

THESIS

“FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT IS QUEER AND HOLY”: EXPLORING THE  
EXPERIENCES AND IDENTITY TENSIONS OF LGBTQ INDIVIDUALS WITHIN  
CHRISTIANITY

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## ABSTRACT

### “FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT IS QUEER AND HOLY”: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES AND IDENTITY TENSIONS OF LGBTQ INDIVIDUALS WITHIN CHRISTIANITY

Historical tensions exist between Christian and LGBTQ communities and LGBTQ people are marginalized within Christianity. The purpose for studying the experiences of LGBTQ people within Christianity is to explicate how this religion both benefits LGBTQ people’s wellbeing and causes them harm, and to offer solutions for increasing their inclusion at personal and congregational levels. Christianity is a dominant U.S. religion and many of its practices are founded by cisgender, heterosexual White men, and the LGBTQ community is socially marginalized. This study uses Dominant Group Theory and Social Identity Theory with emergent themes to investigate how Christians as a dominant group reinforce, impede, or dismantle LGBTQ discrimination and reveals that LGBTQ Christians embody two historically conflicting populations. Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with participants across the U.S. Findings revealed dynamic connections between participants’ Christian faith, their LGBTQ identity, and their other social identities. Participants testified leveraging their knowledge of and experiences within Christianity to enact dominant group strategies to advocate for themselves and other LGBTQ people within Christian contexts. There are unique challenges and opportunities in studying how individuals can glean from dominant and nondominant social identities simultaneously to address ingroup–outgroup tensions. This study revealed more avenues to be explored within this context, using these theories, and additional theories.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*You will love and be loved, and I love you...It gets better.*

*With love, from Eric James.*

The words above are a snippet from Eric James Borges' (2010) YouTube.com video entitled "It Gets Better." The self-shot video was Borges' testament to growing up in an extremist Christian household as a gay youth. In it, he shared that he was bullied his whole life for being gay, and that his conservative Christian parents tried to exorcise him and denied him any support. The video, made in efforts to encourage other LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning) youth, was the last he would ever post before ending his life one month later (ABC News, 2012). In all of Eric's advocacy, no one was advocating for him, and he lost his life to the rigid idea that his identity was unfitting for this world. It is hard to know if Eric planned to stay alive when he created the video, but it is evident in his narrative that he hoped others would. Eric's story was among many disheartening accounts of LGBTQ suicides that led Preston Sprinkle (2016) to write his book *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality is More than an Issue*. In it, the evangelical Christian pastor offers his thoughts on Eric's story and its meaning for Christians in the current moment:

I wish Eric's story was an anomaly, but it's not. Having listened to countless testimonies and looking at startling statistics, I am disheartened to say that the Christian church has often played an unintended yet active role in pushing gay people away from Christ. Sometimes away from Christ and into the grave. The ones who don't kill themselves often end up leaving the church. But here's the thing: most people who are attracted to the same sex don't end up leaving the church because they were told that same-sex

behavior is wrong. They leave because they were dehumanized, ridiculed, and treated like ‘an other.’” (p. 18)

Sprinkle’s sentiment pushes Christians to reconsider the way they address one of the most hurting communities in society, prone to victimization, abuse, and suicide (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015; James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafi, 2016). As communication scholars, it is our job to do the same. As Martin and Nakayama (2000) state, we have been tasked with “understand[ing] the role of power and contextual constraints on communication in order ultimately to achieve a more equitable society” (p. 8). Over the past decade, critical communication scholars have called for inclusion of religion (Broome & Collier, 2012) as well as queerness (Chavez, 2010; see also Nicholas, Ganapathy, & Mau, 2013) in conversations over identities. With the goal of understanding how religion works to enable and constrain LGBTQ identities, this thesis responds to that need.

Tensions between Christian and LGBTQ communities are not new. Many conservative Christian denominations stand out as especially condemning of LGBTQ identities, historically and currently (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000), and homosexuality remains one of the most commonly debated topics in the church. Many of these tensions and debates among Christians are centered around what Gnuse (2015) calls the “7 Gay Texts,” passages in the Bible that allude to and raise contentions about same-sex relations. While not as directly as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer identifying individuals (LGBQs), trans identities are also often contested in Christianity. As of 2017, 63 percent of U.S. Christians believe that gender is determined at birth (Smith, 2017). While this determination does not mean that trans individuals cannot move among fluid gender identities, many Christians use this biological position toward gender to argue that gender transformations are a denial of God’s divine creation, and disagreements over

this notion are contributing to divisions in the church (Smith, 2017). The Christian Institute (2016) associates transgender ideology with self-determinism—an assertion that, if adopted, would mean that a trans identity is an embodiment of fundamental opposition toward submission to a sovereign deity. At large, conservative Christian denominations also equivocate stances on trans identities as they “proscribe rigid gender roles, leaving congregants unclear where gender variance fits” (Beagan & Hattie, 2015, p. 95).

Progressive political shifts toward equality for LGBTQs in the U.S. have been somewhat mirrored in Christian churches in the past decade. Gay marriage was illegal until 2015 when the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in favor of its legalization in all 50 U.S. states (Chappell, 2015). This change of political status for LGBTQs confronts U.S. churches as religious institutions with an imperative to be tolerant of people of difference, especially through recognition of same-sex marriage and ordination of queer leadership (The Pluralism Project, 2020). But the fight for equality is not over. Over the past few years, we see the progressive attempts of the LGBTQ community tethered to areas of workplace and health care reform (USA News, 2020). Just as LGBTQ rights are negotiated across a partisan political divide, the Christian church by no means unanimously supports LGBTQ identities. Conservative churches, mostly evangelicals, remain predominantly condemning of LGBTQs and even actively work against them in the form of anti-LGBTQ advocacy groups (The Pluralism Project, 2020).

The Christian church at large is divided over affirming and nonaffirming postures toward LGBTQs and topics that involve them such as same-sex marriage and gender transformations. The affirming stance, taken by many progressive denominations, means to believe that God sanctions same-sex relations. The nonaffirming stance, taken by many conservatives, means to believe that God only condones monogamous marital sex between cisgender, heterosexual

couples. Presbyterian, Evangelical Lutheran, Episcopal, United Methodist, and United Church of Christ (UCC) denominations have led the progressive shift (Feeney, 2015), though there is variability between churches within the denominations.<sup>1</sup> For example, the United Methodist Church split into two camps in 2020 after experiencing tensions over queer topics for decades; churches in the denomination voted to either adopt a fully open and affirming statement of faith or splinter off as an anti-LGBTQ congregation (Burns, 2020).<sup>2</sup> These denominations and their open and affirming church affiliates have experienced major pushback resulting from plurality of pre-existing opinions among congregational members. On the other hand, Evangelical and American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) denominations postulate that an LGBTQ-affirming stance fundamentally opposes Biblical teaching, and they remain equivocal over transgender topics (Human Rights Campaign, 2020).<sup>3</sup>

Understanding that there is variance among denominations in terms of what constitutes a God-ordained sexual ethic is important to the context of LGBTQs' experiences within Christianity for the reason that their individual exposures to different denominations vary widely. Despite stances on LGBTQ inclusion, a common thread between affirming and nonaffirming denominations is the belief that same-sex sin does not explicitly determine spiritual damnation (Boltz-Weber, 2020). However, many Christians such as Preston Sprinkle believe that choosing to undergo gender transformations, to be in openly gay relationships, or to engage in same-sex relations is indicative of one's weak or broken relationship with God.<sup>4</sup> Despite the various

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<sup>1</sup> The list of denominations presented here, while extensive and comprised of main denominations in the U.S., is not inclusive of all Christian (non)denominations. For example, many churches claim to be non-denominational, or independent.

<sup>2</sup> Many are still in the decision-making process.

<sup>3</sup> Some ABCUSA churches have broken away from the parent denomination over disagreements on membership of individual welcoming and affirming churches.

<sup>4</sup>Sprinkle makes this declaration in his book, "People to be Loved."

positions held, Christianity's common framing of queer sexuality and gender as 'issues' to be debated, implicates the core identities of LGBTQs. The very existence of *affirming* and *nonaffirming* labels holds discursive meaning. That is to say, there has been so much controversy over LGBTQ topics in the church that congregations now need (and arguably have always needed) to take a (non)/affirming stance at the doctrinal level. It seems that Christianity at large gives a disproportionate amount of attention to topics of queered gender and sexuality compared to other (non)biblical<sup>5</sup> topics or 'issues' in a way that focuses in on an LGBTQ identity as something to be dissected. This is why Sprinkle (2016) says that homosexuality—and I extend this to gender queering—are not issues, but words that represent *people* to be loved.

The notion that LGBTQs within Christianity experience tensions over their identity (Beagon and Hattie, 2015) is not surprising. Paradoxical as it may seem, however, extant literature shows that some individuals actually construct their identity as homosexual Christians (Catedral, 2018; Fuchs, 2003). Fifty-four percent of LGBTQ Americans affiliate with Christianity (Jones & Cox, 2017), which is curious considering the tensions previously described. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of LGBTQ Christians within organized Christianity—how they understand their beliefs and identities to be or not be connected, communicated, negotiated, accepted, and enacted. This work centers around elevating voices of LGBTQ Christians and, through their narratives, offers meaningful insights surrounding the communication—its breakdowns, successes, and potential for pragmatic change—between the church and the LGBTQ community.

The relationship between Christianity and queer gender/sexuality is a rich context in which to theorize about complicated and co-embodied social identities and their dominance and

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<sup>5</sup> *Homosexuality* is not mentioned in original Greek and Roman translations of the Bible.

marginalization. Social psychology and critical intergroup theories, namely Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Dominant Group Theory (DGT; Razzante & Orbe, 2018) respectively, can work in conversation to address the complex tensions embodied by LGBTQ Christians whose sexual and spiritual identities begin internally. Religion plays a significant role in well-being and identity construction (Coşgel & Minkler, 2004). Individuals benefit by ascribing to religiosity and the group membership it offers (Beagon & Hattie, 2015). Associating with religion often promotes physical and mental health and provides a sense of security and sense of belonging (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). Thus, I argue that SIT is advantageous for exploring the experiences of LGBTQ Christians and how their religious/spiritual and gender/sexual orientation work together in their identity construction. Further, LGBTQ Christians are associated with two separate social groups, one which is marginalized (the LGBTQ community) and one which is dominant (Christian faith community). Thus, DGT is also advantageous for this research as it considers that social groups are either dominant or marginalized, and people can maintain dual group membership. At first blush, we might think of LGBTQ Christians as a marginalized group, and I by no means attempt to undermine the marginality tied to queer sexual and gender orientations. However, these individuals also identify with Christianity which is a dominant U.S. religion (Schlosser, 2003). Because of their affordances, we can apply SIT and DGT to questions centered on the ways in which LGBTQ Christians negotiate their social identities as members of dominant and marginalized groups, as well as how they perceive dominance, marginalization, and belonging to either group in given situations.

To my knowledge there are no published qualitative studies in the communication field that phenomenologically explore the experiences of LGBTQ Christians within organized

Christianity. This research fills that gap. Over the past decade or so, critical (inter)cultural and organizational scholars have called for inclusion of religion (Broome & Collier, 2012) as well as queerness (Chavez, 2010; Jones, 2020; Nicholas et al., 2013) in conversations over identities, as well as pushed their colleagues to understand religion as a socially constructed aspect of identity that is co-embodied with myriad other constructs (Buzzanell & Harter, 2006; Smith, et al., 2006). Pairing religious identity with gender and sexual orientations also contributes to conversations of contemporary intersectionality (Nicholas et al., 2013; see also Lutz, Vivar, & Supik, 2011; for intersectionality see Crenshaw, 1991) as LGBTQ Christians embody unique overlapping identities. Finally, this work contributes to organizational communication as Christianity is an organized system of faith with structurally embedded traditions that enable and constrain enactment of various social identities and the interactions between members. Christian churches in the U.S. continue to decline in attendance, and one of the key factors influencing church attendance and attrition is relationship building (Corley, 2018). Thus, exploring the communicative aspects of LGBTQs' experiences can also contribute to understanding and improvement of relationship building in church communities.

### **Thesis Outline**

To lay a foundation for this work, in the coming chapter I offer a synthesis of relevant literature on DGT and SIT, how they work in conversation together, and how they can be used as lenses through which to study the phenomenon of LGBTQs' lived experiences within organized Christianity. Following the literature, I lay out a series of questions yielded by the theories' postulates. In the third chapter I outline the context and procedures for my research. Namely, I describe my participants' demographics, my positionality as a researcher, the recruitment and interview strategies used to explore my research questions, and my approach toward analyzing

the data. Following the methodology, I present my findings which include participant data and autoethnographic intervals that capture my own experiences as an LGBTQ Christian and my reactions to the data. Finally, I discuss the findings in conversation with previous literature to support and extend theory and yield practical implications and directions for future research.

## **Chapter 2: A Review of Relevant Literature**

This study uses Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and Dominant Group Theory (DGT; Razzante & Orbe, 2018) as lenses through which to examine the experiences of LGBTQ people within the context of Christianity. Christianity is a dominant U.S. religion and many of its practices are founded by cisgender, heterosexual White men, and the LGBTQ community is socially marginalized. Therefore, DGT and SIT are advantageous for investigating how Christians as dominant group members work to reinforce, impede, or dismantle LGBTQ discrimination, and how LGBTQ Christians navigate through life and religious experiences from a complex standpoint. This chapter serves as a synthesis of DGT and SIT and justifies their individual and combined uses for the context of this work.

To begin this section, I will discuss SIT to relay the nature of social identities and ingroup/outgroup relationships. I will then discuss how religion is tied to and bolsters social identities and present my first two research questions geared at understanding LGBTQ people's interest in Christianity. After reviewing SIT, I will explore DGT which serves as a lens to understand how LGBTQ Christians glean from their dual identities to enact communication strategies for addressing LGBTQ-Christian group tensions, then ask my third research question. Finally, after discussing how DGT and SIT work in tandem to show how LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ Christians as members of the same religion might work to advocate for cohesion, I pose my fourth and fifth research questions. Throughout the literature review, I will continue to offer context-setting sections that guide an understanding of how these theories are applicable to the experiences of LGBTQ people within Christianity.

### **Social Identity Theory**

A simple reflection of social interactions evidences that more often than not, when someone is asked to describe who they are, they will almost always name their identity in terms of a job title, family, gender, partnership/marital status, or religious or political affiliation, to name a few labels. SIT holds that individuals develop their self-concept from the groups of which they are a part. That is, each person has an individual identity (a self-concept) that is interconnected with a social identity (a definition of themselves in relation to the world). One's self-concept is derived from their perceived belonging to social groups with which they identify (ingroups) and positive or negative value connotations associated with their groups relative to others (outgroups; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

SIT asserts that individuals strive to maintain a positive self-concept and achieve this by making relative comparisons with members of relevant outgroups that favor their ingroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These comparative appraisals and evaluations are inherent to what is referred to as *intergroup behavior*, defined as the interactions between one or more members of an ingroup and an outgroup (Sherif, 1967) within which the context and frequency of communication is irrelevant (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The way that one gleans a social identity is directly linked to the group behavior on somewhat of a continuum. That is, group and individual behaviors are constitutive of each other; on one pole, individuals see themselves as having a unique and individual purpose, and on the other pole they see themselves as a group member identical to all others, or a prototype, with a need to socially represent the group and as affected by the group's social status (Turner & Oaks, 1986). This notion will become more explicit as I address the theory's origins and reconceptualizations and give a more in-depth explanation of the processes of SIT. A further look into the theory in the next two sections should remain grounded

in this idea that a personal identity and a social identity are always interconnected (McDougal, 1921).

**Underpinnings of SIT.** SIT was built on the early work of social psychologist Henri Tajfel (1974, 1978, 1982) that explored perception, racism, discrimination, and prejudice resulting from the interactions between large social categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, and social class; Hogg, 1996). While SIT began with a focus on intergroup behaviors at this meta-societal level, through the work of Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987), the breadth of research on these behaviors now includes interactions between *self-inclusive* social groups—groups to which people assign themselves and which at times are smaller and more locative and socially interactive than large-scale categories (e.g., fandoms, sports teams, campus clubs, religious denominations, and political parties; Hogg, 1996).<sup>6</sup>

Tajfel and Turner’s adoption of a holistic view of intergroup behavior is influenced by a conglomerate of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup social psychological research. Namely, by looking at work on inter- and intrapersonal discrimination, prejudice, and authoritarian behaviors (see Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), concepts of frustration and aggression (see Berkowitz, 1962, 1969, 1974; Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), and intergroup conflict (Sherif, 1953, 1967; Campbell, 1967) that traditionally polarized the individual and group’s psychological experiences, Tajfel and Turner (1986) recognized and filled a gap in intergroup psychology research that addressed “the complex interweaving of individual or interpersonal behavior within the contextual social processes of

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<sup>6</sup> I recognize that larger social categories such as race are a social construct which people often do (not) assign themselves, but more generally social groups are always self-inclusive. Ashforth et al. (2001) also note there is also an explicit difference between psychological groups and social groups, the former being more psychological and the latter more co-locative.

intergroup conflict” (p. 276). Essentially, they explored how group behavior shapes individual members’ conception of their identity as it relates to the group (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Confounding reconceptualizations of SIT (see Turner and Oakes, 1986) offered an even more socially interactive view of social identity that explores how individuals come to initially become a part of groups and the various reasons why. For example, Turner (1982) developed Self-Categorization Theory which narrows in on the social identity aspect (as opposed to the personal identity aspect) of SIT. Through Self-Categorization Theory, Turner (1982) posited that individuals construct their identity through abstract levels of the social self:

Self-categorization as a human being (the superordinate category) based on differentiations between species, ingroup/outgroup categorizations (the self as a social category) based on differentiations between groups of people (class, race, nationality, occupation, etc.) and personal self-categorizations (the subordinate level) based on differentiations between oneself as a unique individual and other (relevant) in-group members. (Turner & Oakes, 1986, p. 241)

These levels of identity and how they function will become more explicit and apparent throughout the discussion of the literature, but for now we can understand identity to be hierarchical (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Hogg and Terry (2000) note that while these offerings about the social self-concept merited the conceptualization of Self-Categorization Theory, the theory proposed ideas true to Tajfel’s (1982) initial and ultimate claim that “a system of social categorizations creates and defines an individual’s own place in society” (Tajfel, 1972, p. 293). Thus, newer SIT perspectives implicate a focus of self-categorization and its concern with the cognitive and behavioral functions of categorization, the immediate context which situates each level of identity at any given moment (situational context), and the way individuals

*depersonalize*, or assimilate, into the group by internalizing the prototypical aspects of the group (Hogg & Terry, 2000). The current work uses this bolstered perspective of SIT and some of the contentions it addresses: how identities become relevant and salient based on social context, and how one might lose individuality and/or gain purpose—often simultaneously—in light of seeing themselves as part of a collective (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

**Tenants of SIT.** SIT can be elaborated as a set of cognitive processes (Stets & Burke, 2000) including social categorization and social comparison. The cognitive motive behind these processes is a universal desire among individuals to maintain a positive self-concept. This section defines and outlines the interrelatedness of SIT’s tenants, further crystalizing the way group identity affects self-concept.

***Social categories and categorizing.*** An understanding of what constitutes a social group precedes understanding categorization. Social groups are defined in terms of social categories in that they are collectives with no limited number of individuals (Abrams & Hogg, 2006) who all perceive themselves to be a part of the same social category (e.g., a group of racial/ethnic minorities; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Essentially, groups form around categories (e.g., an LGBTQ pride club at a university), and are defined in terms of categories (e.g., sexual minorities; Stets & Burke, 2000). Turner (1984; Turner et al., 1987) held that while some groups become inherently socially structured and rely on intricate member-interactions in order to function by definition (e.g., sports teams or clubs), categories alone can be strictly psychological in that the members need not hold strong interpersonal ties with each other and understanding their membership on a psychological level qualifies them as a member (i.e., not all sexual minorities join groups that surround their identity; Turner et al., 1995). As Stone (1990) articulated, “one’s identity is established when others place [them] as a social object by assigning [them] the same words of

identity that [they] appropriate...for [themselves]” (p. 143). The sense of community alone that categorical membership offers is what encourages and strengthens individuals (Abrams & Hogg, 2006). Nevertheless, Tajfel and Turner (1986) hold that a group member should feel emotionally drawn to the group for it to be of any significance to their identity.

The act of *categorizing* is the cognitive process of grouping oneself and others with one or more categories (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Individuals categorize by delineating themselves from and associating with social groups and other members of social in/outgroups. According to McLeod (2009), we categorize when we “divide the world into ‘them’ and ‘us’” (para. 10). Standing on concepts such as uncertainty reduction (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner & Oakes, 1986) SIT holds that it is easier to understand people in terms of groups with pre-existing socially constructed assumptions assigned to them; thus, people are socialized to see and explain each other in terms of groups, so much so that they can only be defined in those terms (McDougall, 1921 Crisp & Hewstone, 2007).

***Social comparison.*** Social comparison is a result of and a catalyst for categorization as its evaluative aspect (Hogg et al., 1995). Aside from establishing a shared understanding of belonging to a group, ingroup members should also agree upon the positive or negative evaluation of their ingroup and outgroups (e.g., minoritized group members such as LatinX immigrants or gay people would likely have a collective understanding that they are minoritized relative to relevant US nationals or heterosexual counterparts, respectively; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Further, groups also desire to be evaluated positively. Because every individual seeks to maintain a positive social identity, a group as a collective of individuals mirrors the same desire. Upon grouping, individuals evaluate their social status in terms of their ingroup membership and the value of the group relative to outgroups. To achieve validation, people go beyond

categorizing as “‘similar to’ or ‘different from’ [and compare themselves as] ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than, members of other groups” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 283).

***Consequences of categorization and social comparison.*** Every social identity is seen relative to another. As individuals socially identify through categorization and comparison, they make inevitable social presumptions and judgements which lead to biases, discrimination, and negative stereotyping (Tajfel, 1982). Through categorizing, people’s identities become reduced through the overgeneralizations of categories. Where a stereotype is a belief about a social group (Campbell, 1967), assuming homogeneity across members (expecting they will represent the group the same way) leads to inaccurate unrealistic expectations about each person as an individual (Knippenberg & Dijksterhuis, 2000). As ingroups desire to maintain a positive value connotation relative to outgroups, if members perceive their group identity as negative, they will either leave the ingroup or make attempts to appraise the ingroup identity by making comparisons which favor their ingroup relative to some relevant outgroups (e.g., a B-scoring student would likely appraise through comparing with C-scoring rather than A-scoring students; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These favorable comparisons include reducing outgroups into negative stereotypes (Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2018) against which individuals can compare themselves to reappraise their ingroup (e.g., B-students assign C-students as less capable, thus B students are more than less capable; Tajfel, 1970; Brewer, 1979; Brewer & Silver, 1978).

***Group identification.*** While social categorization is cognitive, this process results in group behavior (Hogg et al., 1995). Social identification is not an explicit tenant of SIT but it is often extracted as the ongoing function of categorization that guides group-like behavior, as the cohesion between the self and the social group (Hogg & Terry, 2000). As previously mentioned, while the term *group* is ambiguous, we can think of a group in terms of an organization (Smith,

2016; Hogg & Terry, 2000). To better understand the process of group identification, it is necessary to delineate the constructs of individual identity, group identification, and group commitment. Individual identity refers to one's personal, characteristics, values, beliefs, enduring and fluid traits, and the ways in which one perceives themselves relative to others (Cruz, 2017; Kuhn, 2006; Scott, 2020). Identification concerns one's own perception of themselves as part of a larger collective such as a group or organization, and the extent to which they define themselves in terms of the identity of the collective (Scott, 2020). Finally, commitment refers to the attitudinal and behavioral manifestations of identification (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979); it is one's involvement with the collective based on their level of identification (Porter & Smith, 1970).

Individuals identify with a group so much as they perceive to be a member (Turner et al., 1987); group members hold a level of emotional value about their group and some consensus about their own and others' belonging to and the evaluation of the group (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987). Because individuals self-categorize into groups with which they find themselves to be a natural fit (Hogg & Terry, 2000), they are likely to be committed to a group because it suits and shapes the relevant categorized identity. Ashcroft and Mael (1989) for example, put this into context as such: A worker will be committed to an organization not just because they perceive to be a part of it, but because the organization is a good fit as it foments their career goals. If the organization's purpose, culture, and values align with an individual's, that person is likely to be committed to it since commitment is the defined as the strength of identity (Mowday et al., 1979). That identification influences them to emulate the common attitudes, beliefs, values, and feelings of the organization of which they are a part, and stirs their desire to represent the organization. From the above we can glean that identifying, by and large,

will result in communicating, through behavior, the various attitudes, beliefs, values, and feelings of the group (Hogg, 1996; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995).

**Salience.** A SIT perspective holds that salience is the activation of a group identity influenced by context for the purpose of reaching an individual or social goal (Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg et al., 1995). Essentially, people invoke readily accessible identities when they perceive their immediate social context as one that is a likely fit for those identities (Oakes, 1987). Using organized religion as an example, we can consider this immediate context as a church service where certain rituals are practiced. In this type of gathering, congregants might participate by drawing from what they know about certain rituals such as songs sang, texts read, and messages shared, and in doing so, activate their most religious selves. Participating in this way, according to Oaks, would make salient their religious identity, though their goals for which they participate might vary.

Hogg et al. (1995) note “different contexts may prescribe different contextually relevant behaviors contingent on the same social identity” (p. 265). In other words, a salient identity is one that is perceived as important to a context at a given moment in time, such as in the above example. While some identities are more or less malleable than others (Stets & Burke, 2000), individuals embody the nexus of multiple social categories (e.g., LGBTQ Christians who are in two very different camps; Stets & Burke, 2000) that become salient and thus accessed at different times as a result of social contexts and communicative interactions within contexts (Oaks, 1987). For example, one would assume that an LGBTQ Christian in a Pride march might feel their queer identity as highly salient since the common denominator among people participating in Pride is a celebration of the LGBTQ community.

*Salience and organizing.* Organizational theorizing helps elucidate the mechanisms of salience, as organizations are typically hierarchical and thus explicate one's subordinate, group, or superordinate categorizations, the categorizations of the social-self posited by Turner (1982). Where one identity may be more or less core to an individual across time, identities become salient at different categorical levels based on context. Consider a pastor. At the individual-level, they see themselves a pastor in relation to their congregation. At the group level, they are a pastor among other pastors and ministers. At the organizational level, they are a member of one of many Christian denominations. This example shows that, aside from categorical ranking, comparison with other social identities (e.g., church congregants) simultaneously works in making the identity salient. For instance, among a church congregation, our pastor would find their pastoral role to be salient, and thus would draw from their ability to teach, preach, and lead, or enact any other expected behaviors pertaining to that role. That same pastor, taken out of the church context, might perceive their pastoral identity as less salient, such as when at home or participating in other areas of society. While a pastor might always perceive of themselves as a religious and/or spiritual person, when they are met by the immediate context of home life, for instance, they likely experience their role as parent/spouse/some type of family member as most salient. Likewise, in a church congregation, they activate their pastoral role very highly.

Organizations serve as hosts for multiple and often competing group and individual identities—not just simply career roles, but an array of races, sexes, genders, ages, and various attitudes attached congregate in organizations. The larger and more complex the organization, the higher the variety of identities that exist within that structure. Ashforth, Johnson, Hogg, and Terry (2001) speak of Turner's categorical levels in terms of higher and lower order groups. They posit that organizations are higher order groups, meaning more abstract and inclusive of

smaller, lower order ingroups and outgroups (e.g., a group of interns versus a group of directors in a corporation). Ashforth and colleagues (2001) suggest that lower order groups are nested within the higher level of the organization, and these levels compete in terms of salience depending on whether their larger organizational or smaller subgroup identity is called for more immediately. Ashforth and colleagues also posit that, more often than not, lower level roles (i.e., individual jobs) are more salient than the larger, higher level organizational identity to organizational members because lower level roles are met within the immediate context, meaning that which they are experiencing in the moment (Scott, Corman, and Cheney, 1998). For instance, when an administrative assistant walks into work, they are probably met with an agenda, demands of coworkers, and various timely tasks that feel much more tangible in the moment than the organization's culture, mission, and value statement. On the other hand, Ashforth and colleagues suggest that if the individual perceives their personhood strongly aligns with the organization (such as through its mission, values, and goals), they might at times feel that the larger organizational identity is highly salient as they enact their smaller role. The subordinate identity is especially salient when it serves as the common ground identity for ingroups and outgroups who otherwise hold each other in comparison across a multiplicity of personal differences such as demographic characteristics (e.g., LatinX female and White male employees of the same company or straight and queer congregants of the same church; Pratt, 2001).<sup>7</sup> When members outside of the organization would otherwise have no common

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<sup>7</sup> I make a cognizant choice to capitalize identity groups in this work equally and equitably. By capitalizing *White*, I speak of it as an identity group of its own and thus, avoid suggesting it as the dominant, default racial group. In alignment with scholars such as Chakravarty, Kuo, Grubbs, and McIlwain (2018), I find it important to delineate and dismantle dominant White structures in these small operational ways.

understanding of others' lived experiences, they can experience intragroup cohesion as members of the same collective.

While an organizational identity can create cohesion, it can also explicate members' differences as they are put into an immediate social context, and this can lead to conflict. For instance, while a church might shift its stance on LGBTQ inclusion, the identities of LGBTQ congregants are brought to the foreground and relationships and interactions between members might become difficult to navigate as those individuals align more or less with the church's stance.

**Applications of SIT in communication.** A social psychology theory, SIT has saturated the field of communication studies. Its applications include yet are not limited to studies on retirement (Smith, 2016), stereotyping and nationalism among sports (Ferrucci, & Tandoc, 2018), intergroup perceptions within political discussions (Bond, Shulman, & Bilbert, 2018), transnational crises communications and encounters (Borden, 2016; Luring, 2008), effects of media on motivation (McKinley, Mastro, & Warber, 2014), and LatinX representations within media (Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Kopacz, 2008). Many of these studies empirically investigate the communicative aspects of social identities, their representation, and how they are conflicting and cohesive across communicative contexts.

SIT has also been emphasized in research on organizations. The theory is conducive to such contexts in that organizations are groups that contain subgroups, and individuals associate identity at these larger and smaller levels (Smith, 2016; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Research in the past few decades led by primary scholars such as Ashcroft & Mael (1989; Pratt, 2001) has largely explicated SIT's utility to explore the behavioral and affective aspects between intergroups within organizations and organizational processes (see Suzuki, 1998; van

Knippenberg & Hogg, 2001; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2001). Scott (2007) further draws attention to the array of SIT's emergent application to organizational identification (see Myers, Davis, Schreuder, & Seibold, 2016; Scott, 2007; Williams, 2011), a socially constructive process in which people define themselves as an organizational member (Myers et al., 2016). SIT offers a way to explore how individuals create ingroup/outgroup boundaries between and within organizations (the process of *categorization*) and appraise their identity by associating with prestigious or highly regarded organizations (the process of *self-appraisal*; Scott, 2020). Many of these works on organizational identification have bridged the psychological aspects of SIT and organizational psychology research with the field of communication, as well as help guide in outlining the aspects of SIT most pertinent to the current discussion.

**Christianity as a higher-level identity.** Religion is a higher order group that is predetermined to have a strong influence on identity. Ashforth et al. (2001) posit that the more one finds a superordinate identity subjectively important (or core to an individual's sense of self) the more likely they will be to internalize the various attitudes, beliefs, and values of that identity. Often, individuals find higher order organizational identities salient because they provide a higher order perspective through which to make sense of the lower. Ysseldyk et al. (2010) provide a host of reasons as to why religion is a salient superordinate identity to many.

Christianity is superordinate and is salient as both an identity and an organized religion. First, as an organized religion, it offers unique membership to people seeking a sense of belonging with other believers, and rules and norms to abide by (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). Many churches hold their own set of values with which people align, and many offer a wide range of programs such as youth camps, Bible studies, marriage and family trainings, and addiction counseling, to name a few. Second, as a faith, Christianity is a superordinate identity that reduces

“existential anxiety and offer[s] an eternal group membership” since theists believe in eternal life (Ysseldyk et al., 2010, p. 62; Kinnvall, 2004). Beyond this, Reiss (2004) provides a taxonomy of reasons why people seek God, such as seeking freedom from guilt, explanations for human suffering, ability to cope with life circumstances, and a fulfilment of intellectual curiosity. These reasons evidence that, while not every motive can be accounted for, people often seek God and religion to gain a meaningful sense of self within a larger—physical and allegedly eternal—world.

**LGBTQ and Christian identities in context.** As we move into thinking of Christianity through an organizational context, this can be rationalized as such: Religion is both intrinsic (i.e., internalized, spiritual) and extrinsic (i.e., external, outwardly practiced) and can be motivated by either or both of these orientations (Cohen & Hill, 2007). Said otherwise, people associate with Christianity on either psychological-categorical and/or social-group levels, as belief is separate from practice. Where religion may be superordinate, organized Christianity<sup>8</sup> sets the higher order parameter in which to understand LGBTQ Christians’ social identities in a more tangible and immediate context.

**SIT and LGBTQ Christians.** In exploring the experiences of LGBTQ Christians, SIT is advantageous. I argue that it is productive to consider Christian and LGBTQ communities together because they are relevant social groups to one another; their evaluative significance is the sexual ethic(s) traditionally postulated by a myriad of Christian denominations, that is largely restrictive of LGBTQ identities. As outlined in the introduction, the church broadly condemns sexual relations outside of monogamous marital sex between a cisgender, heterosexual couple,

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<sup>8</sup> There is a very clear delineation here between religious organizing and religious organizations. For example, Christians might gather in independent or alternative settings outside of a church. On the other hand, religious organizations exceed that of churches, and can include religious nonprofits and advocacy groups, to name a few.

and believe that gender is predetermined. While this description of a sexual ethic very core to many Christians is not implicative of all LGBTQ people, to be LGBTQ and live a life that is not celibate or that is gender incongruent means to be met with strong opposition in many Christian spaces. Recent trends show us that still today, half of U.S. Christians are highly opposed to homosexuality (Murphy, 2015). Evangelical protestants remain largely against homosexuality and, out of 36 percent of those who affirm it, half of them are millennials born between 1981 and 1996 (Pew Research Center, 2019). These certain Christian attitudes and values do not seem like a relative and inclusive fit for LGBTQ identities. On the other hand, two thirds of Catholics and mainline protestants are now supportive of same-sex marriage (Pew Research Center, 2019) and an array of LGBTQ Methodist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran clergy are becoming ordained (Human Rights Campaign, 2020). Still, while many of these protestant churches are becoming more inclusive, their theological framing still queer sexual and gender orientations as sinful and stigmatized.

Despite tensions between LGBTQ and Christian communities, a considerable amount of the LGBTQ population aligns with Christianity. Fifty four percent of American LGBTQs affiliate with evangelical Protestant, Hispanic Catholic, and Hispanic Protestant denominations (Jones & Cox, 2017), which are among the most conservative branches of Christianity (Hout, Greeley, & Wilde, 2001; Marty, Nelson, Spalding, Chadwick, & Bainton, 2019). From an intergroup perspective that SIT offers, the fact that Christian teaching and Christian churches remain considerably opposed to a new sexual ethic more inclusive of LGBTQ orientations makes this phenomenon one of inquiry. There is a gap in research that addresses motives behind why so many of these individuals claim this religiosity as part of their identity. Catedral (2018) offers a rationale for individuals claiming religiosity in suggesting that, often times, when Christianity

threatens other aspects of their identity, people exercise their agency to detach from the commonly interpreted “grey areas” of Christianity that condone their sexual orientation. As they do so, they attach themselves to the figurehead, or referent leader, of Jesus and parts of scripture in the New Testament that focus on the loving, accepting, and inclusive characteristics of God. Nevertheless, this equivocation is not a powerful enough explanation for understanding the lived experiences of real people who are seeking certainty and validation of their complex and unique identities. Therefore, this thesis explores the following questions,

**RQ1:** Why do LGBTQ individuals affiliate with Christianity?

**RQ2:** What tensions exist between LGBTQ and Christian identities, and when does each of the two identities become salient?

### **Dominant Group Theory**

In the above sections, I noted that LGBTQ people are marginalized and Christians are dominant societal groups. While SIT is advantageous for exploring Christian and LGBTQ communities as outgroups, Dominant Group Theory (DGT), which I outline in this section, is advantageous for understanding LGBTQ Christians as members of both dominant and marginalized groups. DGT focuses on intergroup communication through a dominant group lens. The theory suggests that when individuals consciously recognize their dual positionality within a given structure, they will be able to draw from their own marginalized experiences to understand how to communicate as a dominant group member, to achieve personal and social goals. I apply this theory to LGBTQ Christians’ experiences and, in doing so, implicate them as dominant to the extent that they can glean from a dominant group identity. I do this to explore the unique intersection of these identities from a novel perspective.

DGT offers a lens through which to understand and interrogate relationships between various groups. As a new communication theory, it developed at the intersection of many different foundational theories and premises. DGT posits that the U.S. society is constituted by dominant and minoritized groups, and that social structures in place ultimately work to benefit the dominant group (Foucault, 1977; Orbe, 1998; Razzante & Orbe, 2018). Dominant groups “include cisgender men, European Americans, Christians, heterosexuals, the able-bodied, native English speakers, and those from the middle and upper classes” (Razzante, 2018, p. 360). Their counterpart minority populations, referred to as co-cultural groups, are comprised of “trans persons, people of color, LGBT[Q] persons, people with disabilities, non-native English speakers, and those from a lower class” (Razzante & Orbe, 2018, p. 360; see also Allen, 2014). While Christians are considered dominant, there are other nondominant religions as well. DGT recognizes that while the power differentials between dominant and co-cultural groups are difficult to interrogate across all sociocultural contexts, “everyone can or will identify as [a member of both groups] in one way or another” and anyone can be a member of more than one dominant or co-cultural group, simultaneously (Razzante, 2018a, p. 401; see also Orbe, 1998).

Foundational to DGT is an understanding that in sociocultural contexts, dominance, privilege, and power are inextricably linked. DGT assesses the connection between culture, power, and privilege, all of which are communicatively constituted (Razzante and Orbe, 2018; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016). Power can be used by dominant groups in positive productive ways, as well as in negative harmful ways (Foucault, 1977), that either reinforce, impede, or dismantle oppressive power structures (Razant & Orbe, 2018). Since power is communicative, DGT classifies strategies used for communicating power into four themes: “(a) using dominant group membership for reinforcement of privilege [e.g., when non-

LGBTQ Christians downplay that they fit the heterosexual, cisgender mold that goes uncontested in the church], (b) coming to a dominant group awareness [e.g., when non-LGBTQ Christians recognize their social identities are exempt from being implicated in LGBTQ topics], (c) using dominant group membership for support of co-cultural groups [e.g., non-LGBTQ Christians being empathetic and understanding toward LGBTQs because of an understanding that they might struggle as both religious and social minorities], and (d) using dominant group membership for disrupting practices of oppression [e.g., when non-LGBTQ Christians actively affirm, interact with, and support the experiences of LGBTQs]” (Razzante, 2018, p. 401).<sup>9</sup> In sum, DGT offers a way to examine intercultural and intergroup communication by considering that various contexts and lived experiences influence various forms of communication strategies employed by dominant groups when interacting with marginalized populations, as well as the purpose and motives for those strategies (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). In the next few sections I will outline the theoretical tenants of, surrounding literature on, and existing application studies supporting DGT, as well as the extensions DGT offers the field of communication.

**Underpinnings of DGT.** DGT’s framework is built on the main premises of Co-cultural Theory (CCT; Orbe, 1998) and extant literature on power, privilege, and communication. First, an understanding of CCT and its influential theories is necessary. Like DGT, CCT maintains that the U.S. is a pluralistic society constituted of co-cultural and dominant groups among which there have historically been power differentials. CCT also contends that communication is used to discursively enact and deconstruct this power. CCT’s central goal is to phenomenologically explore the communication strategies used by co-cultural groups to reclaim agency and voice in

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<sup>9</sup> These examples might change as I am more informed by data, but they serve as visuals for the time being.

their interactions with dominant groups. CCT is a derivative of Standpoint Theory (Smith, 1987) and Muted Group Theory (MGT; Kramarae, 1981; Ardener, 2005), both which I outline below.

***Muted Group Theory.*** A tenant of CCT, MGT contends that each society has a dominant structure in which the dominant group controls the communication and its circulation in society (Kramare, 1981). By way of this control, nondominant groups are muted, recognized as alternative to the dominant norm, and “to be heard and heeded, an individual must use...dominant mode[s] of expression (Wall & Gannon-Leary, 1999, p. 22).

The way muted groups become and remain muted is discursive (Herring, Johnson, & DiBenedetto, 1995). That is, larger societal discourses perpetuate the marginality of muted groups who are not represented. For example, it is a social norm that a woman will take her husband’s name upon marriage, connotative that she belongs to him as his property. Another powerful discourse in U.S. society is the terming of immigrants as *aliens* or *illegal aliens*, by other U.S. citizens, which constructs social understandings of the entire immigrant population as not belonging. Orbe (1998a) ultimately uses MGT to argue that muted groups create their own subsystems of communication to resist the larger dominant communication structure and, within this system, they “establish a variety of communication strategies to gain their voices within and outside of dominant structures as a way of fighting to become unmuted” (p. 25). These groups resist dominant power by rejecting to be defined by dominant terms; they “talk back” by claiming their own language and terms by which to define themselves, or by appropriating oppressive dominant labels. The term *queer*, for example, was once derogatory and the LGBTQ community has reclaimed it by using it as the all-inclusive term for LGBTQ identities. The phrase “We’re here, and we’re queer, get used to it,” a favorite chant at Pride that dates back to the 1970’s Stonewall Riots (Marhoefer, 2021), completely reclaims the pride associated with

being queer that dominant heteronormative discourses previously worked to dismantle. It is the nature of these muted strategies that contribute to CCT.

**Standpoint Theory.** Standpoint Theory (Smith, 1987) contributes to CCT through the argument that there is no universal vantage point through which to view and make sense of the world and produce knowledge. Through a standpoint lens, individuals each develop a certain vantage point and epistemology based on their lived experiences (Smith, 1987). Standpoint theorizing also rests on the premise that societal groups have been labeled as superior (e.g., cisgender White men) and subordinate (e.g., traditionally, women and people of color; Smith, 1987; Stanback & Pearce, 1981), and society incongruently privileges and values the standpoint of superior groups, thus perpetuating power imbalances. Standpoint scholars strictly argue, “to adopt dominant elite standpoints inevitably encourages legitimization and naturalization of the status quo” (Adler & Jermier, 2005, p. 942). Hartsock (1997) crystalizes that the biggest purpose of Standpoint Theory is to uphold the argument that, while individuals can be categorized into groups, they still have their own unique way of being in and making sense of the world. This openness to various experiences promotes more social equity and understanding of the other. Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) assert that standpoints can be “individual and collective, self- as well as other-directed” (p. 316). Ultimately, Orbe (1998) is interested in these notions of nonconformity, between- and within-group differences, and appreciation of difference as key constituents of CCT.

**CCT.** Orbe (1998b) marks CCT by terming it the standpoint of muted groups; Standpoint Theory and MGT are closely related and (re)inform each other. Where MGT primarily focuses on larger discourses (e.g., public communication; Ardender, 1978; Wall et al., 1989) that systematically silence minoritized populations, Standpoint Theory primarily accounts for the

everyday experiences of minoritized groups (Smith, 1987; Herring et al., 1995). The greatest way these theories work together as tenants of CCT is by showing that, even within these muted groups, there exists variance of identity, and thus, variance of lived experiences that inform individuals' standpoints. For example, in relation to the White male, all other societal groups are subordinate (Orbe, 1998). Smith (1987) maintains that while standpoints of women are different than those of people of color, both groups should be recognized as nondominant and have the ability to see a dominant societal structure with a holistic lens based on their marginalization. Broadly categorizing these groups discursively delineates those who have access to power from those who do not, while acknowledging the vastly different experiences between and within muted groups. Experiences reinforce standpoints, and standpoints influence communication that can work to either mute or unmute. While no standpoint is more valid than the other, what validates a standpoint is an individual's lived experiences because these experiences are matter of fact; they are concrete (Orbe, 1998).

Building from MGT and Standpoint Theory and adopting a phenomenological research approach, CCT seeks to understand the strategic communication choices that nondominant groups make when communicating with dominant group members in society. With these theories as its guiding tenants, CCT is condensed into five epistemological premises, summarized as the following: First, every society has a hierarchy in which dominant groups (e.g., those of middle and upper classes, heterosexuals, those who are able-bodied, White cisgender men, and Christians) are privileged. Second, these groups have historically been privileged over marginalized groups (e.g., women, people of color, the lower class, those with disabilities, and LGBTQs), what Orbe calls co-cultural groups. Third, dominant groups control larger societal structures of communication through which they reinforce their privilege both consciously and

unconsciously, based on their field of experience. *Field of experiences* refers to the ways in which one has been socialized, educated, and nurtured by individuals, groups, and organizations; it is this sum of one's life experiences that informs a person's "constant process of considering, selecting, enacting, and then evaluating how one communicates" (Razzante & Orbe, 2018, p. 362). Fourth, although co-cultural members vary widely across their identities and lived experiences (e.g., a straight Black woman might be very different than a queer White man), they are all marginalized relative to dominant groups and within dominant structures. Finally, as these dominant groups and their communication structures inherently oppress co-cultural groups, co-cultural members adopt strategies of communication in response to that same oppression.

**DGT's central question and guiding constructs.** Extending CCT, DGT validates those postulates, but is most interested with the second premise: "dominant group members occupy positions of power that they use—consciously or unconsciously—to create and maintain communication systems that reflect, reinforce, and promote their field of experiences" (Orbe, 1998, p. 11). From this premise, DGT derives a central question: How do we conceive of "majority groups who, at times, may consciously utilize their societal privilege to dismantle oppressive structures?" (Razzante & Orbe, 2018 p. 359). Razzante and Orbe (2018) reason that the premise should be complexified and extended based on Foucault's (1977) notion that power can be positive and negative, meaning used for good and bad. In other words, we can see how dominant groups in society intentionally act in ways that benefit and edify the nondominant, showing the variability of power uses and motive for those uses (e.g., White allies of people of color or straight allies of the LGBTQ community).

Aside from its roots in CCT and Foucauldian notions of power, DGT's central question can be rationalized through surrounding concepts of microaggression strategies, allyship, and

thinking under the influence. First, Sue et al.'s (2007) work on racial biases across cultural understanding contends that microaggression strategies are used by White people to covertly discriminate against people of other races on structural and individual levels. These “microaggressive exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous” (Sue & Constantine, 2007, p. 137). These strategies are delineated into three camps: microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations. Microinvalidations are subtle ways of undermining or negating the feelings and experiences of one's reality (e.g., commenting on one's unexpected intelligence based on their race; Sue et al., 2007). Microassaults are more overt and deliberate acts such as using racial epithets, and microinsults involve specific words and actions meant to be insensitive or demeaning, such as telling a person of color that they should not overthink a racist comment that an offender might not have meant (Sue & Constantine, 2007). Razzante and Orbe (2018; see also Orbe & Batten, 2017) adopt Sue et al.'s (2007) assertions but suggest that these various ways of communicating across difference can be extended to theorizing about other types of injustices outside of racism. Microaggressions relate back to DGT in two ways: They are a means by which dominant group members reinforce power subtly and intricately, and they are strategies enacted in the very structure that DGT purports to be dismantling.

As a second contributor to DGT, DeTurk's (2011) work on allyship of dominant groups within social justice initiatives suggests that people a) enact allyship at a structural level such as through political action in the form of fundraising and lobbying, and b) at an individual level such as by establishing themselves as allies (e.g., straight allies in the LGBTQ community), and offering material resources and assistance to those marginalized and in need. DeTurk, in

accordance with Foucault (1977), helps us see the ways in which people in privileged positions can enact positive power to advocate for and become allies of the marginalized on multiple levels of grouping and organizing.

The final thread of research guiding CCT and thus DGT is Allen's (2014) work on thinking under the influence (TUI). TUI is the processes of making unconscious decisions about other people based on understandings of them as belonging to either superior or inferior social groups, and the stereotypes held about those groups. People make unfair decisions in favor of or against others as they perceive them to be superior or inferior. Allen (2019) offers the example of employers who make decisions about hiring based on names of applications. For instance, people with names that are associated with minoritized races such as Black or Hispanic are less likely to be chosen for hire than people with White European names, regardless of the quality of their application. TUI as a framework suggests that by being mindful of their own thoughts and feelings, people can become aware of implicit biases that occur while under the influence, and this coming to consciousness is important because, otherwise, inclusion of a wide variety of identities becomes inhibited in social contexts (Allen, 2014). Borrowing from TUI, DGT recognizes that while dominant group members might use privilege positively for allyship in a given context, they might, at the same time, use it as a means by which to discriminate in the same context, unconsciously (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). That is, while strategic allyship must be enacted consciously, dominant groups are often unaware of their privilege and think, do, and say things unconsciously which perpetuates the status quo of societal power imbalances.

DGT combines, builds from, and extends these concepts of microaggression strategies, allyship, and TUI to argue that dominant groups consciously and unconsciously utilize power, and that only through a recognition of one's own power and privilege can they consciously and

strategically leverage their position for allyship or reinforcement of power and privilege on multiple levels. DGT pivots from CCT, not only by adopting new ways of thinking about uses of power, allyship, and microaggressions in intercultural and intergroup contexts, but also through its research applications. DGT and CCT are both phenomenologically rooted, meaning they “focus...on the conscious experience of a person as she or he relates to the lived world” (Orbe, 1998, p. 6). Both theories also explore interactions between dominant and co-cultural groups but DGT’s main delineation is that it invests in the insights of dominant group members to better understand the variation in their communication strategies, the motives behind them, and the way they might work in favor of co-cultural counterparts (Razzante and Orbe, 2018).

A new theory, DGT has been applied empirically in very unique ways. For example, Razzante (2018a) explored the ways in which undergraduate students who avow as White are attentive to the concerns of racial counterparts and how, when recognizing they are in a place of privilege, White students might use that privilege to extend material and emotional support. In another study, through putting DGT, CCT, and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) theories in conversation, Razzante (2018b) examined the ways in which administrators of color in higher education balanced their social identities as both racially minoritized and institutionally privileged to advocate for university inclusion initiatives. Finally, Orbe and Batten (2017) theorized through DGT to conduct a discourse analysis of online comments of dominant White men in response to co-cultural group concerns over Donald Trump’s 2016 election. These studies shift from other tangential studies informed by CCT which explore communication strategies of co-cultural members when interacting with dominant groups (Ahmed & Orbe, 1992; Orbe, 1994; Orbe, 1996; Roberts and Orbe, 1996); together they create a host of exemplars of

dominant group members seeking opportunities afforded them by their social position, to dismantle power structures.

Through these studies it can be seen that DGT's interrogation of the standpoint of dominant groups does two things. First, used in conversation with CCT, it offers a more holistic interrogation of dominant and co-cultural group interactions (Razzante, 2018a, 2018b; Razzante & Orbe, 2018) which challenges assumptions that it is the role of the marginalized, who have been muted and oppressed by the dominant, to advocate for themselves. Second, it recognizes that to strategically use privilege, one must recognize their own privileged position within a societal structure that serves dominant groups at the expense of the minoritized. It is important to note Razzante and Orbe (2018) crystalize that their approaches are "not to re-center traditional scholarship, which focuses on the communication of dominant group members" (p. 355), but rather to glean from the subjective perspectives of dominant group members by probing the *how* and *why* behind their interactions, and recenter the burden of social justice initiatives back on dominant groups who have the power to make systemic change in a system which regards their voices. Gleaning from experiences of dominant group members enables these members to be guided into a recognition of their societal positionality and their way of being in the world relative to nondominant groups (e.g., see the praxis strategies of Razzante, 2018a). Indeed, seeing oneself relative to the other is a mandate for creating structural change (Deetz & Simpson, 2004).

**Six factors influencing dominant group communication.** Communication is a mechanism through which people can work to convey who they are to and what they desire from others across myriad contexts. DGT presents six factors that influence dominant group communication (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). These influencing factors are potentially best

interpreted as questions. First, *interactional outcome* asks what a dominant group interlocuter desires from a communication interaction with a co-cultural member. Second, *communication approach* seeks to explore the type of behavior identified in this communication interaction. Third, *field of experience* is concerned with understanding the life experience that informs communication. Fourth, *abilities* asks what societal (dis)/advantages the dominant interlocuter has that supports or works against their communication. Fifth, *situational context* seeks to know about the context/structure/organization in which the communication takes place. Finally, *perceived costs and rewards* seeks to know how dominant interlocuters weigh their interactions with co-cultural members as positive or negative based on the costs and benefits of those interactions.

DGT posits a matrix of communication orientations constituted by two of the above factors of influence: communication approach and interactional outcome. First, communication approach ranges from nonassertive to assertive to aggressive communication. Second, interactional outcome describes how dominant group members interact with co-cultural group members to reach desired outcomes. These desired outcomes include reinforcement, impediment, and dismantling of their own [disproportionate] power and of larger dominant oppressive structures. In the resulting matrix, these three types of communication approaches and three types of interactional outcomes posit nine orientations of communication, ranging from *nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive reinforcement* to *nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive impediment*, to *nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive dismantling*. Reinforcement orientations ultimately reify dominant oppressive structures, impediment orientations seek to challenge the dominant status quo through interpersonal interactions, and dismantling orientations interrogate dominant group oppression at a structural level. All these orientations posed are used by

dominant groups as day-to-day discursive and rhetorical strategies that either reinforce, impede, or dismantle power. While none of these orientations are suggested as more ideal or effective than others, individuals can access and use—to varying degrees of consciousness—a different orientation at any given moment, based on their lived experience, the context of situations, and their preferred outcome of communication interactions. Below, I will elaborate on the nine orientations—each of which Razzante (2018) asserts can be enacted (un)consciously—and give an example of how they might be enacted within organized religious contexts.

The first communication orientation is *nonassertive reinforcement*, which describes how dominant group members ultimately “maintain the status quo” (Razzante & Orbe, 2018, p. 367) of a dominant society by failing to intervene from their place of privilege. In this strategy, passivity and a failure to confront one’s own privilege perpetuates structural power imbalances. For example, a non-LGBTQ Christian might recognize that they share a religious space with LGBTQ Christians, and they may even know that within a religious and societal system LGBTQ Christians are commonly recognized as subordinate, but they may not actively seek to know about that population and their experiences or investigate any sort of power difference. Additionally, this could take the form of LGBTQ topics not being addressed in sermons or Bible studies.

Second, *assertive reinforcement* manifests when dominant group members downplay or disidentify from their dominant group status or emphasize minoritized aspects of their identity as a way to avoid getting lumped into a classification of privilege (Razzante, 2018). The intention might be to relate with and consider the needs of the co-cultural other but having the ability to choose to downplay one’s privilege is an act of privilege in itself. One example of this is when Christians associate with people of different sexual orientations by saying that, before they found

God, they “struggled” with same-sex attraction. Rather than encouraging others, this might have the reverse effect by implicating a same-sex-attracted person as someone whose ‘lifestyle’ is already a point of contention in religious contexts or that could be perceived as making a relationship with God inaccessible. This communication stance could also manifest through non-LGBTQ Christians pointing to a part of their life that is also marked as different, such as being a person of color, a woman, or having a lower socioeconomic status as a way of relating to being marginalized. Again, the intention is not always malicious, but the result still reinforces the act of othering.

*Aggressive reinforcement* is the next orientation and is characterized by intention to reinforce oppression. This orientation commonly manifests through interpersonal interactions, but that is not always the case. Razzante and Orbe posit that it is within this orientation that microaggressions, microassaults, and microinsults (Sue, 2010) are enacted. Sue et al. (2007) assert that microinvalidations, a type of microaggressions, “exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality” of others (p. 37). In a church context, subtle comments might be made to LGBTQ Christians that suggest they have a different way of living. The terms *gay lifestyle* or *homosexual lifestyle* are commonly used to refer to LGBTQ individuals in the church and typically encompass many assumptions about nonmarital sex or other nontraditional sexual relations not condoned by many denominations. Additionally, in small groups, (e.g., many churches offer weekly support groups for those seeking community with others of similar age/who are in the same “walk of life”), LGBTQ couples might face microinvalidations through minor comments suggestive of their inability to relate to marital topics of heterosexual couples, since they might have queered gender roles and/or sexual dynamics and cannot conceive children in traditional ways.

Microaggressions are included in this orientation since they are not always interpersonal and can also be meso (organizational) or even macro (structural; Sue, 2010). In 2019, Westboro Baptist Church congregants exemplified meso-level aggression by picketing at Thousand Oaks (TO) High School, home of a Pride Alliance club. The picketing was in response to the 2018 Borderline night club shooting in Thousand Oaks, California. In the event of the shooting, a marine veteran opened fire killing 12 victims, most of whom were TO High School students (Smith, Williams, Blankstein, Jamieson & Siemaszko, 2018). Roughly 20 members of Westboro Baptist, by the support of their larger congregation, showed up to TO High with signs that read “God sent the shooter,” suggesting the tragedy was God’s way of punishing TO High for its progressive nature and support of the queer community (Mcafee, 2019, para. 6). Finally, a microaggression at the macro-level can be seen in the form of individuals voting or lobbying for anti-LGBTQ policy. This type of move reinforces dominance in a political system where LGBTQ rights are already precarious.

Moving from reinforcement which happens on a structural level, orientations that impede dominant oppression are enacted on an individual level. A *non-assertive impediment* approach is really a matter of one recognizing their own privilege and doing the inner work to understand marginalized standpoints as best as possible. For dominant individuals, this could look more specifically like educating oneself about the various ways their social status is inherently dominant, and their attempt to consciously unlearn the ways they have unconsciously reinscribed their social dominance. Non-LGBTQ Christians might enact this through confronting or reconfronting areas of Biblical text surrounding sexuality and approaching the subject more openly, or with newness; rather than using the Bible to assert and confirm their own beliefs and

biases, they might explore the especially interpretive areas of the Bible and consider its alternative postulations, despite the discomfort of any possible disruptions of existing beliefs.

The second type of impediment orientation is *assertive impediment* which, like assertive reinforcement, “seeks to balance the needs” of both dominant and co-cultural groups (Razzante & Orbe, 2018, p. 366). While an assertive reinforcement orientation still benefits dominant groups through their dismissal of privilege as an attempt to identify with minoritized groups, assertive impediment also seeks a balance between groups, yet with the goal to impede dominant traditions. This orientation of impediment is justified by a preferred outcome that centers on elevating marginalized voices. The purpose for the balancing of self and others is ultimately to ensure that one who is a part of a dominant group is tending to self enough to approach tending to others with healthy boundaries. This balancing act could ensure that burnout does not occur. For these reasons, while it is not ideal in every context, Razzante and Orbe posit that it seems to be the closest to an “ideal approach” (p. 367). This communication stance could look like church mentorship of Christians. Specifically, while individual members might have differing convictions about affirming same-sex sexuality, they will at the least work to show love and acceptance of LGBTQ members, regardless of any perception that they are living in sin.

Next, *aggressive impediment* communication strategies essentially mirror those of aggressive reinforcement. The delineation between the two are their preferred outcomes of impeding versus enforcing dominant structures. For example, as aggressive reinforcement uses discursive microaggressive strategies, aggressive impediment uses microvalidations as supportive communication. In the church this might look like edification on an individual, interpersonal level. Specifically, non-LGBTQ members might actively seek to understand the Bible’s posture toward LGBTQ people to use their knowledge and position as believers seasoned

in the word of God to be a guiding support for LGBTQ Christians who are seeking to be confident in their faith positions and feel legitimized in church membership. They might also make subtle moves to show inclusion or affirmation by intentionally socializing with LGBTQ Christians outside of church settings and include them in alternative settings such as community groups.

Where reinforcement orientations work to uphold existing power structures, dismantling orientations work against them. First, through a *non-assertive dismantling* orientation one can only legitimately work to dismantle power structures by “sacrificing self” (Razzante & Orbe, 2018, p. 368). Taking a nonassertive approach to power systems—by definition of assertive—does not directly interrogate them (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). It seems that the closest example to this in a religious context would be a non-LGBTQ Christian risking their own appearance by expressing support of the LGBTQ community within a church denomination that specifies clear repercussions for taking this kind of stance.

Second, *assertive dismantling* is a strategy in which one “maintains a balance of self and others’ needs in attempt to invoke societal change” (Razzante & Orbe, 2018, p. 368). In some cases where an individual might hold dominant and co-cultural group membership, this balancing might look like gleaning from their own positionality and informing one aspect of themselves through another. In the context of Christianity, this stance most resembles the notion of Christians as active citizens. That is, this stance would manifest through Christians advocating for pro-LGBTQ legislation (or against anti-LGBTQ legislation), attending a Pride rally, joining open and affirming churches, and engaging in Biblical and lay conversations with the goal of arguing for LGBTQ equal rights in Christian churches and larger societal contexts.

Finally, *aggressive dismantling* is the final communication orientation the matrix. This stance is ultimately a haphazard approach to fighting for institutional change. While their preferred outcome in this case is the dismantling of unjust systems, dominant group members enact strategies that could create danger or perpetuate oppression for the oppressed minority. Through this stance, dominant members often seek to create change where it is not asked. This aggression is unfortunately apparent in many churches' attempts to create an open and affirming church community without first consulting its LGBTQ members or stakeholders. Some denominations have what is the equivalent to an onboarding process for LGBTQ members, that could backfire when those individuals are disproportionately tokenized.

**Additional benefits of DGT.** So far, we have seen how DGT offers the perspective of dominant groups and the various strategies they enact, turning the tables of CCT methods. We have also seen the benefits behind investigating through a dominant lens with the goal of advocating for marginalized groups. While DGT's communication orientations have great utility for understanding communication strategies more holistically, Razzante and Orbe (2018; see also Razzante, 2018a) argue this utility can be stretched by highlighting that members of society can and will identify with both dominant and marginalized groups at some point in their life (Razzante, 2018a). Sometimes, one's dominance and marginalization are contingent on context, meaning certain social identities might hold more or less weight within individual structures consisting of different norms and ideologies. When individuals consciously recognize their dual positionality within a given structure, as DGT posits, they will be able to draw from their own marginalized experiences to inform how to communicate as a dominant group member (Ahmed, 2012; Razzante & Orbe, 2018). Yancy (2012) calls this an "epistemic advantage," (p. 8) because one individual can have two or more identity constructs—each which informs their interpretation

of the world—that interact with each other. In turn, this interpretation informs how one communicates in the world. In accordance, Allen (2014) highlights that individuals might avow and embody various social identities simultaneously, and that communication is the catalyst which ultimately constructs and reinforces those identities, and vice versa. These claims work together to create the premise that we act not only because of who we are, but also because of how we think about who we are.

The “both/and” epistemic logic of DGT helps interrogate group essentialism and fixedness of dominant identities (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). Offering research methods that locate the perspectives of individuals who avow as both dominant and marginalized, DGT regards *perception* of power and privilege through considering that individuals perceive to have identities and also have varying perceptions of privilege yielded by those identities. In addition, offering the above communication orientations, Razzante and Orbe (2018) espouse their desire to see DGT applied to understanding unique and dynamic identities and contexts. In their implications for future research of DGT, they even suggest it can be applied within heterosexist structures.

**Context setting.** I argue that many of its aspects make DGT a conducive theory through which to explore the experiences of LGBTQ Christians in religious contexts. Pointing back to the literature tells us that Christians are dominant groups and LGBTQ people are co-cultural groups. As I have outlined, these groups have historic tensions. Individuals who avow to both Christian and queer identities negotiate their identity as they find themselves in the eb and flow of tensions present in these traditionally colliding groups within a religious structure that is at large still highly heterosexist and homophobic. Moreover, sexuality and spirituality can be outwardly organized, practiced, and displayed but, just as well, they can be completely

internalized and invisible. These invisible and affective aspects of spirituality and sexuality open up a range of opportunities to ask queer Christians about their lived experiences, as some might consider someone in both of these groups to embody a state of tension or oppression.

The impetus behind exploring this phenomenon is really a matter of allyship to U.S. LGBTQ community members, many of whom “have been raised in an organized religion [yet while] many continue to cherish their faith community...too many have been forced to leave those communities behind because of condemnation of LGBTQ people” (Human Rights Campaign, para. 1). While religion serves as a safe haven for many people in the LGBTQ community, suicide, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempt rates among these minoritized members run rampant. But for more than reasons of discrimination, the biggest reason they have life-ending thoughts or attempts is because of feelings of internal tension because they belong/ed to groups that have been socially constructed as fundamentally oppositional. DGT can be applied to this phenomenon by phenomenologically exploring how LGBTQ Christians’ perception of their own privilege and/or marginalization—and how those standpoints intervene with one another—can influence their perception of their inclusion/affirmation and social validity in religious spaces. Specifically, DGT can help uncover the ways LGBTQ Christians might use their dual positionality to advocate for themselves as sexual minorities within dominant Christian contexts. Thus, this project asks,

**RQ3:** How do LGBTQ Christians use communication strategies to advocate for affirmation of their own identity in religious contexts?

**SIT, DGT, and LGBTQ Christians.** In the review of SIT, I highlighted that social identities exist hierarchically, and group identities are nested identities within the higher order (Ashcroft, 2001). While groups are referred to as lower level, *lower* does not necessarily mean of

lesser value. SIT does, however, address that groups are of lower or higher status relative to others (i.e., the working class versus the upper class; Pratt, 2001). It suggests these members of low-status groups attempt to either reframe their status at psychological and ideological levels or select groups of an even lower status to compare themselves with socially—often resulting in successful attempts to develop a positive value of their own group (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

DGT holds that identities are socially gauged as minoritized or dominant; the theory's critical approach to groups concerns—through the dominant group perspective—how identity-based privilege of dominant groups is communicated on micro-individual, meso-organizational, and macro-societal levels. Razzante and Orbe (2018) offer that these dominant groups communicate power based on a variety of distinct motives to reinforce, impede, or dismantle societal power structures. DGT challenges dominant group essentialism by reconsidering that all dominant groups assert negative power (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). This considered, at first blush, DGT challenges SIT's claim that all individuals make only favorable comparisons of ingroups and use outgroups to appraise their value; it complicates the likelihood that just because intergroup difference exists, social groups will discriminate upon these differences. This leads me to consider SIT's caveat about identity salience: at times and depending on degree of value one finds in the superordinate categorical identity, individuals find their superordinate identity more salient than their ingroup identity. When this happens, it is often because ingroup/outgroup members feel a strong need to be a part of a "powerful and edifying collective" (Ashcroft & Mael, 2001, p. 37). In other words, groups that clash might sometimes find cohesion in the higher order identity. This notion begs the question:

**RQ 4:** How do LGBTQ Christians experience support among interactions with non-LGBTQ Christians in religious contexts?

SIT considers that every individual has a multiplicity of identities, and DGT suggests at least one of those identities will be marginalized or dominant. Razzante and Orbe (2018) posit, while some people are more advantaged than others across time (e.g., men versus women), dominant group members can glean from their marginalized experiences to better understand those of other marginalized people (e.g., a man can think of a time in which he felt subordinate in relation to another man with more societal power because of some other role). This coalesces with Tajfel and Turner's (1986) claim that social groups are always making comparisons with others, but through DGT we see the possibility for nonoverlapping groups to compare with each other to understand each other. The notion that outgroups might make these comparisons to increase understanding of each other, guides the final question of this research.

**RQ5:** How do LGBTQ Christians, who embody historically conflicting identities, draw from their own faith positions and sexual orientations to advocate for each other?

In summary, the above literature highlights not only that individuals can be of both dominant and nondominant groups simultaneously, but that dominant group members can glean from their marginalized identities to address power structures and either oppress or advocate for nondominant groups consciously or unconsciously. The literature also shows that when people organize around identity groups such as religion, that can create ingroup/outgroup cohesion or tension. This synthesis of literature, along with emergent themes I will later present, sets the stage to investigate how Christians as a dominant group work to reinforce, impede, or dismantle LGBTQ discrimination, and how LGBTQ Christians navigate through religious spaces as the embodiment of two historically conflicting social groups.

### **Chapter 3: Method**

This study originated from a desire to explore and better understand the various experiences of LGBTQ Christians in organized Christianity. To address this phenomenon, I conducted a qualitative study aimed at understanding the experiences of LGBTQ Christians through their own perspectives and offer autoethnographic accounts of my own experiences coming out as a queer Christian. While my understanding and analysis of these experiences are not generalizable, I conducted this process in hopes of elevating and giving meaning to the experiences of participants, while searching for commonalities they all shared based on their unique identities. This work was also centered around the hope of being able to relay the experiences of participants to church leaders and congregants seeking to be more inclusive and welcoming toward the LGBTQ population. Gaining an understanding of the needs of participants can provide a map for tangible change. In this methodology section, I describe my own position as the researcher of this work and my experience with this communication phenomenon. Subsequently, I describe my participants then outline my method used for participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis.

#### **Researcher Role and Ethical Considerations**

I identify as queer—to be very specific, I am a cisgender woman in a loving, committed relationship with another cisgender woman. I was raised in nonaffirming conservative Baptist and evangelical churches. Not exploring my sexual orientation until my early twenties, I already had one foot out of church by the time I came out, simply because I was starting to disidentify with the larger messages I was receiving from the church that were not affirming of identities of difference. I did not necessarily care about the perspectives my church body held about my sexual orientation once I became solidified in it, since at that point, my identity as a church

member held low valence. However, I cared a lot about how many people in the church treated people like me, because I saw the influence the church had on their identities. Because of relational ties, I still tried to remain a member of a church even after I came out. Despite efforts to maintain these social ties within the church upon making my sexual orientation public, I lost the support and validation of many people who have always stood by me—the ones who I did not simply see as “people of the church,” but rather those who had always been *my* people, my confidants. That personal loss led me to interrogate the notion that some people will in fact leave another over a disagreement on something like sexual orientation. Also, since that loss, I have not remained or reintegrated as a member of a church community but have maintained the Christian faith along with a few yet edifying relationships with other Christians in support of my sexual orientation and even alignment with my stance on sexual ethics altogether. Most of these individuals also seek Christianity in alternative ways outside of the church, yet not a single one of us lacks the desire to someday find a community in which to dwell in complete transparency, immersed in the affirmation of who and what we are the moment we enter.

I am a scholar of diversity and inclusion. All of my studies and research up until this point have centered around inclusion of minority groups and bridging broken relationships between communities. As one of the faith, I have done the work to learn about different Christians’ perspectives vis a vis the LGBTQ community, and the conversations I have had with many believers lend to my understanding of how complex and different these attitudes and beliefs are. Because of my sexual orientation, I had a point of leverage to ask about the attitudes, beliefs, and values of people like me—the ones of difference—the other queers in Christian spaces. Because of my identity, I was able to provide a safe and brave space for them to share their experiences in a way that many people in many Christian circles cannot. I embody complex

diversity; thus, I have a need to find where I and others like me can be included, starting within this body of work.

As an academic, I have done the internal work of training myself to be malleable and patient with the perspectives of others when it comes to conversations of Christian faith. I am not easily shaken by being in religious or academic contexts in which I find myself fundamentally opposed because of my sexual or spiritual orientation. Without a doubt, my open mind and experience in these two worlds will help me remain reflexive and relatable as a researcher. As an LGBTQ Christian, I identify with my participants and was able to hold a space in interviews for them to fill with sensitive issues relating to their identities and lived experiences as members of a marginalized population. I was able to understand the memories and feelings these interviews brought up, and my role in this experience was to guide my participants with the utmost care and support.

### **Participants**

I conducted 14 in-depth interviews to cover a variety of experiences and reach data saturation (Tracy, 2013). To qualify for participation in this study, participants were at least 18 years or older and identified as LGBTQ (with the exception of straight, cisgender allies who identify with the community in terms of being an advocate) and as a member of a Christian community or a former member of a Christian community during a time in which they also identified as LGBTQ. Participants were not required to be or have been an official member of a church community such as through baptism or an official welcoming process but were required to have had experience attending a church and participating with the congregation. At the time of the interviews, all 14 participants reported that they conceive of themselves as more spiritual than religious, but each of them had a significant number of past experience(s) within

Christianity. Only four participants reported that they still participate in church gatherings, where participation means attending services frequently if not weekly. For two of those four, participation equated to being a church leader (i.e., youth leader/Bible study leader). Only three interviewees affiliated with a church congregation that both claimed and espoused an open and affirming theological stance. Participants' pseudonyms, ages, avowed sexual orientation, described gender and/or sex, denominational background, and avowal to minoritized group(s) can be found in Table 1.

<b>Table 1</b>						
<b><i>Participant Demographics</i></b>						
<b>Name and pronouns</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Avowed sexual orientation</b>	<b>Described gender/sex</b>	<b>Denominational background/experience</b>	<b>Avowed minoritized population</b>	<b>Interview length</b>
Sara (she/her)	25	Bisexual; LGBTQ ally	Female	Southern Baptist	Disabled (OCD centered around moral convictions)	1:19:09
Atlas (they/them)	–	Queer/lesbian-queer	Nonbinary	Non-denominational	No	51:15
Mitchel (he/him)	29	Gay	Male	Catholic; Southern Gospel Baptist	Biracial (Black and White)	1:07:07
Chantal (she/her)	32	Queer	Female	Catholic; Ecumenical Catholic	Queer	1:00:48
Pen (they/them)	41	Attracted to females	Gender-queer	Catholic; Assemblies of God	Mixed race; ethnic	50:22
Sue (she/her)	28	She/Her	Woman	First Church of the Nazarenes; Non-denominational; Unitarian	Low socioeconomic status	56:32
Junior (he/him)	40	Gay	Male	Protestant; Catholic	Latino; LGBTQ	57:08
Stephanie (she/her)	38	Queer	Woman	Roman Catholic	Puerto Rican from the south	52:46
Peter	36	Gay	Man	Roman Catholic	Hispanic	54:46

(he/him)						
Jackie (she/her)	–	Lesbian/ queer/ gay/mostly attracted to women	Woman	Catholic; Charismatic Protestant	LGBTQ	48:34
Meredith (she/her)	23	Bisexual	Woman	Fundamentalist; Methodist	No	40:42
Kris (he/him)	34	Gay	Male	Roman Catholic	Latino	46:42
Tiffany (she/her)	43	Bisexual	Female	–	No	50:39
Claire (she/her)	36	Queer; bisexual; open	Woman	Methodist; Catholic	Woman	52:17

*Note.* A dash (–) indicates that information was not offered by participants.

**Recruitment.** Snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) was used to recruit participants. This method is a process of individuals referring one another based on a known attribute or common characteristic that qualifies them for research (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Initial participants were recruited through my existing social networks. Snowball sampling is not only advantageous for researching groups of people with certain characteristics in common, but also for those who may otherwise be difficult to recruit (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Finally, an aspect of this method valued in the current work is that this method gave the opportunity for participants to build community with those who share their unique identity as they reached out to recruit each other via social media. See Appendix A for text of a recruitment email.

## **Procedure**

**Data collection.** To gather data, I used semi-structured interviews which fall under a qualitative research method. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility in the interactions with participants (Tracy, 2013). Leveraging this flexibility during interviews, I briefly disclosed some of my own aspects of identity including that I am a cisgender, bisexual woman in a monogamous relationship, with an array of dependents, experiences, and identities that make me the researcher

I am. While all interviews were co-constructed, some resulted in more or less of my own disclosure depending on participants' level of solicitation or invitation. I shared what I felt called to in order to create the most reciprocal, natural, and interactional interview space. Doing so created a bond and safety with participants.

Interviews averaged 60 minutes in duration, only exceeding the maximum scheduled 60 minutes if participants wanted to keep sharing beyond that. Interviews were held via Zoom. Because we were in a global pandemic during the time of this research, this channel of communication allowed us to follow standard health and safety protocols as outlined by the CDC and state and local guidelines. Interviews were recorded with the permission of participants, and further transcribed word-for-word. A waiver of documented consent was distributed to participants preceding the interviews. Signed consent was not necessary since the research presented no more than minimal risk of harm and a signature would be the only way to link participants with the research. A waiver of documented consent form can be found in Appendix B.

Finally, while most data were collected in the allotted interview time, some participants chose to follow up via email to share artifacts that represented some of their experiences. These artifacts included screenshots of text messages that they had received from loved ones and value statements and emails from their church communities that came up in interviews and as having influenced their religious and/or coming-out experiences. That participants wanted to continue disclosure of data shows the procedural integrity by which I aimed to push forth this research.

**Interview protocol.** The interview protocol included a set of 17 questions. Initial screening questions were asked to ensure participants met the qualifications of the research. Thereafter, a series of open-ended questions that explore the experiences of participants were

asked. The protocol (see Appendix C) was informed by the research questions that emerged from the literature. Therefore, I reviewed those questions and explicated how the theories reviewed were addressed by the interview questions.

RQ1 (Why do LGBTQ individuals affiliate with Christianity?) was informed by Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory (SIT) and thus the interview questions were composed with that in mind. The questions were geared toward understanding the motive for group affiliation and how that bolstered identity. The questions also provided a platform for participants to express the aspects of Christianity that were salient to them and worked to positively uplift their identities. Additionally, RQ2 (What tensions exist between LGBTQ and Christian identities, and when does each of the two identities become salient?) was also informed by SIT, and thus, the interview questions asked participants to describe various tensions they feel when populating religious contexts, based on their dual identities as both Christian and queer.

RQ3 (How do LGBTQ Christians use communication strategies to advocate for affirmation of their own identity in religious contexts?) is informed by Razzante & Orbe's (2018) Dominant Group Theory (DGT). Because DGT explores communication interactions of dominant and marginalized groups through the perspectives of the dominant, these interview questions probed participants to think about the ways in which they strategically communicate based on their ability to identify with a dominant Christian identity/(group).

Finally, RQ4 (How do LGBTQ Christians experience support among religious interactions with non-LGBTQ Christians?) and RQ5 (How do LGBTQ Christians, who embody historically conflicting identities, draw from their own faith positions and sexual orientations to advocate for each other?) are informed by juxtaposing SIT and DGT in conversation with one another. Interview questions in this vein explore how participants as LGBTQ Christians

experience interactions which enhance their positive sense of self, as well as how they work to advocate for one another as they share unique and often contested identities in a larger dominant Christian context.

**Data analysis.** For my analysis I used a phrenetic iterative approach which is a method of alternating between drawing from existing theories and from emergent data to make meaning of social phenomena (Tracy, 2013). In this case, DGT and SIT were the theories that paired with my emergent data. I analyzed the data through a process of primary and secondary coding cycles. In a primary coding cycle, one brackets their research questions and concepts derived from the theories used in the research, to identify consistent words or phrases that emerge within the data (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 196; Tracy, 2013). To identify these themes which are also referred to as initial codes (Tracy, 2013), I searched the transcribed interviews for a wide range of categories. I identified 293 first-level codes and grouped them together into axial codes, or the more specific codes that open codes are grouped in together in a way that makes sense for interpretation (Tracy, 2013). For example, the axial code of *black and white thinking* encompassed first-level codes of *the bible as an uncontested truth*, *church as politicized*, *false or perceived binary*, and *false certainty that LGBTQ people are going to hell*. Once these themes were established, I applied them to each transcript. During this entire process, a code book was developed and referenced.

**Autoethnography.** Adding a secondary layer of data generation and analysis, I used the method of evocative autoethnography. The overarching method of autoethnography is a form of narrative analysis in which a researcher documents their own lived experiences as a way of reflexively making sense of their data. According to Tracy (2013),

Many autoethnographies are marked by intersectionality, focusing on how intersecting identity standpoints based on sexual orientation, gender identity, social class, ethnicity, religion, age, ability, and education emerge as salient in our interactions, and how these subject positions impact one's privilege, marginalization, or vulnerability in life as lived. (p. 70)

These markings made autoethnography rich for the present study which explored the intersection and overlap of Christian and LGBTQ communities and identities. This method was rich for me as a researcher who embodies those overlapping identities.

Evocative autoethnography is a specific avenue of autoethnographic inquiry which allowed me to move beyond objectively describing my experiences as they related to the research process and social phenomenon I interrogated and offer my thoughts and feelings about those experiences as data (Mendéz, 2013). Furthermore, evocative autoethnography allows for my readers to connect with participants and me on a personal and human level as I explored and exposed parts of my own lived experiences in the text in hopes to invoke empathy and understanding from readers toward LGBTQ Christians. This transparent process connects researcher with participants with reader. Using autoethnography also allowed me to build trust between participants and reader. By exposing my own story, I proved and modeled the trust I have in my reader as a steward of my transparency and myself as the researcher who protects sacred and confidential information. This modeling also bolstered my participants' dependability on me as a steward of their stories, as they know that I, as someone with similar lived experiences, would never breach their confidentiality and would uphold the validity of the data which they have so generously offered me because I know the implications otherwise. Writing from an LGBTQ Christian standpoint, using evocative autoethnographic inquiry is advantageous

in a few ways. On one hand, my readers who have had exposure to or are socialized in either or both LGBTQ and Christian communities will be able to relate to my account of personal experiences as well as my analysis of participant data. On the other hand, my readers who do not have exposure to or experiences with these communities can still draw from and transfer their experiences in and with other social contexts to identify with my stories and the stories of my participants in this work.

Autoethnography, in all of its forms, can be done selectively and either retroactively or in the moment (Williams, 2016). In order to record my own lived experiences, throughout my research process I journaled about stories of my own past experiences, thoughts, and feelings as a Christian queer, as well as how this project affected my thoughts and feelings throughout its duration. Not written in one singular place, these reflections were scattered on the back of notebooks, on leftover napkins, in text messages, notes apps, and on the sidebars of this project draft. Some parts were written and erased or crossed out, other parts were edited, and some parts were left completely raw. This act of journaling and the personal data I created was bracketed throughout the process of collecting the data set from my participants. Because evocative autoethnographic methods suggest that one can record their experiences from the past as well as the present, this allowed for temporal freedom in introspection and reflection. For example, as I interviewed my participants, they often shared things that ignited memories of my own past that yielded new feelings and novel interpretation of my research conducted at a specific moment in time. Autoethnography is a method of inquiry in itself (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018), and it is also a way of identifying with participants who hold similar identities and have similar lived experiences. Thus, as I collected my data, completed the coding process, and recorded my results, I incorporated salient themes from my journal into a discussion with findings from my

participants, to help me interpret the emergent data holistically. While I wrote down many accounts of my own experiences throughout my data collection and coding phases, waiting to finalize my story until the analysis was another means toward bracketing my subjectivity and protecting myself from constructing a narrative with myself as the protagonist, while fully recognizing my field of experiences inherently bears an effect on the final presentation of the data.

Finally, as evocative autoethnography yields evocative information and can be an evocative process, the method had two implications for the present work. First, as this research unfolded and I presented my findings, I not only reported personal data that was transparent and raw but offered excerpts of my journal as intervals throughout my discussion section, as an act of transparency. Second, in doing so, I broke an analytical narrative to queer my writing process to provide a more personal—at times even poetic—and embodied account of my life as an LGBTQ Christian and my role as a researcher in this work. Once again, the aim of this study was not to yield generalizable findings but rather to support participants in gaining a deeper sense of their identity and offer these reflections to all who are interested in being more inclusive of LGBTQ/LGBTQ Christian identities and supportive of the experiences of those populations.

## Chapter 4: Findings

Fourteen semi-structured interviews conducted in this project yielded a rich data set that both evidences and contributes to Dominant Group Theory and Social Identity Theory, as well as reveals the lived experiences of LGBTQ people in the context of Christianity. The purpose of this study is to explore research in these areas of social identity and dominant group communication through the analysis of LGBTQ Christians to gain an understanding of their experiences as social and spiritual/religious beings and the ways in which they communicate across historically conflicting social groups, namely LGBTQ and Christian communities. The LGBTQ Christian demographic is underrepresented in communication literature and this project begins to give the group a voice. These findings also serve religious communities that are eager to extend and increase inclusion and outreach initiatives toward the LGBTQ community—one that has often been incongruently dismissed, silenced, excluded, and oppressed across many Christian denominations.

In this section, I relay the lived experiences of my research participants through their own words. Through excerpts, streams of consciousness, and simple statements responding to questions asked from my interview protocol, this section confronts and exposes in-depth and meaningful answers from participant interviews, or data, I use to support my findings. Ten of my participants whose data I am reporting have asked explicitly that their real names be used, three participants chose their own pseudonyms to protect their identities, and one participant was assigned a pseudonym upon request.

### **Affiliation with Christianity**

The first question in this research asked: *Why do LGBTQ individuals affiliate with Christianity?* Interviews revealed that affiliation with Christianity is dynamic and defined in

many ways. Participants offered a complex web of reasons as to why they do or did affiliate with Christianity, including family culture, acceptance from God, community belonging, comfort, social justice, and identity development.

**Family culture.** Most participants reported that their religion and family culture were inextricably linked. Many of them even used ‘culture’ and ‘family’ interchangeably, thus, I call this theme *family culture*. For instance, Mitchell (he/him) states:

I think it's worth mentioning that it really has been a culture thing for me. It's just what my parents were, always very kind of Christian, and mom was raised Catholic. My dad was raised Super Southern Gospel Baptist. And so that's kind of always been a part of my culture.

Mitchell’s religious affiliation was essentially a matter of family lineage.

Coincidentally, most participants who identified as Hispanic/LatinX came from Catholic/Roman Catholic/Ecumenical Catholic backgrounds and attested that their religion and race/ethnicity were perceived as inseparable. For those who did grow up Catholic, Catholicism, infiltrated their upbringing and socialization. Junior (he/him) exemplifies this:

I was born in it in the sense that my parents were Catholic, you know? So that was the beginning of understanding that there is a God and, you know, there's creation and then there's all these different rules of the Ten Commandments. And all those different processes that we had to go through in Catholicism, which was, you know, baptism and communion. Oh, and then the fact that I went to Catholic school.

All participants, including Junior, argued that their upbringing in the faith had striking impact on their social identities, but they offered varied responses encompassing how they feel about church and religion in general at this point in their lives. Moving from family culture as a more

external influence for associating with Christianity, I highlight themes below that emerged in interviews as intrinsic motivators for associating with the faith.

**Acceptance from God.** *“I was listening to this song which just broke me wide open. After listening to a few times, I meditated and asked God, “Lord what brings you Jubilee? What situation in my life or people I know bring you jubilee?” Immediately the Lord showed me you. And how much He adores you. With a protective fire and intimacy. I love you. And I wanted to let you know God shared with me how proud He is of you and who you are. You are His beloved. You are perfectly and wonderfully made...I love you. Jesus loves you. Wildly.”*  
*–text messages from the right people at the right time.*

The theme of acceptance from God emerged as interviewees expressed an overall perception that God loves, values, and affirms participants unconditionally for who they are, regardless of gender/sexual orientation. In my life, I have often been randomly graced by a feeling of acceptance from God, and my hunch is that it is a result of having God’s spirit within me. I also believe God works in and through other people like my friends in the faith who send me texts out of the blue to affirm and support me. Whatever the reason this acceptance is bestowed upon us, many participants reported the feeling as something that ties them to their faith. For example, when asked if she had ever felt a conflict between her queer identity and Christian faith, Claire (she/her) responded: “I think what's interesting about how your question strikes me is that I never felt conflict within myself...I never felt unloved...Jesus loved me.” Her assurance struck me. Jackie (she/her) adds:

I think knowing and very much believing that God was for me and that God was willing to go to the places in my heart that I might have felt shame or guilt around, always

allowed me to feel like Jesus was really there with me in my challenges, whether that was around sexuality or anything else.

Speaking to more specific messaging, other participants cited the Bible as a message of God's acceptance toward them. Atlas (they/them) stated, "even though I'm queer, that doesn't...take me away from my faith. If anything, it helped me find more beauty in it. And I am very grateful to find that I could be queer and find passages that could elevate me." Pen (they/them) also adds, "I never felt judgment from God...When I was really working on a relationship [with God] through prayer and meditation and reading the Bible, it was always love."

These excerpts evidence that participants are aware of the external tensions surrounding being queer and Christian yet, despite these tensions, they each attest to feeling a consonance between who they are as LGBTQ and who God is to them—someone they could find acceptance in. Some participants even highlight that their vulnerable relationship with God is their very definition of Christianity. Yet, while some define their faith as relational intimacy with God, others added that their relationships with other people in the faith work to constitute Christianity as something that is practiced. This concept of practice gets at some of the outward organizational aspects of Christianity, such as community.

**Community belonging.** The next theme to emerge as a reason to affiliate with Christianity was community belonging. Participants communicate this as a desire or ability to fit in with a group of people either for the purpose of practicing Christianity, or because of Christianity (i.e., the Bible talks a lot about being in communion with one another so many Christians congregate out of obligation at the least). A church community is an entity whose members support each other in and share a faith system but also exist in community through day-to-day pursuits. They often congregate outside of church but do so because of a shared

understanding of God and religion and what their purpose in the world is. Pen's comment helps tease out the way in which concepts of community belonging and acceptance from God can be very different:

I still say that there's no, there's no community like the church community...And it was something that was really impactful to me because my family wasn't you know, my parents were divorced...My mom worked all the time. And so, for me, our church community—my church community—was really like where my friends, where my extended family were. But it was also not an affirming space in any way.

Pen suggested that the church body can be leveraged as a network of familial support, one in which people aid each other in tangible ways. But Pen also noted that what was lacking in their community was acceptance of varying gender and sexual orientations, hence “not an affirming space.” On the other hand, Tiffany (she/hers) felt truly accepted by her close church friends in terms of her identity, on top of experiencing a sense of community at church:

I would say, the thing I miss is community. I mean, my dearest friends that I still have in my life, who have been accepting of who I am, are all friends from church...that community was really important. And I do miss that...And I miss having that be a routine aspect of my life. Although they're still in my life, that community aspect on a weekly basis isn't necessarily there anymore. And I do miss them.

Tiffany also mentioned that her church friends were among the first she came out to and, while she expressed they were both affirming of her sexuality as well as her closest friends, church is what brought them into community together. The loyalty to weekly religious practice kept her friendships highly integrated, but that integration has shifted as a result of Tiffany disassociating with the church.

A bit of a different take, Mitchell did not express sensing as much overt acceptance within his church, but he did feel relief in social interactions afforded by church:

Things I really valued while I was at church was a place of belonging and community. I'm a major extrovert and...I come from a seriously abusive background and the church was the first place that I developed healthy relationships with, like just human beings, adults... so, community, [is] a place to kind of express myself...I love corporate worship and being able to go somewhere and just kind of like be in 'all the feels' you know, and kind of connect and communicate. That's probably the only thing that I really like that I can't get that anywhere else.

What Mitchell notes about *corporate worship*—a term which denotes individuals coming together as a group with the shared goal of encountering God through prayer, song, communion, and other various forms of supplication—speaks to one of the advantageous aspects of Christianity as an organized around religion, which is that it has the power to bring people together and promote a feeling of cohesion and belonging.

Like Mitchell, Meredith (she/hers) came from an untraditional family setting and looked to her church community as a place “to find friends and...kind of a distraction...for people to love [her] and accept [her].” Atlas also adds “I needed extra support in my life when I didn't get it at home, and I really was comforted getting it from a church.” Lots of similar sentiments were shared by others, but Atlas’ comment bridges the theme of being drawn to community with an aspect of *comfort*, which also emerged as a motivator for associating with the faith.

**Comfort.** Participants commonly expressed comfort in the feeling that they could lean on God and religion when faced with trials of life, and I operationalize comfort as the internalization of that understanding.

Two types of comfort emerged in this study's findings, and their delineation is important. The first is *comfort in the superordinate*, a theme expressed in interviews as a calming brought by one's belief that they have access to God or a loving deity, and that such a being can help explain their purpose in life. To exemplify, Sue (she/hers) describes the vastness of God as a refuge:

In some of the more difficult times in my life, I have managed to get myself more at peace when...praying to God. I'm talking to the source of the universe, whatever that has looked like. But I just felt more at peace in my life. And I felt like even when things go wrong or so long in my own definition of wrong, I felt better about moving from that when I have something else right to believe in.

Junior suggested how he has found comfort in compartmentalizing God and the church—something most participants have done: “Now, I'm much more spiritual and I feel like I know more. I don't know, I feel more in tune with God as opposed to a God that is preached...I experience him in everything I do and everything I see in moments in my life.”

The second type of comfort expressed in interviews was *comfort in religiosity*. Participants expressed this comfort as having a sense of purpose and guidance yielded by symbols and rituals found in and through organized Christianity, where rituals are practices such as corporate worship and prayer and symbols are figureheads such as Jesus, goddesses, and the saints who promote and exemplify social justice. Kris (he/his) expresses a comfort found in “the structure of the rituals,” which he notes “[is] something that I have even been a little removed from...in my adult life but comes back to me like riding a bike...I know all the responses, the songs, when you sit and then stand, and the prayers.” Stephanie adds, “what I love about identifying as ecumenical Catholic is I find complete peace in Catholic prayers, specifically the

rosary, like just the repetitive nature of it. It's even my way of meditating.” These responses posit that comfort was found in both the content of religion and participants’ ability to engage in it.

*“Cast all your cares upon God, for God cares for you.” The words hung on the banner above the alter of the church in which I grew up. Every Sunday I fixated on them. Of all the sermons heard and songs sang, when I think of church I think of that banner and the way it made everything else fade away.*

*I’ve always had a love-hate relationship with the church. Some days, the handshakes and smiles and interactions felt so contrived, and the power of sermons felt so performative. Other times, I felt as if one verse of a hymn could fix everything broken in my life, like being in church was being at the threshold of heaven. These days, I keep my distance—maybe because of the demands of life, maybe because I’m afraid I won’t fit in the same, maybe because I don’t want to deal with people’s opinions about me, maybe because I’ve just simply changed. I haven’t quite reconciled why. But in all the time away, I’ve never felt like God went anywhere. God is still my comfort and the one on whom I cast my cares. The rest I can later reconcile.*

**Social justice.** As interviews revealed that participants clung to figureheads of Christianity such as Jesus for comfort, they were also attracted to the social justice that religious figureheads promote and exemplify. They noted that a belief in a higher power informed their higher purpose, a purpose most articulated as advocating for social justice. Social justice was also expressed in subthemes such as love, care, support, and advocacy for all people. For example, Mitchell notes, “what draws me [to Christianity], I don't know, just, I'm a very altruistic person and I'm very much [about the] ‘unconditional love and humanities, social justice and help people’ kind of thing.” Sara (she/her) adds,

I also believe that there's a story in the Bible about after Jesus was resurrected, he met two men...And they welcomed [Jesus] in and they treated him well. And then he revealed it to be himself. And I really believe that that's our job as people...we don't know who is sent with a higher purpose. We don't know when we're supposed to, you know, respond to that call of the other...I'd say my spirituality is a call for others.

Peter admires nuns for their social involvement: “Whenever I see like an interview with a nun who is protesting nuclear power or something, I'm just like, cool, I love her already. Like, what a badass.” As a collective, participants noted the many altruistic aspects of Christianity and their desire to hold fast to and even practice those parts of Christianity which enable them to be social-justice advocates.

**Identity development.** Christianity, as both an organized religion and a faith system, played a major role in the identity development of participants, and identity development was something that attracted them to the religion. Namely, many interviewees expressed Christianity as a catalyst for wellness. Mitchell noted, “It can help with your mental health and, you know, just having a positive outlook on how you present yourself to the world.”

For some participants, religion was also found to support their LGBTQ identity development. For example, Jackie, still an integral part of her church community, stated the church is “a place where I have people who walk with me in the complexity of very much identifying as LGBTQ and having this this theology, but also being someone who's going to push [the church] into better understanding LGBTQ people across the spectrum.”

Fortunately for Jackie, she feels validated in her identity as someone who is both Christian and bisexual and works to support both communities attached to those identities. However, her comment also alludes to the tense experience of embodying an LGBTQ identity

and claiming a faith system or theology. Such a concept brings us to the next question in this research because, while interviews yielded answers as to why LGBTQ people desire to affiliate or associate with organized Christianity, common tensions emerge by doing so.

### **Tensions between LGBTQ and Christian Communities**

*I remember lying in bed next to her, my hair line drenched, ears flooded from tears I couldn't stop. I buried my head in the uncovered chest of my girlfriend of two years, as if her heart was a magnet and I couldn't get close enough. Everything in our day was beautiful until that point. She and I had spent a summer evening on the beach—tacos, sunset, the works. We were walking back to the car, and she made a comment about the afterlife—the context was irrelevant and, I can't even recall the comment itself but, it had to do with someone's thoughts on reincarnation. Regardless of the statement altogether, what she said triggered a thought rooted in my gut: That someday we would die, and we don't know for sure what's coming. I remember asking myself, "What if being with her means I won't make it to some afterlife, wherever or whatever that even is?" And I don't mean just because she's a woman. I mean because of everything we do and are together: unmarried, sexually intimate, having some variations in our belief systems. I never felt much condemnation about my sexual orientation, but rather how I go through the world in my body and with whom. I've always heard so much controversy about same-sex love in the church, but what about all the other ways I could screw up? And if I'm doing it all wrong, why am I so happy with my life? And if I am wrong, is it that big a deal? She saw my body break right there on the boardwalk and I told her about my sudden revelation. Visceral reactions. Worry. Fear. Anger. I became, in a moment, a stranger to my own life. We talked about it in the car and across our pillows later that night. In a moment I had gone from feeling total consonance and peace in being with this person, to feeling completely in sin. A*

*slippery slope of intrusive thoughts: I'm unworthy of God, I'm a sinner, I could be making a huge mistake and, if I am, can this mistake really impede God's love for me in the end? Does God hate our relationship? Am I responsible for my partner's well-being if I believe this way of living is wrong and I pull her down with me?*

*Where was this all coming from?*

*Thoughts that can outright bend a mind.*

*"I don't know if I can be with you," I told her.*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"I mean I really have no idea if I am allowed to be."*

*Words felt viscerally in hearts. The sudden belief in black and white, right and wrong, and that we were in the wrong. But did believing that make it true?*

*"I don't understand what's happening," were the first words out of her mouth the next morning.*

*Her eyes were the saddest and glossiest and prettiest I'd ever seen.*

*And the worst part? That I, having grown up in the faith, having cited to her every reason why I think God blesses our relationship, breaking down to a shell of doubt in an instant, dismantled her. I was supposed to protect her, to be a witness of God's unconditional love for her. Though she didn't grow up in the faith, I told her to trust that God loved and affirmed her. And there I was redacting every belief about God and every bit of theology I had interpreted as validating my human nature to love this woman with all of my being. She did nothing wrong and everything she knew was uprooted because of some inkling I felt the night before. And she was—we both were—heartbroken about what it all meant for us.*

*I read a book once about a woman who identified as gay, and then had what she believed to be a revelation from God. In this revelation, she was told to leave the woman she was with.*

*You know, that “turn from your old ways” moment they talk about in church. And she did. And she goes on to write about how she turned to heterosexuality once she got saved, and about how God blessed that by giving her and her husband two babies. As I read her memoir, I could never shake the question, “What happened to the woman she loved?” “This ‘once-gay’ writer had dropped the woman from her narrative as quickly as she had dumped her in real life,” I thought. And I always wondered what that other woman thought about God after being left in the name of God. What if she didn’t know God? What if now she’ll ever want to? It’s not right for me to read between the lines. And maybe that writer and I have different convictions and ways of witnessing, and that’s okay with me. But what that book elicited for me is the belief that, above being called to live righteously, I am called to love people. I think there are a lot of grey areas in the Bible, but the words that have always resonated with me are as follows:*

*“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Matthew 22:36-40*

*Because of these words, I stayed with Katie through the tumultuous feelings of grief and fear of judgement and separation from God. Those feelings passed like a sickness and what stayed was the peace and fulfillment of what I believe to be God within me. Not long after that night I prayed and asked God to fill me with peace if the life I was living was one I could move forward in. I remember saying “God, if you love me, then you must want me, and if you want me, you have the power to make me what you need me to be. So, if I can’t be this, change me. Make me not want her.” God didn’t change me. And I still want her. And I also want God. And I know some people in my life who will say that night on the boardwalk was God revealing some sort of truth to me—a spiritual conviction as they say. But a lot of those same people also tell me the*

*devil prowls about to tempt and taunt, and what is good comes from God and what is bad comes from the devil. Closing the door to love has never once in my life felt good. I'm not here to be the judge of good and evil, right and wrong, but what I am saying is that I feel like my same-sex love has made me a special target within spiritual warfare. There is a deep-rooted tension there. I have never felt a stronger pull than the love of God and the love of a woman pulling me at the same time—and not necessarily in opposing directions. And, for me, all I can do is try to love God and love my partner as myself, with an open heart and mind. And if I am wrong about everything else under the sun, including acting on my sexual orientation, at least I am trying to love.*

My second research question asks, “What tensions exist between LGBTQ and Christian identities?” Broadly, interviews revealed most of these tensions exist due to lack of attempts between LGBTQ and Christian communities to understand each other while making assumptions about the other group, the church’s inability at large to articulate values and opinions on sexuality and gender, and both groups’ struggle to converge over language and terminology used by the other. In other words, tension was found to be a result of communication or lack thereof, and coded themes and excerpts from participants evidence this more intricately.

**Black and white thinking.** Similar to my own experiences, one of the biggest tensions participants noted between the church and the queer community was that, often, people who are both in the church and outside the queer community made hasty conclusions about same-sex relations as either right or wrong. I coded this as black and white thinking. Some participants articulated the concept as a *false binary* or *perceived binary*—the belief in objective truth that posits what is right and wrong and how one should behave according to God’s plan.

Mitchell noted, when people project belief in objective truth but do not live according to that truth themselves, they perpetuate Christian hypocrisy and hold others to a double standard:

Something the church taught me is black and white thinking: it's either all bad or all good... And so, sexuality is kind of a complex thing where my convictions are a little more loose. I don't know that I've given myself permission to really experiment or anything, but I don't push judgment on the people around me anymore because it's like, those same standards that I was being placed under, the people that put them on me, they don't even follow those things...and it's just like...the scam of it all.

Mitchell's words help exemplify this push to be perfect—a common concept that surges its way through Christianity—this unattainable standard that, when unmet, people feel distraught in their faith and often spiral in their journey toward desired sanctification.

Kris also noted in our conversation that his sexuality made him feel like he could never be fully catholic and fully gay because same-sex attraction falls outside of a traditional Catholic sexual ethic. Many people interviewed shared a sentiment similar to this and, whether they still consider themselves to be Christian, have struggled to identify with the religion, lest they be perceived as hypocritical or one-sided. To combat this hypocrisy in her own life, Claire asks an important question, “I think for me, specifically around the Christian faith, there exists some arrogance and entitlement, I perceive, and that colonization nature of “this is the way, the truth, and the light, and all other things are wrong.” Throughout the interview, Clare wondered what kinds of damage people in the church could avoid by simply being willing to be wrong and hold softly various opinions about topics like same-sex love. While the church can be rife with binary thought, living as a Christian queer is to adopt fluidity and to have some peace notwithstanding the grey areas of theology as they pertain to sexuality/gender. Thus, encountering black and

white thinking in the church left most participants feeling like they were on the margins and were frequently confronted about their alleged sin. Meredith expressed,

Pretty much throughout that entire time of being in, like fundamentalist Christianity, [bisexuality] was constructed as a sin. I had several of my youth group leaders have one-on-one conversations with me being like, “you know, you can't do this. Life will not be fulfilling to you ultimately... You're not going to be happy if you pursue dating women.”

Adding on, Peter shared that the discourse in his communities framed same-sex relations as “just bad.”

I feel like when there was a mass where it was being talked about or like mentioned, it was like such a veiled reference where it was, you know, “a man who lives with a man is in sin,” you know? And so that is the extent of what was talked about, about gender and being gay and—bisexuality probably wasn't a thing because people were like “black or white; you're either gay or you're not.”

I appreciate how Peter used “black or white” to refer to not only believing theology as objective truth, but also as a term that captures parochial thought which denies the fluidity of sexuality and gender.

A unique and reflexive take on black and white thinking, Pen shared how they used to project personal beliefs on other queer people in their church:

Even though I was a part of this [LGBTQ] community...I absolutely was like “marriage is between a man and a woman.” Like, I didn't know what the fuck I was talking about...I absolutely projected that. I even remember meeting this woman who was out as queer and was coming to church. And I remember having a conversation. I was like, “you know, that—that's not like—that's not OK.” I know that God doesn't want you to be

[that]...she probably, the whole time, was like “I know that you're queer. I can feel it. And this is ridiculous.”

Finally, although results revealed that black and white thinking was primarily one-directional, Claire offered a special perspective on other side of the coin.

I feel a lot of sadness for folks who can't access—this is my perception—who can't access compassion for folks who are still making the choice to reconcile those identities. I think that there is a lot of judgment within our [LGBTQ] community for queer people who try to also have a spiritual connection...I feel like it's rooted in sadness, harm and jealousy...And so, to vilify folks who are struggling even more from within both communities...and being ostracized from both communities you are desperately trying to be a part of, feels cruel. And I know that hurt people hurt people. And so, I think that there's a lot of judgment that can come from within our communities for folks who are trying to reconcile that. So, I try to come from a place of curiosity and understanding.

Claire's comment really offers a sentiment of equity and empathy, one that is necessary in dismantling deep-seated, often systemic bias and prejudice for outgroups.

**Implication.** Black and white thinking in the church often manifests in the form of non-LGBTQ Christians weaponizing conclusions about same-sex love and relationships as well as genderqueer identities. Implication is a theme that summates this premise and can be thought of as an allusion, that which goes without saying, or a conclusion made from something that was not plainly said. Participates remarked that, often, the ‘inappropriateness’ of their queer identity was implied rather than explicitly suggested. For instance, Stephanie tells a story about the time she wanted to be baptized in the Catholic church, and, in order for that to happen, she had to complete a ritual of confessing the implied sin of same-sex relations:

We each had to have like a confession of our sins before we were actually able to be baptized in the Holy Spirit...[the minister] had like a long list of like, “have you done this?” which really made me... rooted in the guilt [of those things] a little bit. So for instance, some of the questions were like...“Have you engaged in sexual intimacy with women?” And at that time, I had not. But I was still discerning this thing. And so, all of these really specific questions were enlightening me to all the ways in which I had sinned and didn't even know if I had sinned in God’s eyes or in the church's eyes.

This experience exemplifies the projection of guilt and shame that burdened many participants.

Implication also came in the form of people communicating evasively about LGBTQ topics. Kris explained, “there weren't really any direct instances that I could think of when, you know, my family or my church community knocked down homosexuality...as a sin. ‘You're going to hell, be damned,’ whatever. But it was just very much a pink elephant thing that we all kind of knew about it.” Implication also came in the form of participants being told that to be queer was to be misinformed, misguided, or lost. Tiffany’s experience with feeling implicated is unique in that, while questioning how to identify, she was told,

“You feel confused and you're having a hard time because you're doing something wrong. And that's the reason why you're struggling with your identity, not because you are queer, but because you're actually not.” I heard that a lot.

Peter talked about how his preconceived understanding of what it means to be gay in the church hindered his ability to really grasp his own sexuality:

When any masses had any content about like people who [are gay]...like they never even say the word *gay*, because it's like a scary word—it's like off limits...So it was really hard for me actually when I was growing up in the church to really even know, like,

“what is being gay?” Which is why it took me so long to know that I was, because I didn't know that that was a thing I could be.

These responses offer two things. First, they reveal the impact of language on social identity, as one cannot define themselves as gay if they have a blurry conception of what that means in a given context. Second, they summarize the way participants are told that they are in sin by choosing to engage in same-sex relations/relationships. This is an important concept since being implicated as a sinner stunted the development of participants' LGBTQ and Christian identities. Further, most participants attested to believing that their church communities were devoutly trying to fight for them as people who were 'lost,' or 'broken,' and the turn-off of such ineffective evangelism was the very reason many participants left the church feeling betrayed, unloved, unaccepted, and unaffirmed.

*I have found that implication is what sends me spiraling, and where implication shows up most in my life is discursively—what I like to think of as the day-to-day language we use, or the words we choose. “I used to be gay but then I found God and God saved me,” someone once said to me. I can't think of a better example of implication than some variation of this sentence (which I hear quite often in—especially fundamental—Christian spaces). I can't speak enough to how much harm comes from claiming the objective truth that to be LGBTQ is to be lost. To equate finding God with a non-LGBTQ orientation is to make a false claim that anyone who is LGBTQ is devoid of God. And that anyone who finds God will supernaturally become straight. This is why language matters—I truly believe the people in my life who have said those words to me did so with the intention of witnessing to me by proclaiming the power of God's love. Implication is not always intentional, but I can't think of how it has productively served me. And there, is the tension.*

*Imagine the beauty in each other we would find if we would open our hearts before speaking our minds.*

**Lack of language.** While the tension of implication is a communication breakdown, another tension related to language was participants' inability to articulate coming out or being out. This is because both LGBTQ and Christian communities have distinct vocabularies through which members construct shared meaning. Participants reported feeling the inability to communicate either their queer orientation or their faith position, due to language barriers within either or both communities. This is not surprising, considering that these communities are not perceived as historically compatible. While the communication breakdown is a two-way street, the church's shortcomings in addressing LGBTQ topics inclusively or even at all, was a noted frustration among participants. Jackie describes:

When I was in college, I started realizing that there's this pattern in my life of like experiencing these flickers of attraction to other women. And I was suddenly like, oh, like...I'm actually like into girls. And I was like, why do I do this? Like, I'm a Christian and I've never heard anyone of my church talk about this as though it's someone in the church. It's always like people 'out there' who made this choice. And I didn't know who to talk to.

During our time together, Jackie spoke about how church communities do not address same-sex attraction as a result of assuming—or pretending—no one in the congregation experiences it.

Another participant, Atlas, identifies as asexual and gender nonbinary, and noted that their labels are particularly hard for people in the church to understand and articulate:

When people ask me about why I'm suddenly asexual, I don't want them to ask me why. And so I don't mention being nonbinary as often... because they don't understand it all

the time and I don't like it when I explain it to them and they are not respecting at all. Then I'm like, my God, I feel like we missed the mark and then I feel like [we're] setting ourselves up for disappointment...I feel like my labels, they're a little more complicated and they require a little extra explanation. Not everybody is ready for it in my life sometimes.

Peter added to this concept of the church diluting LGBTQ identities due to lack of language and understanding of Biblical texts:

Conversations around these gender terms weren't even there because it was just framed as like "thou shall not lie with another person of the same sex"...And I recognize that...there were no teachings that said that people weren't supposed to be gay—that was all interpretation.

Peter's comment is an interesting one because it links the lack of language in the church with the projection of common Christian beliefs about being LGBTQ. Language is necessary for sensemaking because we make sense of things not just by and within ourselves, but along with others who are inherently tied to our identity development. When the language necessary to process something so substantive is missing from a body of people, tension emerges as uncertainty increases. In this this case, it seems that participants encountered many people with formed conclusions about LGBTQ topics who did not know how to communicate their opinions.

**Forced gender roles.** Not unlike the way continuity in language is important for identity development, so is an understanding of gender-based stereotypes. In teasing out tensions between the church and the LGBTQ community, I asked participants what kind of conversations they have around gender and sexual identities with other people in the church. Meredith pointed out the rigid gender norms that existed in her fundamentalist faith community:

There were so many sermons given on, you know, the roles of biblical manhood and biblical womanhood and...all this stuff of how marriage is for a man and a woman...And there's no such thing as being trans. That's just being, you know, confused or like broken or actively living in sin. Same thing with acting on being gay. You know, if you were gay, that was supposed to be like a call to singleness and a call to celibacy.

As Meredith expresses, respondents felt that, because so many church communities perpetuated the gender binary, they closed the window of opportunity for anyone to speak organically about their gender and sexual diversity. This also robbed participants the ability to seek religious council for other life circumstances/experiences (e.g., child rearing, marriage, etc.).

As a genderqueer/gender non-binary individual, Pen (they/them) goes on to explain that their gender is something they did not even have time and space to think about until later in life, and that this was a result of gendered norms infiltrating their church:

I think that there there's definitely a projection of what the relationship should be between a man and a woman...I remember hearing all of those things that never seem to quite fit. But I, at the time...I could never imagine being married to a man. I didn't realize at the time, really my own development. I didn't realize it until more in the last probably like five years, really, how this part of my identity has been so shoved down that I need to explore it a little bit more. So it wasn't even on my radar—my gender identity.

While also genderqueer, Atlas recognized their gender as fluid much earlier in life, and struggled with conversations on gender and sexuality in youth group:

They did a relationship series every two years with the high schoolers, right, where we talked about like what it was like to date and how you're supposed to date for marriage and finding the right man or woman and that was kind of it...There was no space for

anybody who wasn't a man or a woman. And there wasn't any space for you to like the same sex or anything like that. And so, yeah, I definitely say like there were times when I didn't feel like [those relationships] could co-exist.

These excerpts work to show the ways in which forcing gender roles and espousing an expectation about how people should act or even love because of their gender took away the time and space for people to really explore their gender and sexual divergence in a safe space and way.

*My dad is a wonderful person and has never fallen short of showing his love for me, even when it felt clunky. He always believed it was his responsibility to protect his daughters as his “manly and Godly duty.” He was the classic ‘clean the shotgun’ dad when we would bring boys over to the house, even if they were just friends. I had little interest in dating anyone for most of high school, but my sister and I both limited the amount of times we would bring a boy home, because of my dad. And then came Katie Raye, the first woman and the last person I ever brought home (long after high school). My dad knew I was dating her, but nothing could have prepared him for the shift of meeting a grown woman instead of a teenage boy at his doorstep. There was an awkwardness to his demeanor. His posture slumped more than usual but he still spoke to her with his stern, sharp wit. I laughed nervously as he asked her if she wanted to “tour the yard.” Katie is a gentle, well-mannered, kindhearted person even at first blush, and she didn’t give my dad anything to problematize. I could tell my dad was reaching to be soft, but he wanted to protect, to intimidate, to establish dominance. Tension emerged as his identities of father and protector and her identities of girlfriend, guest, and woman, all intersected in a moment. Honestly, in retrospect, we all think of the whole interaction as rather comical. Nevertheless, it does work to show that, like the way gender is fluid, we can be nimble in how we*

*perform gender. To lock gender down as something static is to impede the ways in which we can effectively and cohesively communicate across it. My dad learned that his need to protect me had nothing to do with Katie's gender, but who she was to me. And she was the one I should have brought home all along.*

**Weaponizing the Bible.** The previous subthemes coded as tensions between LGBTQ and church communities are somewhat non-assertive in nature. They are, for the most part, ways of communicating that may be unintentional, though they have clearly still caused harm by reifying stigmas and stereotypes. However, the next theme of tension that participants reported was weaponization of the Bible. That is, participants noted that people in their lives often gleaned from and/or quoted Bible verses (often without given context) to formulate and amplify a stance that being queer is morally and biblically wrong. This is a communication tactic that is much more assertive and often done conscientiously. Similar to themes of implication and forced gender roles, weaponizing the Bible happened on group and interpersonal levels. As Peter explained, sometimes passages that oppose the LGBTQ community were cited in formal church contexts:

I guess I'd say like it was any number of random times when I was at church and like that the message for that Sunday was just like, you know, [about how] certain people aren't worthy of the love of God. I don't know exactly how the priest would have said it or even like which passages from the Bible he was using or anything. But like the fact that he could use the Bible, I guess, to say that Jesus didn't love a group of people. I was like, "but that's not really what I've learned this entire time."

As Tiffany testifies, sometimes these passages were brought up in more interpersonal contexts: "My stepmom would just send me emails all the time, like quoting scripture, telling me how

wrong it is...And said ‘you need to move back home where we can keep you safe and you could then be straight.’” Other participants like Sara drew from iterations of stories they had grown up hearing:

I'm tired of hearing “I knit you in the womb so you can't possibly be gay or transgender.”  
I'm so tired of hearing about the guy who ejaculated next to the lady, but not in the lady, and that's why birth control is like bad...so many of these things that have just been twisted and like, if you think God can do anything, why on earth could he not give people complex ideas?

The tension for these participants seemed to not only lie in the fact that they were confronted with Bible verses that were used against their core identity, but also that these verses were diluted to someone else’s interpretation of them.

## **Identities**

**Making sense of identity.** The second part of the research question asks “When do Christian and/or queer identities become salient?” Participants were always aware of the various tensions between these two identities and contentions that Christianity has historically had with the LGBTQ community; however, they did not feel the need to explore these notions deeply until they began to understand and make sense of their LGBTQ identities. In other words, their association with Christianity became salient when they used their faith to explore the “permissibility” of their LGBTQ identity within the confounds of theology or religion (i.e., what they felt like God or the church would have to say about their gender/sexual orientation). Upon recognition and/or exploration of their orientation, they often used their faith for sensemaking. Participants felt each of their identities to be salient the more they assessed the compatibility between them. Tiffany explores this salience:

It's interesting because, the way that I approach the conversation [now] is very different—vastly different—I should say, before I was out....Before, I was having these conversations with people openly all of the time, like “something needs to change in the church...Like why are we not loving the queer community?” I was very open and very vocal about my opinion. And then I came out and I kind of shut up and got really quiet because I knew the answers that [friends in the church] had, because we'd been having this conversation for a long time. And I knew what they were saying behind the scenes and knew what they were saying behind the backs of people who are queer. And I think having that knowledge going into those conversations felt really scary after that, because I was like, “we've talked about this, and I know that you think that this is wrong.”

Kris, like many others who noted similar things, felt the salience of his gay identity most when he tried to suppress it in light of his spiritual/religious convictions. He noted, “I spent several sleepless nights, you know, praying that I would wake up differently or hoping I could change, or if there is some way to kind of recreate myself into some image, perceived or otherwise, I would be accepted and would be loved.” This comment encompasses how his faith informed his idea of what it meant to be gay, and the fact that he believed his sexuality was wrong made him attend to it even more, as well as ruminate on feelings of guilt.

These responses exemplify how an identity becomes salient in light of another, as well as how people are a sum of multiple social and individual identities. Further, these exemplars reveal that queer and Christian identities, for the most part, became salient in tandem. While that is meaningful to note, the main takeaway is that identity salience affects identity development and communication about identity. In Tiffany's case, she became much less assertive in advocating for the LGBTQ community after she came out. Kris also mentioned later in his interview that he

is in a rather affirming religious climate and, because of that, no longer toils deeply with his sexuality like he used to when he was in a conservative Catholic environment.

**Coming out.** *My partner and I met in November of 2018 and, just weeks after, I sat my dad down over a beer and Indian food to tell him about the new addition to my life. It was a simple conversation; I told him I was dating someone and that it was a woman. We laughed and cried and exchanged a laugh when he said “I’ve always known this day would come.” When we left the restaurant, he got into his car and sent me a text message I will never forget:*

*“I am.*

*So happy.*

*You are in love.”*

*To which I realized, I never told him I was in love. But I was. And that was that and coming out wasn’t much of a thought to me once my immediate family and best friends knew. I couldn’t stand the thought of keeping the best thing that ever happened to me a secret, but I know everyone’s confidence in coming out is different—a phenomenon worth utmost regard. I also know I am privileged to have the support of the people I love. I think coming out is a long process and it is always happening as we are always evolving and revealing our evolving selves to the world. I had never done much self-searching before I had feelings for a woman well into my twenties. But my relationship with a woman whom I love fiercely was the catalyst for coming out. Loving her made me so confident in this orientation to the point where my walk and talk and dress even altered a bit, which also felt so freeing. While that’s the case, I also fully recognize that orientations change. The takeaway here for me is that my LGBTQ identity felt salient because of another person. And I now feel like a stranger to straightness.*

Similar to participants experiencing identity salience as a result of sensemaking, they also experienced identity salience when they either came out to their LGBTQ community as Christian or came out to their Christian community as LGBTQ. Many explained that they came out in response to pressures to distinctly label themselves (e.g., as gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, etc.). Coming out can be defined in this context as revealing to others that one's own gender or sexual orientation is anything but cisgender and/or heterosexual.

Claire explained her coming out story in terms of how she chose to label herself, articulating how fluid identity can be. She also offered a very rich explanation of some terms used to label individuals in the queer community, and the ways in which we might challenge tendencies to lock people into certain labels because of who they love or how they present themselves:

I identify as a cisgender woman, meaning that the parts I was biologically born with match my gender identity as to how it has developed thus far. 'Cis' meaning "on the same side." And I think that's important to me in terms of how my femininity has developed and my tracking within the LGBTQ community and not being clocked or tracked [or] oftentimes feeling the need of a partner to legitimize my space within the community. I identify as queer and bisexual and open. Part of that feels like sexual orientation. [The] other feels like a romantic/philosophical orientation. I am in a monogamous relationship and love my partner very much. It is also a biracial relationship. And I think due to some of that, it's provided an opportunity and exposure to explore lots of my own identity in a variety of different forms. I stayed away from the term bisexual for a long time because of the stigma associated with it. I felt *queer* [as a label] to be more expansive and provided more opportunity for me to self-disclose and

define it as I wanted... I also realized that it is a privilege to not be clocked, stereotyped, assaulted, aggressed upon because of perception. And so, weaving through that has been a beautiful, necessary entanglement.

Claire highlighted coming out as an often long process; one that, at times, people even endure subconsciously. In fact, respondents mentioned that they did not feel the need to really pinpoint a label until someone asked them to describe or label themselves if at all possible—not unlike the way I did in my interviewing them. Respondents expressed that figuring out how to get from one day to the next in their own skin was hard enough, and that confidence in labeling—and truly internalizing—their feelings/tendencies/preferences came with time, support, and exploration. While I never felt a need to hide my sexuality, that fear of labeling myself as something determinate really resonates.

Tiffany eloquently points to the crux of coming out as a Christian queer and how even avowing to the terms *Christian* and *queer* can be a struggle:

What's really interesting about identifying as both Christian and queer is I think you come out twice. I think that you come out in your Christian community as queer and receive a lot of rejection. And I think you come out in your queer community as Christian and receive a lot of rejection. And I think it makes a lot of sense, though, because I think that so many people have been so hurt by religion that there's like a visceral response when you say that's something you still adhere to. So, I think that's one of the hardest things to navigate.

As articulated above, being LGBTQ and being Christian is an entanglement of identities. The language of *coming out* often constructs an understanding that queer people come out from the LGBTQ community as having fully reconciled their queerness. However, that is not always the

case. To be an LGBTQ Christian is a complex web of understanding how one's faith and gender/sexual orientation work together to inform their way of being in the world and being with God. It is also a journey of growing and being accepted within each community, and also learning what it means to identify and internalize that membership. In my experience, the more I reconciled both my LGBTQ and Christian identities, the less salient those identities became in comparison to one another. I just felt whole.

**Relationships.** Like my story, many participants testified that they came out because they felt their relationship with someone else necessitated it. Thus, the theme of relationship(s) emerged as something that made participants' LGBTQ identity salient. For some, being in a relationship with another person made their choice to come out—and to what degree—more or less easy. Chantal (she/her) grew up in Roman Catholicism and was closeted for a long time until,

Once I got engaged and I was like getting married, I was like, OK, I'm not going to hide a marriage. I'm done doing that. It's one thing to hide a girlfriend, I think, or to hide a partner. It's different for me in my head. It just felt different to hide a wife. And so, I came back from my wedding and some of [my] students kind of knew that I had gotten married. And I also had a ring and all that kind of stuff. And they said, "What's your husband's name?" I said, "her name is Stephanie".

Marriage was something that solidified and further legitimated Chantal's romantic relationship, and that was the catalyst for coming out. While marriage does not have that same effect for all people, Chantal's sentiment shows how identifying with someone of the same sex revealed her sexuality, and claiming both a wife and an LGBTQ orientation was important.

In some cases, participants revealed that their sexuality/gender became salient as they learned that they had feelings for someone of the same sex and/or gender for the first time. For example, Sue explained that in terms of her relationship with her partner, they were really good friends before she came out, thus, they simultaneously came out and became a couple. Tiffany's story is similar except her sensemaking was nuanced in that the person she fell for was already out:

My coming out process happened because I fell in love with a woman. I had dated men my whole life. I started grad school, met this girl—they identified as a woman at the time...And we became friends, and I immediately was having feelings for this woman that I had never experienced...we basically went out to get drinks and we were sitting there and I was like super nervous. And I was like, "I don't know what to do with this. Like, I'm attracted to you and I've never been attracted to women before this. And this doesn't make any sense. And I'm straight and you're gay and [people] know you're gay...and like, none of this makes any sense"...And then we were together for three years.

*I know Tiffany personally. I grew up with her, share a rich past with her, share family with her. Over the years, she has become one of the fondest of people to me. I was one of the first people she ever told about this relationship and I will never forget the night she did, sitting on a slab of old wood in her dad's backyard while she was home visiting from New York where she had built another life for herself. I just remember thinking I was proud of her, knowing this new-found love and the unveiling of it likely took an overwhelming amount of courage. Little did I know, months later, I would be calling Tiffany to tell her about my feelings for a woman. Our experiences happened so similarly. We befriended a person, grew to care about them, grew to become deeply*

*attracted to them, and were deeply hurt by them. Such a simple equation. The falling, the wanting, the having, the becoming, and the losing all felt so natural, so primitive, and we got to share that humanity together. So, when I code the theme of relationships, I mean more than saying people come out because of the person to whom they are attracted or with whom they are in a romantic/sexual relationship. I also mean that people feel the need to come out to friends and family because of the nature of those relationships, too. Coming out was easy for me because I cared deeply for the person I was with at the time, but also for the people to whom I came out. And as long as I am sharing about the first woman I fell for, I will elaborate.*

*She will remain nameless, and she and I were but no longer are...whatever we were. We didn't last long but being with her taught me that I could have feelings that were different than anything I knew before. We started out as friends until she began to show a care for me deeper than any other friend had in a long time and, unlike the men I had tried to be with, she had a tenderness to her. And maybe that had nothing to do with her womanhood, but it was something I could only get from her. She came along and changed everything about romance as I knew it. I thought falling in love was meant to be easy, she showed me it's messy. I thought it was straightforward, she showed me it's complicated. I thought it was boring, she showed me it could be thrilling. And I craved that tension. The other tension was that she was with someone else. I was a free agent falling into my sexuality, she was already taken, and we were each other's hanging fruit. We hardly spent any time alone together but in the time that we did have, the feelings were so concentrated, so intense. There was so much desire yet restraint. Our story can be summed up in a late-night journal entry:*

*Our fingertips intertwined like the threads of fabric that covered them. In the same way we buried our hands under blankets to hide our desire from others, I buried those feelings so deeply*

*inside of myself that I was unsure if I was ignoring them or internalizing them. It turns out I had been doing both at the same time, the 'hiding me' as well as the 'becoming me,' and the sensemaking of the time we spent together took years.*

*Our story consisted of so many 'almost's and 'what-if's; our relationship was built on secrets manifested as kisses through door cracks and subtle glances behind backs of the people from whom we thought the lust was worth hiding. After all, there was someone else, and we knew we had to honor that but often failed. But the guilt of lusting after someone else's someone conflated with the guilt of being with a woman.*

*In between our few short-lived intimate moments together were painful words of struggle and wishing for us to be more, to come out, to say "hell with the rest." That didn't happen, but I tried my hardest, though I think we both agree now that it all worked out for the best.*

*While we were not each other's end, we helped each other find new beginnings as she became a mother, and I became someone else's lover. None of what we are now is what we thought we'd be then, but she got some of what she wanted, and all I wanted was to be...wanted. And now, by someone else, I am.*

*I will always be grateful for the lesson she was about life and sexuality and all that I thought about my theology to be true—that a person can choose when they fall and for whom. If not for her, I'd never learn I had the courage to exist in the world as God's creation the way I believe I am meant to.*

The theme of relationships showcases how personal identity is tied to social identity. Many participants felt that establishing a relationship with someone else was almost impossible to do without revealing their own identity to others. In the case of many in the LGBTQ community, being in a closeted relationship (meaning not having come out separately and/or

together) is very common, but I was not able to account for anyone who is in a same-sex or same-gender relationship and still closeted. It can be argued that the longer two people are in a relationship, the harder hiding that becomes. And I heard that a lot from participants.

In summary, like any identity, internalizing sexual and gender orientations takes time and self-learning. In the same way that participants “came out” as LGBTQ and flourished in their identities over time, reaching a level of confidence to advocate for their LGBTQ identity was the result of a learned process, one of which many participants are still undergoing. Moreover, while most participants took a nonassertive, passive approach to responding to oppression of their queer identity in most contexts, those that did developed their communication strategies overtime. As you will see in the next section, participants reported that the more they came into their gender/sexual orientation in the day-to-day (e.g., in the workplace, among family, and other facets of life), the more strongly they advocated for the LGBTQ community in religious spaces.

### **Leveraging Field of Experience to Advocate for Self**

Participants’ upbringing in and around the church provided them with a very robust knowledge set about how Christians as a group have historically responded to the LGBTQ community with opposition. On the other hand, the same upbringing made most participants feel like an integral part of their faith community and that Christianity was a major constituent of their identity. Razzante and Orbe (2018) define field of experience as the summation of one’s life events. While field of experience is not a form of communication, it informs communication, since experiences (moments of trauma, pleasure, etc.) shape the way people respond to future social interactions. The third question in this research asked how LGBTQ Christians use communication strategies to advocate for affirmation of their own identity in religious contexts. One of the themes to emerge is *leveraging field of experience*, where to leverage is to use one’s

knowledge of and experiences within Christianity to be able to protect their own LGBTQ identity from common forms of religious oppression and disruption. Participants reported communicatively leveraging field of experience through segmentation, preservation, and education.

**Segmentation.** I define segmentation as a process of separating and compartmentalizing aspects of life in ways that support coming out as LGBTQ. That is, to physically distance from oppressive people and experiences, or focus on aspects of Christianity (e.g., versus and sermons) that can be perceived as inclusive of LGBTQ identities. Kris exemplified segmenting by using physical distance.

In my early part of my college...I was still kind of wrestling with biology, and this approach to being up in Boulder [a more liberal area than from where he came], live free or die hard, go out, celebrate pride, rainbows, but then also kind of being a quasi-closeted version of myself, kind of outside of that environment and around my family...when I first went off to college...I remember after being dropped off, just kind of having this really eye-opening perspective that, you know what? Now that I've got some distance from my family, from my past, from my parents, I get to live authentically, live openly. I'm not really going to hide it. And so that was really gratifying and affirming in a certain respect. Also damaging because it really does kind of reinforce the double life.

Kris' sentiment shows how he was able to leverage proximity. To be distanced from his family was to be protected from conservatism that impeded his sexual identity.

In addition, Peter's response depicts segmentation at a more internal versus physical level as he disassociated from theological messages he perceived as condemning:

So, catechism class and all this stuff is like, “Jesus can be angry, right? Or God can be angry, but he loves everything”...it feels like too many contradictions...how does the church expect me to follow and like believe in all of these contradictions when they can't really explain themselves? And so that's kind of where I was like, “well, I can just choose what I believe in and kind of go off on my own [knowledge]”...I can decide that the morals that I grew up with and around, like the Ten Commandments and stuff like that, are still good morals, whether or not they were just made up by a group of people or they were given to us on a tablet. That's magical to me...But I don't have to be going to church every Sunday to have those values. So, I kind of just decided, what am I taking away?

**Preservation.** Participants also responded to conflict over their gender/sexual identity through preservation. They noted they preserved on behalf of both themselves and others, where to preserve is to limit or control how much of themselves they disclose in terms of gender or sexuality. The purpose of this preservation is to protect from potential harm. Respondents noted that the more people knew about them, the more chance there was for those parts of themselves to be discriminated against. Claire explains that preservation was necessary in formal catholic services she attended with a past partner:

In making choices, disclosure choices is always there. So when they ask for prayers or concerns at the beginning of the service, you know, do you share what's really on your mind or do you not?...I very much tuned into the relationships and not wanting to make people uncomfortable. And so, listening to cues around me, being intentional or paying attention to my situational awareness and emotional intelligence of like, “whose feathers am I going to ruffle?”

Chantal adds, “We saw my wife's mom from Alabama and we've gone back to visit her folks a couple of times for the holidays, and going to an Alabama Catholic Church for Christmas mass, we like, I remember we piled our coats between us just in case.” Before noting this, Chantal described the relief she and her wife feel at their current church where “[they] can give each other a kiss in the sanctuary and [are] not going to be the only ones.”

Finally, Tiffany describes how she steers conversations for the sake of preservation: “In conversations with my family...I think that I'm intentional about what I choose to talk about. I think there's still, there's a little bit of a charge and editing of myself because you're just like, you're trying to preserve relationships and yourself and be productive.”

The concept of preservation is unique here and relates closely to what Camara and Orbe (2010) name as *censoring self* when oppressed by dominant groups, which is inherently communicative. However, these excerpts uniquely highlight censoring self for the purpose of preserving relationships and promoting harmony with those by whom participants desired to be accepted.

**Educating.** The field of experience participants had also informed their knowledge set, both about the queer community and Christian community, and they used their field of experience to advocate for the former. At times, participants relied on communicating their sexuality as scientific and factual when others tried to diminish their knowledge about sexuality/gender. I coded this as educating. For example, Atlas said, “I know the science behind people who are transgender. Like, I love looking at that research that supports it. And I love to, you know, talk about how you can find homosexuality in like hundreds and hundreds of animal species.” Tiffany noted,

I've advocated more now by telling my family this is how I identify. This is how I identify like, I am a bisexual woman, there's no shame in it. I'm happy with who I am. I'm in a relationship. It's good. This is not changing. And so, I think I've just like been more direct with them as the best way that I've advocated.

Atlas and Tiffany illustrate that, when they recognized and learned their own dual positionality as both queer and Christian, the salience of their identities emerged for them, and they started to act upon and leverage that way of knowing. That knowledge and acceptance of their own identity led them to be better advocates for themselves. Coming out is a process and, like any identity, internalizing sexual and gender orientations takes time and self-learning. In the same way that participants “came out” as LGBTQ and flourished/are flourishing in their identities over time, reaching a level of confidence to advocate for their LGBTQ identity also takes time and is something that some participants still do not feel comfortable doing.

### **Leveraging Dual Identity for Community**

Participants also reported that the more they came into their gender/sexual orientation, the more strongly they advocated for LGBTQ peers. The fifth question guiding this research is “how do LGBTQ Christians, who embody historically conflicting identities, draw from their own faith positions and sexual orientations to advocate for each other?” Razzante and Orbe’s (2018) theoretical tenant of *leveraging dual group identity* emerged from the responses to the question of how LGBTQ Christians advocate for themselves. And, just as participants leveraged their dual identity to protect themselves, they also did the same to show allyship toward each other. Thus, the results to RQ5 are juxtaposed next to results with RQ3. Participants collectively remarked that their experience with religiosity guided their approaches to dealing with conflict or other forms of confrontation they were met with because of their LGBTQ identity. Leveraging dual

identity in regards to other-centered advocacy or alliance means to draw, from personal experience in the church, an awareness of the various struggles one might face as an LGBTQ person, and hold empathy for others who share a similar identity. Leveraging dual group identity for the sake of community is constituted by codes of *reappropriation*, *validation*, and, similar to the code that emerged under advocating for self, *ingroup/outgroup educating*.

**Reappropriation.** Many participants navigated both the feeling that Christianity was important to uphold along with an awareness of how the church has hurt fellow LGBTQ community members. They reported that a fear of other LGBTQ friends leaving the church or walking away from the faith altogether led themselves to make attempts to prove that Christianity is not a homogenous group of judgmental, condemning people whose goal is to push out the LGBTQ community. Participants exemplified reappropriation in the sense that they reclaimed church narratives they perceived as harmful to the LGBTQ community, to make both Christianity at large, and specific faith groups, more attractive and appealing to the LGBTQ community. An excerpt from Tiffany really gets at her heart for Jesus and her LGBTQ peers, and the way she felt the need to prove that Jesus is loving toward the queer community even when people are not. She illustrates reappropriation by apologizing for the church as a form of LGBTQ advocacy:

When I first came out, was trying to be really vocal about my Christian identity because I thought it was important. And I think part of that came from the fact that I've seen so much pain done in the name of the church, in the name of Jesus to the queer community. And I really, really wanted to try to shift that because...I don't think it's about Jesus, and Jesus is great...And so I think I wanted people to know it's OK. And [they] can identify as both of these things. I am somebody who does...I want to apologize to [them] for what

has happened to [them] in the church. It's absolutely not OK and it's unacceptable. I now feel it and I've had it happen to me. But...I want to pursue what I think is true and right, which is being able to hold both identities in a way that feels really good.

Tiffany believed with great conviction that she was loved and accepted by God. Having accepted her dual identity as well as the notion that God could love her as is, she stressed the desire for others like her to feel the same peace and consonance. Stephanie added that she belongs to an open and affirming Catholic church and it is important for her to expose to LGBTQ community members the possibility of finding LGBTQ-inclusive faith communities.

I volunteered to work the booth for our church at Pride down in Denver...I was sitting there from the church perspective, trying to speak with queer people and say, “no, we are open and affirming. Yeah, here are the things that we believe and why you are welcome in our space. I know it says [we are] Catholic, but we're not the scary Catholics that you grew up with.”

Finally, Mitchell reappropriated narratives through the practice of prayer as he shared a desire for LGBTQ people in his life to know peace and would offer the kind of open-minded prayers for which he had always longed: “I would pray that God would give them peace about whatever decision they needed to make because I know how sensitive it is. I had, you know, years and years and years of people laying hands on me, praying the gay out of me.”

*“You can wear this one” she said, pulling a semi-casual blouse from her closet. She handed it to me with a small assortment of pills—some Advil and vitamins she scrounged up to kick my hangover. I had a commitment to lead worship at church that morning after spending the night at her house for the first time. “You’re so crazy” she said through a giggle, “I can’t believe you’re going to church right now.” She always talked about how she hated God, but she*

*remained supportive of my opposing feelings. She talked about how God had taken so much away from her, and she did—she lost some very significant people in her life and constantly carried that grief. How could I blame her? I tried to not bombard her with my beliefs too much, which made me sad because my belief was that God loved her to her depths and wasn't the source of her loss and cries when she cries and hates when she hurts. But there wasn't really anyone else in her life I could see sharing that with her. I constantly weighed the cost of trying to convince her God wasn't the monster she thought and the possibility of losing her if I pushed too hard. I never quite found the line. And then I became her next loss. Years later, the question still haunts me: How do I, a flawed, feeble human even begin to represent a God I believe to be unwavering and unconditionally loving?*

**Educating.** In the same way participants educated others about LGBTQ topics as a form of advocating for their own identity, they also educated on behalf of others like themselves.

Claire unpacks this:

Rarely do I shy away from an opportunity to advocate when I'm given the platform, hence me being in this interview... Yeah, I'll be there. I'll do it. I think my advocacy for myself earlier was much quieter, like [in this] kind of culture of appeasement... I would do just about anything to bend over backwards, make myself smaller and make the people in my life smile.

Peter and Stephanie both were involved with panels at Colorado State University and promoted dialogue on LGBTQ topics through a biblical lens. Peter noted:

I brought in a panel of religious experts who were like text experts, because I was curious and, I...also understood that plenty of the people who might come to the [Pride] office at CSU might be those people are who are having their religious struggle. And so,

I wanted to provide a program for them, not necessarily for me... I kind of was just like, well, it's my role to program this, even though I don't care as much about the church. But people do have this struggle.

Stephanie is often a panelist with the same Pride Resource Center and educates people by “just being able to share [her] personal coming out story and allowing folks to just ask questions specifically, like first year students.”

**Validation.** The final theme that explains LGBTQ advocacy is validation, a broader theme that summates the way participants shared time and space, listened to, and commiserated with one another. Atlas explained how they gave and received validation:

Towards the end of my time at church, I found out there were two or three other kids that I had grown up with there that were also queer... And we kind of like, we felt scandalous. We were like, “were we really raised all together?”... And we were like patting each other on the back about being queer...and that's where I always felt the most comfort was when we had our own private time together...we had that shared bond where we were all told “no,” and we grew up the same way together and we still came out like that. It was very comforting that we weren't alone, and we didn't feel like we were broken or anything.

While Atlas refers to “patting on the back” as more of a metaphor, they explain that they experienced and communicated, through conversation, solidarity with friends who also came out in the church. Atlas also combatted this metaphorical ‘aloneness’ with actual physical interaction. Chantal also reported that advocacy looked like showing up for monumental events in peoples’ lives, as she noted, “I very much believe in, like going to and supporting people at a same-sex wedding.”

Adding a layer of physicality to the theme of time and space, Mitchell noted how he supports the LGBTQ community quite performatively. He mentioned that for occasions such as Halloween, he dresses in drag, and often likes to throw in some “flare” to his church outfits. Mitchell finds it important to publicly support the unique expressions of queer sexuality and gender. He noted, “I get invited to go to the Gay Pride Festival. And I like that if people see me, they're going to see that I'm supporting that.” As another way of validating, Sara writes to people at random:

With all of these people who have like helped me comes to terms with like my sexuality or who I am or how to feel safe, like I'll write long sappy messages every couple of months like, “hey, you impacted my life, I love you. That's probably weird. You're always going to be in my heart. Like, if there's anything I can do to support you, even if you want to brag about yourself like I'm here to be your cheerleader, you're a rock star.”

Pen noted that they and their friends validate through “commiserating” about painful experiences in the church. “We just connect...like, ‘oh my gosh, can you believe how crazy that was?’ ...Or ‘oh my God, these are like the messed up messages that you were receiving?’”

Finally, Jackie associates with more traditional views about Christianity and sexual ethics, yet, identifying as a celibate bisexual, still finds ways to validate other LGBTQ community members within more exclusive faith communities:

In the LGBTQ community, I'm mostly connected with LGBTQ Christians and some of those would identify with me along with a more traditional view... for people with a more traditional view, I guess a lot of the conversations are just kind of being a listening ear for people...Like, there are people who are like, “hey, I have this internal experience and I also have this church community that doesn't understand and has hurt me in

different ways. And there's also God and I'm trying to figure out where God is in that.” So, some of it is just listening to people and validating their experience and saying, “That's so hard” and like to point out things that have happened in the church and to call them out as wrong and to lament those things and then to say, “OK, what do you need for to move forward?” “What does spiritual maturity look like for you, even though you have been hurt or marginalized?” “What does God have for your life and how can I root for you in that?”

While Jackie posits a more strict sexual ethic, she can still reach others with empathy across a shared identity. She separates her own convictions to focus on validating the lived experiences of others.

### **Non-LGBTQ Christian–LGBTQ Christian Advocacy**

*It is easy to love out of similarity, but there is, perhaps, nothing more beautiful than loving despite our differences. I'll keep being me, you keep being you, we'll keep being here for each other.*

The final question explored in this research (How do LGBTQ Christians experience support among interactions with non-LGBTQ Christians in religious contexts?) unfortunately yielded the least amount of responses from participants, but gives insight into some pragmatic ways that non-LGBTQ Christians are helping the LGBTQ community. Two themes that emerged were dismantling assumptions of scripture, and recognition.

**Dismantling assumptions of scripture.** Dismantling assumptions of scripture refers to revisiting the Bible and its claims, or lack thereof, about same-sex relationships/attraction, sex, and gender/gender roles, with reflexivity and hermeneutic focus—that which can be thought of

as an interpretive reading of scripture—to gain new insight and invite new understandings of the text. Sara explained,

I feel supported by LGBTQ Christians when they're specifically willing to talk to you about the specific verses...sitting down and unpacking them together, whether that's like looking up original context, like philosophizing on what we think that means or how it could, like, apply interpersonally...If Christians really want to get in the word with me, like I'm always down for those talks and I dig deep...I just love hearing how [the Bible] manifests in different religions and different cultures and realizing, again, that it's probably been there longer than the English language has been around to record it. And like finding people who are willing to talk about their experiences but also like who are willing to like talk archival research with you, like go sit down and find stories and kind of help connect the dots or shoot the shit or whatever.

Sara notes a sentiment that runs commonly throughout the LGBTQ community: a desire for people to be transparent about the reasons why they may hold certain values or opinions relating to sexuality and gender. Additionally, the church is packed with individuals who are trained Biblical scholars and theologians who have the wherewithal to really show care toward the LGBTQ community by diving deep and unpacking biblical history and context from an unbiased point of view, or at least do so without weaponizing or decontextualizing the only evidence the church really has about God's message on love. Sara's comment elicits a simple yet pivotal line of inquiry: What if people would explore scripture and critically interrogate its potential history and context, recognizing that its truths derived might be subject to the beholder? What kind of tension and false assumption would be spared? And how much could the theological knowledge within the church and among leaders be leveraged for supportive conversations if people would

let their guard down and listen to the lived experiences of the other? It is also very fitting that Sara incorporates the political nature of tensions between Christianity and LGBTQ topics. As has been noted many times in this work, Christianity and the LGBTQ community are seen as diametrically opposed communities but, with shifting religious climates and pushes to be more inclusive, we can see that the lines between these communities are blurring and something such as homosexuality cannot be diluted to partisan issue.

Adding to this, Tiffany believes she has derived explicit validation about her sexuality as a result of exploring biblical context with a friend:

He is the one person that I can think of who did point to scripture to affirm me. He's not queer and he is a...Christian who is like, "I love you...and I think that things have been misinterpreted," and actually talked about scripture that had to do with procreation and all these things. It was contextual... and he broke some theological stuff down for me...it made me feel so good and so supported because scripture had only up until that point been used against me specifically and against just like queer identities.

Tiffany's experience points back to the tension of weaponizing the Bible to project subjective truth. She also shows the other side of the coin—that she has just as much a right to glean a subjective truth of her own from the Bible. What is more, the constant theme here is that the catalyst to her feeling supported was her friend's act of giving time and space to explore the Bible with her, showing empathy as a someone who is not queer.

Finally, Atlas's mom, who had previously been a women's group leader at church, offered the same support:

All the times when I would read [the Bible], I wanted to try to find anything that would like, tell me it was OK [to be this way]...my mom, because she knew that I was

struggling...made a notebook, and when she found me having a hard time, she would go for her Bible and she would look up all kinds of verses she could find to share with me, to kind of bring me this feeling that, you know, look at the scripture that's telling you to love yourself and, you know, it's OK to be you, and know I love you the way you are...all the scriptures that were, you know, telling you to love yourself and that you're a beautiful person regardless of anything...And so I was really happy to have that...the Bible can be interpreted in so many ways and it's really interesting how things are just altered to fit a different narrative, what people want...So it's, it was good to finally like, yeah, get a different perspective and have somebody show me that it can be good and that I'm in there, you know?

Atlas was able to find themselves in the Bible through the loving guidance of their mom, and with that, I introduce the theme of recognition.

**Recognition.** Similar to being able to recognize oneself in Biblical text as made in the image of God, others reported a broader recognition within their faith communities. Jackie, who identifies as bisexual and chooses to live in singleness and celibacy, attends a congregation that is not open and affirming but welcoming of LGBTQ members. She shares her experience feeling recognized by her church leadership as they encouraged her to lead a workshop on singleness and celibacy: “The fact that he wanted...me to lead the church in the realm of singleness? It was really cool...like, ‘OK, we want you to speak on singleness, and we have no qualms about you talking about your sexuality.’”

Stephanie, who also had access to more open and inclusive church communities, felt that the most impactful way the church showed acceptance of her was through holding services that were explicitly and exclusively open and affirming:

I can't remember the actual name of [the church], but...I went to their alternative service with my girlfriend at the time and her mom...it was not anything that I was used to. But like, everybody was ridiculously inviting and they were like, "oh, my gosh, you two are a couple? Awesome, fantastic." And just completely enveloped us.

Stephanie's positive response to this experience really draws on the enabling and constraining aspects of churches as organizations: holding inclusive services enabled Stephanie's feeling of security in being authentically LGBTQ within a given parameter and gave her confidence that the people attending were guaranteed to support and share her same values. Kris also talked about the way his more conservative community celebrated his same-sex relationship in a very tangible way that took him by surprise:

When I got engaged to be married, there was kind of a tradition of that faith group that, you know, you usually invite the whole group to a wedding...There was just a super radical, I would say...embrace of me and my now husband. That group, they threw us a wedding shower...and [gave] us gifts after our purchase of our first home. And they all came together at the actual wedding and celebrated with us...They always ask me about my husband. So that was kind of really reaffirming experience that really sticks close to my heart.

Kris's experience is refreshing, especially since this effort to show love was done as a collective group. That said, it also makes clear the discrepancy of acceptance toward the LGBTQ community. Kris felt accepted because a church community normalized his same-sex marriage. The fact that being treated like any other straight couple stood out to him, reveals that he is used to being treated as abnormal.

*"Is Katie coming to dinner?"*

*“Can I have Katie’s address so I can invite her myself?”*

*“You and Katie are more than welcome to come stay with us anytime.”*

*“Please tell Katie hi for me.”*

*“Ask Katie what she thinks.”*

*“Want to go on a double date?”*

*“What’s it like being with a woman? I am so curious about everything.”*

*“Do you two want kids someday?”*

*“When do you think you’ll try?”*

*For me, recognition is in the little things.*

Many other participants did recognize a few non-LGBTQ individuals in their life who really took initiative in loving them as a friend, family member, or community member. Like Sue’s dad, who, when she told him she was with a woman, simply said “Are you happy? Then it doesn’t matter. Don’t waste time in your life not being happy.” Sue and I both got lucky with supportive parents. But there are not enough stories in my data that evidence a moving amount of equity and inclusion for the underrepresented LGBTQ community in religious settings.

These results as a whole work to evidence the variation of LGBTQ people’s experiences within Christianity. These stories shared do not represent universal truths or settle any type of theological or philosophical debate about God, sexuality, or morality. But as I move forward to discuss how the theories presented in the literature apply to these findings, my hope is that these stories, and real-time reactions to them, are kept alive.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This thesis began by citing relevant research on Social Identity Theory and Dominant Group Theory. Communication theory research had yet to examine the experiences of LGBTQ people within the context of organized Christianity and this thesis addressed that gap in scholarship. Fourteen interviews were conducted among research participants of varying ages, backgrounds, sexual/gender orientation(s), geographic locations, and opinions about or experience within organized Christianity. This thesis explored the following questions: (RQ1) Why do LGBTQ individuals affiliate with Christianity?, (RQ2) What tensions exist between LGBTQ and Christian identities, and when does each of the two identities become salient?, (RQ3) How do LGBTQ Christians use communication strategies to advocate for affirmation of their own identity in religious contexts?, (RQ4) How do LGBTQ Christians experience support among religious interactions with non-LGBTQ Christians?, and (RQ5) How do LGBTQ Christians, who embody historically conflicting identities, draw from their own faith positions and sexual orientations to advocate for each other?

Findings of this study revealed that LGBTQ Christians are the embodiment of groups with sociohistorical tensions, and that the experiences of LGBTQ people within organized Christianity vary significantly. This section exists to put literature previously reviewed in conversation with the study's findings, and is organized as follows: To begin, I will explain how my findings contribute to, validate, and extend, Social Identity Theory and Dominant Group Theory individually and in conversation with one another. Following, I will discuss the practical contributions of this study and share about my experience collating and making sense of my data. To conclude, I will acknowledge the limitations of my research, and future directions to explore.

### **Contributions to Social Identity Theory**

**Identity development.** This study's findings contribute to and extend Social Identity Theory's postulation that individuals are likely to be committed to a group because it suits, shapes, and aligns with their purpose, culture, and values (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Mowday et al., 1979). My participants associated with organized Christianity for a host of reasons including that it aligned with and facilitated their values of structure, ritualism, community, and family bond, gave them a means to organize for social justice, and guided their access to a superior being through prayer, corporate worship, and communion.

Another reason participants practiced Christianity as an organized religion is because they had a belief in and relationship with God that could be facilitated by the church. At least at one point in their life, all participants identified as theists and of a faith stance that they believed most fundamentally aligned with Christianity. Meanwhile, their level of commitment to, identification with, and affinity for organized Christianity varied. That aspect of the findings shows that a desire to be a part of a social group such as organized religion fluctuates along the course of people's lives and as a result of their experiences. Participants' varying commitment to and practice of Christianity in tandem with holding firm beliefs about and affinity for God, also shows that identity can exist at both group and categorical levels. Every participant of this study claimed be more spiritual than religious at this point in their life, and many conceived of themselves as categorically or abstractly *Christian*, though only some still organize around that identity.

**Tensions in Christianity.** The major impetus behind asking why LGBTQ people identify with Christianity is because the religion has, at large, been historically unaccepting of the LGBTQ community. Participants have all experienced this lack of acceptance, but most of them, and for the reasons above, still felt organized Christianity worth pursuing because the benefits

outweigh the cost of dealignment over stances within the church on LGBTQ topics. This points to Hogg & Terry's (2000) assertion that one might lose individuality and/or gain purpose in light of seeing themselves as part of a collective, despite ingroup tensions. The data reveal that, at times, participants and those with whom they were in community were able to set aside differences on topics of sexual ethics to experience intragroup cohesion as members of the same Christian collective and focus their energy on other needs of the group.

In a similar vein, these findings also point to the literature which says that people not only affiliate with groups because they fit in or are in alignment with the group, but also because the group can productively foster one or many parts of one's identity (Ashcroft & Mael, 1989). Participants associated with organized Christianity because they conceived of their religious affiliation as strongly tied to multiple overlapping areas of identity. For them, being a Christian meant being an advocate for justice, a good family and community member, and someone who could find comfort in God during times of need. For these reasons, participants were not quick to part with the faith even when they felt marginalized within their faith communities. While the fact that group membership contributes to the holistic development of a person can help explain why LGBTQ people may want to be a part of a social group that has historically been so oppressive of the LGBTQ community, such desire to affiliate changes across the course of one's life.

**Disassociation.** This project shows that disassociation can be processual and a consequence of an accumulation of harmful encounters or breaks in relationships endured. While participants were not quick to depart from the faith in difficult times, quite a few of them eventually did and they recalled many painful memories associated with their faith communities that eventually impacted their perceived fit and desire to affiliate with Christianity. Much of their

commitment to religion relied on the positive/negative experiences with or actions of others within in their faith communities, and the valance participants placed on those experiences. Participants who encountered intragroup conflict, judging, shaming, or any sort of microaggressions had a much harder time associating with organized Christianity across all points of their life than those whose experiences in the church were more supportive and uplifting. Further, the more conflict or oppression participants shouldered, the more resistance they now have toward organized Christianity. Some participants now have a hard time calling themselves a Christian because the harm other Christians have caused them does not align with the faith system that they believe is centered on love. Notwithstanding, the damage that participants felt the church caused them hardly affected their love for God and their belief that they are love by God. The findings shed light on the fact that members might compartmentalize aspects of a social group and only affiliate for one or a few of those aspects, and might eventually disassociate if their negative experiences become too much to bear.

### **TUI and Social Comparisons**

Hierarchy and power imbalances reported in the data show that LGBTQ and Christian communities make unfavorable comparisons about one another, and that the LGBTQ community is a societal subsystem laden with tensions of its own. The results reveal that most of the tension between Christian and LGBTQ communities was a result of both groups stereotyping, generalizing, and holding—mostly negative—preconceived notions about the other. These causes of tension circle back to one of DGT's guiding tenants of *thinking under the influence* (TUI), or the process of people unconsciously making decisions in favor of or against others as they perceive them to be superior or inferior (Allen, 2014). Gleaning from the data, Christian and LGBTQ community members both fell into this way of thinking as a two-way-street. The results

also showed that when participants did not tend to their unconscious biases, they would end up enacting harmful communication behaviors. For instance, Pen noted that, before realizing they were gendernonbinary, they had passed judgement on and harmfully confronted other queer people. Clare also noted that there is not a lot of grace between LGBTQ and Christian communities as many people from either group “can't access compassion for folks who are still making the choice to reconcile those identities.”

Participants also reported tensions and social comparisons extent within the LGBTQ community, which extend SIT's claim that all individuals make only favorable comparisons of ingroups and use outgroups to appraise their value (Pratt, 2001). Many participants reported that there is an identity hierarchy within the LGBTQ community that caused tension as participants struggled with feelings of superiority/inferiority in relation to other LGBTQ members. Namely, those who identified as strictly gay/bisexual/lesbian were perceived as having a higher status in the queer community than genderqueer or trans individuals. A potential result of this hierarchy, participants felt peer pressure from within the LGBTQ community to label themselves clearly and definitively as *L/G/B/T/Q*, and genderqueer participants noted the exceptional struggles attached to the inability to avow as gender conforming. DGT adopts the argument that in each societal system there exists a hierarchy of power to which some people have more access than others, and it should not be forgotten that even marginalized communities have margins to which people are pushed.

### **Tensions and Identity Salience**

Results contributed to SIT's construct of identity salience by showing that a salient identity is one that is perceived as important to a context at a given moment in time (Hogg, 1995). Participants invoked their LGBTQ identity as they connected with, advocated for, and

established relationships with other LGBTQ members that they found meaningful, important, and even necessary for their own development.

The data show that connecting across LGBTQ and/or LGBTQ-Christian similarities breeds salience of those shared identities, but also that participants' identities became salient across tensions over those same identities. That is, as a part of both Christian and LGBTQ communities, they expected their queerness to be an issue for their Christian social circles (which it often was), and their faith to be an issue for their LGBTQ social circles (which it sometimes was), and the knowledge that they might not be accepted in either community caused internal tensions. For example, some participants reported that their queer identity was most salient before they came out because hiding their gender/sexual orientation only heightened their awareness of it. They hid their queerness to avoid external tensions with family, church friends, etc., and suppressing their identity caused internal tension. This tension invoked their LGBTQ identity as one they wanted to further access and expose yet suppressed especially in contexts which they knew would be unsupportive (e.g., in certain places of worship). Stephanie depicted this as she recalled being in a nonaffirming church with her partner and felt the need to cover up their hand-holding with a jacket when she normally would not do so in any other social setting. The unsupportive, nonaffirming context of that church had the power to explicate Stephanie's behavior as divergent from the majority of other church members who would not be approving of, let alone would display that kind of same-sex affection, especially in a church context. In summary, as it relates to identity salience and tensions, these findings show that when people possess identities tied to historically conflicting social groups, they become the embodiment of that tension which only heightens their awareness of each of their identities and their complex overlapping.

## **Contributions to Dominant Group Theory**

**Communication tactics and outcomes.** Participants demonstrated DGT's concept of gleaning from dual positionalities and leveraging a variety of communication tactics to protect themselves and others from tensions over their LGBTQ identities within Christianity. One of the main justifications for applying Dominant Group Theory to the context of this research is the theory's postulation that when individuals consciously recognize their dual positionality within a given structure, they will be able to draw from their own marginalized experiences to inform how to communicate as a dominant group member to achieve personal and social goals. Having grown up in or having had significant exposure to Christianity, participants gleaned from their past and leveraged their dual identity as queer and Christian to advocate for, protect, and empathize with LGBTQ Christians, including themselves. For example, many of them knew which verses in the Bible to avoid talking about with friends and which sermons on marriage and sexual ethics to skip because they knew their pastors would frame those messages in a cisheterosexual light. Testimonials such as this, and others below, lend themselves as examples in action for Razzante and Orbe's matrix that has only recently been presented and used in just a handful of studies on dominant groups in contexts outside of religion.

**Nonassertive impediment.** A nonassertive impediment orientation was adopted by participants as they engaged in self-reflexivity and identity sensemaking in real time during interviews. Some respondents (myself included) shared about and reflected on how they feel privileged to come from families who were supportive of their coming out process. Some also spoke about how their ability to pass as straight or bisexual gave them privilege above others such as some trans people. DGT posits that tactics of engaging in self-reflexivity and recognizing privilege are quintessentially the subtle acts which exemplify a nonassertive impediment

orientation. One of DGT's critical contributions is that it forces dominant group members to confront their standpoint in relation to others, and many respondents did so within and because of the interview process. Thus, not only does the data contribute to DGT, but participants' confrontation of privilege in real time also showcases the procedural strength of this research.

**Assertive impediment.** An assertive impediment orientation was evidenced in the data as participants educated their own communities about what it is like to be a queer Christian and what it takes to navigate life in that skin. DGT posits that an assertive impediment orientation seeks to balance the needs of both dominant and nondominant groups, and participants enacted this balance by educating both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ Christians in their lives on how to treat one another, listen, and share space across difference. DGT literature also notes that this orientation affirms co-cultural concerns, and participants exemplified assertive impediment by affirming and validating the lived experiences of others in the queer community, even those who were not affiliated with the church. Jackie spoke to this a lot, noting that, while she comes from a nonaffirming congregation, her heart and advocacy extends to LGBTQ people no matter their interest in religion or their sexual ethics. As members of both Christian and LGBTQ communities for a time, many participants assertively impeded harmful dominant messaging that is exclusive of the queer community.

Razzante and Orbe (2018) say that an assertive impediment orientation privileges the needs of co-cultural group members as a means to negotiate oppressive structures (p. 367). As I mentioned in the literature review, examples of assertive impediment I expected to find were instances of non-LGBTQ members challenging their understanding of the Bible's claims about sexual ethics. Part of why I anticipated to hear that in the data was because of my own life experiences of being supported in this way. Participants reported one of the main ways they felt

supported by non-LGBTQ Christians in their faith journey was when those outgroup members were willing to sit down and have open conversations about the Bible while being reflexive from their own standpoint, putting various passages into context that might work to reaffirm LGBTQ identities or dismantle assumptions that the Bible condemns same-sex love (i.e., the “7 Gay Texts” mentioned in the introduction). In summary, these pieces of the data add to DGT’s burgeoning matrix by offering more tangible examples of assertive impediment to guide scholars in their application of this communication orientation to the same or paralleling research contexts.

### **Aggressive Impediment**

Results contained unique exemplars of aggressive impediment that capture other foundational theoretical tenants of DGT. These exemplars include microaffirmations and talking back.

**Microaffirmations.** Participants supported other LGBTQ Christians in small and tangible yet impactful ways which reflected Razzante and Orbe’s (2018) microaffirmations, or the small ways people affirm each other through words and actions. While not specifically coded as a theme, the concept of microaffirmations from the literature broadly covers the ways participants worked to affirm other LGBTQ Christian peers through listening, offering words of support, sending validating text messages, and even engaging in small performative acts such as dressing in drag for Halloween. These acts of solidarity were done with the intention of countering microaggressions in religious contexts.

**Talking back.** Very similar to the ways participants used micro communication strategies to alter negative religious encounters for other LGBTQ members, they also reclaimed negative narratives within and among Christian communities by sharing messages with LGBTQ

peers such as “Jesus loves you” and “this church is an affirming space” to lure them toward Christianity out of care and concern for their spiritual well-being. The theme of reappropriation in the results reflects back on MGT’s notion of talking back, in that muted or nondominant groups alter messaging of the dominant to reclaim power and agency. What is unique about participants reclaiming narratives is that participants possess a dual identity and are talking back to their own Christian community as they reappropriate church language to share love and inclusion to LGBTQ peers. That is, by highlighting the positive and inclusive motives of their churches, participants were forced to confront significant flaws and hypocrisy often present in the rhetoric of their faith communities and Christianity at large. Many participants felt that their faith communities missed the mark on espousing inclusion and that the onus to spread supportive messages fell on them as LGBTQ Christians. The data extends MGT which focuses on the act of talking back as something done only by muted groups, and points to how talking back from a position of dual identity (i.e. Christian and LGBTQ) merits reflexivity but also might yield significantly powerful results since dominant ears are more inclined to dominant voices.

Emergent themes of segmenting identity and preserving relationships also reflect on talking back as a way of gaining control of dominant groups and reclaiming societal narratives. This tactic was littered in the results and took unique form that might extend the way we as communication scholars try to be inclusive of nonverbals as forms of communicating. In the same way that ‘talking back’ works to control dominant narratives, tactics of preserving relationships and segmenting identity yielded similar outcomes for participants. That is, by omitting truths about gender/sexuality and avoiding settings where their identity would be challenged, participants relinquished the power of unsupportive narratives. While participants did report that they directly advocate for the LGBTQ community in educational spaces and

through platforms such as panels, pride rallies, and even social media, limiting their communication was their most common and powerful way of harnessing harmful narratives.

**Perceived costs and rewards.** While many communication orientations were adopted by participants to advocate for their own identity as well as the identities of their peers, I can think of times I failed to advocate for LGBTQ people outside of the faith, due to a fear of potential outcomes. My autoethnography touched on one particular relationship in which I frequently weighed the cost of sharing God's love with the other person for two reasons: The first is that I did not want her to push God away if I pushed her too hard. The other is that I feared losing her if I advocated for my faith, let alone the love of a God she believed was the source of her pain. Other participants shared similar sentiments as they preserved relationships with family members by avoiding conversations about gender and sex, or even hid their LGBTQ identity. DGT says that dominant group members adopt certain communication orientations based on perceived costs and rewards of social interactions, and participants each evaluated the significance of their relationships, especially the ones they would lose, when coming out. Unfortunately, and with no intentions of being insensitive to participants' coming-out processes, including my own, each interaction in which we hid our identity because of a perceived cost such as losing someone, we also risked reinforcing dominant Christian messaging that coming out is in fact wrong or against the religion. This gives rise to the difficulty wrapped up in impeding and dismantling power structures; dominant messages are so engrained in our systems of thought that even members of dominant groups who have only the best intentions still struggle to unravel the harm that marginalized communities have shouldered.

### **Practical Suggestions**

The current research yielded many practical suggestions for advocating for LGBTQ people and increasing the communication between Christian and LGBTQ communities. First, LGBTQ organizations need to support their Christian members. More public awareness campaigns on LGBTQ suicides and mental health related to spiritual and religious tensions and trauma would benefit LGBTQ and religious communities. In a similar vein, existing organizations such as The Human Rights Campaign that advocate for LGBTQ rights, celebrate trans identities, are nonbiased toward religion, and serve to educate communities about the social marginality and health of this population would benefit from more funding and promotion. These organizations should also partner with churches to share and receive vital knowledge. That is, LGBTQ organizations can equip congregations with research-based resources and trainings that promote and teach on how to enact inclusion. These trainings should include information on how to breakdown language barriers between the church and LGBTQ community and how to lead support groups for LGBTQ members—especially youth—within church congregations. Church leaders can also assist LGBTQ organizations by sharing the current and historical challenges of many of their LGBTQ members and attendees.

To yield and share these helpful insights with public organizations and combat LGBTQ tensions, churches need to support, listen to, and care for their own LGBTQ populations. They should do so by facilitating more safe, open, and honest discussions with and led by LGBTQ congregants, and be more operationally inclusive whether denominationally affirming or nonaffirming. As for open and affirming churches, I argue a need for them to better market inclusion at the organizational level (i.e., church sermons, statements of faith, websites, representation in leadership, and marketing materials) so that LGBTQ members of the public might be aware that these churches hold faith stances that support LGBTQ sexual ethics and

celebrate queer identities. That said, these communities need to find a balance between espousing inclusion of and tokenizing the LGBTQ community. Perhaps further research studies can seek out the response of LGBTQ church members and LGBTQ onlookers to church websites and marketing materials. These congregations should also impede gender norms by eliminating gender-specific bathrooms and practicing use of pronoun preference by offering name tags for congregants to be intentional in their labeling of themselves and one another.

Making suggestions to nonaffirming churches poses some more difficulty, and each congregation has the right to their own theological standpoints and sexual ethic; however, I do suggest that these congregations consider the harm in perpetuating gender norms and overemphasizing same-sex relations in sermons. These congregations, while allowed to fundamentally oppose genderqueering and same-sex love or even attraction, should not be directly exclusive of LGBTQ people walking through their doors. A step further, these communities might offer tangible support such as food drives and other supplies for LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness and other basic needs or health disparities. They should also consider using nametags for preferred pronouns, since names and pronouns describe and represent people, not issues. If churches want to authentically show the love of God, their efforts will not discriminate against or exclude the LGBTQ community in any way.

Finally, many LGBTQ people do not associate with religion or affiliate with organized religion but are closely affected by it. Therefore, more social organizations should be created in schools and universities (e.g., the Pride Resource Center at CSU) that exist to educate and support people in the queer community who desire to participate in dialogue over topics such as spirituality, sex, and gender, and their intersections.

### **Experiences of the Researcher**

I am wildly grateful for the insightful, meaningful, and transparent contributions of my research participants. As many of them unveiled some of their deepest, most unveiled parts of themselves, they noted that they were able to do so because I could draw from my own experiences to empathize with them. Interviews, while semistructured, felt like natural, uninhibited conversations between old and new friends as we opened up a space to hold our struggles softly and embrace our humanity together.

As each interview was moving and yielded data in an equally important way, each participant had a unique set of lived experiences and postures toward the church and the LGBTQ community. While participants all identified as LGBTQ, they had different sexual and gender orientations which is reflective of the larger LGBTQ community. They also depicted varying levels of confidence in and tension over their identity. While some of their experiences more or less paralleled my own story, there was not a single theme in the data that did not sink in my gut to some degree. Sometimes it felt like pain, sometimes it felt like peace, but all of it was felt in solidarity. If I had to pick a part of my story that differed from a lot of my participants and most queer people I meet in life, it would be that owning my sexuality came with ease, and I recognize that statement carries a tone of privilege that I also own and hope to leverage in productive ways. While there was ease in my coming out to other people, internally reconciling my sexuality and my faith was the crux of my struggle. As seen in the data, I have had my days of questioning God's acceptance of me, which has helped me set the interview table with empathy.

One suggestion I offer future researchers is to be open and honest about their own positionality as it relates to any subject at hand, whether they have commonalities or not. There is something to be said about transparency and the human connection that it yields. The second suggestion I offer is to have an open mind since there exists so much variability among people

within both Christian and LGBTQ communities. A willingness to listen to ideas of difference without casting judgement will yield rich data that needs to be shared to promote and enact change.

The last few things I will say about my experience is that this research required me to reconnect with people who were a part of my story and relive painful moments with them for the sake of sensemaking. Candidly, asking permission from others to write parts of my story that implicate them felt like digging up old bones but also yielded a lot of joy and even rekindled a few relationships. I am happy to report that at the closing of this research, I have found new peace and closure with some of those significant people. I also confess that there were days, even weeks as I wrote this body of work where I felt almost complete emptiness and was disassociated from the work altogether, which I believe was my own soul's way of taking a breath. At the end of it all, I speak so much more fluently about my own sexuality and relationship with God because of this work. I hope my participants feel the same.

### **Limitations**

This study contributes to a growing body of literature on Dominant Group Theory, extends Social Identity Theory, and shines a light on the marginalized LGBTQ population, yet it has limitations. The first limitation is that I was unable to recruit anyone who identifies as transgender or transsexual. There already exists a dearth of research on the trans community/trans identities within the field of communication, and a lack of language and resources for trans individuals in Christian communities. Further, trans individuals are the most underrepresented group within the larger LGBTQ community and to not have the opportunity to elevate voices from that population was very unfortunate. Another limitation of this study falls under the recruitment process as I was unable to interview anyone who had been introduced to

Christianity later in life after already establishing their LGBTQ social identity. Participants spoke about their experiences coming out from within religion and having pre-existing social networks in the church which made it challenging to highlight the ways Christian communities might be exclusive from an outsider's perspective. Many queer people are kept out of church, but my participants were first pushed out.

Also a procedural shortcoming, I regret not asking participants whether they identify with a dominant group population. As mentioned in the contributions, throughout interviews, some participants' recognition of their dominant group privilege was emergent. However, in the same way I asked them if they identify as marginalized in the interview protocol, I should have countered that by asking whether they directly avow as dominant.

As any study with a theoretical framework, the current research was conducted through the scope of DGT and SIT which limited the potential to view the social context of LGBTQ people within religious contexts from a variety of other perspectives. DGT in particular focuses on communication from the dominant point of view and researching Christians as a dominant group is novel to the field of communication. Notwithstanding, individuals avowing both dominant and nondominant identities are still marginalized outside of any context that privileges their dominant identity. While I highlight the dual identity of participants, their Christian identity predetermines their dominance since the context of this research does not expand beyond religious parameters. In their conceptualization of this theory, Razzante and Orbe (2018) noted this as a limitation, calling DGT a uni-dimensional approach to interactions, and I was unable to offer a more dynamic approach.

### **Directions for Future Research**

There are an endless number of paths this research could have taken to reach the end goal of elevating the voices of people in the queer community and shedding light on their experiences to better inform Christian communities on how to be more inclusive of this marginalized population. I am hopeful for this topic to further be explored by communication scholars. The many alternative paths of this research which I outline below include theories of contemporary intersectionality (Nicholas et al., 2013; see also Lutz et al., 2011), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), disidentification (Scott et al., 1998; see also Turnage, 2010), and intersecting literature on tension and identity salience.

Beyond avowing as Christian and queer, participants reflected on their race, socioeconomic status and where they believe to fall within the hierarchy of the LGBTQ community. One participant even acknowledged her ability to easily pass as cishetero and White which gave her privilege in relation to her partner who was LatinX and did not typically pass as heterosexual or White. Thus, I suggest scholars investigate the lived experiences of queer Christians in religious contexts through a contemporary intersectionality lens to see how one's whole matrix of identities might inform their social and even religious privilege.

As participants were reflexive about their matrix of identities and how it informs their social privilege or marginalization, they gave accounts of internal tension they experienced as the embodiment of multiple, often competing identities. While DGT explores the notion of gleaning from dual positionality to yield informed, productive responses to external conflict, it would be advantageous to research queer Christians' lived experiences through intrapersonal theories such as cognitive dissonance since LGBTQ Christians often experience mental discomfort when making conflicting action choices to organize around Christianity and live according to their gender/sexual orientation.

It was noted under the contribution to disassociation that many participants eventually parted from the church, and some abandoned the Christian faith altogether. Thus, I argue organizational disidentification scholarship would benefit these phenomena. While the literature says people disidentify with organizations because of various events that challenge their values (Scott et al., 1998), this project points to disidentification as a series of subtle decisions people make to protect themselves from the implications of ingroup dealignment (on sexual ethics, for example). Participants' narratives around having "slowly fell away" or stories about segmenting religion and even relationships with religious others, indicate that very notion. The literature posits that when one identifies with a group, they in turn disidentify from others (Turnage, 2010), and this study reveals participants' disidentification not as a process that occurs by default but because of subtle yet deliberate choices to protect themselves from harmful aspects of religion. Because of this, and because DGT does not address how marginalized groups make their exit from dominant contexts, scholars might conceptualize disidentification as a communication tactic—even an exit strategy—used by marginalized people to address tensions within dominant structures.

Finally, future research might also benefit from a realization I had as the author of this work. That is, toward the end of this research I became aware that the tension I experienced as a result of being queer seems to be diminished by various life stressors such as trauma or loss. As this study's findings were being collated, my grandma passed and I brought my partner to her memorial service where she met a few key family members who had no prior knowledge of her. I had limited fear or restraint in bringing Katie along with me and outing myself to the rest of family who did not know I was gay. My grandma's passing and my need to show up for my family, with the support of my partner, diminished my discomfort in coming out to my family.

The salience of my queer identity and the tensions that coming out would have otherwise caused within my conservative Christian family, were minimized in light of death and collective mourning. More so than my LGBTQ identity becoming activated, my identities as a granddaughter, other family member, etc., became the identities most immediate to the situational contexts of death, grief, trauma, loss, emergency, etc. For this reason, I suggest literature on identity salience and tension be put in conversation with one another and that scholars conceive of not just identities, but tensions over identities, as more or less salient based on situational context.

## Conclusion

The goal of this research was to connect theory and apply it to the experiences of LGBTQ people within the context of Christianity and highlight how LGBTQ Christians navigate the world from a complex standpoint as simultaneously dominant and marginalized. These efforts brought forth new insights about dominant and co-cultural groups as it paired Christians and LGBTQ members as inter- and co-cultural members within religious contexts. Further, this work showed that in religious contexts, Christians are dominant groups and LGBTQ people are marginalized, and LGBTQ Christians inherently obtain dual identity as a part of two cultural groups.

The theoretical framework applied in this context showcased many external tensions between the LGBTQ community and Christianity and the internal tensions endured by LGBTQ Christians. The data from participants yielded new ideas for future research of this population and provided exemplars of communication orientations adopted by dominant group members to impede societal power structures which privilege dominant groups.

This work also showed that the invisible, internal tensions experienced by LGBTQ Christians can weigh on them significantly. While my story and the stories of participants yielded pragmatic suggestions on how to be more inclusive of the LGBTQ community at large, this work also exists to share the pain and desperation of the LGBTQ community as an impetus for social and religious change and as a justification for igniting critical conversations on this topic in the field of communication. Awareness of and future scholarship on communication tensions between Christian and queer communities can increase and inform inclusivity of LGBTQ people and maybe even save lives of people just like Eric James.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear [XX],

I am reaching out today to invite you to participate in a study that I am conducting.

As an LGBTQ Christian, you have likely had some unique experiences along the course of your spiritual and/or religious journey. Perhaps you have overcome obstacles relating to your identity. To celebrate the experiences of LGBTQ Christians and to understand more about how they understand and communicate their identities, I am collecting stories from those who identify or have identified with Christianity and as a member of the LGBTQ community, simultaneously.

If you would like to participate in this study, please send an email to [jade.young@colostate.edu](mailto:jade.young@colostate.edu). I will then contact you to schedule a phone or video platform interview. Interviews will last approximately one hour. I will report broad themes from my study and use direct quotes as support for those themes. When quotations are used, I will attribute them to a pseudonym. I will be collecting some demographic information. When I report and share the data to others, I will aggregate this information. I will keep your data confidential; your name and responses will be kept separately. Any personal identifiers will be removed from the transcript of your interview and will be kept in an encrypted file on a password protected computer, accessible only to me and my Principal Investigator, Dr. Elizabeth Williams, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Colorado State University.

While there are no direct benefits of participating for you, I hope to gain more knowledge on the experiences of LGBTQ Christians so I can elevate the LGBTQ community by igniting conversations promoting LGBTQ inclusion and support initiatives within Christian communities. Risks of participating in this study are minimal. However, there may be psychological discomfort from participating in this study, as you may be reflecting on uncomfortable/traumatic experiences. Resources are provided below if this occurs. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researchers have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential (but unknown) risks.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact me, Jade Young, at [jade.young@colostate.edu](mailto:jade.young@colostate.edu); (805) 910-9088 or Dr. Elizabeth Williams at [elizabeth.a.williams@colostate.edu](mailto:elizabeth.a.williams@colostate.edu); (317) 340-3002. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553.

### **LGBTQ Support Resources:**

LGBTQ Support Resources • <https://www.thetrevorproject.org> • <https://itgetsbetter.org> • National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-8255 (online chat available)

- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Crisis Text Line: Text START to 741-741

- Crisis Text Line is free, 24/7 support for those in crisis. Text from anywhere in the USA to text with a trained Crisis Counselor. • The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender National Hotline: (888) 843-4564 • The GLBT National Youth Talkline (youth serving youth through age 25): (800) 246-7743.

- Both provide telephone, online private one-to-one chat and email peer-support, as well as factual information and local resources for cities and towns across the United States. • Trans Lifeline: (877) 565-8860

- Trans Lifeline is a trans-led organization that connects trans people to the community, support, and resources they need to survive and thrive

## **Appendix B: Waiver of Documented Consent**

My name is Jade Young and I am a Graduate Teaching Assistant from Colorado State University in the Communication Studies department. I am conducting a research study on the experiences of LGBTQ Christians. The project seeks to examine, through in-depth interviews, how they interact with other Christians, members of the LGBTQ community, and other LGBTQ Christians, and how they understand their faith and gender/sexuality to conflict and/or coincide. The title of this project is “For the Love of All that is Queer and Holy.” Dr. Elizabeth Williams, Assistant Professor from Colorado State University in the Communication Studies department, is the Principal Investigator and I am the Co-PI. As someone who identifies or has identified with Christianity and as a member of the LGBTQ community, you were selected as a possible participant in this study.

During our time together, I would like you to answer a series of questions about your religious/spiritual experiences. This interview will take approximately one hour. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time and/or decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to address, without penalty or explanation.

There are no known risks to participating in this study. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but I have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential (but unknown) risks.

I will not connect your name or personal identifiers to the data I collect. When I report and share the data to others, I will combine the data from all participants. If I quote you, I will use a pseudonym. If you consent, I would like to audio record our conversation today. I will then transcribe the interview and delete the audio file. I will not include any personal identifiers on the transcript of your interview. Colorado State University, as well as members of the Institutional Review Boards, have the legal right to review your research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. By answering the questions, you are voluntarily agreeing to participate. You are free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to answer for any reason.

If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at [jade.young@colostate.edu](mailto:jade.young@colostate.edu); (805) 910-9088. If you have questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); (970) 491-1553.

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol

### Introduction:

- Thank you so much for meeting with me today!  
Did you have a chance to look at the waiver of signed consent provided to you?
- Do you have any questions about the form?
- Is there anything I should know or that you would like to tell me before we get started?
- Do you consent to this interview and the larger study at hand? Do you consent to being audibly recorded for the sake of my transcription of this interview into text form?
- I am going to start by asking you some screening questions. Feel free to elaborate or be as brief on anything you need.

### Screening Questions

- Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ community?
  - Can you describe your gender/sexual orientation for reference during this interview?
- Do you identify or have you ever identified with Christianity?  
Have you ever affiliated with a church community, or been a member of a church?

### Open-Ended Questions

[RQ1: Why do LGBTQ individuals affiliate with Christianity?]

- What draws you to Christianity?
- If you attend church, why? If not, why not?
- How would you describe yourself as spiritual, religious, or both?

[RQ2: What tensions exist between LGBTQ and Christian identities, and when does each of the two identities become salient?]

- If there was ever a time where you felt like you could not be both Christian and LGBTQ, can you tell me about that?
  - Why did you feel that way?
  - What kind of interactions or experiences provoked those thoughts?
  - Was this a specific circumstance or a stage of life?
- If there was ever a time where you felt like being both Christian and LGBTQ really felt right, or resonant, can you tell me about that?
  - Why did you feel that way?
  - What kind of interactions or experiences provoked those thoughts?
  - Was this a specific circumstance or a stage of life?
- When are you more or less comfortable in your own skin as LGBTQ in church or around religious people/settings?
  - How do you act in these settings?

- How do you perceive your LGBTQ identity being challenged by Christianity or other believers?
  - Does this happen in certain contexts or interactions?
  - What kinds of messages or behaviors promote those feelings?

**[RQ3: How do LGBTQ Christians use communication strategies to advocate for affirmation of their own identity in religious contexts?]**

- Tell me about your coming out process
  - Are you out to your church community/Christians in your life?
- What are some things you do or say when around other Christians to advocate for your LGBTQ identity?
- Can you tell me about how you approach to conversations about gender and sexual identities with other Christians?
  - Is this approach different than your conversations with people in other social circles?
- Tell me about how you do or do not present yourself as LGBTQ to other Christians.
  - Do you highlight or omit certain aspects of your gender/sexuality?
  - When it comes to being LGBTQ, do you try or have ever tried to stand out or blend in, and how?

**[RQ4: How do LGBTQ Christians experience support among interactions with non-LGBTQ Christians in religious contexts?]**

- Tell me about the support you receive by other non-LGBTQ Christians in regard to your LGBTQ identity.
  - Does this happen in certain contexts or interactions?
  - What kinds of messages or behaviors promote those feelings?
- What non-LGBTQ Christians in your life have been most influential in strengthening your identity as an LGBTQ Christian?
  - What is their role in church (e.g., are they in leadership)?
  - How have they shown support?
  - Does this happen in certain contexts or interactions?
  - What kinds of messages or behaviors promote those feelings?

**[RQ5: How do LGBTQ Christians, who embody historically conflicting identities, draw from their own faith positions and sexual orientations to advocate for each other?]**

- Tell me about how and when you feel most supported by other LGBTQ Christians in regard to being both LGBTQ and Christian.
- What aspects of your faith do you find most liberating of your sexual/gender orientation?
- How do you feel your faith and sexual/gender orientation relate to each other?
  - Has your faith changed how you think about being LGBTQ, in any way?
  - How have changed over time?

- When another LGBTQ Christian you know struggles to reconcile their faith position and gender/sexual orientation, how do you support them?
  - What aspects of your faith do you bring into the conversation?

### **Demographic Questions**

- How do you describe your gender?  
How do you describe your sexual orientation?
- Are you an official member of a church congregation?
- What is your age?
- Do you identify with a minoritized population?

### **Wrap-Up**

- Is there anything else you would like to share with me?
- Thank you for meeting with me!