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Queer and Homeless in the Digital Age

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Queer and Homeless in the Digital Age

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Abstract

This exploratory study will examine how the Internet is used by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth to cope with homelessness. It will also examine what the potential risks and benefits of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness using the Internet for support. Many marginalized groups, including homeless people, use the Internet as a resource, as well as a means of finding social acceptance (Berg 2012, ASA 2012). LGBTQ youth also use the Internet to connect with peers (Lever, Grove, Royce and Gillespie 2008). Using an extended case study research design, this work examines how homelessness is navigated by LGBTQ youth, primarily through the Internet, and how traditional means of support (i.e. shelters) can better meet the special needs of this population.
Introduction

“Shelter,” a photography book by Lucky S. Michaels, chronicles the experiences of homeless lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth in New York City. Michaels' own experience with homelessness inspired his decision to take the photos in this book—candid, intimate photos of LGBTQ youth living in shelters or on the street. Flipping through these pages, the empathy for these youth is clear in Michaels’ photos. The portraits are graphic, honest, and extremely tender. The introduction of the book describes how Michaels worked hard to publish this collection because of his concern over the disproportionate number of LGBTQ-identified youth living without a permanent home, and the lack of awareness of this issue. Ten years after the publication of his book, LGBTQ youth still make up 20 to 40% of the homeless youth population in the United States (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2014). This fact is generally recognized within the LGBTQ community itself, but not by the rest of the population, or the formal systems of support that are intended to help those experiencing homelessness.

Despite how many homeless youth are reported to be LGBTQ-identified, LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness are underrepresented in academic research (Reck 2009, Rice, Barman-Adhikari, Rhoades, Winetrobe, Fulginiti, Astor, Montoya, Plant and Kordic 2013, Washington 2011). They also receive the least in terms of official government services; federal agencies that help the homeless do not even acknowledge LGBTQ people as a marginalized population (Kosciw, Greytak and Diaz 2009, Reck 2009, Poteat, DiGiovanni, Sinclair, Koenig and Russell 2012).

This prompts the question: “If there are so many LGBTQ-identified homeless youth who aren't receiving formal specialized services, how are they coping?” Informal methods of coping with homelessness are not unprecedented, but what particular methods are being used by queer home-
less youth? My recent experience working at the LGBT Community Center of New Orleans provided evidence that LGBTQ community members experiencing homelessness often did not feel safe or welcome at local shelters; they would instead use the Internet at public places or through a cell phone in order to find alternate methods of managing homelessness. Conversations with clients suggested that they would reach out in informal ways to the community for support, often through social networking sites, microblogging platforms and online classified advertisement websites such as craigslist or Backpage. When asking LGBTQ-identified peers who had experienced homelessness, similar tendencies revealed themselves.

Recent studies show that smart phones, libraries and youth centers allow homeless youth to access the Internet with relative ease; 85% of homeless people get online at least once a week (Rice, Lee and Tait 2011). Many marginalized groups, including homeless people, use the Internet as a resource, as well as a means of finding social acceptance (Berg 2012, ASA 2012). Meanwhile, LGBTQ youth also use the Internet to connect with peers, find resources and seek out social acceptance (Lever, Grove, Royce and Gillespie 2008).

LGBTQ youth are considered a high-risk group that is underrepresented in academic research (Reck 2009). They are at higher risk of suicide, drug use, and sex with strangers than their heterosexual counterparts (Kosciw, Greytak and Diaz 2009, Reck 2009, Poteat, DiGiovanni, Sinclair, Koenig and Russell 2012). What this research project hopes to uncover is not only how the Internet is used by LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness—both in the benefits it offers and the potential risks—but also what kinds of changes on the part of formal providers may be needed in order to account for the large proportion of sexual and gender minorities on the streets. With all of that in mind, this study also looks at how risk is framed and defined for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, in particular in relation to their sex work, a form of coping that has recently been found to be a common strategy for youth experiencing homelessness.
This study first explores the theories that are the foundation for research on high-risk populations, specifically queer youth. It follows with a discussion of the literature relating to homelessness, LGBTQ youth and the Internet. It then identifies the gaps in research that drove the specific research questions, following with the research design, methods used, and the data. Finally, it concludes with an analysis of the data collected and a discussion of the findings as they relate to the original research questions.

**Theory**

The focus of my research was initially homeless youth, how they are neglected by society, and what methods of alternative coping—such as using the Internet to find resources—might develop as a result. Much of the research on homeless youth notes a lack of consideration of sub-populations, taking a critical social approach. Using this critical social approach, my research began to develop and explore more specific sub-populations as they are failed by social structures, thus leading to the focus on LGBTQ homeless youth.

Critical social theory's goal is to criticize and modify the framework of traditional Marxian theory to accommodate the evolving economy and sociopolitical climate (Antonio 1983). It examines how and why social structures fail, and sees social problems as resulting from the fundamental need for social change, not unique or individual cases of crisis. As such, this project's aim of more extensive research on gender and sexual minorities acknowledges the need for social change and how structures have failed LGBTQ youth, in particular those experiencing homelessness. The need to question the structures that empower certain populations over others—in this case, heterosexual youth over LGBTQ youth—is a significant component of critical social
theory, making it a driving force behind this research. Because critical social theory pushes for the evolution of the sociopolitical climate, it inspires the exploration of marginalized populations. Within the context of this research, that exploration seeks to find specifically why LGBTQ youth make up only 5 to 7 percent of the American population, but anywhere from 20 to 40 percent of homeless youth (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2014).

While the critical research on homelessness made note of the need to focus on LGBTQ youth, it is queer theory that drives the focus on that population for this paper. Queer theory examines the workings of power through sexual categories and the “coping mechanisms of discredited and discreditable sexual beings” (Gamson and Moone 2004:47). It also states that no one should be discriminated against because of their gender or sexuality (Gamson and Moone 2004). Queer theory is the foundation of this research, using critical social theory only inasmuch as it supports the notion that homeless LGBTQ youth, as a marginalized community, should have their voices heard. It is queer theory that led to the following research questions being directed not at homeless youth in general, but at LGBTQ homeless youth.

Finally, this research employs a queer of color critique on sex work and how risk is framed for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness. This theoretical approach is explained in Ferguson's book “Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique.” According to Ferguson, Marxism and revolutionary nationalism “disavow race, gender and sexuality's mutually formative role in political and economic relations” (Ferguson 2004:3); in other words, these theoretical approaches do not acknowledge the impact of race, class, gender and sexuality as they define capitalist formations. Queer of color critique, on the other hand, is an “epistemological intervention” to these theories, which critiques the capitalist system as exclusionary to non-normative identities (Ferguson 2004: 3). More specific to this research, Ferguson discusses the heteronormative framework of sexuality through the lens of Weber's theory of rationalization, or the Western idea
that reason is “reified in a system of material and intellectual culture...which is fully developed in industrial capitalism” (Ferguson 2004: 83). The theory of rationalization states that sexuality, an illogical and untamed forced, must be regulated through heteropatriarchal means of intimate expression; even privatized spaces like the home and the body must be controlled in order for society to be fully rationalized (Ferguson 2004). It should be clarified that this study did not focus exclusively on queer people of color; this theoretical framework is not limited to that population, but rather seeks to dismantle the white, heteronormative definition of sex and gender. In this paper, this theory is framed as a “queer of color” perspective because it contrasts with the dominant structure in place, which is white and heteronormative; not because it is discussing exclusively queer people of color.

Ferguson writes that Weber's theory of rationalization discounts factors such as race, class, sexuality and gender, which are treated as fixed cultural perspectives that do not allow for the adoption of the rationalized system of white heteropatriarchal culture. He points out that there is a need for more queer of color analysis, which is inclusive of non-white, nonheteronormative identities that exist outside of the gender practices and identities that enforce rationalization. He also states that queer of color critique is a necessary intervention to sexual and gender regulation, which in turn enforce racist practices (Ferguson 2004: 3). These racist practices include biased perspectives on sexuality, sex work and non-normative gender presentations.

Queer of color analysis is relevant to this research given the high percentage of LGBTQ youth of color living on the streets and engaging in sex work (Reck 2009, Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015), and it is necessary to more critically interpret how risk, in particular sexual risk, is framed for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness. Most of the following literature frames sex work as a desperate last resort, rife with dangers such as sexually transmitted diseases, assault and worse (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu,
Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015, Murphy, Taylor and Bolden 2015). However in spite of the intrinsic dangers involved in an illegal job, when using a queer of color critical approach to sex work and the corresponding risks, one must acknowledge the need for a critique of capitalism and traditional occupations, which often exclude LGBTQ people of color (Reck 2009, Pritchard 2013). Furthermore, when considering sex work and other non-normative sexual practices, this research acknowledges the imperialist influence on people of color and their sex practices, and how these practices were violently suppressed because they were believed to be “uncivilized, degraded, undisciplined and...wholly unchristian” (Ferguson 2004: 86). As such, this research approaches the data and the literature concerning sex work understanding that the associated risks may only be defined as risks within a rational, white heteronormative framework; once using a queer of color analysis and re-framing rationalization, these risks may be considered negligible, necessary or may not be considered risks at all.

As such, this study's literature review included research on LGBTQ youth of color and sex work, as well as homelessness and the Internet. The following section discusses this literature, and examines the experiences of homeless people, specifically LGBTQ youth, and the Internet as a tool. It uses a critical social lens to interpret the perceived heightened risk of marginalized youth and the corresponding lack of support.

**Literature**

The literature here offers insight into the experiences of LGBTQ homeless youth. It connects research on specific risk factors concerning LGBTQ youth with research on homelessness and different forms of coping. Finally, this literature covers Internet use among the homeless and among LGBTQ youth, assessing both the risks and the benefits of using the Internet as a resource.
Homelessness:

Studies using both qualitative and quantitative methods have shown that sub-populations of homeless people generally do not receive much-needed targeted services and support (Reck 2009, GAO 2010, Rice, Barman-Adhikari, Rhoades, Winetrobe, Fulginiti, Astor, Montoya, Plant and Kordic 2013). One study on homelessness analyzed online databases covering attributes of homelessness over 20 years, in order to identify the 6 most significant attributes relating to homelessness. The results showed that there were heightened risks for homeless youth between 14 and 23, making age a significant attribute (Washington 2011). Another study using semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ youth of color and white LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness in San Francisco, confirmed that homeless LGBTQ youth, particularly youth of color, were more likely to engage in at-risk behavior, but were less likely to receive formal support in seeking shelter; at-risk behavior in this study, as well as others, was commonly defined as drug use, unprotected sex and suicide ideation (Reck 2009, Klein 2012, Pritchard 2013). Finally, a study published in the National Institute of Health journal indicated that while homeless LGBTQ youth, particularly transgender youth of color, were more likely to be homeless than any other population, they were less likely to receive outreach from shelters. This study used supplemental surveys to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, and ran regressions to make connections between demographics and circumstances (Rice et al, 2013).

Perlman, Willard, Herbers, Cutuli and Garg used the Youth Risk Behavior Survey to identify that many homeless youth “double-up” (stay with family or friends) as opposed to staying in shelters or public places (2010); the interviews in Reck's study in San Francisco on LGBTQ youth of color experiencing homelessness also showed that LGBTQ youth are more inclined to stay at people’s houses than in formal shelters (235). This method of “doubling-up” reflects the alternative methods of coping that LGBTQ homeless youth appear to defer to when experiencing
homelessness. Reck's research found that most homeless LGBTQ youth of color relied on non-agency forms of shelter, including staying with strangers and practicing survival sex, or sex in exchange for “money or shelter” (Reck 2009: 234). The study done by Eric Rice and colleagues in 2013 found that LGBTQ adolescents were more likely to report staying with strangers than in shelters, which was shown to be a particularly risky form of homelessness in regard to sexual health (Rice et al 2013). Both studies reflected that LGBTQ homeless youth of color were at higher risk and in greater need of outreach and support (Reck 2009, Rice et al 2013). Rice's research notes that "LGBTQ youth may not feel welcome in shelters that primarily focus their services on heterosexual youth," (Rice et al 2008: 5). Reck's research shows that marginally housed youth felt exclusion even from gay adult communities and their community resources (2009: 236). In short, although there are resources available for homeless populations, studies have shown that LGBTQ youth may not only not feel their needs can be met there, but may not even feel comfortable approaching traditional housing programs.

LGBTQ youth experience significantly more alienation from their guardians, other authority figures and peers. The literature points to this as the reason for their alternate methods of coping, and using their peer network for support above all else. Research also indicates that sexual, and especially gender minorities such as transgender individuals and gender non-conforming people have more difficulty finding stable employment and housing due to discrimination (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015). As such, themes of peer networking and suspicion of outsiders (heterosexuals and formal support systems) were prominent in research on LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015, Reck 2009); a recent study from the Urban Institute titled “Surviving the Streets of New York” pointed to this as another reason for why so many LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness participate in “survival sex” (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañue-
Survival sex, which is defined as the exchange of sex for money or material goods, has been found to be a common method of coping for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015: 9). This study came out while I was coding my data, and contributed to deductive codes that proved very relevant within my interviews, such as survival sex, sex work and peer networking. The data showed, overwhelmingly, that LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness are more likely to use survival sex as a tactic, and included statistics such as “transgender youth in New York City have been found to be eight times as likely as nontransgender youth to trade sex for a safe place to stay” (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015: 11).

The Urban Institute study used over 200 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ-identified youth and adults who were either currently participating in survival sex while homeless, or had done so in their life. Much like Reck’s research from 2009 in San Francisco, this study showed that LGBTQ youth who experience homelessness are often unable, or unwilling to go to shelters for help; fear of homophobic or transphobic clients and discriminating providers, make shelters an unsafe and often unavailable option for LGBTQ youth on the streets (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015). “Youth service providers report that LGBTQ youth prefer to engage in ‘couch surfing’ that involves sexual exchange, rather than risk experiencing the abuse and potential violence they sometimes face in youth shelters or foster care” (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015: 12). Virtually all of the youth interviewed were racial minorities, and most had experiences with either being kicked out by family members because of perceived gender and/or orientation, or unsafe living experiences elsewhere (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015).

Less than a month before the release of the Urban Institute study, a notice was issued by the U.S.
Department of Housing and Urban Development regarding gender in emergency shelters and housing. According to the publication in February, “In response to public comments, HUD stated in the preamble to the final rule that it was not mandating a national policy on placement of transgender persons in single-sex shelters, but would instead monitor its programs to determine whether additional guidance or setting a national policy may be necessary or appropriate” (HUD 2015). While this suggests that at least as of very recently, the issues facing gender minorities are being recognized, literature shows that feelings of distrust and fear are already deeply embedded in the LGBTQ community.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning Youth:

To better understand why LGBTQ youth make up a disproportionate number of the homeless youth population in the United States, one has to understand the elevated level of risk that LGBTQ youth face in general as compared to their heterosexual peers. Multiple studies suggest that LGBTQ youth experience frequent victimization at school from heterosexual students, and compromised health due to higher rates of unsafe sex and substance abuse (Kosciw, Greytak and Diaz 2009, Reck 2009, Poteat, DiGiovanni, Sinclair, Koenig and Russell 2012, Pierce 2012). LGBTQ youth are at higher risk than heterosexual youth for a variety of factors, including homelessness, with the less-researched and consequently less-visible groups—bisexual and transgender youth—often showing higher rates of risk (Reck 2009). Yariv Pierce's note proposing a federal notification law requiring specific anti-bullying measures for LGBTQ youth, sited that 84.6 percent of LGBTQ students have been verbally harassed in school, with 40.1% reporting physical harassment and 18.8% reporting physical assault (309). This same article stated that "School bullies commonly focus on LGBT and LGBT-perceived students because bullies target norm violators who appear too feminine or too masculine" (309).

All of these studies have the same short-coming, which is that they cannot thoroughly address
many of the identities included within the LGBTQ community; much of the research within this review neglects the "Q" demographic (queer or questioning) in their surveys and interviews, while many cannot account for the intersectional minorities within this community such as LGBTQ people of color (Reck 2009). Pritchard's (2013) study states that research on LGBTQ youth bullying has not had a "critical and sustained analysis of the ways that race, ethnicity, class and other identities complicate discussions of how bullying and bias-motivated violence affects a diversity of queer youth" (Pritchard 2013: 320). Pritchard combined a content analysis of recent media coverage of bullying, and in-depth interviews with over sixty lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer black youth to determine particular risks for LGBTQ youth of color. His findings indicated that these students often experience more exclusion and alienation because they feel alienated from both the white LGBTQ community and the heterosexual community of color (Pritchard 2013).

This heightened risk and stigmatization from peers and formal institutions such as schools and shelters, also speaks to why LGBTQ youth may turn to peers for help and suggestions for coping. This circles back to the theme of survival sex and why so many LGBTQ youth on the streets use it as a strategy; the Urban Institute study showed that of the many ways homeless LGBTQ got involved in survival sex, the majority got involved through the aid of a friend or peer (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Banuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015: 23).

The distinction between “survival sex” and “sex work” was not defined in the Urban Institute article. The former is described as “trading sex for survival,” and based on the studies referenced it is common for that term, rather than the term “sex work,” to be used in conjunction with homeless people and other at-risk groups (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Banuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015: 10). The perception that at-risk groups who engage in sex work are automatically engaged in “survival sex,” implying that their situation is inherently desperate and one from
which they need saving, could pose a problem when approaching said groups. Multiple inter-
views cited in the Urban Institute study indicated the agency felt by the participants when engag-
ing in sex work. One interviewee was quoted as saying: “Even though it’s not like a job on the
books, it still kind of feels good to like be able to say I made my own money. I have money.”
(Dank, Yahner, Madden, Banuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015: 62). Only 15% had
been involved in exploitative situations (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Banuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora
and Conner 2015: 51), while 82% said there were positive things about sex work (Dank, Yahner,
Madden, Banuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015: 61).

In another recent study done by Loyola University in collaboration with youth services provider
Covenant House, New Orleans, the term “survival sex” was used alongside the term “sex traf-
ficking.” This study defined survival sex as anyone who has performed a sex act for money,
food, housing or some other basic necessity when they thought they had no other options (Mur-
phy, Taylor and Bolden 2015: 3). While the research clarified the distinction between those co-
erced into sex work (“sex trafficking”) and those who chose the occupation, it persisted in con-
flating sex work with non-consensual labor and implicitly defining it as an act of desperation.

For instance, the study, called HTIAM-14 (Human Trafficking Interview and Assessment Meas-
ure 2014) (Murphy, Taylor and Bolden 2015: 6), is titled with a bias; it theoretically addresses all
forms of trade for sex, but by including “Human Trafficking” in its title implied that the central
focus was non-consensual sex work. Further, the study automatically includes those under 18
who engage in sex work in the statistics for “sex trafficking,” rather than acknowledging youth
who are willingly engaged in sex work (Murphy, Taylor and Bolden 2015:6). While the concern
regarding underage sex work and questions of consent is valid, the literature has indicated that
most of the at-risk youth living on the streets have difficulty obtaining not only formal housing,
but traditional employment because of discrimination based on their perceived gender or sexual-
ity. Deciding to do sex work could then be considered not necessarily an act of tragic despera-
tion, but a practical approach to the problem of being judged as unemployable. A Queer of
Color critique highlights that normative concerns – such as those highlighted in the HTIAM-14
study - about consent and age assume do not consider the ways in which the mainstream social
structure often fails to support marginalized populations (Ferguson 2004). Therefore, approach-
ing sex work as an occupation from which one needs saving could be potentially alienating; what
if these youth do not feel a need to reform, or “be saved” from sex work? I discuss this theme
further in my findings after collecting my own data through semi-structured interviews, includ-
ing one with a staff member from Covenant House, New Orleans. First, I will discuss literature
pertaining to the Internet and its relevance to marginalized groups, in particular LGBTQ youth
experiencing homelessness.

The Internet:

For high-risk or minority communities, the Internet may serve as an option for connecting with
others and developing one's identity. Literature shows that often, online communities form in
response to a lack of success navigating in-person social networking. DeHann, Kuper, Magee,
Bigelow, and Mustansi did a mixed methods study on how LGBT youth explore online identi-
ties and relationships. Their data, based on both semi-structured interviews and surveys, showed
that Internet use among LGBT youth for community formation is not uncommon; in this study,
37.5% of the participants interviewed reported using the Internet for finding offline events such
as parties or rallies, while over 50% in the same group said they used the Internet to increase
self-esteem or to "increase comfort or competence for offline social and sexual relationships
(Dehann et al 2013: 424). Not surprisingly, research done online also yielded information about
the Internet and the LGBT community. A study using a content analysis of online websites and
semi-structured interviews noted that the Internet offers connectivity for a variety of minority
populations through Internet dating sites, including LGBT people. People who have trouble meeting in-person can use the Internet to find others with similar interests or identities (Lever, Grov, Royce and Gillespie 2008).

Also, many online social media platforms and microblogging platforms are populated by LGBTQ youth and their stories, and encountered many LGBTQ-directed news sites and websites while doing this review, such as Black Girl Dangerous, Autostraddle, TransGriot, and many more. These websites cover a wide spectrum of demographics and intersecting LGBTQ identities that could use further academic exploration. For example, the website “Leaving Evidence” is a blog by a queer-identified disabled Korean woman working for disability justice and transformative justice responses to child sexual abuse (http://leavingevidence.wordpress.com 2014).

While risk and how it is framed for this community requires further critique, there are certainly hazards for youth using the Internet, in particular LGBTQ youth. These include cyberbullying, which is “Sending threatening email or text messages, posting disparaging comments, videos, or photos about someone on a social networking site, web or blog” (1st International Conference on LGBT Psychology and Related Fields 2013), is one example. “Perhaps the group affected the most by cyberbullying are youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning the sexual identity” (Wiederhold 2014: 569). Weiderhold (2014) shows that LGBT youth are more than twice as likely as heterosexual youth to report cyberbullying. Wiederhold references a website called CyberBullyHotline (cyberbullyhotline.com 2014) dedicated to reporting findings of studies on cyberbullying's impact on LBGTQ youth. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) offers educational materials and programs to help prevent cyberbullying on their website (community.pflag.org/cyberbullying 2014).

Additional risks that have been explored in the literature include seeking out “survival sex” (Reck 2009, Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015) and other
forms of sex trade. Rice and Young in 2010 analyzed data from 201 surveys completed by homeless youth in Los Angeles. Their findings suggested that for homeless youth, using online social networks can be associated with “both potential increases and decreases in HIV/STI risk behaviors in homeless youth,” while 10% of those interviewed had used the Internet to engage in sex exchange for food, drugs or a place to stay (Rice and Young 2010:14). The internet, despite its advantages, arguably poses dangers for marginalized youth. Dehaan and colleagues' study suggests that there is an increased risk of LGBTQ youth engaging in unprotected sex as a result of online interactions (2013). Studies like that have also been done on gay and bisexual men, surveying gay Internet users to find that those who are HIV-positive are at a higher risk of having unprotected anal intercourse with a casual partner if they use the Internet (Bolding, Davis, Graham, Sherr and Elford 2005). Grov, Breslow, Newcomb, Rosenberger and Bauermeister (2013) analyzed research on the use of the Internet by gay and bisexual men from 1990 to 2013; they noted that studies throughout the 1990s suggested that use of the Internet to meet sex partners was a risk factor for HIV and STI transmission because it allowed more access to casual (and often unprotected) sex.

The use of social media websites by today's youth brings up some interesting questions. An essay by Aimee Morrison in the book *Identity Technologies* covers questions such as: “What social pressures are at play in determining what is written on the site and who can see it?” (Poletti and Rak 2014: 113) Are websites such as Facebook, a social media platform, coercive? This is significant in considering the risks for LGBTQ youth, because research indicates that if something is harmful to heterosexual youth, LGBTQ youth are even more vulnerable due to heightened stigma and lack of resources (Reck 2009, Klein 2012, Pritchard 2013). If the Internet has the potential to be coercive to non-minority, non-high-risk youth, it is safe to conjecture that it can be coercive for high-risk youth.
Also on the theme of potentially-dangerous coercion, an article from the British Medical Journal discusses a phenomenon known as “Cybersuicide,” defined as “attempted or completed suicide influenced by the Internet,” (Biddle, Donovan, Hawton and Kapur 2008). This content analysis of multiple websites indicated that while some of these websites offer spaces for people to share their distress, and therefore may serve a non-dangerous purpose as well, they all offer suicide as problem-solving strategy and are therefore very risky (Biddle et al 2008). Because LGBTQ youth are more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual counterparts (Kosciw Greytak Diaz 2009, Reck 2009, Poteat DiGiovanni Sinclair Koenig Russell 2012, Pierce 2012), it is fair to assume that these kinds of websites could prove to be a greater risk to LGBTQ youth than heterosexual youth.

While these risks are a necessary consideration, this study focuses largely on the way the internet is used as a tool for both finding resources and community building among homeless LGBTQ youth. In turn, it is important to focus on the way that the Internet's availability has become significant for navigating homelessness. Research using a non-probability sample of 169 homeless youth showed that 62% of homeless people have a cellphone and that 85% of them get online at least once a week, through which they access “a wide spectrum of network ties” and social support (Rice, Lee and Tait 2011). An online article by Nate Berg, summarizing multiple studies using interviews with homeless youth, states that most homeless people are usually able to access the Internet, whether through cell phones or on computers at public libraries (Berg 2012). The American Sociological Association did a study in 2012 titled "Homeless People find Equality, Acceptance on Social Networking Sites," which indicated that homeless people are met with less hostility over the Internet, and find a “sense of belonging that is based on more than possessions” (ASA 2012: 1).

Further, while LGBTQ homeless youth could certainly encounter issues like cyberbullying and
cybersuicide online, and are thus not irrelevant, these issues are likely less prevalent through the use of internet technologies that are central to this study, which emphasize online community spaces and resource acquisition. Additionally, a shortcoming of many of the studies on “risks” is that these are often defined through heteronormative frameworks. For instance, while one of the risks of the Internet is LGBTQ people using it to navigate sex work, or survival sex, this is also one of the benefits; 40% of the youth engaging in sex work used the Internet to post ads online, and 34% of those doing so did it because they perceived it as safer than walking the streets (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015: 31). Allowing more opportunity to screen clients and thus avoid potential violence, or interference by law enforcement, and also increasing discretion, the Internet offers an appealing way to work (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015: 32).

Employing a queer of color critique and reconsidering how risk is framed, these “risks” could also be considered negligible and/or necessary components of navigating around the white, heteronormative system of rationalization (Ferguson 2004). A need for more critical analysis of sex work and the various forms of coping mechanisms employed by LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness inspired the following research questions.

**Research Questions**

Within the literature there was a notable lack of personal accounts from LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, with minimal exploration of alternate coping mechanisms and self-empowerment among their community. While there are some newer studies including personal accounts from LGBTQ youth, little academic work examines themes of agency and resilience of LGBTQ youth on the streets. While some exploration of their nontraditional methods of coping
exists, the details are still relatively unknown, including the risks and benefits of tools such as the 
Internet. Furthermore, although research indicates that homeless people often use the Internet, 
the ways in which providers, shelters and government agencies could potentially use the Internet 
to reach out to LGBTQ youth has not yet been formally examined. As such, the research ques-
tions developed for this project are,  *How is the Internet used by lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-
gender and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth to cope with homelessness and the lack of 
queer-friendly services? What are the risks and benefits of LGBTQ youth using the Internet to 
cope with homelessness? How can providers better meet the needs of this sub-population of 
homeless youth through the Internet?*

**Research Design**

This is an exploratory study that uses an extended case study research design. Exploratory re-
search seeks to investigate an area of social life that has been under-researched (Nagy, Biber and 
Leavy 2011). Using mixed methods, this research presents an issue that deserves further explo-
ration by looking specifically at the topic of the Internet and the ways it is used for coping by 
LGBTQ homeless youth, as well as how formal service providers might make use of the Internet 
to better-meet the needs of this population. I then framed my work as an extended case study, 
which is rooted in the theory that micro-level interactions can be used to reflect on macro-level 
dynamics (Burawoy 1998). This approach, which is appropriate considering my small, but rele-
vant, data set, considers more unique interactions to be relevant to a broader context. With only 
three interviews, I hope to discern relevant information about larger populations. 
Extended case study also employs a “reflexive model of science,” which uses more than one dia-
logue to explain empirical phenomena; in other words, instead of the strict and singular model of 
science, it takes various narratives into consideration when looking at evidence (Burawoy 1998:
5). A reflexive model of science begins with a dialogue between the participant and the observer, embeds said dialogue within local and extralocal forces, and then facilitates comprehension through a final dialogue that expands the theory to a macro level (Burawoy 1998). In the case of this research, I used three interviews with peers as the initial dialogue, which I linked to broader dynamics through my content analysis, and then used both sets of data to speak to the experience of homeless LGBTQ youth in the United States.

Methods

For this study, I used qualitative semi-structured life world interviews and a quantitative conceptual content analysis for my data collection. Qualitative semi-structured life world interviews are intended to have several suggested questions and a sequence of themes that must be covered, however the structure is open enough to allow for changes in order and forms of questions asked (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). I chose this method because of the sensitivity surrounding the topic at hand, and because it appeared that a less structured, more casual approach would make the interviewee feel more comfortable, and have less potentially negative impact on their emotional well-being.

Recent discussions about qualitative interviewing emphasize that it is important to consider the relationship that exists between the interviewer and the interviewee (Creswell 2013: 173). While I was unable to obtain in-person interviews for all of the participants—one was over Skype, one was over the phone and two were written exchanges over e-mail—I still aimed to navigate through sensitive topics in a manner that allowed for the interviewee to feel less intimidated by the unequal power dynamic that is present in semi-structured interviewing (Creswell 2013). Research suggests that more collaborative interviewing allows for more equality in the dynamic, which is why I also allowed participants to choose the manner in which they answered questions
(Creswell 2013). This was the case for both the providers and LGBTQ people who have experienced homelessness; while providers were in a considerably less vulnerable situation than the participants discussing their experiences with homelessness, I still did not want them to be wary of me addressing them from a critical social perspective. Therefore, I allowed them to answer questions in whatever setting they chose.

My method for recruiting LGBTQ people who have experienced homelessness was through snowball sampling; while I initially intended to recruit participants over the Internet, on social media websites such as Tumblr, I found that this was not a reliable method of recruitment. Therefore, I reached out to my peer network and in this way, found three participants who agreed to an interview. One was done over Skype because she was in another state, the other was done over an e-mail exchange because she did not wish to speak over the phone, and one was done in-person at my home. Both voice interviews were recorded and transcribed, while the text interview was saved as a document on my computer. The details concerning their background and where they were homeless will be discussed in the “Data” section of this study.

My method for recruiting service providers was also done through networking, although not necessarily snowball sampling; I wrote letters to the four service providers I was interested in, The LGBT Community Center of New Orleans, Covenant House New Orleans, The Hetrick Martin Institute in New York City and Lost N’ Found in Atlanta, Georgia. I had connections with staff at the LGBT Community Center of New Orleans and Covenant House New Orleans. Lost N’ Found responded through e-mail to my request, and while Hetrick Martin did respond, they did not follow-through for the interview. I did a phone interview with a representative of Lost N’ Found, alias “Amy”, over the phone. She allowed me to record the interview, which I then transcribed. A staff member from the LGBT Community Center of New Orleans, alias “Katie,” answered my questions over an e-mail exchange. Finally, a staff member from Covenant House
New Orleans, alias “Joseph,” agreed to meet with me at their location in the French Quarter, but he did not permit me to record the interview.

The basis for choosing the website transhousingnetwork.com was because this website offered information on members of the population being researched. The stories posted regarding searching for housing often gave detailed descriptions of the person's back story, their gender and sexual identity and their experiences with using the Internet for resources. As such, this website corresponded with the information collected through interviewing, and was a very useful way to supplement a lack of more interviewees.

The basis for choosing Covenant House's website was also because they included detailed descriptions of clients' experiences, but this time from the perspective of the provider. This website was a useful source for collecting information on Covenant House's perception of their clients, as well as further exploring their methods of outreach. While additional content analysis could have been done of LGBT Community Center and Lost N' Found, it was decided that because these programs were already directing services at the LGBTQ community, an analysis of their website would not prove as useful for collecting codes and themes relevant to researching how a traditional service provider can better serve the LGBTQ community. Further, those two providers do not have nearly the reach or reputation that Covenant House does. Both are extremely new at offering services, are relatively unknown, and have a very small client base.

Validity and Reliability

The validity of this study was strong; both the interviews and content analysis successfully measured the impact of the Internet on LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness, as well as the ways in which formal providers could improve their online outreach. While the formal definition of qualitative validity is that the researcher checks for the accuracy of findings (Creswell 2014), modern qualitative researchers have re-conceptualized validation with a “postmodern sen-
sibility” (Creswell 2013: 247). Some researchers, such as Wolcott, have little use for validation and believe that “validation neither guides nor informs his work” (Creswell 2013: 247). I chose Lather’s ironic validation, which presents a truth as a problem; the truth here is that LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness are neglected and have developed alternate methods of coping as a result, which this research has successfully measured (Creswell 2013: 247). The clarification of researcher bias must be considered, because I myself have experienced difficulties with housing and discrimination as a sexual and gender minority, which has likely shaped my interpretation of my results (Creswell 2013: 251).

Qualitative reliability is intended to indicate that my approach would be consistent across different scenarios and projects (Creswell 2014: 201). This study can be considered reliable because although I was only able to recruit a small sample of interviewees, my quantitative content analysis allowed me to collect data from the desired population, and the data collected confirmed my codes and themes developed through interviewing. This research could be done with a larger pool of participants, or in a different state or city, and the findings would be consistent. This is based on the wide demographic reached through aforementioned content analysis; the website used, transhousingnetwork.com, reflected a range of genders, sexual backgrounds and locations. Controlling for race could unfortunately not be done because of lack of information from one of the participants and most of the stories used for the content analysis. Had controlling for race been achieved, perhaps I could have developed a more thorough understanding of how the Queer of Color critique plays out within white heteronormative societal structures.
Data

Data included qualitative semi-structured life world interviews and quantitative content analyses of online resources. IRB approval was received by the University of New Orleans, and six interviews have been conducted; this includes three with LGBTQ people over 18 who have experienced homelessness, and three with service providers who address housing. I chose not to interview youth because of their heightened risk and concern over taking advantage of those not of consenting age. All interviewees signed a consent form. Three of the interviews were recorded and transcribed, one asked that I take notes and not record him during the interview, and the final two asked to respond in text over e-mail. All interviews/notes have been printed and are in a locked drawer in my home office, to be destroyed upon completion of the research. All interviewees’ names were kept anonymous.

In total, three semi-structured interviews with shelter providers and three with LGBTQ people who experienced homelessness were performed. These providers were Lost N’ Found in Atlanta, Georgia, and the LGBT Community Center and Covenant House in New Orleans, Louisiana. The three LGBTQ people were recruited through snowball sampling, and included G, a Hispanic transgender male who was homeless in Austin, Texas, M, a white queer-identified cisgender female who was homeless in Portland, Oregon, and R, a transgender female, race unknown who was homeless in New York City. While snowball sampling was initially successful, I found myself uncomfortable continuing to pursue peers for their stories about homelessness; concerned I would cause unnecessary emotional duress or discomfort because of the close proximity I shared with my own community members, I chose not to recruit for more interviews but to instead supplement with a content analysis of online resources.

A conceptual content analysis examines specific content for the evidence of certain codes and
themes, and then quantifies and tallies the results (http://writing.colostate.edu 2015). The focus of conceptual content analysis is the occurrence of certain terms or concepts, whether they appear implicitly or explicitly (http://writing.colostate.edu/ 2015). The first website analyzed was transhousingnetwork.com, a website where transgender-identified people who are experiencing homelessness can post online seeking potential temporary living arrangements, or a couch to sleep on. Similar to the structure of a website called “Couchsurfing.com,” where people can post looking for places to stay while traveling and also post their own “couch,” or room as an option for travelers, people can post on transhousingnetwork.com to let users know that they have a couch, or place to stay if you are nearby, transgender and homeless. This website was analyzed using codes relating to LGBTQ experiences of homelessness and their resiliency. This website was categorized as a “Website for Finding Shelter.” While data suggested that other websites are used to seek shelter, such as craigslist.org and Facebook.com, this website was found to provide the most in-depth look at the circumstances surrounding those seeking shelter, contributing the most in terms of data. 207 posts total were analyzed from October 2014 to February 2015.

The other category of websites is “Provider Websites,” which includes a content analysis of Covenant House, New Orleans, and the section of their website called “Our Kids.” This website was analyzed to both further explore mainstream provider perception of LGBTQ youth and to understand how providers are using the Internet to have an impact on clients, or potential clients. This website was chosen for analysis over Lost N' Found Atlanta and the LGBT Community Center of New Orleans because of the three: 1) the provider has international impact and is the largest privately-funded charity in the Americas (https://www.covenanthouse.org/); 2) this is the only provider not focusing their services on the LGBTQ community, and therefore, represented a mainstream approach to providing youth services.

In addition to its significant impact, Covenant House is also relevant because of its particular
background and religious affiliation. Covenant House was founded in the late 1960s by a Franciscan priest, Father Ritter. It started in New York and throughout the 1980s it expanded to 20 more cities throughout the United States, Central America and Canada, under the leadership of Sister Mary Rose and Sister Tricia Cruise (https://www.covenanthouse.org/). Both the international influence and this conservative perspective make it particularly relevant to the study of formal services and their relationship with LGBTQ clients, which is why Covenant House deserves further analysis. In this study, the organization represents the perspective of a mainstream social service provider, although with the recognition that every institution has unique features and approaches.

Analysis

For the semi-structured interviews, several deductive codes were developed through the literature review, while additional inductive and several In Vivo codes emerged while transcribing. The codes used were intended to highlight how the Internet affects the daily life of LGBTQ youth who have experienced homelessness, as well as the need for service providers to adjust policies to better meet the needs of the LGBTQ community. These codes were used to develop themes and were divided up accordingly among these themes. Themes were divided up as “LGBTQ People Experienced Homelessness Themes” and “Service Provider Themes.” Codes developed during interviews were used as deductive codes for the content analysis of two websites—transhousingnetwork.com and Covenant House, New Orleans' website—and additional inductive codes emerged during analysis.

For transhousingnetwork.com, I used the codes developed through the semi-structured interviews, with several inductive codes emerging during analysis. Using the archives of the website, the months of October 2014 through February 2015 were analyzed, using twenty posts from each month, selecting from every other post. These codes and their corresponding themes, to be dis-
cussed in the following section, were listed under “Websites for finding shelter.” For the Covenant House New Orleans Website, labeled a “Service Provider Website,” I used coding developed for the service provider interviews; however in this case, I only used the codes within the theme “Gap in service provider outreach and population needs.” As such, I focused on the section “Our Kids,” which is where Covenant House lists stories about its clients, revealing shelter perceptions of clients and how their situations are addressed by Covenant House. Inductive codes also emerged, contributing to the theme of “Gap in service provider outreach and population needs,” while also bringing to light new themes, discussed in the following section. Every other story in the section “Our Kids,” was analyzed, totaling in 27 stories. Codes and themes were compared across content analysis and the interviews, noting similarities, differences and patterns.

While the semi-structured interviews were conducted with the intention of a qualitative analysis while only the content analysis was meant to be quantitative, I tallied up the instances of all of the codes and organized those, along with the themes, into tables. Their numerical value is next to the code, and shown in the “Findings” section of this study.

Findings

This study sought out to show what ways the Internet is used to cope by LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, as well as what providers can do to better-meet the needs of a statistically under-served population. I also examine the theme of the Internet and how alternate methods of coping, including the Internet, contribute to a sense of agency and strength among LGBTQ population who experience homelessness. I present a discussion of the themes found in the semi-structured interviews, followed by those uncovered in the content analysis, concluding with a comparison across cases.
Semi-structured Interviews:

The semi-structured interviews discussed below were conducted with 3 LGBTQ people who have experienced homelessness, and 3 traditional service providers. Themes of agency and resilience among the people who have experienced homelessness were highlighted, while the perspective of service providers was analyzed to better understand any potential deficiency in services for LGBTQ youth.

Table 1: LGBTQ People Who Have Experienced Homelessness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“LGBTQ Themes”</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Struggling vs. Thriving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deductive codes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desperation: 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources/tools: 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternate forms of coping: 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street Savvy: 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploitation: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inductive Codes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Personal charisma” (In Vivo code from interview with “R”): 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength/Triumph: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference between agency and victimization: 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisible homeless: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers/Challenges to normalcy: 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance of uncertainty: 17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Survival sex/Sex work                               |
| Deductive codes:                                    |
| Survival sex/sex work: 5                            |
| Inductive Codes:                                    |
“Being a hooker totally got me out of being homeless” (In Vivo code from interview with “G”): 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informal Support Systems/Alternate Forms of Coping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deductive codes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer network: 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inductive Codes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity: 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies: 26</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of the Internet: Risks and Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deductive codes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Internet offering resources: 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Internet offering safety: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risks of the Internet: 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suspicion of Outsiders and Formal Support Systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deductive codes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of services: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No safety in shelters: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inductive Codes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I want to help you go to jail” (In Vivo code from interview with “G”): 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The devil you know: 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LGBTQ Themes: Discussion**

Struggling vs. Thriving:

The theme that showed to be most prominent in interviews based on the quantitative value of the
codes was “Struggling vs. Thriving.” This theme was meant to highlight that although the interviewees' narratives indicated many challenges to daily life while being homeless, there was also a need to maintain self-reliance and independence. Stories were not told with an emphasis on negative circumstances, but rather with an emphasis on how one overcame said negative circumstances. These stories indicated pride in one's own self-resilience. Humor was also used to show strength in the face of difficult and even life-threatening situations. M's interview was frequently interrupted by her own laughter. Below is an excerpt in which she brought up coping with depression and self-harm while homeless:

M: And you know, having to cut yourself at work at Pottery Fun (laughs) because these are things that come up, 'cause what are you going to do, cut in your car with the windows open? No. Like…oh god…(laughs).

Me: What was that at the pottery place?

M: Oh, cutting there. Because I would get the urge to cut myself and I'd be at work, and there'd be no one there, so I've cut myself a couple of times in the bathroom at Pottery Fun (laughs), just taking a break to come out, you know...that's a homeless problem.

An In Vivo code “Personal Charisma,” which came from the e-mail interview with R, also indicated a sense of empowerment and self-reliance while homeless. “Personal charisma” was one of the resources R said she used while homelessness; her own charm was described as a tool, and a method of coping. This code was indicative of both the self-awareness and confidence that was apparent in conversations with all of the participants who had experienced homelessness.

“Strategies” and “Alternate forms of coping” were two very common codes. While a strategic approach to homelessness might seem intuitive—most people have strategies for how they cope with difficulty—the creativity of the methods in these interviews suggested how far some LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness will go to seek out not just safety, but a self-sufficient lifestyle. For example, strategies included dumpster diving (going through the trash of restaurants or grocery stores for food) and eating the complimentary breakfast at hotels, as op-
posed to going to shelters, soup kitchens, or other formal systems of support.

The findings related to the theme of “Struggling vs. Thriving” are especially significant given that the literature review did not reveal themes related to self-empowerment. Interviews with homeless youth did not explore their positive experiences, and the discussion of sex work was framed almost entirely negatively, even in the face of participants reporting positive views of sex work (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015).

Survival sex/sex work:

The term “survival sex” came from the provider perspective in both the literature and interviews, while the term “sex work” came up across all cases. The discussion surrounding sex work in the interviews with LGBTQ-identified people was entirely positive. This was most evident in the interview with G, in which the In Vivo code “Being a hooker totally got me out of being homeless” emerged. He discussed using the website craigslist.org to solicit sex work, earning him enough money to get out of being homeless. While this specific code only came up once, it was notable in that it contrasted with the depiction of sex work in the literature and from the perspective of providers.

Within the literature, sex work as a theme developed from the perception that young people experiencing homelessness were being forced into a less-than-desirable occupation (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015, Murphy, Taylor and Bolden 2015). However, in the framework of critical social theory, the prevalence of sex work among this sub-population indicates a process of adaptation in the face of failing social structures (Antonio 1983). The interviews conducted with LGBTQ people who have experienced homelessness illustrated that even among three people, there are a wide range of coping mechanisms present, none of which included formal shelters. This suggests that in the face of a society that does not provide adequate support, this sub-population is developing different strategies in order to ac-
commodate for their special needs.

The use of strategies that fall outside of the traditional capitalist framework appeared to be met with concern by providers like Covenant House, at least when it came to sex work (Murphy, Taylor and Bolden 2015). When employing a Queer of Color Critique, the concept of “survival sex” could be problematic because it evokes desperation solely on the principle of sex work as a dangerous, unhealthy occupation; Ferguson's queer of color critique indicates that the regulation of non-normative sex practices is rooted in racism and patriarchy (Ferguson 2004: 3). This suggests a need for providers to approach sex work using a queer of color analysis and a perspective that does not limit the idea of acceptable occupations to ones within the traditional capitalist system.

Informal Support Systems/Alternate Forms of Coping:

“Informal support systems/alternate forms of coping” was flushed out as its own theme due to the high occurrence of codes relating to non-traditional networks and coping mechanisms. The codes “Strategies” and “Peer network” overlapped frequently, suggesting that LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness use their community to cope and strategize when facing homelessness. Internet was noted as a method of coping, as well as a method of reaching out to peers. This was significant in that these strategies ranged so far and wide; G spoke about “dumpster diving” for food and finding sex work on craigslist.org, while R discussed hitchhiking and staying with friends. M spoke about staying in her car and sleeping in hotel parking lots. All of them used methods that fall outside of what queer of color analysis might describe as the traditional capitalist framework, finding non-normative solutions to their problems (Ferguson 2004). With a queer of color critical perspective in mind, these alternate methods of coping are just as valid as solutions offered by formal providers in that they met the needs of the person experiencing homelessness (Ferguson 2004). The interviewees did not fixate on failed experiments in
navigating homelessness, but rather successful endeavors, suggesting that their alternate forms of coping were valid and useful to them. Sex work was discussed by interviewees R and G, either objectively as a form of trade needed to make money, or in a positive way as something that, in G's case, even helped alleviate homelessness. This suggests that for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, a queer of color analysis of sex work is needed to understand sex work as a practical alternative to traditional jobs, rather than as a particularly risky or desperate choice.

Use of the Internet: Risks and Benefits for LGBTQ People:

While the Internet as a positive resource came up relatively frequently, the risks of the Internet were never brought by an interviewee. The interviewee G was the only participant to acknowledge any potential risk, but only when prompted. He did not report having encountered any specific risks himself, however he admitted that in retrospect, he probably had approached the situation with some level of carelessness. However, a suspicion of outsiders and a tendency to approach more familiar dangers (“The devil you know” was a code from the interview with G) led me to understand that the Internet was being used with the explicit intention of avoiding the more traditional risks associated with being LGBTQ and homeless (and in some instances, underage; this will be discussed in a later section. While “The devil you know” did not come up in other interviews, it did come up in later coding and suggested a preference for the more familiar risks of alternate coping over unknown dangers. G was quoted as saying, “I guess I've just always been used to doing things the wrong way. I don't know, like...anything to get shit done,” implying that alternate methods, albeit risky, may be the preferred, if not the only method available.

This connects back to Ferguson's queer of color analysis and how risk is framed for sub-populations that do not fall within Weber's traditional theory of rationalization (Ferguson 2004). Given the need to navigate around and supplement the traditional and exclusionary job market, G and other interviewees may have viewed the normative concept of “risk” as irrelevant to the life-
style they were leading. The idea of risk within the realm of rationalized capitalism, which excludes LGBTQ people of color, might be irrelevant to a transgender person of color, such as G (Ferguson 2004: 84). This could also speak to why there is a suspicion of the traditional, normative systems in place, which is discussed further for the following theme.

Suspicion of Outsiders and Formal Support Systems:
The theme of alternate methods of coping is tied to the theme of avoiding the traditional methods of coping; more specifically, the suspicion of outsiders and the traditional shelter providers available to LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness. The theme of lack of safety in shelters came up in the literature (Reck 2009), and was again discussed in interviews with G and R. Because exploitation as a result of perceived gender and/or sexuality was a theme discussed in several studies relating to LGBTQ issues (Reck 2009, Pritchard 2013, Kosciw, Greytak and Diaz 2009), this led me to focus on the way that the Internet allows LGBTQ people, including youth, to reach out for help within spaces where they feel safe; namely, spaces that are either entirely, or predominantly LGBTQ. Suspicion of the conventional systems and how they may not account for one's non-normative identity makes sense considering Ferguson's queer of color analysis, which speaks to how non-white, non-heteronormative people are excluded from traditional capitalist systems (Ferguson 2004: 4).

This fear or disregard of traditional systems was suggested across cases; after concluding my content analysis (which will be discussed in more detail later on), I interpreted that the lack of discussion surrounding shelters on transhousingnetwork.com, a website geared towards housing, indicated that it is not even on most of their radars; that is to say, shelters are not brought up as unsafe options because it is assumed they are unsafe options. People did not offer information on shelters or advice on formal institutions, suggesting that they are not even considered as options.
The first sign of this came up in the interview with G, when he seemed surprised I even brought up shelters as an option:

**Me:** Did you ever consider staying at a shelter, or formal housing support?

**G:** (Pause) No...because...they scare me...I don't know, being queer and everything, it's kind of a scary place. And...I don't know, Texas kind of sucks, like...in general. I mean, I love Texas, but I don't like Texas politics, I don't like how, um, how they deal with homeless people.

**Me:** So...pretend I'm not me for a second and I don't know anything about shelters and why it might be scary, why...what about the shelter experience did you think was going to be scary as a queer person?

**G:** Well...when I was 19, I was still very strongly, uh, dyke-identified, so, I was, you know, pretty militant-looking lesbian, with like, I don't know, wore like...fatigues, army fatigue pants, and like, shaved my head and stuff. Just...looking alternative and being in a homeless shelter with a bunch of people who...I don't know...who I didn't know...who could potentially be like, really terrible people, really scared me.

G was caught off-guard that I proposed shelters as an option, which is why I asked that he “Pretend I'm not me for a second and I don't know about shelters and why it might be scary.” Therefore, the lack of this code was actually significant, as it spoke to the alienation between the population and formal service providers. While G's fear was based on speculation, R brought up in her interview having had a bad experience with gender discrimination in a shelter. She did not think that shelters were an option for her after that, and had opted for staying with friends or even strangers.

### Table 2: Service Providers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Service Provider Themes”</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Federal funding/Public Image</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deductive codes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Housing Rights:</strong> 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Inductive Codes:**

Provider public face: 12 for covenant house + one mentioned in LGBTCCNO interview, 9 for lost and found, 4 for LGBTCCNO, 26 total

Federal/private Funding: 1, re: Covenant House

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**Getting Online and Getting Clients**

**Deductive codes:**

Internet-based outreach: CH 5, LNF 10, LGBTCCNO 6

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**Perceived gap in provider outreach and population needs**

**Deductive codes:**

Lack of knowledge of LGBTQ community/community served: 4

Rejection based on gender or sexuality: 1

**Inductive Codes:**

Attempted recruitment: 10

Provider as Savior: 8

Provider reform: 9, 8 in CH interview, 1 re: Covenant House

Judgment of clients: 6, 5 in CH, 1 re: covenant House

---

**Who is Serving the LGBTQ Community?**

**Deductive codes:**

Outreach to LGBTQ people:

**Inductive Codes:**

Community Partners: CH 7 + 1 re: CH in LGBTCCNO interview, LNF 1, LGBTCCNO 3

---

*Service Provider Themes: Discussion*

Federal Funding/Public Image:

Codes such as “Provider Public Face” came up for all three organizations, indicating that they all maintained a certain image for the public, such as listing certain statistics and accolades within
the interview, or referring to methods for gaining/maintaining funding. While these themes were not particularly strong, they were significant in that they inspired other codes relating to provider's relationships with clients. Because of new developments by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (H.U.D.), some traditional shelters will have to alter or expand their programming and training in order to account for new federal policies regarding sexual and gender minorities (2014). This is relevant because it affects the provider-client relationship for traditional shelters.

Getting Online and Getting Clients:

All three service providers discussed using the Internet at least minimally for outreach. Lost N' Found's staff assistant Amy mentioned having a Facebook page with over 7,000 'likes,' as well as a website. However the most significant way the Internet came up in conversation with Amy was when she brought up how clients reported using it. Evidently, many clients used the Internet to make phone calls, with smart phone apps such as “Google Voice.” These apps allow clients to make phone calls using the Internet when they cannot afford a phone plan. She discussed how accessible wireless Internet is in Atlanta, with “mobile hotspots” and other features all over the city making it easy to access the Internet for free. We also discussed how this was not uncommon in cities, and that wireless Internet has become a commodity that more and more people are able to use freely.

LGBTCCNO's services are all almost entirely online. Their representative Katie brought up that two years ago “the Center did not even have a working e-mail address,” and that a lot of change had occurred recently, with their development being almost entirely based out of their website. While they have not been able to afford an actual community space as of yet—they currently operate out of a small office, with no walk-in hours available—they have been able to meet the needs of clients through their online directory, emergency response via the Center's e-mail ad-
dress, and by reaching out to the community for resources via social media websites such as Facebook. When clients reach out to the Center, staff uses the Internet to network on behalf of the client to find them necessary information or queer-friendly services. Katie did mention that this proved difficult for some homeless clients, who prefer office hours and do not have regular access to the Internet.

In my conversation with Joseph, he mentioned Covenant House’s attempt to recruit clients through Backpage.com by seeking out people that appeared to be victims of sex trafficking. Joseph also said that some clients find out about Covenant House through their pamphlets, which mentions their website. On the website, there is a section called “Our Kids,” where client's stories are discussed. This section was analyzed in order to better understand how Covenant House both perceives and portrays their clients.

Perceived gap in provider outreach and population needs:
Covenant House was the only organization interviewed for this study that does not explicitly focus on the LGBTQ population. Housing service providers that explicitly address this population are few and far between; only as recently as this past year was the first long-term housing facility for LGBTQ people created in San Antonio, Texas. There are housing assistance programs, or drop-in centers in major cities such as New York and San Francisco, however their facilities are limited to one or two locations, and fairly modest. Covenant House, on the other hand, is nationwide and has larger, better-funded facilities. In an interview with a staff member from Covenant House New Orleans, it was confirmed that Covenant House was aware of the disproportionate rate of LGBTQ-identified homeless youth. He stated from his understanding that 30% of their youth were LGBTQ-identified, with 1 to 2% of their population identifying as transgender. Joseph reported that LGBTQ clients at Covenant House felt comfortable based on the fact that more LGBTQ-identified clients were staying there, and for longer periods of time.
Another topic that suggested a potential gap in provider perception and the population's needs was the only form of online recruitment used by the three providers. Joseph discussed Covenant House's method of online recruitment—on Backpage.com, a website known for soliciting sex work—as their strategy for finding clients who are thought to be victims of sex trafficking. Joseph reported that this method of recruitment so far had not been successful, and that over two years they had not reached any new clients. In my interview with G, when I brought up Covenant House's method of recruitment, he responded “Well that's...interesting” and then said, “It's like, I want to help you...go to jail!” indicating suspicion of a service provider that would recruit via a known sex solicitation website. Joseph stated that he believed pimps, or exploiters, were preventing victims from getting Covenant House's help via the Internet. On the other hand, G's suspicion of this method of recruitment is an example of how providers might unintentionally alienate clients. With a significant proportion of sex workers using the Internet to find clients (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015: 31), the presence of a formal service provider in that space could be perceived as having legal ramifications for consensual sex work. Lost N' Found and The LGBT Community Center do not actively recruit clients, which made this strategy stand out.

Sex work and survival sex also came up as relevant codes in the interview with Lost N' Found employee Amy. She described sex work as “being in the lifestyle,” and explained that some of Lost N' Found's clients currently were, or had been sex workers. This suggests that it would help providers to be sex work-friendly in order to best meet the needs of the LGBTQ community; in the case of traditional service providers, who may not be able to publically advocate for sex work because of legal reasons, this may look like a different approach to sex trafficking. While traditional service providers like Covenant House use and develop programming based on sex trafficking, a queer of color analysis suggests that this solely negative perspective
on sex work from providers could be alienating for sub-populations such as LGBTQ people (Ferguson 2004). Clients who perceive sex work as a necessary means to navigating an exclusionary capitalist job market may not wish to engage with a provider that strongly advocates against sex trafficking, which could mean changes for how traditional service providers publicize their services (Ferguson 2004).

Who Is Serving the LGBTQ Community?:

All three organizations discussed community partnerships, and maintaining connections with other services in their areas in order to meet the needs of their clients. In the case of Covenant House, this was especially significant. Joseph brought up that Covenant House was seeing “more and more LGBT youth” and that they were adjusting their facilities to accommodate these changes. One example was working with Breakout! New Orleans, an organization dedicated to the decriminalization of LGBTQ youth of color, to train their staff on LGBTQ issues and sensitivity. While LGBTCCNO and Lost N’ Found both addressed partnering with other services, it was only Covenant House that spoke to adjusting their internal structure to partner with Breakout! This form of community partnership was particularly relevant in that it exemplified how LGBTQ people require additional, specific services.

“Outreach to LGBTQ people” as a code was also minimally present, and both Lost N’ Found and Covenant House mentioned that outreach was almost unnecessary; clients came to them, they did not need to seek them out. Joseph stated that they had not done any outreach to LGBTQ potential clients yet because they were constantly being contacted by clients as it was. Lost N’ Found did not do any outreach in that they have minimal facilities that are usually at-capacity. LGBTCCNO were contacted by very few homeless clients in general; because they do not have their own facilities, they did not do any of their own outreach, but rather just worked with clients that contacted them through their e-mail address.
These interviews, both with LGBTQ people who have experienced homelessness and with providers, spoke to the Internet as a tool. Interviews with G, M and R indicated that Internet was used as a method of coping, and a means of reaching out to peers and seeking out informal strategies. Providers discussed its importance both for clients and for their own methods of self-promotion. While there was only one example of specific outreach to clients—Covenant House through Backpage.com—all service providers acknowledged using the Internet, and clients finding out about them via the Internet. A significant theme identified was a potential gap in provider perception of clients, brought up by G and R addressing feeling unsafe in shelters. The way sex work was discussed by Covenant House versus how it was discussed by LGBTQ people who have experienced homelessness was very different. While the LGBT Community Center did not discuss sex work, Lost N’ Found’s staff member Amy revealed that sex work was an open topic of conversation between staff and clients, with it framed as an autonomous decision than a trafficking situation.

**Content Analysis:**

This content analysis looks at the provider website, Covenant House, specifically the section “Our Kids,” and the website for finding shelter, transhousingnetwork.com. Because only three interviews with LGBTQ people who experienced homelessness were conducted, and because these were people over 18 and not youth, I chose to supplement my data with a content analysis of the stories on transhousingnetwork.com.

*Website for Finding Shelter: transhousingnetwork.com*

**Table 3: Stories on transhousingnetwork.com**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Websites for Finding Shelter”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Perspectives on Sex Work</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Deductive Codes:*
“Being a hooker totally got me out of being homeless”: 1
Survival sex/sex work: 6

Inductive Codes:
Defending sex work: 10/ sex worker affirming “hashtag” appeared 3 times

Seeking out Safety in Numbers, or Avoiding Heterosexual People:

Deductive Codes:
Peer network: 32

Inductive Codes:
Seeking LGBTQ safe spaces: 51

Rejection Based on Sexuality and/or Gender

Deductive Codes:
Exploitation: 39
No safety in shelters: 3
Lack of services: 9
Risks of the Internet: 2
Desperation: 47

Inductive Codes:

“I can take care of myself, I just don't want to be homeless”

Deductive Codes:
Strength/Triumph: 7
Difference between agency and victimization: 21
The devil you know: 1
The Internet offering resources: 55
The Internet offering safety: 7
Resources/tools: (5) 8
Alternate forms of coping: 32
Street savvy: 5
“Personal charisma”: 1
Invisible homeless: 10 (6)
Barriers/challenges to normalcy: 14
Acceptance of uncertainty: 26
Reciprocity: 41
Boundaries: 61

*Inductive Codes:*

*Website for Finding Shelter: Discussion*

Positive Perspectives on Sex Work:

Within the content analysis of this website, sex work was exclusively perceived positively, so much so that the code “Defending sex work” came up 10 times in conjunction with the “hashtag” (a categorization system for online social media websites) *sex worker affirming*, indicating that an important theme for people seeking shelter is a positive perspective on sex work. While the codes within the theme “Positive Perspectives on Sex Work,” were not especially frequent, I interpreted that most posts did not reveal their subjects’ money-making strategies and that this was either because of a) fear of legal repercussions, or b) fear of judgment and stigmatization. Code terms came up that I know from conversations with sex workers mean sex work, such as “Independent contractor” or “taking commissions,” further confirming that fear of legal repercussions was a concern for people posting. The existence of these code terms suggests that posting online about sex work is risky, and also that sex work might be more prevalent than coding suggested. This connects back to the theme of positive perspectives on sex work, as it points to its use as income and as a source of independence.

Seeking out Safety in Numbers, or Avoiding Heterosexual People:
The code “Seeking LGBTQ safe spaces” came up 51 times, the third-most common code. Many people posting on this website explicitly stated that they did not want to live with people who were not LGBTQ-identified. Also included in this theme was “peer network,” where people posting voiced seeking the help of queer-identified people, or information on LGBTQ-related issues. This was a fairly common code, coming up 32 times, illustrating again an active choice among LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness to operate within their own community. These codes were connected in that they both suggested that LGBTQ people sought out support and company of peers over their heterosexual counterparts. Multiple posts on transhousingnetwork.com discussed wanting to stay exclusively with LGBTQ-identified people, which often overlapped with stories of reaching out to peers for support. These codes supported one-another, in that they both indicated a desire to network within the community, and not interact with non-LGBTQ people.

**Rejection Based on Sexuality and/or Gender:**

There were many reports of exploitation, a code that came up 39 times. Some stories revealed abusive relationships with families, heterosexual roommates or former partners. Other stories discussed feeling unsafe, or unable to “be themselves” in housing situations. Multiple posts indicated that being a gender or sexual minority left people more susceptible to abuse or exploitation; one person wrote, “I have been cooped up with this roommate for several months and it is grating on my sanity, among other things he is a constant verbal abuser and he turned out to be far less open minded than he assured me when I moved in.”

There was little discussion about a lack of services for LGBTQ people, unsafe shelters, or risks of the Internet. People posting did not discuss failed attempts at finding housing, or failed services so much as they described specifically what they needed. Many posts did not focus on the negative elements of their experiences. While they usually reported a reason for their home-
lessness, which was very often because of exploitation based on gender and/or sexuality, they did not use the posts to discuss negative housing experiences in explicit detail. Rather, they discussed their skill sets, their needs and their future plans. Many remained very positive, as opposed to dwelling on their experiences of rejection, and voiced feeling strong as opposed to down-trodden. One example is of a person posting who wrote, “I’ve not got a lot of money but would be willing to do anything so I can be the women I want to be.” Another person wrote, “I am legally female. I live a genuine life. Jobs are hard, but my work ethic carries me through.”

The code “Desperation” came up 47 times, which illustrated again that many people posting were coming from challenging situations usually related to being a sexual and/or gender minority. These stories were coded as “Desperation” based on the subjective language used by the people posting. Some said the word “desperate,” while others discussed unsafe situations that they needed to get out of immediately. The lack of safety was generally related to non-LGBTQ people emotionally or physically abusing them. For example, one person who identified as a “non-binary DFAB” (meaning they are gender-non-conforming, but were “designated female at birth,” or DFAB) discussed feeling unsafe in their current living situation: “I’m a Nonbinary dfab currently stuck in a bad living situation that recently escalated to physical violence, and I really need to get out. I’m searching for an apartment with a friend right now so I’m hoping it won’t be too long term. It just isn’t healthy or safe for me to be here any longer.”

“I can take care of myself, I just don't want to be homeless”:

This theme is a quote from a post on transhousingnetwork.com, which captured the agency and strength that was strongly illustrated throughout this website. This theme encompassed the most codes, including those relating to the Internet offering resources or safety. Seeking to answer the question of how the Internet impacts the lived experiences of LGBTQ people/youth experiencing homelessness, I focused on the code “The Internet offering resources.” Because this is an online
source, there is a potential bias; all of it is being done online, so one might presume that all posts would inevitably be considered evidence of “The Internet offering resource.” However, for the sake of this code I chose specifically to count posts where, a) Someone was offering a place to stay or specific resources, b) Where people explicitly said they only had Internet access and c) Instances where someone discussed other ways of using the Internet for resources. In doing this, I did not code every single post as “The Internet offering resources.” Even so, quantitatively this code was the second-most common, coming up 55 times. This code related to self-sufficiency and autonomy, given that all of the posts (except for two for youth under 18) were written by people using the Internet to independently navigate finding housing by themselves.

Also relating to self-sufficiency and independence, the most common code was “Boundaries,” which appeared 61 times. This illustrates that people posting were adamant about maintaining standards even in the face living on the street; they might be hungry and homeless, but they did not want to be around hard drugs, or live with large dogs, or someplace too far from the bus station, etc. In spite of desperation and exploitation, LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness were not willing to make drastic changes to themselves or their needs for the sake of a place to live. They still had their pride.

People posting were also eager to offer “Reciprocity,” which was a popular code, appearing 41 times; posts often indicated that people were willing to clean, run errands or just help out in general in exchange for housing. Despite how frequently the posts were also coded as desperation, or exploitation, they also often corresponded with the code “Reciprocity,” indicating that the people posting did not want something for nothing. They simply wanted people to understand that they were seeking a safe space, which is presumably why the second-most common code was the deductive code “Seeking LGBTQ safe spaces.” Posts that indicated a fear or avoidance of heterosexual people, or a specific desire to be around other LGBTQ people, were very com-
mon.

In summary, these posts showed themes of autonomy and self-sufficiency, and a positive perspective on sex work. There were the codes “Exploitation” and “Desperation,” but these often corresponded with the codes “Boundaries” and “Reciprocity.” While people posting did discuss why they might be homeless, they focused more on their skills and ability to be self-sufficient than they did their struggles and trauma. These are stories not about their downfalls, but rather about portraying themselves and their needs in a positive light. They reflect autonomy in the face of homelessness. Nonetheless, these posts tell quite a different story than those posted in the “Our Kids” section of Covenant House’s website.

*Service Provider Website (Covenant House):*

**Table 4: Stories on Covenant House, “Our Kids”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Service Provider Websites”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reform as a model for service provision</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Deductive Codes:</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider reform: 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgment of clients: 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Inductive Codes:</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional jobs/education: 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Public Face for Funding</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Deductive Codes:</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider as Savior: 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Inductive Codes:</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best/only option is Covenant House: 28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“We Must Mend Their Broken Souls”

*Deductive Codes:*

- Sex trafficking/sex work: 12
- Lack of knowledge of LGBTQ community/community served: 1
- Attempted recruitment: 1

*Inductive Codes:*

- Religion: 3
- Assuming client perspective: 95
- Client trauma: 81

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*Service Provider Website: Discussion*

Reform as a model for service provision:

This theme included the codes “Provider Reform,” “Judgment of clients” and “Traditional jobs/education,” which came up 40, 34 and 28 times respectively in 27 stories. The theme of reform was strong, with stories often starting with a client having no job or schooling, and ending with a successful graduation or a new traditional job. Stories illustrated that Covenant House offers different programs that clients complete successfully to in exchange for housing and services. Partnerships offering services such as help seeking employment, substance abuse reduction and education came up frequently in stories. This was significant in that these kinds of programs are fairly common at shelters, but are not frequent codes in transhousingnetwork.com.

Although some people posting discussed their traditional job and education aspirations, most did not visibly prioritize these concerns. This suggests that those programs, while necessary for some clients, may not meet the needs of the LGBTQ population, especially those seeking hous-
ing. It is not to suggest that LGBTQ clients do not also seek out traditional forms of support such as assistance with education and employment, but that the ways in which these things are emphasized by service providers could be reframed, or combined with other, less traditional means of support.

“Judgment of Clients” came from descriptions of client situations that used subjective adjectives, such as “No one chooses to be homeless, especially not a naive, 15-year-old girl,” or “Jodie struggled to survive—often in a world she didn't understand.” Alluding to client's being unaware, or helpless, were coded as “Client Judgment” and contrasted with the themes of strength and self-reliance that were common on transhousingnetwork.com. Very few client descriptions used terms regarding their strength or resilience, but instead used language such as “betrayed,” “struggled,” “vulnerable,” etc.

A Public Face for Funding:
The descriptions of these clients also included fundraising efforts on behalf of Covenant House, stating that “you can help more kids like______ if you donate to Covenant House” in several of the stories. The code “Provider as Savior” which was developed through interviewing, came up 39 times. Stories that discussed Covenant House “saving a life” or “being the only hope” were coded as “Provider as Savior,” and often also as “Covenant House as best/only option.” This came up 28 times, in conjunction with statements such as “Alexis had been praying for someone to help her find her way when she finally found Covenant House,” or “We are Julie’s family now. The rest of the world – her father, her mother, her friends – have turned the page on Julie’s life already. If Julie’s going to make it, it’s going to be our hands that hold her, our hearts that love her, and our gentle help that lifts her up and gives her dreams wings.” Describing Covenant
House as the only hope for these clients was often immediately followed by a statement related to funding. For example, after a story describing the sexual abuse experienced by one client, they conclude by saying “With your support, Covenant House can be ready when the first chilly nights of fall bring cold and frightened homeless kids in. Help us take care of those who have run from the horrors of their homes to the horrors of the streets.”

“We Must Mend Their Broken Souls”:
Unlike transhousingnetwork.com, where posters often remained ambiguous about their trauma, these stories described in graphic language what happened to clients prior to entering Covenant House. The code “Client Trauma” came up frequently at 81 times, while “Assuming Client Perspective” was the most common code, coming up 95 times. Stories where the narration interpreted the client's feelings, thoughts or opinions about Covenant House, their own trauma or being homeless, were labeled as “Assuming Client Perspective.” Most stories described the feelings of the clients in detail, with statements such as “Joey gave up all hope...” or “We are still their family.” These codes fell under the theme “We must mend their broken souls,” a direct quote from one of the Covenant House stories.

Comparison of Provider Website to Population Website:
While the code “sex trafficking/sex work” only came up 12 times in the “My Kids” stories, in every instance it was portrayed as a dangerous, exploitative situation. This contrasts with the positive, affirming attitude of sex work that was present on transhousingnetwork.com and in my interviews. The study by the Urban Institute on sex work also indicated positive perceptions from LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness in spite of its negative angle (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Bañuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015: 35), while transhousingnetwork.com requires you to check-off whether you are “sex worker affirming” as a form of categorization when you submit a post. Queer of color critique would suggest that that sex work is a concept
that exists outside of the traditional capitalist critique of people and healthy lifestyles; there is no room for the “black drag queen prostitute,” in the traditional paradigm of sexuality, race and gender, which puts sex work on the fringe and allows it to be demonized (Ferguson 2004:2). In the comparison across cases, I seek to do additional analysis of these perspectives on sex work and how they are relevant.

Websites like transhousingnetwork.com show that people posting are quite sensitive regarding their trauma. This is illustrated by the fact that although the codes “Desperation” and Exploitation” came up frequently, the details were usually minimal. This differs from the way that Covenant House discusses past traumas, which are very detailed in most of the stories. While the self-perception on transhousingnetwork.com seemed to be one of moving on from trauma and developing self-reliance and independence, Covenant House's language surrounding clients does not indicate these same themes. The focus on the trauma and helplessness of the youth in the stories contrasts with how the people on transhousingnetwork.com present themselves, which is as not using formal shelters or services, and being capable of working or paying for the resources or housing received. The descriptions of stories of trauma had distinctively different themes, with those on the Covenant House website reflecting more themes of helplessness and tragedy, while transhousingnetwork.com reflecting more themes of strength and optimism.

**Comparison Across Cases:**

**Table 3: Content Analysis and Interview Themes**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>LGBTQ People Interviews</th>
<th>Provider Interviews</th>
<th>Provider Website Content Analysis</th>
<th>Websites for Finding Shelter Content Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Struggling vs. Thriving</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I can take care of myself, I just don't want to be homeless”</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal Support Systems/Alternate Methods of Coping</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of the Internet: Risks and Benefits</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Online and Getting Clients</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Survival sex/sex work</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Perspectives on Sex work</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection Based on Sexuality and/or Gender</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding non-LGBTQ people</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspicion of Outsiders and Formal Support Systems</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal funding/Public Image</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Public Face for Funding  | X  | X  
---|---|---
Perceived gap in provider outreach and population needs  | X  | X  | X  
“We Must Mend Their Broken Souls”  | X  | X  
Reform as a model for service provision  |  
Services for LGBTQ people  | X  | X  

How is the Internet used by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth to cope with homelessness and the lack of queer-friendly services?  

A comparison of themes across content showed that all of the themes that overlapped in interviews for LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness, also overlapped with the themes developed through the content analysis of transhousingnetwork.com. When reflecting on critical social theory, which examines how social structures fail due to a need for radical change, one can interpret that this sub-population has initiated change through their alternate methods of coping, which may or may not align with provider perception. These alternate forms of coping often included the Internet, speaking to its usefulness as a tool in the face of societal neglect. Meanwhile, themes relating to peer network and an avoidance of outsiders are evident in accounts from LGBTQ people who are experiencing, or who have experienced homelessness, and suggest that many LGBTQ people who are homeless opt to reach out to their peer group by using the Internet. Both interviews and content analysis relating to LGBTQ experiences of homelessness
addressed the use of the Internet as a means through which to avoid further rejection and discrimina-
tion.

Given the evidence from both the literature and my research that LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness do not resort to formal service providers (Reck 2009), the Internet being present as a theme across all cases is not surprising. Both clients and providers illustrated an understanding of the significance of the Internet as a tool. While the Internet as a theme was not as strong in provider interviews or content analysis, it was very significant in interviews with LGBTQ-identified participants, as well as in the content analysis of transhousingnetwork.com, revealing a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the Internet.

This study covered a variety of ways that the Internet is used as an alternate method of coping by LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness. G revealed that he used craigslist.org to solicit sex work while he was homeless, which in turn earned him enough money to get out of being homeless. On transhousingnetwork.com, the stories often included details of the person's identity and life, suggesting that this post was not just a chance to find housing, but a chance to self-represent in a way that would lead to the best possible housing. This study suggests that the Internet allows LGBTQ people the opportunity to navigate housing while being true to their identities as gender and/or sexual minorities. It also allowed them the safety of expressing themselves honestly without the repercussions that could occur in-person, or even over the phone. By using the Internet, LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness are able to represent themselves in the way that they desire, establish boundaries, reach out to peers with whom they feel safer than formal service providers, and establish agency and independence. The Internet has become far more accessible, making it a tool that even disenfranchised populations can use on their own, without having to ask for help. They can negotiate their lifestyle and housing on their own terms, repre-
senting a gender and identity that they might find is not acknowledged or respected in predominantly heterosexual spaces.

*What are the risks and benefits of LGBTQ youth using the Internet to cope with homelessness?*

It was difficult to assess risks for this community on the Internet given this study's stance on redefining risk, particularly in terms of sex work. While certain traditional risks that are considered an issue for LGBTQ people—factors such as sex with strangers, or unprotected sex—can be heightened by access to the Internet, this study recognizes that these risks may not be relevant compared to the need for autonomy (Dehan et al 2013: 424, Reck 2009). The fact that none of the three interviewees brought-up any risks on their own volition, and the fact that risks of the Internet was a minimal code within the analysis of transhousingnetwork.com, suggests that the risks of the Internet may be there, but they are not necessarily considered significant by the subjects. The benefits of the Internet were a much stronger code, and a more relevant theme to this study.

One notable way the Internet benefits this population is that those who are engaged in sex work or other non-traditional forms of work, may engage with affirming peers online. Positive perspectives on sex work came up in interviews with LGBTQ people, as well as in the content analysis of transhousingnetwork.com; however it did not come up positively in discussions with providers, or in the Covenant House content analysis. This suggests another gap in provider perception and population self-image. While Lost N' Found's interview suggested a more accepting stance on sex work than Covenant House, none of the providers seem to have an awareness of how necessary sex work is for gender and/or sexual minorities, or rather that it is not always a last resort, but an active decision. Difficulty finding jobs due to perceived gender and/or sexuality fell under the theme of “Rejection based on Sexuality and/or Gender,” however there was seemingly no accounting of how sex work could alleviate this problem by providers; only by
LGBTQ people.

With that in mind, one major benefit of the Internet is the connectivity it offers between LGBTQ people, who may rather not engage with heterosexual people or heteronormative formal support systems. Their need for support from others who better-understand their situation is evident across all stories. The safety to navigate black market jobs, or even their own identity without fear of repercussion, is an advantage of the Internet and websites like transhousingnetwork.com. While risks of websites like that can only be assumed—the Internet often presents risks such as predatory people accessing resource websites to exploit vulnerable people—this exploratory study did not reveal any tangible risks, or at least none that LGBTQ people using the Internet felt threatened-enough by for it to be accounted for in the research. Furthermore, this study indicated a need to re-frame how risk is defined for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, who often exist outside of the traditional capitalist system that rejects them based on identity; for LGBTQ sex workers, for example, the concept of “risk” would differ from how it is framed by providers and formal support services. “Risk” as an objective term could be associated with nearly any occupation, but it is the demonization of sex work and other non-heteropatriarchal sex practices that make the corresponding risk of those occupations perceived as especially perilous, or not worth it (Ferguson 2004). Reducing the demonization of these practices could lead to risk being framed differently, and the corresponding support in turn being more relevant and less of a “savior” approach.

How can providers better meet the needs of this sub-population of homeless youth through the Internet?

The theme of the gap in provider perception and population needs was evident in all cases, and a distrust of outsiders was common in cases from LGBTQ people's perspectives. As such, there is
a need for further understanding of LGBTQ people's needs by providers, as well as more attempts at recruitment by LGBTQ-identified people to bridge the sense of distrust that is a strong theme for queer people who are homeless. Since a fear of heterosexual people was evident on transhousingsetwork.com, outreach by staff who identify as members of the community could help alleviate distrust of formal service providers.

Traditional shelters such as Covenant House, who do not specifically or solely address the LGBTQ population, could better meet their clients' needs by presenting a more accessible website. While Joseph has mentioned LGBTQ sensitive training for his staff in his interview, this should be more extensive and better-represented on their website to the population, in ways that might encourage LGBTQ clients that Covenant House is a safe space for them. Because many of these potential clients are using the Internet for support, there is a need for the online presence of these organizations to reflect an LGBTQ-friendly atmosphere. Furthermore, any changes met could be discussed with current LGBTQ clients, to determine if the changes are in fact meeting their needs as a community.

Finally, the emphasis on education and job reform may also be alienating to clients who do not relate to these as markers of success. Best practice for most shelters is usually a focus on job and skill development. This exploratory study points to a different way of reaching this population, by understanding their specific skill sets and special needs. Many stories from both the content analysis and the interviews with LGBTQ people discussed rejection from traditional jobs, which suggests that providers and clients may be prioritizing different things. A queer of color critique suggests that these traditional jobs and educational opportunities may be unavailable to marginalized groups such as LGBTQ youth of color experiencing homelessness; this perspective could potentially be employed by providers in order to further acknowledge and account for their cli-
ents' range of special needs and circumstances (Ferguson 2004).

On the subject of queer of color critique, this approach could also be used by providers when discussing sex work, whether with potential clients or on their website. Because of the high percentage of LGBTQ youth engaging in sex work (Dank, Yahner, Madden, Banuelos, Yu, Ritchie, Mora and Conner 2015) a theoretical standpoint that allows for the idea that sex work is a necessary and even desirable trade, could alleviate potential alienation between providers and LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness. If providers shaped their online presence to reflect this perspective, they may be considered more inclusive by potential LGBTQ clients.

Shortcomings of Study

While conducting this research, as a member of the LGBTQ community, I found myself uncomfortable with the snowball sampling recruitment process, and chose not to further pursue interviews. Ethical concerns arose about exploiting an already vulnerable population, and the perception of LGBTQ people and sex workers in the literature made me feel ill-at-ease about contributing to an already alienating rhetoric. As such, this study is not as in-depth as it could have been, and would have revealed more information had I continued recruiting.

This study is also not an accurate representation of the experience of LGBTQ youth who are homeless; I found this population difficult, if not impossible to approach for two reasons: Firstly, I feared being part of further exploitation of LGBTQ minors on the street, and secondly, they are a seemingly invisible population because of the legal issues surrounding their age. When speaking with Amy from Lost N' Found, she brought up that there is a national law that runaways must be reported within 72 hours; as such, Lost N' Found can temporarily help underage youth who have run away from home due to exploitative or dangerous situations, but that is all. Given the high instance of the code “exploitation” and the theme “Rejection Based on Gender and Sexual-
ity” while analyzing posts and stories from LGBTQ adults, it is feasible to assume that LGBTQ youth experience this as often, if not more so. However their presence is still very minimal online, at least within the scope of my research. Further research into how youth cope with the legal system in navigating their homelessness would be beneficial.

If more time were allowed, I would also conduct interviews with additional service providers that do not specifically reach out to LGBTQ people, and compare those interviews and codes with more organizations like Lost N’ Found, and the other, newer shelter providers that serve the LGBTQ community. In doing this, I would be better-able to analyze how service providers could better meet the needs of their population, both in terms of their online public face and outreach, and also in terms of their treatment of clients.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The research question “How is the Internet used by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth to cope with homelessness and the lack of queer-friendly services?” can be best-addressed with the theme “I can take care of myself, I just don't want to be homeless anymore,” a quote from a post on transhousingnetwork.com In the face of rejection and/or judgment from formal support systems, the Internet appears to be used a system of navigating around said formal support systems. The codes “Peer network” and “Alternate forms of coping” were extremely common and often pointed to Internet-based resources and interactions. Many of the people posting on transhousingnetwork.com were using that as their primary method of seeking help. Interviews revealed that all of the participants used the Internet to reach people they otherwise would not have access to, including peers, potential work opportunities in the case of sex work, and any kind of information pertaining to LGBTQ-friendly resources. The Internet also provided access that being homeless otherwise makes impossible. Regardless of gender or sexual orientation, the Internet is now a wealth of information and free resources
that people in-need and without money can access. For example, Amy from Lost N’ Found discussed that most clients call the shelter from an online application called “Google Voice,” which allows users to make calls and texts without paying.

Despite this access, outreach by LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness to formal support systems was still rare, or at least not widely discussed based on interviews and my content analysis. Because the theme of finding LGBTQ safe spaces was so common, I have concluded that there is a need for more LGBTQ social media websites dedicated exclusively to resource exchange and housing support. Furthermore, while Lost N’ Found and LGBTCCNO both discussed Internet use and LGBTQ-friendly resources, neither organization discussed intentional online outreach to LGBTQ clients. Intentional and non-judgmental outreach on websites such as transhousingnetwork.com could lead to more trust between LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness and formal systems of support. This connects back to funding; it was also noted that a lack of resources limits the capacity for intentional online outreach. Lost N’ Found has just begun renovation on a new house, but are still very limited as far as how many people they can house, while Joseph from Covenant House admitted that online recruitment was minimal because they are usually at capacity without it. Additional resources for these organizations that would in turn inspire online recruitment, and potentially reaching clients who would not otherwise know about said organizations, is crucial.

Given the strong presence of codes such as “Peer network” in interviews and “Seeking LGBTQ safe spaces” in the content analysis, I have concluded from this study that more outreach from LGBTQ-identified community members is needed to inspire trust between formal systems of support and LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness. Themes of rejection and exploitation at the hands of their heterosexual counterparts suggest that LGBTQ people in extremely vulnerable situations may not want to speak with another straight person, but rather with a member of their
community who they feel understands their experience. Additionally, online outreach to
LGBTQ-directed websites such as transhousingnetwork.com would help create awareness of
newer shelters that offer LGBTQ safe spaces such as Lost N' Found, as well as potentially creat-
ing trust in these shelters.

Based on themes of positive perspectives on sex work, this outreach could benefit from employ-
ing queer of color analysis, acknowledging the racist and heteropatriarchal nature of traditional
occupations and the need of sub-populations to develop strategies around it (Ferguson 2004).
This is especially significant considering how many LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness
are people of color (Reck 2009, National Alliance to End Homelessness), and the fact that the
United States has a history of excluding racial groups that are not considered “white” from the
rights and privileges of citizenship (Ferguson 2004: 15). As such, this historical context and cor-
responding theoretical approach are relevant to working with this marginalized population, and
to developing perspectives on non-normative jobs, namely sex work, in order to better-
accommodate for their special needs.

With that in mind, the distinction between sex work, survival sex and sex trafficking needs to be
clarified for both formal support systems and academia. I had difficulty finding a recent and
specific definition of survival sex aside from that in the Loyola study, which defines it as “sex
acts performed in exchange for food, housing, or some other basic necessity because they had no
other way to access resources.” (Murphy, Taylor and Bolden 2015: 9) As I stated in my litera-
ture review, this makes sex work distinct from other forms of trade because of the assumption
that if you are doing sex work for food, as opposed to, say, babysitting for food, you are there-
fore desperate and engaged in a form of “survival sex” as opposed to what is, by definition, a
market exchange. Sex trafficking was defined as anyone engaging in sex work through force or
fraud, as well as anyone under 18 engaging in sex work (Murphy, Taylor and Bolden 2015: 9).
The content analysis of transhousingnetwork.com revealed that many LGBTQ people have trouble acquiring a traditional job because of their perceived gender and/or sexuality, or because of lack of paperwork and proper identification, an issue that faces gender non-conforming individuals. This is confirmed in the literature on LGBTQ people (Reck 2009, National Alliance to End Homelessness 2014). Sex work is a trade that gender and sexual minorities have access to. The Internet is a common place for people to engage in sex work, which was revealed in the Urban Institute study as well as in my interview with Lost N’ Found; evidently, gay “hook-up apps” (applications for your smart phone that connect you with local potential romantic/sexual partners) are used to engage in sex work. As such, a more comprehensive understanding of this type of work, and online recruitment that does suggest that one must “reform” one's choice of work, would be ideal. The way that sex work vs. sex trafficking is defined is an issue that deserves further exploration, allowing youths to define consensual sex and work practices for themselves.

Finally, while the Internet has become a popular place for LGBTQ people over 18 to navigate homelessness and better-access resources, the presence of actual youth (under 18) was nearly non-existent within my research. I have concluded that the legal issues surrounding youth under 18 being labeled as “runaways” makes the Internet an unsafe place for them to openly admit to their housing status. In the two posts that discussed underage people experiencing homelessness on transhousingnetwork.com, both were written by adults so as to maintain the anonymity of the youth. People who are underage and have been kicked-out or run away, do not have a method of reaching out without being reported to their guardians and/or child services. As such, I suggest that some form of anonymous outreach via the Internet is necessary, with potential for all messages to be received without revealing a corresponding personal e-mail address. In doing this, LGBTQ youth have the agency and safety to reach out for help without legal repercussions. The concern there is the risk of exploitation by predatory people; while “Risks of the Internet” was
not a popular code in either my interviews or content analysis, the risks of the Internet for LGBTQ youth are still evident in the literature review (Wiederhold 2014). Some form of adult moderator, ideally LGBTQ-identified and who has also experienced homelessness, could be a potential buffer for said website.

In conclusion, more outreach on behalf of providers/formal support systems by LGBTQ-identified adults and in general, more support from within the LGBTQ community would benefit LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness, ideally youth as well. The strong themes of peer networking and informal systems of support pointed to the desire for help to be acquired within the community. A distrust of outsiders and a negative perception of shelters are additional reasons that speak to why the support would be better-received if it came from within the community.

In regards to the questions addressing use of the Internet and homelessness, the Internet has given rise to multiple informal methods of support in an attempt to avoid exposure to exploitation from non-LGBTQ people, however these systems are still minimal, informal and not widely used; given how many people experiencing homelessness identify as transgender (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2014), transhousingnetwork.com was relatively sparse, with only 414 posts between October 2014 and February 2015.

Furthermore, and even more importantly, transhousingnetwork.com is the only website I was able to uncover that emphasized safety and autonomy for people seeking shelter and resources; interviews revealed that gay hook-up apps and craigslist.org are also used for seeking housing, but usually in the framework of exchanging sex for shelter. These websites are not intended for navigating sex work, nor do they have screening processes, thus making them potentially dangerous for users. Again, while the code “Risks of the Internet” was not a popular one, I acknowledge that there is a bias given that most of the people I spoke to, and the stories I analyzed,
were mostly recruited via the Internet. Given the prominence of the code “Exploitation” in my content analysis, there are extreme risks facing LBTQ people using the Internet for sex work and housing, albeit unknown ones as of yet. This should be addressed with more research on the use of the Internet and hook-up apps for sex work, as well as additional outreach to sex workers regarding their experiences using the Internet for finding clients.

In summary, the Internet is used by LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness as a tool to navigate around non-LGBTQ people and formal support systems that are perceived as either judgmental or unsafe. It is a popular resource for people who are at-risk, either for reaching out to their community or to do something as simple as make a phone call, when they otherwise could not. It is also a wealth of information that one can access easily or for free; wireless Internet is almost everywhere in most urban settings, and online sources such as the LGBTCCNO website offer information on things like queer-friendly employers and doctors. It is also used as a tool for alternate methods of coping such as engaging in sex work, or trading skills in exchange for money or housing. Finally, it is used to connect to peers and seek out housing that does not limit their lifestyles or beliefs. Providers and formal systems of support would benefit from enlisting members of the LGBTQ community to reach out to potential clients, and more open-minded, receptive staff trained in LGBTQ issues and matters pertaining to sex work. While better housing options are clearly important to this community, they are not as important as maintaining one's identity and lifestyle; while it may appear to providers that they are desperate, they are not so desperate as to sacrifice who they are. LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness are vulnerable, but they are by no means weak.
References


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Vita

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