

April 2018

Understanding the relationship between sexual identity, life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and online community use

Aaliyah L. Gray
Stetson University, agray@stetson.edu

Erin W. Moore
Stetson University, ewmoore@stetson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gray, Aaliyah L. and Moore, Erin W. (2018) "Understanding the relationship between sexual identity, life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and online community use," *Modern Psychological Studies*: Vol. 23 : No. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps/vol23/iss2/4>

This articles is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals, Magazines, and Newsletters at UTC Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Psychological Studies by an authorized editor of UTC Scholar. For more information, please contact scholar@utc.edu.

Abstract

Identity-based frameworks allow for a diverse look at sexuality because they consider non-binary groups that are typically excluded. This study sought to address gaps in LGBQ research by utilizing a diverse sample of sexual identities. It was hypothesized that asexual, demisexual, polysexual, and pansexual individuals would report lower levels of life satisfaction and psychological well-being, more frequent support-seeking internet use, and lower sense of community compared to gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. A total of 284 individuals completed an online survey. Results suggest that experiences of life satisfaction, well-being, and sense of community are more nuanced than considered in past research. Further research is needed to create more inclusive means of intervention for LGBQ individuals.

Keywords: sexual identity, LGBQ, life satisfaction, distress, sense of community, internet use

Understanding the Relationship Between Sexual Identity,
Life Satisfaction, Psychological Well-Being, and Online Community Use

Research focusing on sexual minority individuals has been a priority of the field of psychology for many years (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008; Anderson & Adley, 1997; APA, 2011; Mayer et al., 2008). *Sexual minority* is a term referring to the membership of groups and communities that engage in sexual behavior perceived as counter-mainstream, such as non-heterosexual sexual activity, same-sex attraction, or identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) (Mutstanski, 2015; UC Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center, 2013). Mayer et al. (2008) suggested that increased focus on sexual minority groups began with Alfred Kinsey's work on sexual expression, and, by 1980, providing health services to these individuals was a primary goal for many clinics, mental health programs, and health providers due to the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic. This concern about sexual minority individuals, however, was narrow in focus. Much research on sexuality focused on those identifying as gay – men attracted to men – and lesbian – women attracted to women – excluding sexualities that do not fit within the traditional conceptualization of sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation is largely perceived to exist as binary with exclusively heterosexual attraction and exclusively gay/lesbian attraction representing polar boundaries (APA, 2008; Blosnich, Nasuti, Mays, & Cochran, 2016; Callis, 2014; Galupo, Davis, Gryniewicz, & Mitchell, 2014). As a result of this thinking, research on the sexual minority experience has been measured relative to heterosexuality; individuals either experience opposite-sex attraction or they do not (Galupo et al., 2014). Using only sexual orientation to understand the sexual minority experience has many negative implications for sexuality research. For example, in this model of

sexuality, bisexual individuals are put in-between heterosexual attraction and gay/lesbian attraction. Individuals experiencing this type of sexual attraction are perceived by others to experience a mix of heterosexual and gay or lesbian desires, or to eventually transition from one form of attraction to the other – a negative stereotype about bisexuality (Rostosky, Riggle, Pascale-Hague, & McCants, 2010). Further, both pansexual and polysexual sexual attraction are considered to be types of bisexuality rather than separate orientations (Island Sexual Health, 2014), while asexuality is considered the absence of both heterosexual and gay/lesbian attraction rather than an orientation separate from ideas about either. Due to this binary framework, sexualities that are not heterosexual or gay/lesbian have been little studied and understood in general.

More recently, however, bisexuality has been increasingly explored as a part of sexual minority research (Blosnich et al., 2016; Bruce, Harper, & Bauermeister, 2015; Callis, 2014; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Diamond & Lucas, 2004; Frost & Meyer, 2012; Galupo et al., 2014; Gillespie, Frederick, Harari, & Grov, 2015; Perales, 2016; Powdthavee & Wooden, 2014; Przedworski et al., 2015; Rostosky et al., 2010; Sells, 2013; Sutter & Perrin, 2016). In response to gender studies heavily influencing recent research about sexuality, bisexuality has come to be defined in non-binary terms as the attraction to at least two genders (Callis, 2014; Mayer et al., 2008; UC Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center, 2013). Similarly, this greater understanding about gender and sexuality has also lent itself to the increased discussion of other non-binary sexualities (Callis, 2014). For example, asexuality – the lack of sexual attraction – and pansexuality – attraction to all genders – are other sexualities that have received more visibility in recent psychological research (Callis, 2013; Galupo et al., 2014; Hinderliter, 2009; Island Sexual Health, 2014; MacNeela & Murphy, 2011; UC Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center,

2013). Still, demisexuality – in which sexual attraction only forms after emotional bonding with an individual – and polysexuality – attraction to many genders – are virtually invisible in psychological research (Demisexuality Resource Center, 2015; Island Sexual Health, 2014). According to Mayer et al. (2008), the relative invisibility of these non-binary sexualities is the result of sexual minority research being based on sexual orientation rather than sexual identity.

Viewing sexuality from a binary framework has negative implications for sexual minority research because it fails to realize the complexities of the sexual minority experience. In a qualitative study conducted by Galupo et al. (2014), participants who were not exclusively gay, lesbian, or bisexual indicated feeling unrepresented in sexual orientation scales frequently used in research. In the words of one participant, many existing measures “[leave] no space for pansexual/fluid individuals” because those sexual identities are not viewed as sexual orientations (Galupo et al., 2014, p. 446). Accounting for complexities within sexuality is vital to conducting comprehensive research about sexual minority experiences and needs.

Approaching sexual minority research from an identity-based framework would allow for research that is comprehensive and more reflective of sexual minority individuals. Sexual identity is characterized by exploration, fluidity, and change (Mayer et al., 2008; Sells, 2013). It relies on self-identification, as noted by Galupo et al. (2014), one of the only studies to extensively discuss a sexual identity framework to research. In this qualitative study, the researchers mentioned that self-identification was primary for participants; sexual orientation was secondary, if used at all. In fact, participants rejected use of the terms used in the orientation-based scales. They preferred to use a variety of terms including asexual, bisexual, demisexual, and pansexual to describe their sexual identities, terms often neglected in sexual orientation research. Acknowledgement of the individualistic nature of sexual attraction,

therefore, must be incorporated into research by utilizing sexual identity rather than sexual orientation. Studies like the one conducted by Galupo et al. allow individuals who are largely invisible in research to contribute to the field's understanding of sexual minority experiences. Without these individuals, current understandings of the relationship between sexuality and psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and the role of community in the sexual minority experience must be questioned.

One major issue in sexual minority research is that much of the research has focused on the particular differences between gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals and their heterosexual peers. For example, research suggests that sexual minority status is associated with poorer subjective well-being and mental health as well as increased suicidality due to many factors including minority stress, discrimination, and victimization; but, studies supporting these findings tend to focus on gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals (Bruce et al., 2015; Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Perales, 2016; Przedworski et al., 2015; Sells, 2013). More specifically, Sutter and Perrin (2016) suggested that LGBTQ individuals show higher rates of anxiety, mood, and substance use disorders than heterosexual individuals. More research, therefore, is needed that explores the differences between asexual, demisexual, pansexual, and polysexual individuals, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals to understand variance that may exist in the experiences of sexual minorities as some research suggest differences between gay, lesbian, and bisexual, and "other" exist.

Those identified in research as "other" (e.g., queer, questioning, other) differ in experiences from gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. Gay and lesbian individuals, for example, score higher than bisexuals and those grouped as "other" on life satisfaction and psychological well-being measures, although these findings are mixed (Perales, 2016;

Powdthavee & Wooden, 2014). Without clarification of “other,” however, it is not appropriate to generalize these findings to asexuals, demisexuals, polysexuals, and pansexuals, although it is clear that levels of vulnerability to psychological distress and life dissatisfaction vary amongst sexual minority groups.

Vulnerability to psychological distress and life dissatisfaction is related to isolation and small social networks (Bruce et al., 2015; Sells, 2013). Frost and Meyer (2012) suggested that connectedness to a community is an extension of the inherent human need to belong and is associated with positive outcomes. Support from friends, especially from friends with similar experiences, is associated with decreased emotional distress, and increased life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Bruce et al., 2015; Diamond & Lucas, 2004; Gillespie et al., 2015). The likelihood of isolation and discrimination for sexual minority individuals, however, is higher compared to heterosexual peers (Hanckel & Morris, 2014). Lack of connection to the larger lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGB) community further limits access to resources that can promote positive outcomes for sexual minority individuals (Bruce et al., 2015).

Building friendships within the larger LGBQ community, however, is a struggle for some sexual identities. Even bisexuals, despite visibility in name, face isolation within the LGBQ community. Negative attitudes towards bisexuals result in suspicion, invalidation, and rejection from both heterosexual and non-heterosexual peers, which may explain lower life satisfaction and psychological well-being scores compared to gay and lesbian individuals (Rostosky et al., 2010). Similar experiences are described by MacNeela and Murphy (2011). Asexual participants in their study anticipated invalidation from others and expressed feeling outside the mainstream of society. Invalidation as a shared experience between bisexual and asexual individuals indicates that understanding the LGBQ community with regards to sexual minority groups is

important to furthering sexual minority research as a whole.

Research suggests that individuals who face greater degrees of isolation may be more likely to use the internet to find social support (MacNeela & Murphy, 2011; Sells, 2013). Many sexual minority individuals report several purposes for internet use including creating a positive identity, finding support, and fostering a sense of community (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Frost & Meyer, 2012; Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Sells, 2013). MacNeela and Murphy (2011) found that online communities were a primary source of support for some asexual individuals and functioned as a source of community in light of isolation and invisibility even for individuals minimally invested in online interaction. Accordingly, there is a need for more research on how the internet possibly remedies isolation experienced by sexualities that are not socially or empirically visible, or have been little researched.

Additionally, the role of age on sexual minority individuals must be examined in research on this topic. According to Perales (2016), psychological distress and poorer subjective well-being are most reported during adolescence and young adulthood among those ages 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000). Over time, psychological distress and life dissatisfaction fade, and levels of subjective well-being increase. Consequently, younger individuals navigating their sexual identity may be more vulnerable to psychological distress and life dissatisfaction than older sexual minority individuals. Age, therefore, should be considered in sexual minority research when recruiting adult populations.

There is a clear need to adopt a sexual identity approach to research on sexual minority individuals and their experiences. Providing a platform for asexual, demisexual, pansexual, and polysexual individuals will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of sexuality and its complexities. The current study sought to address the gaps in sexual minority research by

utilizing a sample composed of diverse sexual identities, including heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, demisexual, polysexual, and pansexual individuals, and focusing on the factors: life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and internet/online community use.

Therefore, it was hypothesized that:

1. asexual, demisexual, polysexual, and pansexual individuals would report lower levels of life satisfaction and psychological well-being than gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals;
2. asexual, demisexual, polysexual, and pansexual individuals would report feeling less connected to the LGBTQ community than gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals; and,
3. asexual, demisexual, polysexual, and pansexual individuals would report using the internet to seek social support more frequently than those identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals.

Method

Participants

According to *a priori* G*Power analyses, 246 participants were needed to be recruited in order to achieve sufficient statistical power (.80) to detect a medium effect size. To be eligible to participate, individuals needed to be at least 18 years old and identify as one of the following sexualities: asexual, demisexual, polysexual, pansexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, or heterosexual. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling from Reddit.com.

Reddit.com was an appropriate site for this research because of the subreddit structure. Subreddits are user-created and maintained forum-like pages of Reddit dedicated to a specific topic. Subreddits function as communities where users are able to interact with each other through posts and comments to these posts. The subreddits utilized for recruitment in this study were chosen for their relatively large number of subscribers and high activity (indicated by users

online at any given moment). Subreddits of specific sexual identity groups were targeted for recruitment to ensure representation of each group focused on in this study. An advertisement was posted on the following subreddit pages: /r/participants, /r/samplesize, /r/lgbt, /r/ainbow, /r/bisexual, /r/pansexual, /r/asexual, and /r/actuallesbians. Subreddits /r/participants and /r/samplesize are pages dedicated to research participation; these subreddits were included to ensure some heterosexual participation. Subreddits /r/lgbt and /r/ainbow are pages generally dedicated to the LGBTQ community. The subreddits /r/bisexual, /r/pansexual, /r/asexual, and /r/actuallesbians are dedicated to specific sexual identity groups; for example, /r/bisexual specifically caters to non-binary sexualities, and /r/actuallesbians caters to cis and trans women who experience attraction to women.

The advertisement posted to reddit explained both the nature of the study and compensation, which was entry into a lottery to win one of two \$25 Amazon gift cards. Approval for all study procedures was obtained from the university's institutional review board. A total of 607 participants was recruited, but after removal of 10 participants who identified as "other" (not belonging to one of the eight sexual identity groups under study), 35 individuals who were under 18 years old, and 278 incomplete responses, the final analytical sample consisted of 284 participants.

Asexual individuals ($n = 123$, 43.3%) were the most represented sexual identity group in this study, followed by lesbian ($n = 44$, 15.5%), pansexual ($n = 38$, 13.4%), heterosexual ($n = 33$, 11.6%), and bisexual individuals ($n = 22$, 7.7%). The least represented groups included gay ($n = 8$, 2.8%), demisexual ($n = 12$, 4.2%), and polysexual individuals ($n = 4$, 1.4%). The majority of the sample was female ($n = 184$, 64.8%), with 34.5% ($n = 98$) identifying as male, and 0.4% ($n = 1$) as intersex. Regarding gender, most ($n = 219$, 77.1%) reported being

cisgender; 7.4% ($n = 21$) reported being transgender, and 15.5% ($n = 44$) characterized their gender as nonbinary. The majority ($n = 224$, 78.9%) of the sample was White. The rest of the sample indicated their race as Black ($n = 3$, 1.1%), Hispanic/Latin ($n = 12$, 4.2%), Asian ($n = 16$, 5.6%), Middle Eastern ($n = 1$, 0.4%), or multiracial ($n = 28$, 9.9%). The sample was relatively young with the average age being 23.59 ($SD = 4.72$, range = 18-40). A large part of the sample had attended higher education, indicating their education level as some college with no degree ($n = 103$, 36.3%) or having earned an Associate's ($n = 26$, 9.2%), Bachelor's ($n = 89$, 31.3%), or a graduate degree ($n = 30$, 10.6%). The rest of the sample indicated their education level as attending some high school ($n = 7$, 2.5%) or finishing high school/GED ($n = 29$, 10.2%). About half ($n = 167$, 58.8%) of the sample indicated that they were not in a relationship or dating. Other individuals in the sample were casually dating ($n = 23$, 8.1%), in an open relationship ($n = 19$, 6.7%), in a committed relationship but not living together ($n = 25$, 8.8%), or in a committed relationship and living together ($n = 48$, 16.9%); two individuals (0.7%) were not represented by any of these relationship types.

Research Design

This study used an ex post facto single-factor design investigating the relationship between sexual identity and multiple outcomes variables. The independent variable was sexual identity, and participants self-selected into one of eight groups: asexual, demisexual, polysexual, pansexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, or heterosexual. Outcome variables included life satisfaction, psychological well-being, sense of connection of the LGBTQ community, and internet use behaviors.

Measures

Index of Psychological Distress (Moore et al., 2004). Participants completed the Index

of Psychological Distress, a six-item measure that assesses nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, worthlessness, sadness, and effort to live. This index was used to measure psychological well-being. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Very Often*) for how frequently each feeling has been experienced over the last 30 days (i.e., “In the last 30 days, how often have you felt nervous?”). Items were averaged together to create an overall score; higher scores indicated lower psychological well-being. It was found to have good internal consistency ($\alpha = .86$).

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, 1985). The SLWS is a five-item measure that assessed participants’ evaluation of their life. This measure was used to indicate how dissatisfied participants are with life. Items (i.e., “In most ways my life is close to my ideal.”) were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*), and summed to create an overall score. Higher scores indicated more satisfaction with life. The scale was found to have excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$).

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Positive Identity Measure (LGB-PIM; Riggle, Mohr, Rostosky, Fingerhut, & Balsam, 2014). The LGB-PIM is a 25-item measure that assessed dimensions of identity development in lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. This study used the five items from the Community subscale to measure participants’ perceptions of social support and friendships within the LGB community; it was only completed by individuals who indicated a sexuality other than heterosexual in the current study. Items (i.e., “I feel supported by the LGB community.”) were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*) and averaged together to create an overall score; higher scores indicated a greater sense of community. It was found to have good internal consistency ($\alpha = .85$).

Two items were developed to measure internet use for the purposes of seeking social

support. The first item was of forced choice format assessing how participants viewed their frequency of internet use to socialize with others, seek social support, and make friends. Answer options included *Never*, *Sometimes*, and *Frequently*. The second item was open-ended instructing participants to self-report how many hours in the past week they have used the internet to socialize with others, seek social support, and make friends. Further, one item was developed to assess the likeliness of a participant to have offline friends of the same sexual identity. Answer options included *None of them*, *A few of them*, and *Mostly all of them*. Participants also completed demographic items assessing sex, gender, race, level of education, relationship status, and age. Additionally, two items were included as attention checks: “Select ‘2’ as your response for this item” and a true/false item: “The year is 2026.”

Procedure

Participants completed an online survey created using KwikSurveys after providing informed consent. Participants first indicated their sexuality and skip-logic was applied regarding which scales they would complete. The community subscale of LGB-PIM followed by the SWLS, the Index of Psychological Distress, and remaining questions were given to non-heterosexual participants. For heterosexual participants, the LGB-PIM subscale was not included. The survey ended with demographic questions. Completion of the survey took 10-15 minutes. Upon submitting their responses, participants were redirected to a separate webpage where they had the option to provide their email address to be entered in the lottery for compensation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 24. Preliminary analyses indicated that age was not significantly linearly related to life satisfaction ($r = .07$, $p = .25$) or psychological well-being ($r =$

-.10, $p = .10$); age, therefore, was not used as a covariate in any analyses. Three independent t -tests were performed to determine if participants who identified as asexual, demisexual, polysexual, or pansexual reported lower levels of life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and sense of community than those who identified as bisexual, gay, or lesbian. Two one-way ANOVAs were performed to compare individual group differences among gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, demisexual, polysexual, and pansexual individuals on psychological well-being and life satisfaction with heterosexual individuals included as a comparison group. A one-way ANOVA was used to determine whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, demisexual, polysexual, and pansexual individuals reported differences in connection to the LGBQ community. A chi square and one-way ANOVA were used to determine whether identifying as asexual, demisexual, polysexual, or pansexual was associated with more support-seeking internet use compared to bisexual, gay, lesbian, and heterosexual individuals. As an exploratory analysis, a chi-square was used to identify any association between sexual identity and the likelihood of having offline friends of the same sexual identity.

Results

Life Satisfaction and Psychological Well-Being

An independent t -test found no significant difference between those who identified as gay, lesbian, and bisexual and those who identified as asexual, demisexual, pansexual, and polysexual regarding their life satisfaction, $t(249) = -0.67, p = .50$. A one-way ANOVA was used to compare differences between the individual sexual identity groups. Homogeneity of variance was violated and the Welch's F correction was used. There was a small significant difference between sexual identity groups regarding life satisfaction scores, $F(7, 32.961) = 2.941, p = .02, \omega^2 = .03$. Post hoc analyses using Games-Howell indicated that the average life

satisfaction score for asexual individuals ($M = 20.12$, $SD = 7.65$, $p = .05$) and gay individuals ($M = 16.36$, $SD = 4.96$, $p = .04$) were significantly lower than mean scores for heterosexual individuals ($M = 24.09$, $SD = 5.79$). See Table 1 for full means and standard deviations for all groups.

There was no significant difference between dichotomized groups on psychological well-being, $t(249) = 0.84$, $p = .40$. When analyzed with ANOVA, there was a small but significant difference between groups on psychological well-being, $F(7, 276) = 2.790$, $p = .01$, $\omega^2 = .04$. Post hoc analyses using Hochberg indicated that the average well-being scores for demisexual individuals ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.73$) were significantly higher than the average score for heterosexual individuals ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.84$), $p = .05$.

Sense of Community

An independent t -test found a significant difference between groups, $t(249) = 5.08$, $p < .001$, $r = .32$; asexual, demisexual, pansexual, and polysexual individuals reported significantly lower sense of community scores ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.19$) compared to gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.41$). When analyzed with ANOVA, there was a violation of homogeneity; Welch's F correction was used. There was a large significant difference between groups on community scores, $F(6, 25.909) = 8.653$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .15$. Post hoc analyses using Games-Howell indicated that the average sense of community score for asexual individuals ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.10$) was significantly lower than gay ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 0.82$, $p = .01$), lesbian ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.41$, $p < .001$), and pansexual ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.04$, $p < .001$) individuals.

About half (48.2%, $n = 137$) of the participants reported having no friends in their offline life of the same sexual identity as them; 40.5% ($n = 115$) reported having some friends of the same sexual identity, and 11.3% ($n = 32$) reported that all of their offline friends were of the

same sexual identity as them. There was a significant association between sexual identity and the likeliness of having offline friends of the same sexual identity, $\chi^2(14) = 207.19, p < .001$.

Participants who identified as demisexual or asexual were significantly more likely to not have any offline friends of the same sexual identity. Bisexual, lesbian, and pansexual individuals were significantly more likely to have a few friends of the same sexual identity. Further, identifying as heterosexual was associated with significantly higher likeliness of having all offline friends of the same sexuality.

Online Community Use

Approximately half of the sample ($n = 145, 51.1\%$) reported that they sometimes use the internet to socialize, seek support, and make friends; 36.6% ($n = 104$) reported frequently using the internet for these reasons, and 11.6% ($n = 33$) reported never using the internet for these reasons. There was no significant association between sexual identity and the perceived frequency of time spent online, $\chi^2(14) = 12.85, p = .54$. Average hours spent online was highest ($M = 19.86, SD = 21.91$) for bisexual individuals. Averages for lesbian ($M = 14.01, SD = 18.55$), asexual ($M = 13.57, SD = 15.95$), pansexual ($M = 13.32, SD = 15.85$), and demisexual ($M = 12.83, SD = 15.53$) individuals followed. Gay ($M = 10.75, SD = 14.38$), heterosexual ($M = 9.22, SD = 12.14$), and polysexual ($M = 8.00, SD = 9.27$) individuals reported the lowest averages. There was no significant difference between groups when considering the amount of hours spent online, $F(7, 267) = 0.87, p = .53$.

Discussion

This study sought to address gaps in sexual minority research by exploring the relationship between sexual identity and life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and online community use. It was hypothesized that asexual, demisexual, polysexual, and pansexual

individuals would report lower levels of life satisfaction when compared to gay, lesbian, bisexual individuals; this hypothesis was not fully supported. When compared dichotomously, there was no notable difference between the two groups, suggesting no intergroup difference as originally conceptualized between the two. Compared to heterosexuals, all non-heterosexual groups were less satisfied with life when compared individually, although not all significantly; only asexual and gay individuals were found to be significantly less satisfied with life compared to heterosexuals. There were differences amongst sexual minority groups that were unexpected; pansexuals were more satisfied with life compared to lesbians and bisexuals, but polysexual and gay individuals were the least satisfied groups. These findings are inconsistent with previous research that suggests both pansexual and bisexual individuals would be less satisfied with life compared to lesbian and gay individuals, as these groups tend to score higher than bisexuals and those grouped as “other” (i.e., pansexual) on life satisfaction measures (Perales, 2016; Powdthavee & Wooden, 2014). It is clear that further studies with larger representation across sexual identities are needed to clarify and expand on these findings. Recruiting larger groups of each sexual identity could yield clearer statistical differences and better explain variance related to sexual identity.

It was hypothesized that asexual, demisexual, polysexual, and pansexual individuals would report lower levels of psychological well-being than gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. This hypothesis was not fully supported. Differences between the groups when separated into two were not significant. Compared to all other groups heterosexual participants reported lower distress scores indicating higher levels of psychological well-being. Specifically, heterosexual individuals reported significantly higher levels of psychological well-being when compared to demisexuals. This is consistent with previous research that suggests that

heterosexuality is associated with better life outcomes (Perales, 2016). Very little research, however, has explored demisexuality to give insight into this finding. Polysexual individuals reported lower levels of psychological well-being compared to all other groups, and pansexuals were more distressed when compared to gay and lesbian individuals. As previous research suggested, gay and lesbian individuals tended to score higher than bisexuals and those grouped as “other” on psychological well-being measures (Perales, 2016; Powdthavee & Wooden, 2014). “Other” in these previous studies could include individuals who are polysexual or pansexual. More research is needed to explore these findings. Furthermore, inconsistent with the hypothesis and some previous research, asexuals reported higher levels of psychological well-being than bisexuals. There could be many reasons for this inconsistency. For one, bisexuals were one of the least represented in the sample. Another reason could be that negative attitudes about bisexuality perpetuated by both individuals within the LGBQ community and those who are heterosexual contribute to distress and lower psychological well-being (Rostosky et al., 2010). Further research with a larger population of bisexual individuals could provide clearer findings.

It was hypothesized that asexual, demisexual, polysexual, and pansexual individuals would report feeling less connected to the LGBQ community than gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. This hypothesis was not fully supported as well. A significant difference was found when asexual, demisexual, polysexual, and pansexual individuals were compared to gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. This difference could be the result of the exclusion from the LGBQ community felt by asexuals (MacNeela & Murphy, 2011) considering the larger representation of asexual in the sample compared to other groups. This difference could also indicate that there is an effect of lack of representation on sense of community, though more research is needed with greater representation of each group to clarify these results.

When groups were compared against each other, it was only found to be significant that asexuals felt less connected to the LGBTQ community when compared to gay, lesbian, and pansexual individuals. However, groups averages indicated that demisexual and polysexual individuals also felt less connected to the LGBTQ community. Asexuals may feel less connected to the LGBTQ community because they expect invalidation by others and feel that they are outsiders (MacNeela & Murphy, 2011). This may also be true of demisexual and polysexuals. Interestingly, pansexuals felt more connected to the LGBTQ community compared to bisexual individuals. According to Rostosky et al. (2010), bisexuals face rejection and isolation from both heterosexual and non-heterosexual peers, which may explain why they feel less connected to the LGBTQ community compared to pansexuals, who are largely underrepresented in research. Further research into sense of connection to the LGBTQ community is needed as lack of connection limits access to resources that can promote positive outcomes regarding general well-being (Bruce et al., 2015).

According to Hanckel and Morris (2014), the likelihood of isolation for sexual minority individuals is higher compared to their heterosexual peers. This study's findings were consistent with this previous study as being heterosexual was associated with having all offline friends of the same sexual identity while identifying as asexual and demisexual was associated with a greater likelihood of having no offline friends of the same sexual identity. Lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual individuals were likely to report having some friends of the same identity. This is consistent with Hanckel and Morris (2014), who suggested that the isolation sexual minority individuals face is mostly local (i.e., offline). Having friends of similar experiences, however, is associated with decreased emotional distress, increased life satisfaction, and psychological well-being (Bruce et al., 2015; Diamond & Lucas, 2004; Gillespie et al., 2015). Further research,

therefore, should recruit larger groups across sexual identities to find stronger associations between sexuality and the likeliness of having similar local friends.

Most participants indicated that they sometimes used the internet to seeking support, socialize, and make friends. Gillespie et al. (2015) suggested that friendships satisfy many important needs in our lives including the need to bond with similar people; the internet, specifically online communities, make fulfilling this need easier. For sexual minority individuals, the internet provides means to create a positive identity, find support, and foster a sense of community (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Frost & Meyer, 2012; Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Sells, 2013). In this study, bisexuals reported the largest average of hours spent seeking support, socializing, and making friends online. Research suggests that individuals who face greater degrees of isolation may be more likely to use the internet to find social support, and bisexuals are subject to isolation from both heterosexual and non-heterosexual peers (MacNeela & Murphy, 2011; Rostosky et al., 2010; Sells, 2013). Differences in online use habits were not significant, however. This may have occurred because participants were recruited specifically on a community-based website; Reddit attracts active internet users that may generally spend more time online. To clarify these findings, more balanced recruitment across sexual identities is necessary. Further research should recruit individuals from both offline and online sources. Galupo et al. (2014), for example, used snowball sampling to recruit participants from multiple online sites and local/offline sites. Future research should consider other recruiting approaches.

Limitations

This study was not without limitations. The primary limitation of this study was the composition of the sample. Almost half of the participants were asexual while other sexual identity groups were very small in size (e.g., polysexuals). Balanced recruitment should be

considered for future research. Using quota sampling, for example, could have created groups of more equivalent sizes in this study. The source of recruitment was another limitation.

Participants were recruited entirely online and from only one site. Recruiting from a community-based website (i.e., Reddit) could have impacted how many hours participants were online in general. Recruiting offline users in addition to online users would better represent online-use patterns. Multiple on-/off-line sites should be considered for future research. Further, difficulty in recruiting from some groups may also be a result of individuals' reluctance to participate in research focused on sexual identity; users on multiple subreddits that were recruited from in this study demonstrated a general distrust towards researchers. Many users felt that they would be misrepresented or stereotyped in research. Conducting research that prioritizes diversity could reduce this feeling in future research.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to address gaps in sexual minority research and contribute to expanding the body of literature regarding sexual minority individuals. As demonstrated by this study, not all sexual identity groups have the same experiences regarding life satisfaction, psychological well-being, or sense of community. Making an effort to increase diversity by including underrepresented sexual identities in psychological research is a necessary step to providing more comprehensive resources to sexual minority individuals. Further research in this area of study can be applied to creating more inclusive means of intervention that improves psychological well-being, increases life satisfaction, and actively meets the needs of underrepresented sexual identities.

References

- American Psychological Association (APA). (2008). *Answers to your questions: For a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/topics/orientation.pdf>
- American Psychological Association (APA). (2011). *APA policy statements on lesbian, gay, bisexual, & transgender concerns*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/booklet.pdf>
- Anderson, C. W., & Adley, A. R. (1997). *Gay and lesbian issues: Abstracts of the psychological and behavioral literature, 1985-1996*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/biblio.aspx>
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469-480. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>
- Blosnich, J. R., Nasuti, L. J., Mays, V. M., & Cochran, S. D. (2016). Suicidality and sexual orientation: Characteristics of symptom severity, disclosure, and timing across the life course. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 86(1), 69-78. doi: 10.1037/ort0000112
- Bruce, D., Harper, G. W., & Bauermeister, J. A. (2015). Minority stress, positive identity development, and depressive symptoms: Implications for resilience among sexual minority male youth. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 2(3), 287-296. doi: 10.1037/sgd0000128
- Callis, A. S. (2014). Bisexual, pansexual, queer: Non-binary identities and the sexual borderlands. *Sexualities*, 17(1/2), 63-80. doi: 10.1177/1363260713511094
- Craig, S. L., & McInroy, L. (2014). You can form a part of yourself online: The influence of new

- media on identity development and coming out for LGBTQ youth. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 18(1), 95-109. doi: 10.1080/19359705.2013.777007
- Demisexuality Resource Center. (2015). *What is demisexuality?* Retrieved from <http://demisexuality.org/articles/what-is-demisexuality/>
- Diamond, L. M., & Lucas, S. (2004). Sexual-minority and heterosexual youths' peer relationships: Experiences, expectations, and implications for well-being. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 14(3), 313-340. doi: 10.1111/j.1532-7795.2004.00077.x
- Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 49(1), 71-75. doi: 10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13
- Frost, D., & Meyer, I. (2012). Measuring community connectedness among diverse sexual minority populations. *Journal of Sex Research*, 49(1), 36-49. doi: 10.1080/00224499.201.565427
- Galupo, M. P., Davis, K. S., Gryniewicz, A. L., & Mitchell, R. C. (2014). Conceptualization of sexual orientation identity among sexual minorities: Patterns across sexual and gender identity. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 14(3-4), 433-456. doi: 10.1080/15299716.2014.933466
- Gillespie, B. J., Frederick, D., Harari, L., & Grov, C. (2015). Homophily, close friendship, and life satisfaction among gay, lesbian, heterosexual, and bisexual men and women. *PLoS ONE*, 10(6), doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0128900
- Hanckel, B., & Morris, A. (2014). Finding community and contesting heteronormativity: Queer young people's engagement in an Australian online community. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(7), 872-886. doi: 10.1080/13676261.2013.878792
- Hinderliter, A. C. (2009). Methodological issues for studying asexuality. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 38(6), 619-621. doi: 10.1007/s10508-009-9502-x

- Island Sexual Health. (2014). *Definitions of bisexuality, pansexuality and polysexuality*. Retrieved from <http://beyondthetalk.ca/definitions-bisexuality-pansexuality-polysexuality-eliana>
- MacNeela, P., & Murphy, A. (2015). Freedom, invisibility, and community: A qualitative study of self-identification with asexuality. *Archive of Sexual Behavior, 44*(3), 779-812. doi:10.1007/s10508-014-0458-0
- Mayer, K. H., Bradford, J. B., Makadon, H. J., Stall, R., Goldhammer, H., & Landers, S. (2008). Sexual and gender minority health: What we know and what needs to be done. *American Journal of Public Health, 98*(6), 989-995. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2007.127811
- Moore, P. J., Sickel, A. E., Malat J., Williams, D., Jackson, J., & Adler, N. E. (2004). Psychosocial factors in medical and psychological treatment avoidance: The role of the doctor-patient relationship. *Journal of Health Psychology, 9*(3), 421-433. doi: 10.1177/1359105304042351
- Mustanski, B. (2015). Future direction in research on sexual minority adolescent mental, behavioral, and sexual health. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, 44*(1), 204-219. doi:10.1060/13374416.2014.982756
- Perales, F. (2016). The costs of being “different”: Sexual identity and subjective wellbeing over the life course. *Social Indicators Research, 127*(2), 827–849. doi: 01.1007/s11205-015-0974-x
- Powdthavee, N., & Wooden, M. (2015). Life satisfaction and sexual minorities: Evidence from Australia and the United Kingdom. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 116*, 107-126. doi: 10.1016/j.jebo.2015.04.012
- Przedworski, J. M., VanKim, N. A., Eisenberg, M. E., McAlpine, D. D., Lust, K. A., & Laska,

- M. N. (2015). Self-reported mental disorders and distress by sexual orientation. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, *49*(1), 29-40. doi: 10.1016/j.amepre.2015.01.024
- Rostosky, S. S., Riggle, E. D. B., Pascale-Hague, D., & McCants, L. E. (2010). The positive aspects of a bisexual self-identification. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *1*(2), 131-144. doi: 10.1080/19319899.2010.484595
- Riggle, E. D. B., Mohr, J. J., Rostosky, S. S., Fingerhut, A. W., & Balsm, K. F. (2014). A multifactor lesbian, gay, and bisexual positive identity measure. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, *1*(4), 398-411. doi: 10.1037sgd0000057
- Sells, T. G. C. (2013). The construction of sexual identities in an online gay, lesbian, and bisexual bulletin board system. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, *23*(8), 893-907. doi: 10.1080/10911359.2013.803452
- Sutter, M., & Perrin, P. (2016). Discrimination, mental health, and suicidal ideation among LGBTQ people of color. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *63*(1), 98-105. doi: 10.1037cou0000126
- UC Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center. (2013). *Definition of terms*. Retrieved from http://geneq.berkeley.edu/lgbt_resources_definiton_of_terms#sexual_minority

Appendix A

Table 1

Comparisons of Sexual Identity Groups on Outcome Variables

	Life Satisfaction	Psychological Well-Being	Sense of Community	Hours Spent Online
Sexuality	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Gay	16.38 (4.96)	3.15 (0.82)	4.80 (0.82)	10.75 (14.38)
Lesbian	19.45 (8.65)	3.32 (0.92)	4.38 (1.41)	14.05 (18.55)
Bisexual	19.55 (6.76)	3.52 (0.99)	4.13 (1.58)	19.86 (21.91)
Asexual	20.12 (7.65)	3.13 (0.95)	3.26 (1.10)	13.57 (15.95)
Demisexual	19.08 (5.26)	3.82 (0.73)	3.18 (1.48)	12.83 (15.53)
Polysexual	13.25 (9.29)	4.04 (0.64)	3.00 (1.38)	8.00 (9.27)
Pansexual	19.84 (6.14)	3.39 (0.78)	4.25 (1.04)	13.32 (15.85)
Heterosexual	24.09 (5.79)	2.85 (0.84)	n/a	9.22 (12.14)