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O Brother, Where Art Thou?

Understanding Culturally-Produced Limitations On Gay Male Community Formation in South Central Appalachia

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Communication and Performance

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Professional Communication

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by

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Dr. Amber Kinser, Chair

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Keywords: Dialectics, Appalachia, Gay Community, Rural Sexuality, Masculinities

ABSTRACT

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

Understanding Culturally-Produced Limitations On Gay Male Community Formation in South Central Appalachia

by

Michael Brewer

This research examines limitations presented to gay men living in south central Appalachia that are produced by Appalachian culture itself, in regard to community formation. This qualitative study intersects existing scholarship on rural sexualities, gay communities and Appalachian culture in order to gain insight into the complexities that effect men in the region. The data is synthesized through a contextual dialectics framework in order to position both the Appalachian culture in its entirety, and gay men residing in the region, as agentic actors that are simultaneously informed by and produce tensions between the two. This study explores ways in which gay men in south central Appalachia determine and rectify obstacles that are perpetuated by their conservative culture in regard to forming social bonds with other non-heterosexual men. The current study extends the body of scholarship on rural non-heterosexualities, and underscores contextual complexities specific to the Appalachian region of the US.

DEDICATION

There are two groups of people in which I choose to dedicate this thesis to. First, I want to dedicate this research to all of the men and women who face adversity in their daily lives—especially those living in geographic regions that make it difficult to feel loved, supported or even tolerated. I aspire to have a career that is dedicated to *our* cause, so that one day, social injustices will be eradicated for the greater good; I want to do this through my research and teachings, and this thesis is the first step to making my dreams a reality. Thank you for inspiring me, and thank you for being brave.

Secondly, I want to dedicate this thesis to the women in my life who have helped mold me into person that I have become. Coco Chanel once said, "Women have always been the strong ones of the world. The men are always seeking from women a little pillow to put their heads down on. They are always longing for the mother who held them as infants." Since my childhood, I have sought both the comforts and the insights that women offer, in which I believe to be invaluable. I have been blessed with an abundance of strong females throughout my life—all of which are empowering in different ways. Thank you to my Nena, my mom, my stepmom, my professors and all of the amazing female friends that I am blessed to have in my life. Thank you for inspiring me, teaching me, and embodying the ideal representations of womanhood—in all of your unique, beautifully complicated, and most fascinating ways.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the members of my committee, thank you for your invaluable insight, advice and expertise. Without your guidance—not only with this thesis, but also throughout the discourse of my graduate school career thus far—I would not be the scholar that I have come to be. I greatly thank you, and sincerely appreciate the contributions—within the parameters of this thesis and beyond—that you have lent. I will carry the knowledge that you have gifted me into my future.

To my chair, Dr. Kinser, thank you for being the strong, empowering, inspiring woman that you are. Your presence in my life has become more than significant throughout the trajectory of my graduate program, and I am certain that without it, I would be a fraction of not only the *scholar* that I am today, but also the *person* that I have grown to be. Over the last two years you have kindly shared with me your advice, patience and insight, and please know that every word you have gifted me has been met with open ears and an open heart. You truly have changed my life, and I will never forget that, nor will I ever underestimate the impact that you have had on me—not simply as an aspiring academic working his way up the ranks—but as a human being. You are truly an inspiration, and I hope that anyone who has the privilege of getting to know you will appreciate you as much as I have. You will always be my "Tennessee Mom."

And lastly, to my family and "friend-family"—thank you all for the ongoing support that you have granted me throughout my graduate program, and the thesis-writing process. It has been a long, often-times stressful road, and you all have been charged with having to listen to me complain and occasionally question my sanity. Thank you for being my emotional crutch, my rock, and my inspiration through it all.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I was always different; I could not explain it. I had trouble putting my finger on what it was that made me feel so detached from my peers at school. I have felt different for as long as I can remember. In elementary school, when all the other boys sprinted to the baseball field at recess to join in a spirited effort of America's favorite pastime, I was occupied on the swings or the monkey bars with all of the girls in my class, talking about the newest Spice Girls song or most recent episode of *Dawson's Creek.* When I was in middle school, those ubiquitous dances that are familiar to so many–the ones where boys and girls are supposed to romantically cavort with one another while maintaining a terribly awkward distance between each other–were the things of my nightmares. I would rather stay at home and listen to music alone, not having my hand awkwardly around some girl's hips. I had been different all along, yet I could never attach a name or a definition to how I felt. Looking back, it is rather obvious what was going on, but to a little boy oblivious and naïve to the world, nothing added up.

When I was three and four years old I used to love to wear my grandma's stilettos. I would parade through the house, proudly showing off the interesting designs of the shoes themselves–the high heel, the bright colors– as well as my ever-increasing ability to walk in them. I would take my great-grandma's purses and endless pieces of gold jewelry and hang them across my body, giving me the appearance of a miniature version of Mr. T crossed with Carol Burnett. In elementary school I wore cowboy boots frequently. Not because I had some sort of stereotypical, masculinized infatuation with cowboys and the like, but because I liked the heel on

them. I found that those were the only shoes I could wear in public that came even remotely close to the shoes I so proudly wore at my grandparent's house. How's that for irony?

It was never acknowledged until I was in seventh grade, but once it was, it was all-consuming. One of my new friends since entering the terrifying world of middle school—a brash, boisterous girl from Boston—said something to me one day that was pivotal. At lunch period, in the middle of my pizza and French fries meal, she looked at me and said, "Ya know, Brandon, I've been thinking. I think you might be bisexual." "Bi-what?" I responded. And there it was; years of confusion and weird feelings, all succinctly and bluntly stated by my Boston friend. That day marked a very dark, challenging period in my life. I finally had a name—an identifier—to attach to my situation. The only problem was that I was not bisexual; I was gay. And I knew it. I had never been attracted to girls in any way, yet it did not really occur to me until puberty began. Luckily for me, puberty came right around the same time as my friend's declarative statement about my sexuality. From that point, on I rode a roller coaster of emotions; the same ones that many gay men discuss when describing their adolescent years can also be applied to my own: fear, shame, grief, sadness, confusion, and self-loathing.

My attitude towards my own sexuality was informed by the attitudes towards sexuality from my friends and family. I was raised in a middle class, protestant family in a small town in the mountains of Western North Carolina. My home region is often referred to as the "Bible Belt," due to its association with a multitude of churches and rampant, deeply seeded religious fundamentalism. The topic of sexuality was never really discussed in my family. I never received the "sex talk" about how boys and girls operate. Looking back, I have always wondered if my parents opted not to tell me about the birds and the bees because all along they knew that their little bird had no interest in the bees, given my penchant for girlish things. All I really knew

about gay people was what I had heard from my family talking about them in passing. The way I understood them to be was immoral and elusive, hiding in the shadows of society. They were not like everyone else. They were…different.

It is likely that those who do not identify with a culturally normative sexuality must break down barriers and overcome hurdles—intrapsychically, interpersonally and culturally. "Coming out" is not a simple linear process; it is complex and multi-layered. "Coming out" can mean an individual has a newfound freedom (Ridge, Minichiello, & Plummer, 1997), a freedom that can generate new space to create identity and extend personal growth. Any shifts in self-acceptance and identity however, may come with a price. As with other rural areas in the United States, the region of Southern Appalachia places high emphasis on traditional gender roles and normative (hetero)sexuality (Kimmel & Ferber, 2000; Sears, 1989). These traditional views create potential turmoil regarding coming out as well as social and self-acceptance among non-heterosexual individuals who reside in the region.

As someone who has spent the duration of their life residing in south central Appalachia, I am more than familiar with some of the issues that non-heterosexuals can face. These issues have not defined me, but they have, of course, affected me. When I entered graduate school I had planned to make *gender and pop culture* my main area of study, yet as I progressed in the program and was exposed to innumerable studies about gender and sexuality, it became very obvious to me that there was little research on gay men and Appalachian life: this surprised me. *There are plenty of non-heterosexual men in this region, many of whom have probably faced the same kinds of hurdles as I have,* I kept thinking to myself. *Where are their stories in academic research? Why are they not given a voice?* I kept pondering. My search for answers led me to pursue a study involving gay men in South Central Appalachia.

The subject of gay men in Appalachia has a very wide breadth; there is a multitude of issues that scholars could focus on, but as a researcher who has experienced firsthand what gay life in the US mountainous South is like, I chose to focus on a subject that has been of interests to me in my own life: that of community formation and unification amongst gay men. While living in a small town for the first twenty years of my life, I was never exposed to fellow homosexuals; I was a non-heterosexual attempting to navigate through a heterosexual world. Once I began college, and traded in my small town for that of a small city, I was suddenly introduced to an array of people, experiencing diversity on a day-to-day basis for the first time in my life. As I prepared to relocate, I had preconceived notions about what an ideal gay life in a city would be like; I imagined groups of men engaging with one another in a supportive way, creating a sense of unity among those that identified as non-heterosexual. What I found however, was a population of men who seemed not only divided, but also at odds with one another at times, and I was disappointed with the revelation that, in the specific city that I moved to, the unity I expected was absent

Surely other gay men in this city long for a sense of connection, of closeness with their peers who share the same sexual persuasion, I would think to myself. I learned in conversation with peers, classmates, colleagues and acquaintances in several southern cities over a long period of time, that this was a trend that transcended the city where I attended college, and was a common theme across multiple cities in Appalachia.

This study explores limitations confronting gay men in the south central Appalachian region of the United States in regard to community formation. The region is divided into subregions that "are contiguous regions of relatively homogenous characteristics (topography, demographics, and economics) within Appalachia." (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2014) I

focus on men who were born in and continue to live in the south central subregion, consisting primarily of Eastern Tennessee and Western North Carolina. Community is "a group of people that has a shared characteristic, but the range of shared characteristics that can form the basis of a community is dizzyingly broad." (Holt, 2001, p. 857) The breadth and ambiguity of such a definition notwithstanding, this study attempts to examine the ways that gay men in Appalachia form communities with one another, and the obstacles presented by the region when doing so. In order to understand the challenges to communal formation and building relationships among gay men, it is important to first understand the locatedness of gay men in the geographic and cultural space of Appalachia.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sexualities in the South

The south central Appalachian region of the United States is distinct from other regions in the country. The area is known for its emphasis on the family and prominence of religion Baunach, Burgess & Muse, 2010). The South in general, as Sears (1991) explains, "most visibly reflects those fundamental values that represent the heartland of America and that are often associated with negative attitudes and feelings about homosexuality" (p. 422). Further, racism, sexism and evangelical religion are endemic to the Appalachian region (Frederick, 2009).

While scholars have concluded that the South produces unique circumstances for gay men and women (Baunach, et al., 2010) academic research has shed little light on what these specific circumstances are, particularly in relation to community formation and interpersonal relationships among gay men. Much of the academic research pertaining to Appalachian studies highlights religion and general rurality of the region as two of its defining characteristics. (Baunach et al., 2010; Leppman, 2005) In what follows, I examine these areas and their relationship to human sexuality.

Religious Overtones and Biblical Fundamentalism in Appalachia

Some of my earliest memories of my childhood pertain to church. I vividly remember attending Sunday afternoon church dinners in my family's Methodist church fellowship hall, sitting alone at the long dinner-hall style tables, watching women socialize with each other, praising one another over their homemade bunt cakes and impeccably baked casseroles. I remember Sunday school; sitting in an *it's always too cold in here* classroom pretending to listen

to what “Ms. Jewel,” my sixty-something teacher, had to say about the Bible and its messages of morality. The funny thing is, as many memories of church as I have garnered over the years, none of them are actually what I would consider to be good ones. I hated church. I felt like the black sheep of the congregation. I spent my time during the sermons sitting beside my parents on the benches, drawing Warhol-inspired doodles on that day’s printed bulletin. I couldn’t wait for each sermon to be over. The thing I always looked forward to on Sunday? Lunch. Most Southerners know that with tradition, on Sunday after church, you go out to eat, or you go to the home of the matriarch of the family for a feast that would be the envy of royalty. That was the part I liked–but only that part.

My narrative is not uncommon; church life and traditional, fundamental religion plays a huge part in everyday life in Appalachia. It felt as though the church and its congregation were the hallmarks of community in my hometown. Men and women centered their lives on church meetings, sermons and social gatherings. Men formed close friendships with fellow men, as did women with their fellow “sisters in Christ.” The children in my church all seemed to form bonds as well, often playing with one another outside the church building once a sermon ended and having sleepovers and campouts at each other’s homes. But not me; I never felt like I was part of that community.

Appalachia is home to many of the most conservative religious beliefs in the US South including Pentecostal, Baptist and the “Church of God With Signs”, a doctrine that emphasizes the power of biblical inerrancy and snake handling (Bain, 2009). The South is steeped in religiosity and traditionalism (Baunach et al., 2010). Given that biblical inerrancy, fundamentalism and traditionalism play such large parts in everyday life in Appalachia, it comes

as no surprise that non-heterosexuals living in the area may find difficulty in finding acceptance, or even tolerance, from the people around them.

Further reiterating the significance of religion in the region, it is important to note that churches heavily populate the geographic landscapes in Appalachia. *Churchscapes* are part of the landscape itself, constantly producing and reproducing physical reminders of the importance of religion, and the permeation of biblical philosophy throughout the region, creating a high number of "Mountain churches," the small, close-knit communities found in rural Appalachia that are formed in backwoods churches (Leppman, 2005). The small communities that are formed in churches perpetuate biblical fundamentalism throughout the region, and promote politically conservative ideas and viewpoints. The mountain churches serve as a constant reminder that in Appalachia, conservative, traditional ideology is omnipresent.

Many south central Appalachians are introduced to church life and Christianity long before being introduced to other forms of community and interpersonal bonding in preschool or elementary school. Early exposure to religious fundamentalism has often seeped into the schools that Appalachian children attend, fostering conservative values about many issues, including human sexuality.

Appalachian Perceptions of Masculinity and Sexuality

The south central Appalachian and Southern regions of the U.S. are those that are steeped in "traditionalism" (Baunach et al., 2010), providing explanation, in part, as to why some inhabitants of the region are disapproving of non-heterosexuality. Gay men and women have a higher likelihood of being bullied by others in the South, compared to other US regions (Sears, 1991) due to the fact that the area not only tolerates homophobia, but also perpetuates it.

Individuals in the US in general are exposed to homophobia and gay bashing at an early age, and as Enron (1987) contends, these are learned attitudes that do not come naturally to human beings, but are instead informed by localized, cultural norms. The church has profound influence on the overarching beliefs in the South, influencing a myriad of aspects, including adult professional life. Studies have shown that high school teachers and guidance counselors in the South are more likely to be critical of student's homosexuality and less likely to empathize than in other regions of the U.S, which creates a sense of "othering" against those who do not identify as heterosexual (Sears, 1991).

The cold climate of the classroom can have long-lasting effects on not only those who identify as non-heterosexual, but heterosexuals as well. Heterosexual college students are often confused about homosexuality and its possible stereotypical implications such as presumably rampant H.I.V. and AIDS among gay men (Mulwo & Tomaselli, 2009). This lack of understanding of an entire subgroup of people is fostered in part by the failure to acknowledge said subgroup in secondary educational environments, such as high school classrooms. Although attitudes towards gay men have changed from 1996 to 2010 (in 1996, 68% of the population believed that *sex between men* is wrong, versus 41% in 2010), (Baunach et al., 2010), the South, and its classrooms, can still be a difficult place to be non-heterosexual. The same study suggests that increased contact between heterosexuals and gay men and women in the South leads to higher levels of comfort and acceptance. Understanding that the level of acceptance obtained by adolescent non-heterosexuals from their peers can play a rather large part in their self-identity and mental health (Shio & Savaya, 2011), it becomes clear that overall shifts in patterns of acceptance such as those presented in Baunach's study can have profound impact on students' self-acceptance and identity confidence.

Adolescents create meaning and understanding regarding self-identity within the parameters of their educational environment. Masculinity is created, validated and broadcast on the schoolyard at an early age (Mac & Ghaill, 1994), promoting ideals as to how males should act and behave, establishing an environment with a heightened sense of heterosexism early in a child's life. Heterosexism, as Pharr (1988) asserts, "creates the climate for homophobia with its assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual and its display of power and privileges as the norm." (p. 16). Homophobia is not only a product of heterosexist masculinity but is also agentic of such; homophobia is one of the guiding principles of heterosexual masculinity (Herek, 2000). framing homophobia as a response from heterosexual men who feel that it threatens the very definition of what it means to be a male, Kimmel (1994) contends that, "homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men,".

To highlight a contradiction within the heterosexist framework of expected gender roles in the educational environment, Sears (1991) notes that while boys are expected to adhere to masculine gendered roles, girls are allowed to deviate from the expectations of femininity in a more liberal way. This is accepted under the assumption that being a "tomboy" is an innate phase of female childhood, whereas male transgression from gendered norms is considered to be "sissieness" (Sears, 1991). The notion of such rigid gender roles, as well as labels such as tomboy and sissy are not only tools of sexism but also, as Pharr (1988) contends, bold forms of homophobia that are kept in place in order to ensure heterosexual masculinity as the ideal form of human (male) behavior. Such sexism and related homophobia are taught to students at a very early age. Pascoe (2007) established that the high school educational environment is the nexus of adolescent masculinity establishment, and that administrators, staff and faculty within these

spaces often reinforce gendered and heterodominant norms. This ideology is perpetuated even more rampantly in rural regions of the United States

Although America emphasizes masculinity and its codes more heavily than other countries (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003), rural expectations of such are often times more extreme than urban areas, placing high emphasis on primitive gender roles that place the male in positions of power and female in the position of helper or aid (Kimmel & Ferber, 2000). This reiterates the belief that "masculinity" in its most basic form equals strength and dominance over women and other minorities (Katz, 1995).

The predominantly rural South promotes traditional ideals of masculinity, which emphasize virility, physical strength and assertiveness in a more intensified way than other regions in the country (Frederick, 2009). This biased viewpoint creates an encumbrance for males growing up in the South; from an early age men are expected to behave and engage in a specific way, limiting possibilities of self-identity and expression. What constitutes preferred masculinity is informed by geographic culture, traditions, and contexts; established in part by comparing the male figure to subordinates, and determining ways to remain dominant over them (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Noting the significance of the variable of geography in regard to masculinity, sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) postulated that,

> In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports… Any male who fails to qualify in any of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least–as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior." p. 128)

Goffman's articulation of masculinity or the *ideal male* is interesting in that it describes a very specific type of American male, and any man that does not embody every trait listed, is subject to have their masculinity questioned by themselves or others.

Most thought-provoking about Goffman's critique is that, conceptually, there is a war of masculinities within American culture. Although rural masculinities have been thought to be some of the most restrictive, Goffman's reference to "urban" suggests that even the least rural Appalachian male is lacking some form of masculine component, due to his regional placement in the rural South instead of the urban North. Per Goffman's theory, these two geographic locations lie in opposition to one another; one housing legitimate masculinity while the other does not. To also understand that the Appalachian region of the United States has had a long history of being considered one of the more impoverished regions in the country (Anglin, 2002; Jargowsky, 1998), also provides insight as to possible explanations for the South's strict, arguably overcompensating, preferences of masculinity. Pharr (1988) contends that economics are "not only as the root cause of sexism but also the underlying, driving force that keeps all the oppressions in place" (p. 10), reiterating Goffman's position that economic standing plays a large role in masculinity construction.

Adults in rural regions often embody and abide by these rigid traits of masculinity and gender roles—and no doubt teach them to their offspring at young ages—thus utilizing sexism and homophobia as tools to perpetually codify a patriarchal culture that begins in the home and infiltrates the school classrooms. Adolescents are susceptible to these culturally informed traditional roles and expectations early on (Katz, 1995), and it has been noted that "it is at puberty that the full force of society's pressure to conform to heterosexuality and prepare for

marriage is brought to bear" (Pharr, 1988, p. 17) This can be problematic when a male is the antithesis of expected male sexuality—bisexual or homosexual rather than heterosexual.

Gay men often feel the need to validate their masculinity by engaging in risky sexual behavior, such as *barebacking* (i.e., unprotected anal sex) (Davis, 2002; Riggs, 2006). This form of sex can function as an expression of masculinity given its lack of restriction and limits (Riggs, 2006). Men find this activity to be devoid of discipline and regulation, and thus can assert their own masculine-driven power within the parameters of sexual activity. Obviously this can be problematic, in that unprotected sex is the leading cause of contracting HIV/AIDS; exhibiting "masculine" behaviors in this way can have negative long-term effects for non-heterosexual men. Kimmel and Levine (1998) establish that the 1970s were a turning point for gay male identity, noting that non-heterosexual males began to assert personas that were gender-conforming and heavily reliant on traditional expectations of rigid masculinities. Correlating this with the strong emphasis on traditional masculinity—specifically in the South— accounts in part for why a recent article in *The New Yorker* suggests that HIV has such a "grip on the American South" (Stillman, 2014). Some gay men in Appalachia feel pressure to exhibit *some* form of masculinity even if they violate the foundations of what is accepted as genuine, traditional masculinity simply by being homosexual. In 1995 Abraham Verghes wrote the groundbreaking book entitled *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story* that described in depth the AIDS epidemic in Appalachia, specifically Eastern Tennessee. These accounts lend support to the claim that not only is HIV/AIDS in the South a product of unsafe sex practices, but that the South is agentic to the spread of the disease, by perpetuating rigid expectations of masculinity and sexuality that can lead to unsafe sex practices.

In addition to devout religious ideology and a strong urge to maintain traditional gender roles, the rural landscape of Appalachian culture can produce additional dilemmas and complications for gay men and women; the following section discusses these dilemmas in depth.

Isolation and Rurality in Appalachia

Fifteen thousand. That is the population of my hometown; where I spent the first twenty years of my life. It was hardly a thriving metropolis like the ones I saw on television; my town was nestled in the mountains of Western North Carolina. Instead of living in a home surrounded by towering skyscrapers and condominiums, it was enclosed by lofty pines and rolling hills. It was isolated. It was remote. It was … rural.

Living beyond the parameters of the cityscape had its benefits and, just like most other things, also came with its share of setbacks. But you adjust. You adapt. You survive. Ever since I was a little boy, I dreamed of moving away, however. I wanted to replace the fields full of grazing cattle with busy streets and sidewalks filled with an array of people. I wanted less serenity, and more chaos. In short, I wanted to be in the city; no particular city, just … in *a* city. As I grew older and began to form what would become my adolescent and young-adult identity, it became more and more apparent that, as a gay man, my hometown simply would not be the best place for me to spend the duration of my life. During my teenage years, my day-to-day life would range from tolerable to *if I don't get out of here soon I'm going to lose my mind*. Just as prior research (Sears, 1991; Baunach et al., 2010) has described, the school environment can be a challenging and even emotionally damaging space for non-heterosexual men in Appalachia, and I was no exception to these testaments.

By my sophomore year, I was the *only* openly gay person in my high school. During my freshmen year, there was one male who was openly gay—I saved that proclamation until my

sophomore year. This rather brave young man was bullied frequently, and eventually decided to move to upstate New York where he had extended family. The following year, after I came out of the closet to my friends and peers, a move to New York did not sound half bad. Unlike my peer, I did not have the luxury of that option; all of my family are from Appalachia and still reside in the region. *I'll just have to tough it out*, I would think to myself daily, anxiously anticipating the day when I would be released from the shackles of adolescence and parental control, and move. High school graduation could not come soon enough. By age twenty, I had gotten free from the grips of the Appalachian small town that I had felt so shackled by for all those years. It was bliss.

Gay men and women moving out of their small, and often rural hometowns, is not a new pattern. In fact, it is a practice that has been of much debate in academic inquiry for quite some time now. One of the major arguments is whether or not rurality can offer gay men and women a prosperous, healthy life. It has been noted that "for many in the gay and lesbian community, there is a loss of public acceptance, a loss of allies, a loss of place and belonging" (Pharr, 1988, p. 23), especially those in rural communities. Rural life is often experienced by non-heterosexual men and women as hostile . In addition to the more restrictive expectations for masculinity in rural areas, there is also lower visibility of queer culture in rural areas, and certainly fewer opportunities for companionship, as a major facet to rurality is isolation for all inhabitants. Isolation is further intensified when an individual belongs to a minority subgenre of people.

In her essay "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imagery and the Great Gay Migration" (1995), Kath Weston declares that gay men and women most often leave their rural hometowns behind for city life. Weston claims that non-heterosexuals relocate to larger cities to find greater

acceptance and community, to assert a stronger, more liberated gay identity, and to gain discernibility among the population. Residents of rural communities—especially those in the South—are often critical of and hostile towards gay individuals who disrupt the norms of local culture, preferring the visibility of both them and their culture be minimal to non-existent. As Pharr (1988) contends, "visible gay men are the objects of extreme hatred and fear by heterosexual men because their breaking ranks with male heterosexual solidarity is seen as a damaging rent in the very fabric of sexism." (p. 18) Those who exhibit gendered behavior that is noticeably or outwardly queered may find rural life particularly difficult; whether or not a non-heterosexual can "pass" as heterosexual through appearance and mannerism determines their success in the rural community (Wienke & Hill, 2013), because those individuals provide less disruption to traditionally preferred gender patterns.

In opposition to visibility lies isolation, which some scholars believe is the unhealthiest aspect of rural gay life (Annes & Redlin, 2012). To be isolated is to be alone, with little-to-no social networks, support or alliances. Larger cities promote greater public visibility to gay men and women by offering a higher number of queer spaces and platforms for queer identity, hence becoming a beacon of hope for those attempting to migrate. Cities also offer gay men and women the opportunity to not live an isolated life, but instead have meaningful relationships and networks with fellow non-heterosexuals.

Although urban life seemingly offers many crucial benefits to gays, it too has its share of setbacks. Research has argued that urban life offers no better possibilities for marginalized sexualities (Wienke & Hill, 2013), but city life does tend to offer more resources for gays in regard to social networking and support systems, even though the cost of living and pressures of maintaining an "ideal" gay lifestyle in the city is emotionally stressing on men and women. An

abundance of financial resources are needed for urban living and the consumerist behavior that is perpetuated as a gay ideal (Barrett & Pollack, 2005). Representations of ideal gay lifestyles that place emphasis on consumerism are represented in many forms, especially those in media. Television shows such as *Queer Eye For the Straight Guy* and *Will and Grace* depict the ideal gay man as being well-groomed, dressed in designer clothes, eating at fine dining restaurants regularly and living in expensive homes and apartments. These representations of gayness relay messages to mass queer audiences that in order to be an attractive, upstanding, *ideal* gay citizen, one must conform to these notions of spending and excess (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). Gay men living in urban areas who strive beyond their means for this lifestyle may well confront emotional and psychological stress.

The day-to-day stresses of urban living on gay men and women may exceed the stresses that they once felt in their rural hometowns. Although gay men and women's visibility may be minimal in rural areas, they are met with restrictive expectations and qualifiers for visibility in larger, urban areas. The city "stands for a gay 'Mecca' where it is safe to be gay and to express freely ones's gayness" (Annes & Redlin, 2012, p.62), but is also noted that many gay men and women remain in the city and engage in urban living only briefly. A common trajectory of this gay migration is that many gay men and women leave rurality for urbanism in order to establish their gay identities, only to return back to rural life a short time later. This notion derails the assumption that most, if not all, gays move to urban environments as the *end point* of their personal journeys, suggesting instead that the pull towards urban life may be temporary.

Even though it has its own stresses and expectations specific to gay life, urbanism offers more opportunities for gay men and women to establish and assert individual identities than rurality. As many scholars have shown, identity establishment as a gay man is a complex process

influenced by many factors. The following section of this chapter discusses these processes in greater detail.

Identity Establishment Among Gay Men: From the Closet and Beyond

Identity "indicates a placement within a set of social-structural relations" (Hutson, 2010, p. 215); the "coming out" process can indicate a turning point in identity that signals a passage into a "new social group or social structure" (p. 220). Given that this passage to a new selfhood is a transitional period in one's life, one of the hurdles to overcome is learning how to establish an identity as an openly non-heterosexual individual. This means that gay men must find their new identity as an *openly* gay male, in a world that is often unfriendly, biased, or judgmental towards them. Gay men then learn to cope with their freedoms to be open about their sexuality, and gain comfort in doing so.

Just as one "comes out" of the closet, one is simultaneously "coming in" to a new culture and a world that is often unfamiliar (Ridge, Plummer, & Peasley, 2006, p. 506). This "coming in" process can also create an identity crisis among gay men, who may question their sense of self, their placement within society, and the *type* of gay person they want to be. Authenticity is a motivating factor in establishing this new identity; the ability to be openly gay, yet not succumb to stereotypical or idealized versions of non-heterosexuality, is a prominent goal for many gay men. Part of this transition involves establishing an identity outside of the authority of one's parents, as well as resisting dominant heterosexual cultural norms (Hutson, 2010). With this newly found identity, many men also find struggle with balancing self-acceptance and family acceptance. A previous study indicates that 89% of gay men find their families to be an important part of their life (Wilkinson, Holt, Rawstorne, Kippax, & Worth, 2012). This statistic

highlights the dialectical tensions that gay men face when dealing with their homosexuality and their attachment to kinship, and the ways in which they navigate through such tensions. Men must also establish their own sexuality and masculinity in a "homophobic world" (Ridge, 2006, p. 507) and, given that southern culture is more tolerant of homophobia than other US regions, this transition can be extremely difficult.

Identity Establishment within the Gay Scene and Gay Communities

Attempting to create a new identity after making the transition through the homophillic passage can be a difficult undertaking. Gay men must figure out ways in which they want to be male, how they want to embody and represent gay masculinity in their own way, in gay spaces such as clubs and bars as well as outside of these spaces, in the hetero-dominant world. As gay men and women have higher levels of stress relative to their heterosexual counterparts when it comes to intergroup relations (Hegarty, Pratto, & Lemieux, 2004), it would make sense that gay men would want to surround themselves with people with whom they can be comfortable, and who provide ample levels of support and comfort. Friendships can provide gay men with support that they may not receive from family (Wilkinson et al., 2012). Although supportive friendships positively contribute to gay men's mental health, the friendships among gay men are complicated by the structure, limitations and boundaries of such relationships (Shio & Savaya, 2011).

Friendships among gay men are divisive in the same way that friendships among heterosexuals can be. Just as with hetero-dominant culture, relationships within gay communities are affected by class, ethnicity and family background (Wilkinson et al., 2012) and have varying social statuses that can often create restrictive and exclusive membership within the overall community (Ridge et al., 1997). In addition to the complexities presented by class and ethnicity,

there are three primary sub-groups of gay male friendship: Communal, Sexual and Social (Wilkinson et al., 2012). The next three subsections will explore each of these dynamics more closely.

The significance and implications of gay community immersion. Precisely defining what makes a gay *community* is a rather difficult task. Non-heterosexual individuals have had a semi-linear cultural and social progression over the last century. Beginning in the 20th century, American homosexuals were thought to be a deviant subculture, followed by a progression towards being considered a politically charged by-product of the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movement of the 1960's and 1970's, to what is now considered to be a social movement (Wilkinson et al., 2012) fighting for equality and visibility in the socio-political arena. The gay community was initially considered to be a group of people whose only commonality was sexual experiences (a deviant subculture) and a group that provided support to fellow gay men and women that could not be found in heterosexual institutions, therefore making the aspect of sexuality itself vital to the community (Wilkinson et al., 2012). However, cultural views have shifted over the past two decades.

Gay communities are now viewed by many as a conceptualized alliance consisting of non-heterosexuals, promoting changes in political climate and government politics, with hopes of conveying a sense of normality to their heterosexual counterparts (Ridge et al., 1997). Gay communities are an anchor for gay identities and the gay liberation movement (Holt, 2011), and a rallying, allied gay community is necessary for politically promoting better health policies for non-heterosexual individuals (Wilkinson et al., 2012). Although a formed alliance of non-heterosexuals can be beneficial emotionally, politically and socially, there are complexities and concerns within friendships between gay men that can be problematic at a micro level.

Men within the gay community face the task of handling relational complexities in order to establish successful and meaningful friendships. These issues can range from the pleasures and risks of drug and alcohol abuse, the complicated dynamics of gay male friendship (both sexualized and non-sexualized) and the exclusionary methods that gay men employ with one another to regulate physical appearance, lust and sexualized competition among one another. Sexuality within the gay community is a convoluted matter, often times complicating specific dynamics of interpersonal relationships by blurring the lines between friend and lover, emotionally supportive friend or sexualized competition.

Sexualization of the gay community. The dynamic of friendships between gay men is complex. One of the more abstruse aspects is that of the role of sex within these relationships. Gay men face tensions that arise from the basic nature of their ongoing relationships with one another: questioning whether the relationship is simply that of an emotionally supportive friend, or a sexual or prospective sexual partner. Gay friendships are shaped by social structures whereby sexuality is a large component of their relationships (Nardi, 1992). Given that the one commonality that all gay men within the community share is their attraction to other men, it is easy to understand how this dynamic can be complex and perplexing at best.

One of the dominating themes in gay friendship is that of idealized gender and masculinity roles, which come to fruition through the appearance of gay men. Appearance in gay culture is restrictive and determines who is deemed attractive and worthy for "membership" among individual groups in the community (Ridge et al., 1997). This "merit" also extends to interpersonal, sexualized relations that occur between gay men. Appearance is informed by hypermasculinized ideals which lead to a preferred body type (Hutson, 2010) that gay men aspire not only for themselves, but for their sexual partners to have as well. Research on gay male

attraction has shown that a majority of non-heterosexual men are attracted to men with strong masculine dispositions and mannerisms (Ridge et al., 1997), most often finding those who embody traditional masculine roles as more sexually desirable than their more effeminate counterparts. Gender and masculine ideals also affect the ways that men dress and present their bodies to one another (Hutson, 2010), wearing tight clothes in gay bars and venues, for example, in order to draw attention to their body, and create a sexualized self.

This regimented process of adhering to (stereo) typically masculinized behavior within the gay community creates conflict while simultaneously providing some benefits. While sexualized relationships amongst gay men provide connection in some ways, it simultaneously creates distance and fragmentation within the community (Ridge et al., 1997). This fragmentation comes in the form of competitiveness and divided subgroups (Ridge et al., 2006). A platonic friendship (to stronger or lesser degrees), but with a sexualized component, called a "Friends with Benefits" (FWB) relationship, plays a large role in the gay community (Ridge et al., 1997). While many men do not have desire to be in committed, monogamous relationships, a sexual appetite still remains, resulting in the men often engaging in a FWB-type relationship. In a FWB relationship there are typically no formal long or short-term commitments to one another or monogamy. The scholars also note that although FWB relationships play a prominent role in the gay community, they can prevent social support and long-term friendship due to the sexualized nature of the relational dynamic.

The role sex plays in gay male companionship and friendship is dependent upon the individual. Research has shown that when it comes to socializing, a majority of gay men attend clubs, bars or other casual gay venues and engage in typical hobbies, as opposed to visiting the more stereotypical, super-sexualized spaces such as bathhouses, sex clubs and strip clubs

(Wilkinson et al., 2012). When it comes to the online gay scene (including chat rooms, dating websites and "hook-up" websites), there is a division in regard to what men desire from these sources. 55% of gay men employ online dating and cellular phone dating-based applications as a means to have casual sex, while 55% also join in an attempt to find friendships (Wilkinson et al. 2012). Given that there is an overlapping of these percentages, the research reiterates the fact there is much ambiguity among males pertaining to boundaries between plutonic friend and sexual partner. Men who use these sites are simultaneously looking for friends *and* sex; something many gay men believe they can find in a singular person.

These relationships are often created or established in a sub-group of the gay community as a whole—the gay *scene*. The scene is considered to be a commercialized gay venue (Ridge et al., 2006) that serves the purpose of fostering relationship building, while also perpetuating many negative habits including excessive drug and alcohol usage and promiscuous sex. The scene is where many gay men establish their individualized gay identity, and determine how they want to engage as gay men both independently and with other men.

The Scene: Identity Formation, Pleasure, and Socialization

The *scene* is a culmination of the many facets of individualized gay culture. Given that gay men and women are left to perform their own independent versions of their sexuality in a heterodominant world, the scene is the intersecting of these diverse, non-heterosexual identities. The gay scene consists of any type of gay space that is made for profit, although this definition typically refers to bars, clubs and any other venues that stand as a meeting place for gay men and women that are dominated by capitalism and financial profit by an institution. This queer space is one in which men can each perform their identity among other non-heterosexual men, allowing them to create a more sexualized self in the presence of others. Although the scene can

be considered a liberating space for non-heterosexuals, it is also a place that marginalizes individuals (Hammers, 2008). Within these spaces there are three predominant themes that arise: the cultivation of individualized identity, a space in which pleasure seeking is the overarching agenda, and the complexities of social networking and social groups. It is to these themes that I now turn.

The scene as a space for pleasure seeking. The scene provides men (and women) with broader boundaries to perform gender norms; the gay scene not only broadens, but also *reproduces* the sexual and gender norms of heterosexual society, in a more liberalized manor (Taylor, 2008). Although gay men emulate much of the gendered norms of the hegemonic world, such as aspiring to maintain a sense of masculinity and power, the scene allows for a broader interpretation of this masculinity. By adopting non-hetero idealizations and networks, gay men are left to understand their own individualized versions of masculinity, perform them in these spaces, and thus create new versions of masculinity (Ridge et al., 2006). Within the confines of queer spaces and the scene, much of this identity is centered on sexuality, hence creating an emphasized sexualized self. This process of creating a sexualized self is in part what makes the scene a space that is centered on *pleasure seeking*.

While the scene allows gay men to pursue many identities, it is the sexualized self that is the most common identity employed (Ridge et al., 2006). This affirms Hutson's (2010) assessment that gay men have many core values that relate to their self-identity, but social situations may dictate which of those identities takes prominence over others at particular times. Given that the scene allows men to explore pleasures and gayness fully, it has most commonly been geared to perpetuate casual sex and short-term relationships

Casual sex is not the only pleasure that is associated with the scene. Excessive drinking and drug use is also a common activity affiliated with these queer spaces. Drugs "are frequently an ordinary and positive part of scene life" (Ridge et al., 1997, p. 159). Given that the scene is centered on leisure and pleasure, the commonality of drug and alcohol use is not surprising. Many factors within these spaces contribute to the sense of pleasure that is bolstered, including sexualized dance music, low lighting and an abundance of alcohol within reach (Taylor, 2008). When combined with the sexualized self, these factors contribute to a world that is fulfilling to men on several levels, while concurrently being hazardous to their health. Unsafe sex practices, numerous sex partners and excessive drug use have all had significant impact on gay men's health (Ryan et al., 2009). The degree of scene preoccupation that some gay men have creates potential to interfere with their everyday life to the extent that they forego other responsibilities (Ridge et al., 2006), opting instead to create their own social networks within the confines of the scene, and choosing to have the scene remain their primary source for leisure and social support.

The role of social networking within the scene. The scene is a world unto its own; it is separated from larger social institutions and the generalized gay community as a whole (Ridge et al., 2006). Within the parameters of the scene exists a unique dichotomy of gay male friendship, bearing its own complexities and hazards.

The scene is a broad space created for the expression of many gender and sexualized identities. With this freedom comes a sense of competition between men, in order to gain attention from other men and create powerful social networks. The gay scene has been referred to as a "pecking order" (Ridge et al., 2006, p. 505) in which men fight for power with one another. The scene is commonly divided into exclusive subgroups, identified by labels such as "Party boy" "Bear" or "Twink" that maintain, regulate and distribute social power, thus creating

an element of rigid social regulation (Ridge et al., 2006). Creating identifiers and labels such as these further segregate and dissect the non-heterosexual community, often times leaving specific categorizations of men to police and discriminate against one another. Grouped identities such as "Bear" and "Twink" maintain specific qualifiers for inclusion, and those who do not meet certain criteria for admittance are perceived as undesirabled—resulting in a further marginalization of subgroups in an already marginalized collective of individuals.

Given the complexities and often negative impact of the scene, Ridge et al. (2006) contend that for the best interests of gay men, it serves better to temporarily involve oneself in the gay scene in order to engage in the positive aspects of the space. These aspects include forming an individualized identity, gaining acceptance of one's masculinity, and learning how to socialize with other gay men. The same research concluded that temporary immersion into the scene in order to gain identity awareness, followed by a re-entering of the hetero-dominant world can be most beneficial to gay men. This provides men with a heightened sense of self-awareness in regard to their sexuality, and ways to negotiate this identity with the hegemonic system of everyday life.

Gay Communities in Appalachia:

Linking Regional Factors with Communal Outcomes

When intersecting the complexities and unique structure of gay communities with the cultural atmosphere of rural Appalachian life, the result is a matter that, unsurprisingly, comes with its own unique set of interesting, albeit problematic issues. What *is* surprising is the fact that little academic research has focused on this specific demographic of people. Prior sections of this paper have established that social class has potential to divide gay communities (Wilkinson,

et al., 2012) and that many gay communities have restrictive membership that is determined by financial status (Ridge, et al., 1997). These restrictive measures are in part due the notion that the *ideal* gay man is one that places high value on consumerism, culture and worldly possessions (Barrett & Pollack, 2005), thus leaving those who cannot afford these luxuries out of the parameters of *gay idealism* and community involvement.

Speaking specifically about the south central Appalachian region of the United States, these luxuries may be difficult to obtain given the area's geographic placement and economic status. Research has demonstrated that the Appalachian region is steeped in economic turmoil, a place that has been long-regarded as an overall impoverished and underdeveloped area (Anglin, 2002; Jargowsky, 1998). The rurality of Appalachia leaves sparse opportunity for high-paying jobs for men and women to obtain, leaving much of the work fields to be blue collar with lower paying wages. Gay men who are blue collar or working class are less likely to be involved in gay communities (Barrett & Pollack, 2004). It is also known that gay men who are involved in the gay communities are more likely to practice safe sex and employ condom use (Holt, 2011). Using these two pieces of research, it becomes rather clear that correlations can be drawn between rural Appalachian gay men and the high rates of HIV/AIDS in the area that has been discussed earlier in this paper.

Taking into account the harsh economic factors that many Appalachian residents endure, and combining them with the scrutiny and disdain that gay men and women face in the South (Baunach, et al., 2010; Sears, 1991;), it becomes clear that non-heterosexuals in the region may have to accept low paying jobs due to discrimination or lack of tolerance and acceptance from their home communities, relative that found in larger urban areas. This further alienates gay men

from being able to afford the luxuries and amenities that many other gay men view as essential to be part of a larger, more socialized network or community.

Another challenge that gay communities in Appalachia face is that of migration. As Weston (1995) discussed, many gays and lesbians opt to move from their rural hometowns into larger cities in order to assert their gay identities and find financial success that will afford them the luxury of participating in idealic gay consumer culture. What this does to those who choose not to migrate, is leave very few options for socialization, friendships and romantic relationships. In essence, in Appalachia there is a drought of diversity pertaining to sexuality; and those that *do* remain in the region while simultaneously attempting to be visible still face the issue of *isolation* do to the sparse nature of the gay population.

This review of literature has highlighted existing research on rurality and Appalachian culture, and integrated it with existing research pertaining to gay communities, migration, and gay male relationships. The review has identified some of the canonical and archetypal problems that non-heterosexuals may face in rural regions of Appalachia, with variables such as rurality, economics and biblical inerrancy affecting community and identity formation. Prior research has however focused little attention to the complexities that exist for non-heterosexual men in rural areas—particularly those in the South—pertaining to communal formation. This study attempts to fill in some of the gaps between existing literature/research in order to have a more nuanced understanding of these complexities. When combining previous research on the two areas of study—*Southern rurality* and *gay communities*—an academic framework is created and thus provides a foundation for research to begin on gay men in south centralAppalachia that aims to understand specific factors that affect community formation among gay men in the region. The

present study's purpose is to explore gay community formation in one region of Appalachia, and to examine the challenges and limitations that are presented to men in the region.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

The primary objective of this study is to examine community formation among gay men in the south central Appalachian region of the United States. Specifically, this study aims to better understand the challenges that are presented by Appalachian culture to non-heterosexual men in the region, in regard to forming meaningful relationships of support with one another. This research has chosen to focus only on men, as gender could potentially have a large impact on limitations presented to non-heterosexuals in the South

Participant Selection

Participants were adult males who identified as non-heterosexual. The men selected for participation were not to be "discreet" nor "in the closet" prior to their involvement in the study so that the risk of *outting* someone about their sexuality would be negligible. The men involved in this study are men who are “out” about their sexuality, and who were comfortable discussing their sexuality and related subject matter. Participants were also required to have been born in and continue to live in the southern region of the United States. There were eight participants in total, between the ages of twenty-one and thirty, with a median age of twenty-five-years-old. All participants in this study were able-bodied, Caucasian and considered to be young in age. Because these variables are in alignment with traditionally preferred social markers, it must be noted that this could perhaps impact the men’s involvement—or lack thereof—within the gay community. The men in this study (presumably) face no other cultural stigmas beyond their sexual orientation, and thus may not feel the need or desire for gay communal assimilation, in

that they perhaps find general socialization within the public sphere to be an easy, readily available option.

Participants were recruited in three ways: 1) gathering a convenience sample, or one that is "drawn from that part of the population that is close to hand, readily available, or convenient" (Bhattacherjee, 2012, p. 69) with students in an on-campus *Queer Studies* classes, 2) utilizing a *snowball* sample by selecting interested friends of the researcher's friends as participants and 3) creating an account on the popular gay dating cellular phone application entitled *Grindr* (a phone application well-known among gay men for facilitating computer-mediated and real-life based friendships and relationships). The researcher created a profile on the app, used the "biography" section of the profile as a way to briefly explain the nature of the study, and requested that interested potential participants send a personal message for further, more detailed information. Those who responded via this method were provided general information about the study, including the purpose, subject matter, data collection method, via personal messages.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were gathered using three one-on-one interviews as well as two focus groups. The interviews and focus groups were performed in various spaces, dependent upon where the participants felt most comfortable. One focus group was held in my home and the other was held in my office at the university I attend. Two of the independent interviews were held in the participant's respective homes; and the third in my office. Both the individual interviews and the focus groups were moderated by me and were informed by a Standard Interview Schedule (Appendices A), which "uses a formally structured schedule of interview questions" (Berg, 2009, p. 105). The interview schedule was structured after the Patton Model (Madison, 2012), which follows a regimented set of questions pertaining to behavior, experience, opinions, values,

feelings and knowledge (p. 30). In this study, questions focused on the participants' experiences, feelings, and values pertaining to a multitude of subjects, including experiences living as a gay male in Appalachian culture, social habits, family upbringing, and interpersonal relationships. The schedule served as a blueprint for the initial trajectory of the dialogue between the participant(s) and myself. The interview schedule was also intersected with *narrative interviewing* in this study. Narrative interviewing allows the researcher to include oneself in the research by combining their personal narratives and experiences with those of the participant when they are share similarities (Krizek, 2003). Just as this paper has allowed space for the researcher's narrative voice comment intermittently, the interviews were performed in a similar way. That is, the participants would occasionally ask for my opinion or experiences on a topic of conversation, which would in turn lead to further dialogue pertaining to the subject matter. This approach served as a fruitful and beneficial technique for the data collection itself.

Furthering my own role within the text of this paper, I attempted to create a multi-layered account of gay men in Appalachia, intersecting traditional qualitative methodology with a nuanced, progressive form of qualitative inquiry: autoethnography. Given that I am a gay man who has always lived in Appalachia, I considered my own articulations and my experiences amid those of my participants; I employed a similar technique of utilizing the self, when constructing the review of literature as well. My personal experiences were synthesized in the data in two distinctive ways: narrative interviewing (as previously described), and autoethnographic accounts throughout the paper. My personal narratives shared in the interviews with participants (narrative interviewing) , as well as in the text of this paper (autoethnographic writing), serve as a method to make the study a more rich, multi-layered account of life as gay men in Appalachia.

The questions guiding the data collection center around three predominant areas: 1) *upbringing in rural Appalachia and family life*. This portion of questions discusses the "coming out" process with the family, levels of familial acceptance and emotional closeness to family members. In this research, "family" consists of immediate family such as parents or legal guardians, and siblings. 2) The next section discusses the topic of the *gay community* in general. Within the context of this study, *community* refers to political, social, and personal attachment to LGBT related issues and individuals. These questions focus on personal friendships, networking, and involvement with other gay men and women. And lastly, the final portion of questions center around *gay clubs* specifically. Questions in this section discuss involvement in the "scene", and the types of behaviors the participants engage in within these spaces. This section also discusses relational dynamics of homosexual and heterosexual clubs, and the types of individuals that attend these venues.

The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, although several measures were taken by the researcher to ensure the privacy and anonymity of the participants. The interviews were recorded using the researcher's personal laptop computer as well as utilizing a voice record application on the researcher’s cellular phone; the audio files were then transcribed verbatim. Each individual participant was assigned a pseudonym for this research project. Pseudonyms were utilized as a way of maintaining complete anonymity throughout the duration of the research, from the transcribed interviews themselves, to the written portion of the study

Data Analysis

The data was coded, borrowing from grounded theory approaches (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a guiding principle in finding and organizing emergent themes in written data, and

intersecting them with theoretical constructs. By utilizing aspects of the grounded theory technique, the researcher was able to discover emergent themes in the data that were not anticipated, and that contributed to a greater insight on the subject matter. Coding is "the process of grouping together themes and categories that you have accumulated in the field" (Madison, 2012, p. 43) and is also "the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations" (Charmaz, 2006a, p. 43). This research employed two types of coding, including axial and line-by-line. Initital coding consists of two main phases: "an initial phase involving naming each word, line, or segment of data followed by 2) a focused, selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate and organize large amounts of data" (Charmaz, 2006a, p. 46). This research employed both phases of the coding schema.

After initial codes were generated from the written data, correlating memos were drawn up. Charmaz (2006b) asserts the relevance of the memo by stating "the memo hints at how sensitizing concepts, long left silent, may murmur during coding and analysis" (p. 76). For this study, memos were created to demonstrate the overarching themes that emerged from the transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups. Post-memo phase, the final overarching themes for the essay were thus discovered and highlighted. Post-memo and coding phase, data were positioned within the framework of relational dialectics.

Theoretical Framework:

Understanding Culturally Imposed Limitations For Gay Male Community Formation as Dialectical Tensions

Building off of Baxter's (1988) conceptual framework that views human relationships as ongoing entities who face tensions and contradicting goals, this study frames the relationship between Appalachian culture and the gay male community as a broader representation of these contradictions and opposing goals. Although originally designed as a framework to understand and explain the dyadic tensions that exist in interpersonal relationships, researches have expanded and applied the dialectical perspective to a number of contexts, including tensions in group settings (Kramer, 2004), tensions within organizations (Gibbs, 2009), and tensions that exist in community-campus partnerships (Dumlao & Janke, 2012).

Montero (1998) examined the dialectical tensions that are negotiated between active social minorities and active social majorities, asserting that there is "a struggle of forces, brutal and subtle at the same time, occurring between the society as a global majority and the community as a minority capable of producing a dissident social movement." (p. 285). The current study builds on this foundational understanding by employing Rawlins' (1992) framework of contextual dialectics in an attempt to understand tensions that exist between the gay community (minority) and the south central Appalachian culture (majority). This study replaces the *individual* with *a collective group of individuals*, viewing each as a social whole, emphasizing the fact that, "social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 3).

After being identified and appropriately coded, each theme found within the interviews was framed within an already-existing tension of the dialectical framework in order to provide a

clear understanding of the tensions that exists between Appalachian culture and the gay male collective. In order to provide understanding of this conceptual framework, it is important to first offer an overview of the fundamentals of relational dialectics.

The relational dialectics framework was initially created as a way to explore the ongoing, often opposing tensions that are in flux within interpersonal relationships. Rawlins (1992) extended Baxter's (1988) dialectical frameworks by positing that tensions exists not only in interpersonal relationships, but also in the relationships between individuals and the broader culture as a whole. *Contextual* dialectics, Rawlins contends, "describe cultural conceptions that frame and permeate interaction within specific friendships yet are conceivably subject to revision as a result of significant changes in everyday practices." (p. 9)

Within dialectics—both relational *and* contextual—are four conceptual assumptions that exist in relationships between human beings. The four conceptual assumptions are: contradictions, causation, praxis and totality. Additionally, there are two possible ways in which individuals can resolve tensions: integration and reaffirmation. These four assumptions, along with the two techniques for resolution, will be discussed in depth, drawing from Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) work on relational dialectics.

Contradictions, Causation, and Praxis

Contradictions are assumed to exist and be a prominent facet of any interpersonal relationship. Contradictions are an inherent part of social life and are not necessarily negative, as many individuals may assume them to be. Contradictions can in fact be a positive aspect of relationships, as they have potential to promote change (Baxter & Montgomery,1996). Contradictions are made up of conceptual oppositions, which can be negative or positive, logical or functional.

Oppositions and contradictions within relationships between two entities work together to inform and influence one another, creating what is called a *unity of oppositions*. These contradictions can be positive, leading to a practical unification between the opposing viewpoints while simultaneously being interdependent parts of a larger social whole; a concept that is termed *interactive unity*. While remaining as interdependent parts of a larger whole, each viewpoint can lend to positive change, creating what is referred to as the *dynamic interplay of oppositions,* or "the interplay of opposing tendencies that serves as the driving force for ongoing change in any social system, including personal relationships." (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 10) The oppositions that exist in relationships between two entities can be a *positive* component–one that spurs progressive change, creating a cause-and-effect reaction; this concept is known as causation.

Although some may view contradictions or opposing views within relationships to be a distinctly negative component, there is possibility that these oppositions can work with one another to create a healthier relationship. *Causation* refers to the cause-and-effect of the tensions that exists within a relationship—a negotiation that is in flux yet can lead to positive change.

Causation can be broken down into two distinctive categories: linear and cyclical. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) assert that a linear cause-and-effect exhibits "non-repeating moves in which the system is permanently changed" (p. 13), whereas cyclical cause-and-effect is when the "interplay of oppositions takes on a back-and-forth flavor." (p. 13) Each unit in the relationship can decide how it will respond to the oppositions and differing viewpoints; relational contradictions can be resolved, with negotiations being made by each party. In a linear pattern, a one-time solution is solidified and thus becomes the principle for which each unit of the relationship follows. In a cyclical pattern, a solution is not solidified, thus leaving each

independent party to be in perpetual negotiation that responds to relational contradictions. Both linear and cyclical causations are informed by and hinge upon the actions of those in each independent unit of the relationship, a concept known as *praxis*.

In its most simplistic definition, praxis means that humans are agentic—they respond to and control their circumstances through actions. Building upon this elementary construct, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) posit that human beings are actors, "making communicative choices in how to function in their social world." (p. 13) Actions and beliefs by each unit in the relationship are what create the possibility of contradictions therein, and each unit or actor must respond to these contradictions, thus creating an ongoing cycle of negotiating to resolve opposing beliefs. Although there are multitudes of ways that opposing forces in the relationship can be managed, relational dialectics contends that there are two primary ways that actors can respond to these oppositions: integration and reaffirmation.

Integration and reaffirmation. As Baxter and Montgomery (1996) contend, integration means that, "both parties are able to respond fully to all opposing forces at once without any compromise or dilution." (p. 65); this is assumed to be the most unlikely outcome when negotiating contradictions within an interdependent relationship. The conceptual assumption of integration suggests that the initial opposing views are still considered to be in opposition to one another and that neither unit within the relationship makes changes to aid a resolution; instead, the contradictions are assumed to be begrudgingly accepted by both parties, which permits the relationship to continue functioning. In contrast with an integration approach to contradiction management is the reaffirmation approach–one that is viewed as much more realistic and healthy.

Reaffirmation occurs in a relationship between two parties when each party (actor[s]) recognizes that the polarities can be mitigated yet still remain in opposition towards one another in some capacity. However, each party sees the opposition as fruitful or beneficial in some way, and both parties come to appreciate the dynamic between the two opposing contradictions. The core concept of integration is compromise; each party within the larger, integrated relationship compromises to some degree, foregoing such strong personal opinions in order to maintain a more astute dynamic between the two, creating a healthier more fulfilling relationship. The concepts of both integration *and* reaffirmation reiterate Bay's (1982) claim that, "the right balance between our duty and obligation to respect our fellow humans and our freedom to take exception to their views and behavior cannot be determined by any fixed formula," (p. 70) alluding to the fact that mending tensions between dyadic parties is complex contextual. In addition to contradiction, causation and praxis, there is one remaining fundamental element of dialectics that must be discussed prior to beginning the data analysis portion of this study: totality.

Totality

The last remaining core assumption to dialectics is that of totality. Totality, in its simplest definition means, "a process of relations or interdependencies." (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 15) Totality refers to the ways that independent forces or units inform one another and thus create the possibility for oppositions and contradictions within each unit. As praxis refers to the actors who perform and create the tensions that are to be negotiated, totality pertains to the relationship that exists between the two actors. Within totality there are two primary sub-categories of contradiction and all forms of opposition are assumed to fall under one category or the other: internal contradictions, and external contradictions.

Internal contradictions pertain to the relationship between two people. Members in an interpersonal relationship inform and negotiate the tensions that lie within. The individuals themselves spur the contradictions within the relationship, as opposed to outside influences. External contradictions connect the individual to the larger, social world, highlighting the tensions that exists between the expectations of the individual relationship and the expectations of the larger whole in which the actors are embedded. The study of external contradictions acknowledges that the social world has regulated expectations for ways in which human relationships should be maintained and negotiated.

Building upon the four fundamental assumptions of contradictions in relational dialectics, as well as the two ways to resolve them, I will now explain the procedure for transcending the core concepts of dialectics outside of the parameters of interpersonal relationships and instead applying them to larger, socialized groups.

Tensions Between Sexual Minorities and Heterosexual Majorities: Expanding the Contextual Dialectic Approach

Given that "dialectical theorists situate praxis in different domains of social life, depending on their particular interests" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 14), this study situates the role of praxis not as two separate units within an interpersonal relationship, but instead frames two separate units within a larger, integrated culture as a whole. As opposed to observing two actors within an interpersonal relationship, the researcher has taken the south central region of Appalachia and dissected it into two sub-categories, each of which are represented as an "actor": (1) gay men in Appalachia and (2) the social climate that is enforced by the traditional Southern views as discussed in the literature review portion of this study.

The region serves as the fusion of the collective actors' individual viewpoints and represents the space in which oppositions are created and negotiated**.** Framing two products of the region as agentic actors, while simultaneously framing the south central Appalachian region as the space where the integrated actors create and negotiate oppositions, allows the researcher to understand the tensions that exists between gay men in Appalachia and the social climate of Appalachia itself.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into limitations presented to gay men in south central Appalachia regarding community formation, and framing these limitations as dialectical tensions that exists between the gay men in the region, and Appalachian culture as a whole. The south central Appalachian region produces a cultural climate that often-times critical of homosexuality; it is these views that inform gay males' perceptions of identity and community and thus creates opposition between the two units of analysis.

In her (1988) original dialectic framework, Baxter discussed numerous fundamental tensions that exist in interpersonal relationships. It is these initial tensions that scholars have built off of throughout the discourse of academic research. Although she established numerous tensions, this study does not utilize any of the original dialectical tensions from Baxter's initial framework; instead, the researcher has applied two tensions that were later developed: *private and public*, and *real and ideal*.

Rawlins (1992) extends upon Baxter's initial framework for dialectics by implementing several new contextual tensions that exist in human relationships. Among them are *private and public* and *real and ideal*. Public/private tensions examine the extent to which the public, social life affects relationships, and real/ideal tensions study the interplay between ideologic expectations between two units verses the realistic nature of relationship between the two units.

Understanding that there are tensions between majority and minority cultures (Montero, 1998), this study adds to the body of literature and academic output that has focused on dialectics specific to sexual minorities. In attempts to understand the struggles that exist between sexual majorities and sexual minorities, the dialectical approach has been applied to types of sexually marginalized groups. Previous research has focused on tensions that exist between the general public and same-sex committed couples (Perlich, 1997); tensions that are culturally produced between the public and the gay community in regard to same-sex marriage (Lannutti, 2005); tensions between individuals who identify as bisexual, and the more culturally visible gay/heterosexual communities (Meyer, 2003); and tensions that are produced via homophobia as a driver for social exclusion of sexual minorities (Flávia & Madureira, 2007).

After providing an overview of the fundamental principles of relational dialectics and intersecting them with the data of this study, a conceptual framework is created that provides insight into the dialectical tensions that exists between gay men and Appalachian culture in regard to gay male community formation. The framework informs data results, positing the differences between the two distinctive social bodies as that of ongoing tensions that can be maintained, negotiated and perhaps rectified. I now turn to the *results/discussion* portion of this study.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As discussed in the methods portion of this study, the participant data are framed predominantly through a contextual dialectics lens, therefore conceptualizing the results as that of dialectical tensions that exist between gay men in South Central Appalachia and the cultural atmosphere of the region itself. Bakhtin (1984) establishes that in order for a dialogue to occur, each unit must fuse its independent perspectives together while simultaneously maintaining the uniqueness of each perspective. The units form a connected conversation, but only when there are two distinct, differentiated voices. Within the context of this study, the two voices belong to men who identify as non-heterosexual and live in Appalachia, and the cultural atmosphere in the South Central region that often perpetuate traditional, biblically-informed, and marginalizing viewpoints.

The data results are framed through two independent dialectical concepts: public/private, and real/ideal, each of which has sub-categories that detail specific tensions that exist therein. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) contend that localized, independent cultures have an interest in and influence on the ways in which individuals in that culture create and engage in relationships. Cultural expectations for how individuals engage within one another, and what constitutes "appropriate" relationships are informed by a myriad of socialized factors including habitualization, systems of rewards, and relational legitimacy (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

Rawlins (1992) contends that contextual dialectics "interweave in numerous and sometimes ambiguous ways" (p. 23), reiterating the potential complexities that exist in the relationship between the South Central Appalachian culture and the non-heterosexual male

inhabitants of the region. Drawing on academic research in dialectics that places emphasis on culture and its influence on human relationships, I turn now to the study results and discussion.

Public and Private Tensions Between Gay Men in Appalachia and its Culture

> *Social life exists in and through people's communicative practices, by which people give voice to multiple (perhaps even infinite) opposing tendencies. Social life is an unfinished, ongoing dialogue in which polyphony of dialectical voices struggle against one another to be heard, and in that struggle they set the stage for future struggles. (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 4.)*

When attempting to understand specific limitations that are presented to gay men in regard to community formation in Appalachia, it is crucial to consider the culture of the region. The culture itself serves as the problematic nexus of community formation and the limitations thereof. The public/private dialectical tension provides an insightful framework for understanding some of the ongoing hurdles gay men in Appalachia must face pertaining to community involvement. Rawlins' (1992) public/private framework "articulates the tensions produced as experiences and behaviors . . . transcend private and public realms." (p. 9) This situates the Appalachian cultural public and the gay male population as independent actors informing one another in an ongoing relationship, creating space for oppositions and contradictions within, following the core concepts of Baxter's (1988) dialectical framework. In the following subsections, two components of the Appalachian region are framed through the public/private construct: predominance of Christian influence in the public setting, and lack of public spaces for gay socialization.

Christian Influence in the Public Sphere of Appalachia

The influence that the public majority has over the marginalized minority should not be underestimated—nor should the tensions that their relationship produces. Montero (1998) notes that,

> Tension between the influence of the majorities and that of the minorities seems to be continuous. It never stops. On the one hand, the majority holding the established power exerts a pressuring or repressing influence that can be imbued with the burden of tradition. On the other, the minority is undermining that position with its own ideas and opposing positions, characterized by perseverance, consistency, insistence, and resistance. (p. 288)

Speaking specifically about south central Appalachian culture, this study has already highlighted Christianity's influence in the region. Biblical literalism, rampant fundamentalism, and predominant churchscapes have remained a fixture of South Central Appalachia since its early formations. Prior academic research (Dumlao & Janke, 2012; Gibbs, 2009; Montero, 1998) has drawn attention to the significance that localized culture can have on relationships of those who live and engage within said culture. It has been noted that couples conforming to and abiding by society's expectations somehow legitimizes and validates their relationship (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Rawlins, 1992). Given that Appalachia places such high emphasis on Christian-informed beliefs and values, and promotes the preference of traditional/hypermasculinized masculinity, the public attitude towards homosexuality is generally disapproving. Correlating this to the assertion that relational validation often stems from cultural approval, it comes as no surprise that several of the participants of this study

discussed how the role of Christianity in their lives has had an impact on the ways in which they perceive themselves as individuals, as well as their sexuality.

Dan, a twenty-two-year-old who was born in and continues to live in Appalachia, stated that, "before I realized I was gay, I realized it was wrong. So that was hard for me to come to terms with it. I actually got kicked out of that [Christian] school. Pretty much for that reason." Dan's assertion that he realized that being gay was wrong long before he knew he was gay, provides glimpse into the role that Christianity has in the self-acceptance of some gay men—especially those who live in an area where the religion is so prominent. Dan went on to describe the impact of feeling "wrong":

> I always kinda' like, had a chip on my shoulder about it 'cuz I was never really into the Christian lifestyle, and I was kinda' forced into that. Like I said, I went to a Christian high school and they also made me go to church and shit like that so I was rebellious in high school. I also felt like I had a lack of ability to express myself because of that so I became like—not introverted—but like I contained myself more.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) contend that, "public legitimation is an important feature in the crystallization of a relationship's identity in contemporary American society" (p. 61), and Dan's statement supports this claim. Dan believes that the highly Christian atmosphere of the public culture in which he lived as a teenager had a large impact on not only how he viewed himself, but also how he engaged with others. Dan became introverted and self-contained because he did not feel welcome within his geographic/cultural parameters, and could not conform to the expectations placed upon him in either his high school or the broader culture. His lack of self-comfort and ability to self-express prevented him from the possibility of engaging with others as a confident gay male, and relating to other gay men on a social level. When discussing the

possibility of other gay men at his school, Dan asserted that there was in fact none, "at least none that were out and could be open about it and connect on that level, ya know what I mean? 'Cuz that was basically against the rules of the school." Dan connects the religious environment in which he socialized to a barrier for connections amongst other gay men, therefore preventing any time of community among them.

Another participant also discussed Christianity during his high school years. Twenty-five-year-old Barry stated that,

> In high school I was in the church a lot more. Now I have nothing to do with the church. That was motivating me to stay in the closet, and trying to repress all those feelings and praying them away really. So in high school there was really no conscience effort to come out.

Like Dan, Barry described the influence that Christianity had on his choice to remain in the closet. With both Barry and Dan, Christianity imposed a sense of self-shame and repression—contributing to their refusal to acknowledge their sexuality, preventing them both from socially engaging with others while simultaneously maintaining a public gay identity.

Christian ideology as a driver for informing adolescent identity was not the only topic that participants discussed when talking about the role of fundamentalism in their lives. Twenty-four year old south central Appalachian resident Andy candidly discussed his father's reaction when he told him that he was gay. Andy's father was also born in and continues to reside in Appalachia. Andy recalled that his father told him:

> 'You're my son, I'll always love and support you, but…you need to square yourself up with God.' And that's all he said to me, and I said 'ok' and that 'me and God are good'… He's one of those people that wants to think that like, he's one of those

people I think that is coerced into thinking homosexuality is wrong and such an evil thing.

Within Andy's statement is a critical point to discuss: his father's initial response. Upon his sons' "coming out", Andy's father immediately equates his sexuality with immorality, a homo-prejudice attitude that no doubt has been informed by his own Appalachian upbringing. His narrative represents the core dialectical tension that exists between the overwhelmingly Christian public atmosphere of Appalachia, and its opposition to Andy's sexuality—therefore permeating from the public sphere to that of the private. Andy asserts that his father had been coerced to believe that homosexuality was innately wrong—the coercion no doubt a product of the Christian influence that his father had been under throughout his life, and having influence over an opinion that may have otherwise been different.. The predominant dialectical dilemma that Andy faces is how to have a fulfilling, enriched relationship with his father, who has been culturally informed to not be supportive or understanding towards his son's sexuality—and could be synthesized through the autonomy/connectedness dialectical tension (Baxter & Montgomery, 1988). Andy's narrative demonstrates how one tension—in this particular case, the public/private, can create by-product tensions. Weston (1997) contends that gay individuals' decision to partake in gay culture—including community formation—often-times hinge upon the relationships that they have with their family. Many gay men and women feel a stronger need or desire for gay community participation when they have been rejected by their own family, therefore going into the world and discovering/creating their own unique networks of support that operate and function as a kinship family would. Andy's narrative underscores how these decisions come to be made by non-heterosexual individuals; Andy was charged with the task of addressing the tension between him and his dad, and determining ways to operate within the

relationship in order to maintain personal contact with his father while simultaneously attempting to gain acceptance and approval from him.

Andy's narrative offers insight into the strong role that Christian fundamentalism plays, not only in public educational atmospheres as the narratives of Dan and Barry depict, but also in a much more private space—within the confines of the home and immediate family. Describing a somewhat idealized perception of social norms that exist outside of the parameters of the South, twenty-one-year-old participant Josh summed up the atmosphere of rural south central Appalachia succinctly by saying, "people up North are just so much more progressive." His statement both reiterates the notion that the general public of the South remains a conservative environment that can be problematic for the private lives of those who do not conform to the cultural expectations of the region, while simultaneously believing that these social inequities are limited to—or are at the very least exaggerated—the South.

Barry, who discussed the significance of religion in his high school environment, also discussed his current workplace, and how the cultural expectations within Appalachia are in opposition to even his most basic personality traits:

> Not to say I feel discriminated against by my coworkers, but just by the people that come in. I have to be more reserved. Like if a customer comes in and I like their shirt and I want to tell them, but I don't wanna come off as a big queen. I can find it a limitation.

Barry associates—because he anticipates that others will associate—the simple variable of clothing to being effeminate, and something he views as being in opposition to the perpetuated culture within the public sphere. No doubt the religious atmosphere of Appalachia informs Barry's perceptions of customers' responses towards even the most harmless compliment. As discussed previously, Southern masculinities are informed by myriad factors. One of the

overarching themes in Southern masculinity is the social positioning of the male over the female—a positioning that is informed and supported by the biblical literalism of the region. Barry's personal behavior hinges upon the public's expectations as to what constitutes as gender appropriate communication, reiterating Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) assertion that public culture and society are "a social collective with patterned interactions relative to how personal relationships are conducted." (p. 162)

Within south central Appalachia, Christianity informs what is considered to be appropriate behavior in the private lives of its inhabitants, having a large affect on the extent to which gay men can live openly, genuinely and freely. "Self-contained," "introverted" and "limited" were phrases that the men used to describe how the region's religiosity affects personal behavior. Given that gay communities are said to be an anchor for gay identities (Holt, 2011) that aim to convey a sense of normality towards their heterosexual peers (Ridge et al., 1997), gay men in Appalachia are left with little opportunity to form such communities because they remain an oppressed group of people in the region. In order to form a community amongst one another, gay men must be visible in the public sphere (Wilkinson et al., 2012), and not self-contained as Dan describes.

Understanding the relationship between gay men and the Appalachian public through a dialectic framework can be beneficial when attempting to underscore the core issues therein. The contradictions that exist between the religious public and the non-heterosexual private, result in a cyclical causation between the actors (praxis), in which one actor (Appalachia) is perpetually establishing boundaries for what is considered acceptable behavior by the other actors. The religious fervor of the south central Appalachian public bears significant influence on gay men in the region in regard to community formation; these men must determine ways in which they can

negotiate the desire for communal formation while simultaneously acknowledging that they live in a geographic area that makes this a challenge.

Gay men in Appalachia must determine ways in which they can acquire and maintain a confident, gay self-identity despite the general public's attempts at silencing, mitigating and erasing their public presence. Although high levels of religiosity exists in South Central Appalachia, it is necessary for gay men to assert confident selves in order to become visible, unite with other visible, *out* men, and establish larger, unified communities amongst one another. This change/shift in the gay male collective could potentially increase their public visibility (normalizing their sexualities), perhaps eventually assimilating into the broader Appalachian culture, thusly leading to a stronger sense of public acceptance

In addition to religiosity creating a dialectical tension between the public and private sphere, there is yet another tension that exists between the south central Appalachian public sphere and the private, socialized lives of gay men in the region: the lack of public gay spaces that promote social and communal gathering among non-heterosexual men.

An Overview of the Lack of Public Gay Spaces in South Central Appalachia

One of the main frustrations with Appalachian culture that the participants discussed was the lack of public spaces to engage socially with other non-heterosexual men. Although many of the participants discussed their desire to have more opportunities to create friendships and form communal bonds with other gay men (as discussed later in the results), they all shared a similar frustration that this seemed rather difficult to achieve due to lack of platforms available to do so. When asked what kind of activities he partakes in among the local gay culture, Steven, age 27, said, "I go to the gay bar and dance and pay tab and tip the queens. Other than that, to my knowledge here there isn't any kind [of gay culture]," painting a bold, clear, if bleak picture.

Twenty-one-year-old participant Josh had strong opinions on the types of accessible spaces that are available for non-heterosexual men:

> I think it's kinda fucked up, that the only thing available is a bar. And the reason I think it's fucked up—I mean what else would there be? We live in a world that's drove by capital; by things that we can gain money off of. To say that there's a niche there is saying that there is a population of folk that can be exploited for monetary gain.

Josh goes on to describe his frustrations about restricted options for socializing:

> There are bigger cities that have multiple gay bars. Some that hit even more specific niches. Like gay men or lesbian women or gay—anything else. And that at least makes something different. But here, you don't really see anything outside of just the "gay" bar. Nothing else is really—we don't really have a "gay restaurant", and even then it would be for money. You don't really have a gay anything else.

Josh's reference to a lacking of other types queer-friendly spaces in the region reiterates what other scholars (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Weston, 1995) have asserted about the low public visibility of non-heterosexual populations in rural environments. Twenty-four-year-old Andy, who was not particularly interested in the gay club scene, felt that, "I think, unfortunately growing up in the South, if you do want to meet another guy or want to be around other gay guys, you're somewhat forced [to visit *only* the gay bars] in areas around here."

Some of the participants felt hostile towards the constraints on gay socializing. Re-establishing what prior research (Ridge et al., 2006) has suggested about gay clubs, some participants felt that the club scene was overtly sexualized and found this to be a turn-off. Josh, 21, had a strong opinion on the matter, stating that:

> The fact that gay bars are the only place that hand out condoms with your drink—I think that's insulting and assuming that like, you're going to fuck somebody, and that it's going to be unsafe and that were are going to exchange HIV. Because that was totally a stereotype for many, many years. And I cannot disconnect that [history of the bias].

The sexualized environment perpetuated within the parameters of the gay club is so off-putting to the participant that he typically opts not to attend such venues. In another interview, Dan, 22, tries to identify the roots of sexualized gay clubs:

> I think that stems from the gay culture not being accepted. It's like 'here's this gay guy from this school and here's a gay guy from that school,' and they can't find a boyfriend––they can't have love–they can't have sex. So whenever they go to the gay club and they meet, that barrier is broken and they have sex.

Dan's analysis of the gay club is significant in part because he insinuates that gay men have difficulty finding a partner, suggesting that "finding" other men in the region to date or socialize with is a difficult challenge due to low visibility. Secondly, Dan believes that gay men *can't have love* in the particular region; this stark, somewhat bleak utterance once again notes that the possibilities of gay male relationships in south central Appalachia potentially hinge upon public attitudes towards homosexual unions.

Participants in this study also equated gay clubs as not only the sole place available to meet other gay men, but in some cases, but also the only place where people could truly be themselves and express their gay identity. When discussing the reasons that some men attend gay clubs, Andy, 24, noted that, "I feel that a lot of people submerge themselves in [the scene] because it's the only time and place they can feel comfortable with themselves." James, 30,

likewise explained, “there’s lots of people that are very closeted; because of their jobs or their families or something, and you go to the bar and that’s the only place they can be out.” Both Andy and James’ explanations as to why some gay men in Appalachia regularly visit gay clubs further solidifies previous research (Ridge et al., 2006; Taylor, 2008) that contends that gay men often times visit gay spaces as means to full express their gay identity when the broader culture does not permit them to do so publicly. James’ mention of remaining highly closeted in the public sphere as being a driver for gay club attendance is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it reasserts the idea that in Appalachia, public visibility of gay men remains minimal, and secondly, it simultaneously claims that the unwelcoming atmosphere of the culture as a whole leaves gay men with few other options as to where they can be *out* and express their gay identity in a non-hostile environment.

Although frustrated by the lack of other options for communal formation and socialization, some men in this study believe that the gay club does serve as a space where men can feel protected in an otherwise hostile cultural environment. When Steven, 27, explained why he visits the local gay club, he notes that:

> You don’t have to get the condescending look or the “over the shoulder” glance from people. Which I accept; it’s fine. It’s part of this culture—well, part of this area we live in. People are what they are but I would say it’s a lot more comfortable of an environment in the gay bar—the gay scene.

Steven is describing his own acceptance of the fact that, from his experiences as an openly gay male in Appalachia, the public cultural sphere is generally unwelcoming towards non-heterosexual sexual identities. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) contend that *network overlapping*—a process in which both parties (actors) that are involved in the dialectical tensions

at hand, join to interact with one another—is a positive step when attempting to rectify the tensions. Steven's personal account makes the possibility of a network overlap between the heterosexual public sphere and non-heterosexual men seem unlikely for some gay men in the region, strengthening the dialectical tensions that exist between the two units.

Brad, 21, had a similar opinion about the personal comfort in public spaces that are not allocated specifically for sexual minorities. When discussing hetero-dominant bars, he stated that:

> If it's like a straight bar—and I am more flamboyant and out there, and I mean I do have feelings so I don't wanna get aggravated. I try not to let things bother me and not pay attention, but I just have to like, see what area we're going to. I have comfort, but I don't wanna be uncomfortable the whole time.

Brad's narrative is similar to Steven's in that they both describe levels of discomfort in some public spaces. Just as Steven says that he accepts it because it is "part of the culture," Brad seems to have a similar passive attitude.

The participant's narratives regarding both the high visibility of Christian influence in Appalachian culture and the low visibility of gay spaces in the culture provide insight into the dialectical tensions that exist between gay men in Appalachia and the culture that is produced by the region itself. The conservative Christian ethos in the public sphere perpetuates conservative viewpoints on sexuality, leaving some gay men feeling pressured to stay closeted to their family, classmates, coworkers and peers, thus having their private lives fully permeated by public opinion.

The narratives depicted in this study solidify Flåvia and Madureira's (2007) contention that homophobia is less of a *fear* of marginalized sexualities, but instead a cultural barrier

perpetuated by the dominant majority to keep undesired sexualities out of particular spaces. South central Appalachian homophobia is employed by many of its (heterosexual) residents in an attempt to "gatekeep" (p. 331) undesired sexualities from gaining admission to dominant spaces. The researchers also contend that this metaphorical getekeeping via homophobia creates contextual dialectical tensions between *the home/the secure*, *the strange/unfamiliar*, and *stability/change*.

Synthesizing the participant narratives not only within the broader contextual framework of public/private, but also through the more specified dialectics that Flåvia and Maduereira establish, allows for a deeper understanding of the tumultuous relationship that exist between south central Appalachian culture and its non-heterosexual inhabitants. Gay men in the region discussed a lack of security in public spaces that are not specified as being queer friendly. The regional culture attempts to keep these spaces limited and invisible as a means to gatekeep sexualities it perceives to be immoral or inauthentic. Additionally, the dominant culture employs homophobia as a mechanism to mitigate sexualities from public spaces that it deems as strange and unfamiliar according to their own conservative beliefs. Lastly, homophobia is used as a method for preventing social progression, and simultaneously guaranteeing the visibility of *preferred* sexualities and the invisibility of those that are *not*—concreting the stability/change tension firmly in place in the south central Appalachian space.

Implications of the Contextual Public/Private Tension Between South Central Appalachian Culture and Non-Heterosexual Individuals

The public attitude towards homosexuality in the region has prevented an increase in spaces for gay men to socialize with one another and thus form communal bonds, solidifying prior research regarding the epidemic of low visibility of non-heterosexuals in rural areas.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) assert that, "self-identity, and thus conceptions of our 'inner,' 'private,' 'unique,' or 'separate' being, come about only though our social relationships (p. 88); within the confines of Appalachia, the lack of spaces for gay men to establish these identities via socialization among one another is a dialectical tension of opposing forces. Gay men need public spaces that are inviting and accepting of non-heterosexuals, so that they have a place to engage with one another in venues that are not solely created for sexualization, such as clubs. Simply stated, community formation cannot occur when there is no space for men to meet, engage and form long-term bonds with one another that can lead to social change and a shift in public attitude towards homosexuality, as gay communities have the potential to do (Holt, 2011; Ridge et al., 2006; Wilkinson, et al., 2012).

From a dialectical standpoint, how do gay men in south central Appalachia negotiate these tensions, and how can they make them less consequential? The men face a cultural environment that they perceive as preventative of communal formation for a number of reasons, two of which being a strong Christian public atmosphere, and a lack of public spaces for them to gather. The latter is no doubt informed by the former, and the men must determine ways to engage with one another despite an effort by the public to marginalize and silence them. The relationship between gay men and south central Appalachia is constantly in flux, with the public praxis informing the capabilities of the gay private in a myriad of ways, leaving the men charged with the task of establishing secure gay identities, and bringing those identities together in a larger collective, creating a unified community and an increase in public visibility. Given that there are few spaces/platforms for these identities to come to fruition, and a public pushback informed by religiosity, men must address these tensions the best ways that they know how.

If gay men want to have a stronger sense of community among themselves, they may have to retaliate against the dominant public culture in order to make this occur. Speaking specifically about religion in the public and private spheres, gay men must navigate ways in which they can assert a strong gay identity, while simultaneously being mindful of the religious overtones cast by family members, coworkers and other regional inhabitants. Asserting a strong gay identity may result in backlash from family members, including general disapproval or perhaps even abandonment/relational termination. If men choose to embody a stronger, more public gay identity, they run the risk of severe repercussions, including job termination, public scrutiny or social ostracization. Men must determine ways in which they can live their gay lives more fully, while also ensuring that the consequences for doing so are somewhat minimal.

As a gay male who too lives in the south central region of Appalachia, I empathize with the men in this study, because their experiences—in part—reflect those of my own. I too have experienced the cloak of invisibility that a highly Christian atmosphere has seemingly placed over non-heterosexual individuals, and as the men have discussed, it can be frustrating and problematic for establishing gay/gay social relationships.

When you live in a region that you perceive as hostile towards what you are, it is difficult to not feel the effects of such marginalization. At different points in my life, I have viewed Appalachia as the playing field for an ongoing battle between Christianity and gayness—not to say that the two are mutually exclusive, because they certainly are not, yet many Christian-identified individuals in the area would certainly disagree with this tenet— in which one is constantly trying to erase the presence of the other. Intellectually, of course it is better to understand the complex relationship between the two more-so as tensions as opposed to a war,

but when you feel as though you are being attacked from the culture in which you reside, sometimes war seems like the only fitting word.

While I empathize with the participants regarding a lack of public gay spaces in the region—a fact so undeniable it would seem grossly, insultingly humorous to deny such a claim––I cannot say that it is something that necessarily bothers me on a personal level. While yes, I think that the measures that the conservative culture will go to in order to keep gay visibility as minimal as possible is, ironically—get this—ungodly (a word choice that many people in the region would more-than-likely deem blasphemous, per the subject matter), it is honestly not something that impacts my personal life to a strong degree. Make no mistake, I think that there should be more gay-oriented spaces in Appalachia, but I am not losing any sleep over having just one designated establishment in town in which I can go dance with a person of the same sex and have a guarantee that there won't be repercussions. My opinion is not informed by a personal disdain for bars or clubs, but rather my personal discomfort with and lack of skill in dancing

In addition to the dialectical tensions that exist within the public/private construct, another set of tensions that are in opposition to one another in regard to community formation can be found for gay men in Appalachia: the contradictions that lie within the *ideal* lives that gay men in the region would like to have, and the *real* lives in which they lead.

Real and Ideal Dialectical Tensions Among Gay Men in South Central Appalachia

The second dialectical framework employed in this study is the conceptual dialectic of the real and the ideal. This is yet another contextual dialectic (Rawlins, 1992), and one that, "formulates the interplay between the abstract ideals and expectations often associated with friendship and the nettlesome realties or unexpected rewards of actual communication between friends." (Rawlins, 1992, p. 11) Within this framework, tensions between units are informed by

a perceived way in which the relationship would function, verses the actual experiences of the relationship. The contradictions and oppositions within this construct arise when one or both units (actors) within the union feel disconnect between the idealized relationship and the lived relationship.

Part of what informs the units' expectations of the ideal is that of the broader, public culture. The real/ideal dialectical framework is applied to three issues that were prominently discussed by the participants in this study: a longing for gay male social relationships by gay men in Appalachia, lack of diversity in the Appalachian region, and perceptions of the gay scene as competitive. Framing each of these issues through the real/ideal framework provides an appropriate analysis for understanding how they affect gay community formation in the south central Appalachian region.

Eighty-six percent of the eight participants interviewed expressed either a desire for social relationships with other gay men, or a sense of sadness that they did not have the opportunity to have such in the Appalachian region. Although Baxter and Montgomery (1996) contend that males are socialized to believe that the self should remain autonomous from others, the men in this study expressed a desire to have a stronger sense of community with other non-heterosexuals in the area—a fact that once again displays how the autonomy/connectedness tension is a major by-product of gay men's lives in the region.

Twenty-four-year-old Andy felt a sense of remorse when asked about the role of gay/gay social relationships in his life. He stated that, "It's always—even to this day—kind of bummed me out that I don't have more gay men friends. Um, just 'cuz like I feel like I should, you know what I mean?" Josh, 21, made a similar statement in another interview: "Most of my friends are straight. But this is the South, not like San Francisco where I could make the majority of my

friends be gay men, because I wouldn't have that many friends here." Both Andy and Josh's narratives indicate that they desire relationships with fellow non-heterosexual men, to some degree, but that there are elements that are preventative of having such. The narratives also demonstrate a dialectical tension that exist between themselves and the Appalachian public culture; the idealized preference to have healthy, gay male friendships is in opposition to the lived life experience of having few opportunities to do so, as presented by what Josh blatantly states as the South, once again signifying a romanticized perception of geographic areas outside of the South in regard to social acceptance and possibilities.

Speaking to why gay social relationships were important, several participants felt that there is a shared sense of understanding between gay men that does not translate to friendships with heterosexual individuals. Steven 27, believed gay/gay friendships are essential—a "fix": "Everything that you can say to a gay person they probably understand, and stuff that if you say to someone who's straight, it's just like...crickets. So yea I definitely have to have my gay fix; I have to have my gay friends." Barry, 25, reiterated the sentiment by noting that, "I think it's something you should have some connection to. Having variety for the sake of variety, but being able to have someone to talk and express to who understands where you're coming from." As with Steven, Barry associates the relationship between gay men to that of a shared understanding of the gay life. This "mutual understanding" is no doubt a positive tool that can be employed to combat an otherwise hostile culture; a culture that produces challenging living environments for these men that only they can understand and relate to. When speaking about gay/gay social relationships within Appalachia specifically, twenty-two-year-old Dan said that, "there's not really that outlet around here," yet another example of a participant painting a rather bleak picture for gay men in the region.

Although several participants expressed a sense of frustration over the lack of opportunity for gay/gay friendships in Appalachia, one participant, Richie, 26, seemed to have a sense of hope about the matter:

> I do think that we have a strong sense of community [where I live]. I think that it is there, whether we like each other or not. Like I'm not gonna watch another gay get harassed on the street and be compliant about it. I think a gay man wouldn't watch me getting harassed. There is something that ties us all together.

Something rather alarming is Richie's assertion that there is a community among gay men in Appalachia, but only when a person poses a threat to someone who identifies as gay, threatening or placing physical harm on them. Richie underscores the challenges that gay men face in a perpetually hostile culture, even going so far as discussing physical harm.

The participants' narratives regarding a preference for gay male friendship can be understood more clearly through the contextual dialectical framework of Rawlins' (1992) *real and ideal*. The men contend that bonds between non-heterosexual men are ideal, in that they facilitate understanding and commonality that cannot be found in other types of friendships. The men also express frustration with the fact that, in Appalachia, gay male socialized relationships are hard to establish, creating a real/ideal tension of opposition between the Appalachian culture and the gay male population. As to why these friendships may be illusive in the area, the participants suggests that it is due to the lack of diversity in the region, creating yet another dialectical tension of oppositions between Appalachian gay men and Appalachian culture.

Contradictory Tensions Between a Preferably Diverse and an Unequivocally Uniform Culture

The participants in this study made it rather clear why forming bonds with one another in Appalachia is a tedious, almost-but-not-quite impossible task: there is simply a lack of "out" or strongly-identified gay men in the area to do so. Numerous participants discussed their dissatisfaction with Appalachia's lack of diversity—an assertion that no doubt plays a large role in the lack of gay communities in the region. Reiterating prior academic suggestions that rural areas perpetuate a low cultural and public visibility for non-heterosexuals, the men depict the South as a place lacking in diverse cultures and people.

The overarching theme that the participants discuss is Appalachia as heterodominant culture in which social networks hinge largely upon immersion into straight-oriented communities and social groups. Gibbs (2009) asserts that the contextual dialectical tension of *inclusion/exclusion* (which can be synthesized within the real/ideal framework) is a prominent fixture in bodies of people consisting of multiple cultures. Speaking specifically about the relationship between same-sex couples and the heterosexual majority within the broader cultural context, Perlich (1997) contends that the external dialectical tensions between the two groups are not only limited to issues of inclusion, but encompass *revelation/concealment* and *conventionality/uniqueness* as well. The participants' personal experiences mirror this assertion, with each detailing examples of how they do not feel welcomed by the public whole, therefore creating a dialectic tension between the unified public, and the less-visible, marginalized minority group of non-heterosexual men.

When discussing the environment of his secondary education, Andy, 24, said that his "high school was all white—no minorities. No blacks, Latinos. Very Southern—cowboy boots, camo', belt buckles, cowboy hats." Andy makes it very clear that the social components of his high school atmosphere are those that are directly associated with the South. Twenty-six-year-old Richie made a similar claim by asserting that,

> I've always mainly hung out with heterosexual people. We've been surrounded by heterosexual people our entire lives. You don't, growing up, especially in this area, you don't find a lot of gay men, especially who are out, that you can really hang out with. So we're—*I*— was constantly in a state of having to fit in with straight people.

As with Andy's narrative, Richie draws correlation between Appalachia as a geographic location and the homogeneous atmosphere thereof. In an attempt to gain and maintain any type of social/public acceptance, fitting in, or "passing," is a commonly used technique employed by non-heterosexual males in the south central region of Appalachia. The act of passing can be understood in terms of revelation/concealment tension. Gay men are faced with the decision of revealing and embracing their gay identity to a hostile public, or concealing/downplaying it in order to maintain a sense of social equilibrium between the two groups.

Viewing the heterodominant culture as an opportunity to change perceptions of gay men, Josh, 21, said that, "most of my friends are still like, straight. And, I really like breaking down stereotypes for them because I am not a hairdresser, or a fashion designer, [or] even by any means, flamboyant." In this narrative, the participant reframes the predominantly heterosexual atmosphere as a space to change public opinion on gay men, choosing to break down stereotypes that often overshadow them. Richie, 26, had similar thoughts on navigating through the uninformed culture of Appalachia; he contends that, "I grew up surrounded by country, straight

people, so that's very much still in me. Being a country bumpkin I guess." As opposed to asserting a strong gay identity and attempting to form communal bonds with other gay men, Richie found it easier to immerse himself into the "country-oriented" heterosexual culture in which he lives. Both Josh and Richie portray their experiences as gay men in Appalachia as an immersion into the "straight" culture as opposed to attempting to reach out and form bonds with other underrepresented sexual minorities. Whether or not this decision stems from personal choice or personal circumstance is unclear. However, another participant describes his association with heterodominant social circles not as a matter of preference, but rather as a product of the region itself. These stories reiterate the tensions between the revelation/concealment that minority sexualities must often wrestle with (Perlich, 1997).

Gay men in south central Appalachia must decide ways in which they will assert a gay identity, knowing that their decision will no doubt have an affect on their social lives. If gay men want to garner a stronger sense of public acceptance, they may feel an inclination to assimilate into the broader, all-encompassing "straight culture", while simultaneously mitigating their gay identity. The participants in this study discussed this subject matter in a way that frames social acceptance by the public majority, and a fully-lived gay life as mutually exclusive concepts in which recalibration is not seemingly possible. This can be problematic for communal formation among gay men for obvious reasons; if men want to be less-marginalized by the general public, downplaying or concealing their gay identity is one tactic for accomplishing this. Conversely, if men want to assert a stronger gay identity with the intention of promoting higher visibility of gay culture in the region, thus leading to more opportunity for communal formation, they risk the consequence of facing pushback from the heterodominant majority. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) posit that human beings are actors, "making

communicative choices in how to function in their social world." (p. 13), creating praxis that frames individuals as agents of change in regard to tensions within relationships.

Continuing the claim that the majority of participants make, twenty-five-year-old Barry also contends that his social circle consists of primarily, if not all, heterosexuals. He maintains that

> I'm more detached than anything with the gay community. It's not anything against it; I'm just not involved, hardly at all. Where I came out later, my community was straight-oriented. That's where most of my friends lie, but it's not from wanting just straight friends.

While seeming somewhat oxymoronic, Barry's statements underscore a tension between the real and the ideal. As with other participants' narratives, Barry's words convey an internal dialectical tension that exists between him and the culture in which he lives. These narratives can also be understood as representations of the conventionality/uniqueness dialectic tension that Perlich (1997) contends is part non-heterosexual life; participants must make logical, rational and thought-out choices as to whether or not they will abide by the conventional expectations that are imposed upon them by the dominant conservative culture of south central Appalachia, or conversely, exude and embody a sense of sexual/gay identity uniqueness that counters the public's preferences.

Gay men in south central Appalachia make difficult decisions regarding how (or if) they want to assert a gay identity. Some men long to embody a unique identity that allows them to freely and fully express all components of who they "truly" are, including the aspects of their personality/interests that defy cultural norms or expectations. These "unique" characteristics could include—but are certainly not limited to—masculinities, physical appearance, personal

interests and hobbies. Displaying these unique characteristics can however have social consequences, which may dictate the men's choice to embody a more conventional identity, a decision that no doubt comes with its own set of problematic issues. Men who choose to conform to more conventional representations of manhood/masculinity for the sake of dominant social assimilation do not allow themselves the option to socialize and engage with other gay men, thus limiting the possibility of communal formation among gay men. In addition to the difficult choices men must make pertaining to uniqueness and conventionality in regard to living their "ideal" lives, there is another matter that some o the men discussed that creates a hindrance to communal formation

Some of the participants felt an inclination to discuss the social behaviors that occur when men do come together in a singular space to make themselves visible to one another. The following section conceptualizes yet another example of the tensions that exist between the ideal and the real.

Competitiveness as a Limitation for Community Formation to Gay Men in South Central Appalachia

The fact that gay men in Appalachia are socially divided as opposed to a collective, unified group could produce a number of implications; however, when discussing how low visibility affects relationships between gay men, the dominant theme in the men's narratives was that of detailing a sense of competitiveness among one another within the gay scene.

Isolation and low visibility can have a profound impact on the ways in which gay men relate and engage with one another. Isolation from other gay men can produce interesting phenomena in gay culture. In this portion of the study, the participant's narratives are once again framed through the real and ideal dialectical framework. Because gay men in Appalachia lack

gay spaces that foster a sense of public support for non-heterosexuals, the gay club is the sole source that gay men in the region can utilize as a way of meeting and socializing with groups of other gay men in a public setting. Academic research has suggested that gay men attend gay clubs and immerse themselves into the gay scene for a number of reasons, including identity formation (Taylor, 2008) and enjoying a more sexualized self (Ridge et al., 2006). When discussing their own experiences with gay clubs in smaller, Appalachian towns or cities, the men in this study shared a sense of frustration regarding behavior that exists within these spaces. The men's narratives depict a sense of disconnect between the preferred atmosphere within the clubs, verses the realistic nature of the space.

One of the possible reasons that relationships among gay men within gay spaces in Appalachia are tense is due to sex. As participant Dan noted previously, gay men in Appalachia often feel they do not live in a culture that is supportive of their sexuality—a culture that makes them feel like they, as he stated, "can't have love, can't have sex." Because of this, the gay club serves as a destination where gay men can embrace their sexualized selves, and assert a gay identity that they otherwise may oppress. The overtly sexualized nature can be frustrating and off-putting to some men, however. Twenty-four-year-old Andy contends:

> As males specifically in the gay community, like, gay men, we get so like, headstrong and whatever about ourselves—like I feel like it's more always a competition. They put the sex—like *we* put the sex and like that strictly to the forefront more than heterosexual people and also [more than] lesbian couples.

Andy's narrative is critical to understand because it draws together two concepts into one, overarching issue: sexuality and competition. Andy's choice to relate what he perceives as the

sexualized nature of men to that of competitiveness within the gay club scene is significant when understanding why the sense of competition exists to begin with.

When discussing his initial experiences with the gay club scene in Appalachia, twenty-one-year-old Brad had similar thoughts about sex and competition:

> Going into the gay community—it's like I thought it's all about—I thought we had to have sex, and that it was a competition, and that made me not like it. I hate competing with people. I just hate that. Like why can't we all just have a one mind track—why can't we all be friends? It's just like, why can't we have a conversation, and not be catty?

As with Andy, Brad was quick to associate the public space of the gay club to a sense of competition and intense sexuality. It is Brad's narrative that highlights the core contextual dialectical tension between some gay men in Appalachia and the public gay scene. Brad contends that the environment within the confines of the gay club is nothing like he imagined it would be, or preferred it be, a sentiment that other participants in the same focus group shared. The men reveal tensions that are in opposition of one another: their wish that relationships among gay men in public gay spaces would be supportive, friendly and social (ideal), verses the competitive, sexualized nature of such (real). In order to address these tensions, the men determine ways in which they want to engage with other men in public spaces, if at all.

Thirty-year-old James asserts that competition is a large part of the gay club scene in Appalachia, with particular emphasis placed on general attitudes of *disliking* among the men, "I do feel like, a sense of competition. I mean, go to The Cage Club [local, Appalachian gay bar] and just people-watch for 30 minutes, and you can just see, and feel this intense like, people hating other people and talking shit." Another interview participant, Richie, 26, thinks similarly

about the scene: “I find it to be catty and shady and I’m–my own paranoia makes it hard to hang out with gay people because I’m always wondering what they say when I’m not around.”

Both men discuss the significance of gay men talking about one another behind each other’s backs within gay spaces; Richie goes so far as to say that it makes him paranoid and that it makes it hard to for him “hang out with gay people,” creating a generalized, umbrella statement about an entire subgroup of people. Highlighting more intensely the dialectical tension between the ideal and real in regard to social relationships within Appalachian gay spaces, James, 30, in a tone that exuded frustration, found himself wondering, “Is this what gay people are like? Is this what they do?’ Because I didn’t really know any gay people from when I was younger, and that was the first group of gay people I knew, and I was like, “this sucks.” Just as Richie seemed to have distaste for gay men in general due to the experiences he has had with them in Appalachian gay clubs, James too reveals a sense of frustration with the subgroup. In his own synopsis of interpersonal relationships between gay men in Appalachian gay spaces, twenty-five year old Barry mirrored James’ feelings by stating that, “I find the interaction to be frustrating—poor communication and behavior. I guess I’ve come to expect it for what it is.” Barry also seems to have accepted the behavior as standard practice, insinuating that he does not foresee a change in behavioral patterns amongst Appalachian gay men in public spaces.

Framing the relationships that exist between gay men in south central Appalachia through the inclusion/exclusion tension that Gibbs (2009) contends is part of all bodies of people that are composed of multiple cultures, allows for a clearer understanding of why the relationships exist the way that they do. Bay (1982) states that, “it is natural to want authentic communities, and yet they cannot be achieved or preserved without continuing struggle, for hierarchies, and therefore hierarchal tendencies are also natural.” (p. 75) Some gay men in Appalachia long for a

shared sense of community among fellow non-heterosexual men; it is in public spaces that are allotted for gay socialization however, that complex relational issues between the men arise. Synthesizing the desires that some participants have of communal formation and gay brotherhood as an ideal life, versus the often-perceived competitive nature of such relationships as the realistic life, allows for a clearer understanding of how these viewpoints are in opposition to one another. Further analysis through an inclusion/exclusion framework addresses the challenges that gay men face in a generally competitive web of relationships, when they long for social support and inclusion.

Some of the participants in this study cite heterosexual friendships as their main source of social support, in part due to the off-putting behavior that they perceive within gay social spaces. Gay men in Appalachia—as represented by the men in this study—make cognitive choices about the social networks that they have in their life. Each decision they make perhaps comes with its own contextual consequence; if a male feels the need to immerse in a social network consisting of predominantly non-heterosexuals (for mutual support, understanding, and specific commonalities, as previously discussed by participants in this study), he may in turn face an atmosphere that is hostile, restrictive, exclusionary and competitive. Gay men rectify the tensions that exist between their wants and their realities—to be included in non-heterosexual social circles or to remain distant from them—knowing that there are possible consequences for each. Men's decision to include themselves in gay social circles hinge up on their perception of acceptance from other gay men, which leads to the individuals' decision of whether to remain active within gay social networks, or retreat to the dominant heterosexual social-scape of Appalachia.

Not only must these men determine ways to rectify the tensions between their ideal selves/lives and the realities that are perpetuated by a rigid, discerningly conservative culture, but they also must make decisions as to how they will engage socially in the culture—decisions that no doubt affect whether the *real* lives they lead are simultaneously their *ideal* ones. Non-heterosexual men face the inclusion/seclusion tension (Perlich, 1997) between themselves and the *heterodominant* culture, yet they also face these tensions with one another in *non-heterosexual* culture. The often-hostile relationships between gay men in rural areas reiterate Bay's (1982) notion that within *all* communities lie hierarchies that are constantly being negotiated. These tensions between gay men are no doubt informed by the context/consequences of living in a geographic/cultural space that forces them to make difficult decisions about their daily lives due to the hostility that is presented to them from the general public.

I can attest to the men's claims; I too have experienced snide attitudes from fellow gay men in gay-oriented spaces, without—to my knowledge—doing anything to merit such. When I relocated from my hometown to yet another part of South Central Appalachia to begin work on my undergraduate degree, a female that I had befriended (and yes, she was in fact heterosexual) told me something one day that struck a nerve with me. She said, "I have a lot of gay friends, and from how I've always perceived it, gay guys have either one of two relationships with each other: they're either fucking each other, or they hate each other." Clearly, not the most assuring sentiment to receive, when one of the predominant thing you were looking forward to after your move, was the possibility of finally gaining social relationships with fellow gay men. At first I did not want to believe her—I thought her statement was peppered with dramatics and not steeped in truth—but, after a few visits to the local gay bar, and engaging with gay men in the workplace, I realized that's sadly, her statement was based on truth.

I have genuinely never understood this behavior, and it is behavior that I perceive to be somewhat isolated to the South Central Appalachian region—at least, as far as I have learned thus far. A year or so later, a twenty-something male and myself were on a first date, discussing our social circles and the types of people we surround ourselves with. A recent transplant (not a participant in this study) from New York, the male seemed shocked that 99% of the people that were a part of my social circle were heterosexual. "It's just not like that where I'm from," he contended, "I've lived in several cities and every one I've lived in, there's been a strong amount of social support between gay guys. I think it's one-hundred percent necessary." While I could not have agreed more, his statement only made me feel more discouraged about the state of gay/gay relationships in the region in which I lived. That conversation was initially what sparked my interests in gay communities, and especially those in the South. That date was the last time he and I ever had contact with one another—we were different in innumerable ways—but even though the date itself did not spark a whirlwind of romance for years to come, it did in fact spark what would later turn into the current research project. If truth be told, I would much rather a date produce an interesting research study as opposed to a romantic partner—a sure sign of being one of those career-obsessed academics.

As far as platonic relationships go, not much has changed for me since that date. I have three close friends who identify as gay males, and just as the participants discuss, I take something from those friendships that I cannot get anywhere else. Call it a "shared understanding" or whatever label you would like to assign it, but there is indeed a very rewarding, albeit at-times complex dynamic that exists between the interplay of two gay men in a platonic relationship. I wish that I had more, but unfortunately, the culture in which I currently reside has made that out to be a challenge of epic proportions.

The ideal/real dialectical tension that exists between gay men in south central Appalachia and the (few) public spaces that are offered to them for socialization is one that signifies a deeper issue amid the non-heterosexual population in the region. The participants in this study depicted a contradiction between how they believe relationships among the gay social whole should be within the public gay scene—supportive, friendly, accommodating—verses the realistic nature of such–sexualized, competitive and unhealthy. While at surface level it may seem the problems lie within the gay men themselves, but that is not true. This study aims to gain insight into the dialectical tensions that exist between gay men and Appalachian culture, and how this culture presents limitations for communal formation. This study contends that the Appalachian culture as a public whole, with its traditional, Christian, rural, masculinist atmosphere, makes gay communal formation difficult to achieve for gay men in the region, shifting the blame from the gay men themselves, to the larger culture at hand.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to shed light on what cultural factors could contribute to the isolated, often-complex nature of gay/gay social relationships in south central Appalachia, and why communal formation within the region is a seemingly difficult task to accomplish. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) contend that within all dialectical tensions between two units, a possibility for recalibration exists. Recalibration "captures a synthesis or transformation in the expressed form of a contradiction such that opposing forces are no longer regarded as oppositional to one another." (p. 65)

Contextual dialectics pose that the broader culture in which people live—cultures consisting of unique ethics, values, beliefs and standards for human behavior—are a determinant for the ways in which inhabitants of said culture interact and engage with one another. This study has employed two frameworks within contextual dialectics in order to better synthesize and rationalize gay/gay relationships in Appalachia, and the culturally-imposed limitations that these friendships face in regard to community formation: public/private, and real/ideal.

Understanding some of the participant's frustrations between Appalachian culture and gay life through the public/private framework allows the audience to understand the role that Appalachia plays in ensuring the invisibility and marginalization of gay bodies in the region. As the participants have discussed, Appalachia is perceived as providing physical limitations for spaces that are delegated to non-heterosexual men, and the area is also charged with promoting a generally Christian public atmosphere—a notion that has also made gay men in the area feel ostracized and unwelcome.

The real/ideal dialectic provides a general framework that lends insight into the tensions that arise when the cultural atmosphere permeates the interpersonal relationships of individuals that reside within the parameters of the culture. Cultural influence poses the possibility of creating a disconnect/opposition between how individuals would prefer to live their idyllic life, verses the truth of their lived life, as is the scenario with the participants regarding gay visibility and diversity representation. When speaking on the importance of visibility in the region, twenty-one-year-old participant Josh succinctly summarized the predominant issue/tension that exists between the heterodominant culture of Appalachia and its gay inhabitants, "growing up in this heterosexual, white, Christian atmosphere, sometimes you just need to change shit up. Diversity is a good thing,"

Regarding community formation, this study has demonstrated that there are obvious dialectical tensions that exist between gay men in Appalachia and the culture as a public whole. Understanding these tensions as products of the clash between public atmosphere and private aspirations, idyllic lives and realistic circumstance, there is a clearer understanding of the significance of Appalachian culture in relation to gay communal development. Within the conceptual framework of the ideal/real, this study suggests that thus far, there are two predominant dialectical oppositions between gay males in Appalachia and the Appalachian public atmosphere. *First*, is the core tension between the participants' belief that gay male friendships are an important facet of gay identity (ideal), yet difficult to attain (real). This tension is directly affected by the *second* tension that exists between the two units: the participants' opinion that *some* type of communal immersion is necessary to facilitate a social self, and that a diverse population is an important facet of such (ideal), yet the heterodominated

atmosphere of Appalachia produces a low visibility of minorities—sexual and otherwise—thus establishing limitations for the types of communities that gay men can form and engage in (real).

This study has underscored ways in which gay men in Appalachia feel marginalized by the geographic and cultural atmosphere in which they live, and how this marginalization has led to difficulties in creating strong, support, highly visible communities of non-heterosexual men in the region. Men must perpetually wrestle with the tensions that exists between the two agentic actors, in attempts to reach a state of recalibration and thus live healthy gay lives in a region that otherwise deems with insignificant. Although there is still little known about the complexities and adversities that minority sexualities face in Appalachia, from this study I have gathered that a shared sense of community among non-heterosexuals will indeed create a stronger sense of cultural visibility, thus potentially leading to a more normalized, rational understanding of gay culture by the region's heterosexual inhabitants.

CHAPTER 6

LIMITATIONS

This study works to contribute to the body of scholarship on human sexuality, identity politics and human relationships. While this study does produce meaningful data output that can be applied and incorporated into future research, it does come with limitations. The four predominant limitations of this study are the participant sample size, time restrictions, independent variables of race, age and class, and the specificity of the research topic itself.

The sample size of this study was rather short—eight participants in total. While the eight men who participated in this study were instrumental in gaining insight into gay life in the south central Appalachian region of the US, having more individuals might aid in a clearer understanding of the complexities that these men face in their lives. With additional participants, the data output would be richer and offer a wider breadth of viewpoints, opinions and lived experiences, contributing to an overall stronger, more thorough study. A larger sample size would be beneficial, in that the study would then be representing a larger body of people, and thus gain more credibility among some academics. The predominant reason for not having more participants in this study is due to the second limitation of this research: time constraints.

This study was executed in approximately seven months. Due to the time constraints that I face as a graduate student, I was not able to produce a study over a long-term period, therefore making the process relatively quick and succinct. I would have preferred to have less-restrictive time limitations so that I could gather data from more participants, and spend more time engaging with the data itself, lending to a more in-depth analysis. Having a longer period of time to work on this study would have also allowed me to further analyze the existing research on subjects pertinent to this study, including but not limited to masculinities, Appalachian

culture, gay communal formation, and gay rural life; this would make the current study more contextualized and certainly offer a more detailed framework for the reader to synthesize the data through. To provide an even more thoroughly contextualized study, exploring other participant variables is necessary. This brings me to the third limitation of this study.

For this research project I employed a relatively uniform group of participants. All participants involved were college-educated, middle class Caucasian men, ranging in age from twenty-one to thirty, and all of whom were able-bodied individuals. These variables can be understood as limitations, given that they narrow the scope of the research, and limit the degree of contextualization that is applied. Certainly, participants who come from a more diverse economic background, who are not college educated, are not Caucasian, not able-bodied and not in their twenties have potentially experienced different interpretations of gay life in south central Appalachia. This study focuses solely on a specific type of gay male, with similar life experiences and backgrounds, thus producing data output that is somewhat skewed. In addition to these, there is one other variable in this study that could be perceived as a limitation: the site of the study. The subject of Appalachian culture is the last limitation that I will briefly discuss.

This study has focused solely on gay life for men in the south central Appalachian region of the US; all nine of the participants were from North Carolina, Tennessee or Virginia. By building off of existing research pertaining to gayness in rural environments, yet specifying the focus to Appalachian gayness, this study—even though it could be perceived as a limitation—contributes to a greater, nuanced understanding of rural sexualities and the complexities thereof.

CHAPTER 7

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The intent of the current research project is to fill in a number of gaps that exist within current literature and research. This study has drawn from existing research on a multitude of subjects, including gay interpersonal relationships, masculinities, visibility and gay life in rural environments, and Appalachian culture, in an attempt to extend the body of knowledge on gay life in the south central Appalachian region of the US—an area perceived as the microcosm of the (stereo)typically traditional South. Over the past two decades there has been a substantial increase in attention paid by academics on rural gay life; however, little research exist that focus specifically on gay life in the Southern region of the US, and none that focus extensively/specifically on non-heterosexual lives in Appalachia. The purpose of this study is to underscore complexities faced by non-heterosexuals in the Appalachian region, which lends to a greater understanding of the relationship that exists between marginalized groups of people and the region-specific cultures in which they inhabit.

This study provides a foundation on which future research can be built upon. There are many possibilities as to what types of scholarship can be produced in order to extend the findings in the current study, although there are five variables in this project that could be easily altered, resulting in an even richer understanding of sexualities in Appalachia. The age range, class, race, able-bodied status, and the specific region of Appalachia that is under analysis could each be altered in future studies, which would potentially provide further understanding of Appalachian male sexualities while simultaneously highlighting contextual differences in regard to the challenges that groups marginalized groups face.

All of the participants in this study are "young" by most standards. Of the eight participants, all but one was under thirty years old. The median age for participants was twenty-five-years-old. Future researchers may want to change the age bracket for the individuals that they study, to note how or *if* age is a significant factor in the desire for communal formation among non-heterosexuals in rural areas. All of the men in this study experienced their adolescence and their ongoing-adulthood in an era that has generally been more approving of same-sex unions—broadly speaking. Men/women who experienced gay life when same-sex relationships were widely unaccepted may have differing viewpoints on the significance of gay/gay relationships and communities. This is a subject that has generally been overlooked in academic research, although this study provides an initial framework for beginning future analysis. Another variable that could be studied in future research is that of social class/economic standing.

Every participant in this study has either received their Bachelors degree or is currently in the process of obtaining it. This was not done in an attempt to circumnavigate the issue of class, but more so out of convenience. Future scholarship could explore ways that class affects gay life in Appalachia—a study that would more than likely produce interesting data output, given that existing research has discussed the significance that financial status has on gay communal formation, as well as the disparaging economic status of Appalachia. When intersecting the two, a platform is set in which meaningful, contextualized research can be executed.

Future research might also direct attention to race, exploring intersections between racial/ethnic identity (necessarily including whiteness) and sexual identity. The subject of race has long been inextricably linked with Southern/Appalachian culture, and it would be useful to

examine how it plays out in gay life in the region, may give to different dialectical tensions than those explored here.

Non-able-bodied individuals more than likely face additional hurdles in regard to community formation in south central Appalachia. Yet another future direction of this study would be to examine the differences that this further-marginalized group must face, and how they negotiate tensions between a desire for community, and limitations that are presented to them in attempting to do so.

In addition to age, class, race, and able-bodiedness, there is one additional variable within this study that could be easily altered in order to extend the future direction of the subject matter: the specific geographic region in which the researcher chooses to focus.

The south central region of Appalachia has been the focal point of the current study. The decision to focus on this specific region resulted from a number of factors, including practicality (I, the researcher, currently live in the region) and a lack of existing research on sexuality within the parameters of Appalachia. The specific Appalachian area of focus within this study is located in the Southern region of the US; however, Appalachia extends into the Northern parts of the US as well, and future research should focus on regional differences on perceptions of sexuality spanning *all* of Appalachia. Future scholarship could perhaps determine if Appalachia in its entirety promotes the same types of rigid expectations of masculinity and gender roles, resulting in what the participants in this study perceive as a hostile environment for non-heterosexuals, or, if this exists exclusively in the parts of Appalachia that are concurrently located in the South.

As noted, there are innumerable future directions in which this study could be taken. I have provided three rather simple variable alterations that could extend the body of knowledge of

sexualities in Appalachia—a subject matter that has been grossly ignored in academic scholarship. Future researchers could examine more closely the contextual complexities that exist in the interplay between Appalachian culture and gender/biological sex, age, or other specific geographic spaces within the Appalachian region. However, these are not the only three directions that this research could take; ultimately, future direction hinges upon scholars' personal preferences as to what merits further, deeper analysis and what gaps in existing research and literature they aspire to bridge.

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APPENDICES A

Standard Interview Schedule

Goals and Aims:

- Gain comprehensive understanding into personal narrative of gay men living in or residing in Appalachia.
- Gain clarification regarding familial acceptance in regard to offspring that identify as non-heterosexual.
- Obtain further understanding on gay communities, immersion or rejection thereof and reasons why.

Guidelines:

- All conversations will be tape-recorded (two devices).
- No other means of recording will occur (including but not limited to video recording, etc.).
- Questions will be guided throughout, and divided by topic.

What will we do with your stories?

- All names used (including those of the participants, locations discussed, and other names including friends, family members or any other relationships discussed) will be kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for all accounts of personal identification including people and places.
- Personal stories will be used to gain further understanding on the topics previously discussed. These narratives, in addition to other extensive literature, will be compiled to create a paper that will be used in a classroom setting, with the possibility of being presented at conference or published in an academic journal.

Research Questions

Rapport Questions

How are you doing today? (Throwaway Question)

Demographic Questions

So, would you mind telling me a little about yourselves? Where are you from? Where do you currently live? How old are you?

How did you find yourself in Johnson City? (Throwaway Question, most likely)

Talk to me about life as a gay man in Appalachia.

The following questions relate directly to the initial research topic. Given that the study aspires to provide correlation between familial acceptance of homosexuality and need for gay community immersion on behalf of the homosexual offspring, the following questions address one of the two key concepts on the matter: The level of acceptance from parents in regards to "coming out" may have a positive correlation to the need for gay community immersion.

I would like to hear your experiences regarding "coming out" to your family.

- *Have you "came out" or confided to your family regarding your sexual orientation?* (Essential Question)
- At what age were you when you came out?
- *If you have not confided this to your parents, tell me about this decision.* (Essential Question/Feeling Question/Value Question)
- *How did they react initially?*
- *Have their opinions of you or your sexuality changed or shifted since the time that you came out?*
- *Talk to me about your family's level of support.*
- *How do you discuss your sexuality around your family? Do you feel comfortable doing so?*

I want to switch gears for a bit. I'd like to discuss your immersion and involvement with the gay community. (Throwaway Question/ Transition)

The next series of questions is crucial to my research. These questions all relate to the topic of gay communities, and the participant's identity within thereof. This is the second key component to this study. The following questions address an array of topics all centered on *gay communities*.

I would like for you to discuss with me your involvement within the gay community.

- *How would you describe your relationship with the local gay community?* (Essential Question/ Feeling Question)

- *How important to you is it that you are a part of the local (or, as a whole) gay community?*

- *Having a social network that consists of many non-heterosexual people is important for a lot of gay men. How do you feel about this?* (Opinion Question/ Feeling Question)

A large facet to this study has to do with gay clubs. Initially, the researcher longed to see if there was a positive correlation between lack of familial acceptance and desire to attend gay clubs, but after further reading of literature, the topic was broadened from simply gay clubs, to gay *communities*. Although the topic has been broadened, inquiry into the concept of gay clubs specifically, is imperative in this survey. Gay clubs are often considered to be the "epicenter" of gay communal meetings and gatherings, hence very relevant in this research.

I would now like to speak more specifically on the topic of gay clubs.

- *For some gay men, attendance at gay or predominantly gay clubs is a regular occurrence. I would like to get your thoughts on this.* (Transition)

- *How often do you attend a predominantly gay club?*

- *What makes the gay club scene more appealing than that of a dominantly heterosexual one?* (Essential Question/ Opinion Question)

- *If you do not attend gay clubs regularly, or immerse yourself in the culture as a whole, why not?* (Essential Question/ Value Question/ Opinion Question)

APPENDICES B

Focus Group Moderator Guide

Informing Participants

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