LGBTQ+ Experiences in Conservative Christian Communities

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of the Fraser Valley, 2019

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək̓ʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

Using in-depth interviews with six participants, this qualitative project examines LGBTQ+ experiences in Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta through the lens of queer theory. The research questions guiding this project are: 1) How influential is the role of Christianity in the formation of non-normative genders and sexualities? 2) How do LGBTQ+ individuals understand their LGBTQ+ identity when situated within a traditionally heteronormative religious community? 3) Does there continue to be a code of silence surrounding LGBTQ+ identities within Conservative Christian communities? 4) How do LGBTQ+ individuals deal with the perceived incompatibility between their faith and their sexuality and/or gender?

Findings indicate that participants view the silence surrounding LGBTQ+ issues and the subsequent lack of formal support for LGBTQ+ individuals as complicit in perpetuating rhetoric that LGBTQ+ identities are abnormal, sinful, and shameful. The majority of participants did not experience extended internalized conflict between their sexual/gender and religious identities, though they did struggle with trying to integrate their LGBTQ+ identities into their Conservative Christian communities. All participants shifted to a more personalized faith and view Christianity as a resource instead of a requirement, and the majority of participants frame both their gender/sexual identity and religious identity as fluid and liminal, subject to change depending on the context. Recommendations for Conservative Christian communities to better address sexual and gender diversity include exposure, celebration of LGBTQ+ identities, adherence to unconditional love as a core tenet of Christianity, and transparency regarding community stances on LGBTQ+ individuals and issues.

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Introduction

Positionality

In qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher is not absent from the research process, and that the results of a research project are a reflection of both the participants and the researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Hallberg, 2006). Therefore, I want to begin this paper with a recognition of my own positionality and subject position in relation to this project on LGBTQ+ experiences in Conservative Christian communities. As this topic and research are largely inspired by my own experiences, it is important that I acknowledge this at the outset of this paper.

I was born into a Mennonite Christian family in the Fraser Valley, was raised as a Christian, and considered myself part of the Christian community that was comprised of my family, church, school, and friend groups for the majority of my life. I was content within these different sectors and identified as a Christian for my childhood and teenage years, going on to attend Bible school overseas following graduation from my Christian high school. However, as I began taking courses at a secular university for my undergraduate degree, I began to realize that I was not heterosexual, as had always been assumed and implicitly enforced, and subsequently I began identifying as gay. With this new identity I began to experience discomfort in these previously safe and comfortable spaces, as LGBTQ+ individuals and issues were almost never discussed except to reiterate that the Bible said that being gay was a sin. I began to feel out of place as I no longer felt represented in these contexts and felt pressure to hide that part of myself for fear of my gay identity marking me as an outsider and as willingly living in sin, potentially incurring shame not only onto myself but onto my family as well.

These fears meant that I did not disclose my gay identity to those in my Conservative Christian community for several years, and began to distance myself from both the social and personal aspects of Christianity due to a lack of support, or even acknowledgement, both formally and informally, that LGBTQ+ individuals exist and have unique struggles and experiences within these communities. Eventually I came out to my immediate family and to a pastor in my church, the former reacting with shock and statements of 'we still love you, we'll work through this,' and the latter recommending Christian books about those struggling with same-sex attraction to me and solidifying my fears that I would not be allowed to be a member of the church, be a youth leader, or participate in any real or significant capacity due to my non-normative identity. Since I no longer felt that I had a place in the church, I stopped attending and distanced myself further from these Conservative Christian communities, instead finding community in secular areas and confiding in some of my more progressive Christian friends.

My experiences as a queer person in a Conservative Christian community and my attempts to understand these experiences through a sociological lens inspired this current project, and as such, my positionality is inextricably linked to the research process and the findings of this project. My position as someone who identifies as a member of the group I am studying was beneficial for this project in that it facilitated the building of rapport with participants and allowed for a deeper understanding and analysis of their experiences, presented here in a way that is both respectful and thoughtful. However, I also came into this project with my own experiences of being a LGBTQ+ person in a Conservative Christian community, which may have influenced the areas that I chose to focus on and how I chose to present the data from this project. Therefore, I have made an effort to keep these potential

biases in mind and acknowledge my subject position at every step of the process. By utilizing queer theory to view participants' experiences as fluid and diverse, and making space for the participants to talk about what they felt is important, I have endeavoured to allow the participants and data to speak for themselves instead of being heavily filtered through my own experiences and preconceived notions. It is my hope that the results of this study will provide insight into how LGBTQ+ individuals experience these communities, as well as provide some general guidance for Conservative Christian communities on how to respectfully address LGBTQ+ identities and issues within their communities.

Definitions

This study examines two main aspects of identity: sexual/gender identity, and religious identity. In this project, these identities are subjectively defined and understood by each participant, rather than being held to an objective or pre-determined category. Sexual/gender identity is typically defined as how individuals situate themselves within known sexual and gender categories (Levy, 2008). For the purposes of this study, I will interchangeably be using the terms 'LGBTQ+' (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others) and 'non-normative gender/sexuality' to refer to any individual who does not identify as both heterosexual and cisgender. Often '2' is included in this acronym to represent those who identify as Two-Spirit; however, none of the participants in my study used this label and the previous literature on this topic does not mention Two-Spirit identities. Therefore, for the purposes of this project I will not be including '2' in the acronym as the unique experiences of Two-Spirit individuals are not represented. The different experiences of individuals holding these various identities are complex and fluid, and these complexities are explored throughout this paper, however it is

necessary to provide a general definition here in order to specify on whom this research is focusing, and emphasize how these particular identities are often in contrast to the assumed norms of the communities being examined. Undoubtably, those who identify as both cisgender and heterosexual within Conservative Christian communities also have unique and complex experiences concerning their gender and sexual identities, however these experiences are outside of the scope of the current research and therefore will not be discussed in depth in this paper.

Religious identity can also be a complex and fluid category for individuals, and therefore I am inclined to resist providing a concrete definition of it. Though I asked participants to describe their current religious identity, I intentionally did not provide them with a definition for the term in order to allow their own subjective views on religion and religious identity to more clearly shine through in the interviews. Therefore, instead of providing a limiting definition of the term, I will just say that religious identity is understood differently for each individual, and is often seen as fluid and open to change.

In this project, I also chose to focus on Conservative Christian communities as a whole, instead of a specific aspect of Christian community such as church, family, or school, in order to better understand the intersections of these various aspects of community. It has been noted by Kilmer (2014) that religious identity can no longer be understood as linear and formed primarily within the church; instead, it can be characterized as a complex, continual formation throughout an individual's life. Religious identity intersects with multiple categories and therefore requires intersectional dialogue to accurately address areas of dissonance (Kilmer, 2014). My broadening of this definition encapsulates all of these different aspects, and allows

individuals to discuss not only the variety of different contexts in which they experience Christian community, but also the ways these contexts are interrelated and dependent upon each other, ultimately providing a more well-rounded and in-depth portrayal of how LGBTQ+ individuals experience these different Conservative Christian communities.

Purpose & Significance

Examining and understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities continues to be a pressing issue contemporarily. Research on religious contexts suggests that even people who are not personally religious may be influenced by the religious culture in which they live (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). Moore & Vanneman (2003) found that people living in a more religious region of the United States tended to have more conservative gender attitudes even if they did not consider themselves personally religious. In Canada, there is some evidence of increased polarization in attitudes towards sex outside of traditional marriage (Reimer, 2017). Canada has always had an important right wing, made up of a significant number of Christian evangelicals and concentrated in specific regions of the country (Smith, 2012). Specifically, Alberta and parts of British Columbia have been described as a regional culture often emphasizing conservative family values (Woodard, 2011). Therefore, this topic is becoming increasingly prominent in Canadian society and is important to examine.

O'Brien (2014) argues that religion matters, and is important to consider for three reasons: as a significant basis for self-meaning and understanding; as a major socio-historical force that reflects the variations in cultural dominance and political climates; and as a basis for determining inclusion and exclusion across families, communities, networks, and organizations. Sexual minority religiosity has been found to serve as both a developmental asset and a source

of risk for sexual minority individuals (Dahl & Galiher, 2012), demonstrating a clear need to examine this topic in more depth to better understand these complex relationships between LGBTQ+ individuals, their faiths, and their faith communities. As a result of often-condemning denominational positions, it is important for researchers to gain an increased understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within religious contexts (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). Ultimately, the goal of this research is not to search for universal truths, but to make sense of the diverse specificity of lived experience as it impacts the history of individuals, cultures, and societies in flux (Hammack, 2005).

Context

Like this topic itself, the intersections of queer theory, LGBTQ+ studies, and religious studies have historically been tense, if not outright conflicting. The sociology of religion generally ignored LGBTQ+ religiosities until the early 1990s, and despite the growth of LGBTQ+-centred and queer theology, when the topic of sexual and gender variance is taken up by religion scholars all too often the discussion is heterosexist and homophobic, and bisexuals, transgender people, and other identities are written out entirely (Wilcox, 2006). Similarly, references to religion in queer theory and LGBTQ+ studies in the past have typically been sparse, brief, and generally derogatory (Wilcox, 2006). Though Christianity is frequently typecast as either oppressor or liberator, in reality its roles have spanned a wide range, from fierce oppression to oblivious neutrality, to outright radicalism (Wilcox, 2003). Religion is not only a tool of homophobia and transphobia, and a force of oppression for people who identify as LGBTQ+, but can also be key to agency and empowerment, as both religious and LGBTQ+ identities are crucial aspects of personal identity and subjectivity (Van Klinken, 2015).

Throughout my research I have focused on engaging critically with these complexities, recognizing that situations that are often framed as one-sided are in reality infinitely more fluid and multi-faceted than they first appear.

As stated above, the role that religious faith plays in individuals' lives can be very important, often providing emotional and social support (Levy, 2008). In addition to being a source of encouragement, religious faith can also strongly shape an individual's identity and worldview. Religious institutions provide a social network, cultural traditions, and a value base, and for numerous Christians, religion is the foundation and centrepiece of their lives (Levy & Reeves, 2011; Dahl & Galliher, 2012). However, religious factors have created significant barriers for LGBTQ+ individuals to both take part in and benefit from faith communities (Murr, 2013). Therefore, individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ within Christian communities face a unique set of challenges in not only attempting to integrate their faith and gender or sexual identities, but also in attempting to exist as full members of the community while professing an identity that is often viewed as sinful. Research done in the United States typically points to religion as one of the strongest predictors of attitudes about homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009), and condemnation by mainstream faith traditions has inflicted considerable harm on sexual and gender minorities (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). The significance and implications of this makes the topic of LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities an important area for research.

Historically, institutional religion has been used as a mechanism for heterosexist intolerance and oppression toward homosexuality specifically, as well as other non-normative genders and sexualities (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). The church provides community and context

for personal faith, which can be both a blessing and a challenge for people who identify as LGBTQ+, particularly when the community denies complete inclusion (Harris et al., 2020). Despite increased tolerance from many denominations, there remains a lack of acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals in major religious institutions, and many organizations have not fundamentally altered their viewpoint that LGBTQ+ identities go against their moral code (Sherkat et al., 2011; Dahl & Galliher, 2012). Church theologies are often inconsistent regarding how to approach these topics, however the majority of Christian churches continue to view homosexuality as a sin, regardless of their specific beliefs about how the Bible should be viewed and interpreted (Ntombana et al., 2020; Levy, 2008). Notably, non-affirming contexts tend to be those rooted in fundamentalism (Whitley, 2009), and conservative Protestants are typically seen as having the least accepting attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009).

These doctrines that condemn homosexuality constitute the ideological backdrop against which Christians initially experience their LGBTQ+ identity -- at worst, they are irredeemable sinners; at best, they suffer from problems or afflictions (O'Brien, 2004). Therefore, for many LGBTQ+ individuals, a flight from religious intolerance has become a central aspect of personal 'coming out' stories in which religion is clearly framed as the enemy (O'Brien, 2004). However, simply leaving these communities is not always an option. Shedding an entire structure of meaning may leave the individual cast adrift in a sea of meaninglessness, which may be even less tolerable than the knowledge that they are potentially damned (O'Brien, 2004). This context of intolerance, silence, and condemnation of LGBTQ+ identities in Christian communities can then influence the way LGBTQ+ individuals within these

communities perceive themselves, those around them, and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. If an individual views religion as an important part of their life, these feelings of exclusion and shame can be increasingly detrimental to them.

Gaps in Research

This current project addresses a variety of gaps in the academic literature on LGBTQ+ experiences in Conservative Christian communities; most notably, the lack of Canadian context. Religion is often seen as an important predictor of attitudes about homosexuality and other non-normative identities. However, cross-national differences in cultural orientation suggest that the role religion has in explaining homosexual attitudes may depend on a nation's cultural context (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). Coburn et al. (2019) mention the importance of understanding regional influences as they contribute to the lived experiences of religious LGBTQ+ people, and encourage future studies to look at different areas to see how findings compare. Therefore, expanding on this research in a Canadian context is vital to understanding how LGBTQ+ individuals experience Conservative Christian communities under different national values and cultural contexts.

To my knowledge, only two existing studies focus on LGBTQ+ identities in Christian communities in Canada: one conducted by Beagan & Hattie (2015) situated on the east coast of Canada examining LGBTQ experiences with religion and spirituality, and the other conducted by Dueck (2012) situated in Manitoba which addressed lesbian, gay, and queer perspectives on being Mennonite (both an ethnic group and Christian denomination). Canada has a large and diverse population, with different regions containing a multitude of different cultural contexts. Therefore, the current study addresses this gap in research by presenting the experiences of

LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities on the west coast of Canada, specifically within the provinces of British Columbia and Alberta.

Empirical research examining conflicts between sexual and gender identity and religious upbringing is scarce, especially studies which focus on the process of resolving this conflict (Levy & Edmonton, 2014). Notably, while previous research addresses the heterosexual norm present in many Christian communities, there is little examination of a similarly assumed cisgender norm. The participants in the current study discuss their experiences with this cisgender norm, highlighting this gap in research. Dahl & Galliher (2012) suggest that future research consider the various pathways by which one's religious upbringing may serve as a developmental asset, including the incorporation of core values into one's overall identity. The current study examines these areas in depth by explicitly discussing both the results of any conflict participants experienced between their sexual/gender and religious identities, and exploring if and how participants continue to utilize many of the Christian values they were taught despite negative experiences within their Conservative Christian communities.

There is a growing recognition in North American society that more needs to be done to support LGBTQ+ individuals in religious contexts (Wright-Maley et al., 2016). Significant qualitative studies that focus on LGBTQ+ experiences in religious contexts do exist, however these studies largely focus on the religious climate present within the United States. Canadian studies on this topic are few and far between, and no longer reflect the current social and religious climate. Therefore, the current study aims to provide a uniquely Canadian perspective on this issue, to expand on the themes described in previous studies, to discover whether these

themes are still relevant given the Canadian context and shifting social climate, and to explore any new themes that arise in the data.

Research Questions

This qualitative study aims to understand how LGBTQ+ people experience non-normative genders and sexualities within the context of Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How influential is the role of Christianity in the formation of non-normative genders and sexualities?
2. How do LGBTQ+ individuals understand their LGBTQ+ identity when situated within a traditionally heteronormative religious community?
3. Does there continue to be a code of silence surrounding LGBTQ+ identities within Conservative Christian communities?
4. How do LGBTQ+ individuals deal with the perceived incompatibility between their faith and their sexuality and/or gender?

Literature Review

This literature review begins by outlining the background and current climate of how LGBTQ+ issues are addressed in Christianity, specifically focusing on the prevalence and influence of institutional heteronormativity in the first section, and the code of silence surrounding LGBTQ+ topics in the second section. Due to this uninviting environment, LGBTQ+ and Christian identities are widely perceived to be mutually exclusive (Walton, 2000; O'Brien, 2004). The third section discusses the conflict experienced between these identities, and the fourth section examines the negative and positive consequences associated with attempting to reconcile two often contradictory ways of living. The fifth section looks at the ways LGBTQ+ individuals are able to integrate these two identities despite their perceived contradictory nature.

Institutional Heteronormativity

Previous research emphasizes the presence of institutionalized heteronormativity within Christian communities. Notably, though literature on this topic often discusses the presence of a heterosexual norm within these communities, a cisgender norm and assumed cisgender identity in Christian communities is rarely mentioned in previous research. Therefore, the heterosexual norm will be addressed in this literature review, while the cisgender norm that many of the participants of the current study also discussed will be addressed in the following chapters.

The presupposition and normative standard of heterosexuality is salient and often unchallenged within Western society, and can be exacerbated within Christian religious contexts (Dahl & Galiher, 2012). Institutional heteronormativity enjoys hegemonic status in

Christian sexual-ethics debates, serving to disqualify from the realm of the 'ideal' all life choices other than heterosexual relationships within marriage (Webster, 1998). Anything outside of these sexual norms often becomes unknowable, non-existent, and a perceived threat to faith communities (Dueck, 2012). Heteronormativity creates a binary between the identification as heterosexual and non-heterosexual, in which non-heterosexuality is viewed as abnormal and is measured in its difference from heterosexuality (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Heterosexuality thus remains the fundamental, unexamined, and unquestioned normative standard which grounds discussions about sexuality, and by which all else is judged and evaluated. It becomes seen as something innate and stable, without an appreciation for changing meanings and significations over time (Dueck-Read, 2015). Sexual and gender minority individuals within Christian communities may be exposed to negative and condemning denominational teachings regarding their gender identity, sexual attraction, and behavior, which in turn leads to heightened frustration and confusion regarding their own values related to gender identity, sexual behavior, attractions, faith, family, and the afterlife (Dahl & Galiher, 2012).

Christian communities are important social contexts in which to examine the social construction of sexual desire and gender identity, as they are socializing institutions in which individuals often struggle to define themselves in relation to others (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2013). Institutional heteronormativity is apparent in these communities when LGBTQ+-identified individuals are not offered the same rights that heterosexuals enjoy (Levy, 2008). When a greater number of individuals within a community operate within heteronormative cultural schemas produced by their own religious beliefs and behaviours, heteronormativity acquires more legitimacy and power, creating a relational context that limits available options

for sexual expression and identity and stigmatizes same-sex sexuality (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2013). Wilkinson & Pearson note that

> Many major religions reaffirm heteronormativity through the creation of powerful rituals and beliefs that celebrate 'appropriate' expressions of sexuality and gender differences associated with heterosexual marriage and by teaching the restriction of sexual activity to married, heterosexual couples, thus labelling all other forms of sexuality as deviant. (2013, pg. 182)

Sexuality in these communities has often been viewed as a concept only for adults, reinforcing the idea of maintaining innocence and moral purity (Grozelle, 2017). This mentality views children as in need of protection from gender and sexual identities seen as 'dangerous' or 'inappropriate;' or, identities that go against the heterosexual norm (Grozelle, 2017). In many Christian communities, cisgender heterosexual identification and curtailed sexual practices are central in order to self-identify as someone belonging to these communities, which often celebrate unity rather than diversity (Dueck, 2012). Quinlivan & Town (1999) note that for the lesbian and gay youth they interviewed about sexual diversity in New Zealand secondary schools, the pervasive message received was that sexuality was reproductive and heteronormative. This reinforced the minority and abnormal status of alternative forms of gender and sexuality within the community, and simultaneously reinforced the normality of heteronormativity while also inferring that there was something wrong and abnormal about experiencing same-sex desires (Quinlivan & Town, 1999).

In their study on family relationships and the religious identities of LGBTQ+ Christians, Hickey & Grafsky (2017) found that a considerable number of their participants reported that their parents were misinformed about the nature of sexual orientation, with the belief that sexual orientation could change with the right efforts and resources and that it was a choice

that had a causal explanation affecting parents' reactions to their child's disclosure. The participants in Beagan & Hattie's (2015) study explained that beyond specifically homo-negative messages, several had also experienced their religious communities as more broadly sex-negative. The construction of even masturbation as sinful left many feeling that sex in general was shameful, and same-sex attraction doubly so (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Due to this, many of the participants delayed sexual activity until relatively late in life, and simply avoided sex -- this allowed participants to come to terms with identity separately from their feelings and beliefs about sex (Beagan & Hattie, 2015).

Institutional religion has historically been used as a mechanism for heterosexist intolerance and oppression toward homosexuality and non-normative genders (Grozelle, 2017; Levy, 2008). Heteronormativity thus remains the fundamental, unexamined norm which is grounding most discussions on sexuality in these communities (Dueck, 2012). Individual religiosity continues to be a strong and persistent predictor of negative attitudes toward same-sex sexuality specifically and non-normative genders and sexualities more broadly, shaping the behavior and well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2013). Previous literature indicates that the message from a majority of Christian institutions has often been a message of condemnation towards non-normative identities.

Code of Silence

A common theme in the current literature on LGBTQ+ experiences in Christian communities is that there is a 'code of silence' surrounding the acknowledgement and discussion of LGBTQ+ identities in these communities. This is enforced both formally and informally; explicitly and implicitly. Formal discourses systematically eliminate the plethora of

desires, sexual practices, bodies, and genders present in these communities, which in turn pathologizes, limits, and 'others' that which contests the unspoken and unexamined heterosexual norm (Dueck, 2012). When LGBTQ+ identities remain hidden or ignored, a heterosexist culture can continue to thrive and remain unchallenged (Griffen & Outlet, 2003). Additionally, when LGBTQ+ individuals are afraid to disclose their LGBTQ+ status, then the community is only aware of heterosexually-identified individuals, which in turn perpetuates further silence on these topics and enforces a culture of institutional heteronormativity (Craig et al., 2017; Herek, 1990). Quinlivan & Town (1999) found that current religious practices appear to have a vested interest in maintaining silences concerning (homo)sexualities and continue to reinforce and promote heterosexuality as the norm. For all of the gay and lesbian youth they interviewed, the pervasive silence concerning their experiences, feelings, and perceptions of their sexuality contributed to their feelings of isolation and invisibility within their environments (Quinlivan & Town, 1999).

Levy's (2008) study utilized in-depth interviews with 15 individuals in the Southeastern United States to understand the processes by which gay, lesbian, and queer-identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. She found that although the queer participants in her study were raised in a variety of Christian denominations, all participants expressed a negative church doctrine in regard to homosexuality (Levy, 2008). For many of Levy's (2008) participants, although same-sex behaviours were occasionally mentioned as sinful, the subject was so taboo that it was rarely ever discussed; however, the negative connotations were still clear. Interestingly, because homosexuality was such a taboo topic, some participants did not realize that being gay

or lesbian was an option until later in life and thus had trouble making sense of their same-sex attractions (Levy, 2008).

Dueck (2012) found that silence was a major theme emerging from her interviews as well. She conducted interviews with 9 Canadian lesbian, gay, and queer individuals about how they could be both LGQ and Mennonite (a denomination of Christianity) (Dueck, 2012). For many of her participants, no explicit messages were spoken, yet actions and presumptions clearly laid out what was acceptable and within community norms (Dueck, 2012). The topic of sexuality remained largely unaddressed by the churches, proving to be a source of difficulty for the participants (Dueck, 2012). Interacting with and 'breaking' this pervasive silence came with risks, as it meant being active in regularly and intentionally pushing the limits of gender and sexuality norms in the community (Dueck, 2012). Although some participants received a great amount of informal support from individuals within the religious community, the formal structures left them systematically vulnerable and served as a painful form of exclusion, and a continuing factor perpetuating the silence surrounding non-normative sexualities (Dueck, 2012). Similarly, Craig et al. (2017) found that many of their American LGBTQ Christian college student participants noted that homophobic attitudes, beliefs, and language were never discussed directly; instead, the school administrators and faculty used broadly understood 'code words' to enforce the message that LGBTQ identities and behaviours were unacceptable – this encapsulated an intricate exclusionary system that reinforced the idea that LGBTQ students were a threat to religious beliefs.

The maintenance of silence in a climate of institutionalized heteronormativity characterizes the complex experiences LGBTQ+ individuals have in Christian contexts. Sexuality

and gender identity are integral aspects of personhood and when they are limited, not recognized or talked about, the community both fails to see the diversity of sexual and gender identities around them and limits those with non-normative identities within the community (Dueck, 2012). The silencing of LGBTQ+ individuals and their allies ultimately reinforces the predominance of heteronormativity and gender normativity within these communities and fuels fears of disclosure (Craig et al., 2017). This absence of support for LGBTQ+ individuals in religious contexts tends to undermine the qualities of tolerance, openness, and equity often espoused in these communities (Wright-Maley et al., 2016).

Conflict

The role that religious faith plays in individuals' lives can be very important, often providing emotional and social support. It has also traditionally been understood as protective for a variety of psychosocial health outcomes (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). However, the generalizability of these findings to those who identify as LGBTQ+ is questioned due to varying Christian denominational teachings on same-sex attractions and sexual behaviour (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). Doctrines that condemn homosexuality constitute the ideological backdrop against which individuals initially experience their non-normative gender or sexuality (O'Brien, 2004; Levy, 2008). As a result, LGBTQ+ individuals often feel alienated within non-affirming religious organizations, which tend to be rooted in fundamentalism. This presents a significant predicament for LGBTQ+ individuals in Christian environments: abandoning Christianity may mean losing a sense of meaning and purpose, yet keeping this particular religion means facing the prospect of damnation (O'Brien, 2004).

For many LGBTQ+ individuals, a flight from religious intolerance is a central aspect of personal 'coming out' stories. This often involves a process of renouncing religious roots, and for many individuals this is a painful and alienating process that involves not only casting off an entire system of meaning and belonging, but forging a new non-Christian ideology (O'Brien, 2004). In an ethnographic study on lesbian and gay Christians who choose to remain in mainstream Christian denominations while also being out about their sexuality, O'Brien (2004) utilizes the term 'gay predicament' to describe the idea that one cannot be both a good Christian and LGBTQ+. At worst, LGBTQ+ people are seen as irredeemable sinners; at best, they suffer from problems or afflictions. The interviewees in her study described this period of initial struggle as very lonely and painful, with a sense of insurmountable shame and alienation (O'Brien, 2004).

When gender and sexual minority individuals within religious contexts are exposed to negative and condemning denominational teachings regarding their sexual attractions and behaviour, this can lead to heightened frustration and confusion regarding their own values related to sexual behaviour, gender, attractions, faith, family, and the afterlife (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). Previous research reveals that LGBTQ+ individuals within Christian communities commonly experience identity conflicts (Levy, 2008). The identities that one perceives as being incompatible with being LGBTQ+ tend to have a significant impact on the formation of one's LGBTQ+ identity (Walton, 2000). For many LGBTQ+ individuals who grew up in Christian communities, religious and sexual/gender identities are both highly personal and deeply rooted, and the experienced conflict can lead to aggravated harms (Joldersma, 2016; Murr, 2013). Those in religious communities are often taught that being LGBTQ+ means the severance

of a spiritual relationship, though many have been raised in religious social contexts that include family, educational, and church systems (Craig et al., 2017).

In her study with gay and lesbian Christians, Levy (2008) found that her participants defined the conflict between their sexual identity and Christian upbringing as a clash between implicit or explicit church doctrine on homosexuality and their own experiences of same-sex attraction. Interestingly, some participants' realization that religious doctrine was not completely correct began with issues other than homosexuality, though eventually these doubts spread to include the community's stance on homosexuality (Levy, 2008). The resolution of this conflict included all participants stepping away from organized religion, embracing a more personalized faith which may or may not be religious in nature, and an acceptance of their sexual identity (Levy, 2008). Levy & Reeves' (2011) study similarly found that their participants experienced inconsistencies in church doctrine regarding issues other than LGBTQ+ identities, such as divorce, birth control, and suicide. This disconnect between church doctrine and the participants' experiences of the world caused them to question their faith and begin working through the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs (Levy & Reeves, 2011).

Dahl & Galliher's (2012) study with LGBTQ adolescents and young adults found that their participants described questioning their religious faith and teachings, and a proportion also experienced internalized conflict. However, they had different perspectives regarding their connection or lack of connection to their church (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). As the participants started experiencing conflict between their religious and sexual identities, they found their personal experiences of same-sex attractions were not congruent with what they had been

taught and began to question the teachings of their childhood faith as a result (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). This process of questioning was chaotic and frustrating, as many of the participants' personal experiences with same-sex attractions did not coincide with what they were taught (Dahl & Galliher, 2012).

In their study on the spirituality of black lesbians in South Africa, Ntombana et al. (2020) found that their participants were scared of coming out to their church peers about their sexual orientation because they knew that their churches perceived homosexuality as a sin. The participants discussed painful and isolating experiences when their sexual and religious identities were negotiated; this was attributed to the homonegativity that was experienced in the churches where they were members (Ntombana et al., 2020). Although the church continued to symbolize a place of refuge for participants, it also occupied a complicated position in their lives because the churches were still struggling with 'the issue' of same-sex relationships and consequently responded in homophobic, micro-aggressive, and judgemental ways (Ntombana et al., 2020).

A significant theme within this identity conflict is the concept of a fight for survival, which includes emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical facets. This conflict and fight for survival can lead to feelings of liminality in which individuals feel trapped in a struggle to reconcile two seemingly contradictory identities. The struggle to live authentically both as a religious or spiritual person and as LGBTQ+ poses a challenge for many individuals in Christian communities. They may be nostalgic for the feelings of closeness with their religion, but cannot reconcile them with their shame (Craig et al., 2017). Shedding an entire structure of meaning can leave one cast adrift in a sea of meaninglessness -- which may be even less tolerable than

the knowledge that one is living in sin (O'Brien, 2004). The way in which LGBTQ+ individuals reconcile their predicament is often a solitary process, one that reflects aspects of a culture of religious individualism rather than community and congregational support (O'Brien, 2004).

Gardner (2017) conducted 65 semi-structured interviews with current students and recent alumni at nine evangelical Christian colleges and universities in the United States concerning the discursive strategies in LGBTQ+ Christian college students' negotiation of their sexual identities. The respondents in Gardner's (2017) study demonstrated a common strategy to dissociate the person of Jesus and his example of love from the connotations of organized religion inherent in the label. Murr (2013) conducted eight interviews with lesbian and bisexual women in the United States who grew up in non-affirming Christian environments and describe their current spiritual practice as meaningful and affirming. Similarly to Gardner (2017), all of the participants in Murr's (2013) study reported that their faith was stronger after going through this conflict than it had been in the past, however most did not find a lasting home in affirming churches. In moving away from organized religion, faith became more personal. Interestingly, many of the participants reported that they never once believed that their same-gender relationships were sinful; they understood the teachings of the Church, but never once believed or internalized them (Murr, 2013). By questioning and eventually rejecting the teachings of their Christian leaders, participants separated the voice of their churches from the voice of God and concluded that God was more loving and accepting than they had originally been told (Murr, 2013).

Some of Beagan & Hattie's (2015) participants experienced very little spiritual conflict regarding their LGBTQ identities, though they did face family conflict and experienced profound

losses of community, friends, and family. Similarly, Coburn et al.'s (2019) study with queer Christian women found that individuals connect the conflict they have experienced regarding being both queer and Christian to understandings of church doctrine, the influence of religious leaders, and their involvement in various relationships, rather than being internally conflicted about their own sexual orientation. The findings from this study point to these identities as potentially supporting and fostering each other, rather than inherently being conflicting (Coburn et al., 2019). Ultimately, faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions for many LGBTQ+ individuals in Christian communities (Levy, 2008).

Consequences

Negative Impacts

Struggling with conflict between religion and sexuality or gender identity, as well as an LGBTQ+-adverse environment, can have significant and long-lasting consequences on LGBTQ+ individuals. When LGBTQ+ people find themselves in anti-LGBTQ+ religious contexts, they are at risk of victimization, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, despair, self-loathing, isolation, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, internalized homophobia and transphobia, difficulties in school, feelings of shame, guilt, substance abuse, dysfunctional peer group and family relationships, and attempts to change their gender identity or sexual orientation through reparative therapy or prayer (Wright-Maley et al., 2016; Joldersma, 2016; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Grozelle, 2017; Murr, 2013; Levy, 2008; Yip, 1998; Moon & Tobin, 2018; Beagan & Hattie, 2015).

Homophobia and transphobia in these contexts refer to negative, fearful or hateful attitudes and behaviours toward LGBTQ+ individuals, and differs from the common definition

of 'phobia' in that the fear is not rooted in individual experience, but rather in culturally learned prejudices (O'Brien, 2008). Individuals are more likely to act out their prejudices when they consider them to be culturally legitimate and shared by others (O'Brien, 2008). Internalized homophobia and transphobia are recognized by researchers as stress-inducing scenarios that many sexual and gender minorities relate to or have experienced (Meek, 2014). Because most anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes are learned through normal socialization in society, internalized homophobia and transphobia can be particularly insidious stressors (Barnes & Meyer, 2012). A lack of religious affirmation and acceptance can lead to internalized homophobia or transphobia, through which LGBTQ+ individuals incorporate into their self-concept these negative views about their gender, sexuality, and lifestyle (Yip, 1998). In their study with lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, Barnes & Meyer (2012) found that non-affirming religion was associated with higher internalized homophobia, and that non-affirming religious settings present a hostile social environment for LGB individuals.

In their study, Dahl & Galliher (2012) discovered four main themes related to negative outcomes for LGBTQ adolescents and young adults raised within a Christian religious context: feelings of inadequacy, religious-related guilt, depressive symptoms, and social strain. Their participants often felt alone in this process of questioning, because talking about one's same-sex attractions in their Christian communities would indicate an inability to control or deny their attractions (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). Previous research also suggests higher amounts of stress for these individuals due to living with the constant fear of exposure (Yip, 1998). Gardner's (2017) study on LGBTQ Christian college students notes that the labels these students assign themselves can result in expulsion, or at the very least a kind of social death in

the heteronormative Christian college world. In attempts to render their complicated identities intelligible, these non-normative sexual identity labels were found to constrain the participants' identities and reproduce a minority status in a heteronormative social context (Gardner, 2017).

Research also suggests that early involvement in conservative churches is strongly associated with internalized feelings of shame and inferiority for LGBTQ+ individuals (Murr, 2013). Within this context, harmful experiences are prevalent. Murr (2013) found in her interviews with queer Christian women that her participants experienced family conflict, condemnation, rejection from the faith community, internalized negative messages, and attempts to change one's orientation. Religious reasons were almost always cited for the negative responses from participants' families (Murr, 2013). Wright-Maley et al. (2016) similarly found four themes related to negative outcomes emerging from this conflict between LGBTQ+ identities and religious identities: feelings of inadequacy, religious-related guilt, struggles with depressive symptoms, and difficulty in social relationships with both friends and family members.

Beagan & Hattie (2015) found that the psychological and emotional harms done to some of their Eastern Canadian LGBTQ participants through organized religion were extensive, and some participants felt disconnected from their bodies and experienced delayed sexual activity due to this. Interestingly, there were no age patterns in their study -- stories of harms done through faith traditions were as intense for those in their twenties as those in their fifties and sixties (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Many of the participants who suppressed their LGBTQ identities for extended periods said that their depression or anxiety lifted once they came out; with the loss of family and community they may have been lonely and isolated, but they felt less internal

conflict (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Beagan & Hattie (2015) argue that for those involved in Christian traditions the harm is not lessening over time. Even the very young participants in their study experienced homo-negative and sex-negative messages, shame, guilt, and anxiety about spending an eternity in hell (Beagan & Hattie, 2015).

Craig et al. (2017) explain that very few of the LGBTQ2 students in religious universities whom they interviewed reported seeking help to cope with their struggles due to a lack of safe or available resources, and that such experiences of shame contributed to accumulated stress to their mental health and other long-lasting negative impacts. Many of the participants reported instances of being disciplined for attempting to embody their LGBTQ identities, and the central themes described by the participants was a fight for survival involving institutionalized homo/transphobia, a culture of fear, marginalization and isolation, struggle, and coping and resilience (Craig et al., 2017). Additionally, Craig et al. (2017) note the importance of community experienced in these schools, and argue that being isolated, voluntarily or involuntarily, from religious communities may represent a loss of identity and self for individuals because such support may be difficult to find elsewhere for those who have been raised in religious social contexts that include family, educational, and church systems. This fear of isolation contributed to struggles with suffering and suicide and caused inner turmoil for the participants, as many had found comfort in their religious relationships and were nostalgic for the feelings of closeness with their religion (Craig et al., 2017).

The results of the study suggest that LGBTQ students in religious colleges and universities who do not have 'out' classmates or professors, or an LGBTQ-affirming climate to neutralize pre-existing prejudicial attitudes, may experience threats to their mental health

(Craig et al., 2017). Although religious environments often provide a sense of community and belonging, the rejection experienced by some of the participants left them floundering for social connections and support, forcing them to seek community outside of traditional religious contexts in order to survive (Craig et al., 2017). The results of Craig et al.'s (2017) study indicate that involvement with non-affirming and non-inclusive religious organizations may pose serious risks for LGBTQ+ individuals. Coburn et al.'s (2019) participants similarly explained that over the years of being involved in church communities, they had many experiences that communicated that queer people and relationships were not affirmed, which impacted them personally.

In Benson et al.'s (2018) study on transgender individuals in faith communities, they found that much of the conflict participants experienced came from cisgender people, despite the participants themselves feeling at peace in their faith. They received many social messages from others that they were going against God's plan, were subverting family values, and that their identity was sinful or something to be ashamed of (Benson et al., 2018). Several of the participants experienced clear discriminatory reactions after revealing their gender identity -- this reinforced the notion that faith is inherently tied to the morality associated with a cisgender identity in these communities (Benson et al., 2018). Interestingly, in Hickey & Grafsky's (2017) study on family relationships and religious identities of LGBQ Christians, their participants described the multifaceted meaning-making process of being LGBQ and Christian with both enthusiasm and solemnity; however, when asked about how others perceived these experiences they described feeling misunderstood and separated. Participants' parents often 'checked in' on the status of the participants' LGBQ and religious identities, the outcome of which often affecting the extent to which they accepted their child's non-normative gender or

sexuality (Hickey & Grafsky, 2017). Participants also reported feeling as if their parents largely perceived them through the lens of their sexuality, which stunted the opportunity for proximity and intimacy -- both an over- and under-emphasis on the participants' LGBQ identities produced feelings of being misunderstood (Hickey & Grafsky, 2017).

Positive Impacts

However, the consequences of conflict between one's non-normative gender or sexual identity and one's religious identity are not always negative; previous research shows that there may also be positive consequences related to this conflict. There is evidence that religion and spirituality may also contribute to the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ people. In their interviews with 19 LGBTQ+ adolescents and young adults raised within a Christian religious context in the United States, Dahl & Galliher (2012) found four themes related to positive outcomes: participants described their own experiences coming out in a religious context as facilitative of their own self-acceptance, they described themselves as more open-minded, they shared that they had incorporated some of their childhood religious values into their current identity, and they discussed positive social experiences and supports. Despite disengaging from their childhood religious faiths, many of their participants highlighted the way their religious upbringing impacted their value orientation and sense of self (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). Some of the core values gained from their childhood religious faiths continued to be central to their sense of identity, and the majority shared a desire to continue exploring their religious and gender and sexual identities in the future (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). In this way, participants highlighted their ability to carefully select the values from their religious upbringing that complimented their identity, suggesting that religiosity may serve as a protective benefit for

some sexual and gender minorities who integrate childhood religious values into their overall identity (Dahl & Galliher, 2012).

In their study, Rosenkrantz et al. (2016) similarly found that their participants' religious/spiritual identities helped them form and express a more authentic LGBTQ identity, and many participants explained how struggles related to their religious/spiritual LGBTQ identity provided an opportunity to develop deeper meaning in their life. Participants valued how their identities contributed to their ability to align their religious/spiritual values and LGBTQ life experiences through empathy, openness, and action (Rosenkrantz et al., 2016). The importance of struggle when going through an identity conflict resurfaces in much of the literature. O'Brien (2004) notes that in all of her interviews with lesbian and gay Christians in the United States, participants remarked in some way or another that their core sense of being was shaped significantly by the struggle to reconcile homosexuality and religiosity. A significant outcome of these reflections was the articulation of contradiction itself as useful and worthwhile in the shaping of their identity (O'Brien, 2004). Similarly, Van Klinken (2015) found that their participants do not just combine but also reconcile their sexuality and faith through a process that involves spiritual struggle, not only with the church but also with the God preached about in church.

Integration

Throughout the literature, there is evidence that some LGBTQ+ individuals are able to integrate their sexual/gender and religious identities in a way that subverts the apparent contradictions between the two identities, though it is noted across multiple studies that this is no easy task and often involves a significant and private struggle for the individual. Meek (2014)

notes that some of his participants were able to negotiate a position that recognized both their religious faith and their sexual identity, however this compromise was effectively a private undertaking that did little to challenge the entrenched attitudes of those around them. Similarly, in Benson et al.'s (2018) study with transgender individuals in faith communities, participants described feeling at peace due to the belief that their being transgender was a part of God's plan. Participants ultimately appeared to tailor their belief systems to fit their specific faith needs and values instead of accepting or internalizing discriminatory religious beliefs, which helped them to maintain a strong connection to a higher power (Benson et al., 2018).

The respondents in Gardner's (2017) study also demonstrated a common strategy of dissociating the person of Jesus and his example of love from the connotations of organized religion inherent in the label 'Christian.' Beagan & Hattie's (2015) participants separated their own beliefs from the people and politics of a specific church, which was key for many participants in order to integrate their LGBTQ identities. Those who did not reject Christianity instead crafted some form of relationship to spirituality, which was often an individualized set of beliefs and practices (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Despite condemnation from their faith traditions, many of the participants continued seeking some form of spirituality, and selecting elements from a range of spiritual paths to create a novel package was portrayed as a way to fill that sense of longing and yearning (Beagan & Hattie, 2015).

Levy (2008) discovered that as her gay and lesbian Christian participants developed their spiritual and religious beliefs, they became critical of institutionalized religion and tended to reject the homophobic beliefs of the church, instead focusing on their own Christian beliefs and faith. Gardner (2017) also found that many of the gay Christian college students they

interviewed demonstrated a disregard for external moral authorities, instead relying on their own moral authority to guide their interpretation of the Bible. Dahl & Galliher (2012) found that their participants tended to disengage with their childhood faiths, identified their own values, and clarified their own religious beliefs. Walton (2000) found that a gay identity affected the Christian identities of the participants in his study, and vice-versa, in a dynamic way.

LGBTQ+ people comprise an important segment of religious and church life while experiencing challenges around acceptance and inclusion (Harris et al., 2020). The existing research suggests that there are both significant potential benefits and risks for LGBTQ+ individuals involved in Christian communities. Previous literature and academic work on this topic clearly demonstrate that Christian communities are important places for resolving conflict between religious and non-normative sexual/gender identities (Joldersma, 2016). The literature shows that LGBTQ+ individuals in Christian communities have experienced institutional heterosexuality, silence surrounding their identities, conflict between their sexual/gender and religious identities, and both positive and negative consequences of this conflict, with many individuals choosing to maintain their faith despite negative experiences. These apparent contradictions in the literature demonstrate a clear need to further explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within these contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Queer Theory

This study utilizes queer theory to frame the experiences LGBTQ+ individuals have in Conservative Christian communities. Queer theory insists that gendered and sexual subjectivities and positionalities are located within religious, cultural, economic, racial, colonial, and class contexts (Ioannides, 2014). Queer is then a process of problematizing and scrutinizing the genealogy of categories, and throws into focus the inadequacy of binary distinctions as categories that both enable and constrain individuals (Ioannides, 2014). Identity is viewed as fluid, multifaceted, ever-changing, flexible, and open-ended (Levy & Edmiston, 2014). Therefore, queer theory moves beyond exploring sexual orientation, gender, and religion in isolation and instead considers how religious identity interplays with sexual and gender identity in ways that simultaneously produce a context of empowerment and disempowerment (Siraj, 2014). With its radical focus on difference and subverting the normative, queer theory by definition has the responsibility to question deeply the social power accorded to members of dominant groups (Wilcox, 2006).

Resisting the model of stability that claims heterosexuality as its origin, queer instead focuses on the mismatches and instabilities between sex, gender, and desire (Jagose, 1996). Jagose (1996) notes that there is a crucial distinction here between homosexual behaviour, which is ubiquitous, and homosexual identity, which evolves under specific historical conditions. While homosexual behaviour has been subject to religious condemnation and legal prosecution for centuries, organized protests against such institutionalized prejudices was largely a consequence of the emergent category of ‘homosexual’ (Jagose, 1996). Genders and

sexualities therefore reflect the time and place in which they exist and the individuals who enact them. The expression of gender and sexuality remains unstable, changing as the individual affects, and is affected by, society (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Through a queer lens, then, sexuality and gender have the potential to be defined as more than acts; queer is not connected to any particular body, pleasure, or practice, but is more a matter of positioning and becoming (Ioannides, 2014). Ultimately, queer offers itself as something that questions the assumption that existing descriptors such as 'lesbian' and 'gay' are self-evident, and as a necessarily infixed site of engagement and contestation (Jagose, 1996).

Queer theorists question the concept of heterosexuality and homosexuality, as well as the duality and binary implied by these terms (Dueck-Read, 2015). To denaturalize these terms is not to minimize the significance of those categories, but to ask that they be contextualized or historicized rather than assumed as natural and purely descriptive (Jagose, 1996). Jagose (1996) notes that identity categories are often complicit in the very structures that their assertions were intended to overthrow. Queer, then, is seen as an identity without an essence -- it is necessarily indeterminate, is differently valued in different contexts, and refers to self-identification rather than empirical observations (Jagose, 1996). To be 'queer' is to be a person in flux; it is a process of problematizing and scrutinizing the genealogy of categories while throwing into focus the inadequacy of binary distinctions as referents of experience (Watson, 2005).

This perspective critically analyzes the meaning of identity, focusing on intersections of identities and resisting oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender (Abes & Kasch, 2007). 'Identity' is not seen as an empirical category, but is instead seen as the product

of processes of identification (Jagose, 1996). Genders and sexualities reflect the time and place they inhabit, and so their expressions are fluid and constantly changing. Identities in a queer perspective are not fixed, stable, or inherent (Dueck, 2012), but are seen as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions (Jagose, 1996). Queer theory then provide a place for multiple identities in multiple categories, including gender, religion, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and more (Levy 2008). Anderson characterizes identity as "a socially constructed and fluid thing, shaped at first by factors beyond one's control but also eventually by one's intentional choices and actions" (2014, pg. 212). Identity, then, is an effect of identification with and against others. It is ongoing, always incomplete, and is a process rather than a property (Jagose, 1996), an ever-changing process of negotiating the self (Levy, 2008). By refusing to crystallize in any specific form, queer is able to maintain a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal (Jagose, 1996). Instead of framing this lens as oppositional to identity politics, it is more accurate to represent it as ceaselessly interrogating both the preconditions of identity and its effects (Jagose, 1996).

Queer theory provides a lens by which to examine faith and sexual or gender identity as fluid and intertwined concepts (Levy, 2008). This study, then, moves beyond exploring various identities in isolation, instead considering the way religious identity interplays with sexual and gender identity in a way that may simultaneously produce a context of both empowerment and disempowerment (Siraj, 2014).

Liminality

A common concept used by scholars to explain the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities, and which nicely supplements queer theory, is the concept

of liminality (Wright-Maley et al., 2016; Gardner, 2017; Abes & Kasch, 2007). Liminality can be defined as a state of being betwixt and between; one who is in a liminal state does not have a place in the social structure and is left feeling like they don't belong.

Liminality helps to illuminate the tensions and ambiguities that exist in the consideration of LGBTQ+ issues in the space between individuals' personal beliefs and their willingness to engage with these issues (Wright-Maley et al., 2016). Gardner (2017) argues that the liminality of sexual identity negotiation illuminates the liminality of rhetorical agency in a scene of social power. It offers the possibility of transformation by holding both LGBTQ+ and religious identities in ways that may produce social as well as personal change. Additionally, it provides a framework for understanding the complex ways in which an individual performs sexuality or gender in resistance to and as part of the dominant culture (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Therefore, by inhabiting this liminal space gender and sexual minority religiosity can serve as both a developmental asset and a source of risk for gender and sexual minority individuals (Dahl & Galliher, 2012).

Cultural Heterosexism

To frame the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within the broader cultural ideologies of religious institutions, the concept of cultural heterosexism is useful. Herek (1990) coined the term 'cultural heterosexism,' which can be defined as an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-cisgender and non-heterosexual forms of behaviour, identity, relationship, or community, and is manifested in both societal customs and institutions such as religion. "Cultural heterosexism is like the air that we breathe: it is so ubiquitous that it is hardly noticeable" (Herek, 1990, p. 317). This heterosexism is one component of the broader

and overlapping ideologies of sexuality and gender, in which heterosexuality (and cisgender) is equated ideologically with 'normal' masculinity and 'normal' femininity, whereas non-normative genders and sexualities are equated with violating the norms of gender and sexuality (Herek, 1990). This operates principally by rendering LGBTQ+ identities invisible and, when this fails, by trivializing, repressing, or stigmatizing them; cultural heterosexism therefore fosters individual anti-gay attitudes by providing a ready-made system of values and stereotypical beliefs that justify these attitudes as natural (Herek, 1990).

This system creates conditions in which LGBTQ+ individuals remain largely invisible while the concept of non-normative genders and sexualities, and homosexuality specifically, is attributed various symbolic statuses such as deviant, sick, or evil (Herek, 1990). These symbolic statuses form the basis for broader attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals, rather than actual interactive experiences with LGBTQ+ individuals themselves. Herek (1990) argues that this alternation between invisibility and condemnation is readily apparent in religious institutions -- in prescribing guidelines for moral living, Christian religious institutions stress heteronormative values such as the inherent virtue of committed marital relationships through which children are conceived and raised in faith. LGBTQ+ individuals are treated as abstract concepts in these communities, and framing these identities in opposition to what is considered 'normal' solidifies both the outsider status of LGBTQ+ identities, as well as one's own status as an insider who belongs to the community (Herek, 1990). By opposing what is viewed as sinful and abnormal, one affirms one's own goodness.

Sacramental Shame & Coming Out as Confession

Coined by Moon & Tobin (2018), sacramental shame refers to the elevation of heteronormativity to the level of the sacred, rendering those who violate it not as persons, but monsters. Sacraments can be defined as ceremonies or rituals, dispensed by the church, that provide tangible opportunities to experience God's presence in and through community, and which some churches deem as necessary for salvation (Moon & Tobin, 2018). Conservative Christian communities that see LGBTQ+ attractions and experiences as sinful end up, often unintentionally, treating shame as a special sacrament just for LGBTQ+ members, requiring that they constantly display this shame as a sign that they have not turned their back on their faith (Moon & Tobin, 2018). In dispensing this shame as a sacrament, non-affirming Christians require constant displays of shame as proof that LGBTQ+ members love God and belong in the community. Many Protestant churches recognize no sacraments at all, and others do not see sacraments as necessary for salvation, so the existence of this non-formalized but indispensable sacrament only for LGBTQ+ people is teeming with irony (Moon & Tobin, 2018).

What makes this so harmful is that those in Conservative Christian communities often dispense this shame with sincere expressions of care and affection, compounding the sense that one's capacity to give and receive love is damaged (Moon & Tobin, 2018). "What feels like love to those trying to save their loved one, does not feel like love—or feels like a confusing, conditional, entrapping, and harmful form of it—to the person being told constantly to mistrust and fix their very capacity to relate to God and others" (Moon & Tobin, 2018, p. 457). The frenzy and desperation with which non-affirming Christians try to 'fix' those who violate sexuality and gender norms indicates that this is a very serious transgression -- no other sin

seems to yield this level of panic, and none so threatens a person's Christian credentials (Moon & Tobin, 2018). Moon & Tobin (2018) argue that in these communities, one's ability to be recognized as a person created by God actually depends on one's ability to be recognized within the gender and sexuality norms of the community, and not being recognized within these norms calls into question the individual's very personhood. However, rather than denying full personhood to someone who transgresses these boundaries, communities often dispense 'compassionate' sacramental shame as a sincere attempt to love (Moon & Tobin, 2018).

Sacramental shame, then, is a ritualized, spiritualized form of shame that both grows out of and serves to protect fundamentalist Christian theologies, and when internalized, prevents LGBTQ+ individuals from embodying their LGBTQ+ identities (Moon & Tobin, 2018). Moon & Tobin (2018) argue that the use of sacramental shame poses as love while also locating the shame in the shamed person's own constant failures of will. This shame then becomes an instrument of oppression, as it is dispensed unevenly and unjustly amid social hierarchies (Moon & Tobin, 2018). People often dispense this shame believing it will help their loved ones to conform to God's will, however, Moon & Tobin (2018) argue that the sacramental shame dynamic grows out of and serves to protect theologies that ground the recognition of personhood in a particular binary understanding of gender and sexuality.

Coming out still tends to call into question the validity of one's faith, and even their very existence (Wilcox, 2003). Anderson (2014) argues that the act of coming out by LGBTQ+ individuals in religious contexts is perceived by those within the religious community as a public confession of sin and guilt. The emphasis is put on the visibility of non-normative gender or sexual identity just as much, if not more, than any actual practices associated with those

identities. By making the punishable offence the admission of homosexuality, rather than the practice of homosexuality, the church is then able to manipulate this public and vulnerable act as a confession of guilt (Anderson, 2014). This framing of coming out as a confession of sin relegates LGBTQ+ individuals who are 'out' to an inferior position within the ideology of God's created order in that cisgender heterosexuals are seen as created more in the image of God than those with non-normative genders and sexualities (Anderson, 2014). This works to coerce LGBTQ+ individuals to stay in the closet and avoid discussing any struggles they may be having for fear of admitting to what is often perceived as an irredeemable sin. Additionally, having to continually overcome invisibility is itself a frustrating experience, and allowing others to assume that one is heterosexual or cisgender is often the path of least resistance (Herek, 1990).

Anderson (2014) explains that the act of coming out highlights the complex ways that individual agency interacts with institutional authority -- there is a complicated relationship between the religious individual and the religious institution in that even if individuals within the congregation are supportive, often the denomination is not. During these contentions the emphasis is put more on establishing the authority of the institutional church, and less on the actual acts that are considered incompatible with Christian teachings. Anderson (2014) concludes that establishing the exact nature of the offending practices ultimately seems less important than establishing certain protocols to facilitate these LGBTQ+ confessions of guilt.

Although it has been observed that there has been an increased, though indirect, call on religious leaders to cease persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals and homosexual individuals specifically, the definition of homosexuality as inherently disordered remains largely intact (O'Brien, 2014). Although this is often framed as sympathetic and loving through the rhetoric of

'hate the sin, love the sinner,' there is arguably nothing loving about such an encompassing condemnation. The use of this euphemistic language promising love therefore works to cover the exclusionary violence of these very discussions (Dueck-Read, 2015). Where religion is culturally dominant, LGBT religious participation is likely to be tolerated and even encouraged as long as the 'sinner' remembers their place (O'Brien, 2014). In having already labelled the individual as a 'sinner,' Dueck (2012) argues that the judging has already taken place and that the person is fundamentally not given full account of their personhood, remaining unintelligible. Ultimately, cisgender identities and heterosexual desires become the largely uncontested basis for ethical existence in many of these Conservative Christian communities (Dueck-Read, 2015).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative interpretive approach to research in which emphasis was placed on how the participants made sense or meaning out of their experiences in Conservative Christian communities (Creswell & Miller, 1997). Qualitative researchers study phenomena and processes within the context of their natural settings and intend to make sense of those matters in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Hallberg, 2006). Importantly, in this perspective the researcher is not absent from the narrative (Creswell & Miller, 1997). Therefore, this research focused on the meanings associated with individual experiences, and as the researcher I engaged with these experiences reflexively at every step. I am not exempt from this process, and tried to be constantly aware of my positionality and lens as I collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data.

In this study I utilized queer theory to inform my research and to sensitize myself to particular elements of participants' experiences, with a focus on not predetermining the meanings of those experiences. Actively checking my own subject position and positionality in relation to the data is essential to allow the data to speak for itself, and to limit the presence of preconceived notions regarding the topic and findings. A way to facilitate this is to use the constant comparative method. Hallberg (2006) explains that the constant comparative method of grounded theory involves every part of the data, including emerging codes, categories, properties, and dimensions, being constantly compared with all other parts of the data to explore variations, similarities, and differences. This allows me as the researcher to explore various connections and aspects of the data that I originally would not have thought of, and to

consider different and new ways of understanding the problem that I, or previous literature on the topic, had not considered.

The collection and analysis of data in this perspective is seen as a simultaneous process starting with sampling that seeks to maximize variations in experiences and descriptions by using participants from a variety of backgrounds (Hallberg, 2006). Thus, diversity in this study was sought regarding both Christian denominations and gender or sexuality; heterogeneity of participants was hoped for to draw common themes from a variety of experiences. Finally, this methodological lens positions data and analysis as social constructions reflecting both the participant and the researcher, the results of which can be presented as narratives or as a story specifying categories, conditions, conceptual relationships, and consequences (Hallberg, 2006). Despite actively checking my positionality and adopting a constant comparative approach throughout the research process, this study is inevitably influenced by, and reflective of, my own subjective understandings of the topic to some extent.

Sampling & Recruitment

As LGBTQ+ identities are often stigmatized within traditional Christian contexts, it was logical to gather participants through snowball sampling, starting with my personal connections. Noy (2008) explains that snowball sampling and in-depth interviewing are inextricably linked; respondent-driven sampling shapes the interview interaction. Knowledge is at the same time both researched and produced through snowball sampling, and it is of a dynamic nature (Noy, 2008). Participants exert a significant amount of influence on the overall research, how research plays onto and into existing social dynamics, and consequently, how additional knowledge can be gained (Noy, 2008). This project aims to present the participants'

experiences tangibly and respectfully; therefore, snowball sampling is well suited for the study in terms of both feasibility and methodology in order to gain this knowledge.

The personal connections contacted for this project are primarily situated in Victoria and in the Fraser Valley in British Columbia, and as such the majority of the participants in this study are from these two areas, though participants discussed growing up and living in various areas throughout both British Columbia and Alberta. My personal connections no longer participate in their respective Conservative Christian communities, and as such, participants who do still participate in their Conservative Christian communities are underrepresented in this study (though not nonexistent). In order to ensure as diverse a sample as possible in terms of genders, sexualities, and denominations represented in this study, initial seed participants were heterogeneous. In other words, the personal connections I contacted to be part of this study were diverse in regards to their genders, sexualities, and Christian denominations. Potential subsequent participants were chosen based on their diversity in relation to the initial wave of participants and whether they consider themselves current members of their Conservative Christian communities. This strategy was used in order to draw common themes from diverse individual experiences.

In order to participate in this study, participants had to:

- Not identify as both cisgender and heterosexual
- Have been part of an Evangelical or Protestant Conservative Christian community in Canada (as subjectively defined by each participant) for a minimum of six months, and within the last 8 years
- Be between the ages of 19 and 35

Potential participants were contacted via email with a script (see Appendix A) that contained a brief description of the project and were asked to participate in an interview to discuss their experiences. They were informed that their responses would remain confidential, and their names and any identifying characteristics would not be included in the final paper. If they indicated interest in the project, they were sent a consent form (see Appendix B) which described the project's risks and benefits and includes my contact information if they had any questions about the study. After each interview I asked participants if they knew of anyone else who might be interested in participating in the project, and if so if they could pass on my email address to the potential participant so they might get in touch with me for an interview.

Although I initially hoped for 8-12 participants, the stigmatized nature of individuals with LGBTQ+ identities in many of these Conservative Christian communities meant that some of the participants did not know anyone else who was LGBTQ+, and general difficulties associated with the current climate of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed additional stress for some potential participants which ultimately dissuaded them from participating in a project where they may be discussing uncomfortable experiences. Identifying and recruiting hard-to-reach populations has been recognized as a challenge for researchers regardless of methodology type (Matthews & Cramer, 2008), and without the social and personal impacts being experienced by the majority of individuals due to COVID-19. Due to these challenges and the time constraints on this project, I decided to close recruitment at six participants.

Sample

During the interviews I asked each of the participants to state their current gender and sexual identity, as well as their current religious identity. However, I did not gather any

additional demographic information such as age, race, class, etc. I chose to forego gathering these characteristics in order to ensure participant privacy and confidentiality in this study because this is a stigmatized and hard-to-reach population, and as such I cannot speak to the additional intersections of religious and gender/sexual identity with other aspects of identity such as those stated above. All participants were assigned pseudonyms and any identifying characteristics are excluded in the analysis and results of this study. When asking participants to describe their gender, sexual, and religious identities, this in itself proved to be less straightforward than expected. Participants used many different terms to describe themselves, emphasizing the fluidity of these labels and categories. Therefore, I hesitate to categorize these individuals and their identities into a table or matrix, as the reality of these identities as described by the participants are infinitely more complex (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Memo on Categorization

> Going into this project I fully intended to create a matrix presenting the gender, sexuality, and religious affiliation demographics of the participants. However, after conducting my interviews and asking participants to describe (define) their gender, sexuality, and current religious identity, and seeing how difficult this proved to be (and going through similar difficulties/processes in my own personal life), I am presented with the problem of categorization. Even narrowing down participants based on the branch of Christianity they were/are part of proved difficult due to the fluidity of these categories; for example, one participant grew up in a charismatic evangelical church, but now attends an Anglican Church that is more closely aligned with Catholicism. People and identities are diverse, complex, fluid, constantly changing and growing, and can shift depending on the context. They are not accurately represented by our strict and often binary categories of Christian/non-Christian, male/female, queer/straight, etc. When asked about their current religious identity, one participant asserted that that was more difficult and complicated to describe than their gender or sexuality. Although I do think those interview questions were still valuable to include, as they brought this issue of categorization to the forefront and forced me to critically examine this assumption that I held going into this project, I don't think attempting to confine these infinitely complex and diverse experiences into preconceived and limiting categories of gender, sexuality, and religious identity is useful in this project without recognizing the fluidity inherent in each of these categories. Instead, I must adhere more closely to the tenets of queer

theory to ensure that I view all of these different identities as necessarily undefinable, essentially fluid, and unable to be contained within preconceived social categories.

Participants used a variety of diverse labels to describe their sexual and gender identities, including bisexual, cisgender, gender-void, gender-queer, gender-fluid, questioning, agender, non-binary, queer, asexual, aromantic, transfeminine, transmasculine, and gay. They also participated in a variety of different Conservative Christian communities and denominations, including Mennonite Brethren, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, Mennonite Christian, Pentecostal, Baptist, and non-denominational. These Conservative Christian communities often comprised participants' family, church, school, and friend groups.

Interviews & Data Collection

The data for this project was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with six participants who either are currently part of a Conservative Christian community, or have been within the last eight years. A semi-structured interview format was used so that participants were not limited to predetermined interview questions, but were able to take the conversation in the directions that they felt were relevant and important in this topic. Intensive interviewing permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic and goes beneath the surface of ordinary conversation (Charmaz, 2006). The participant is asked to describe and reflect upon their experiences in ways that seldom occur in everyday life (Hallberg, 2006). Semi-structured interviews have proven to be both versatile and flexible, providing advantages such as enabling reciprocity between participant and interviewer, allowing the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on the participant's responses, and allowing space for participants' individual verbal expressions (Kallio et al., 2016). An interview guide provides a focus for the discussion during the interviews but is not followed strictly; instead, the research area is

explored by collecting similar types of information and providing the participants with guidance on what to talk about (Kallio et al., 2016).

The interviews for this project took place at a time that was convenient and comfortable for the participant and happened over Zoom, a secure video platform, as per research guidelines at the University of Victoria in light of COVID-19. Signed consent forms were obtained by email prior to each interview, and interviews were audio-recorded for transcription purposes. I began each interview with some light chitchat and introduced myself if necessary, before asking if the participant had any questions before starting, checking that the participant was ready to start the interview, and then beginning recording. Challenges associated with web-based interviewing were experienced such as unstable internet connections resulting in minimal data loss, and a noticeable lack of personal connection and rapport developed with participants compared to my previous experiences with traditional face-to-face interviewing. However, web-based interviewing allowed me to interview individuals across the province who otherwise would not have been able to participate if I had done face-to-face interviews due to lack of time and resources available for me to travel to each participant. It also allowed individuals to participate in the interviews from the comfort of their own homes, which are safer and more familiar spaces for the participants compared to if we had met in a conference room, coffee shop, or other public place. Ultimately, I found that web-based interviewing has both pros and cons depending on the nature of the researcher's project, the resources available, and the availability and location of the participants.

As some of the interview questions may have encouraged the discussion of sensitive content, participants were not required to answer any questions they did not want to, and

were given the option to verbally withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were also given the option of receiving a copy of the final paper once complete. Interview questions were centred around the main research questions; participants were asked about their experiences within Conservative Christian communities, how influential the role of Christianity was/is on the formation of their gender and/or sexuality, how they understand their LGBTQ+ identity when situated within Christianity, whether there was a code of silence surrounding non-normative genders and sexualities, and how they reconciled the perceived incompatibility between their LGBTQ+ identity and their Christian identity. See Appendix C for a list of the interview questions.

Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours and utilized an interview guide with open-ended questions and probes to structure the discussion, though participants were encouraged to speak about whatever they felt was important or relevant to the topic. Throughout the process I made sure to be aware of my own positionality and how my own experiences might influence the collection of data; therefore I encouraged participants to share what was important to them and encouraged them to discuss experiences that were not explicitly related to the interview questions if they felt the experiences were supplemental in their understanding of the topic. I explicitly encouraged this at the end of each interview when I asked participants if there was anything else they would like to discuss relating to the topic of LGBTQ+ experiences in Christian communities that I had not touched on in the previous interview questions. This proved very useful, as it gave participants the option to discuss aspects of the topic I had not considered, and many of the participants took this chance to 'sum up' their overall experiences and opinions.

Analysis

Interviews were recorded on my password-protected computer, and I transcribed them verbatim while excluding any identifying characteristics. Member checking was utilized at this stage; transcripts were returned to the participants so they could confirm the validity and accuracy of my transcription of their words and the information provided, and add or remove any details if necessary (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Only one participant adjusted their transcript, and only minimally regarding a single identification term. Transcripts were analyzed with NVivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2020) using thematic analysis to identify codes, themes, and categories. These themes emerged from the data instead of being pre-selected in order to accurately represent the participants' experiences, and formed the structure and content of this final paper. Codes were grouped together into categories and themes to form a coherent discussion that took into account all aspects of the data and endeavoured to answer the research questions.

This project utilized a hierarchical coding process of initial (open) line-by-line coding, focused (selective) coding, and axial or theoretical coding (specifying relationships between categories) (Hallberg, 2006). Through this process, every category earns its way into the analysis in that it must be grounded in the data rather than being generated from the researcher's hypotheses and preconceptions -- emerging categories must fit and explain the collected data rather than preconceived concepts being forced upon the data (Hallberg, 2006). Thus, every code developed during my analysis of the data was necessarily present in the transcripts before I connected it to broader themes in the existing literature. I engaged with researcher reflexivity throughout the research process, and acknowledge my own subjective

views and experiences with this topic that may influence the presentation of the data and findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The analysis, which relates to time, culture, and context, ultimately reflects both the participant's and the researcher's way of thinking (Hallberg, 2006).

Ethics

Because I conducted interviews with human subjects for this project, I obtained ethics approval (see Appendix D) from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board prior to contacting participants. This project was approved as minimal risk, with specific precautions taken to limit the risks associated with interviewing stigmatized populations about potentially uncomfortable experiences, which may result in emotional or psychological discomfort for the participants. These precautions included reminding participants that they did not need to answer any questions they did not want to, reminding them that they can withdraw from the study at any time, providing them with resources and access to the University of Victoria mental health services should they experience discomfort following the interview, giving them the option to take a five-minute break during the interview if needed, and providing them with the interview questions in advance. If participants decided to withdraw, they were ensured that their data would not be used in the study without their permission. Additionally, confidentiality was emphasized by assigning participants pseudonyms in the final paper and by removing all identifying characteristics. However, this confidentiality is potentially limited as my reliance on snowball sampling meant some of the participants were aware of the identities of other participants.

The risks and benefits of participation in this project were made clear in the consent form (see Appendix B), and I obtained informed written consent from all participants prior to

interviewing them. During the interviews I focused on being aware of the participant's emotional state, and if they began to appear uncomfortable or distressed I would suggest that we take a five minute break, and encouraged them to take their time when answering questions. Benefits of this study for participants might include talking through unresolved issues and feeling like they are making a difference by sharing their experiences. Benefits to society may include a resource for churches, Conservative Christian communities, and LGBTQ+ advocacy groups as they work to better address LGBTQ+ experiences in these contexts. Benefits to the research community may include a contribution to queer theory, LGBTQ+ studies, and religious studies, the contribution of a deeper understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences in Conservative Christian communities, and a presentation of LGBTQ+ experiences that is tangible and respectful.

Audio, consent forms, and other data files for this project were stored on my password-protected computer, and any physical files were kept in my locked home. Only I have access to this data and information and I am the only one who knows the identities of the participants in this study.

Findings

For this study I interviewed six participants regarding their experiences in Conservative Christian communities. Interview questions were centred around the initial research questions. Payton, Charlie, Quinn, Shay, Kieran, and Parker were asked about how influential the role of Christianity was or is on the formation of their gender or sexuality, how they understand their LGBTQ+ identity when situated within Christianity, whether there was a code of silence surrounding non-normative genders and sexualities, and how they reconciled the perceived incompatibility between their LGBTQ+ identity and their Christian identity. The participants discussed how the cisgender heterosexual norm presented itself within their different communities, the different responses their communities had to non-normative genders and sexualities, the impacts this had on them personally, and what their current religious identity is. I also asked the participants how their Conservative Christian communities could better address and support LGBTQ+ individuals and issues moving forward, and their recommendations for change are outlined at the end of this chapter.

Participant Overview

Payton

Payton grew up in a "very conservative Christian community" and attended a Mennonite Brethren church for the majority of her childhood. She explained that this denomination of Christianity does not acknowledge LGBTQ+ individuals or issues, and that the church she grew up in "still is struggling with the idea of women in leadership, so LGBT issues are not going to be a thing for a while." When asked about her overall experience in the community, Payton explained that while she was technically part of it, she "wasn't psyched

about it" growing up, and never felt that it was her own. Her parents were "super involved" in her church, but she explained that she never liked going to church and how for her it was "just a cultural aspect and nothing really personal." Payton uses she/her pronouns "for now," and currently identifies as bisexual and as a cis female, though she noted that "the gender thing is a bit more unknown" and she could see herself "being more fluid than someone who identifies specifically as cis female." She mentioned gender-fluid, questioning, and queer as potential gender identities and that "gender as a non-defined concept is more interesting to me at this point," but that she hasn't landed on anything specific yet.

Charlie

Charlie grew up Mormon, which they emphasized is "a white supremacist cult" that taught racist, ableist, homophobic, and transphobic ideology. Their overall experience in this community was described as confusing; "the teachings just always contradicted each other" and tended to be contrary to their own experiences, principles, and morals as well. Charlie is most comfortable with they/them pronouns, but notes that "it doesn't really matter to me." When asked about their gender and sexual identities, Charlie explained that

> What matters is that I'm not seen through the lens of gender at all since I have no gender identity. Yeah, I describe myself as gender-void or agender, whichever word makes most sense. And since I don't have a gender identity myself, and I don't really have a concept of gender at all, I don't really have a particular sexual orientation. So personality is what matters to me so, I guess like pansexual is most accurate. But I tend to use gay or queer most often to describe myself.

Quinn

Quinn was born into and raised as one of Jehovah's Witnesses, which they describe as "a high-control group, to put that mildly." They described their overall experience in this community as mixed, noting that there were both good things and negative things. They were

part of the community until their mid-twenties when they began planning their exit, which they explained was "very slow, I just kind of slowly moved out. Because, again it's very difficult to leave without losing everything." Quinn uses they/them pronouns, and described their current gender identity as non-binary and their current sexual orientation as queer. They also identify as "asexual, possibly aromantic, somewhat agender and transmasculine," though "that might change in the future."

Shay

Shay was raised in a Mennonite Christian family and went to church every Sunday, and even though her parents divorced, both sides of her family stayed very involved in Christianity in terms of missions work, church volunteering, youth groups, and schooling. Shay was also very involved in these activities; she participated in "pretty much everything." Shay characterized her overall experiences in her Conservative Christian community as troubling, noting that there were a lot of negative experiences in addition to the positives. When I asked her to describe her current gender identity and sexual orientation, Shay explained that for the purposes of this study she is most comfortable using she/her or they/them pronouns, and identifies as bisexual, "but the more complicated one," specifying that she's interested in two or more genders, but not all. She also identifies as "transfeminine or transfemme, but not trans female or trans woman."

Kieran

Kieran grew up in a Christian family and went to church all of his life. His family is Mennonite, and he noted that "it's sort of an ethno-religious identity as well in that way where not only were we attending a Mennonite Brethren church, but your family is Mennonite and

that's your background." He was also very active in this community, participating in youth groups and church and attending a Christian high school, though he emphasized the importance of the social aspects of these communities for him over the religious aspects. Kieran characterized his overall experiences in his Christian community as positive, explaining that this might be due to the fact that he was able to "fly under the radar really well" regarding his sexuality, describing himself as "fairly straight-passing." Kieran uses he/him pronouns and identifies as a cisgender gay male.

Parker

Parker grew up in a rural Baptist church, and went to a Pentecostal Christian high school and a non-denominational Bible college. She described her experience growing up as a very conservative, and even at times extremist evangelical community:

> So, the anecdote that I use to describe what type of environment I grew up in, so it was a Baptist church, but it was completely filled with people from the South. So like, think Texas. So very conservative. And it was also a farming church too, so it had a very rural kind of vibe to it. And the man that was the pastor was an auctioneer, and with fire and brimstone kind of. And so he would literally auctioneer fire and brimstone, like 'You are going to Hell.'

Her family was very involved in the church, and she emphasized that it was "awful," "a very very small, constraining world," and that there was negative rhetoric and attitudes "around any type of diversity, let alone gender or sexuality." Parker uses she/her pronouns and identifies as queer, explaining that she's relatively new to her queerness and that "finding distinctions between my sexuality and gender in the midst of [past trauma] is very… it's a lot to go through, it's a lot to process. So I just generally say 'I'm queer.' And that's the easiest way for people to understand me."

Cisgender Heterosexual Norm

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the different ways norms and expectations were conveyed to them regarding gender and sexuality within their various Conservative Christian communities. Ultimately, even if LGBTQ+ identities weren't openly addressed or discussed, a cisgender and heterosexual identity was still assumed and enforced both implicitly and explicitly in these communities. This was done through assumed identities from birth, religious doctrine, explicit enforcement when a perceived transgression took place, implicitly through the lack of discussion of non-normative identities, an emphasis on abstinence from sex before marriage, and inaction by authority figures.

Many participants talked about how a cisgender and heterosexual identity was assumed and assigned to them from birth, and explained that these identities were both implicitly and explicitly enforced within the community. Charlie "was told I was a girl and I was told I was straight. Maybe not explicitly but like expected to fit that mold." Shay similarly said that she was assigned male growing up, and that although she was "not a very straight kid," she did not have any words to describe her identity and therefore heterosexuality and a cisgender identity were assumed: "I had zero knowledge that there was anything more to life than cisheteronormativity." Quinn also told me that "I was a girl because I was told I was a girl, and I was kind of like, 'Okay I guess I have to be.' But that didn't ever sit well with me, ever." In Quinn's community "trans people don't exist." These identities were not seen as an option; they were assigned to the participants from birth and enforced throughout their lives.

This cisheteronormativity was often enforced through religious doctrine. Charlie mentioned a piece of Mormon text called 'Family: A Proclamation to the World'; the main point

of this document is that “gender is inherent and eternal, which is used to insist on a strict gender binary and the whole ‘trans people are abominations’ view.” Parker similarly noted that her community “had very very oppressive and even violent attitudes and behaviours towards anyone that wasn’t fitting into that very perfect, heteronormative, nuclear family structure.” The general rhetoric in Parker's community was that “women are here to serve their husband’s sexual needs” and “the thing to work towards was having children and repopulating the world.” Quinn also characterized their community as “a very heteronormative, gender normative group. Literally like, women are to be submissive in the congregation.” Their options as someone perceived as a cis woman were to “either get married, or devote my life to God.” The religious doctrine preached in these communities often reinforced norms surrounding gender and sexuality.

The explicit enforcement of these norms tended to occur when a perceived transgression of the norms was taking place. Charlie recounted one example when they had worn a Batman costume to a Halloween youth night, and was pulled aside by the other leaders “and they’re like, ‘Just make sure that you tell the girls that you’re Batgirl, not Batman.’” Charlie expressed incredulity at this policing of gender norms: “It’s like, oh no I’m transgressing against— oh no, I’m teaching crossdressing to the little girls!” Charlie also discussed how one of the teenagers who attended the youth group “really tried to dress in boy clothes at church and they tried to join the boys’ activities instead of the girls' activities but they were forced to stay with the girls.” Parker talked about an instance of explicit enforcement due to a perceived transgression: A speaker at her Christian high school was talking to the students about confidence and “she mentioned something about the patriarchy being something that harms

women." Following the talk, the students had a meeting where the leaders of the school explicitly reinforced that "actually no, the patriarchy is here to give you a structure and it's here to support you." Parker and the other students were made to write letters to the speaker "to be like, 'You have completely lost your way and you are the reason for the fall of society.'"

Quinn mentioned this explicit enforcement as well when discussing their attempts to express opinions that went against the norms of the community. Their opinions weren't taken seriously in their community because "Witnesses have the opinion that women are not supposed to instruct or teach or tell men what to do" and that expressing more controversial opinions "never works when you're a kid, it never works when you're a woman." Quinn also came under criticism for what they would wear due to "the fact that I was being clocked as not cishet somehow in their brains." They shared one ironic example of this:

> There was a dress I would wear, because you have to wear dresses, that was very comfortable and it didn't feel very constricting so I was happy with that, and […] I would wear leggings underneath it. And in the same dress, I got sent home for it being too short, and they were like, 'You look like a whore, go home.' And in the same dress, a different time I was approached because the leggings I was wearing under it, they were too much like pants and therefore too masculine.

Perceived transgressions of the cisgender heterosexual norm were met with a reinforcement of the norm in the participants' Conservative Christian communities.

Additionally, this cisgender heterosexual norm was often enforced implicitly and indirectly. Parker's community was "very heteronormative" and she noted that a non-normative identity was never even a possibility for her when she was in that community because "the only thing that I could imagine ever doing was being a wife and a mother." Charlie explained that when talking to friends in church about goals for their families, this norm was both assumed and embraced. Similarly, when discussing her friend group at her Christian high

school, Payton said that it "wasn't a queer-friendly group" in the sense that there was never any discussion surrounding LGBTQ+ identities, "so by default it becomes a heteronormative group." When I asked Kieran how he identified growing up in his Christian community, he captured the assumed and implicit enforcement of these norms:

> Had it ever been that directly asked to me at the time, I just would have said that I'm a straight cis male. I think the thing that I thought about when I read this question was that that kind of direct interrogation never really happened growing up, at any point. […] I'd say, had anybody ever asked me, for most of my life, I wouldn't have been like, 'Well, I'm actually not sure '—I probably would have just said like, 'Hey, I'm straight.'

Because everyone was assumed to be cisgender and heterosexual, and LGBTQ+ individuals only existed outside of the community, Kieran did not feel that he had space to articulate any struggles with his identity, or that even acknowledging these struggles was an option for him.

Part of the cisgender heterosexual norm in these Conservative Christian communities was an emphasis on abstinence from sex, which Parker, Payton, Quinn, and Kieran discussed in relation to the development of their own sexualities. Parker noted that her high school required students to sign a code of conduct specifying that students will not engage in "what they term as 'destructive behaviours,' so any drugs, alcohol, swearing, any type of sexual diversity, any type of sex." She characterized this as "a means to really police the boundaries of their communities." Payton similarly explained that her Conservative Christian community didn't explicitly address LGBTQ+ identities, but "the bigger deal at that point was sex in general." She noted that this general understanding of sex outside of marriage as wrong and sinful made it "kind of easy to tie in those thoughts about gay people as well under the big, broad heading of 'let's be chaste, let's not do any of these like naughty things.'" When discussing their sexual orientation Quinn also mentioned this emphasis on abstinence from sex; they explained that

when trying to understand their sexuality they "figured out asexual and just stuck with that because like, you can't get mad at me for not wanting sex." Kieran talked about how "sexuality just isn't really talked about. It's something where, at most they'll be like, 'Hey, don't have sex until marriage.' But like that's about it." He explained that this made it easy for him "to join in on this pseudo-asexual upbringing" and suppress his sexuality.

Inaction by those in the community was also cited by participants as a way this norm is enforced. Payton recounted a specific instance at Bible school where a man told her that "any woman that doesn't take her husband's last name is fundamentally like mentally broken." When she went to the principal of the school to complain about this misogynistic comment, the principal "was like, 'They're just young, they'll grow out of it.'" Payton saw this lack of action on the part of an authority figure as "such a fucking cop-out" and as an unwillingness to address negative and harmful instances of cisheteronormativity. Shay also referenced inaction when discussing her transition, explaining that her homophobic doctor in the community "held me back for wearing pants, held me back because I had a girlfriend, and 'shouldn't you have a boyfriend?' And stuff like that." This inaction on the part of her doctor resulted in the process taking five times as long as it should have, and left Shay feeling very frustrated.

All participants discussed the cisgender heterosexual norm that was present in their communities; even if the communities didn't openly acknowledge or discuss LGBTQ+ identities this norm was still assumed and enforced. This was done through assumed cisgender and heterosexual identities from birth, religious doctrine, explicit enforcement of the norm when a perceived transgression took place, implicit enforcement through the lack of discussion of non-

normative identities, an emphasis on abstinence from sex before marriage, and inaction by authority figures to address negative aspects of cisheteronormativity.

Responses to Non-Normative Genders & Sexualities

The participants' Conservative Christian communities had a variety of responses to non-normative genders and sexualities. These included the use of silence, framing LGBTQ+ identities as sinful or shameful, explicit hate, and differing responses to non-normative sexuality versus non-normative gender identity. Participants also emphasized the changing norms occurring in their communities, and some participants cited ignorance when discussing these responses, noting that people in these communities are often just repeating the rhetoric they have been taught.

Silence

Silence surrounding non-normative genders and sexualities was a prominent theme throughout the interviews. In Kieran's community he noted that LGBTQ+ individuals and issues "didn't really get talked about" because no one "felt like they had a reason to talk about it." It was assumed that "it wasn't an issue that anyone was encountering," and therefore was only discussed "maybe once a year in that way where it was also lumped in with a bunch of other stuff, […] ten minutes of one Sunday." Payton also explained that in her community "there wasn't any talk about it, it was very much not a thing." The people around her were generally neutral on non-normative identities, but she acknowledged that one "unfortunately can't be really neutral in a predominantly heteronormative society so it leaned that way." She concluded that "silence in that case is a condemnation of any sort of diversity." Shay similarly said that LGBTQ+ individuals or issues were "never" discussed in her Conservative Christian

community: “We didn’t have words for it, we didn’t have any knowledge of it […] It was just, there is black and white, blue and pink.” Quinn also noted that in their community, “they don’t recognize trans people at all, they don’t exist.”

After Charlie began coming out in their community, they noted that the responses “were not exactly respectful but not exactly disrespectful, just that kind of like, treating as outcast but not explicitly demonizing me.” When Charlie did experience a moment of explicit hate they tried seeking support from some of their friends but these friends “didn’t really do anything to counter what they were saying about me and what they were saying to me.” Charlie noted that “in Mormonism especially, you don’t really talk about explicitly judging people, it’s more like those whispers and innuendos and like, you’re talked about but never explicitly.” Participants saw this silence as complicit in reinforcing a negative view of non-normative genders and sexualities.

LGBTQ+ Identities as Sinful or Shameful

When there was not silence surrounding non-normative genders and sexualities in the participants’ Conservative Christian communities, the response from these communities was often that LGBTQ+ identities were sinful and shameful. Participants saw this perspective being shared explicitly through formal channels in the community, as well as implicitly, often through rhetoric of ‘hate the sin, love the sinner.’ Charlie explained that their community adhered strictly to this view of LGBTQ+ identities as sinful:

> I definitely was taught the whole predatory lesbian rhetoric, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was because of homosexuality, and the whole TERF views of women— of trans women. You know that whole, ‘how can trans women possibly know what it’s like to be a real woman, if they don’t menstruate and can’t give birth?’

Quinn's community also discussed LGBTQ+ individuals and issues, "but always negatively or in a 'don't do that' sort of way." Homosexuality was framed as "a product of imperfection." Similarly, Parker's church would often discuss "the degradation of society through diverse sexuality" in Sunday school. She noted that the community would frame it in terms of "hate the sin love the sinner." This was similar to Parker's experiences in high school and Bible school as well: "you would pray for individuals who were struggling with any of that."

Similarly, although it wasn't often made explicit, the rhetoric from Payton's community implied that gay people were sinning, "but we're going to love them until they come back to Christ, essentially." She framed this as "a 'love triumphs your sin' perspective," explaining that the implication of this supported and was supported by the stigma surrounding sex in general in the community: "If we're gonna be super against sex, and the erotic in general that ties nicely into we're gonna also hate gay people because it's supposed to be like the ultimate sexual sin." Kieran similarly recalled feeling uncomfortable during the few times LGBTQ+ individuals were discussed in his church, noting that the sermons were "a pretty generic like, 'Well, this Greek word translates to homosexual so that means it's wrong.'" Kieran also worked at a church for five years, and explained that the rhetoric was similar in that the church's approach was, "we'll talk about it once in a while and we'll frame it as empathetically as possible but still end on this note that's like, 'Well, you gotta deny it for the rest of your life.'"

Though LGBTQ+ people weren't talked about much in Payton's community, she recalled that there may have been a class in her Christian high school where they had a debate about being gay, but noted that "the end result is always the same, is that we're all gonna— like there's no debate." When discussing her family kicking her out of the house as a teenager

because of her non-normative gender identity, Shay touched on the seriousness of this perceived sin when she explained that her family "somehow see queerness as being more sinful than actively causing harm to other people." Importantly, Kieran noted that this rhetoric of LGBTQ+ identities as sinful is also being held by the younger people in his community: "I've witnessed circles and communities in [city] that are largely comprised of people my age or a little bit older and I'm like, oh weird, I'm seeing this trend in a super conservative way that I thought was kind of a relic of this generation." Participants' communities tended to frame LGBTQ+ identities as sinful and shameful, and this was communicated to them formally and informally, often through the rhetoric of 'hate the sin, love the sinner.'

Explicit Hate

Charlie, Quinn, Parker, Shay, and Payton mentioned explicit hate towards LGBTQ+ individuals and issues in their Conservative Christian communities, in which there was little possibility for redemption. Charlie talked about how in the Mormon church, one of the apostles "is well-known for his violently homophobic and transphobic rhetoric, even for a Mormon," and that "most of the other leaders of the church hold homophobic and transphobic views too." Homophobia and transphobia were "something that was just discussed every Sunday." Quinn similarly explained that there was explicit hate "from the platform and in official literature," and that some of the people in their community were "full-on disgusted" when discussing LGBTQ+ individuals: "There were people who were like, 'That's not love, that's just lust, it's disgusting, sex is all they want.'" Parker also talked about how her community "had very very oppressive and even violent attitudes and behaviours towards anyone that wasn't fitting into that very perfect, heteronormative, nuclear family structure." In the more informal aspects of

her community, “it was sort of this unspoken thing to never, never talk about any type of gender diversity or sexuality diversity unless you were fervently against it.” Often the framing around LGBTQ+ individuals was that they

> must have experienced some type of horrible trauma and abuse. There is something incredibly broken about you and we need to heal you and fix you to get you back on the good shining path in order for you to go to heaven, because otherwise you are going to contract horrible diseases that will completely ruin your entire life, you will never be happy, you will never have a family, you will never have a community, you will never have eternal life, you will never be fulfilled.

Payton mentioned that the underlying understanding in her community was that “any sort of homosexual attraction was like, evil.” Shay similarly explained that she was “demonized for being queer” by her family, who kicked her out of the house as a teenager. Charlie personally experienced this explicit hate from someone in their congregation when a person from their congregation whom they considered a friend “kept commenting and messaging with attacks against me” to the point where Charlie was scared to go to church. The lack of support from their church in this matter contributed to Charlie’s decision to leave the church: “It was like, how could I be a part of a church that would allow such hate?” Moments of explicit hate towards non-normative genders and sexualities in the participants’ Conservative Christian communities occurred at different intensities and happened through both formal and informal avenues.

Sexuality vs Gender

In Charlie, Quinn, Shay, and Payton’s Conservative Christian communities, non-normative sexuality was treated differently than non-normative gender identity. Charlie noted that while homophobia was present in more explicit and formal aspects of their community, “transphobia is just this everyday assumption among Mormons.” In Quinn’s community,

"homosexuality is extremely frowned upon" but "they don't recognize trans people at all, they don't exist." In Shay's community, "sexuality was not really a thing, gender identity was absolutely not a thing." Payton noted that in her community trans people were "definitely not" talked about, "not even like, thought about." She explained that while the community did talk about gay people, "trans people were such a different, like they didn't even consider that being a thing." Interestingly, this made it easier for her to be accepting of trans people than it was for her to accept gay people "because I had never been given any bad rhetoric about trans people really at all, but like gay people definitely." These differing approaches to non-normative sexuality and non-normative gender identity were present in many of the participants' Conservative Christian communities.

Changing Norms

Participants also noted that the norms around discussing non-normative genders and sexualities in their Conservative Christian communities have been changing over the past few decades. Charlie explained that "historically the church has only relaxed certain rhetoric when North American social norms have just forced their hand." When discussing the way LGBTQ+ individuals and issues were talked about, they explained that when they were younger the view was that LGBTQ+ people were "doomed to hell." But over the years as "social norms in North America specifically have become more accepting of queerness, the church and its members have kind of relaxed on the homophobia." Quinn also acknowledged that their community's current view on gay people of "just don't do that, and that'll be fine" is less explicitly hateful than it has been in the past.

Kieran talked about how this phenomenon manifested in the Christian communities he was a part of as well. He explained that he "just caught the tail end of the period of Christian, BC culture, right at my childhood [being gay] was something that got talked about a little more defined, in 'this is bad' terms." But now Kieran feels that the opinion of the majority of these communities is that it's "such a touchy subject" that the communities don't want to talk about non-normative genders or sexualities anymore. In his opinion they "just kind of dropped it" without actually addressing the issue. He explained that

> it's a weird time to be queer and in any faith community because we're out of the period, for the most part, where people are just being like, viciously denied, but we're definitely not yet in the period where it's very clear and across the board it's something that like, hey we're actually accepting of this now.

While the lessening of explicit hate over time towards non-normative genders and identities in the participants' Conservative Christian communities was acknowledged, the refusal of many of these communities to openly address or embrace LGBTQ+ identities was a point of frustration for many participants.

Repeating Rhetoric

Participants talked about how many people, including themselves, were often just repeating the rhetoric they were taught regarding expectations around gender and sexuality. This was framed by some participants as ignorant and as a result of living in an insulated community, but not as intentionally hateful. When discussing transphobic rhetoric within their community, Charlie explained that they also held those beliefs when they were part of the community because they "didn't know anything else so it's like, I don't have any way to counter this, I don't quite feel right but I don't know why it's wrong yet, so until I figure out what is right I'm gonna hold these views." Kieran mentioned that when he was growing up and would hear

sermons about how homosexuality was sinful, his response was not to question it but instead to say, “Well, I guess that checks out.”

When I asked Payton if a negative view of gay people was present with her peers, she explained that with her friends in high school, “some of them were very much I think believing those kinds of things and the rest were like, ‘we’ve been told this so it must be true.’” Quinn explained that for some people in their community, the approach to non-normative genders or sexualities was negative and misguided, but still from a place of care. They emphasized that the majority of the people in their community “are wonderful people, who are genuine, who have just been either manipulated into it or just like, ‘This sounds fine’ and went with it, or were raised in it.” Payton and Quinn saw instances of the people in their Christian communities simply repeating the rhetoric they had been taught surrounding non-normative genders and sexualities, without necessarily strongly holding those beliefs or being intentionally hateful.

Impacts on Participants

The responses of the participants’ Conservative Christian communities to non-normative genders and sexualities had significant impacts on the participants. They described having a lack of education, language, and exposure around LGBTQ+ identities, which in turn impacted their understandings of their own identities. Participants also experienced mental health struggles, a lack of formal support from their Conservative Christian communities, and for many participants, the loss of that community that they continue to miss.

Lack of Education, Language, & Exposure

Participants described a lack of education, language, and exposure regarding non-normative genders and sexualities in their Conservative Christian communities. This affected all

of the participants' understandings of their own identities. When I asked Quinn to describe their gender identity and sexual orientation when they were part of their Christian community, they explained that it was difficult because they "didn't have information." Payton similarly explained that her community "was so like anti-academia, anti- any sort of education." Kieran also talked about his religious upbringing contributing to his lack of knowledge around LGBTQ+ identities: "I don't think I really had any clue." Parker explained that the stigma and lack of knowledge specifically around sex "just distorts anything and it also doesn't offer any space for there to be any creativity or exploration or even pleasure." Shay similarly talked about how in her community "we didn't have words for it, we didn't have any knowledge of it." She explained that "not having support, not having that knowledge growing up, having to figure everything out so quickly, alone, negatively impacted my life in ways that I am still experiencing today."

Charlie talked extensively about the impact the lack of language regarding LGBTQ+ identities had on them in their community. Within the community, they always knew that the labels they had been assigned weren't accurate, "but I didn't know how to communicate that I'm not, without knowing how to communicate what I actually am." Shay also noted that in middle school and high school, "if I had the words for it back then, I would have called myself non-binary" but did not have the language to describe or understand what she was experiencing. She did have one-on-one conversations with a few of the teachers in her high school about "the vaguest ideas about my sexuality and gender, without the words to really express them, and they were kind and receptive, but they themselves had no idea." Quinn similarly talked about how "with trans things I just did not have any language." Due to this lack

of language and knowledge, they struggled to understand themselves and this "made it very difficult to connect with a creator who didn't like those things apparently."

Charlie talked about the lack of exposure in their Christian community, which contributed to their own negative views of LGBTQ+ identities while they were in the community, explaining that "until I had actually like been exposed to the things that trans people actually say about their actual experiences, I didn't know anything else." Due to the lack of knowledge and the framing of non-normative sexuality as sinful, when Payton experienced attraction towards a girl for the first time, "I didn't say anything and I didn't even think about it." Quinn noticed the effect of this exposure in their own life as well, in that they originally held negative beliefs about LGBTQ+ people but "when I started actually meeting LGBT people, and them being lovely people because they're people and not monsters or whatever, I was like, 'Huh, maybe I have to look at [those beliefs] again.'" Parker was the only participant who grew up personally knowing someone who identified as queer. Her mom had one friend who was "the only queer person I knew." However, Parker noted that after her mom's friend came out, "there was lots of talk" and "people were very uncomfortable with it." Most of the participants experienced a significant lack of education, language, and exposure to LGBTQ+ identities and issues within their Conservative Christian communities, contributing to their understandings of their own identities.

Mental Health

Participants also discussed mental health issues as a result of the ways non-normative genders and sexualities were or were not discussed in their Conservative Christian communities. Payton explained that although her depression was "very much apart from LGBT

issues," it still influenced her "relationship with the church in the sense that the church was not very open towards talking about mental illness" as well. Shay more directly linked her mental health struggles to her burgeoning LGBTQ+ identity: "In queer circles, and especially in transgender circles you see a lot of people who, their growth as a person, like their mental and emotional growth is so much either slower or halted until 20, 25, 30, 35." Parker also talked about how the prevalent violence and abuse that was either overlooked or accepted in her community contributed to a lot of trauma and cognitive dissonance that she now deals with. This has made it difficult for her to understand her own sexuality. Regarding the abuse she experienced, "only now that I've done some healing can I even distinguish that that was not okay." Parker noted that in the community she grew up in, there was "huge stigma around any type of counselling," and there were no conversations around mental health though "there really really should have been."

Quinn directly linked their mental health problems to the way they understood their LGBTQ+ identity as well, specifically regarding their gender identity. They explained that due to a lack of information around non-normative gender identities, getting their period for the first time "was shattering and that was the moment when my major depressive, suicidal ideation state began, for many many many years." Today they are "pursuing the things I need to pursue transition-wise, and being open and finding people who I can be open with. And that major depression, it's gone!" Payton, Shay, Parker, and Quinn discussed experiencing mental health issues, some of which they directly connected to the ways their communities discussed or did not discuss non-normative genders and sexualities, and the ways the participants then understood their burgeoning LGBTQ+ identities.

Lack of Formal Support

Throughout their Conservative Christian communities, participants noted a lack of formal support for those exploring non-normative genders and sexualities. Charlie explained that they never sought help in their Christian community because "I just never saw the merit in it. […] The views that members held and their behaviour toward sexual and gender diversity just discouraged me from seeking anyone else's opinions on the matter." Payton also talked about how her high school "didn't really address things very well." Shay explained that in her church and home life, "I got nothing. There was no help there." She clarified that she would have engaged with formal resources and supports "if it was available. I was definitely looking, but there's just nothing there." Parker similarly explained that seeking help in her Christian community "was never even a possibility for me" due to it being a hateful and violent environment. Quinn did not seek formal help regarding their gender or sexual identity, "not from any authority figure, because I knew that would go very badly." They explained that if they were "known to be queer or gender-non-conforming," they "would have to live alone, because anybody who would live with me, there's a possibility something might happen and therefore it's inappropriate."

Kieran's experience in his community was that

> it felt like I had to do it on my own. Or at least I chose to because I was like, well no one really seems to like talking about this and I don't want to try and figure this out in this weird awkward environment that has been created. So it just felt like there was no point in doing that.

One of the reasons Kieran left the church he was working at was because he wanted to come out. He explained that if he had come out while still working there it would be "awkward for me, for these staff that I work with who, regardless of what I think their viewpoint might be,

now have to deal with the public ramifications of like, what do we do with this employee?" Kieran noted that after coming out, the staff of the church were willing to support and affirm him on an individual level, "but then still witnessing nothing from the church or from any policy level" was frustrating for him. This was noted by Quinn in their community as well; the individual community members were often kind and caring but "my beef, I'll say, is with the upper organization and policies therein."

Charlie noted a specific instance that demonstrated this lack of formal support when they took issue with a sermon preached by one of the apostles in their community. They emailed the leader of their local region "and I'm like, 'I've got something to say about the apostle, I think he said something very awful in his last talk.'" At first the leader was receptive, but when Charlie "told him the story, he never replied!" As the church was "not even going to take feedback," this was Charlie's last straw in deciding to leave. All participants experienced a significant lack of formal support for non-normative genders and sexualities within their Conservative Christian communities.

Loss of Community

When I asked participants if they missed anything about their Conservative Christian communities, Shay, Kieran, Payton, Parker, and Quinn talked about the importance and subsequent loss of community they experienced upon leaving. They valued the sense of community and willingness to support others present in their churches, schools, and families, and some of the participants have struggled with finding this same sense of community outside of Christian institutions. Shay talked about how "it's less the religious aspects that I miss and it is that sense of community. I miss communal lunches, I miss group workshops, conversations,

outreach." Growing up, Kieran experienced his Christian community as "a place where I made tons of really good friends." After he accepted that he was gay, his main struggle was with "how that is going to be in all of these communities." He began to distance himself from the community, explaining that

> I think my struggles with my sexuality and my religious communities has always just been like, how deep do I go, you know? How involved do I get? Do I go to bible college, do I become a camp councillor, all that stuff. And it just became things where I kind of had to look for ways out of it.

Payton noted that although she was part of her Christian community, she "really never felt that it was my own." However, she does miss how easy and straightforward it was to support others within Christian communities:

> In a Christian community when you're struggling with something, you simply have to say, 'I would like some prayer for this.' And it's very socially acceptable to then say all of the things that are going on in your life. Now in secular communities, that kind of segue is a little bit less soft.

Payton also talked about how "I can see from the outside looking in how tight of a community it is and how loving they are. And I wish I could be part of that, but feel fully part of it." In Parker's community "the only way that you have much social interaction is through religion." When I asked her if she missed any aspects of her community, she said, "I really miss some of the community aspects." However, Parker noted that with the COVID pandemic stopping most in-person gatherings, "I've actually found in the last year a lot of distance from any desire to go back, or any desire to be really in a Christian community."

Since leaving their Christian community, Quinn "lost the entire social community." Though they felt unsafe in their community, it was also very insular: "My housing was from Witnesses, my work was from Witnesses, my entire social network was from Witnesses. So if I

left, I would lose literally everything." Leaving was "extremely difficult," and when I asked them what they missed about their community, they said:

> Like, having a built-in community, it's amazing. Having people that you definitely see every week or something like that, who, if something went wrong— like, I broke my foot quite badly like five years ago, and a family who I was quite close with who I desperately, desperately miss, I wish that that was a possibility to continue contact with them. But they just were like, 'You're living with us, for like, however long it takes.'

Quinn sees the people in her community as "wonderful people who really do care about other people, and I miss that." Charlie explained that because they "never really felt like Mormonism was my community in the first place, [leaving] wasn't a huge loss for me." They explained that now they have "a community that I built myself" with "people who do feel like community to me." The participants talked about the impact their communities had on them growing up, the parts of it that they miss, and where they have found that sense of community since leaving their Conservative Christian communities.

Current Religious Identity

After discussing the impacts this rhetoric around non-normative genders and sexualities had on the participants, I asked each participant what their current religious identity is, and whether they would ever consider returning to a Christian community. Interestingly, none of the participants have completely rejected religion and many are open to their religious identity changing in the future. As with describing their sexual and gender identities, participants used a variety of terms to describe their religious identities and emphasized the fluidity of these labels and categories in their lives. Charlie explained that although "I wouldn't put a label on it specifically," they do describe themselves as a religious person: "I formed my own set of religious beliefs. And so I would describe my beliefs as centred on intentional unconditional

love for all living beings and our environment." Although Parker did not use a specific label to describe her current religious identity, she doesn't "identify currently as a Christian or with a Christian community." However, she did note that when talking to people from Christian communities, "generally I would say I'm Anglican. But anywhere that I'm kind of with my people, they know I have a religious background, they know I'm not religious."

Both Payton and Shay currently identify as agnostic. Payton's current stance is that a higher being "could be out there, and if he is out there, they're out there, they're not what I learned about when I was in Sunday school." Shay also identifies as agnostic, and clarified that while she doesn't think "my values and the values of most churches line up very well," she's "not for the destruction of religious identity":

> That stuff, the teachings of Jesus, I can agree with that! Like, that stuff's cool, Jesus was a cool guy. I don't know if he was the Son of God, I don't know if he rose from the dead, but I do believe that he was a kind and compassionate man with love for every human being, and was a prophet. And I can believe in that, and I can take those morals and those teachings with me in my adult life.

Kieran is not currently attending a church, but explained that while he "wouldn't say that I'm going through a huge crisis of faith at the moment," he's also "not in a super big rush to land on something." He noted that he's very comfortable in this in-between stage: "I've got a lot of questions, I've got a lot of doubts, and I'm not super worried about having great answers to questions." Quinn also talked about being in an in-between stage regarding their religious identity. They "still have a sense of a higher power, a higher being of some kind," but at the moment they are "specifically not going and doing anything with that. Until later, until I can approach the concept of God and not have a [trauma] reaction."

I also asked the participants if they would ever consider returning to a Christian community in the future. Most of the participants explained that they are wary of Christian communities due to their past experiences within those communities, but returning to a Christian community is not completely out of the question for any of them. Charlie has thought about returning to a Christian community, but "I have my own set of beliefs now, I haven't experienced any other Christian community that has my set of beliefs or that comes at least close enough to my set of beliefs to feel comfortable around." Payton explained that "the only type of church I would consider going to right now is the United church because they're chill" but "the need for me is not strong enough to go searching for it at this point. Maybe later on in my life but at this point that's not a huge need."

Shay "would consider returning to a Christian community if I found one that I felt was truly Christian." She explained that after seeing the way people in these communities treat each other, "I have so little faith in the Christian community." However, if she "encountered a faithful community that was based in compassion, love, the betterment of the people around us, I would totally be on board for that!" Kieran explained that he would definitely like to return to a Christian community, but noted that this would be dependent on how he was received by the community. For the time being, he does want to return to a Christian community "just that at some purely social level I want to see people again. But do I want to go back to a religious community and have them pick apart my identity? No, I don't if that's going to be the case." Parker is "kind of vaguely part of a Christian community" at the moment - although she has been "slowly dipping my toe back in through this little Anglican Church, […] I don't see, in the foreseeable future anyway, where my whole self could show up in a Christian community."

Quinn acknowledged that "it's possible" that they would return to a Christian community in the future, but "it would take some pretty spectacular group."

Many participants framed their current religious identities as occupying an in-between stage or going through a process of questioning and exploration. Although none of the participants have completely ruled out returning to a Christian community, all participants are wary of how completely they would be accepted, and how fully their own values would align if they were to ever return to a Christian community, due to their previous experiences within these communities.

Recommendations for Change

When I asked participants how well their Conservative Christian communities addressed sexual and gender diversity, participant responses included: "Very poorly"; "Horribly, it didn't exist"; "Extremely poorly"; "Not the best"; "They didn't"; and one participant simply just laughed. I then asked participants how their Conservative Christian communities could do better: responses included an adherence to 'true' Christianity, exposure and open-mindedness towards LGBTQ+ identities, radical change and celebration of LGBTQ+ identities, a social justice focus, and the need for transparency regarding the community's stance on LGBTQ+ identities and issues.

'True' Christianity

Shay, Charlie, Parker, and Quinn talked about how they wished their Christian communities had adhered more closely to what Shay called "true Christianity." She explained that

> I think true Christianity is what we make of it. And I feel that there are a lot of people who call themselves Christians, who could not by any stretch be considered Christians.

> […] But I do genuinely believe that there are people out there who are Christians, who love and respect the people outside of their own groups, and strive to learn, and know that the world is not this static, black and white thing, that things change, and that we're constantly learning and growing as people.

Charlie similarly talked about how if Christianity "was truly a religion intending to share the love of Christ," then "I really believe that they have to focus on teaching and living the radical love that Christ taught." Charlie concluded that "the way that Christian communities address sexual and gender diversity, I really don't think it needs to be an issue if Christians are promoting Christ's love and what Christ actually stood for." Parker referenced this idea when discussing potentially returning to a Christian community: "How focused are you on sin? What types of sin are we talking about, are we talking about the sin of white supremacy? […] Because there's such this focus on these individual micro-level things." Quinn also touched on how their community was often quick to judge people:

> I think one of the biggest things is like, assuming all of the Bible is true, God and Jesus etc. all those things are as they are, one of the biggest things in the Bible is, nobody knows the mind of God. Nobody can judge, except for God. […] God is love. That is a tenant. So surely, anybody who loves cannot be wrong. And who are we to judge that?

Participants discussed an adherence to 'true' Christianity in terms of unconditional love as something they would recommend to Conservative Christian communities in addressing sexual and gender diversity.

Exposure & Open-mindedness

Participants discussed exposure and open-mindedness towards LGBTQ+ people and issues as a way their Conservative Christian communities can better address sexual and gender diversity. Payton explained that "I think that there just needs to be conversation." However, she noted that "information in and of itself is not enough. I think that the human connection

and the emotional side is what actually changes minds." She emphasized "that kind of open-mindedness, that willingness to learn." Shay similarly feels that "so many of the problems in the Christian community, at least what I experienced, could be saved with just… education, and like a little bit of open-mindedness." Kieran talked about how his mom had "this feminist spirit" when he was growing up that is "very parallel in today's age with people also arguing for LGBTQ inclusion in church." He would see her books on women in leadership "and I would read about the authors and be like, oh cool they also have this great stance on being queer." He acknowledged this was one of the reasons he "was never worried about not being accepted at home." In terms of recommendations, he explained that "it would be great to have them really explore" the issue.

Parker explained that this lack of exposure and open-mindedness is a frustration she has with the church currently, in that "I'm here to wrestle with a very different beast than any of the conversation topics that are coming up here." However, she did mention that "going to this little Anglican Church has been very very healing for me because theirs was the first Christian spaces that has been wholeheartedly warm and accepting of [LGBTQ+ people]." When I asked Quinn for recommendations, they said, "Just like, acknowledging existence and further than that, supporting people." They emphasized "unlimited membership, actual inclusion, and just realizing that we literally cannot judge." Payton, Shay, Kieran, Parker, and Quinn expressed a need for exposure and open-mindedness towards non-normative genders and sexualities within Conservative Christian communities.

Radical Change & Celebration

Payton, Kieran, Parker, and Quinn discussed the need for radical change and emphasized a celebration of LGBTQ+ identities in their Conservative Christian communities, which they framed as more important than simply acceptance. Charlie believes that "incremental progress in addressing things like sexual and gender diversity is actually a hindrance" in Christian communities. Payton explained that "a whole systemic change" is "ideal," but she isn't sure that this is possible: "I think it'll be gradual." Quinn similarly talked about how they "would love to see some disturbance of that power hierarchy" present in these communities, "and that we would see more collaborative practices in those spaces."

When discussing the potential for education regarding sexual and gender diversity in her Christian high school, Payton explained that "the posture has to change towards more of an exploratory and a celebration versus a, 'We can talk about this and we love you,' but there's still a deficit." Kieran expressed frustration with the unwillingness of his Christian communities to fully accept and celebrate LGBTQ+ identities. He noted that there are a "few denominations and churches that are actually affirming in how outgoing they are about it and how forward-facing that is," but if he were to ever get involved with a Christian community again he'd "prefer to know that they're affirming officially, on paper." Parker "would love to see more queer joy" in Christian churches. However, she noted that she "would also watch it with hesitation because I feel like in the time that we're in of identity politics and diversity politics and stuff, I'd fear the appropriation of that." Parker explained that something she really appreciates about the Anglican Church she has been to "is how vocal they are in their allyship, and how relevant, even their preaching and their newsletters and stuff are." Quinn emphasized "unlimited membership [and] actual inclusion" in these communities, "not just like, 'Well, you

can be here but just be quiet.'" Participants emphasized the importance of radical change and a celebration of LGBTQ+ identities in Conservative Christian communities.

Social Justice Focus

Charlie, Payton, Kieran, and Parker also talked about the importance of these communities having a focus on social justice issues with a broader scope than only addressing LGBTQ+ identities, emphasizing the intersectionality of many of these identities. Charlie explained that if Christianity "was truly a religion intending to share the love of Christ, then it could do better by championing human rights and promoting activism in that regard." They expanded on this:

> So fighting for the rights for, and personally supporting sex workers, disabled persons, those who don't have homes, Black and Indigenous people of colour, all who are oppressed is what Christ taught and how he lived, and resisting structural oppression and power wherever possible.

Some participants used the example of women in leadership to demonstrate how un-progressive their Conservative Christian communities are regarding social justice issues as a whole. Payton noted that "the church I grew up in still is struggling with the idea of women in leadership, so LGBT issues are not gonna be a thing for a while." Regarding the silence surrounding these topics, she explained that "you see that in not just LGBT issues, it's pretty obvious in Indigenous issues and like, Black Lives Matter, etc." Kieran similarly talked about how in his Christian community, "even women in leadership is still such a divisive issue." He explained that "if that's barely at the point where we're starting to see progress, then I don't have a lot of faith for the immediate [future]" regarding LGBTQ+ acceptance in these communities.

Parker also noted that in the community she grew up in, "people who embodied any type of diversity, whether that's racial diversity, ethnic diversity, ability, like any type of diversity was really targeted and scapegoated." Parker did talk about how she really appreciated the Anglican church she went to in "how involved they were in their community, in the newsfeed that I see every day, and how willing they were to bring that into religious spaces." She emphasized the need for Christian communities to "diversify their leadership" and noted that she "would love if more Christian spaces and stuff were trauma-informed [and] understood consent." Participants discussed the need for diversity and a broader social justice focus in their Conservative Christian communities, pointing towards the intersectionality of many of these identities.

Transparency

The final major recommendation participants emphasized was a need for Conservative Christian communities to be transparent regarding their stance on non-normative genders and sexualities. Kieran discussed this recommendation at length. He explained that many churches in his region are unclear about where they stand on LGBTQ+ issues, and as someone who is quite open to returning to a Christian community once COVID restrictions lift, he finds this lack of clarity and transparency frustrating:

> I feel like it's something that I want to shake people by the shoulders and be like, just say what you believe and commit to something, and if you don't know, then truly try and figure it out. But living in this weird state where you're just not talking about it at all and you would have to wait until, like is it going to have to be me, that I have to start attending and then be like, hey can I volunteer? And then get told no and be like, okay sweet, I wasted like a year and a half of my life trying to figure out your beliefs because you just weren't forthcoming about it.

Kieran also acknowledged the incongruency between the official stance of the organization and the views of individuals within the congregation. He hopes that Christian communities can "recognize that ultimately, I don't care what you believe, I want to know what this community is saying, written down on paper. And ultimately that supersedes whether or not everyone on your pastoral team is actually affirming."

Parker also talked about how "this is something that I really struggle with in the Christian community, is the lack of transparency and the lack of accountability." Similarly to Kieran, she saw "one huge thing that is actually not that hard to do" in Christian communities would be

> to be very clear in where you stand and communicate that very clearly. If you're not affirming, sure, but please make that very clear on your welcome package, please make that very clear on your website. That would be one huge thing, for me anyways if I think about looking for a new church, that would really take a lot of stress and potential pain off of my— and create a slightly safer space.

Parker also talked about the need for transparency regarding "when harm happens and when conflict happens in their community." Participants emphasized a need for transparency regarding LGBTQ+ identities and issues within Conservative Christian communities.

Discussion

This study aims to understand how LGBTQ+ individuals experience non-normative genders and sexualities within the context of Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta. The research questions guiding this project are:

1. Does there continue to be a code of silence surrounding LGBTQ+ identities within Conservative Christian communities?
2. How influential is the role of Christianity in the formation of non-normative genders and sexualities?
3. How do LGBTQ+ individuals deal with the perceived incompatibility between their faith and their sexuality and/or gender?
4. How do LGBTQ+ individuals understand their LGBTQ+ identity when situated within a traditionally heteronormative religious community?

To address these research questions, this discussion consists of four parts. In the first section, I argue that there does continue to be a code of silence, and that the silence and lack of formal support present in many of these communities is complicit in upholding cis- and heteronormative ideals and in perpetuating rhetoric that LGBTQ+ identities are abnormal, sinful, and shameful. The second section addresses the conflict and struggles experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities, specifically focusing on the lack of internalized hate or conflict between participants' sexual or gender identity and their religious identity due to the silence and lack of information surrounding LGBTQ+ identities in their communities. The third section explores how many LGBTQ+ individuals have shifted, or are in the process of shifting, to a more personalized version of the Christian faith they were taught in

their communities, in which religion is viewed as a resource but not necessarily a requirement. Finally, the fourth section examines the fluidity and liminality with which some LGBTQ+ individuals express both their sexual and gender identities, as well as their religious identities, and how this fluidity is often contrary to what is expected regarding identities within Conservative Christian communities.

Silence as Complicit

My first research question asks, Does there continue to be a code of silence surrounding LGBTQ+ identities within Conservative Christian communities? The results from my study indicate that yes, there does continue to be a code of silence within some Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta. These findings are consistent with previous literature on this topic, though my study may provide more nuance as to how this phenomenon presents itself within the context of British Columbia and Alberta. Participants viewed the silence surrounding LGBTQ+ identities and issues and the subsequent lack of formal support, especially from leadership and more formal structures in the community, as upholding cis- and heteronormative ideals, and as complicit in perpetuating rhetoric that LGBTQ+ identities are abnormal, sinful, and shameful. In turn, I argue that this complicit silence and implicit assumption that being LGBTQ+ is sinful frames the act of coming out in these communities as a public confession of sin and guilt (Anderson, 2014), and coerces LGBTQ+ individuals to stay in the closet and avoid discussing their struggles with anyone. Meanwhile, the Conservative Christian communities are able to maintain their 'neutral' stance on the topic and avoid any consequences associated with taking a side. Some participants even saw this

silence as more insidious than outright condemnation, emphasizing the need for transparency in Conservative Christian communities regarding their stance on LGBTQ+ issues.

The silence surrounding non-normative genders and sexualities that was present in Kieran, Payton, Shay, and Quinn's Christian communities was understood by the participants as perpetuating cisheteronormativity in these communities. Similar to Levy & Lo's (2013) findings, strict views of gender identity and gender roles based on the Christian faith did not always match up with the experiences of participants. When LGBTQ+ identities are not represented, a cisheterosexist culture can continue to thrive and remain unchallenged (Griffen & Outlet, 2003). In line with previous research by Beagan & Hattie (2015), participants in my study experienced their Christian communities as broadly sex-negative, and this negative view of sex outside of cisgender, heterosexual marriage included a negative view of those individuals embodying non-normative genders and sexualities. Participants cited churches, family members, and institutions as all playing an important role in communicating expectations about gender and sexuality. A lack of discussion surrounding LGBTQ+ identities was seen by these participants as perpetuating cisgender and heterosexual norms in their communities, regardless of whether the communities were intentional about this.

The silence surrounding these topics is also perpetuated by a lack of formal support for individuals with non-normative genders or sexualities in these communities. Wilcox (2000) notes that the way in which LGBTQ+ individuals reconcile their predicament is often a solitary process which reflects aspects of a culture of religious individualism, rather than community and congregational support; this was reflected by all participants in my study. Gardner (2017) similarly found that when their respondents discussed a turning point in the negotiation of their

spiritual and minority sexual identities, they did so privately and did not turn to a religious authority figure for help. Participants in my study expressed these sentiments as well; they talked about how they felt like they had to go through these struggles on their own because no one in their communities was discussing LGBTQ+ identities, and Shay talked about how she would have accessed resources if they had been available, but "there's just nothing there." While Shay found some support in online forums and Kieran discussed reading books and listening to podcasts on the intersection of LGBTQ2+ identities and Christianity, the other participants did not talk about seeking support for their identities outside of their Christian communities until they had already begun to distance themselves from those communities. Similar to Quinlivan & Town's (1999) study, the pervasive silence concerning participants' experiences, feelings, and perceptions of their gender and sexuality contributed to their feelings of isolation and invisibility within their Conservative Christian communities. This lack of formal support for those with non-normative genders and sexualities perpetuates the general silence surrounding LGBTQ+ identities, which reinforces cisheteronormativity in these Conservative Christian communities.

This combination of a culture of cisheteronormativity, silence surrounding LGBTQ+ identities, and a lack of formal support for those with non-normative genders and sexualities all contribute to the framing of LGBTQ+ identities as abnormal, sinful, and shameful within Conservative Christian communities. Like in Levy's (2008) study, although it often wasn't made explicit, the rhetoric from participants' communities in my study implied that LGBTQ+ people were sinning. This was often framed through the lens of 'hate the sin, love the sinner.' As participants explained, and as previous research has noted, what makes this so harmful is that

these Christian communities often voice this rhetoric with apparently sincere expressions of care and affection, compounding the sense that the capacity of LGBTQ+ people to give and receive love is damaged (Moon & Tobin, 2018). Moon & Tobin (2018) argue that in these communities, one's ability to be recognized as a person created by God actually depends on one's ability to be recognized within the gender binary, and not being recognized within this binary calls into question the individual's personhood. This ultimately becomes an instrument of oppression, and participants' reported experiences in my study demonstrated that this both grows out of and serves to protect theologies that ground the recognition of personhood in a particular binary understanding of both gender and sexuality (Moon & Tobin, 2018). Because sex and gender are assumed to be intrinsic biological characteristics, individuals in these communities are expected to be heterosexual as part of their gender. Due to this conflation of sexuality with sex and gender, people who do not conform to expected gender roles, such as masculine women and feminine men, are often labelled as homosexual and therefore stigmatized (Herek, 1990).

By inferring that LGBTQ+ identities are abnormal, sinful, and shameful, this frames the act of coming out and embracing one's LGBTQ+ identity in these communities as essentially a public confession of sin and guilt. The emphasis is put on the visibility of these non-normative gender or sexual identities equally, if not more so, than any private acts or preferences, and Anderson (2014) argues that the church is then able to manipulate these public and vulnerable acts as confessions of guilt. This then relegates LGBTQ+ individuals who are 'out' to an inferior position within the Christian ideology of God's created order, in that those who identify as

cisgender and heterosexual are seen as created more in the image of God than those with non-normative genders and sexualities (Anderson, 2014).

This concept was touched on by Quinn and Kieran in my study. Quinn explained that after coming out to a few of their friends within their Christian community, the response was that they wouldn't support Quinn's non-normative identity, but they would support Quinn in abstaining from engaging with a non-normative identity, as that was what they believed would make God happy. Though they were not explicitly condemning, the response still frames embracing a LGBTQ+ identity as sinful, shameful, and abnormal, which in turn portrays publicly embracing this identity as a confession of sin and guilt. Kieran similarly felt he couldn't come out until he left his job at the church, and that coming out while working at a church would not be appropriate or acceptable. The implication of this is that coming out would be viewed as announcing one's sin, and as a public confession of guilt within this Christian context. Initial support, followed by a reframing of the act of coming out as a sacrament and sin the individual must bear and openly address (Moon & Tobin, 2018; Anderson, 2014), was a situation some participants acknowledged and many participants aimed to avoid.

In order to avoid these uncomfortable and condemning situations, the participants in my study either stayed in the closet until they were able to distance themselves from their Conservative Christian communities, or only came out to those they knew would be accepting and supportive. When there is no formal support in these communities for those with non-normative genders or sexualities, or if individuals do not have anyone they trust with their struggles, then LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities often must go through these struggles alone. Both my study and previous literature indicate that this

ritualized, spiritualized form of shame regarding LGBTQ+ identities both grows out of and serves to protect fundamentalist Christian theologies and, when internalized, prevents LGBTQ+ individuals from embodying their LGBTQ+ identities (Moon & Tobin, 2018; Dueck, 2012; Craig et al., 2017). The implicit assumption that LGBTQ+ identities are sinful, combined with the framing of coming out as a public confession of this sin, ultimately coerces LGBTQ+ individuals to stay in the closet and avoid discussing their struggles with anyone.

As participants in my study discussed, when LGBTQ+ individuals are not able to come out in Conservative Christian communities without experiencing shame and condemnation, many will choose not to come out until they leave these communities. This was seen by Kieran, Payton, and Shay as perpetuating the silence surrounding these topics and allowing Conservative Christian communities to maintain what appears to be a 'neutral' stance on LGBTQ+ issues, while still framing these identities as sinful and wrong. Kieran explained that many churches believe they can outwardly present a neutral stance on the topic while inwardly and implicitly condemning and framing these identities as sinful. Though this particular nuance has not been examined extensively in previous literature, it is supported by findings regarding the consequences associated with taking a side on controversial topics in Christian communities. Harris et al. (2020) note in their study that both historically and currently, denominational and congregational decisions about controversial topics, including current discussions with respect to LGBTQ+ inclusion, can lead to members leaving due to disagreement. My findings indicate that many Conservative Christian communities will simply avoid openly having these controversial discussions while still implicitly enforcing a strict cisgender heterosexual norm within the community. I argue that this encourages continued

silence and a lack of discussion around these topics -- when Conservative Christian communities maintain this 'neutral' stance without explicitly addressing LGBTQ+ topics and issues within their communities, they are able to avoid any consequences associated with taking a side.

Payton and Kieran saw this silence and alleged 'neutral' stance on LGBTQ+ identities from their Conservative Christian communities as more insidious than outright hate and condemnation. Payton explained that the rhetoric often accompanying this of 'hate the sin, love the sinner' is "to me more insidious than even just like blatant hate for LGBT people." She concluded that "silence in that case is a condemnation of any sort of diversity." Kieran emphasized that communities not wanting to have an official stance on LGBTQ+ identities is in itself a very strong stance, regardless of whether the community intended it in that way or not. To my knowledge, this nuance of Christian communities portraying an alleged neutral stance on LGBTQ+ issues while implicitly condemning them, and this stance being seen by LGBTQ+ individuals as more insidious than outright hate, has not been discussed in previous literature.

This understanding of silence as a more insidious version of condemnation of LGBTQ+ identities by participants is emphasized by the participants' call for transparency in these communities. Specifically, transparency regarding the community's stance on LGBTQ+ identities on a formal, official, and policy level was advocated for by Kieran and Parker. They explained that even if the community states that they are not affirming, transparency on this issue is still appreciated by LGBTQ+ individuals who are considering joining a Christian community. Previous research on religious responses to LGBTQ+ individuals and issues note that there can often be dissonance between the 'official' response of the religious institution and the responses of the individuals that take part in and make up that institution. In the context of Catholicism, Meek

(2014) notes that sympathetic attitudes may be espoused by those within the church which often seem in stark contrast to the attitudes publicly espoused by senior figures.

Official denominational doctrine does not necessarily reflect the thoughts and actions of individual churches or church members (Levy, 2008), and while Kieran, Parker, Shay, and Quinn recognized this in their interviews, Kieran and Parker talked about the official stance of the community as more indicative than an individualized or more personal stance on the issue of whether or not they would be fully accepted into and be able to be fully part of a community. This explicit call for transparency in Christian communities has not been extensively discussed in previous literature, and therefore this study adds significant nuance and complexity to how some LGBTQ+ individuals experience these Conservative Christian communities. Regardless of whether individual community members are accepting, if LGBTQ+ individuals are considering becoming full members of these communities then my research indicates that transparency on an explicit, formal, and official scale is the most ethical and humane course of action for Conservative Christian communities.

The silence surrounding LGBTQ+ individuals and issues in Conservative Christian communities, and the subsequent lack of formal support were viewed by the participants in my study as upholding cisheteronormativity, and as complicit in perpetuating rhetoric that LGBTQ+ individuals are abnormal, sinful, and shameful. This frames the act of coming out in these communities as a public confession of sin and guilt, coercing LGBTQ+ individuals to stay in the closet and deal with their struggles regarding their gender or sexuality without the support or acknowledgement of their Conservative Christian communities. The silencing of LGBTQ+

individuals and their allies ultimately reinforces the predominance of heteronormativity and gender normativity within these communities and fuels fears of disclosure (Craig et al., 2017).

Conflict & Struggle

My second research question asks, How influential is the role of Christianity in the formation of non-normative genders and sexualities? My findings indicate that the role of Christianity in the lives of some LGBTQ+ individuals in British Columbia and Alberta may significantly influence their understandings of their genders and sexualities, and this can be predominantly characterized as an experience of conflict and struggle. While part of their Conservative Christian communities, participants experienced conflict between their own experiences and the teachings in their communities, and they struggled with trying to integrate their LGBTQ+ identities into a religious community that either did not recognize LGBTQ+ issues, or explicitly framed LGBTQ+ identities as sinful. However, Kieran, Payton, and Shay reported that they did not experience extensive internalized hate or conflict between their sexual or gender identity and their religious identity due to the silence and lack of information surrounding LGBTQ+ identities. Alternatively, outright hostility towards LGBTQ+ issues made these identities something that Parker did not even feel comfortable or safe considering as an option until she left the community, thereby avoiding any internal conflict or struggle.

All participants talked about how the teachings of their community often contradicted their own experiences, and Charlie and Shay explained that they never once thought being LGBTQ+ was immoral or wrong. Charlie, Shay, Parker, and Quinn expressed confusion as to why their community would target and label certain things as sinful or wrong, but not others. This was seen as a misinterpretation of Christian doctrine by the community; LGBTQ+ identities as

sinful was not seen as an irrefutable fact by participants, and was therefore not strongly internalized. These findings are similar to previous research by Levy (2008) and Dahl & Galliher (2012), who's participants also characterized this conflict as a clash between Christian doctrine and their own experiences.

Participants also experienced conflict when trying to integrate their LGBTQ+ identities into a Conservative Christian community that either didn't recognize LGBTQ+ identities or framed these identities as sinful. Charlie, Parker, Kieran, and Shay explained that though many of them did not internalize anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, they did struggle with how to be part of their communities while embodying identities that are contrary to what is socially accepted in those communities. This conflict was understood as a conflict between the individual and the community, taking place externally to the individual and on a more social level instead of an individual, internal, or doctrinal level. This phenomena is briefly touched on in Beagan & Hattie's (2015) study, but has not been examined in depth in previous literature.

Interestingly, most participants did not experience extensive internalized hate or conflict between their sexual or gender identity and their religious identity -- this was attributed to the silence and lack of information surrounding LGBTQ+ identities for Shay and Payton, and alternatively to the explicit hate surrounding these identities for Parker, making embodying them not even an option for her until she had left the community. Shay explained that "because of how secluded my Christian community was, and because of how little things were known about or talked about at all, it's not like I had a lot of internalized homophobia." Similar to both Murr's (2013) and Coburn et al.'s (2019) studies, many of the participants in my study never experienced internalized hate or thought their non-normative genders or identities were

sinful or wrong. My findings indicate that for many LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities, there may be no hate to internalize -- gender and sexual diversity simply don't exist. This phenomena has not been discussed extensively in previous literature to my knowledge, and adds additional complexity to understandings of LGBTQ+ experiences in Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta.

Shift to Personalized Faith

My third research question asks, How do LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities deal with the perceived incompatibility between their faith and their sexuality and/or gender? My findings indicate that LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta may shift to a personalized and individualized version of the faith they were raised in. All participants shifted, or are in the process of shifting, to a more personalized version of the Christian faith than they were taught in their communities in order to reconcile the perceived incompatibility between their identities. They view Christianity and Christian communities as a resource or option for them to take advantage of, but not necessarily as a requirement in their lives. They were able to pick and choose which aspects of the Christian faith and teachings they wanted to continue embracing, and discarded the aspects of Christianity that conflicted with their LGBTQ+ identities. This is an example of what Wilcox (2002) calls religious individualism. However, for many participants, shifting to this personalized faith was no easy task -- participants reported feeling a significant loss of community as they distanced themselves from their Conservative Christian communities, which many continue to miss today.

All participants have shifted, or are in the process of shifting, to a personalized version of what they were taught in their Conservative Christian communities. This aligns with previous research which similarly notes that one of the ways LGBTQ+ individuals have dealt with unaffirming religious and faith contexts is to personalize and individualize their faith, instead of rejecting it outright (Benson et al., 2018; Gardner, 2017; Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Levy, 2008). Wilcox (2002) frames this personalized faith as 'religious individualism', and argues that in cases of uncertainty about or direct challenge to one's place in the social order, this societal shift toward religious individualism actually facilitates LGBTQ+ individuals' efforts to create coherence between their religious and sexual or gender identities. Responses from her participants indicated that it was religious individualism, rather than the religious community, that played the key role in resolving the tension between LGBTQ+ and Christian identities (Wilcox, 2002). When faced with ideas that negated their identities, instead of arguing, they simply left the community, thereby definitively sifting such ideas out of their religious beliefs -- this increased flexibility of individual belief and practice was of critical importance and was even seen as a necessity for some (Wilcox, 2002). This individualistic form of religiosity was adopted by all of the participants in my study; it is affected by but not dependent upon the 'official' Christianity espoused in their communities.

Wilcox (2002; 2003) argues that for LGBTQ+ individuals, religion has become a resource rather than a rule book; something to be utilized when it is expedient and ignored or rewritten when it is not. This view of religion as a resource, not a requirement, was expressed by the participants in my study as well. Charlie explained that they have thought about returning to a religious community, but because they have their own set of beliefs, they haven't encountered

a Christian community that aligns closely enough with their beliefs. If there was they would take advantage of it, but being part of a Christian community is not a priority or requirement in Charlie's life. Shay has continued to embrace some of the core values of Christianity, while rejecting other aspects, explaining that she has taken some of those morals and teachings into her adult life. Kieran similarly explained that he is open to returning to church after the pandemic ends, but if attending a church wasn't going to be helpful and beneficial for him then it didn't need to be a requirement in his life. This aligns with Wilcox's (2002) concept of religious individualism as well as with previous literature on this topic, in which a shift to a personalized faith often facilitates LGBTQ+ individuals' efforts to create coherence between their religious and sexual or gender identities.

In Yarhouse & Carr's (2012) interviews with transgender Christians, they found that many participants still identified religious coping activities tied to their faith traditions as sources of support during difficulties -- they had a strong personal faith, but struggled with their local religious communities (Yarhouse & Carr, 2012). This was discussed by the participants in my study as well – participants felt confident in their own personalized and individualized religious identities, but struggled with the doctrine and beliefs espoused in their Conservative Christian communities. Coburn et al.'s (2019) study with queer Christian women also found that a clear distinction was made among participants between what people in non-affirming churches said about same-sex relationships and what the participants knew to be true in their own personal experiences and relationships -- their understandings of God and the Bible did not reflect the non-affirming messages their church communities espoused. Similarly, in my study the participants' emphasis on the lack of formal support in their communities and the

need for transparency regarding the community's stance on LGBTQ+ identities illuminates this struggle with their communities, which was framed as separate from their own personalized beliefs and values.

In Ntombana et al.'s (2020) study, their participants used the strategy of re-negotiating their Christian identity, rather than their sexuality, and most were able to separate their relationship with God from the church itself. The participants in my study also separated their faith and spiritual relationship with a potential higher being from religious doctrine and the church itself, thereby effectively re-negotiating their Christian identity to better support their gender or sexual identity, rather than the other way around. In their study with transgender participants with a Christian upbringing, Levy & Lo (2013) found that although their participants did not regularly attend church, they did maintain their core beliefs and personalized their faith. This proved to be important in resolving conflict between participants' gender identities and religious beliefs (Levy & Lo, 2013). This can be seen with the participants in my study as well -- participants were able to resolve conflict between their sexual or gender identities and their religious identities by personalizing their faith, keeping values and beliefs that were useful to them, and rejecting religious teachings that were harmful.

Some of the participants in Murr's (2013) study walked away from their faith for a period of time and did not engage in spiritual practices. Although their religious identities were not easily abandoned, the participants often needed to reject their religious identity for a time (Murr, 2013). Quinn, Parker, and Kieran also talked about needing to reject their religious identity for a period of time. Quinn explained that they are currently taking a break from engaging with their religious identity, and Parker has "kind of taken a lot of space from a

Christian identity and from being part of a structured Christian community." Kieran talked about taking a step back from his faith and reconsidering whether it is something he still believes in, wants, and whether it is something with which his non-normative identity can coexist. These participants recognized a need to reject Christianity and organized religion for a time, though the possibility of returning to a Christian community was left very much open for all participants.

Interestingly, Kieran and Parker talked about their shift to a personalized version of their faith within the context of the COVID pandemic. With in-person religious gatherings in British Columbia largely non-existent for much of 2020 and continuing into 2021, a few participants described this as facilitating the development of a more personalized version of the faith they were taught in these Conservative Christian communities. Kieran came out during the pandemic, and explained that while he's not going through a crisis of faith at the moment, he is currently utilizing this forced time away to take that step back from the social aspects of his Christian community and examine whether it is something with which he personally still wants to be involved. He also talked about how coming out during the pandemic was largely a positive experience for him, because he wasn't pressured to continue attending uncomfortable in-person community events and was able to take time to analyze what parts of Christianity he wanted to keep and what parts he wanted to discard.

Parker also talked about how before the pandemic she had been attending an Anglican church, but hasn't attended in over a year due to the pandemic. Similarly to Kieran, she found this forced time away from a Christian community as beneficial for her own identity development, and this distance has actually left her with little desire to return to a Christian

community. Though the effects of the COVID pandemic on LGBTQ+ individuals in Christian communities have not been discussed at length in previous literature, my findings here are similar to what Ntombana et al.'s (2020) study touched on: they explain that the COVID pandemic is an opportunity to understand how LGBTQ+ individuals routinely engage with spirituality in solitude and in an isolated manner. They found that the privacy of online forums and the ability to privately consume sermons, gospel music, and different interpretations of the Bible are results of the COVID pandemic, and are portrayed as beneficial for their participants (Ntombana et al., 2020). Similarly, Kieran and Parker framed this time away from their Christian communities due to the pandemic as beneficial and positive for the development of their religious identities.

In embracing this personalized and individualized faith and distancing themselves from their Conservative Christian communities, Shay, Kieran, Parker, and Quinn discussed a significant loss of the sense of community with which they grew up. This has been recognized in previous research as well: Coburn et al.'s (2019) participants described the integration of Christian communities into their lives from the time they were children and how church often felt like a home or family. Similarly, Beagan & Hattie (2015) found that those who were asked to leave their Christian communities because they identified as LGBTQ experienced profound loss, because often the community consisted of their entire social network and many were highly active in their churches. Shay, Kieran, Parker, and Quinn discussed these losses of friends, community, and family at length, and expressed regret at no longer being part of those tight-knit groups.

Barnes & Meyer (2012) found in their interviews with lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, that even when they perceive homophobia in their religious institutions, individuals may retain affiliations with non-affirming settings because they derive great personal meaning from the religious setting to which they have been accustomed -- these settings provide an affiliation and connection with a community that is difficult to discard. Despite the stress of remaining in a non-affirming environment, the cost of leaving is often considered greater. This commitment to such non-affirming settings is evidence of a bind where individuals have to weigh the spiritual, social, psychological, and material costs of abandoning their community versus maintaining these religious affiliations (Barnes & Meyer, 2012). The participants in my study experienced these difficulties – Quinn in particular talked about how if they left their community, they would essentially lose everything, and choosing to leave was an extremely difficult decision for them due to this. For the participants in my study, shifting to a personalized version of their faith and distancing themselves from their Conservative Christian communities in order to embrace their non-normative sexual or gender identities was not an easy decision to make.

My study indicates that LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta may deal with the perceived incompatibility between their religious and sexual or gender identities by shifting to a more personalized version of the faith and teachings they were taught in their Conservative Christian communities. They might view these teachings and communities as a resource for them to take advantage of as needed, but not as a constant requirement for their lives. Participants were able to pick and choose which aspects of Christianity they wanted to continue embracing, and discarded the teachings and doctrines that conflicted with their LGBTQ+ identities, exemplifying Wilcox's (2002) concept of

religious individualism and aligning with previous literature on this topic. However, participants reported experiencing a significant loss of community when shifting away from their Conservative Christian communities towards a more personalized faith, and described this sense of community as something that is difficult to attain in the secular world.

Fluidity & Liminality

My fourth research question asks, How do LGBTQ+ individuals understand their LGBTQ+ identity when situated within a traditionally heteronormative religious community? My findings indicate that some LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta understand both their LGBTQ+ identities and religious identities in fluid and liminal terms. All participants except one described their gender or sexual identity as fluid, with the potential and openness to change the labels they are using in the future if they themselves change, or if they find a label that better describes themselves. Some participants also described their sexual or gender identity as liminal, in that how they identify often depends on the context, to whom they are talking, and how comfortable and trusting the participant feels with them. All participants similarly described their religious identities as fluid, and many described them as occupying a liminal space in that they identify as Christian or not depending on the context, they embrace some Christian teachings and discard others, and they view Christianity and Christian communities as a resource to be taken advantage of when they are useful and welcoming to the participant, but not necessarily as a constant requirement in their lives. However, when taking into account this fluidity of sexual, gender, and religious identities, Payton noted that those in the Conservative Christian communities around them value stable and fixed identities and often see fluid identities as disingenuous. Outwardly embracing fluid

and liminal identities in these communities, especially identities that are already marginalized, can have negative consequences for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+.

Within queer theory, identity is viewed as fluid, multi-faceted, ever-changing, flexible, and open-ended (Levy & Edmiston, 2014); not fixed, stable, or inherent (Dueck 2012), but a constellation of multiple unstable positions (Jagose, 1996). Liminality is a state of being in-between -- this conceptual metaphor of identity as a fluid category suggests that it can be contained but can also leak, seeping through oppressive constraints and confounding others' expectations (Gardner, 2017). Five of the six participants in my study described their sexual and gender identities as fluid and liminal. Charlie explained that they would prefer not to be seen through the lens of gender at all. Payton identifies as bisexual, but emphasized the fluidity and complexity of this label since she doesn't fit into a "typified bisexual experience." Payton also noted that though she currently identifies as a cis female, she could see this potentially being more fluid as well, leaving her gender identity very much open to change and occupying a liminal space between a normative and non-normative gender identity. Shay framed her gender identity as "a very genderqueer person," explaining that she uses 'they', 'she', and sometimes 'he' pronouns with the people to whom she is closest. Quinn used a variety of different terms to describe their gender identity and sexual orientation, noting that "that might change in the future." Participants did not feel the need to settle on a specific label or identity and embraced this fluidity and liminality, recognizing that their identities may change as their lives change.

Shay and Payton also talked about the liminality of their gender or sexual identities depending on the context, who they are talking to, and how much they trust those people. Shay explained that "If I'm filling out a form for the government, I'll just be like, 'F,' right? But if I'm

starting to get to know someone it'll be like, 'Oh I'm transfeminine' and then it'll go further and further and further until the people that I'm closest to know that I'm like, a very genderqueer person." Payton also talked about how when she doesn't want to get too into her identity with someone she will just say she is queer, characterizing this as "a good umbrella term." Participants discussed using different terms or labels to describe their gender or sexual identities depending on the context and how much they trusted the people with whom they are talking, demonstrating the fluidity and liminality of these labels and identities.

As with their gender and sexual identities, participants also tended to frame their religious identities as fluid and liminal; they embraced aspects of the faith they grew up with and discarded others, and identified as Christian or not depending on the context. Shay and Payton identify as agnostic, but all participants characterized their religious identities as a fluid and liminal process that they are in the middle of, not as a specific label that they will adhere to for the rest of their lives. Charlie describes themselves as a religious person, but with their own set of principles and beliefs that they live by, resisting a specific label. Payton currently identifies as agnostic, but expressed an openness to joining a Christian community in the future, should she find one that suits her needs. Kieran is taking a step back from his Christian community, explaining that he's very comfortable in this liminal space where he can have questions and doubts about his faith without assigning himself to a specific religious label.

Quinn talked about how they are also taking some time away from religion and Christianity at the moment, but expressed openness to potentially rejoining a Christian community once they have come to terms with the trauma they experienced within their community, characterizing their religious identity as fluid, liminal, and subject to change. Parker

explained that in unaffirming contexts she identifies as Anglican, but when she is with people she trusts, “they know I have a religious background, they know I’m not religious.” Parker demonstrated the liminality of her religious identity here; it changes depending on who she is talking to, and is often occupying an in-between space without adhering to a specific label.

Charlie and Shay also expressed fluidity between their sexual or gender identities and their religious identities, noting that these are not always two separate categories and highlighting the intersectionality of these identities. Charlie explained that their identity as a religious person can’t be understood without understanding their identity as a gender-void person. Similarly, Shay talked about how she believes that Christianity and queer identity are not two separate things and that they don’t have to be as separated as many people make them out to be. While sexual or gender identity and religious identity are often framed as two separate entities within these specific Conservative Christian communities, participants recognized and emphasized the inherent interconnectedness of these identities in their lives, acknowledging their fluid, liminal, and intersectional nature.

This emphasis on fluidity and liminality has been recognized in previous literature. Levy & Lo’s (2013) participants noted that resolutions between identity and religious upbringing were not seen as final, but as a process of continual growth and change. Similarly, Levy & Reeves (2011) found that resolution of the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs did not occur as a single event or moment for the participants; instead, resolution was treated as an ongoing and continual process. Coburn et al.’s (2019) study with queer Christian women found a multiplicity of identities the participants held that emphasized the importance of holding space for the processes that they navigate in church communities, relationships, and

within themselves. Similarly, Rosenkrantz et al.'s (2016) participants' responses suggested that religious/spiritual and LGBTQ identities interact in ways that can synergistically enhance, support, and inform each other, providing personal and spiritual growth and development. Dahl & Galliher's (2012) participant narratives also did not support a single developmental trajectory of identity formation, but rather emphasized the importance of context, history, and diversity as foundational to understanding participant experiences. The participants in Walton's (2000) study explained that developing a gay identity affected their Christian identity and vice-versa, emphasizing the fluidity in these embodied identities. In my study, participants' characterizations of their identities also emphasized the importance of context and intersectionality. They found comfort in these fluid and liminal identities, embracing the in-between state and seeing it as facilitating growth and self-acceptance.

Additionally, by embracing the fluidity of these identities the participants in my study can be seen as essentially 'queering' not only their sexual and gender identities, but their religious identities as well. Hickey & Grafsky (2017) found that their participants' shift from framing their attractions around existing paradigms to constructing their own paradigm reflected agency, autonomy, and creativity. They argue that all their participants queered their upbringing and their faith to some extent, by integrating two identities largely deemed mutually exclusive and by actively choosing which identities were most salient to them (Hickey & Grafsky, 2017). Participants in my study also expressed agency and autonomy in this 'queering' of their religious identities. "As the concept of queer relates to non-normative identities, participants are, in essence, queering faith as well as sexuality. They are defying the culturally constructed binary of non-heterosexuality and Christianity." (Levy, 2008, p.55) In this

way, participants were able to 'queer' both their sexual and gender identities, and their religious identities, by embracing these identities as fluid and liminal.

However, an important caveat that needs to be acknowledged in this discussion surrounding the fluidity and liminality of identities is that the Conservative Christian communities that the participants in my study were part of, and that many of them still tangentially participate in through family and friends, often value stable and fixed identities and see fluid identities as disingenuous. Payton acknowledged this during her interview, explaining that she is still questioning things and doesn't want to come out to the people in her life that are part of a Christian community until she knows something concrete, "or else it feels disingenuous, especially with the kind of people I want to come out to, they want— the stability aspect of it is huge to them." Heteronormativity creates a binary between the identification as heterosexual and non-heterosexual (Abes & Kasch, 2007); heterosexuality thus remains the fundamental, unexamined, and unquestioned normative standard which grounds discussions about sexuality, and by which all else is judged and evaluated.

A static cisgender and heterosexual identity is assumed within these communities, and is considered 'normal' while LGBTQ+ identities are considered 'abnormal' (Herek, 1990). Similarly, a static religious identity is often assumed. Existing in a liminal space between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal' and adopting a variety of different labels, or no labels at all, is likely to cause tension in a community that so adheres to static and binary categories of identity. In a community that values static, stable, and 'normal' identities, fluidity becomes something to be avoided. Embracing fluidity invites judgement that the individual is disingenuous about their identity or intentions and is not to be taken seriously. Though previous literature has addressed

both the cisgender heterosexual norm present in these communities and the tendency for LGBTQ+ individuals in these communities to lean towards a fluid and liminal religious and sexual or gender identity, the dissonance between these two points has not been examined in depth despite undoubtably affecting how LGBTQ+ individuals are able to express themselves in these communities.

The process of negotiating and reconciling gender, sexuality, and religion is ongoing and complex (Van Klinken, 2015). Almost all participants described their gender, sexual, and religious identities as fluid and liminal. They expressed an openness to change these identities, and described religion as a resource to be taken advantage of as needed, but not a requirement for their lives. However, when taking into account this fluidity of identities, Payton noted that Conservative Christian communities tend to value stable and fixed identities, and often see fluid identities as disingenuous. This can have significant negative consequences for those trying to outwardly embrace their fluid and liminal identities in these communities, especially if these identities are already marginalized. My findings indicate that some LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta understand their gender, sexual, and religious identities as fluid and liminal, though their communities often do not see value in this fluidity.

To address my four research questions, this discussion was split into four parts. In the first section, I argued that the silence and lack of formal support present in many Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta is complicit in upholding cis- and heteronormative ideals and in perpetuating rhetoric that LGBTQ+ identities are abnormal, sinful, and shameful. The second section addressed the conflict and struggles experienced by

participants, specifically focusing on how the majority of participants did not experience very much internalized hate or conflict between their sexual or gender identity and their religious identity due to the silence and lack of information surrounding LGBTQ+ identities in many Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta. The third section focused on exploring how LGBTQ+ individuals have shifted to a more personalized version of the Christian faith they were taught in their communities, in which religion is viewed as a resource but not necessarily as a requirement. Finally, the fourth section examined the fluidity and liminality with which LGBTQ+ individuals expressed both their sexual and gender identities, as well as their religious identities, and how this fluidity is often contrary to the expected static and stable identities within many Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta.

Conclusion

Recommendations

This project examined LGBTQ+ experiences in Conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta. Recommendations to improve the ways these communities address sexual and gender diversity include exposure, celebration of LGBTQ+ identities, adherence to unconditional love as a core tenet of Christianity, and transparency regarding community stances on LGBTQ+ individuals and issues. Exposure to LGBTQ+ individuals and issues was recommended by participants, and is supported by previous literature. It has been noted that individuals' exposure to diversity is likely to increase their tolerance (Grozelle, 2017). Interpersonal contact between LGBTQ+ people and cisgender heterosexuals under favourable conditions has been cited as one of the most effective ways of reducing heterosexism and institutional heteronormativity (Herek, 1990). Herek (1990) notes that LGBTQ+ people can only fulfill the symbolic roles as examples of sin so long as they remain abstract concepts rather than flesh-and-blood human beings -- personally knowing someone who is openly LGBTQ+ can eventually change this perception.

Celebration of LGBTQ+ identities, not just acceptance, was also something the participants in my study recommended for their Conservative Christian communities. LGBTQ+ pride and celebration emerge in the context of recognizing and valuing the humanity in other LGBTQ+ people, which allows individuals to both recognize and affirm their own humanity as LGBTQ+ people (Moon & Tobin, 2018). Benson et al. (2018) found that their transgender participants felt supported when the congregation members made an effort to make them feel welcome through their actions and words towards participants (Benson et al., 2018),

emphasizing a celebratory attitude towards LGBTQ+ identities. Participants in my study also advocated for an adherence to what one participant called 'true Christianity' -- the idea that the most important tenet of Christianity is to love everyone unconditionally and without judgement, including those who are LGBTQ+. Many come to see listening with openness as a charge of Christian love -- this can inspire both individual community members and leaders to expand their vision of Christian love to see it as mandating solidarity with LGBTQ+ communities and other social justice movements (Moon & Tobin, 2018). Beagan & Hattie (2015) found that those of their participants who studied Christian theology intensely appeared to have much less internal conflict regarding LGBTQ+ identities -- they saw teachings condemning non-normative genders and sexualities as flawed human interpretations of Biblical teachings, as did many of the participants in my study.

Transparency was a significant recommendation from the participants in my study when asked how their Conservative Christian communities could better address sexual and gender diversity. This recommendation stems directly from the silence regarding LGBTQ+ individuals and issues in these communities. Dueck (2012) explains that interacting with both the silence in these communities and the overtly negative messages about same-sex desire or relationships means being active in regularly and intentionally pushing the limits of gender and sexuality norms in the community -- this can be done through dress, behaviour, activism, or continuing individual dialogue with people in the community.

Additionally, participants in my study acknowledged a lack of formal support for LGBTQ+ individuals within their Conservative Christian communities due to the silence surrounding these topics -- this points to a strong need for formal supports specifically for LGBTQ+

individuals in these communities, in an environment that is safe, welcoming, confidential, and non-judgemental. Although individual community members and more informal aspects of the community may be affirming and celebratory towards LGBTQ+ individuals, the incongruency between these informal supports and the stances from official levels of the community can undermine the Christian tenets of love and acceptance. Yip (1998) found a strong inclination among his gay male Christian participants to perceive the institutionalized Church to be homophobic and stigmatizing, but perceived a discrepancy between the institutionalized Church and the congregation in that individual believers have the potential for understanding and compassion. At the official level, the Church authority can be criticized for being homophobic and transphobic and resistant to change, but at the individual level the congregation can be seen as sympathetic. This perceived discrepancy can also weaken the position of the institutionalized church as a moral arbiter in the eyes of the respondents and was perceived as hypocritical and ignorant, ultimately failing to provide a wholesome and unconditionally accepting environment for the growth of the spirituality of its believers (Yip, 1998). Both previous literature and the findings in my study demonstrate a clear need for more formal supports for LGBTQ+ individuals in these contexts.

In many Conservative Christian communities, cisgender heterosexual identification and curtailed sexual practices are central in order to self-identify as someone belonging to these communities, which often celebrate unity rather than diversity (Dueck, 2012). Change then requires others to consider their own experiences with LGBTQ+ people, to deeply question doctrinal beliefs, to dissolve the symbolic boundaries that align LGBTQ+ people with the 'profane,' and to incorporate LGBTQ+ people into the realm of the 'sacred' (Hopkins, 2014).

Limitations

This project has resulted in many important conclusions and recommendations for Conservative Christian communities. However, it also has many limitations that need to be acknowledged. Due to time and resource constraints, as well as the target population often being marginalized and stigmatized within their communities, this project relied on snowball sampling from personal connections and resulted in only six participants. Due to these recruitment methods there are likely volunteer biases present in the sample. Those more likely to volunteer to participate in a project examining LGBTQ+ experiences in Conservative Christian communities might also have experienced less significant or long-lasting stigma and shame within these communities, and are less likely to be part of their Christian community currently. Individuals who are currently fully invested in their Conservative Christian community or who had a more extreme or marginalizing Christian upbringing may be more wary of volunteering for this project and discussing their experiences. Additionally, this project was limited to Evangelical and Protestant Conservative Christian communities, and other branches and denominations of Christianity were not examined. Because of this small sample size and limited project scope, these findings are not representative of or generalizable to the larger population in British Columbia and Alberta, and should not be taken as so. Importantly, in order to protect the participants' identities I did not collect any demographic information other than what was directly relevant to the research topic (gender, sexuality, and religious identity); therefore this project is unable to address the intersections of gender or sexual identity and religious identity with other social sectors such as race or class.

Additionally, as this is an exploratory qualitative study relying on interviews, the findings are subjective to participants' experiences and cannot be independently verified. The experiences discussed by the participants in this study are self-reported and may not be true for other LGBTQ+ individuals in Conservative Christian communities. Finally, though I exercised reflexivity throughout the research process, there is the possibility that my personal experiences with this topic influenced my focus in terms of exploring the particular themes that I chose to examine, as I identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community and was part of a Conservative Christian community for much of my life. However, this fact was also beneficial in building rapport with the participants and being able to better understand and represent their experiences in this paper.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should consider utilizing a larger and more representative sample that collects more demographic data, in order to better generalize these findings to the broader population. Additionally, researchers should keep in mind the latent functions of the silence surrounding LGBTQ+ individuals and issues in many of these communities, and consider probing deeper below the surface of this silence to examine the ways it can support the oppression and marginalization of non-normative identities. Finally, participants' emphasis on the fluidity and liminality of both their gender/sexual identities and religious identities points to potential issues with asking participants to confine and categorize themselves using pre-defined, stable, and static labels -- future researchers should take this tendency towards fluidity and liminality into account when researching sexual and gender minority individuals, and when examining the

ways these individuals resolve conflict and attempt to integrate seemingly contradictory identities.

This study looked at the ways LGBTQ+ individuals experience Conservative Christian communities. Participants recognized that their Christian communities did not adequately address sexual and gender diversity, and their experiences in these communities often consisted of a silence around non-normative identities that was seen as complicit in framing LGBTQ+ identities as sinful and shameful. Thus, recommendations for these communities include exposure to and celebration of LGBTQ+ identities, adherence to unconditional love as a core tenet of Christianity, and transparency regarding community stances on LGBTQ+ individuals and issues. Ultimately, the goal of this research is not to discover universal truths, but to make sense of the diverse specificity of lived experiences as they impact individuals, communities, and societies in flux (Hammack, 2005). My hope is that this work will begin to open a dialogue between Conservative Christian communities and their LGBTQ+ members, and encourage these communities to listen to, unconditionally love, and better support those with non-normative genders and sexualities in their midst.

> *I think that there's so much good that is there and can be there if we just… grow. Open our eyes, look a little bit further ahead, and aren't so afraid to talk. Again, that silence kills people.*
>
> *- Shay*

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Appendix A

Email Script – LGBTQ+ Experiences in Christian Communities

Hello, my name is Kelsey Block and I am conducting a study on LGBTQ+ experiences in Christian communities. This project is my thesis for my MA in Sociology at the University of Victoria. I was wondering if you would be interested in participating in this study.

The purpose of this study is to discover how LGBTQ+ individuals experience queerness within the context of Christian communities in Canada. Some of the areas I hope to focus on include how influential the role of religion is in the formation of non-normative genders and sexualities, how LGBTQ+ individuals understand their LGBTQ+ identity when situated within a traditionally heteronormative religious community, whether there continues to be a code of silence surrounding non-normative sexualities and genders within Christian communities, and how LGBTQ+ individuals deal with the perceived incompatibility between their faith and their sexuality/gender identity. Through this study I hope to bring the lived experiences and voices of LGBTQ+ individuals in these contexts to the forefront in a tangible and respectful way.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will interview you about the above topics over Zoom, a secure video platform, at a time that is convenient for you. You will have the option to not answer any questions you do not feel comfortable with. Any identifying information will be kept confidential and your name and the name of the Christian community you were part of will not be included in the final paper. You will also have the option to receive a copy of the final paper at the end of the study.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope to hear back from you soon so we might set up an interview. Feel free to contact me or my supervisor, Steve Garlick, if you have any questions about this project or your participation in it.

Kelsey Block

Appendix B

University of Victoria

Participant Consent Form

LGBTQ+ Experiences in Christian Communities

You are invited to participate in a study entitled LGBTQ+ Experiences in Christian Communities that is being conducted by Kelsey Block.

Kelsey is a graduate student in the department of Sociology at the University of Victoria. You may contact her if you have further questions.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Sociology. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Steve Garlick.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research project is to examine the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals by looking at how LGBTQ+ individuals experience queerness within the context of Canadian Christian communities, and to bring the lived experiences and voices of LGBTQ+ individuals who have been part of Christian communities to the forefront in a tangible and respectful way. Specifically I hope to focus on how influential the role of religion is on the formation of LGBTQ+ individuals' gender or sexuality, how they understand/understood their (often contradictory) LGBTQ+ and Christian identities, how they dealt with this contradiction, and whether there continues to be a 'code of silence' surrounding non-normative genders and sexualities within Christian communities.

Importance of this Research

Research of this type is important because despite the concerns expressed by LGBTQ+ individuals in Christian communities, there is currently a lack of qualitative research examining their experiences in a Canadian context. This research aims to address this gap and provide insight into these experiences to better support LGBTQ+ individuals in these situations.

Participants Selection

You are being asked to participate in this study because you don't identify as both cisgender and heterosexual, have been part of an Evangelical or Protestant Christian community in Canada for a minimum of six months and within the last 8 years, and are between 19 and 35 years old.

What is involved

If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include an audio-recorded interview (45 minutes-1.5 hours) conducted over Zoom concerning your experiences in a

Christian community, a review of the transcript from the interview to ensure accuracy, and sharing Kelsey's contact information with additional potential participants.

An audio recording of the interview will be made for transcription purposes. Only Kelsey will have access to this audio recording. Names and identifying characteristics will be omitted from transcripts.

Inconvenience
Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including time spent interviewing and reviewing transcripts, and contacting additional participants. Other potential inconveniences may include discussing uncomfortable personal experiences and events.

Risks
There are some potential emotional or psychological risks to you by participating in this research due to the personal nature of the subject matter that the project is focusing on. To prevent or to deal with these risks, you will not be required to answer any questions you don't want to, and can withdraw from the study at any time. You will be given the option to take a 5 minute break during the interview. If you continue to experience discomfort following the interview or wish to discuss your experiences further, you can access resources and immediate support at https://www.uvic.ca/mentalhealth/.

Benefits
The potential benefits of your participation in this research include talking through unresolved issues and feeling like you are making a difference by sharing your experiences. Benefits to society may include a resource for churches, Christian communities, and/or LGBTQ+ advocacy groups as they work to better address LGBTQ+ experiences in these contexts. Benefits to the state of knowledge may include a significant contribution to queer theory, LGBTQ+ studies, and religious studies, and a presentation of LGBTQ+ experiences that is tangible and respectful.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will only be used if you give permission for it to be used in the research. If you do not give permission for your data to be used, it will immediately be deleted and destroyed and will not be included in the final paper.

On-going Consent
To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will check in with you during the transcript review stage to confirm that you still consent to participate in this study. If you do not, your data will be immediately deleted and destroyed and will not be included in the final paper.

Anonymity
Anonymity is limited in this project due to the nature of conducting one-on-one interviews. However, steps will be taken to ensure confidentiality (see below) and only Kelsey will know your identity in the final paper.

Confidentiality
Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by assigning all participants pseudonyms and removing all identifying characteristics from the final paper. All identifying data such as interview recordings and transcripts will be stored on Kelsey's password-protected computer and will

only be accessible by her. Although other participants may know that you have participated in this study due to the nature of snowball sampling and the recommendation process, it is unlikely that they will be able to identify your specific responses in the final paper.

Dissemination of Results
It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: As a thesis paper (which will be uploaded to UVic's online database), potentially at an academic conference, and potentially as a published article. Results will also be sent directly to participants.

Disposal of Data
Data from this study will be disposed of after two years following the conclusion of the study (approximately September 2023). Electronic data will be permanently deleted and any physical copies of transcripts will be shredded.

Contacts
Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include Kelsey Block by email.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	*Signature*	*Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. How would you characterize your overall experiences in the Christian community you were/are part of?

2. How would you describe your current gender identity and sexual orientation?
    - What are your pronouns?
    - How would you describe your gender identity and sexual orientation when you were part of the Christian community?
    - Can you describe your religious background?

3. Were LGBTQ+ individuals or issues ever discussed in your Christian community?
    - If yes, by whom? In what contexts? How were they portrayed?
    - Did these discussions, or lack thereof, shape your perceptions of LGBTQ+ people? How so?

4. Did you ever personally struggle with your gender identity or sexuality while you were part of the Christian community?
    - If yes, what did this look like?

5. Did you ever seek help from within the community to discuss struggles regarding your sexuality or gender identity?
    - Why or why not?
    - If yes, can you describe the interaction(s)?

6. Did you experience conflict between your sexuality/gender identity and your religious identity?
    - If yes, can you describe specific instances? How did this conflict affect your life?
    - What was the outcome of this conflict?

7. How would you describe your current religious identity?
    - If you are no longer part of a Christian community, are there aspects of it that you miss?
    - Would you ever consider returning to the Christian community?

8. In your opinion, how well did the Christian community address sexual and gender diversity?
    - How could they have done better?

9. Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

Thanks for your time!

Appendix D

University of Victoria

Office of Research Services I Human Research Ethics Board
Michael Williams Building Rm B202 PO Box 1700 STN CSC Victoria BC V8W 2Y2 Canada
T 250-472-4545 I F 250-721-8960 I uvic.ca/research I ethics@uvic.ca

Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR	**Steve Garlick** (Supervisor)	**ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER** Expedited review - delegated	**20-0335**
PRINCIPAL APPLICANT	**Kelsey Block** **Master's student**	ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE	26-Aug-2020
UVIC DEPARTMENT	**Sociology SOCI**	APPROVED ON	26-Aug-2020
		APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE	25-Aug-2021

PROJECT TITLE **LGBTQ2+ Experiences in Christian Communities**

RESEARCH TEAM MEMBERS
Kelsey Block - ,

DECLARED PROJECT FUNDING **None**

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL
tcps2_core_certificate.pdf - 17-Jul-2020
Sample Interview Questions.docx - 10-Aug-2020
Mental Health Resources.docx - 25-Aug-2020
Email Script.docx - 25-Aug-2020
Consent Form.doc - 25-Aug-2020

CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol.

Modifications
To make any changes to the approved research procedures in your study, please submit a "Request for Modification" form. You must receive ethics approval before proceeding with your modified protocol.

Renewals
Your ethics approval must be current for the period during which you are recruiting participants or collecting data. To renew your protocol, please submit a "Request for Renewal" form before the expiry date on your certificate. You will be sent an emailed reminder prompting you to renew your protocol about six weeks before your expiry date.

Project Closures
When you have completed all data collection activities and will have no further contact with participants, please notify the Human Research Ethics Board by submitting a "Notice of Project Completion" form.

Certification

This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropiate standards of ethcis as outlines by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Participants.

Dr. Rachael Scarth
Associate VP Research Operations

Certificate Issued On: 26-Aug-2020