Queer Christianity: A Qualitative Co-Cultural Study

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ABSTRACT

The following study examined what messages regarding sexuality members of the LGBTQ community received from their Christian faith and what communicative action those individuals took in response to this messaging. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who currently or previously had identified as both LGBTQ and Christian. Interview transcriptions were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results showed an overwhelming number of negative messages about faith and LGBTQ sexuality. The co-cultural theory was used as a theoretical framework to make sense of participants' responses to messages about faith and sexuality. The analysis also revealed a similar story in the participants' experience. LGBTQ individuals were likely to separate from their Christian identity as a result of the negative messaging, only after having tried to assimilate or accommodate with their LGBTQ and Christian identities.

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality has only recently begun to change in meaning, expand in vocabulary, and bring understanding of how people identify with themselves and others (Compton & Dougherty, 2017). The definition of sexuality can vary from person to person, but two cultural groups in particular, the LGBTQ and Christian communities, have opposing definitions and beliefs about sexuality that have caused internal and external conflict in members who identify with both communities (Ivey, 2014). This conflict often then forces individuals who are queer and Christian to renounce one identity in order to keep the other (Bie & Tang, 2016; Ivey, 2014). This study explored what messages these individuals received from the Christian faith concerning sexuality and what communicative actions were taken based on those messages.

The two communities differ in one large way, in that the LGBTQ community openly embraces sexuality (Rubinsky & Cooke-Jackson, 2017), whereas Christianity chooses to veer away from the controversial topic (Maddux, 2001). The dialogue regarding the sexuality of the LGBTQ community must be challenged within the Christian faith. Communication from Christians regarding LGBTQ identity and sexuality has been primarily negative, causing division amongst members who are part of either or both of these groups (Catedral, 2018). Due to the division, the topic of sexuality needs to be addressed in order to reconcile members of the Christian faith to members of the LGBTQ community.

In the relationship between the LGBTQ and Christian community, open dialogue has never advanced to the point of progress (Trammell, 2015). The communication between the LGBTQ community and Christianity is important to research since it is mutually beneficial by providing an understanding about LGBTQ identities and finding the roles sexuality plays in the church. Through open-ended interview questions, the participants were given an opportunity to explain their beliefs and provide a better understanding of their view of faith and sexuality. This allowed for the effective study of the communication preferences of the LGBTQ community, so as to help bridge the gap between both cultural groups and hopefully bring about a change in their relationship.

The study includes a review of literature for the LGBTQ and Christian community, the co-cultural theory, and sexuality, outlining the basis for this research. Next is a brief description of the research questions. Then an explanation of the methods used in this research are offered to further understand the process of this study. After that, the results from the data collection are detailed, followed by a discussion to expand on the results. Finally, personal implications, references, and an appendix are provided for this research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature begins with examining the LGBTQ community, followed by an examination of Christian communities. This will set a guideline for each cultural group's interpretation of identity, specifically regarding sexuality. Next, the principles from the co-cultural theory are presented as a lens for how the

communicative relationship between the LGBTQ and Christian communities can be observed. Finally, an examination of the literature surrounding sexuality is discussed to provide a frame of reference for the themes found in the research questions.

LGBTQ Community and Identity

The LGBTQ community is a collection of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (Rubinsky & Cooke-Jackson, 2017). Some choose to refer to the community simply as the LGB, LGBT, or the LGBTQ+ community, while others refer to the community by the full acronym LGBTQIAA, which adds the terms intersex, asexual, and ally (Rubinsky & Cooke-Jackson, 2017). For the purpose of this study, the community was referred to as the LGBTQ community. This study also refers to the 'queer Christian.' This term was used throughout the study to denote "queer individuals that enact their Christian religious identity" (Ivey, 2014, p. 56).

Sexual expression varies between the two communities presented in this study. Christianity firmly states that sexuality is to be expressed as a "lifelong, sexually exclusive relationship…between a man and a woman" (NAE, 2015, para 1). In contrast, the LGBTQ community has a very open and fluid view of sexuality (Ballard-Reisch & Kline, 2016). Not confined to heterosexual norms, members of the LGBTQ community possess ambiguous "individual definitions" (Rubinsky & Cooke-Jackson, 2017, p. 215) of sexuality. These personal definitions of sexuality can vary within the LGBTQ community based on lived experiences (Rubinsky & Cooke-Jackson, 2017). Compton and Dougherty (2017) explain that LGBTQ individuals are finding more opportunities to "openly communicate about their sexuality" (p. 876). These gay-friendly experiences are pushing LGBTQ individuals to "communicatively construct and negotiate their sexual identity in uncertain and ambiguous terms" (p. 876) while trying not to yield to heteronormativity.

Although the freedom is growing for individuals to define their own sexuality, members of the LGBTQ community are still facing different forms of oppression. Ran (2017) analyzed blogs of gay men in China and found that the Chinese culture is more oppressive than the modern Western culture. Even in an online environment that holds more privacy, gay men around the world still face a struggle with coming out. Despite feeling a contradiction about their sexual orientation, Ran (2017) noted that the LGBTQ community has adopted the term 'pride' as a way to "show pride" and "happily embrace" (p. 89) their identity. Within this community, there are individuals who feel a deeper conflict with their identity, considering themselves to be a queer Christian, meaning both LGBTQ and Christian.

Trammell (2015) researched gay Christian testimonies from the magazine, *Christianity Today*. Their research sought out what communicative strategies were used by self-identifying gay Christians in order to negotiate their conflicting identities. Trammell (2015) found that *Christianity Today* encouraged "homosexual Christians to define their sexualities and life experiences on their own terms rather than succumb to heteronormative conceptualizations of what it means to be gay and religious" (Trammell, 2015, p. 13). In addition, the magazine encouraged individuals to continue to engage in discussion on sexuality with their churches. Gardner's (2017) research focused on college students who identified as both gay and Christian. Their interviews found that many students explained that "God *created* me this way" (Gardner, 2017, p. 32, italics in original). These students appealed to the labels that both supported and rejected traditional religious labels and desired for more support of queer Christian identities within evangelism. Adding to the research above, the present study focused on sexuality according to the queer Christian, in order to connect the messages these individuals receive from both their LGBTQ and Christian identities.

Christianity and Identity

Though rooted at its theological core, Christianity is a broad term that covers a multitude of religious beliefs, identities, and church denominations (Catedral, 2018). According to the Bible, members of the Christian faith are called to be "in the world, but not of the world" (Yip and Ainsworth, 2016, p. 448), meaning they are meant live amongst those with different beliefs, but not live according to their culture. Yip and Ainsworth (2016) argue that this type of Christianity is "ineffective" (p. 448), and that the most effective way of sharing the Gospel of Christ is to be "culturally relevant" (p. 448). Because of the diverse way of thinking, and for the purpose of this research, the term Christianity was allocated to describe the general beliefs within the Christian faith.

As recently as 2015, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) issued a declaration regarding their belief of same-sex marriages, stating that "in response to shifting societal trends, followers of Jesus should embrace his clear vision of marriage" (NAE, 2015, para. 2). The shifting societal trends noted in the quote above is in regard to the laws being passed by the U.S. Congress regarding same-sex marriage. The same declaration also encourages followers of Jesus to be "gracious and compassionate" (NAE, 2015, para. 6) towards those who do not hold the

same view of marriage. Although views of marriage are just one part of the church's teachings on sexuality, it was important to consider marriage under the realm of sexuality for the purpose of this study.

In a rhetorical analysis of scripture verses, Maddux (2001) looked at what the Bible actually says about non-heterosexual sexuality and why there is confusion within the church as to how it should be interpreted. Although the Bible is firm in many other subjects, explicit expression of queer sexuality is one of the most misunderstood and misused topics found in the holy scriptures (Maddux, 2001). This leaves many churches "to struggle with its denominational stance" (Maddux, 2001, p. 95) on same-sex marriage. In their findings, Maddux (2001) explained that, throughout time, there has not been a correct or clear interpretation of the Bible's scripture on same-sex attractions or marriages. Deeb-Sossa and Kane (2007) did research at their teaching institution and discovered that many students referred to the Bible for their reasoning behind being opposed to LGBTQ individuals. Furthermore, Terry (2015) analyzed the "I'm Sorry" campaign, in which many Christians blamed their churches for the reason they condemned LGBTQ sexuality. Aligned with the research above, this study sought out what messages were received by the LGBTQ about sexuality from their Christian faith.

In research done by Catedral (2018), interviews were conducted with individuals from two Christian organizations with different beliefs on sexuality and gender. The interviews showed that each interviewee had a view of sexuality that did not align with that of Christian figures. The misalignments "[obscure] some of the ways in which this alternative Christianity continues to exclude LGB+ Christians" (Catedral, 2018, p. 118). The confusing Biblical texts, along with differing denominational opinions on sexuality, can create a dissonance amongst Christians. Dissonance, often referred to as cognitive dissonance, can be defined as "psychological discomfort" and a "disagreeing conflict" (Jean Tsang, 2019, p. 395). Warner-Garcia (2016) found that discussion regarding sexuality in the church can lead to "new questions, insights, and revisions to both personal and denominational beliefs about sexuality" (p. 144). Considering that the topic of sexuality is still under question in many Christian circles, answers provided by participants in this study implicated resolutions to the questions revolving around queer Christianity.

Co-Cultural Theory

Founded by Mark Orbe (1998), the co-cultural theory fits into the interpretive and critical paradigm within the critical and phenomenological tradition (Orbe, 1998). The co-cultural theory was created as a way to define the communication between two groups: the dominant group and the marginalized or co-cultural group (Orbe, 1998). The theory primarily focuses on how these two groups communicate with each other; however, it focuses on communication within each group as well. A dominant group is any collection of people, places, things, or ideas that are considered to hold power over another cultural group (Orbe, 1998). The co-cultural group is the collection of people, places, things, or ideas that are considered secondary or marginalized and hold less power than another cultural group (Orbe, 1998). For the purpose of this research, Christianity was considered the dominant group due to its size and ability to marginalize other groups, and the LGBTQ community was considered the co-cultural group.

Furthermore, the co-cultural theory helped explain the communication orientation of the LGBTQ community. The communication orientation is a combination of the co-cultural group members' preferred outcome and the communication approach within a specific exchange with the dominant group (Orbe, 1998). Research about the communication orientation is important to explore in order to best understand the relationship between the dominant and co-cultural group (Orbe, 1998). For this study, exploring the communication orientation of the LGBTQ community illustrated their relationship with the Christian faith. Illustrating the relationship between these two cultures provided answers to the research questions posed in this study.

In each communication exchange, an individual may have different goals or preferred outcomes. The co-cultural theory lists the preferred outcomes as assimilation, accommodation, and separation (Orbe, 1998). When an individual from the LGBTQ community prefers to separate from the Christian faith, it means that they want to dissociate with the Christian church and would not want to be affiliated with Christianity in any way. The theory explains that if the individual from the LGBTQ community prefers to assimilate with their Christian faith, they are essentially denying their co-cultural identity to identify with the dominant group (Orbe, 1998). By assimilating, the individuals can often lose part of or all of their co-cultural identity in order to fit in (Orbe, 1998). However, if the individual from the co-cultural group prefers to accommodate their identity with the dominant group, they would be looking for ways to advocate for both groups. Through accommodation, the LGBTQ individual can keep most, if not all, of their own identities and values, and work toward creating a space for others to do so as well within the Christian faith.

The theory also states three avenues to accomplish these preferred outcomes, referred to as the communication approach (Orbe, 1998). A non-assertive approach correlates with passively assimilating, accommodating, or separating (Orbe, 1998). By acting passively, a co-cultural member avoids any conflict with the dominant group. In contrast, an assertive approach means the co-cultural group takes more action in order to reach the desired outcome

(Castle Bell, et al., 2015). Through assertive approaches, co-cultural members will advocate for their needs while still considering the needs of the dominant group. Lastly, an aggressive approach means putting one's need over the other's (Castle Bell, et al., 2015). When a co-cultural member acts aggressively in their communication approach, they influentially attempt to create change for future communication with the dominant group.

In all of these approaches, non-assertive, assertive, and aggressive, the co-cultural group member attempts to achieve their preferred outcome for the communication exchange. A combination of the preferred outcome and the communication approach produce the communication orientation (Orbe, 1998). Studying the communication between the LGBTQ and Christian communities through the lens of the co-cultural theory led to specifying what the communication orientation is between these two cultural groups. Next, a review of literature brings understanding to the differing views of sexuality between the two communities.

Sexuality

In general, sexuality is not a topic that many people clearly understand (Gardner, 2017). Many members of the LGBTQ community still feel as though they themselves are misunderstood (Rubinsky & Cooke-Jackson, 2017). Until recently, sexuality has been defined by a dichotomous male-female relationship, and while new language on sexuality is inclusive, it is still "fluid and expansive" (Ballard-Reisch & Kline, 2016, p. 10). Ballard-Reisch and Kline (2016) go on to explain that the change in definition around sexuality is an attempt to "fully reflect the diversity of lived experience" (p. 10). Not only has the definition of sexuality changed for the present world, but it has changed "how people understand themselves and one another" (Compton & Dougherty, 2017, p. 874). Compton and Dougherty (2017) further elaborate that sexuality is "constructed" (p. 875) and that the "discourse both works to regulate a social hierarchy of what is perceived as appropriate or inappropriate in terms of sexual acts and sexual identities" (p. 875). This idea is what has led to division between the two cultures discussed in this study.

Chávez (2004) analyzed Soulforce, an organization heavily involved in the inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in society and in Christian churches. This research found that most Christian churches would remain firm that sexuality is a biological fact. Nevertheless, many churches and religious organizations are redefining sexuality as a choice (Chávez, 2004). In accordance with the research above, the aspects of sexuality found in this study are gender identity, gender expression, physical attraction, and marriage. Because definitions of sexuality vary among denominations of the Christian church (Catedral, 2018) and among members of the LGBTQ community (Rubinsky & Cooke-Jackson, 2017), this research also relied upon the definitions of sexuality presented by individuals involved in the interviews.

Research Questions

Researchers have long struggled finding answers as to what the Bible explicitly says about LGBTQ sexuality. Maddux (2001) discovered the confusion regarding biblical interpretation of sexuality lies within differences in language and denominations, while Deeb-Sossa and Kane (2007) proclaimed that many students still hold the Bible accountable for their homophobic beliefs. The lack of clarity surrounding queer Christian sexuality made way for the first research question:

RQ1: What messages about sexuality do members of the LGBTQ community report about their Christian faith?

Terry (2015) explains that the "attempt to build bridges between the Christian and LGBT communities is no small feat because LGBT populations have historically been subject to intense critique by the conservative, Evangelical Christians" (p. 299). However, the type of communication outlined in the co-cultural theory illustrates the importance of the responses of the co-cultural group when communicating with the dominant group. Therefore, the second research question was as follows:

RQ2: What communication strategies do LGBTQ individuals employ as a result of this messaging?

METHODS

For the purpose of this research, qualitative methods were selected. Qualitative methods fall into the interpretive paradigm, meaning that research should be inductive and subjective (Nowak & Haynes, 2018). In qualitative research, and in this study, it was important that the research was done with no assumptions in order to grant the participants full authority to share their genuine experiences. Qualitative research has long since differed from quantitative research in that researchers seek more of a "quality" in their data as opposed to a "quantity" of data (Gumpert, 2007), meaning in qualitative research, the number of data is not as important as the quality of the content

from the data. Although a good sample size is required for a reasonable argument to be made, a qualitative method was chosen in this study with more focus of receiving descriptive data and less focus on numerical values.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study. By conducting qualitative, semi-structured interviews, participants helped guide the conversation through sharing how certain experiences influenced their lives, thoughts, and interactions with others (Nowak & Haynes, 2018). Semi-structured interviews are in-depth in nature, meaning that participants produce "a more detailed, rich understanding of the topic of interest" (Public Health Action Support Team, n.d., para. 5). Therefore, for the purpose of gaining descriptive answers from participants in this study, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format.

Participants

Fifteen participants were recruited in order to satisfy interview requirements. Participants selected were 18 years and older who currently or previously had identified as both LGBTQ and Christian. The age of participants ranged between 19 and 28 years old; the average age was 23 years old. The participants were chosen through personal networking and a snowballing method. Snowballing is a method where research participants nominate other individuals who might be interested in being involved with the study (Hopmann, 2012). Being a member of a Christian community and being connected to individuals in the LGBTQ community presented the opportunity to reach out to potential participants and ask of their interest in being part of this study. In addition, each participant was asked if they would know of anyone else who might want to participate in the study.

Procedure

Upon IRB approval, the researcher recruited participants and scheduled interviews. Interviews were conducted in various formats, 7 via zoom, 5 in person, and 3 via phone. The interview questions included 17 main questions that allowed for follow-up questions in order to gain further information. See the Appendix for the interview questions.

Interviews lasted between 30-90 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed afterwards. For confidentiality purposes, any identifying information of the participants were altered or removed, and pseudonyms were implemented where necessary. Audio recordings, transcripts, and data were kept on a secured laptop at all times. After the research is completed, the audio recording, transcripts, and data were deleted.

Data analysis

For this research, a thematic analysis was conducted on the interviews after a transcript was created. Scharp and Sanders (2019) explain that a thematic analysis is a qualitative method that analyzes, describes, and connects similarities between data, which are also known as themes. A thematic analysis of the interviews from this study provided themes and connections from the communicative relationship that members of the LGBTQ community had with their Christian faith.

RESULTS

Although every response was unique, the results from the data collection showed common threads throughout that developed into a common story. The fives themes found from RQ1 summed up the messages that many LGBTQ individuals heard regarding faith and sexuality: Keep it to Yourself, The Bible Can't Be Wrong, Be Who You Are, Strings Attached, and Are You Christian? The four themes found from RQ2 showed the many responses to these messages: Who, What, How Am I?, Be A Pillar in the Church, Hide from Church, and Shining My Light. These themes are explored in depth below.

RQ1: What messages about sexuality do members of the LGBTQ community report about their Christian faith?

The purpose of RQ1 was to identify specific messages that members of the LGBTQ community heard regarding sexuality from their Christian faith. Five themes emerged throughout the process and each is described below. Every participant had a unique story that played into the development of each theme.

Keep it to Yourself. This theme represents the messages that explicitly or implicitly alluded that sexuality, and specifically LGBTQ sexuality, should not be talked about. When asked about what specific messages were heard about faith and sexuality from their family, Owen, responded, "sometimes they were connected and sometimes they weren't." He went on to add that "there wasn't a whole lot of explicit discussions around [sexuality], 'what does this mean? Or what does the Bible say about this?'…it became something that was definitely taboo." Several other participants shared the message that it was a taboo topic. For instance, Gideon explained that the HIV/AIDS crisis in

1994 made his church "very afraid to say anything affirming about homosexuality," which made conversations about homosexuality with his family "extremely condemning, extremely taboo."

One participant, Will, was okay with the church not teaching about sexuality because it was "not their job to be teaching sexuality, regardless of if it is pro LGBTQ or Anti." Most participants, however, shared how the lack of discussion and acknowledgement of queer sexuality sent a stronger message than discussing it. For some, like Matt and Bri, silence on the topic meant internalizing the message that their sexuality was not something to be talked about; it told them that they too should ignore that part of their identity. Another participant, Trevor, added to this thought by remembering how many people would tell him "oh you're gay, that's fine because that means you're just going to live out a single life." Not a single participant appreciated or related with this message of lifelong celibacy and singleness, but, because it was not talked about, it seemed to be the only option they were given if they wanted to remain in the church. For as many participants who were displeased that their families or churches did not talk about sexuality, more stated that when it was talked about, it was not necessarily in a positive light. Most commonly, participants referenced the Bible when noting negative messages about their sexuality.

The Bible Can't Be Wrong. This theme represents the messages where faith and sexuality overlapped. Most of the participants disclosed hearing something along the lines of "homosexuality is a sin," "gay people go to hell," or "God didn't intend for gay marriages or approve of gay people." Sometimes these messages were given by Christians that they did not know well, but sometimes they were given by family members or friends close to them. London recalled many negative conversations about faith and sexuality with her parents and close friends. In one encounter she was told "to get her head on straight" and in another she was told "do whatever you want, but here's what the Bible says against it and if you do that, you're going to go to hell." These messages were often internalized as "I am sinful just being who I am," "I am going to hell," and "God does not love me."

Often times, the Bible was used to explain away LGBTQ sexuality. After hearing the messages above, participants would then often hear "because the Bible says so." The most quoted Bible verse by participants was from Leviticus 20:13 (ESV) which says, "if a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them." Those who came out as queer Christians were often rebuked with this verse in the short phrase "man shall not lie with man." Not surprisingly, those same participants who shared this verse also found, through personal research or through other Christians, that many translations of this verse were talking about pedophilia. Translations can vary greatly amongst different denominations, as many participants noted, and these differences not only cause confusion, but also cause hurt because of reasons like this.

Many other participants, particularly those from Catholic backgrounds, said that the Bible was not necessarily the end all be all, but rather is was on the basis of the Pope. "If the pope would say something, that was the law," stated Chris, who grew up Catholic and began attending Evangelical

Chris, a participant who grew up Catholic and began going to churches in the Evangelical Christian denomination in college, shared that Rachel shared how much more liberal and progressive the current Pope, Pope Francis, had been, especially in regard to queer sexuality. Less than a week after Rachel's interview, another participant, Trevor, noted that Pope Francis had taken a step back from his previous stance and became less affirming of queer marriages.

There were plenty of negative messages to be heard when it came to Church teachings on sexuality. When churches did talk about sexuality, it was most often aimed at straight individuals. Messages like "marriage is between one man and one woman," and "sex is good, but only in the right context, such as in marriage" were most commonly preached. While some, like Iris and Chris, still agree with the sentiment that abstinence of sex until marriage is good, they were painfully aware that their potential for marriage was significantly less because of their faith and sexuality. Thankfully not every participant experienced these negative messages in the same way, and they were able to share positive messages.

Be Who You Are. This theme represents the positive messages heard about faith and sexuality. Out of the 15 participants, only a couple remembered ever hearing positive message about their sexuality. In fact, only Angel was confidently able to say, "the idea of the Bible saying it's a sin to be queer never came home for my family, and it was never used against me." A few others, like Holly and Trevor, never recalled their family or their close friends sharing anything negative about sexuality with them. Another participant, Owen, shared that he was told how valuable his story was and that God could use it to serve other people like himself. And Derek even shared that he was reminded of what the Bible says of how God loves everyone, and that God forgives all sins.

Other positive messages stemmed from the idea of romantic relationships. After he left the church and stopped identifying as a Christian, Parker remembers the strong virtues about sacrificial love and dedication that he learned from the church. Both Angel and Victor recalled positive conversations with their moms after coming out. Victor's mom asked "why wouldn't you want to be in a relationship? You should just be happy," and Angel's mom excitedly shared "hell yeah! Date a girl, smooch a lesbian, I'm here for it!"

While these positive messages were few and far between, each participant was able to share that they had at least one other person from whom they could find support. Occasionally, though, these positive messages looked good on the outside and yet, at the core, there were some strings attached.

Strings Attached. This theme represents the messages heard where there was a give and a take. Many times, the positive messages sounded too good to be true. Owen testified that he had many supportive friends in college who invested in him "as long as I wasn't doing the thing," meaning having sex with men. Bri described it well, saying that these messages were similar to "God loves you, but...," "God loves everyone, except…," or "God created you perfect, with an Asterix." Being a part of that Asterix, Bri explained, was simply "not a good feeling." Victor and Rachel shared similar messages. Rachel recalled several conversations where a trusted Christian friend was more concerned about their theology than they were about their mental health. Victor noted that many Christians are more concerned about his sexuality rather than his understanding of God's love.

In a similar sense, Matt and Trevor brought up the idea of the Side-A and Side-B Christian. As Matt described, "Side-A are Christians who believe gay people can get married in the church. Side B are Christians who believe gay people can exist within the church, but never marry." Though not stated directly, all participants were seeking Side-A Christians, but all participants were met with Side-B Christians for most of their life. The struggle in that, as Matt later noted, was that Side-B Christians are the more theologically correct group, but Side-A Christians are the more accepting and relationally healthier individuals. All of the messages above led to one common theme that left individuals needing to respond to the question: are you Christian?

Are You Christian? This theme represents the messages that explicitly or implicitly asked the question: are you Christian? The messages usually fell along the lines of "you can be queer, but not Christian." Most of the time, these messages were heard after participants reported coming out. One participant, Rachel, used to identify as "same-sex attracted," but then related more with "bi-sexual." When discussing this with someone in her church, Rachel recalled being asked "why do you call yourself bisexual?" She went on to add that it felt like they were asking "aren't you a Christian?" Some participants even remembered being told that other people could be queer, but Christians could not be.

Over half of the participants explained that, among all of the positive or negative remarks about their sexuality, the underlying message that they heard was that you could only be one or the other; you are either queer or you are a Christian. Matt, a participant who no longer identifies as a Christian, referenced Matthew chapter 6 when stating "you can either serve your sexuality or you can serve God." Other participants, like Iris, noted that growing up in a church-going family meant that you could be gay, so long as you didn't "do gay things." Even in LGBTQ accepting churches, this message was received by participants. Trevor shared that although his church would "hold space for queer people," he was frustrated because it was "just not true." This, of course, left many participants feeling like they could not be fully themselves.

All of the above messages were reported by participants regarding their sexuality. Whether positive or negative, each participant went through many stages to get to where they are at now. RQ2 looked at how these individuals responded to these messages.

RQ2: What communication strategies do LGBTQ individuals employ as a result of this messaging?

The purpose of RQ2 was to examine the ways in which these individuals responded to messages about faith and sexuality. Four themes emerged and are discussed below. In light of the themes found in RQ1, there seemed to be a story that developed in the themes identified from the data collected of RQ2. Not every participant responded to the messages in the same way, but each story connected to a theme in some way.

Who, What, How Am I? This theme represents the communication strategy of asking questions. The final theme from RQ1 left off with these individuals being asked whether they could be fully themselves and still be a Christian. Nearly all participants explained that they asked similar questions to the ones indicated below.

Most participants, including Iris, were confused and frustrated and asked questions like "is it okay that I feel these things? Even if I struggle with it, is it okay?" These questions were much more introspective about their own attractions and personal identities. Several, like Rachel and Matt, began with questions like these about their

sexuality, but eventually began having questions aimed at God or at their theology, leading to a faith-deconstruction of sorts. Inquisitions like "what the heck God?" or "what the fuck?" were usually followed by "I'm questioning you now, because I'm so confused," and "why are you making me go through this?" Still, some aimed their questions at other people. Bri, for instance, grew up in a small rural community, where she had never met an openly gay person, and no one was very affirming of LGBTQ people. When she did meet LGBTQ affirming people, she would "ask a lot of questions…just to see what it was all about and what their thoughts were that were different than my parents." These questions of who they were, what they believed, and how they were going to belong in this world, led these individuals to respond in many ways, making way for the following themes.

Be A Pillar in the Church. This theme represents the strategy of getting connected to a church and/or remaining in the church. Though not true of every participant, many started their journey here. Some participants showed off their faith-related tattoos. Several, including Parker and Victor, grew up in Catholic church-going families, but began attending more Evangelical or non-denominational based churches as they grew older. Both grew deeper in their faith in this way and remained close to their faith community for a while. A few participants noted working for their church or being involved in church-related events during this stage of life. A handful of others, including Rachel and Trevor, explained that they did research about faith and the LGBTQ community, in hopes of finding a solution to mend the two communities. A couple participants shared that they would blend in and use "Christian-ese," which often included identifying as straight, identifying as Christian, and shamed LGBTQ sexuality. Still, these participants felt they needed to go to church for nothing more than "they had no other option." Others, who had positive experiences in the church, such as Angel and Derek, noted that they would attempt to share their positive queer and faith related experiences with others. Often times, those attempts were met with negative feedback.

Many participants had positive, non-faith related responses to the messages they heard. Some participants talked about how they stopped viewing porn or masturbating and some began taking medications for things like anxiety and depression. After a review of this theme, however, one of the most common response of any that were given throughout the interview process was that individuals became more knowledgeable about their sexuality. A few noted that it did not necessarily mean they were more confident or comfortable, but almost all of these individuals were aware that they knew more about sexuality, specifically their own, than most people did.

Owen opened up and shared that the negative talk around his sexuality "led to a lot of self-loathing and a lot of fear of myself," and he said later "honestly I feel confident talking about this because I've spent so much time working on it but it created emotional and psychological wounds that have taken years to heal." A few others, like Derek and Victor, went on the say that they began to view the struggles with their sexuality in a positive light. By being more open or vocal about their sexuality and their Christian beliefs, they were able to relate with and help those who had similar life experiences.

Still, some noted that they grew closer to God because of the negative messages. Matt and Owen both talked about how God was the only person they felt they could talk to during their hard times in life. While both found comfort in those moments, Matt went on to say that conversations about faith and sexuality "really pushed me close to God, so that I could really trying to understand God's perspective, God's answer, what God's point of view would have been," but ultimately he felt this was not a healthy relationship. He added that he eventually accepted that there was not a place of queer Christians in the church and thus did not feel like his relationship with God, or the church, was healthy anymore.

While Matt was clear in noting that this was not his only reason for leaving the church, many participants did share that they left the church or their faith because of similar reasons. A handful of participants still find themselves involved in the church in some way, but many did not remain part of the church for long. For some participants, the next theme signified a second response to the messages they heard. For some, the next theme was their first response.

Hide from Church. This theme represents the response by participants to stop going to church or stop identifying with Christians who shared messages like the ones given above. Some participants distinguished that they stopped going to church but still considered themselves a part of the Christian faith. Others, like Gideon and Parker, solely stopped identifying as Christian at all. A few others, including Matt, Trevor, and Rachel, used the term 'deconstruction' when discussing their departure from the church and described the deconstruction of their faith as "an incredibly painful process," "confusing," and, in some ways, "freeing."

Another participant, Will, noted that the negative messages found in RQ1 caused them to become very skeptical of organized religion. Other participants agreed with Will, saying that they also stopped trying to understand the Bible or follow anything in the Bible. Will continued this thought by saying "I don't rely on [the Bible] for support, I

don't go to it in times of trouble. It's just not something that I feel is bringing anything good into my life and previously has been traumatizing during my childhood." A small sample expressed that they began looking into or practicing other religions, such as Buddhism, but more participants shared that they do not practice any sort of religion anymore.

Furthermore, some participants acknowledged that they just became more nervous around Christians. London cited that this was because of the backlash that she has received and the fact that "it's very hard to find people who I don't get ridiculed for [my sexuality] in or out of the religion." Almost half of the participants stated that they stopped being friends with or associating with people who agreed with the negative messages about faith and sexuality. While positive in nature for them, several remarked that it was of course hard to lose friends or family that they had once been so close with.

For some, their response to the messages they heard meant they changed how they dressed or how they acted. For better or for worse, many began dressing more how they wanted to, such as wearing nail polish or flannel shirts, or they began dressing to "blend in." Several brought up the idea of becoming more subdued or reserved with their speech and their actions. Unfortunately, many also claimed they denied their sexual identity, whether in front of others or within themselves. Some merely thought about their sexuality less, but other participants used terms such as "numbing," "freezing," and "cognitive dissonance" to describe some of these feelings. A few participants even reported having anxiety and becoming depressed because of these messages.

Many participants still find themselves separated from their faith identity or their sexuality to some degree. One way or another, each individual has made their way, or are making their way, to being fully themselves, which was the last theme found from the analysis of the data.

Shining My Light. This theme represents the responses to the messages that left individuals feeling empowered and able to be themselves. Though not true of every participant, many have gotten to a place with their faith and sexuality where they can be fully themselves and, in a sense, shine their light. Some are at a stage where they are just accepting their sexuality and becoming comfortable with it. Rachel said they are "defrosting" when it comes to the acknowledgment of their sexuality and Bri explained they are "starting to come to terms" with their sexuality and "learning how to integrate that into part of who I am rather than keeping it at a distance." For many, like Holly and London, this meant feeling comfortable enough to come out to their family, friends, and sometimes strangers. Holly was also one of the few individuals who felt like they never had to change who they were and coming out was merely a chance for them to talk more openly about sexuality. Most participants shared similar experiences of being more comfortable with talking about sexuality. Several participants, like Derek, expressed that they began to talk about their sexuality with Christians as a learning opportunity for them to understand what it is all about.

For some, comfortability looks like having more control of how they identify and how they portray themselves. Angel and London both went through the process of changing their name to fit who they truly are. Others stopped using terms like "same-sex attracted" or "attracted to guys and girls" and began using terms that fit themselves, such as gay, bi, queer, asexual, or more simply, "I like humans." More than that, most participants shared that they felt they had more control over who they talked to about their sexuality and how in depth they discuss it with them. For the participants, it created a sense that they could be who they wanted and not be under the control of society.

All in all, not every individual provided messages that fit into each theme perfectly. And not every theme matched the feelings of each individual perfectly. But, as the research suggests, these individuals are not worried about not fitting perfectly; they are more focused on being themselves, perfectly. What was found in the data analysis shows a clear understanding of how the co-cultural theory works and plays into this research, as described below.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to use elements from the co-cultural theory to help make sense of the relationship, specifically the communicative relationship, between two cultural groups: the LGBTQ community and the Christian faith. This section will seek to make known, bring understanding to, and inspire action for the effects of the messages received by the participants and their responses. As stated earlier, the themes found from RQ1 and RQ2 developed into a similar story of processing responses received about sexuality and Christianity and what participants did about it. This section will first discuss some general findings, followed by the co-cultural theory within each research question, and will conclude with personal implications.

One of the first things noted in the interviews was that the term 'LGBTQ' did not really resonate with many individuals. Contrary to the terms used in this research and the research done by Rubinsky & Cooke-Jackson (2017), most participants referred to their sexuality as 'queer' and referred to the LGBTQ community as either the queer community or, simply, "the community." This seems to align with Ran's (2017) research on how the LGBTQ community reclaimed the term 'pride.' In the current study, individuals are reclaiming the term 'queer.'

RQ1: What messages about sexuality do members of the LGBTQ community report about their Christian faith?

The five themes of RQ1 were Keep it to Yourself, The Bible Can't Be Wrong, Be Who You Are, Strings Attached, and Are You Christian? The themes that developed through this research question showed that there was a strong relationship with the messaging and the response from the participants. One thing that became clear early on about the messages received was that most of them were negative. Only one participant was able to say that they grew up in a home that fully embraced faith and LGBTQ sexuality. These negative messages were not always explicit or stated directly to the individual. In fact, participants noted welcoming and accepting responses from parents or friends when they came out just as often as they noted negative responses. This finding supports Razzante and Orbe's (2018) discussion of Dominant Group Theory in which they acknowledge both overt and covert forms of cultural discrimination.

The more explicit messages, usually delivered by family or leaders in the church, came directly from the Bible, as was reported by Deeb-Sossa and Kane (2007). The passage from Leviticus chapter 20 was most commonly referenced by participants in regard to negative messages towards their sexuality from the Bible. Additionally, participants referenced the Old Testament most often when discussing the Bible, but rarely discussed the New Testament or specific verses from the New Testament. The participants that were more familiar with the Bible and the Christian church were also more aware that there were many translational differences which, as Maddux (2001) conveyed, causes confusion and unreliability in the scriptures. These negative, biblically-based passages relayed the message that God was loving to all people, except LGBTQ individuals. Implicit messages most commonly came in the form of silence. This research aligned with Maddux (2001) as well in that sexuality, let alone LGBTQ sexuality, was not talked about in faith or family settings, which meant something far greater for these individuals: this part of my identity is not to be talked about. Similarly, the lack of other LGBTQ individuals in their churches set these participants up for feelings of isolation and loneliness.

The positive messages, though few and far between, were relieving for the participants to share. For most, they did not hear positive messages about their sexuality until after leaving their faith or until attending a more accepting church. Most participants were acutely aware of which denominations were more accepting, or "progressive," and which were non-accepting, or "conservative." For a lot of participants, though, the positive messages were often met with skepticism. Because there were so few positive messages heard about sexuality, specifically LGBTQ sexuality, participants were happy to accept them but hesitant to believe them.

While the co-cultural theory focuses mostly on the communication from the co-cultural group, the Dominant Group Theory (DGT) helps explain the dominant group's role in the relationship. In short, the theory focuses on communication from the dominant group and how they oppress the cultural group, knowingly or not, by means of their cultural power (Razzante and Orbe, 2018). As stated previously, the data analysis for this research question seemed to prove the DGT correct. Time after time, members of churches were unaware of the effects their beliefs, actions, and words have on queer Christians and the LGBTQ community as a whole. Very few participants could identify specific accepting and supportive members of their church.

RQ2: What communication strategies do LGBTQ individuals employ as a result of this messaging?

Again, the four themes of RQ2 were Who, What, Wow Am I?, Be A Pillar in the Church, Hide from Church, and Shining My Light. The themes fell in line with the co-cultural theory to tell a story in common with most experiences shared. The co-cultural theory, outlined by Orbe (1998), expresses that there are generally three ways a co-cultural group will communicate with a dominant group (assimilating, accommodating, or separating) and three means to achieve that communication (assertively, aggressively, or non-assertively), forming a communication orientation. The first theme was Who, What, How Am I? and the internal or external questions asked by participants often led to their response to assimilate, accommodate, or separate. After a while, participants who were asking internal questions about who they were and what they believed tended to drift away from their faith. Similarly, participants who asked external questions towards other members of their faith began to separate due to the lack of conversation.

The second theme found, Be A Pillar in the Church, was an attempt to assimilate for some and an attempt to accommodate for others. For those assimilating, being a pillar in the church looked like going to church even

though they did not want to, calling themselves Christian even though they did not truly mean it, or some variation of "blending in." It also meant that they felt they had no power to change the narrative around faith and sexuality. Not once in the interview process did a participant disclose that they had no desire to change the messages about sexuality within Christianity; it was never a matter of if they wanted to, it was always a matter of if they had the power to. Most participants shared that they had no power to change the dominant culture and therefore assimilated.

For those accommodating, being a pillar in the church meant that they had a desire to make a change and they had a means by which to make those changes. Several participants noted being heavily involved with their church, some to the point of working at the church. Even still, these participants, unless going to an already progressive and LGBTQ accepting church, were not successful in their attempts to find common ground between their two cultural identities. Most participants started their journey within this theme. They either grew up assimilating in the church, then tried accommodating for both groups before separating from the church, or they started going to church attempting to accommodate for both groups and then moved to the next stage of the journey, which was usually some form of separation.

Hide from the Church, the second theme, was the theme that represented the individuals who separated from their church, faith, or religious identity. Each had a different reason, but all participants found themselves here at some point in time. Not every participant grew up in a church going family, but even those who became a Christian at an older time in life reported separating from the church soon after. Some participants stayed here for a little bit of time while some are still here today. Those who stayed here a short amount of time usually had a deconstruction or reconstruction of their faith and generally, when they began associating with a church again, they went to a church in a different denomination than the one they grew up in. For those who are still in the separation stage, most affirmed that they have no plans or desires to change that.

Finally, the third theme was Shining My Light. Participants aligning with this theme either found themselves accommodating or separating. For those accommodating, shining their light looked like being fully themselves while also being a part of a faith community. Although these participants did not feel like they had the power to change the whole of organized religion, they have begun by accommodating with those in their sphere of influence. For those separating, many participants shared that separating from their church or faith brought a lot of freedom and peace. These participants felt like they could finally be fully themselves and not be defined by any societal "box." Many noted that they feel like a more authentic version of themselves and some noted realizing how toxic their Christian community was growing up.

It is important to indicate the communication orientation of these interactions as well. For those assimilating, most were nonassertive in their approach and some were assertive. Notably, a few reported aggressively assimilating, meaning they themselves displayed messages of hate towards other members of the LGBTQ community. Those that accommodated mostly achieved this by non-assertively hoping for a change or assertively asking close family and friends to reshape their Christian beliefs towards the LGBTQ community. No participants disclosed aggressively trying to accommodate. Commonly, those that separated from the church did so either assertively or non-assertively. A few commented that they would consider achieving their separation aggressively, meaning being involved in protests and other things of that sort.

Considering the results of this research, there is a lot of work to be done. Bri's final comments reiterated that "I don't think people in the church understand the extent and the gravity of the pain that they have caused people." The findings in this research support Terry's (2015) comments that the mending of the relationship between the LGBTQ and Christian communities will take time and effort because of the negative messages from Christians. Iris's parting words were that "love is the answer and it's God. He is love…without love and grace, we are nothing." Although this research does not present solutions to problems indicated, the voices shared in this study are meant to incite a response. Derek's closing statement encouraged to "give people that are both gay and Christian a voice in the church."

The negative messages received about LGBTQ sexuality far outweighed the positive messages. The dilemma alluded to by the participants, explicitly or otherwise, was whether you can be queer and be Christian. Do you need to separate from one identity? Can you be both? If anything is clear after this research, it is that conversations need to happen about faith and sexuality. Consistent with Trammell's (2015) research, Gideon wishes that sexuality in the church "was a topic that people weren't so afraid to talk about." Silence speaks louder than words. There will not be a one-size-fits-all solution after this research, but there is a solution out there that needs to be sought out. Listen to the voices and stories shared in this research and understand that healing starts with small steps. As a final challenge, Matt gave this charge:

> Every individual has an impact factor and multiple individuals have a much higher impact factor. Getting an entire church to take part in something [like this study], getting a panel of gay Christians and gay non-Christians to speak about their experiences and their trauma and their joys and their good experiences I

think could be really meaningful to getting more Christians who have no idea what gay people go through with the church; could be really impactful, yet it also might not be. So, I think the challenge would be see to it that this research study changes something about you because you will have an impact in way or another.

The purpose of this study was to explore what messages regarding sexuality members of the LGBTQ community received from their Christian faith and how they responded to those messages. The results from the thematic analysis generally supported previous research in that negative messages about their sexuality were commonly heard. This also suggested to these individuals that need to choose one of their identities over the other. Participants responses to these messages varied, but each were somewhere along on their journey to being fully themselves. In all, every participant felt there was a divide between the LGBTQ community and the Christian faith, but none felt they had the power to change it. Then again, that was the purpose of this research – to share their voices and their experience and in that, they hold the power to create change.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The major limitation to this research was time. Due to time constraints, only 15 participants were interviewed, and the analysis of data was not as in-depth as desired. Had there been more time allotted for the research, analysis, and presentation of data, more implication could have been defined and a more in-depth study could have been produced.

Future research could look at different demographic information. This study focused on age, gender, sexual orientation, and religious identity of participants, but did not look at race, relational status, or location of participants. Knowledge of this demographic information could bring about a better understanding of the intersectionality of identities and how that influenced their responses to the research questions.

Furthermore, this study only focused on Evangelical sects of Christianity, with Catholicism being brought up by participants. Future research could look at the same research questions within other religions and faith identities as well as be compared to responses and experiences of queer Christians. Along that line, future research could use the Dominant Group Theory to better understand the role that the Christian faith plays in the relationship with members of the LGBTQ community.

Finally, future research could study specific queer identities and how they respond to messages about faith and sexuality. Are there similarities and differences in how different queer identities respond to these messages? How do queer Christians relate to and bond with others who have shared experiences with them? Other communication theories, such as the Relational Dialectics Theory, Communication Privacy Management Theory, and the Uncertainty Reduction Theory could provide more understanding to the research provided in this study.

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APPENDIX

1. Thanks for talking with me for my research. Before we get to the specific questions, I need to confirm some demographic information.
   a. name/spelling; b. age; c. gender; sexual orientation/preference; religious affiliation/identity
2. I want to make sure I understand how you define the terms I use in my research. Let's start with your definition or understanding of *sexuality*. What does that mean to you?
3. What is your comfort level with your sexuality today?
   a. do you freely talk about it with your network of friends?
   b. with members of the LGBTQ community?
   c. with your family?
4. Tell me about your background with your church and religious life.
   a. how was faith talked about in your family as you grew up?
   b. how was faith performed or practiced in your family?
5. How did you/your family understand the Bible's teachings on sexuality?
6. What were some specific messages you remember hearing about faith and sexuality by your family?
   a. by other church members?
   b. by leaders in your church?
7. How did these messages impact your relationship with others who felt different from you and your beliefs?
8. How did these messages impact your relationship with those who felt similar to you and your beliefs?
9. How did these messages affect your faith and your belief in God?
10. What, if any, tensions or internal conflicts did you experience about your faith and your sexuality when growing up (or in years past)?
11. What, if any, tensions or internal conflicts do you experience about your faith and your sexuality today?
12. In what ways (if any) has the Christian church's teachings on sexuality influenced the way that you express yourself or your personal identities?
    a. what verbal things do you do/notice?
    b. what nonverbal things do you do/notice?
13. How do you feel about the teaching or non-teaching of sexuality within a Christian setting (church, youth groups, religious organizations, etc.)?
14. What is your personal understanding today about the Bible, the church, and sexuality?
15. What is your relationship like today with the Christian church?
16. What differences, if any, do you notice in how you discuss sexuality with your church members vs members of the LGBTQ community?
17. Is there anything else you'd like to share about faith, sexuality, and Christianity?
18. Before we end, do you know of anyone else who might be interested in participating in this study?