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Exploring the Affirmative Role of Gay Icons in Coming Out

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Coming out is a process experienced by many sexual minorities that necessitates the individual disclosure of a personal attribute (i.e., sexual orientation) about him or herself that may otherwise go unnoticed. Compounded by myriad stressors of youth, the coming out process can yield a host of negative outcomes (suicide, depression, etc.) for questioning young people. This research utilized sense of community and collective identity frameworks (specifically, the attribute of symbols that is explicated in both literatures) to explore the affirmative role that gay icons can have in individual coming out processes. Retrospective, open-ended interviews were conducted with 10 “out and proud” gay men in the northeast region of the United States. Interviews were video-recorded, transcribed, and content-analyzed to identify themes. Three themes emerged from the data inductively. Sense of Self refers to the strongest link that participants perceived among all gay icons, Shared Identity refers to the connectedness that participants felt with the icons they mentioned, and Enabler of Coming Out refers to the belief among participants that they received validating messages about their emerging sexualities from the icons with whom they identified. Implications for policy, practice, and future research are also discussed.

Keywords: LGBT, sense of community, collective identity, coming out, symbols

Literature Review

Though not every youth is sexually active, all youth have a sexual orientation (Canadian Pediatric Society, 2008). The extent to which young people are aware of this orientation will vary at the individual level. Manning (2015) defines “coming out” as the process of realizing and accepting one’s nonheterosexual identity (e.g., a gay, lesbian, or bisexual). Cohler and Hammack (2007) note that coming out is a process through which a gay youth “acknowledges and accepts same-sex desire as congruent with other aspects of the self” (p. 52). According to the United Kingdom advocacy organization known as Stonewall (2015), coming out may also refer to sharing this personal attribute (sexual orientation) with others. In the coming out process, however, stress can develop as a result of experiencing or anticipating a negative response from one’s family and peers (Heathrington & Lavner, 2008). Questioning youth—

those still exploring their emerging sexual identities—may, in turn, rely on media to understand and validate their emerging sexual orientations (Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2009).

The Pew Research Center (2013) reports on coming out trends among a sample of 398 self-identifying gay men, aged 18 and older. Men in the Pew study reported first “thinking” they were gay at the average age of 10, “knowing” they were gay at age 15, and “coming out” as gay at age 18. Though outliers exist (many individuals “come out” later in life; some may repress their sexual orientation altogether), the Pew data suggest that gay, American men come out at the precipice of legal adulthood. There is speculation, however, about what processes the individual experiences between thinking he is gay (age 10) and coming out as gay (age 18). In Eriksonian terms, this young person is already struggling to define who he is in the world and who he can become (Erikson, 1968).¹ Because “gay” has traditionally been a stigmatized identity—whereby “stigma” is defined as societal disapproval (Goffman, 1963)—it behooves

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¹ This paper disproportionately uses male-centric pronouns, as the study’s sample is exclusively “out and proud” gay men.

scholars to further investigate what may actually facilitate one's decision to come out, or make one feel positively about his homosexual identity. According to Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998), a stigmatized individual's entire humanity and societal membership are assumed suspect. This disapproval can emanate from society-at-large (social stigma) or from the individual himself (internalized stigma). This stigmatization may result in dehumanization and segregation (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000), impeding the individual's capacity to develop in a way that is safe and healthy for him.

Research (e.g., Gallup, 2015; NORC, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015) suggests that societal attitudes toward gays and lesbians have become more favorable in recent years. These attitudinal changes are allied with a growing presence of gay characters and gay personalities in popular media (Shugart, 2003). On TV, gay characters have evolved from mere foppish guest stars (see Styler, Lear, & Rich, 1971) to complicated, central, principal roles (see Soloway, 2016). This is a welcome trend. Nevertheless, the 2013 Pew study also documents that LGBT individuals still experience stigmatization and discrimination because of their status as sexual minorities (Pew Research Center, 2013). Additional research correlates this stigmatized status with higher incidences of physical harassment (Friedman, Marshal, Stall, Cheong, & Wright, 2008), health and mental health problems (Bird, Kuhns, & Garofalo, 2012), suicide (Cover, 2013), and risky behaviors like substance use (Forenza, Windsor, & Benoit, 2012). These negative outcomes can be explained by the minority stress model, which details the damaging effects of a discriminatory social environment (Alessi, 2014; Baams, Grossman, & Russell, 2015; Dentato, Halkitis, & Orwat, 2013; Meyer, 2003; Testa, Habarth, Peta, Balsam, & Bockting, 2015).

Meyer (1995) originally conceived the minority stress model as being composed of three processes: Internalized homophobia, perceived stigma, and the experience of discriminatory events. Meyer (2003) then added another process, identity concealment. LGBT youth who experience processes described in the minority stress model are at risk of decreased self-esteem (Meyer, 2014) and avoidant coping strategies (Dentato et al., 2013). In spite of these risk factors, many sexual minority youth have de-

veloped successful coping mechanisms (Meyer, 2003, 2014). Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia (2015) found that media could foster positive coping mechanisms and resilience for the 19 LGBT youth in their sample. Tsay and Bodine (2012) noted that a college student's interpersonal (social) needs were capable of facilitating heightened parasocial interactions with media characters. Horton and Wohl (1956) define parasocial interactions as one-sided relationships that help explain an audience member's perceived connection to the media he or she is consuming. Though the landmark writing of Horton and Wohl is dated, contemporary research (Hu, 2015; Madison & Porter, 2015) has demonstrated that parasocial interaction is still a salient phenomenon of inquiry.

In qualitative research with 15 sexual minority youth, DiFulvio (2011) found that group affiliations affirmed participant identities. Drawing on case studies, Sadowski, Chow, and Scanlon (2009) also affirmed the utility of social relationships in the lives of LGBT young people. Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) found that social connection was a protective factor against suicide for this population. Many LGBT youth find resilience through a shared identity with others who happen to be LGBT (Meyer, 2003; Testa et al., 2015). As Meyer says, "Members of stigmatized groups who have a strong sense of community cohesiveness evaluate themselves in comparison with others who are like them rather than with members of the dominant culture" (Meyer, 2003, p. 6). In the absence of immediately accessible gay-affirming individuals or role models, questioning youth may "evaluate" themselves through parasocial relationships with gay or gay-affirming figures from popular culture and media. As research (Craig et al., 2015; Tsay-Vogel & Schwartz, 2014) has demonstrated, figures from popular culture are capable of facilitating a perceived community for consumers of such media. Yet no prior research has explored the extent to which this type of ersatz inclusion may positively impact one's coming out process.

Theoretical Framework

In their seminal article, McMillan and Chavis (1986) operationalize four dimensions of "sense of community." Those operationalized dimensions are: Membership, influence, needs fulfill-

ment, and emotional connection. Since their formative research, sense of community has been associated with positive, prosocial processes like social capital, the theory that social networks have inherent value (Putnam, 2000), and organizational empowerment, which is a framework that describes efforts to produce psychological empowerment for individual organization members (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 130). “Community” often refers to geographic, location-based entities such as neighborhoods and towns. Gusfield (1975), however, indicates that community can also refer to relational notions like categorical memberships or ascribed statuses (e.g., sexual orientation).

With respect to the dimension of membership, McMillan and Chavis (1986) identify five attributes of membership necessary to experience “sense of community.” These attributes are: Boundaries, emotional safety, belonging/identification, personal investment, and common symbol systems. *Boundaries* refer to the notion that people “do” and “don’t” belong in a group. With respect to gay youth, coming out is the process through which one de-facto joins the gay community. By definition this is a community of similarly oriented males. *Emotional safety* refers to an individual’s need to feel safe within his community. To this end, the perceived “risk” of coming out as gay must afford more internal security than the decision to repress one’s sexual identity. *Belonging/Identification* necessitates that one perceive himself as feeling accepted by the focal community. In other words, both the individual and the community perceive the individual to be a categorical “fit.” *Personal investment* refers to individual sacrifice that makes community membership special and valuable. For young men, the coming out process—and the risk (perceived or actual) of alienating friends and family—may be illustrative of such an investment. Finally, the attribute of *common symbols* is important to community membership. McMillan and Chavis note that experiencing these “symbols” (AKA artifacts, traditions, etc.) is a right of passage for any collective identity.

Collective identity is an ambiguous term that grew out of the psychology and sociology disciplines (Gleason, 1983). It is a framework for understanding processes of group membership, and is often applied to phenomena that it may only tangentially support (Brubaker & Cooper,

2000). Much collective identity research pertains to social movements. For example, Ghaziani (2011) uses collective identity to explore the evolution of an “us versus them” mentality among advocates for LGBT rights. Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004) note that collective identity is not exclusive to the movement literature; it can also be used to understand processes of group membership. The researchers further explicate seven primary elements of collective identity. *Self categorization* refers to one’s own identification with the group. *Evaluation* refers to one’s positive or negative feelings about the group. *Importance* refers to the relevance he affords the group. *Social embeddedness* is the degree to which an individual’s collective identity is part of his day-to-day life. *Behavioral involvement* pertains to the individual’s propensity to engage in actions that implicate the group. *Content and meaning* pertains to the notion of a shared history with other group members.

Finally, Ashmore et al. (2004) identify *attachment* as a seventh primary dimension of collective identity. Attachment, in this sense, refers to a group member’s need to connect with a focal community. “The power of this need for attachment,” they state, “is illustrated by our ability to develop affective ties even to symbols that represent these groups” (p. 90). This notion of collective identity being, in part, derived through attachment to symbols compliments McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) conception of membership. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986) membership is populated (also “in part”) by an individual’s encountering of common symbols as a right of passage into a categorical membership. For a young man who is trapped between thinking he is gay and coming out as gay, a symbol that represents the gay community may be as obvious as a rainbow flag or a pink “safe space” triangle. More covertly, a symbol for such an individual to connect with—or attach to—may take the form of a public figure, a “gay icon.”

In popular culture, public entertainers such as Judy Garland and Barbra Streisand are colloquially referred to as gay icons because of their strong support among gay male fans. Myriad editorials (e.g., Dalton, 2013; Musto, 2014) proclaim these icons are symbols of the gay community. Yet Bird, Kuhns, and Garofalo (2012) note a gap in knowledge about the impact that

these media icons may have on a young person's healthy development and coming out process. This formative, exploratory, retrospective study attempts to answer this question: What is the perceived relationship between gay icons and the coming out process for currently "out and proud" gay men?

Methods

Research Setting and Sample

After securing IRB approval, this research utilized a nonprobability, convenience sample of 10 "out and proud" (as declared in the recruitment flyer) gay men living in the northeast region of the United States. To secure the sample, the author and the executive director of a statewide LGBT advocacy organization circulated the recruitment flyer on social media (Twitter) and other gay-affirming online outlets. The flyer invited out and proud men (18+ years old) to participate in a research project titled "Sexual Development and Early Identification with Gay Culture." The flyer also detailed the author's intent to collect data via the video recording of participant interviews. This yielded a total of 10 participants who were ultimately recruited, interviewed, videoed, and remunerated \$20 for their time. Saturation, which occurs in nonprobability sampling when "the addition of more units does not result in new information" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 183), was achieved at 10 units. Creswell (1998) indicates that 10 units is the upper-estimate for reaching saturation in a phenomenological study, such as this one.

Participants were racially and ethnically diverse. Six were White, two were Black, one was Asian, and one was Latino. Most were in their 30s ($n = 4$), though some were in their 20s ($n = 3$), and some were over 50 ($n = 3$). Half ($n = 5$) grew up/came out in the suburbs of major metropolitan cities (specifically Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia). Others grew up/came out in more rural pockets of the United States ($n = 4$). One participant was born in the United States, but came of age (and came out) living abroad, as a member of the armed services. Demographic data regarding education and income were not collected, as they were not perceived relevant to the phenomena of inquiry.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each of the 10 participants was interviewed in person, at a single point in time (cross sectional research), during a 4-month period. The author conducted all interviews, which lasted ~30–45 min each. The semistructured interview questionnaire was developed by the author, a qualitative methodologist with an educational and professional background in both communications and youth development. The questionnaire probed for the perceived relationship(s) between gay icons and the coming out process. The open-ended questions were informed by the sense of community and collective identity literatures (see Appendix for the full questionnaire).

Per IRB protocol, responses from each in-depth interview were video recorded by the author. Responses were subsequently transcribed into an Excel spreadsheet, where they were organized by question. Thus began the first round of thematic analysis and a priori coding, where repeated concepts were noted when they were expressed by a majority ($n = 9$) of the sample. The author then returned to the spreadsheet to conduct deeper analysis among questions. This deeper analysis collapsed concepts (e.g., desires to dress or act like a certain icon) into categorical "themes" (e.g., Shared Identity), which comprise the findings of this research. Categorical themes were shared with the 10 research participants, for their review and comment. Though some participants asked questions about how themes were derived, all were in agreement with the preliminary findings of this research. This processes—commonly known as "member check"—is to enhance credibility and validity regarding the interpretation of subjective experiences (Koelsch, 2013). Finally, data and themes were shared with a qualitative methodologist unaffiliated with this project. After subsequent discussion, agreement regarding the identified themes was achieved.

Results

This formative research supports and extends our current understanding of sense of community (vis-à-vis its "group membership" dimension) and collective identity (vis-à-vis its "attachment" dimension). It explores the relationship between gay icons (symbols of the

gay community) in popular media and individual coming out processes. Three emergent themes (Sense of Self, Shared Identity, and Enabler of Coming Out) transcended the data inductively. In other words, these themes were not expressly probed for in the interview questionnaire. An emergent theme was identified when it was illustrated by a strong majority ($n = 9$) of participants. Results are organized according to these emergent themes and offer a formative understanding of the affirmative role that gay icons (symbols) can play in individual coming out processes.

Sense of Self

When asked to identify gay icons, almost all participants ($n = 8$) exclusively named female entertainers, with special value placed on singers. Half of the sample ($n = 5$) identified Cher, Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Ellen DeGeneres as gay icons. Other responses varied at the individual level, with one 50+-year-old participant citing deceased male entertainers—famous for their flamboyant personalities—who were rumored (e.g., Paul Lynde) and known (e.g., Charles Nelson Reilly) to be gay. Another participant discussed “out and proud” political leaders like Harvey Milk and Barney Frank. Though most of the icons identified were white, several participants mentioned Black entertainers (chiefly Queen Latifah and Diana Ross), though none identified icons from other racial/ethnic minority groups (Latino, Asian, Arab, etc.).

Though variability existed regarding who participants identified as a gay icon, the identified qualities that icons were perceived to share were almost unanimous. All participants ($N = 10$) cited a strong “sense of self” (to quote one participant) as the dominant attribute linking all gay icons. “It was empowering to see them be so confident with who they were,” said one participant. Other adjectives like “cutting edge,” “fierce,” and “campy” were used to describe an icon’s perceived qualities.

Some participants ($n = 5$) referred to the broader appeal of these icons, who—though they may derive substantial support from fans who happen to be gay—also appeal to nongay audiences. In the words of three participants, this made gay icons seem “safe and approachable to everyone,” regardless of everyone’s

views on homosexuality. “[Lady Gaga] caters to the gay community and the straight community. She’s disarming in that sense,” said one participant. “Gays are feared by people who don’t know them, but [Cher] is the liminal space in between,” said another. To this end, gay icons were also perceived by all participants ($N = 10$) to be explicitly or implicitly supportive of gay rights.

Because of their support for gay rights (or, as one participant referred to it, using their celebrity to make “positive contributions to the world”), most participants ($n = 8$) described gay icons in welcoming and inclusive terms. When asked to elaborate on how they knew this to be true (because participants cannot say with certainty that these individuals are, in fact, welcoming and inclusive), one participant indicated that “They create an environment that is beautiful or surprising, and it takes you away from your everyday crap.” This participant further explicated how he found solace in the “beautiful and surprising” worlds of gay icons in his questioning years. Another participant illustrated a similar experience of feeling valued by gay icons. “As a kid,” he began, “I didn’t know what gay was—I didn’t know what gay affirming was . . . but I knew that they were.” These notions of feeling connected to gay icons are described more by the second emergent theme, Shared Identity.

Shared Identity

It is not surprising that—before having actually “come out” as gay men—a majority of the sample ($n = 9$) felt a sense of shared identity or “connectedness” with the gay icons that they admired most. Several participants elaborated on why they identified with a (previously described “cutting edge,” “fierce,” “campy,” and/or “inclusive”) female entertainer that they had never even met. “There were no Black males that I identified with,” said one African American participant. To quote a White participant, “When I was growing up, there really weren’t a lot of gay [role models], so I think I was looking for people to identify with.” A third participant elaborated on this theme. “Even though I wasn’t [out as] gay,” he began, “it just gave me so much joy to see someone so campy and over-the-top that I could kind-of relate to.” The individual who cited Paul Lynde and

Charles Nelson Reilly as his icons-of-choice noted:

I wanted to model my life after them. I wanted to be as witty and adored as they were. At the same time, I didn't want to be *just* like them, because then my secret would be out and everyone would know I was gay.

All but one participant ($n = 9$) further illustrated the emergent theme of shared identity by citing a strong connection with, and investment in, the icon's art. For three of the four top-named icons in this study (Cher, Madonna, and Lady Gaga), the product they are selling is music. "In connecting with the music, I also connected with the person," said a participant. Yet participants conceded that Cher, Madonna, and Lady Gaga are also performance artists. They create entire experiences for their audiences, where the experiences have potential to supersede the music. As another participant observed, "They aren't just a musician or a TV personality, they are an entire brand . . . and they know their brand very well."

To this end, participants also reflected on their youthful desires to connect with icons outside of the icon's product (e.g., the music). "If Cher wore a mesh outfit, then I wanted to wear a mesh outfit," said one. Another described the welcome intoxication of having once attended a Bette Midler concert—replete with ostrich feathers and extravagance—and feeling a sense of peace amid the spectacle. "If you live in a small town, a lot of culture is not available to you," he said. "So you're looking for something that's not where you are. And these people are not where we are," he concluded.

Enabler of Coming Out

The most palpable theme to emerge from this research ($n = 9$) is the perception of gay icons enabling one's individual coming out process. Here again, all participants ($N = 10$) explicated their belief that gay icons were explicitly or implicitly supportive of LGBT rights. Additionally, all participants ($N = 10$) indicated having received some validation about their emerging sexuality from popular culture. For two participants, these overt validations came from the affirming rhetoric of elected officials. For four participants, validations were implied in the tenor and storylines of TV shows like *The Golden Girls* ($n = 2$) and *Dawson's Creek* ($n = 2$). "One piece of media that really hit home for

me—and this is when I started thinking about (coming out)—was when (TV) started introducing gay characters or characters coming out of the closet," said one participant. A second participant offered a similar experience:

Right around when I was coming out myself, Lady Gaga came out with her *Born this Way* album. It just seemed like perfect timing—that it was the time I decided to come out—and it was such a revolution for [Lady Gaga] to say that you're beautiful and brave to be the way you were born.

When participants were asked to share what they would say to the icons they considered influential in their coming out processes, "thank you" was the most common response ($n = 9$). All participants ($N = 10$) agreed that today's questioning and/or coming out youth had a host of media characters and gay icons to affirm their emerging sexualities. Here, the names of Lady Gaga and Ellen DeGeneres were again invoked, alongside other contemporary entertainers like Neil Patrick Harris, public figures like Caitlyn Jenner, and—as one participant noted—"I think right now the most influential, pro-gay figure that we have is not an expected one. I actually think it's President Barack Obama." These symbols—these gay icons and their allied, affirmative counterparts in the popular media—were viewed by all participants ($N = 10$) as vital to facilitating a young person's healthy coming out.

Discussion

This formative, exploratory research supports and extends the sense of community and collective identity literatures by attempting to answer this question: What is the perceived relationship between gay icons and the coming out process for currently "out and proud" gay men? Per McMillan and Chavis (1986) and Ashmore et al. (2004), both sense of community and collective identity literatures discuss symbolism as a vital component of group membership and attachment (respective dimensions of the aforementioned frameworks). Public entertainers like Judy Garland and Barbra Streisand are considered gay icons, and are assumed to be symbols—or rights of passage—for the gay community (Dalton, 2013; Musto, 2014). Research participants in this study illustrated having experienced parasocial interactions—or one-sided relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956)—with the

gay icons they named. To the extent that these icons (symbols) contribute to facilitating sense of community and collective identity during one's coming out process, gay icons may be capable of moderating the risk factors (see Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006) associated with coming out. In sum, gay icons were capable of facilitating an ersatz community and affirming one's emergent sexual identity for the participants in this study.

Findings of the research reveal three emergent themes. *Sense of Self* refers to the strongest commonality that all participants ($N = 10$) perceive gay icons to share. *Shared Identity* refers to the belief among most participants ($n = 9$) that—at the time of their coming out—participants experienced a perceived connection with these icons. *Enabler of Coming Out* is the belief among participants ($n = 9$) that they perceived welcome, inclusive, and validating messages about their emergent sexuality from gay icons during their coming out processes.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

Policymakers will benefit from this research, as it contributes to a growing body of literature on inclusion. In the simplest terms, when questioning youth feel that their identity is damaged or stigmatized, receiving positive affirmations from their social environment is a healthy reinforcement of one's emerging sexuality. To this end, when policymakers (and their actual policies) adopt an inclusive attitude toward gays and other sexual minorities, questioning youth stand to benefit from feelings of validation.

Youth practitioners will benefit from this research, as it also contributes to a larger body of literature on role modeling. Role models—even those in the public sphere—can help to facilitate a questioning young person's healthy development. This may be done implicitly (through the icon's music or art) or overtly (in this case, advocating on behalf of sexual minorities). Practitioners must be wary, however, that the role models (icons) discussed in this research will not be accessible to questioning youth. Characters or personalities from popular media will not be present to offer support and encouragement to questioning young people. As such—in steering young people toward these affirming figures and their “products”—practi-

tioners must be aware that any relationship (i.e., “shared identity”) that develops is, in fact, an ersatz relationship. It is a one-sided, parasocial relationship (Tsay-Vogel & Schwartz, 2014) that exists only in the mind of the questioning youth.

Curiously, all of the most commonly cited icons (Cher, Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Ellen DeGeneres) are women, only one of whom (Ellen DeGeneres) identifies as gay. It is notable that this sample of “out and proud” gay men did not collectively cite a single “out and proud” gay man as his icon-of-choice. Perhaps this oversight is attributed to generational dynamics and changes in popular culture's acceptance of gay lifestyles. In the 1960s and 1970s, Paul Lynde (who was rumored to be gay) and Charles Nelson Reilly (who only came out publicly in the years leading up to his death in 2007) created entire personas around being eccentric and closeted. These personas are paradoxical to the confidence and empowerment exuded by the aforementioned women. Therefore, it is not surprising that only one individual cited them as gay icons. Similarly, another participant cited Harvey Milk and Barney Frank (regional “out and proud” politicians) as gay icons. Though Milk and Frank might be perceived as more confident and gay-affirming than Lynde or Reilly, it should be noted that they are politicians, and not named as “icons” by the bulk of the sample, who overwhelmingly cited public entertainers. Perhaps subsequent generations of “out and proud” gay men will have more similarly identified “out and proud” public entertainers from the pantheon of popular culture to draw from (the aforementioned Neil Patrick Harris comes to mind).

Future research will benefit from a larger sampling frame and a mixed methods design. Future research should not be retrospective; instead, it should recruit a sample of individuals that is somewhere in the coming out process (though this, of course, is still likely to yield a biased sample of youth who are already “mostly” out). If an unbiased sample is recruited, however, perceptions of icon sense of self, shared identity with an icon, and/or the icon's perceived role in an individual coming out process will be more available to research participants than it is in this retrospective study. Future research may also wish to explore the role of gay icons as it relates to other dimen-

sions of sense of community and collective identity. Finally (and most importantly), future research must include other sexual minorities. Future research may wish to stratify these populations by race/ethnicity to discern more specifically what perceived role models are available to these underrepresented groups.

Limitations

Qualitative research is context-bound (Patton, 2001). Readers should not generalize beyond the experiences of the 10 participants described here. Similarly, this sample is a biased one. It consists of self-selecting “out and proud” gay men. This sample does not include “closeted” gay men, “men on the down-low,” bisexual men, or gay men living in traditionally conservative communities (the densely populated northeast, where this sample was acquired, is a mostly reliable bastion of liberalism and diversity). Additionally, the author concedes that a young person’s parasocial relationship with a gay icon (or other media character) is not an ideal one. The author is not blindly endorsing this one-sided dynamic; rather, he believes in its utility to connect and protect a potentially fragile person in his coming out process. To this end, the author believes that participant responses to open-ended questions in this study make a unique, insightful, and substantive contribution to the LGBT, sense of community, collective identity, and media psychology literatures.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. Who do you consider a gay icon? Kindly name several of them and tell me why you consider them gay icons. (What do they do that warrants this title?)
2. Now I'd like you to think back to your coming-out process, and tell me—at that moment—what, if any, gay-affirming or gay-validating figures in popular culture you might have looked up to and why.
3. How did you discover this person? (How old were you? What else was happening in your life at the time?)
4. Did this person ever do anything that led you to believe he or she was gay-affirming? If so, what did they do?
5. Tell me about experiences you've had with this person. Did you ever see him or her perform? Have you ever met him or her? What were those experiences like?
6. Tell me about the role that this person played in your coming-out process.
7. If you could say something to this person, what would it be?
8. Who—in your opinion—are gay-affirming or gay-validating figures for today's young people currently in the questioning or coming out process?
9. A similar question as before: What do these public figures do that makes you know they're "gay-affirming" or "gay-validating"?
10. Are there any other thoughts you would like to share about gay icons, the coming out process, or the potential relationship between them?

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