



# When I Realized I was the Gay Best Friend: Queer Media Representation and the “Coming Out” Process

*This essay examines queer representation in widespread media and its impact during the coming out process. I examine three coming out stories in popular media and use my own story to shine a light on the challenges of coming out as LGBTQIA+. I hope readers who are struggling with coming out can use these examples to voice their LGBTQIA+ stories. <sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

Throughout this essay, I examine queer representation in widespread media and its impact during the coming out process. Coming out is widely known as the process by which an individual acknowledges, accepts, and discloses to family and friends their sexual orientation or gender identity. This is an ongoing process throughout a person’s life and may change over time and by context. The LGBTQIA+ acronym represents lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, or allies, and more. The acronym has changed over time to incorporate various identities as new gender-expansive modes of identification emerge. The term queer is currently defined as the umbrella term

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for gender and sexual identities who are not heterosexual or cisgender. This topic is vital for individuals who are LGBTQIA+ and for individuals who consume media habitually. Within the United States population, four and five-tenths identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community (Stevens, 2020), and seventy percent of that population gathers information online on queer subjects (Bond et al., 2008). For queer individuals, understanding one's own gender and sexual identity within a cisnormative and heteronormative cultural context is often a complicated process. When queerness is portrayed as unusual, individuals navigating their identity may struggle. When represented diversely and as common, individuals may not struggle (as much) when navigating their identity. It is crucial to discuss how media affects individuals with various marginalized identities to better understand the role media has on those experiences.

I hope that readers will leave this essay understanding that exclusivity and visibility in widespread media have an influence on queer experiences. I hope that readers recognize the difference between presence vs. representation. I will review existing scholarship on the queer experience that magnify numerous coming out stories. Subsequently, I will

examine three coming out stories in popular media and use my own story to shine a light on the challenges of coming out as LGBTQIA+. I will examine how exclusivity in media creates a challenging experience for queer individuals. Additionally, I will examine how visibility creates an affirming experience for queer individuals. I hope readers who are struggling with coming out can use these examples to voice their LGBTQIA+ stories.

### **Coming Out**

The coming out process has been debated for decades. There are several theoretical models that provide a framework for understanding the LGBTQIA+ experience. Dille (2002) discusses the six most known models. First is the "Developmental Stages of the Coming Out Process" by Eli Coleman: pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationship, and identity integration. Second, Savin-Williams' model consists of awareness of same-sex attractions, sexual experiences, labeling, disclosing, romantic relationships, disclosing one's sexuality to family members, and adopting a positive identity. Third, D'Augelli provides a lifespan model that includes heterosexual identity, LGB identity, social LGB identity, LGB identity as

offspring, intimacy identity, and LGB community identity. Fourth, Rhoads examined an ethnic and cultural identity for non-heterosexual students. Fifth, Fassinger's model consists of four stages: Stage 1 awareness, Stage 2 exploration, Stage 3 deepening commitment, and Stage 4 internalization/synthesis.

This essay will focus on the sixth theoretical model described by Dilley (2002): Vivian Cass' work that consists of six stages of coming out. Stage one is labeled as Identity Confusion, which may consist of experiencing thoughts and feelings of confusion and denial where one may start to wonder about their gender identity and/or sexuality (Cass, 1979). This might be a time of confusion and anxiety (Evans, 2010). Stage 2 is considered Identity Comparison, which may include accepting the possibility of gay identity and facing the social isolation that may occur (Cass, 1979). Stage 3, Identity Tolerance, may include an increase of acceptance of one's identity, increased feelings of isolation and alienation, and the start to connecting with members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Cass, 1979). Stage 4 is considered Identity Acceptance, which includes having answered questions concerning personal queer identity where one may have

accepted a queer identity and may have increasing contact with the LGBTQIA+ community (Cass, 1979). Stage 5 is considered as Identity Pride, which consists of having pride in a new queer identity where one may start to immerse oneself in LGBTQIA+ culture and have feelings of anger with the heterosexual community, which may cause rejection (Cass, 1979). Stage 6 is labeled as Identity Synthesis, which may include integrating different parts of identity to become one where anger felt toward the heterosexual community decreases and a desire of wanting to be one's whole self between different groups of people emerges (Cass, 1979).

Coming out varies from person to person. It can be either a gradual process or one that is sudden. Some individuals may experience each stage of this process while others only experience some. There are numerous studies that examine the queer experience. In this essay, I examine research by McInroy and Craig (2016), who examine LGBTQ youth and their view on queer media representation; Bond et al. (2008), who discuss how self-identifying LGBTQ folk use media during their coming out process; Jones (2020), who proves that heteronormative assumptions impact queer folk; and finally, Magrath (2019),

who discusses LGBTQ male athletes concerning sports media journalism.

McInroy and Craig (2016) argue that though traditional forms of media may spark conversation, television may portray LGBTQ individuals as one-dimensional. They suggest that the lines are becoming more and more blurred as the new wave of new internet media has emerged and taken hold. There is not only a significant shift from traditional media to internet media, but the people who have access to diverse forms of media are shifting. Bond et al. (2008) explain that queer individuals are not the only ones who use various media to gather information on queer topics. Seventy percent of people collect information through the internet, a proportion of whom primarily rely on the internet to gather information on queer subjects and subjecthood (Bond et al., 2008). Furthermore, seventy-two percent of people have used some form of media as their primary means of gathering information during their coming out process (Bond et al., 2008). The survey conducted by Bond et al. (2008) discovered that all self-identifying LGBTQ participants could find sources of information during their coming out process; no participant felt that they lacked knowledge that was not available to them, though the amount spent

researching queerness on the internet is time-consuming. Since there is a mass amount of information and community found, the individuals' reports of loneliness and self-esteem were not affected (Bond et al., 2008). While core feelings may not be negatively impacted due to access of queer internet media, the relationships between queer individuals and their families are.

Heavy media users during the coming out process may be less open with their families, however young LGBTQIA+ individuals who are open with their family experience more family support and less intrinsic homophobia. Findings verify the support from said family may come after a time of mental and verbal anguish (Bond et al., 2008). The mental and verbal anguish queer individuals face from their families may be because of the underlying assumptions about LGBTQIA+ individuals. For instance, in Jones' (2020) study, she explained,

My analysis shows heteronormative assumptions regarding gender inversion to be reproduced by Emma, while both Josh and Ryan imply that there was something in their behavior which allowed others to identify them as homosexual before they were aware of it themselves (p. 511).

Jones (2020) interviewed a youth group of three queer individuals. Using

the theory of performativity coined by Judith Butler, Jones analyzed sociolinguistic discourses employed by the youth in her study and concluded that these individuals had stereotypes placed on them. By this, Jones meant that their families were assuming the youth's gender or sexual identity before the youth figured it out themselves. When the participants in Jones' (2020) research began to unintentionally subscribe to the idea of assumptions their families had about queerness, their families began to assume they must be LGBTQIA+. This is impactful on queer youth because, unlike their heterosexual counterparts, they are navigating in an environment that may be further confusing their identity.

Other than familial relationships, public perception significantly impacts the queer coming out process. The news and tabloids are forms of media that queer people often have to face when well-known publicly. Magrath (2019) explores the idea that if media positively frames an LGBT athlete (particularly a male), their experience is more "accepting." Inclusive masculinity theory, which considers masculinity concerning homophobia, is applied throughout Magrath's study. Journalists do not "out" closeted athletes anymore since media ethics has laid out guidelines

for framing a story about gay athletes (Magrath, 2019). While news media may not be a medium most queer individuals have to navigate, consuming traditional media is more common. McInroy and Craig (2016) determine that LGBTQIA+ individuals feel they have been presented in a way that is uniform to all other queer individuals. The term one-dimensional well describes this feeling of being represented in ways that lack depth and as being superficial. The absence of queer diversity within the media creates stereotypes that then pigeonhole LGBTQIA+ individuals into one uniform identity. Due to this, a binary is created.

The first few stages of the coming out process, according to Vivian Cass' (1979) work, is known as self-discovery and becoming aware of one's gender or sexual identity. During this pivotal time in a person's life, not only visibility but the representation of diverse identity is crucial. Bond et al. (2008) report:

A 22-year-old bisexual female noted that "the media gave me a lot of misinformation. It was like a what-not-to-do guide. I hated the misrepresentation of bisexuals as loose"...Another participant identifying as bisexual stated that "there aren't really that many characters that identified as bi, so no, the media did

nothing to help me better understand my identity. If anything, it probably hindered the process because the few times bisexuality is mentioned, we are always portrayed as either indecisive or oversexed” (p. 42).

While there may be a presence of bisexual individuals, there is a difference between presence and positive and multifaceted representation.

Diverse queer representation would include not only the presence but the real-life stories of queer individuals with intersecting identities. This would include considering individuals with various forms of identity who are marginalized. According to Nielsen's inaugural report (Nielsen Company, 2020), twenty-six percent of the most viewed television programs included at least one actor who identifies as LGBTQIA+. However, most of the queerness presented in traditional media is comprised of white cisgender gay men. Queer people of color or transgender individuals do not nearly have the same amount of screen time. The lack of queer diversity in media also most noticeably impacts the first couple of stages of the coming out process. Jones (2020) states that the stereotypes of young queer folks are not only constructing gay identity but are also restricting and limiting their own sense of self. Understating oneself is

difficult when families are making assumptions, especially before you have a chance to understand your own self. As Jones was able to substantiate that there are assumptions made about queer people, the question then becomes why these assumptions form. Again, the lack of accurate queer representation in traditional media leaves room for assumptions and often promotes stereotypes that do not represent the communities they are representing. There is an additional opportunity for assumption and judgment within the public sphere when dealing with queer identities even though Magrath (2019) states that ethical journalism does not allow "outing" athletes anymore. If queerness is framed in a positive light within news stories, the response is generally more positive. This is how news media can create a more positive experience when coming out because of the approving response.

The stages of the coming out process are highly debated through using Vivian Cass' (1979) work. Along with the different studies examined in this essay, I examined different conclusions on the topic of LGBTQIA+ individuals and media. Consistently each study brought new information that supported one another; one example is explaining that queer visibility in media is one

dimensional. McInroy and Craig (2016) explain why queer individuals face certain assumptions about their gender identity or sexuality from family. While this may be unintentional, it is extremely detrimental for queer folk, especially during the first few stages of their coming out process.

### Public Coming Out Stories

Elliot Page recently came out as being a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. The 34-year-old actor and producer came out as a transgender man and publicly began his/ their transition in December 2020.



A self-portrait photograph taken by Elliot Page in 2021, Wikimedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elliot\\_Page\\_2021.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elliot_Page_2021.png)). CC BY-SA 4.0.

Two films where fans fell in love with Page are *Inception*, which focused on a thief stealing secrets from people's

dreams, and *Juno*, which focused on the story of a pregnant teenager. The story of Page is an interesting one, as his/their journey has been a struggle. During an interview with *Time Magazine*, Page states that he/they expected mass amounts of love while, of course, receiving an immense amount of hatred and transphobia. Not to his surprise, that is precisely what happened (Steinmetz, 2021). Page's story, which was also a shock to him/them, became one of the most notable celebrity coming out stories. During the interview with *Time Magazine*, Page says that becoming an actor at the age of ten came with a huge compromise because he had to look a certain way (Steinmetz, 2021). The struggle of being a young actor and auditioning for different roles caused him to grow back his hair constantly. After cutting his hair to present how he desired, he landed a part in the TV show "Pit Pony," which required wearing a wig. Gender expression is a huge part of disclosure for many transgender individuals when coming out (D. G. Patterson, personal communication, March 31, 2021). The expectations put on Page caused him to suffer panic attacks, anxiety, and depression. In 2014, Page came out as gay during the Human Rights Campaign. After this, he started to produce his LGBTQ films while

marrying his/their partner Emma Portner four years later. Page tells *Time Magazine*, "The difference in how I felt before coming out as gay to after was massive, but did the discomfort in my body ever go away? No, no, no, no" (Steinmetz, 2021). It was not until Page began to show who he/they genuinely are that he began to feel better about himself.

Another well-known public figure is NFL athlete Ryan Kamey Russell. The 29-year-old football player is currently a free agent who formally played for the Dallas Cowboys in 2015, Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 2016-2017, and the Buffalo Bills in 2018. In August 2019, Russell publicly expressed that he was bisexual in an interview with Kevin Arnovitz of ESPN. The reason behind hiding his entire identity was because he did not want it to impact his career negatively. If he lost his career, he would be unable to support his family, particularly his mother and grandfather. Russell spoke of how he received an email from a journalist stating that they had found pictures of him and a man he was thought to be dating. Russell responded and asked the journalist not to share the photos because it would out him. Thankfully, the reporter respected Russell's wishes and did not share the images. However, when Russell did

come out and post publicly about his boyfriend, he received backlash, particularly on Twitter.



From "Today, former #DallasCowboys player #RyanRussell came out," by LGBT, 2019 (<https://www.instagram.com/p/B1xtJc3nFas/>). In the public domain.

The backlash Russell received mainly was because his boyfriend Corey Obrien is white. Preston Mitchum, a black queer attorney of the Director of Policy of URGE: Unite for Reproductive & Gender Equity, posted on Twitter, "If another black man comes out as gay or bisexual and dating a white man, I am going to be so... not surprised." (as cited by NewsOne Staff, 2020). Another user on Twitter stated,

Wanted to be excited that Ryan Russell came out as bisexual, as proud black, East Asian, and Caribbean bi dude I was happy that another person of color has broken down that wall but alas, you guessed it, his partner is white. This s\*\*\* is sick and an epidemic at this point" (Ahmad K. Khan, Ph.D

[@AhmadKhalilDC] as cited by NewsOne Staff, 2020).

Even though Russell faced harsh criticism when coming out, he is currently posting on social media and public about his relationship with Corey Obrien.

Joelle Joanie Siwa, aka "Jojo Siwa" is another celebrity who came out recently. She is a 17-year-old dancer, singer, actress, and entrepreneur running her brand worth over 10 million dollars. Siwa first came into the spotlight on the television show "Dance Moms" when she was younger (Andrew, 2021). She currently has over 10 million followers on her social media platforms. Her contracts with networks like Nickelodeon prove that her audience is of younger age, as she serves as a role model to them. Recently Siwa came out as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community (Andrew, 2021). In January 2021, she posted a picture on her Twitter with the caption, "my cousin got me a new shirt." The shirt reads; Best. Gay. Cousin. Ever.

Before her coming out tweet, Siwa posted a video on a social media platform dancing to Lady Gaga's (2011) "Born this Way," which is viewed widely as a "gay anthem." After Siwa officially posted that her cousin got her a new shirt, she then went on a live stream on



From "My cousin got me a new shirt [Tweet Post]," by J. Siwa, 2021. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/itsjojosiwa/status/1352719582977355777/photo/1>. In the public domain.

Instagram to further confirm her coming out and to thank her fans for their support. She stated in her live stream that "this is the happiest I've ever been" (Andrew, 2021). The question on everyone's mind was, what is Siwa's sexuality if she is coming out? During her Instagram live, she did not put a specific label on her sexuality: "I always believed that my person was just going to be my person," she said. "If that

person happened to be a boy — great! If that person happened to be a girl — great!" (Johnson, 2021). Siwa had noted that both her parents were supportive when they realized she "didn't only like boys" (Andrew, 2021). She also received much online support from fans during this time, and celebrities like Paris Hilton came out in support. While Siwa was welcomed with open arms by the LGBTQIA+ community, she received several negative comments and responded to at least one. Since Siwa's fan base and audience are so young, a few parents were bound to respond. One parent wrote, "My daughter will never watch you again," and Siwa responded with a seemingly unaffected "okay!" (Street, 2021b). Another incident that ensued after Siwa's official coming out was her house getting swatted by police. Siwa said that roughly 50 officers were yelling at her home for everyone to come out (Street, 2021a). Once everyone came out of the house, the police explained that someone called claiming there was an incident at Siwa's house. Paparazzi then jumped out and started to record and take photographs of the situation. She stated that the whole situation was horrifying. Siwa explained that because she recently told the internet how happy she was and spoke publicly about her sexual orientation,

this might be why this happened (Street, 2021a).

All three public figures have a unique coming out story. Page's experience is entirely different because he/they came out as transgender. Though Page had come out as gay a few years previously, society has a more challenging time understanding someone's gender expression. Eight out of ten LGBT adults say there is no social acceptance; twenty-one percent and fifty-nine percent say there is only a little; only three percent say there is a lot of acceptance (Dimock, 2019). Though Page's story has much turmoil with the back and forth of not expressing himself/themselves, film directors are quoted as saying they would love to work with Page and who he/they genuinely are (Steinmetz, 2021). There is still major room for acceptance of transgender individuals, but in this case, news, social, and internet media provided Page with an audience that was supportive of him/them. Page's story is an example of media impacting the coming out experience in an affirming way.

Russell's coming out experience, on the other hand, dealt with more backlash. Russell's story is unique because being a queer male athlete playing for professional major league

sports is uncommon. Only fifteen percent of LGBT adults say there is much acceptance for gay men, while one in four LGBT adults says there is a lot for lesbians (Dimock, 2019). This means that there is a considerable gap considering gay men. Combined with a career of majority straight men, this is the reason Russell did not want to share his entire identity. He received criticism not directly because of his coming out as bisexual but because he is dating a white man (NewsOne Staff, 2020). Comments did criticize his sexuality, but numerous queer activists spoke out negatively on his choice of a partner. Russell faced the most backlash. Whether this is because of his work environment, his own and his boyfriend's races, or even a combination, it is critical to note that news and social media impacted his story. Russell's story is an example of media impacting the coming out experience in a challenging way since people voiced their criticism publicly.

Siwa's coming out was entirely different because she experienced support from her millions of followers, but also allegedly had the police called to her house. Siwa's story is an example of media impacting the coming out experience in not only an affirming sense but also a challenging way as well.

Each of these celebrities works in a field that is media-centered, but in different ways. Siwa is a social media influencer. Russell had to navigate tabloids and his professional sports environment. Pages' career deals with TV shows and films. Each person dealt with their coming out within different forms of popular media, whether social, news, or traditional media. A common theme among all three stories is that they all faced an extreme perception, which created an affirming or challenging experience. All three individuals came out themselves and experienced different levels of acceptance and backlash.

Sixty-seven percent of LGBT people say public figures who are open about being LGBT believe it helps a lot (Dimock, 2019). Even if queer individuals are not publicly accepted, most LGBTQIA+ individuals believe that being public about queerness is helpful. Though public figures may have a challenging experience coming out, they impact other queer individuals and will create a more affirming experience for the coming out process of others.

### **My Story**

The struggles I have faced concerning media when trying to understand my identity may not be original struggles,

but they have been my experience regardless. The first struggle I have dealt with was never having a queer person to look up to or for guidance. I did not have a gay or lesbian person close to me in my life, nor did television shows or movies I watched feature a queer protagonist. Through my research, I have found that this is a common struggle among queer individuals, particularly bisexual and transgender folks. One major issue in media concerning queerness is the presence of queer individuals being based on stereotypes. As a pansexual identifying person, I have never seen someone like myself in media or in my personal life at a younger age, so I never thought my attraction to certain individuals was valid. Like everything else in life, I can only know what I see. Of course, I knew that having an attraction to both women and men was an option, however I never felt comfortable identifying as bisexual or pansexual.

My second struggle growing up as a queer person was never being given the option to be "gay." I was never asked by anyone in my family what my sexuality was, or at least I never knew the term to describe myself. I use the term gay and queer interchangeably, as that is what I am comfortable with. Growing up a cisgender female, no one ever assumed I

was a lesbian or bisexual because I did not fit the stereotypes. This is something that is still hindering my coming out process as my gender identity is still in the closet. I am trying to navigate what being masculine and feminine means to me.

I remember sitting on my bed in my college apartment, the first place I have never lived alone. This apartment has seen me through a lot, so indeed, it was the place where I realized I was queer. I was having trouble understanding what my sexuality was, but one particular night I realized my attraction for individuals who are not cisgender heterosexual masculine males is what makes me queer. I realized all the feelings I have had throughout my life were what people meant when they described homosexuality. Since conversations about attraction were foreign to me, I never knew the feelings I have felt for women and other queer-identifying individuals are that of queerness. It was at this moment I realized I was the gay best friend, the gay cousin, the gay niece, and the gay granddaughter. I have always been the queer person in straight people's lives around me. I say the gay best friend because the queer characters in movies I watch were never the main protagonist or the deuteragonist but always

supporting characters. Personal favorites, like the 2012 film "Perks of Being a Wallflower," the 2004 cult classic "Mean Girls," and the 2009 television show "Glee" are examples of films that contain the gay best friend as a supporting character. Because of these shows, I have also thought queerness looked one way. Though personal favorite films such as 2018 "Love Simon" and the 2013 film "G.B.F" feature a queer protagonist, these films are few and far between. More than any form of media, finding community at college has helped me when navigating my identity. Now, my pansexual identity to me means I am attracted to individuals regardless of their gender identity.

### **Closing Statements**

In this essay, I have explored queer media visibility and the impact it has on the queer coming out process through evaluating previous research, public coming out stories, and my own story. The results from each study reviewed and each celebrity coming out story in this essay prove that different forms of

media impact the coming out process. I have shined light on the challenges of coming out as LGBTQIA+ by examining how exclusivity in media creates a challenging experience for queer individuals and examining how visibility creates an affirming experience for queer individuals. This topic shows the need to understand that media representation does impact experiences, more specifically, the queer experience. Regardless, it is always a person's choice whether to disclose to others (always keeping in mind safety) their queerness, but I at least hope readers feel more comfortable with finding community. In the last parts of this essay, I addressed my own sexual queerness and expressed that my gender identity is still in the closet. My hope for readers of this essay is that they can use these stories as well as my own to express and share their own queerness. I cannot ask others to be proudly open if I am not myself, so I'll go first:

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*Let me tell you about the time I realized I was the gay best friend.*

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