to others to develop further relational intimacy, they also noted that a primary reason to not disclose one’s sexuality was a fear of being rejected based on that sexuality. For example, Martez shared, “The fact that I felt like I wouldn’t be accepted because my sexuality was different than the norm. …I always felt the need to prove myself to people because of my sexuality, because I knew I was gay.” Similarly, Bri mentioned a specific concern if she was to tell her grandmother. When asked if there was anyone she hadn’t told, she offered:

My grandmother. I know she has told me about something, she wouldn’t say she would like disown me as like a family member for being gay, but she talks pretty bad about the whole topic of sexual identity and stuff like that. So I rather not tell it to her. She still doesn’t know to this day.
Although Bri said she did not think disclosing her sexuality to grandmother would result in her being disowned, she was not completely confident that that was not a possibility and therefore had refused to talk to her grandmother about it.

While age is a commonality between Bri’s grandmother and Dong’s family members to whom he has not disclosed, they had different rationale for that nondisclosure. Dong said:

'I’ve never told any relatives because they are older. I don’t want them to know. I don’t think it’s necessary for them to know. But of course I’m jealous if my friends say they’ve come out to their grandmother or whatever, but that’s different. Some of those grandparents can talk to their grandkids about that sorts of things. They went to college or lived in better environments to learn stuff. But my grandparents generation, it’s like wartime, Korean wartime, so they grew up with no food, dying, and hunger, so I don’t expect them to understand me. I don’t think it’s necessary for them to go through the pain, if that’s going to be the pain for them

It is through these comments that Dong suggested that because of his extended family’s age and distance from college having never gone that they would be less likely to understand his sexuality and therefore had the potential to serve as opportunities for him to be rejected.

**Loss of control.** In addition to fearing rejection, participants shared that by disclosing their sexuality, they also risked losing control of what others did
with that information as well as how it impacted their careers and relationships with others. An example of each is shared below. Bri first talked about her fear that disclosing to her grandmother could cause great shock resulting in a decline in health, but she then discussed the reason she tried not to tell new employers. Bri said:

   Like I said before my grandmother she doesn’t know, I’m not trying to keep it away from her…I just don’t want her to have a heart attack over it if she ever does find out. [But] most of the time I do kind of feel like I conceal my sexuality to new important people – like bosses, someone who I can consider [having] an interest in helping me with [the] future, money but mainly like a boss or something and I guess I wouldn’t tell them till later after everything has cooled down.

Like Bri, Amber shared that it is often new people, particularly boyfriends, from whom she contemplated concealing her identity, at least for some period of time. When she was asked if she intentionally concealed her sexual identity from anyone, Amber shared:

   Not any people in my life right now. Normally if I'm seeing a guy I don't like to tell him until I feel like we have reached a certain level because when I date girls they don't care if I like guys or not but actually only the black men who I have dated have a problem with it. Yeah just about every black guy that I have dated has had a
problem with it and they either don't like it period or they don't like the fact that I like girls. They all know now if we made it to that level of trust, but that's the only people who I keep it from, if anyone else ever asked me, I would just say yeah.

While different forms control loss, both Bri and Amber highlighted that sometimes GLBQ college students of color might be less willing to disclose their sexuality to others to whom they are close or desire to be closer with for a few of losing control of that relationship.

**Assuming sexuality was understood.** While the first two examples focused on intentional concealment of sexual identity from others, this third finding was less about concealing one's identity, but instead centered on being unaware that others did not as clearly perceive your sexuality as non-heterosexual as one might have thought. Beyond fear of rejection and some loss of control, GLBQ college students of color also failed to disclose their sexuality because they assumed it was readily apparent or visible to others. Anthony purported that his lifestyle should be sufficient to suggest to others that he is gay. He said, “On campus I would hope the majority of people know, I’m not trying to tell them but I hope that they could see some part of the lifestyle with it and how I act.” Anthony seemed to tap into stereotypes about non-heterosexuality, suggesting that there should be some evidence through his lifestyle, behaviors, and preferred activities from which others should have been able to ascertain his sexuality. Following a similar logic, DQ questioned if individuals who did not
know, or notice, that he was gay were simply naïve, or even blind. He offered, “There are still those who like, I don’t know if they are naïve or what, but they still think I’m straight and when they ask me I tell them but for the most part most people know [I’m gay].” DQ’s comment suggested that he did not understand how people would not know that he’s gay.

While Anthony and DQ assumed that there was visible evidence of their sexuality in their lives and behaviors, not all participants assumed others knew for the same reason. In sharing whom she had disclosed her sexual orientation to previously, Andi said, “I actually accidentally came out to my mom over the phone last night, because I originally thought she might have already known.” This time instead of thinking others should have deduced her sexuality from her appearance or behaviors, Andi thought that her parents must have known she was not straight because of their continual rhetoric about loving her “regardless of who you love.” Andi went on to say, “my parents have always been like it’s okay regardless of who you love so, I just never thought it was something that I needed to talk to them about.” So rather than intending to “come out” to her parents just assumed she could engage in conversations about her sexuality because they already knew about her non-heterosexuality and had even vocalized support of her.

A third instance of not having a meaningful conversation to disclose non-heterosexuality is from Keon; however, this instance was tied to a future romantic relationship. Specifically, Keon said that he and his then-boyfriend never
discussed sexuality, while they were just roommates. He shared that they were initially best friends and roommates and his roommate was assumed straight, but Keon felt it was understood by his roommate that he was gay. When asked if he ever discussed it outright, Keon shared, “Kind of, but not really. I mean, it was understood but not explicit because I never really made a point about it. “That point” referring to when he realized that he had feelings for his best friend and desired to express them. I mean mainly because I didn’t feel like it was a big deal up until that point.” Adrian, DQ, Andi, and Keon all offered a look at non-disclosure as something that was not necessarily meant to conceal their sexuality, but simply did not occur because they assumed the person they would be disclosing to should have already known.

Factors Influencing Disclosure

Participants were asked to recall the first time they disclosed their sexuality to another person. In doing so, participants provided insight into how they understood the act of disclosure as well as a number of approaches they used to guide when they would and would not disclose. Specifically, when thinking about the act of disclosing their sexuality, participants, like Luna said, “coming out and being okay with your sexuality is an ongoing process.” In addition to recognizing the iterative process of disclosure, participants also discussed three important considerations prior to disclosure. First, GLBQ college students of color decided to prioritize whom they would intentionally and personally disclose their sexuality to, as the process can be both emotional and
time consuming. Second, participants relied heavily on their knowledge of how receptive people had been to other sensitive topics prior to deciding to disclose their sexuality to them. Third, GLBQ college students of color identified a number of individuals and contexts that influenced their willingness and the extent to which they disclosed their sexuality to others. Each finding is explored in more detail below.

Prioritizing whom I told. All participants generally agreed that it was impractical and unnecessary to feel responsible for informing every person with whom they had come into contact of their sexual orientation. Frequently participants spoke of prioritizing family members and friends with whom they enjoyed close relationships. For example, Deon said, “There are some family members I’m just not close to and I just don’t feel like I care enough for them to know.” Similarly, DQ shared “I’m not really close with my family, so like most of them don’t know except for a couple of cousins and whatnot but basically for me the way it’s been for about the last year. It’s basically me, myself, and I.” So while participants did not say they would never disclose to individuals they were not particularly close with, they did suggest that those family members took less of a priority when deciding to whom they would reach out and disclose.

Perceptions and history of receptiveness. In addition to making decisions about who they would intentionally engage to disclose their sexual identity, participants also noted a particular willingness to disclose to individuals with who they perceived as particularly open and non-judgmental or with whom
they had a history in which that person showed they were receptive to things outside of what society called normal. For example, when talking about why he first disclosed his sexuality to his godmother, Keon shared:

Well I’ve always been closet with her because she was always the person I could go and talk to without fear of judgment or punishment…we just had a very open relationship where we’ve exchanged a lot of information prior to that.

It was because of prior experiences in which he could be vulnerable with his godmother that Keon felt he could share his revelation about his sexuality with her before sharing it with others. Similarly, Adrian first came out to his older brother and aunt. When asked why his brother first, Adrian responded:

Cause we were just so close. And like he’ll just, he doesn’t judge people like he’s always been like just such a loving, carefree guy, so I, I kinda knew like I felt like his reaction would be the best out of anybody, even if it wasn’t a good reaction.

Similarly, he shared that his aunt was relatable. He went on:

She was just really like, she was kinda like, we’re kinda like the same, like she was kinda the black sheep when she was growing up. She was like the youngest…and then she was just, she’s a little more crazy, like I dunno, our personalities really match, so like when I couldn’t talk to my mom about something, I always knew I could talk to her about something.

116
In his reflections on disclosing his sexuality to his older brother and aunt before other family members, Adrian hinted at the extent to which past experiences influenced his comfort in telling them.

Luna, on the other hand, spoke about how she made disclosure decisions for people with whom she was less familiar. She said:

I don’t mind talking to adults about it or my peers; it just depends on the person, like if I’m around them and they are like I don’t like gay people or they are just giving off that vibe, I’m like I’m not even gonna go there with you.

It is through these comments that Luna illuminated that it’s not just extended histories with others that determine the willingness of GLBQ college students of color to disclose their sexuality to others, but also their perception of how receptive the person was or would be to conversations about diverse sexualities.

**Influence of context and people.** Although there was not a specific question asked during interviews or focus groups, participants frequently spoke of how people and contexts influenced the ways in which disclosure happened in their lives. There are at least four ways this was observed: (a) participants assessed relationship potential, whether friendly or romantic, when disclosing; (b) participants frequently shared being less willing to be out or disclose their sexuality in the workplace; (c) they shared that familial context continued to shape the disclosure process and outcomes, and (d) pop-culture and social media also had shaped disclosure.
First, participants suggested that they would assess the potential depth of new relationships when deciding to disclose. Specifically, sharing that the deeper the possibility for a meaningful, long-term relationship, whether platonic or romantic, the deeper their certainty that they would at some point disclose their sexuality to another. For example, Louis suggested that his expected relationship with someone determines the extent to which he considered the need to disclose his sexual orientation. He said:

It really depends on what kind of relation I see forming with that other person. So if its someone that’s going to be like a long lasting whatever term you might be then yeah I’m definitely gonna have to come out to then at some point, but if we are just meeting for the first time, I don’t even sweat it. It really depends on important I think that person is going to be in some aspect of my life.

Louis suggested the more likely he was to see the potential for a longer-term relationship, the more important sexual identity disclosure became.

Second, in addition to considering the kinds of relationship they had with others, many participants discussed being completely out everywhere except the workplace. One example came from Adrian, who shared:

At work and stuff, I’m still trying to figure it out. Like when I was at Macy’s this summer, umm, that’s where I got my job offer at. I was, I wasn’t vocal about it, but it’s just like, I feel that I have to be careful about stuff like that because it is still at will, umm, when it
comes to termination. So, umm, at work is a different, I mean if I befriend somebody at work and they know, cause like a couple of the interns knew, but as far as like the whole office I’m not really sure if I’d ever fully out in the office. But if they have their own assumptions that’s them, you know. But other than in just society, I’m good, like you know.

Here Adrian spoke to the differences he noticed between campus and what he called “society,” in this case a workplace.

Third, several participants considered how their familial spheres of influence shaped their disclosure potential and the conditions under which disclosure happened. A prime example of family members, who already knew about his sexuality, influencing the likelihood someone would share his sexuality with another, was found in Adrian and his mom. He matter-of-factly stated that his father did not know he was gay solely because his mother had requested that he did not share it. He said:

Oh, well most family knows, except my dad. I never came out to my dad, but I know he knows, well I think he knows. But that’s just me. The only reason I’ve never came out to my dad is because my mom told me not to. Like I always wanted to, but she’s just like “don’t come out to him, until you’re like 25” type of thing, so whatever. But every, majority of my family knows on my mom’s side.
It was clear that although Adrian desired to tell his dad, he has resisted simply to show respect to his mother and her wishes.

Additionally, as the only international student participating in the study to date, Dong offered insight into how his Korean heritage influenced his understanding of his sexuality and its possibility for disclosure. He specifically discussed how his disclosure to family members back in South Korea might have been different than disclosure with others in the U.S. Specifically, Dong mentioned that he has not told his mother. When asked if he would ever tell her, Dong replies:

I wouldn’t say those vocabulary because gay, queer, is very first of all political terms second, still western-centered terms. It is used in Korea but it is not like, it doesn’t necessarily have the same connotation as here, so I wouldn’t say that. I would say, “I like guys and I have had relationships with guys and I love them, I have loved them….Yeah, I never used the word gay, I don’t think, not because they wouldn’t understand it but because I don’t like the word. It just doesn’t feel good.

While Dong discussed his uneasiness with gay as a sexual identity label, he also proffers that given the cultural differences between his life in the US and his family’s life in South Korea, he would almost be required to think of a more action based disclosure of his sexuality.
Fourth and finally, participants spoke of the impact of television shows and social media, like Facebook, on their disclosure decisions and processes. For example, Louis found courage to tell his best friends after watching an episode of a popular television in which one of the main characters also struggled with his sexuality. Louis said:

So I remember watching an episode of Degrassi I don't know if you guys know about that but there is a character Marko who was struggling with sexuality and those episodes where he finally came out to his family and friends – those episodes really had an impact on me like after that I just called my two best friends and told them … I just watched this episode and it really affected me emotionally just so you know I'm gay and that was the first time I actually got it out – it took me a really long time to get comfortable with it but that was the very first time that I disclosed my sexual orientation to someone and then turned out that one of my best friends disclosed to me that she was a lesbian so it all worked out.

Louis suggested that without Degrassi, he would have taken longer to share his sexuality with another. In addition to popular culture artifacts, like television shows, participants spoke to making social media do some of the work of disclosure. For example, Dong said:

I came out to him the third week. One of my tools to come out to him was Facebook. Facebook has interested in, like men or
women. I just added it and didn’t say anything about it. [Interviewer: Your profile said interested in men?] Yes and people knew and then I would like just naturally talk about it like “oh you know, I had my boyfriend there” blah, blah, blah. And people wouldn’t be surprised because they know it already through Facebook. Nobody was super surprised; nobody was like shocked or disgusted. So that was a blessing for me.

Dong’s use of Facebook to share his sexuality in a way that avoided much of the immediate response from others, especially if negative, provided beginning consideration of the role of social media in sexual identity disclosure of GLBQ college students of color. Further, participants’ consideration of social media and television as well as the influence of the workplace and perceived relationships potential highlight the potential for a diversity of media to influence one’s decision making process as it relates to disclosure.

**Conclusion**

This study’s purpose was to investigate the language used by GLBQ college students of color to describe their sexual identity label adoption and disclosure experiences and motivations. Findings above illuminate the ways in which GLBQ college students of color negotiate sexual identity label adoption and disclosure as well as the numerous mediating factors. That is, GLBQ college student of color in this study add to our understanding of how racial and sexual minorities understand label adoption and disclosure possibilities as they relate to
their sexuality as well as provide a unique look into the ways in which these students come to enact those labels, find them to interact with the multitude of social identities, and ultimately make sense of them to strategically share them with others.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This dissertation study sought to investigate the ways in which language and narratives were used in sexual identity label adoption and sexuality disclosure among GLBQ college students of color. To that end, this qualitative, grounded theory, intersectional study had three objectives; specifically the study sought to: (a) document the language and narratives used by GLBQ college students of color, (b) uplift how GLBQ college students of color articulate their sexual identity disclosure decisions and motivations, and detail the factors that influence that GLBQ college students of college consider in their sexual identity label adoption, modification, and disclosure decisions. Given the purpose and objectives of this dissertation study, the following three research questions guided the investigation:

1. How do GLBQ college students of color articulate and describe their process of adopting or resisting a sexual identity label(s)?
2. What language, words, or narratives do GLBQ college students of color use when articulating their decision to disclose their sexual identity?
3. What do GLBQ college students of color report as their motivation(s) for disclosing or not disclosing their sexual identity to others?
In Chapter 4, two overarching categories of findings were shared. The first set of findings related directly to sexual identity label adoption. Second, findings are organized around the idea of sexuality disclosure with three larger categories: motivations for disclosures, impetus to conceal or not vocalize, and factors that influence disclosure. Each set of finds are considered with regard to extant literature below.

**Sexual Identity Label Adoption**

A primary objective of this dissertation study focused on sexual identity label adoption experiences and process for GLBQ college students of color. Unexpectedly, GLBQ college students of color suggested that while extant literature posits that individuals of non-heterosexual sexualities adopt labels to indicate their sexual identity (Cass, 1979; Troiden 1989; D’Augelli, 1994), they have come to understand sexual identity labels to be utilitarian; that is, GLBQ college students of color suggested that while there are times when labels adequately reflect identity, there are other instances in which labels adopted—and potentially deployed—are more appropriately understood as a means to convey non-heteronormative experiences that may or may not completely sync with others understandings of the sexual identity label. There were five findings that emerged in this area. First, nearly all participants were willing to adopt at least one sexual identity label. Second, study participants often reflected on the fact that their ultimate decision to adopt a particular sexual identity label was not a very straightforward path. Third, even once participants identified and adopted
their preferred sexual identity label, many identified alternate labels to use when disclosing to others, if they found their preferred label to be less familiar to others or difficult to explain. Fourth, several Black participants’ understanding of their racial identity was informed by their negotiation and understanding of their sexual orientation. Fifth and finally, GLBQ college students of color who articulated higher levels of involvement in academic and/or social spaces that considered issues of race, sexuality and other social identity categories also demonstrated a greater familiarity with and ability to articulate a variety of sexual identity labels. Each finding is considered in light of extant literature below.

Willing to Adopt Sexual Identity Label

As was noted, upon review of completed demographic questionnaires, all participants had selected an identity label to identify their sexual orientation. Taken alone, this finding could suggest that like the all-white samples used as the basis for extant sexual identity development models (Cass, 1979; Troiden 1989; D’Augelli, 1994), the GLBQ college students of color in this study also found naming their sexual identity important to their conceptualization and enactment of their sexuality. However, when taken with the diversity of responses during interviews, it becomes more clear that for some participants identity labels are important and even easy to adopt, while for others sexual identity label adoption is a last resort and even that the labels are much less important than a personal understanding of one’s own sexuality. While extant literature seems to connect label adoption with one’s development of a healthy
perspective on their non-heterosexuality, findings suggest that participants’ unwillingness to adopt is less than a full embrace of identity labels. It is here the intersectionality calls our attention to the consideration of the social relations and arenas of influence that help GLBQ college students of color understand the extent to which label adoption is a meaningful part of their sexuality. This idea will be explored further in the next section.

**Sexual Identity Label Adoption Was Not Often Straightforward**

One area in which the sexual identity label adoption process and experiences of GLBQ college students of color seem to best mirror existing sexual identity development models is the idea that label adoption was not often a straightforward process. That is, although participants did adopt or acknowledge a non-heterosexuality identity, and adopt a corresponding label, their process was often long, convoluted, circuitous, and even iterative and reoccurring. Although found in a number of identity development theories, this idea is perhaps best captured in Fassinger’s sexual minority identity formation model (Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), when Fassinger and colleagues’ assert that individual and group identity are reciprocal but also continuous and circular processes. It is in this articulation of identity development, or formation as Fassinger calls it, that we are best able to understand what GLBQ college students of color mean when they discuss the ways in which their adopted label has changed over time and place in relation to their ever-evolving understanding of their own sexuality.
Identifying Alternate Sexual Identity Labels

While there is some consideration of which circumstances individuals may revisit their understanding of their sexuality and corresponding identity label, there is practically no consideration of sexual minorities working to develop a repertoire of potential sexual identity labels for use with others. This finding is particularly interesting with consideration of identity authenticity; that is, the extent to which one’s disclosure of non-heterosexuality is consistent across people, places, and time (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Wells & Kline, 1987). Further, the idea of identifying alternate sexual identity labels seem to offer a possible extension to Narui’s (2011) assertion that GLB Asian/American college students often view disclosure decisions as opportunities to exercise agency as they make decisions about the circumstances under which they disclose. Specifically, GLBQ college students of color argue that the use of identity labels is also a form of agency. An example is when Bri suggests that she makes use of bisexual – a former sexual identity label with which she identified – to, in part, decide the degree to which she will educate another. Thus, findings seem to suggest that it is not just points of disclosure when agency can be invoked, but instead that some GLBQ college students of color also see negotiation of identity labels for subsequent disclosure as an additional opportunity to exert agency.

However, participants’ feelings that they needed to adopt – or at least have available – additional sexual identity labels also speak to the persistence of privilege around heterosexism. Specifically, in their articulation of alternate
sexual identity labels, in instance when others did not understand their preferred label, suggests that participants felt some obligation to ensuring that “straight” identified people could understand their sexual identity, even if it was a distortion of the identity with which the GLBQ college student of color preferred to identify. In this way, findings might temper the degree to which GLBQ college students of color could exercise agency, as noted by Narui (2011). This finding taken together with the two preceding findings also offer an opportunity to consider the ways in which social relations and multiple arenas of influence inform this process (Nunez, 2014). Specifically, although participants did suggest that there were times in which they adopted alternate sexual identity labels reflected less familiarity with particular non-heterosexual sexual identity labels by those to whom they chose to disclose their sexuality, they also provide support for the idea that GLBQ college students of color see such labels as tools, invoking an utilitarian understanding of sexuality label adoption that moves beyond adopting labels to encapsulate one’s identity for others.

**Paralleled Racial Identity Development**

Much of the extant research on racial and sexual minorities in college focuses on the experience of racism and homophobia within and without their various minority identity communities and how that ultimately shapes the way they understand and experience their sexual identity. However, what is often not considered is how GLBQ college students of color have their understanding of their racial identity modified or changed. While participants affirmed experiences
with issues of racism and homophobia consistent with extant research (Patton, 2011; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013a, 2013b), they also explicitly spoke to how such experiences helped them re-connect with their racial identities. Study participants offered an opportunity to consider how opportunities to intentionally focus on the development of their sexual identity can have one of two impacts: ignore implications of racial identity or re-embrace racial identity. It is this idea that encourages researchers to continually examine student experiences from an intersectional perspectives with particular attention to three of the six tenets: identity categories are multiple, intersecting and mutually constitutive (Smooth, 2013; Hames-García, 2011); context and power provide meaning (Hulko, 2009); and social identity categories’ relations should not be assumed as fixed (Anthias, 2013; Hancock, 2007).

Further, as participants chose to alter provided demographic questionnaires, they further showed their intentionality in articulating and sharing their various social identities. It is in this idea that the present study upholds intersectionality’s tenet that the relations of identities are not fixed, but rather open for investigation (Anthias, 2013; Hancock, 2007).

**Label Adoption Summary**

Findings on the sexual identity label adoption experiences of GLBQ college students of color extend much of the current literature related to sexual minorities’ willingness and reasons for identity label adoption. Specifically, findings demonstrate the ways in which GLBQ college students also understand
sexual identity label adoption as a part of their sexual identity development. However, findings also extended previous work with regard to agency and label modification. This was especially important as it we consider the degree to which GLBQ college students of color can exercise agency in their experiences in relation to a diversity of communities.

Sexuality Disclosure

In addition to sexual identity label adoption, this study provides important insights in the sexuality disclosure decisions of GLBQ college students of color. Specifically, findings were organized into three distinct areas: (a) motivations for disclosure, (b) impetus to conceal or not vocalize, and (c) factors influencing disclosure. Each is considered below in the context of extant literature.

Motivations for Disclosure

There were four primary motivations for disclosure that emerged. GLBQ college students of color suggested that their motivations for disclosing their sexuality to others often fit within one or more of the following four categories: (a) inviting another into the intimate, personal space of sexuality, (b) a desire to live more authentically than not disclosing would also, (c) an intentional challenge to heteronormativity, and (d) assertion of control of their life and life circumstances. Because of the overlap in these areas, they are discussed collectively rather than as completely separate ideas.

Sexuality studies scholars have frequently written about motivations for disclosure, frequently framing it as the idea of “coming out” of the proverbial
closet. This idea of coming out is now a cultural artifact, used to varying degrees by individuals within and without sexual minority communities. In articulating their motivations for disclosure, many participants affirm Balsam and Mohr’s (2007) claim that the degree to which one discloses his or her non-heterosexual identity can be a behavior measure of their adaptation to the stigma associated with being non-heterosexual. That is, participants often suggested that in some instances they come out to disrupt others enactment of heteronormativity. So, instead of allowing others to assume that they are heterosexuals, they intentionally seek to interrupt that idea that all people are heterosexual by deciding to identify publicly or privately as a sexual minority (Rosales & Gates, 2012).

In addition to affirming the usefulness of coming out and identity disclosure to interrupt heteronormativity, participants also spoke to the sharing of intimacy and assertion of control through identity disclosure. This idea most closely relates to inviting in as articulated by Moore (2011). Specifically, GLBQ college students in this study spoke of the agency they employed by being brave, authentic, and open enough to share their sexual identity with another (Narui, 2011). Here, participants, like Moore, speak to their ability to make decisions about sharing of the sexuality that is not predicated on society’s call for disclosure and potential self-othering. In total, the disclosure motivations of GLBQ college students of color seem to support, extend, and counter extant literature on identity disclosure, namely coming out and inviting in. One area that
may encourage this dialogue may result from the fact that much of the coming out literature was written with limited attention to social identities that would also inform the contexts within non-heterosexual people navigate as they make disclosure decisions.

**Impetus to Conceal or Not Vocalize**

Beyond the disclosure motivations of GLBQ college students of color, participants also provided insight into the reasons they intentionally conceal and/or unintentionally do not disclose their sexuality to others. Three primary considerations emerged: (a) fear of rejection, (b) loss of control, and (c) assumption that sexuality was understood or obvious to others. These three findings are collectively situated in the extant literature below.

First, participants spoke to their fear of being rejected and losing control because of future decisions to disclose their sexual identity label to others. In many ways, this continues to support others assertions that homosexuality is still stigmatized (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). Although not explicitly foregrounded in sexual identity development models (see *becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring* in D’Augelli, 1994), many scholars of racialized sexuality in higher education agree that students often do experience times at which their disclosure causes tension in familial and other social groups and may result in being disowned or rejected by important figures (Patton, 2011; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013a, 2013b).
Second, while Balsam and Mohr (2007) have suggested that GLBQ students of color have the ability to conceal their sexuality, findings extend this idea by adding that while many sexual minorities work to conceal their sexual identity, there are a number of individuals who unintentionally conceal their sexual identity. That is, while Balsam and Mohr argue that the extent to which LGB people explicitly disclose their sexual identity to others, there are a number of GLBQ college students of color in this study who found that over time the degree to which they thought their sexual identity was apparent to others was somewhat inconsistent with the feedback they had received from others.

Further, the idea that GLBQ college students of color may unintentionally conceal their sexuality from others because they have assumed that potential individuals for disclosure should already have known about their non-heterosexuality is an interesting finding and in some ways runs counter to the assertion that disclosure is a “prerequisite to the emergence of a positive homosexual identity” (Wells & Kline, 1987). While Wells and Kline suggest that intentional disclosure is essential for healthy identity development, much like most sexual identity development theorists (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989; D’Augelli, 1994), participants suggest that they have moved beyond this notion that explicit disclosure is the appropriate measure for one's embrace of their sexuality. Also participants believed that their comfort with their sexuality influenced how they lived their life and that as a result they anticipated their sexuality to be more apparent to others. This too complicates our understanding
desire to come out being associated with one’s feeling that heterosexist norms and homophobia continue to exist (Rosales & Gates, 2012). In fact, participants frequently spoke to their understanding of the persistence of heterosexism and homophobia with assigning their unintentional non-disclosure in the assumption that others could see aspects of their visual presentation that would suggest non-heterosexuality.

Factors Influencing Disclosure

Finally, GLBQ college students of color also provided a glimpse into additional factors that influence their disclosure decisions. Specifically, they shared that there was a prioritization of whom they told, review of their perceptions of and history with others with regard to receptiveness to sensitive and/or controversial information, and the ways in which people and various contexts shape their decisions. These ideas are situated in extant literature below.

The first two ideas are often considered in concert in the extant literature. Specifically, participants often discussed their intentional prioritization of others for disclosure and their assessment of the degree to which they believe others will be receptive to their sharing of their sexual identity in tandem. These ideas relate to extant literature in a number of ways. This idea is most closely associated with D’Augelli’s (1994) third process of developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity in which non-heterosexual individuals see disclosure decisions in relation to building a network of social support. As was asserted, GLBQ college students of color sought to use previous interactions with
individuals to determine the extent to which the individual would be likely to act as a source of support and receive one’s sexual identity without judgment. However, these points are distinct from extant literature. Study participants suggested that in addition to assessing one’s potential receptiveness to disclosure of a non-heterosexual sexual identity, they also used physical and emotional proximity in determine to whom they would disclose and when. While sexual identity development models have given some consideration to factors that influence disclosure, little, if any, attention has been provided to the way that space or distance influences one’s desire and need to disclose to another.

One could also say that the second idea of assessing one’s receptiveness to disclosure is reminiscent of identity tolerance of Cass’s (1979) model of homosexuality identity development, in which she asserts that individuals experience a heightened level of identity commitment and seek out others with positive perceptions of homosexuality. While similar of Cass’s assertion, it is different to that extent that Cass found that participants were generally seeking out others who identified as homosexual. In this present study, participants were less concerned with another’s sexual identity and their particular view on homosexuality. Instead participants desired to find individuals who could be open and non-judgmental, who instead of speaking negatively of homosexuality sought to support the GLBQ college student of color and offer a listening ear or personal affirmation.
Sexuality Disclosure in Summary

In total, this dissertation study’s participants provide much insight into the importance of sexuality disclosure amongst GLBQ college students of color. Specifically, participants provide new insight into motivations for disclosure, considerations that may guide or influence non-disclosure, and additional factors that GLBQ college students of color consider when making decisions about the who, what, where and how of disclosure. Consistent with previous literature and the tenets of intersectionality, these findings offer new opportunities to explore the ways in which social relations, power, and context are intimately linked to factors that inform the ways in which GLBQ college students navigate and negotiate sexual identity disclosure.

Limitations

In addition to delimitations noted in Chapter 1, this study has several important limitations to note. The first limitation relates to the data used. Given the use of extant interviews, there were several considerations that could not be addressed, although they were found to be of potential importance. Of particular important were the questions that were not included on the interview protocol. For example, there were no questions on the semi-structured interview protocol that asked study participants to discuss in depth their understanding of their racial identity or explicit opportunities for participants to discuss sexual practice that informed their sexuality and/or adopted sexual identity label. And, while interesting questions, the original scope of study and time that had passed since
the interviews were conducted made re-engageing the participants to address them impractical.

The second limitation focuses on the ability to uplift current events within analysis of the data. Specifically, because of the broad timeframe across which the interviews and focus groups occurred it was difficult to fully capture the external factors that might have influenced the degree to which participants found their race or sexuality to be more or less salient. For example, as I completed this dissertation for submission to my committee, the State of Indiana passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act that many have found to allow discrimination against sexual minorities. I'd imagine that this would have influenced sexuality salience and considerations of discrimination.

**Implications**

Even with the limitations noted above, this dissertation study’s findings offer important implications for practice, research, and theory. Each area is considered below.

**Implication for Practice**

The present study’s findings have implications for several campus constituencies. One group that might benefit from the results of this study is college counseling and consultation center staff members. The results of this study provide counseling staff in intimate look into how study participants conceptualize sexual identity naming and disclosure possibilities. Beyond recognizing reasons why these students may choose to adopt or not adopt a
sexual identity label, this dissertation study illuminates factors—that is, people, places, and things—that may hinder or support the adoption of sexual identity labels by GLBQ college students of color and their willingness to disclose such identities. Counselors might also benefit from a greater understanding of GLBQ college students of color’s motivations for disclosure. They might use these results to help GLBQ college students of color identify healthy and less healthy reasons for desiring to disclose one’s sexual behaviors, desires, and/or identity to others.

A second group that might benefit from the results of this study is LGBTQ center staff members. The results of this study provide staffers of LGBTQ centers with information regarding the ways in which the intersections of social identities influence the sexual identity label adoption and disclosure decisions of GLBQ college students of color. LGBTQ center staff members might use these results to develop more effective programming that responds to the unique needs and “discursive preferences” of GLBQ college students of color as additional sources of support. Their staff also may use these results to develop strategies to foster safe learning spaces that can be used to introduce GLBQ college students of color to the vast array of potential identity labels and subsequently support them in their decision to adopt or refuse the adoption of a sexual identity label.

A third group that might benefit from study results is mono- (e.g., Black, Latino) and multicultural center staff members. Similarly to staff of LGBTQ centers, this study provides cultural center staff with insight into how identity
intersections influence the lived experiences of GLBQ college students of color as well as their willingness to adopt sexual identity labels and disclose their sexuality and any corresponding labels. Mono- and multicultural center staff members might use these results to create more inclusive spaces and programming that provide GLBQ college student of color opportunities to more critically engage their understandings of identity intersections, attending to the concern of some GLBQ college students of color that their non-heterosexual identity hinders their participation in such cultural spaces.

Further this study’s use of intersectionality would also encourage staff across these three campus areas and others (i.e., women’s center, ethnic students programs) to consider how they might best partner to engage students at the intersections of their various identities in ways that promote one’s agency in naming and disclosing their sexuality to others. This would not only assist students in working through issues of identity, but also work to reinforce the idea that they are not seen by campus as discrete identities that are each the responsibility of a different unit on campus.

Implications for Research

The present study’s findings also have implications for future research. For example, this study explored how social identities and contexts influence the willingness of GLBQ college students of color to adopt sexual identity labels and found that there may be a gender difference in which labels are adopted. Future studies might investigate the benefits and challenges of adopting largely
accessible, mainstream non-heterosexual sexual identity labels versus those of less familiarity for particular populations of GLBQ college students of color. That is, how might the introduction of a larger array of possible sexual identity labels influence the ways in which GLBQ college students of color experience identity development? Future theorists might take up this question by assessing how the individuals who have adopted more common sexual identity labels are different and similar to those individuals with less common sexual identity labels on a number of identity development scales, including racial, gender, and sexual identity development, to name a few.

Also this study focused on how GLBQ college students of color make identity label adoption decisions. Future studies might consider the ways in which adopted identity labels differ from noted sexual behaviors and desires of students of color who identify as heterosexual and GLBQ. As some participants might find it easier to disclose sexual behaviors than adopt and disclose a sexual identity label other than exclusively heterosexual, researchers might consider how such decisions impact students’ self-construct and academic success. Qualitative researchers might explore this question by conducting interviews that specifically inquire about students’ preferred labels and sexual behaviors as well as how their self-construct is influenced by the congruence of label and behaviors. Quantitative researchers might employ a survey that measures a student’s sexual identity congruence (e.g., Kinsey Scale), self-construct, and academic success, including GPA and sense of belonging, among others.
Further, as this study employed intersectionality as a theoretical framework guiding analysis, it demonstrated the ways in which studies conceptualized without the explicit use of intersectionality allow particular identities to be taken for granted. Therefore, future empirical investigations of sexual identity label adoption and disclosure might employ intersectionality from the beginning of the study, allowing it to inform the development of the interview protocol. With this modification, researchers may consider additional questions that allow for them to investigate the ways in which students understand other social identities; for example, researchers might interrogate how students conceptualize and articulate their racial and/or gender identities in concert with their sexual identities.

Finally, intersectionality’s third level of analysis is historicity, which provides intentional attention to time. Future research interested in one’s sexual identity naming should provide more attention to time. For example, researchers might engage in a research design that is more longitudinal in nature, providing an opportunity for researchers to provide space for participants to articulate their conceptualization of sexual identity naming, or labels, and how that has changed over the course of an extended time period.

**Implications for Theory**

Finally, the present study offers implications for future theory. To date, literature on GLBQ students in college has largely focused on White, male student samples. The present study offered insight into the influence of various
social factors on the experiences of GLBQ college students of color. Data might be used to extend existing theories about the heterogeneity in experiences among GLBQ students in college.

Much of the literature on identity disclosure has framed the process of coming out as critical to student success and wellbeing (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). The present study presented findings that complicate the assumption that GLBQ college students of color must and should adopt sexual identity labels that are subsequently disclosed to others. Findings might be used to construct a theoretical model that is more sensitive to how multiple marginalized identities intersect to shape the ways in which GLBQ college students of color understand identity adoption and disclosure possibilities and their importance for academic success and wellbeing.

Furthermore, much of the extant literature has focused on the meaning GLBQ students make of their identity label, suggesting one nearly encompassing disclosure or “coming out” experience (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). The present study offered insight into the ways in which GLBQ college students of color make meaning of the identity disclosure process and use that meaning making to guide future opportunities for disclosure. The data might be used to re-conceptualize our understanding of sexual identity label adoption and disclosure processes as reciprocal, and perhaps unending.
Conclusion

As this study sought to interrogate the ways in which GLBQ college students of color articulated their understanding of and experience with sexual identity label adoption and disclosure, it extends the extant higher education literature on racial and sexual minorities in college as well as their experiences navigating sexual identity. By and large, participants suggested that they frequently adopt sexual identity labels, even if with the sole focus on increasing the likelihood that they could communicate their sexuality to others. When resisting label adoptions, GLBQ college students of color frequently suggested that such a stance was informed by their understanding of their own sexuality as well as the limitation of language and narratives to fully encompass all who adopt a specific label. Further, when contemplating the disclosure of their sexuality to others, participants highlighted the ways in which they consider a multitude of factors and spend an immense amount of time and energy to navigate and negotiate opportunities for disclosure, most frequently with the goal of establishing a deeper more intimate relationship with another or asserting their agency within the broader world against societal ills like heteronormativity, racism, and homophobia, among others.


149


Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Data Form

1. Name:
2. Preferred “Pseudonym” (i.e., fake name):
3. Race: *(select all that apply)*
   - □ White
   - □ Black
   - □ Hispanic/Latino
   - □ Asian/Pacific Islander
   - □ American Indian/Alaskan Native
3a. If Black, with which do you identify:
   - □ African American
   - □ African
   - □ Brazilian
   - □ Caribbean
   - □ Haitian
   - □ Jamaican
   - □ West Indian
   - □ Other: _______________________
3b. If Hispanic, with which do you identify:
   - □ Mexican or Mexican American
   - □ Cuban
   - □ Puerto Rican
   - □ Other: _______________________
3c. If Asian, with which do you identify:
   - □ Chinese
   - □ Japanese
   - □ Hmong
   - □ Hawaiian
   - □ Other: _______________________
4. Please indicate your sex: □ Male □ Female □ Transgender
5. Please indicate your sexual orientation:
   - □ Bisexual
   - □ Gay
   - □ Heterosexual
   - □ Lesbian
   - □ Queer
   - □ Other: _______________________
6. As of today, how old are you (in years): _____
7. What is your current classification in college □ Freshman/1st year □ Sophomore/2nd year
□ Junior/3rd year □ Senior/4th year □ Senior/5 or more years □ Graduate Student

8. What is your primary academic major(s)?

____________________________________

9. What is your primary academic minor(s)?

____________________________________

10. What is the highest level of education that your mother/father completed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did not finish high school</th>
<th>Mom</th>
<th>Dad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate from high school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended some college, but did not complete degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earned an associate’s degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earned a bachelor’s degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earned a graduate degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

**Question One**
- Tell me/us a little about yourself and your background.
  - Probe for hometown, family structure, # of siblings etc.

**Question Two**
- In your own words, how do you identify in terms of your sexual orientation and can you share “why” you use the words you use?
  - Probe for clarification of words like gay, down-low, ‘just me’ using “Can you say more?” or “Can you explain what you mean?”
- To what extent, if any, are you “out” to others while in college, including family, friends, and other communities that are important to you?
  - Be sure to probe for “When did you first disclose your sexual orientation to someone else? And can you share how this happened?”
  - Probe by asking “Were you out at all in high school?”
- Are there individuals with whom you have not disclosed, but rather concealed your sexual orientation? And can you share why this is the case?
  - If “NO,” be sure to probe why they might NOT disclose their sexual identity to someone.
Question Three

- How has college been for you, since enrolling, in terms of the academic and social life?
  
  o Probe for stories about their experiences using “Can you give me an example?” or “Can you recall a time when…?”

- How often do you think about your race/ethnicity in college and how often do you think about your sexual orientation in college?
  
  o Probe for stories and triggers (i.e., what causes them to think about their identities)

Question Four

- Have you ever lived in a campus residence hall?
  
  o If “YES,” ask: “Describe your experiences living in the residence halls. Did you ever have challenges or face incidents of racism and / or homophobia in the hall?”
  
  o If “NO,” go to next question.

Question Five

- Tell me about your involvement on campus. Are you involved in any clubs or organizations and be sure to share any leadership positions?
  
  o Has your race and/or sexual orientation ever mattered in these organizations?
  
  o If “YES,” probe for stories and examples.
Question Six

- Since coming to college, have you had any experiences with harassment, physical assault, or bullying?
- Do you feel safe and welcomed at this university?
- When you have challenging moments in college, whom have you sought out for support?

Question Seven

- So tell me/us about your love life and romantic experiences while in college.
- Have there been any difficulties in this area and, if so, why?