Narratives in the American South: LGBTQ+ in the Bible Belt

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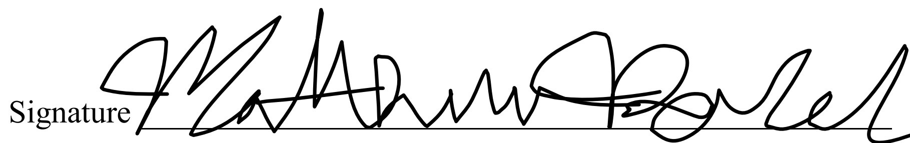

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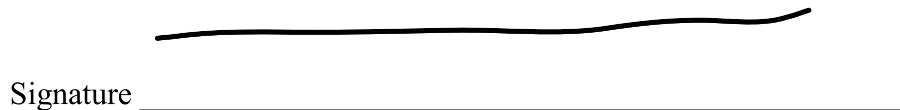

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Abstract

In this paper, I will be exploring narratives of self-disclosing LGBTQIA+ individuals who grew up in the South or have lived here an appropriate amount of time. Through a qualitative approach, I collect stories from individuals utilizing semi-formal and informal interviews as well as conducting field observations of perceived LGBTQ+ safe spaces. My research question (RQ) is "What expressive freedoms or hindrances exist within the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia" with four subsequent questions, "How expressive are individuals in urban centers?" to "How expressive are individuals in rural centers?" then, "Are there apparent absences of representation among racial groups?" and, "What role does religion play in the community's existence?" For this paper, the scope of my research is narrowed to focus on LGBTQ+ individuals in Georgia and how different areas of the state showcase acceptance or rejection of homosexuality from individual perspectives. I wanted to explore relationships over several quadrants: queerness, comfort, freedom, and religion. Through a thematic analysis of my interviews, I found that the five categories: identity, space, geography, family and church, and behavior – and the subcategories: gender expression and queer performance – all contribute to the queer experience in Georgia. By looking at self-identifying queer individuals in different areas around the state, I was able to surmise that the freedom of this group exists on the line of neutrality between good and bad; occasionally dipping in and out of both. One of the most revealing themes present is the idea that gender identity directly impacts comfort and perception of judgment internally and externally. Using the information uncovered here, I hope to re-contextualize dialogue on the perspective on The South's, specifically Georgia's, stance on LGBTQ+ individuals – not in a profound sense, but minor, conversational ways.

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Introduction

The “Good Ole South,” also referred to as The Bible Belt is a region that stretches from the east coast to the Midwest that is met with much criticism and skepticism. When a large group of people is subject to monolithic stereotypes, it is important to assess and challenge those views. Besides the Confederacy's long-lasting grasp on The South, another prominent feature is its religious nature. We think of Southern Baptists as a major combatant against queer identity What if a man wore heels in public, what if a woman wore men’s athletic attire? What would the reactions be to this disruption of heteronormative standards of attire placed on men and women? As time passed, this idea developed into a more general perspective on the LGBTQ+ experience. Especially as the idea developed and new perspectives were gained, my RQ grew to ask, “What expressive freedoms/hindrances exist within the LGBTQIA+ community in Georgia?” This was an important and general question that allowed my scope to be as general as it needed to be to get sufficient data.

Current literature specific to queer individuals in the south focuses on lived experience and all the factors that tie into that realm. As my research developed, I wanted to discover if a direct relationship existed between queer identity and religion in The South. When conducting the thematic analysis of the field notes and interviews, other, more prominent themes began to take shape.

Background

LGBTQ+ modern history in the United States seems to begin in the 1950s with the prominence of anti-homosexual ads then sparking with the Stonewall Riots in 1969. Queer identity is something that has been intertwined with human existence since the beginning of time and has been challenged seemingly recently in the scale of human history. In recent years, we see

a trend of queer groups taking back words like dyke, fag, queer, and more to reaffirm and embrace their identity. Throughout this paper, I will interchangeably use the terms ‘queer’ and ‘LGBTQ+’ as an identifier of the subject I focus on in this study. This general term, queer, describes non-cisgender and non-heterosexual individuals that can be used as an inclusive, alternative term to words like gay or LGBT (“Queer,” 2021).

What I want to look at here is where the RQ comes into play – what expressive freedoms/hindrances exist within the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia? LGBTQ+ rhetoric has become much more prominent in more recent years following the landmark Supreme Court decision in 2015’s *Obergefell v. Hodges* that ultimately ruled in favor of the expansion of freedoms allowing marriage equality and within all 50 states. Court cases in and after 2015 included: *Videckis v. Pepperdine Univ.* (2015), *Winstead v. Lafayette Cty. Bd. of Cty. Comm'rs* (2015), and *EEOC v. Scott Med. Health Ctr., P.C.* (2016) to name a few. A number of these cases highlighted sexual orientation discrimination based on hiring or client decisions.

The purpose of this study is to explore the idea that The South is conservative and anti-LGBT+. In media, it is not unusual to encounter a joke that claims just that – you go to The South as a queer individual, you better be careful. While this can be true in some areas, it is just as important to explore the possibility that many queer-identifying individuals' experiences here are not worse than heterosexual, cis individuals. At the basis of the proposed research questions, I want to identify themes to assess queer identity and comfort as they relate to living in The Bible Belt, specifically Georgia.

To tie the study back to a theoretical framework, I am going to use two theories, Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Proxemics (n.d.). SIT explores the cognitive aspect of intergroup and intragroup socialization of individuals. SIT looks at three components: social categorization,

social identification, and social comparison. Social categorization is how we make sense of our social world by organizing individuals into social groups. In this process, we tend to focus on the similarities of our in-groups and the differences between the out-groups. The second component is social identity and how we sort ourselves into groups and social comparison. In this study, social categorization is. Finally, social comparison is how we organize our groups and others in a hierarchal sense.

Proxemics is essentially the relationship between the geography of individuals and how geography relates to environmental and cultural factors ("Proxemics"). How we interact with things in our space or how things exist in our space are core concepts of this area of study. Queer geography is a subject of study that has persisted since the 1950s and 60s. Together, I intend to look at how being in the Bible Belt (proxemics) influences queer identity (SIT).

Literature Review

Historical Context

America has a recent but involved history with queer identity. As early as the 50s, grassroots movements began sprouting up in more liberal geographies. Even so, people attribute the events at Stonewall in the late 60s as the explosion that jumpstarted attention to LGBTQ+ civil rights. Far in-between and beyond, queer peoples are deeply intertwined in American history, from politics to businesses, key players are looking to influence other key players to make progressive decisions. In this section, sources will be intertwined to provide historical context chronologically.

Altman (1982) critically examines the role of LGB(TQ+) identities in recent events ranging from the 50s to the early 80s. In another source, we get a deeper look at the pre-Stonewall organization that laid the foundation for future LGBT(Q+) movements. Rimmerman

(2002) reports early events that will grow and become larger queer movements. The earliest being the Homophile Movement that had its start in 1951 and spanned to about 1970. This Los Angeles-rooted movement was founded in response to this idea that lesbians and gays were "perverts, psychopaths, deviates, and the like" (D'Emilio 1983, p. 53) (Rimmerman, 2002, p. 20). The organizers outlined four purposes for this movement: to unify isolated homosexuals, to educate all people that homosexual culture was just as un-harmful as other emerging minority cultures at the time such as "Negro, Mexican, and Jewish Peoples" (Rimmerman, 2002, p. 20), to lead by having the "more socially conscious homosexuals provide leadership to the whole mass of social deviates" (Rimmerman, 2002, p. 21), and to assist victimized individuals to recover from the oppression placed on them (Adam 1995, p. 68).

Interestingly, the purpose that outlines the goal 'to lead,' is phrased in such a way that it becomes a distancing statement; we are not them, they are bad we are good. In 1969, just before Stonewall, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was founded on the principle that society needed to be remade as opposed to reformed. Tied to the violence at Stonewall, the GLF was increasingly viewed as radical and eventually collapsed due to disagreements. From this, the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) was formed with a mission to meaningfully reform societal views but had the task of encouraging gays and lesbians to organize politically and work together to force positive legislative change. This organization eventually becomes the still-present Gay and Lesbian Activists Alliance.

Lesbian-feminist, Joan Nestle, wrote, "We lesbians from the 1950s made a mistake in the early 1970s: we allowed our lives to be trivialized and reinterpreted by feminists who did not share our culture" (Altman, 1982, p. 74). This comes as no surprise due to early feminist movements having shown to be monolithic as they serve the socially accepted groups, I.e.,

heterosexual white women. In a time where queer individuals were beginning to strongly enter public discourse, in 1971 the National Organization for Women (NOW) declared that lesbians are to be included in feminism discussion. However, during this decade, the lesbian identity was dropped from the fight by mainstream feminist players.

Altman notes that the 80s marked a shift in the male display of homosexuality from effeminate styling to a “theatrically masculine appearance” (Altman, 1982, p. 1) such as denim and key rings. Popular culture at the time reflects this greatly. The Village People’s still controversial hit, YMCA features a group of men in semi-masculine fashion that includes costumes and denim. Additionally, Mr. T of the early 80s hit television series, *The A-Team,* often wore denim and a plethora of androgynous-coded jewelry; a style adopted by the heterosexual community and mainstream, heterosexual fashion in the 70s.

For the lesbian community, this early-80s consciousness shift in homosexuality came in the form of self-image as gender identity and expression were challenged as the feminist movement of the time allowed room for large numbers of women to be involved in sexual and emotional relationships with other women. For both men and women, this era saw a limited abandonment in the adoption of characteristics of the opposite sex in acts of gender expression. Gay and lesbian groups were becoming less rejecting of their gender identity and more comfortable with their sexuality; a time of release in the release of internalized sexual norms and the rebellion against those identifying markers. Altman describes that the rejection of the homosexual identity began to lessen around this time, and, similarly in a quote from a book entitled, “The New Eroticism: Theories, Vogues and Canons” it is stated, “Pity, just when middle America finally discovered the homosexual, he died” (Burke, 1970, p. 74). This quote almost

directly illustrates this revolution of gender expression from femininity or androgyny to the more masculine expression.

The swirls of change in 1980 birthed The Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF) which had become “an aggressive lobbying and education-based organization” (Rimmerman, 2002, p. 29) that sought to affect the national political and policy process. Throughout the decades, it had grown from its original place, and in 1991, it had a budget of $4.5 million following the 1987 March on Washington. In 1995, the HRC went through extensive changes: a name change, a new director, new headquarters in Washington, and a new website all to stay relevant and continue its mission.

As time progressed, the image of homosexuals as exclusively sexual beings begins to ravage public opinion with the frequent use of lesbianism in male-oriented pornography, and the press’s obsession with stories of homosexual child molesters plunged; both of which persist today. Altman illustrates this in chapter six, “Sexual Freedom and the End of Romance” (1982, p. 172). In the South, we can see the negative views of lesbians by looking at the public’s near disgust of Ma Rainey of Columbus, Georgia. Being a black woman in the South is difficult on its own, but to add insult to injury, Rainey was reportedly a lesbian who frequently indulged in orgies and other sexual acts with members of the same sex.

Two smaller groups in the 90s also found footing. The 1991 Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund’s goal was to elect openly lesbian and gay officials to all levels of government. This idea closely mimicked the GLAA’s goals but differentiates in method – while the GLVF sought election wins for legislative change, the GLAA lobbies legislative changes. Founded in 1993, the Log Cabin Republicans nationally represented lesbian and gay identifying Republicans with more than fifty chapters in the nation (Rimmerman, 2002, p. 37).

In another source closely related to this study, Watkins' (2017) collects, reviews, and updates prior research in this area. One of the pillars of this source is its deeply Southern idea of the four R's proposed by Howard: race, religion, rurality, and resilience (as cited in Watkins, 2017, p. 3). Race is a subject that has persisted throughout the South since the colonization of America. Watkins references another source stating that queer communities in Georgia are composed of different people; "critical heterogeneity" (Watkins, 2017, p. 3).

Religion's role comes in the wake of the 1980s AIDs crisis and higher agendas of anti-queer sentiments. A source states that "The loss of sissies" and the "knowledges they held" allowed for the integration and right-wing Christianity and the advent of a new kind of time (as cited in Watkins, 2017, p. 2). Rurality and resilience come in the form of erasure for queer communities. The example lent in this source looks at the replacement of queer spaces in Roanoke, Virginia before and around 1978. Gay bars and clubs were replaced with bars that did not cater to this minority. Watkins ties this concept of 'resilience' to gentrification and the urbanization and suburbanization of areas that erase minority-centered gathering spots.

Watkins discusses the history of Midtown in Atlanta, Georgia stating that it originally served to house and cloak ex-confederates and criminals. Eventually, this area became a highly desirable one, but as the rich and powerful moved from the area, it is noted that the "undesirable people" (Watkins, 2017, p. 6) moved in around the Piedmont Park area. Coincidentally or perhaps entirely on purpose, Piedmont Park hosts The South's Gay Pride Festival annually. This idea of a "gayborhood" (Watkins, 2017, p. 6) is introduced in the text. A study by Rosenthal from Georgia State University claimed that heterosexual people tend to attract to these areas because of their "perceptions of queer white communities as 'safe' and 'fun'" (as cited in

Watkins, 2017, p. 6). As we assume identities, we form our tribes and will often either live among them already or relocate to be near them because social identity plays a key role in geography and human movement.

Theoretical Foundation: Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a shared psychology and communication theory developed by psychologists Tajfel and Smith, a theory that seeks to explain our self-perception in a social context. Essentially, SIT describes how we evaluate our group identity in relation to others by sorting ourselves into in-groups and out-groups based on the presented identity.

In 1979, Tajfel and Turner of the University of Bristol published “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict” which lays the foundation for Social Identity Theory (SIT) as it is today. Tajfel and Turner defined two extremes of social behavior, social mobility versus social change (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 35). Social mobility that states that individuals may live under the assumption that society is fluid. Therefore, if we are unhappy with our social category, we can simply move to a different part of it or a different category altogether, interpersonal behavior. Alternatively, social change, at its core, is the individual belief that it may be impossible or at least very difficult to traverse society outside of individuals assigned groups; intergroup behavior. This concept is largely related to our concept of ‘in-groups’ versus ‘out-groups.’ The authors indicate that it is unlikely to find these extremes in pure forms (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 34) in the day-to-day, but they serve as templates when examining types of individual and group interactions.

In cases where individuals or key group members seek to practice stratification – boundary implementation, it appears that power is shifted away from social mobility and towards social change (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 35). In cases like belief systems or political views,

individuals may act less as an individual, but exhibit behavior that is more relevant to the group they belong to. Like the concept of groupthink, individuals become very immersed in the identity they have adopted as a part of their group; often referred to as a tribe.

In a 2018 study, Fujita, Harrigan, and Soutar analyzed the role social identity theory had in the relationship between a university's social media content and engagement. Noting that visual content is more impactful, the researchers also uncovered that most of the comments on the university's posts were tagged comments. People were tagging friends and former classmates to this temporary, virtual sub-space that was created specifically to coax a reaction from followers. They found that the users would come to create a shared space of understanding of the content presented (Fujita, Harrigan & Soutar, 2018, p. 66). As an overall contribution to SIT, the researchers posit that social media marketing finds great success in the theory's 'us' versus 'them' logic. By creating a shared space of familiarity, the "us", there is a form of a bond that is instantaneously created that, while not necessarily negative, the 'them' is left out. A safe space is therefore created to share common feelings.

Expanding on SIT, Bochatay et al uncover in-group inner workings. In their discussion, their results suggest that group membership is not assumed and kept, it is a complex, ongoing process that members must earn and maintain over time (Bochatay et al, 2019, p. 805). Due to this constant renewal process, issues may arise within one's in-group versus an out-group's influence. It is important to note that this renewal is not always issued by group opinion leaders, but by other members of the group, even new members. This friction of constant change and unchecked social power can easily lead to in-fighting, group dismantlement, and group partitioning. To exemplify this, think of the popular notion of a "black card;" one's blackness is held to the standards of other black individuals such as what literature or films are consumed.

Each member of this group will have an idea of what “it is to be” and will apply this to others. If others do not fit into that category, friction will occur as members will question the legitimacy of the standards and perhaps even the group itself.

Theoretical Foundation: Proxemics

Geography plays a key role in identity development, but for minority groups, identity development can be heavily influenced by location and density. For example, in America, we tend to think of West Coast communities like Los Angeles or San Francisco as more liberal or accepting of minority groups versus areas like rural Kentucky where individuals do not often encounter diversity. Proxemics studies the relationship between the use of space and nonverbal communication.

The beginning of the twenty-first century carried over many of the struggles and fights queer communities experienced in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Bell and Valentine (2005) provide a collection of researchers that symbiotically present a different aspect of queer identity in geography and space. Aspects like urban versus rural space are the most relevant here. In chapter ten, Knopp claims that cities provide the ability to be discreet that rural areas do not afford. Urban life can provide additional behaviors like voyeurism, exhibitionism, consumption, danger, power, navigation, etc. (2005, p. 151). This sentiment is common in the discussion on proxemics, especially in that of queer communities in history.

Chapter eleven examines lesbian communities in urban and social spaces. In a lot of areas, gay males received more attention as lesbian identities were trivialized under the feminist movements. One participant went as far as to disassociate with their lesbian identity in favor of their other identities (Rothenberg, 2005, pp. 172-173). Businesses can play a key role in the establishment of communities within communities. In the 1970s, Park Slope, New York, a

women's bookstore opened providing a 'women's community' that previously lacked. Some women reported relocating to this area partly due to the existence of a community they identified with (Rothenberg, 2005, p. 177). This directly ties to the role our identity and our membership play in our perception of space.

Moving away from the city, chapter thirteen investigates rural North Dakota and gay and lesbian communities. Women in a rural area, Minot, ND used small factions like softball and bowling league to seek same-sex relationships and men sought discreet, public meeting places (Kramer, 2005, p. 205). Kramer cites a 1981 study in which it was reported that rural women's newspaper 'lifestyle' pages, which included homosexuality among other women issues, engaged in more gatekeeping of information. This fact goes beyond sexual identity but bleeds into feminism and gender roles in a male-controlled society. Kramer also found that rural men had vastly incorrect ideas of what gay men presented as, some describing them all as effeminate transvestites who populated cities as immoral people and deviants.

In his 2010 work, "Space, Place, and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities" Johnston outlines the role of various elements of proxemics in identity development, preservation, and subscription. In chapter two, Johnston quotes, "[The Body] marks a boundary between the self and other" from both physiological and social standpoints" (Valentine, 2010, p. 15) (as cited in Johnston, 2010 p. 21). This means, our bodies exist in physical, social places, but only serve as a physical placeholder in social situations. Our mind and how we decide to present ourselves exist beyond that physical space.

The physiological and social standpoints lie at an intersection that exists between feminist and queer geographies, meaning that both groups have been victims of limitations in body politics. Sexed queer theories have surmised that "the dichotomies of man/woman [are]

problematic and unstable" (Browne, 2006, p. 121) (as cited in Johnston, 2010, p. 23). Referencing the research of Butler's 1990 work in *Gender Trouble*, and expanding on Browne's statement, Johnston summarizes gender expression as "something that we "do," and do recurrently" (2010, p. 24). In the same breath, this concept of being performative appears. As we encounter others, we alter our performance – how we present ourselves to certain people – to achieve a desired response based on our identity presentation. Butler further states that masculinity and femininity are not natural occurrences, rather, they are performances we create socially to appear as one of the two.

In chapter four, Johnston explains that communities exist as the homes, products, and genesis for social action. They tend to reflect and reinforce geographical-specific social relations. If a community is made of many like-minded individuals, the area tends to be reflective of this. Thinking of the often "high towns" that appear in cities around the world where the wealthy live, their homes, lawns, and streets tend to reflect their wealth. On the other end, lower-income communities tend to birth movements as they have fewer resources and need the most. These wealthy areas house people within their communities that may often feel as if they exist inside and outside of their community simultaneously due to communal desire for unity over differences. A byproduct of this desire for unity often is silencing and suppression of identities and beliefs that may be frictional to the group at large (Young, 1990, p. 302) (as cited in Johnston, 2010, p. 63). Communities tend to be established on the principle of excluding certain beliefs and practices. Additionally, different communities may have resulted from the migratory behavior of groups of people looking to live among like-minded people.

Chapter five explores the urban-sexuality relationship. "Cities are spaces that offer possibilities, but they are also spaces that produce tensions and conflicts" (Johnston, 2010, p. 80)

due to factors like proximity and density. One of the major areas of focus in proxemics looks at how living close together affects elements like identity and behavior. This concept is deeply illustrated by the beginnings of movements mentioned earlier, such as the Homophile Movement in Los Angeles, California, or the Stonewall Riots in Manhattan, New York. Both foundational movements began in dense, crowded cities. The chameleon ability that queer people can engage in within large cities is lent to this anonymity of space within space. If a society imposes norms of sexual identity and gender, often nonconformists can essentially hide among the dense population of people.

As earlier sources mentioned, capitalism saw the rise of many things, the production of popular spaces like cafes and boulevards, but also allowed space for queer spaces to exist (Johnston, 2010, p. 80) such as drag shows. Interestingly, Johnston ties homelessness in cityscapes to the disruption of queer culture. For example, there exists 'George Segal's Gay Liberation Monument' in Christopher Park, Greenwich Village, New York – the same community as the Stonewall Riots. The use of space here disrupts this seemingly queer-safe space as there are other park users and predominately homeless men (more so than homeless women) as homelessness in the area "disrupt and subvert norms associated with public and private boundaries" (pg. 85).

Rural geographies tend to cater to the heterosexual mold that chapter six explores. Social relations in many rural areas are often rooted in the unquestioned gender role dichotomy: males follow established male roles, females follow established female roles (Johnston, 2010, p. 96). With this exists the persistent expectation of masculinity, femininity, nuclear family roles, and the overarching subscription to heterosexuality. Much like discussed in chapter four of this text, these rural communities subscribe to an established set of beliefs and practices that are unlikely

to be challenged within the community itself. To challenge these practices, often, queer individuals may move away from home; generally, to urban areas.

Relevant to the Southern ideal, Johnston acknowledges the accepted "country girl" identity (2010, p. 97) as an appropriate template of femininity for rural women. This portrays the woman as submissive, non-emotional, and family-oriented. An appropriate illustrator of this concept would be FarmersOnly.com in which commercials generally, if not always, are racially homogenous. The commercials will feature a lonely farmer or two on a date with a "city-slicker" who does not understand the rural lifestyle, portraying the urban thinking as almost radical. Noticing the cultural friction, a friend would recommend the farmer uses this dating service to find a good girl who understands his or her lifestyle. At the end of the commercial, a large group of physically similar, attractive women appear and sing the service's jingle.

In a 2015 article, McCall and Singer review the proxemics of approach and avoidance in social situations. They state that "we tend to avoid people whom we evaluate negatively and approach people whom we evaluate positively" (p. 2). This research entailed gathering 56 participants to engage in virtual interactions with fair and unfair participants to gauge their level of approach. In one task, the real-life participant would always be participant B alongside auto-generated A and C participants in an economic activity. In this activity, participant A could choose to transfer money to participant B which would triple the money, then participant B could choose to keep the money or send some to participant C. Participants A and C would randomly be assigned the trait of fairness or unfairness when exchanging money as well. This fact alone saw results that showed that participant B would often punish the unfair participant more than the fair. One relevant find here is that participants often turned their backs to unfair players during social interactions with multiple people.

Though this study was conducted in a virtual environment, this lends a lot to how people engage people based on perceived unfairness. For example, looking at the negative treatment of homosexual males being bullied for being a “fag” or “sissy” (Sears, 2009, pg. 50) by heterosexuals, it is a possibility that these individuals will grow to punish heterosexuals because of their involvement in the group that was unfair to them. This may show in a homosexual male’s alteration of clothing, voice, or gate when in the presence of heterosexual males or even avoiding them altogether.

“Space matters. Space is alive, dynamic. Space is a medium of power” (Cram, 2019, p. 99) are the pillars on the rhetoric of space and place but, not when applied to queer communities. Cram criticizes that this concept was lost to queer communities in larger conversations. About orientation in space, Cram defines four pillars: First, positionality describes a human body within a space. This asks, how are we using the space? How much space are we actually using? Second, the term, turning, identifies the where, when, and how subjects turn when engaged meaning how we essentially move through spaces when called upon. Third, torque describes energies, forces, and space and time. Often in public spaces, people may remark that the ‘energy is off’ whether it is crowd nonverbals or environment lending to that. Lastly, impression creates a boundary between the physical body and the socialness of our minds. Beyond our physical bodies, how we exist in a given space leaves an impression on other people in our zone (Cram, 2019, p. 102).

Cram references Tongson’s *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* in which she defines the term “metronormative” (as cited in Cram, 2019, p. 103) referring to the migration of queer peoples to larger cities like Los Angeles or the Bay area. The existence of labeled “gay neighborhoods” and “gayborhoods” (Watkins, 2017, p. 6) such as Cherry Grove on Fire Island,

Provincetown, Key West, Russian River, and Palm Springs showed the path to improvements in social acceptance in the 1960s (Altman, 1982, pp. 74-79). In today's age of overdrive in reality television, we have seen shows focus on gay people in *Fire Island* on the LOGO Network.

Foundational Context: Identity

All social creatures possess identity, and these identities are usually always applied to us by others as well as ourselves. There are many aspects of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, and attitude. But some of our identity is shaped by our surroundings while some are molded by oppressive hands. To understand different aspects of identity, we will explore several sources that provide context to sexual identity.

In a 1993 book, Jung and Smith conceptualize and outline this concept of "heterosexism," a system of bias regarding sexual orientation that employs prejudice in favor of heterosexuals. Rather than being a term that describes the emotional fears, hatreds, physical reactions to homosexuality, Jung and Smith, instead, insist that it is heavily rooted in the "cognitive constellation of beliefs about human sexuality (1993, p. 13). A real example of our heterosexual catering system in America is the 1973 removal of homosexuality as an illness from The American Psychiatric Association.

Jung and Smith outline several costs to heterosexism. One is that there is the belief by heterosexual groups that homosexual acceptance will lead to undermining our traditional accepted idea of a nuclear family. This idea alone suggests that same-sex couples cannot serve as responsible caregivers. Another belief is that homosexuality serves to destabilize society. To combat that, governments that issue limits to homosexual behavior hold a deep-rooted belief that society must control a portion of behaviors of individuals within the society for the common good. An interesting double standard exists in this other cost of heterosexism: confusing the

youth. However, as youths become to understand their sexual differences, they experience debilitating confusion as to why they are different. At the same time, societies condemning homosexuality actively or subliminally disregard and condemn it (Jung & Smith, 1993, p. 97). A final but common cost of heterosexism is the belief that homosexuality is tied to pedophilia a common, but unrelated belief.

According to Katz & Keller, sexual identity is not so much black and white as it is a situational dimension of possibilities. When discussing measuring sexual identity, they stated that a majority of heterosexual-identifying young adults could often describe an instance in which they had engaged in same-sex relations (Katz & Keller, 2011, p. 27). The authors note that a lot of research on the topic of sexual identity is quantitative and tends to fall short of true representation. Data collection methods such as the Likert-type scale exist less as a scale and more as a system for categorization.

Categorizing sexuality is counterintuitive to this idea that sexuality is fluid and can change depending on situational attraction. Sexual identity presentation, for example, is more of a slider than identity itself. Depending on the other aspects of an individual's identity, they may choose to or not to reveal sexual identity due to disadvantageous elements of social interaction (Katz & Keller, 2011, p. 27). A key idea expressed in this chapter is that other identity groups tend to assume that a heterosexual individual knows that they are heterosexual and that they do not often question that. But research over the years says otherwise. A majority of men reported that they have questioned their sexuality at least once, for example.

De Ridder and Van Bauwel ask, “are queer teens able to tell their own intimate stories in social media places equal to their heterosexual peers” (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015, p. 790)? In this study that focuses on intimate storytelling of queer youth, the researchers pull together

focus groups to understand how queer stories are being transmitted to audiences and how the heterosexual-dominate audiences receive them. The researchers highlight that queer individuals tend to withhold their own identity at the cost of emotional labor. Queer youth often cited perceived authenticity deciding to engage or not engage their identity in complex, cultural social media platforms. Non-queer-specific social media communities tend to serve the cisgender, heterosexual communities as default while queer communities and discourse have to be built around those to even begin a conversation (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015, p. 790).

Foundational Context: Religion

Discourse about The South tends to be blanketed in with a few identifiers such as race and religion. American history tells us that some of the earliest colonizers that encroached on America were English Puritans who migrated from England to escape the religious pressure. These “pilgrims” laid the foundation for a lot of American traditions that persist today: Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, etc., whether or not those are actively practiced in the religious context is up to individuals. In this section, we will take a look at texts that investigate religion, homosexuality, and the connection that historically and currently exist between the two.

In a 1989 source, Hasbany looks at the relationship between homosexuality in the world and religion. Though an older text, as the debate of homosexuality in religion continue to rage, many of his points continue to their relevancy. In 1986, the Vatican categorized and condemned “the homosexual condition” as “objectively disordered” due to its nonprocreative nature, a common argument in the Christian narrative. He argues early in the text that churches are in a position in which they will need to respond to the “increasingly sophisticated and articulate” church groups who either have experiences homosexual tendencies or are accepting of them (Hasbany, 1989, p. 8). In the early 20th century, church people gradually moved away from

looking at homosexuality as a psychological sickness (the medical model) to viewing it more in an essentialist way. Meaning, the belief that, in children's early, developmental years, key events and behaviors lend to the permanent and impervious nature of homosexuality.

Jung and Smith's idea of heterocentrism also provides copious weight to the conflict of identity development and religion citing that six texts from the Bible that are often cited as anti-homosexual. These include one, Genesis 19: 1-29 which describes the unnatural lust of homosexuals that simultaneously overlooks the concepts of lust and rape that exist already in heterosexual contexts. Instead of condemning homosexuality, Jung and Smith posit that this book condemns sexual violence. Two, Leviticus 18:22 and three, Leviticus 20:13, both of which refer to certain sexual acts as detestable. Four, Corinthians 6: 9-11, a book that, through translations is believed to have been mistranslated. In 1522, Martin Luther translated "malakoi," soft men, to "weichlinge" meaning "weakling." Additionally, Philo, the first-century contemporary of Paul, used "malakoi" to refer to a man who remarried his first wife. All uses of these terms denote undesirable behavior (Jung & Smith, 1993, p. 75). Five, 1 Timothy 1: 8-11 which outlines the sins of man. Six, Romans 1: 18-32 similarly describes the descent of man into sin.

Jung and Smith also outline three Bible texts that traditionally promote heterocentrism. First, Genesis 1: 27-28 in which the God figure tells his male and female beings to "be fruitful and multiply" (Jung & Smith, 1993, p. 84). This cosigns the purpose of sexual acts between man and woman and does not acknowledge homosexual sexual acts. Second, Genesis 38: 1-11 describes procreation as a command from God, again, only acknowledging heterosexual sexual acts (Jung & Smith, 1993, p. 85). Third, Genesis 2: 18-25 expresses that human sexuality is for human enhancement further suggesting there is no purpose to homosexual sexual acts (Jung &

Smith, 1993, p. 86).

Within church groups around the world, some seek to use science to reinforce religious beliefs. In this source, Jones and Yarhouse define (and reject) three positions on the relationship between science and religion: First, 'perspectivalism' being the view that science and religion are two ways of knowing that support each other while acknowledging alternative and distinct vantage points of perspective of reality. As a rebuttal, the authors say that this is like people talking to each other, but both people have set ideas of their reality and therefore have no insight to understand alternate perspectives (Jones & Yarhouse, 2000, p. 14). Second, 'imperialism' is the perspective that science and religion are competitors vying for sole prominence within the same reality. This would be when a religious-oriented individual firmly believes that "the Bible dictates this" and when a science-oriented individual firmly believes that "Science proves this;" that this 'is as it is' and therefore cannot be that. Lastly, postmodern relativism combines and separates the prior two. In this instance, no dialogue occurs because of the belief that science and religion are vastly distant and cannot agree.

In another section, Jones and Yarhouse cite a debate between two Episcopal bishops in which the more liberal bishop stated: "If the best scientific data seems to put the figure of gay and lesbian people in the world at about 10% of the population, then you and I need to realize that 10% is such a larger percentage that it could hardly be accidental" (2000, pp. 34-47). Essentially, the bishop was questioning why a god would "accidentally" create a group of people that were meant to be hated? Though a progressive philosophical questioning of reality, the authors criticize this statement because they claim it appears as a rebuttal for a conservative argument claiming homosexuality is immoral because it is rare, but there are no mainstream

arguments that claim that. Instead, this 10% appears to simply be a pro-gay agenda attempt to make conservative views on the issue seem scientifically uninformed.

Method

After completing the IRB process (see Appendix A for approval form). The first step in designing a study-appropriate method was looking at how I can get the most information from my research questions. The questions themselves serve as key points to establish the realm I planned to explore. At a general level, I want to explore suppression versus freedom and in the sub-questions, I refine the question to evaluate different aspects of a culture such as race, geography, and religion. For a qualitative study like mine, I decided conducting closed interviews would more accurately catapult me to my desired outcomes. In an interview, physical identifiers and nonverbals play a key role in the data I sought. An individual's perceived comfort can be given away by their body language, like rapid eye movements, fidgeting, checking their phone, or color in one's face. These are all recorded elements because it could be a tell of their comfort.

The eleven interview questions selected were designed as semi-general questions to coax broader stories from participants that could allow me to examine their perspectives and ask deeper questions. When designing the original five interview questions, the questions were general and were only coded in the data analysis section. In the interview process, the original five questions expanded as new, relevant questions appeared. I primarily engaged in convenience snowball sampling; I received one participant which led to them suggesting a person and so on. The purpose for this mindset is for two points: one, the participant is likely to be more comfortable if a familiar face refers me, as opposed to contacting them myself. Two, it is the quickest way to collect stories because people's networks are large, so one person may know

four others who are all willing participants. When people are asked to do something that a familiar entity has already done, it may erase doubt and suspicion and, instead, reveal a degree of trust and willingness.

Once I made a connection with a self-identifying (out of the closet) queer individual, I sought to hear their story through closed, semi-formal, and, sometimes informal, interviews. I connected with seventeen participants in total and asked them to meet in a place of their choice at a time they would like so they could share their stories. These sessions ranged from fifteen minutes to an hour and thirty minutes. This duration was purely dependent on the participant's answer breadth and willingness to engage in dialogue with me outside of their answers. In an interview about one's identity, the participant must be comfortable and confident in what they are saying. For a lot of individuals in the South, safety is a concern, so if a participant is not comfortable, their answers have the potential to be less confident, less complex, and less personal.

The purpose of the study is to gather a narrative of the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in the South, so getting as personal a story as possible is central to the study. It is necessary to highlight the reason the phrase "self-identifying" is being used. This is because it needs to be stressed that specific individuals are not being targeted for malicious or hidden reasons or trying to reach out to closeted individuals in an attempt to avoid bursting personal bubbles of comfort. But rather, individuals who are openly LGBTQ+ and willing to share their stories are central to this storytelling.

The last aspect of my methods used is field observations. I went to different places around Georgia to search for any LGBTQ+ identifiers, i.e., rainbow flags, non-gender conforming presence (which may not always indicate sexuality). The space does not necessarily

have to be labeled "LGBTQ+-friendly," the perspective I am attempting to get a lens on is the concept of comfort with outness; freedom. How are they living and moving through spaces? Additionally, I went to traditionally inclusive events like concerts to assess elements of interaction whether it is nonverbal or geographical.

The race and gender demographics of the seventeen participants are key in the analysis of data. To apply post-study quantitative measures, the demographics for race appeared as the following: 70 percent white, twelve percent black, twelve percent biracial, and six percent Asian. In gender, 88 percent identified a binary gender – 59 percent male, 29 percent female – one participant identifying as trans-non-binary, and one identifying as a trans-woman.

I conducted interviews in cities and some of their satellite towns. I chose three cities with varying perception scales: liberal to conservative and inclusive to exclusive. I visited Atlanta, GA, which currently sits at an estimated population of 506,811 residents. I collected participants in Columbus, GA, which has an estimated population size of 195,769 residents. The smallest city, Valdosta, GA, has a population of 56,457 which is 28% of Columbus's population and 11% of Atlanta's. Another aspect of these three areas that was interesting is that each of these areas is estimated to be predominantly African American. Approximations include Atlanta at 51.0%, Columbus at 46.3%, and Valdosta at 51.3% all according to ACS information from the 2019 official census (U.S. Census Bureau).

Findings

In this section, I will discuss my five main findings based on narrative categories identified from participant stories. These categories are identity, geography, space, family and church, and behavior. These themes were recorded and coded into these five general categories

from the twenty-six based on their core meaning. For example, when a participant mentioned their race as a pillar for a belief, it was coded as “identity speech” in my notes.

Because the twenty-six themes were sorted into five larger categories, the original themes were shuffled. For example, the most frequent theme, number one, may not be in the same category as the second most frequent theme or may be in the same category as the least frequent theme. To account for this distribution, an average number was found by adding the thematic rankings listed in each category then dividing that number by the total number of thematic rankings within the given category. After finding this number, each category was organized in ascending order based on their average giving us the category order: identity, space, geography, family and church, then behavior.

To reiterate, the themes identified all emerged from my RQ, which was “What expressive freedoms/hindrances exist within the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia” with four subsequent questions, “How expressive are individuals in urban centers?” to “How expressive are individuals in rural centers?” then, “Are there apparent absences of representation among racial groups?” and, “What role does religion play in the community’s existence?” In the coming paragraphs, the themes will be presented in order of most discussed to least.

Interview Themes

With a ranking average of 9.3, the first identified category is identity. The four interview questions (IQs) tied to this category were: “how would you identify your sexual orientation?” “How did your family react and how are they now? Are they accepting?” “Do you find yourself code-switching or living a double life?” and “Are there any figures in your past, or present, that have influenced your identity in any way?” The thematic analysis of this category revealed a two-fold trend in participant’s concept of performance or, how they present themselves to the

world and the relationship between comfortability and growth over time. Several different types of terms were used by participants to describe identity: gender, gender expression, self, outness, privilege, and race.

The second identified category with a ranking average of 10.2 is space. As the first of the two categories that tie into proxemics, space is used here to illustrate more specific locations, i.e., the workplace, businesses, or school. The three IQs that catered to this topic were: “Are there meeting places/online spaces specific to your town that are LGBT+ positive?” “Is your church LGBTQ friendly?” and “Is your workplace friendly?” This category revealed a trend in participant’s concept of self-in-space; essentially, proxemics directly. Often, participants used language that indicated they were conscious of how they occupied space and the perception of the self by others in a given space.

Third, with a ranking average of 16.6, is geography. This category is the second of the two categories that tie into proxemics. Rather than a specific location, however, geography refers to a region. In this case, the region is The South. This category had two IQs related to it that read: “Are you comfortable pursuing a relationship openly?” and “What is your experience as an LGBT+ individual in the South?” These questions evoke many responses that overlapped in the larger categories, but as the discussions were designed to be general, they were meant to probe for the southern experience. The yielded trend from this category is appropriately and, perhaps obviously, The South. When discussing elements of geography, participants used the terms “rural” and “city.”

Closely following the previous ranking, the fourth identified category with a ranking average of 16.8 is family and church. This category had three questions associated with it, two of which overlapping with the space and identity categories: “Do you actively practice religion?”

“Is your church LGBTQ friendly?” and “How did your family react/how are they now? Are they accepting?” The trend yielded from this category is in-group interaction. Essentially, a majority of participants reported close relationships with their church or family in their childhood and how that relationship impacted and continues to impact their decision-making process. This category is the most closely associated with SIT.

The last identified category is behavior with a ranking average of seventeen. This category explores both incoming and outgoing behaviors by participants and actors in their lives. The three IQs associated with this category, one of which overlaps with the identity category, are: “How would you describe your freedom to express your sexual/gender identity?” “Do you find yourself code-switching/living a double life?” and “Thinking back to middle school, how did you interact with other kids, how did they interact with you? Are there any memories involving your identity that stick out?” The trend that appeared out of this section is purely reflected in its category title, behavior. Unlike the other categories that averaged five themes, this category only contained two themes. While only containing the two themes, they are well-acknowledged topics concerning the queer identity and can be discussed independently of the identity category.

Observation Themes

After creating the five categories based on the interview themes, the field observations were coded into those five categories but were also assigned to six separate topic-specific categories. It is important to note that interview questions and field observations consist of terminology that has been double-coded into two categories based on the use of language and relevance to the categories outlined. To elaborate, four of the seven observation categories were subcategorized into spatial identifiers, i.e., university, city, event, business, to account for

proxemics. The remaining two topic-specific categories were subcategorized into physical identifiers, i.e., gender expression and queer performance.

For this subcategorization, I will define my use of spatial and physical identifiers. The spatial identifiers describe the space I occupied to observe behavior. I observed two universities as they tend to exhibit more freedoms independent of their city. The city itself is telling of normative behaviors enforced by the local society. Though events can take place in a city or on a university campus, events can often facilitate their own, independent atmosphere depending on the event's intended audience. Lastly, the business subcategory investigates behavior inside of commercial businesses as these areas can also facilitate different atmospheres. The physical identifiers describe the appearance and apparent behaviors of people in a given space. Gender expression ties to how individuals present themselves and the complex elements that make up what we consider as gender, whether it is nonconforming, hyper-gender performance, or somewhere in between. Queer performance explores the interpersonal aspect as opposed to self-presentation.

A significant amount of the thirty-five observation themes were encompassed by the main category, behavior. The identity and space categories also appeared in this area. When comparing each subcategory, I discovered that the university subcategory is heavily tied to gender expression while the other spatial subcategories predominately interact with the queer performance category. What my observations reiterate is how queer performance is intrinsically linked to space. Most observations I made involved more homosexual-leaning queer performances at events. When attending events like concerts, I saw same-sex couples and the breaking down of other normative relational boundaries such as closeness between two same-sex friends.

Revisiting the RQs

Spanning across these various research questions, I found a few key items: first, the degree of openness varies depending on environmental religious concentration as well as political skew; second, there was an obvious lack in the representation of women in my initial interviews; lastly, people of color were not as present or willing in my narrative collections. One of the most revealing themes present is the idea that gender identity directly impacts comfort and perception of judgment internally and externally.

Reexamining my RQ, “What expressive freedoms/hindrances exist within the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia?” My findings reveal that adult, queer individuals tend to coast on the line of neutrality between good and bad. As made apparent in my thematic analysis, a majority of participants mention that they feel more comfortable now that they are adults. Adults can be as social and as reclusive as they want, therefore limiting social interaction. However, whether this aspect of social interaction is positive, or negative is subjective. On the hindrance side, this concept of rural-thought groupthink plays a key role in the disengagement queer individuals experience from self and others. More than half of the participants expressed that most, if not all, negative behavior they experienced concerning their identity were perpetrated by their in-groups of either church or family; occasionally school peers, but this was not reported as frequently.

The proposed sub-questions saw a variety of attention. When looking at the expressive freedoms available to individuals in urban areas versus rural areas, there was a clear distinction both reported by participants and observed by me. As expected, participants who were raised in rural areas experienced more crippling hindrances on their sexual expression citing a variety of abuse from a variety of people while urban participants have far more subdued experiences.

Unexpectedly, though, religion did not play a key role in current expression, rather, was foundational in youth the semi-abandoned or abandoned completely as an adult.

Discussion

Each category defined in the previous section is foundational in understanding the intricacies that queer and other minorities experience in frictional environments. I found that the five categories: identity, space, geography, family and church, and behavior – and the subcategories: gender expression and queer performance – all contribute to the queer experience in Georgia (see Appendix C for full coding sheet). One of the most revealing themes present is the idea that gender identity directly impacts comfort and perception of judgment internally and externally. By looking at self-identifying queer individuals in different areas around the state, I was able to surmise that the freedom of this group exists on the line of neutrality between good and bad; occasionally dipping in and out of both. Throughout this section, I will expand on the categories defined above and provide the themes under each category as context to the information.

Identity

Performance and comfort are very central to this category. Participants mentioned that today, they remain very conscious of how aspects of themselves such as gender identity directly impact comfort and perception of judgment internally and externally. Most participants reported experiencing a great deal of confusion and discomfort surrounding their identity in their youth but described a positive relationship between age and comfort. Much like any youth, young queer individuals are subjected to gender roles at a normal age. Issued before birth, then by family, and perhaps the most impactful, by the education system. As students spend most of their young lives with students, they are subject to bullying and harassment by other kids because they do not

conform to gender-role stereotypes (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012, p. 36). The school personnel tend to avoid intervening in bullying and a study was done that illustrates that as many as 97 percent of students in a Maine high school reporting that teachers do not respond when students make antigay remarks in their presence (Owens, 1998, p. 87).

Pre-emptive rejection of self was another common theme between participants. They reported that just before, during, and even after the coming out process, they had moments of denying the legitimacy of their sexuality. This is rooted in a largely cognitive constellation of beliefs about human sexuality (Jung & Smith, 1993, p. 13). While rejection was a factor in self-identification, near-all participants also claimed that they were confidently able to identify their sexual and gender identity with themselves. Coming out is a process most queer kids go through, and it generally comes in steps. This self-identification is usually the first step as sexual feelings and identity are both internal processes link to the emergence of sexual feelings often triggered by contact with lesbians and gay males (Owens, 1998, p. 44).

An interesting concept that several participants positioned is that of outness – asking, how out will I be? Depending on who is around and where the individual is, this openness of identity comes into question. The need to conduct this cost-benefit analysis as queer individuals move from moment to moment was described as exhausting by many participants and is negatively impacting identity development and mental health (Zoeterman & Wright, 2014, p. 347). This closed-off-ness, as a few participants referenced, is a survival skill to appear as straight as possible which reinforces this heteronormative society we live in. Our society is deeply saturated in prejudice and when it comes to sexual identity, heterosexual people are elevated while queer people experience this prejudice at the hands of the heterosexual (Jung & Smith, 1993, p. 13).

As participants discussed their personal disadvantages as queer individuals, they acknowledged their privilege to other members who do not get the same opportunities they do whether it is racially motivated or related to one's sexual identity. In a co-cultural perspective, however, we all exist on a moving scale of privilege in which are all privileged in some respects and disadvantaged in others (Culver, 2018, p. 596)

My field observations yielded six subcategories, two of which are relevant to identity: queer performance and gender expression. Queer performance generally describes how we, as individuals, present our sexuality – our queerness or lack thereof. In many cases, queer individuals may feel silenced when their sexual identity is involved. When in businesses in smaller cities and towns, I observed a clear lack of expressive freedom of gender expression and sexual identity. As I observed in smaller areas, it became clear that closeness to familiar people likely played a role. Similar to online spaces, if the network (or area) we are in hosts people we do not wish to reveal to, we may subdue our expression (Fox & Warber, 2015, p. 87).

In coding the field observations, I discovered that the spatial university subcategory is heavily tied to gender expression while the other spatial subcategories predominately interact with queer performance. What my observations reiterate is how queer performance is intrinsically linked to space. Most observations I made involved more homosexual-leaning queer performances at events. When attending events like concerts, I saw same-sex couples and the breaking down of other normative relational boundaries such as closeness between two same-sex friends. Looking at the identity of audiences of the events I observed, the population was comprised of mostly people under the age of thirty who engaged in a variety of gender expression through fashion. This indicates a degree of openness that, in turn, facilitates a sort of progressive and inclusive atmosphere.

Space & Geography

To encapsulate proxemics, space and geography are grouped in this section to discuss the close relationship between the two. Our geographical context is The South, and space is far more localized as it varies between schools, cityscapes, businesses, and events. In interviews, all of the participants who indicated they were raised in a rural area mentioned being outed to their family by school officials, schoolmates, and even peer's families. This lends insight to the concept of coming out to others and our perceived trust in that friendship. Queer youth are far more likely to come out to friends because there is less risk involved. There is a degree of separation between friends to where there is not so much dependence, so if a friend rejects their identity, that is the least they can do. Parents, however, can withdraw basic needs like food, shelter, and with those, financial support (Owens, 1998, p. 45).

When looking at proxemics in these categories, we are looking at how regional geography ties into the types of space: public space, social space, personal space, and intimate space (Prabhu, 2010, p. 9) and how we as individuals interact with those spaces. My field observations primarily dealt with proxemics in which I asked, what am I seeing people do here? This space and geography transcend traditional physical means, in a world where virtual space can be significantly impactful, queer identities can still be stifled in expression in the virtual world. Though social networking sites (SNS) theoretically facilitate a far more inclusive and diverse space, heterosexual norming is still rampant. Because SNS are essentially public forums, the door is open for anyone to belittle another person because of their identity. For queer individuals, caution is exercised because that fear of being outed exists among a "hostile majority" (Fox & Warber, 2015, p. 92). The creation of subspaces in the virtual context allows room for expressive freedom. Individuals can make their own SNS-facilitated space that hosts

acceptance and freedom as they choose (Fujita, Harrigan & Soutar, 2018, p. 66). In games even, players can play with large numbers of people, but only actively communicate with a closed group of people. Being able to switch between open and closed channels allows queer players to address varying social instances differently.

This is an example of code-switching, albeit virtual. This concept is closely related to outness, but while outness is applied to the identity category, code-switching is applied to space and geography because of its direct tie to proxemics. Most participants indicated that they participate in altering mannerisms such as dress, speech, and walk depending on the place they are going. If they know beforehand that the space they will be entering is stiffer or if they are unaware of the space and people there entirely, participants indicated defaulting to more straight-passing behavior.

When asked to pinpoint casual queer safe spaces, participants often when one of two routes: stating that the metropolitan Atlanta area is a safe space, or describing some apparatus that is very population-controlled such as themselves or in video games. Heteronormative spaces like businesses and smaller towns tend to default to the rejection of turbulent identities. While not always verbally rejecting non-heterosexual identities, coded words are operationalized to allow for discussion of the norms while simultaneously rejecting abnormal behavior and presentation (Castagno 2008; Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995; Solorzano & Villalpando 1998; Tate 1997; Villenas & Deyhle 1999).

Some participants indicated a prolonged coming out process due to bullying in school. As reported in the identity section, this is not all surprising. A study revealed that 72 percent of 528 LGB youth in New York City had reported that their first experience receiving verbal harassment and bullying due to their sexuality (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012, p. 36). Later in life, however, as

more freedom was experienced, participants received less bullying. When asked if their workplace is accepting, all the participants said yes with two expressing that they step lightly around coworkers. Interestingly, most of the males in this study work dominantly with females which can be linked to the skew towards female acceptance of homosexuals versus male acceptance (Gorsuch, 2019, p. 951). A few participants mentioned that businesses in cities tend to lean more toward social progressiveness in their social responsibility. Especially in cities that promote local business, there is a clear relationship between acceptance of diverse people and local business.

One element of proxemics that was present in most interviews was this concept of self as a safe space. These participants stated that often, if they feel uncomfortable expressing themselves in social situations, it is easier to retreat into themselves; say nothing, be as normal as possible and get what needs to be done quickly. Orbe's communication orientation chart presented in Fox and Warber's article illustrates this concept in two separate quadrants – both aggressive and nonassertive assimilation. Under nonassertive assimilation, featured behaviors include censoring self and averting controversy. Aggressive assimilation features behaviors such as dissociating, mirroring, strategic distancing, and ridiculing self (Fox & Warber, 2005, p. 598).

Here, we can conclude that elements of proxemics that facilitate a negative environment like confederate symbolisms, conservative symbolism, anti-gay religious signage, heteronormative atmospheres, and cisgender-serving areas all coincide to limit expressive freedoms of queer identities. Simultaneously, however, rainbow flags, inclusive church and business signage, and apparent gender and sexual expression in urbanized areas contribute to and grow a positive environment for these freedoms.

Family & Church and Behavior

One of my core questions asked what role religion had in the queer identity in The South. To my surprise, religion does not actively play a role in the day-to-day, rather it is passive. Most participants acknowledged that they believe in a higher power but have distanced themselves from organized religion as they grew older and into their identity. In anti-gay religious circles, the preservation of the interpreted god-intended heterosexuality is the driving force for discriminatory behavior. Anti-queer language has often been used in the silencing of identity where religious entities question whether the acceptance of gayness by moral law can be decided by man or by God (Cobb, 2006, p. 29).

Family is a large motivator in queer individual's decision to come out or not. From the family perspective, there is fear that this gayness is disrupting the heteronormative agenda (Jung & Smith, 1993, p. 90) and the lineage of the family. Tied to this is fear of what others in their network will say; neighbors, church congregation, etc. Whether purposeful or not, parents may engage in priming that can cripple young kid's identity development. Negative comments about sexual minorities or by other adults tend to be internalized and carried by queer youth throughout their formative years (Owens, 1998, p. 200).

More than half of the participants expressed that most, if not all, negative behavior they experienced concerning their identity were perpetrated by their in-groups of either church or family; occasionally school peers, but this was not reported as frequently. Psychologically and socially, this is where we define our ingroups and outgroups and where SIT is strongly tied. Depending on familial and religious closeness, social mobility may not be possible and may leave individuals in the social change category (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 35). As described by participants, most fell into the social change category believing that because family or religion is

all they knew, they could not stray from the accepted heterosexual identity. As they grew, participants become more comfortable with themselves, therefore engaging in more socially mobile behavior, i.e., exploring alternative sexual identities.

Participants also reported frequent spurts of internalized homophobia, rejection of self, and departure of their identity in the past, and occasionally in the present. The social change concept comes into play here too. As we adopt the identity of our relevant group membership, we interact less as individuals but more so as members of the group we are members of at the time (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 35). Because of that perceived importance and dependence on family and church – two groups that tend to be foundational in our perception of self – we begin to engage in intragroup conflict where membership in multiple groups begins to be difficult.
In those formative pre-teen and teen years in which sexual identity is just beginning to evolve, this is simultaneously the time where our memberships (relationships) are greatly challenged by our willingness to be open about our identity, reject, or hide it from our other groups. In these years, it is an active internal fight to maintain any norms established by these two groups. These memberships are not assumed and kept but are constantly re-evaluated over time (Bochatay et al, 2019, p. 805). While participants often referred to this time in their life as being exhaustive, most participants explained that their relationship (and comfort) with these groups either grew over time or were abandoned early on.

Toleration versus acceptance was a common topic in the discussion on acceptance. More than half of the participants could vividly recall slurs being heard in church and reporting an overall negative church experience. While more participants indicated experiencing positive family reactions, a sizeable portion of participants recall or are currently experiencing different elements of abuse from family ranging from physical to emotional – some family members

threatening suicide. The revelation of a queer child can be incredibly disruptive as it greatly undermines familial expectations in two ways: in one way, roles in families and at work are expected to remain unquestioned. A daughter is to marry a man and begin a family. A son is to marry a woman, find a good job, and begin a family. Alternatively, parental goals set upon a child are disrupted. It is a common belief that, as a parent is awaiting the birth of a child and throughout their youth, they imagine what the child's future will be and engage in priming behaviors to ensure a successful life. When either or both of these expectations are violated, it can lead to a great reevaluation of self and the efforts put into the child. Based on these two relationship-related in-groups versus outgroups tied to homosexual identities, we can conclude that SIT is at play in the priming of individuals' identity development.

Revisiting the RQ(s)

My first question asks, "How expressive are individuals in urban centers?" yielded mixed results. There appeared to be a positive relationship between downtown areas and expressive freedom. In Atlanta, for example, I observed an abundance of gender-nonconforming individuals. By gender nonconforming, I mean I had observed males that presented with more feminine appearances including make-up, clothing, gait, or voice type; it is important to note that these factors do not equate to an individual's membership in the LGBTQ+ community, rather that they challenge traditional heteronormative standards. Discussing the three cityscapes I spent time in, there is another relationship between liberalism and conservatism.

Atlanta was the only city of the three that hosted a more saturated population of observed, varied gender expression. For example, in a building that fused corporate and casual atmospheres, I observed a few "butch-presenting" females. Comparatively in Columbus, it is possible to see disruptions in gender expression while in Valdosta, I observed no disruptions. In

terms of red and blue political maps, Atlanta is politically a deeply blue area and is one of the most diverse areas in the state. Hosting the annual Atlanta Gay Pride Festival in Midtown, diversity is a concept that is not foreign to the area.

Columbus is the city I would rank second-most accepting in my hypothetical rankings. Columbus has several spaces that lend safe spaces to LGBTQ+ individuals. There is a consistent drag show on Saturdays in the heart of downtown in a restaurant that shows no outward indication of acceptance in the daytime business hours. Additionally, there is a club in the downtown area that once, but no longer, ventured out to create “Pride Nights” on Tuesday nights. In my observations there, the atmosphere is completely accepting. In one instance, however, a group of men came in who appeared to be heterosexual which ushered in a wave of assumed judgment. Dancing slowed down and the people who were dancing went back to their seats for a drink though there were never any clear signs of judgment from these men.
Participants also reported being called “fag” from a car driving by. This negative catcalling of sorts is likely not absent in Atlanta either.

A few eateries in areas surrounding the downtown strip adopted statements and promotional stances stressing that “Any and all are welcome.” Columbus also hosts “Pride Nights on Broadway” which consists of weekly Saturday block parties that promote acceptance and freedom of expression. A component of this is “Drag Story Hour” where parents can bring their kids to listen to a drag queen read a story. It is clear that events like this have broadened the scope for acceptance in Columbus and have made room for more up-and-coming community leaders that identify as LGBTQ+. Columbus too is a blue area on the political duality with hints of red as you get into the rural outer reaches. Columbus is home to a dedicated art scene that can be lent to this limited acceptance. Before 2016, the city housed a “gay safe zone” that hosted

movie nights and talks for queer youth. Similar to the earlier recounting of Roanoke, Virginia (Watkins, 2017, p. 6), this location shut down for unknown reasons and was eventually, and perhaps, ironically, replaced with the Georgia Republican Party headquarters during the 2016 presidential election cycle.

Lastly, Valdosta is the least accepting in terms of services provided, locations, and perceived comfortability for queer individuals. During my time there, nearly all of the participants expressed a degree of concern for their well-being as well as coming out stories that have left lasting negative effects. In addition to this, Valdosta does not have many exclusive “gay spaces” such as a bar or club. However, what is present is an eatery that hosts drag shows in the downtown area. As expressed before, events and venues like this help to diversify the local community and expand their boundaries for acceptance. It is important to mention one of the factors that drew me to Valdosta was my introduction to a news story that involved vandalization of pride imagery. This home in Valdosta had a pride flag on a pole in their yard and one day found their flag burned on their doorstep. This was surprising to hear and sparked my interest, so I immediately set a date to travel to Valdosta. I categorize this city as sub-urban and sub-rural because it has a city-like quality in the university, downtown area, but as you move further away, it becomes increasingly rural. Because the density of the city is so limited, this may explain the link between Valdosta’s “political redness” and the lack of diversity in apparent sexual identity and freedom.

To conclude, this study reinforces the idea that the more urban the area, the more freedom, or at least wider ability to express one’s identity (Johnston & Longhurst, 2010, p. 80; Knopp, 2005, p. 151). We can likely attribute the acceptance in urbanized areas to the forced

interaction of diverse people. As we live closer together, we tend to build groups centered around our identities, good and bad.

"How expressive are individuals in rural centers?" can only be answered with hesitance. This is because I never visited a 'truly rural' area for this study; populations below the 25,000 mark. However, as previously described, Columbus and Valdosta both have rural elements as you move away from dense inner-city. These sub-rural zones tend to simulate the closed-off, self-reliant nature of truly rural areas. When thinking of areas like the perimeter of Tifton, GA, or the town of Ellaville, it is quite difficult to find LGBTQ+ people because these smaller areas would not recognize the need to have organized areas for these individuals. Based on the stories I gathered from some participants, these smaller towns are more dangerous than urban areas. One referenced haybales being burned because they had unicorns on them. This illustrates both defiance of traditional masculinity and aggressive heteronormativity. Another participant, as I mentioned earlier, referenced a county just north of Valdosta that cracks down on differences including racial differences.

One interesting and prominent link between ruralness, redness, and conservativeness is the prevailing confederate imagery. As you travel through the outskirts of Columbus and many places between here and the outskirts of Valdosta, there are varying sizes of confederate flags billowing in the wind. There are confederate graveyards and monuments also still present in some of these areas. Even in downtown Columbus, the most liberal area of the city, a large Confederate memorial stands. Based on the lack of public groups in these smaller areas and the public dissent of homosexuality in areas like Tifton, I can conclude that, at large, freedoms are stifled by rural communities. This does not reflect all rural communities or individual families within these communities, but a rural community's views will be dominated by the last social

norms established over the years that remain unchallenged in the lagging rural environments (Kramer, 2005, p. 208).

When reviewing the general difference in urban areas versus rural areas' expressive freedoms, there was a clear distinction both reported by participants and observed by me tied to liberalism versus conservativism. As expected, participants who were raised in rural areas experienced more crippling hindrances on their sexual expression citing a variety of abuse from a variety of people while urban participants have far more subdued experiences.

Another important question I ask is "Are there apparent absences of representation among racial groups?" While appearing at rank twelve of twenty-six, race appeared in almost all interviews but did not significantly follow the conversation like other elements did. This does not indicate that race does not play a role in queer identity, it appears it was simply not relevant to the development of these participants' identities. Race itself is an identity that coexists in our pantheon of identities, they all intersect as they all become active and inactive in different situations. In this instance, race was not an active player in the conversation. Interestingly though, all of the non-white participants expressed that their coming out process was not damaging, that their family accepted them in some way.

Only five of the seventeen have are non-white. These are not participants I had necessarily chosen myself; my method of collection was snowballing where I was introduced to 'someone who knows someone who' and so on. Because white participants tended to suggest other white students, The South's saturated history in race relations may play a role in this disconnect. Due to the antecedent revelations, I cannot issue a conclusion on this sub-question as there is not enough supporting data.

My last sub-question came to be “What role does religion play in the community’s existence?” This was not one of my original questions because my scope originally only focused on the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, their daily lives, their educational experiences, family and friendship experiences, and occupational experiences. However, as I started collecting participant stories, religion became a connecting factor. Participants would mention being raised in the church or how this homosexual aspect of their identity clashed with the established religion with the family. I failed to account for the level of saturation and relevance of religion in the South. This also forced me to revisit my research entirely as mentioned in the introduction. Unexpectedly, though, religion did not play as big of a key role in each participant’s identity as I originally expected, rather, was foundational in youth the semi-abandoned or abandoned completely as an adult as identity was explored. To answer this question, however, based on participant accounts, I can conclude that religion has a deep tie to the south, thus, Southern queer individuals are connected to this religious barrier in some way; actively or passively.

Personal Reflection

As I said at the beginning of this paper, one of the main reasons I decided to pursue this research topic was because I had and was exposed to perceptions about The South though I grew up here. Over years of consuming various media, I noticed a trend of The South being painted as over-religious or anti-gay. The community I currently live in has been the only one I have been subjected to in my life. Reading the other literature here from Sears and Johnston, it is clear that numerous experiences are impacted by environments that I did not experience myself.

One of my earliest memories is of having an imaginary girlfriend at around age five. I can remember walking into the living room and announcing to my mother that I have a girlfriend named “Lacey” that lives down the street with her grandmother – her fictitious grandmother. I

cannot be sure why I did that, but I strongly believe it may be linked to my exposure to male-dominated, misogynistic media at an early age. Around the same time at age four, I became of fan of the films *James Bond* and *Austin Powers*. This heavily influenced the more negative behaviors I exhibited at an early age. For example, in pre-kindergarten, I referred to my teacher as a "s*xy b**ch." This sort of macho-masculine behavior was frequent in my younger days, even playing sports, I tried my best to fit in with the other boys, but it never worked out.

As I grew older, I, much like any other kid, experienced bullying in school surrounding my gender and sexuality – before we kids even truly understood what sexuality was. As early as fourth grade around age ten, my twin sister would come home to tell me that her classmates were telling her that I was "gay." I had no idea what that meant at the time, all I knew is that people associated me with the word and laughed and I had no idea why. All I knew was that it didn't feel nice. It was not until I was in sixth grade that it was all spelled out for me. My avoidance of males, surrounding myself with only female friends, my prepubescent voice, and my mannerisms all indicated "gay." Often, my classmates would ask me loaded, no-right-answer questions like "does your mom know you are gay?" This persisted through middle school but slowed once I got into high school because I was more accustomed to shielding myself as well as shift my mannerisms and personality to hide the more feminine part of me. But when I started dating a guy in the summer between eighth grade and ninth grade, things changed.

While staying at my older sister's house over the summer in 2011, I met a young man that was the same age as me that I immediately clicked with. As soon as the summer hit, thirteen-year-old me started coming out to people I did not know too well as to limit the stakes; as a participant worded it, I conducted cost-benefit analyses on my coming out interactions. The guy and I started as friends and exchanged Facebook accounts to message and talk more. After

months, perhaps going into 2012, we let his mother know and I was worried because they were a rural family and was not sure how his family would react but she reacted much better than I thought. The next day, however, my father called me into his room to talk. He said that a woman messaged him on Facebook saying "your son is dating my son" and was essentially trying to gauge his reaction. I can vividly remember my heart pounding because my father is from a deeply religious family in rural Kentucky and I had spent the months before that watching coming out videos on YouTube and seeing the array of reactions from love to death threats. But looking back, he said the most normal, helpful thing "just do not send inappropriate photos or messages" to warn me about the dangers of lewd content.

The following day, my mother comes down the hallway in our house with a huge smile on her face asking "is it true? Do you have a boyfriend?" An incredibly positive reaction. I just nod and run to my room. At this point, I had been outed two-fold by someone else's parent when I was not ready. At the time, and even today, I feel robbed of the moment for things to happen organically. I assumed up until those three days that my parents would not like me anymore and because I would not be marrying a woman. I think in trying to avoid applying labels to me as a kid, they subscribed to the heteronormative default of saying things like "do you have a girlfriend" or "ooh, do you like her?" Now that I am older, I understand that, in our current heteronormative society, coming out is a daily task that we have to do repeatedly to new people, but not verbally. Like in my youth, other people are going to assign my sexuality if my behavior is not heteronormative. To combat the negative repercussions of displaying my true gender habits or hints of sexuality, I heavily subscribe to code-switching. Even to this day, I have never referred to myself as "gay" and only in March of 2021 have I been somewhat comfortable even saying the word.

Code-switching is a survival tool generally used by non-cisgender, heterosexual individuals but can be used by anyone. For example, a catholic person amongst an atheistic environment. I predominately engage in code-switching around males who appear heterosexual or religious in some way. I did not start code-switching as heavily as I do now until I was a sophomore in college. At that time, I got a job and was working hard to advance in the area. This job I worked was heavily reliant on my voice which I had just recently begun to embrace as more feminine but still deep. After submitting a voice portfolio, my boss told me that I need to sound "less girly" because the audience shouldn't be able to tell if I am gay or straight – a heteronormative observation. Further, I tend to dress in clothes that I describe as genderless, such as long dusters or cardigans, large hats, and light makeup. One day, my boss said that I "should not wear dresses" because clients and the public may not accept that. While this is true, I felt and continue to feel that I cannot fit in the way I am.

To begin to wrap up, I should question myself on how does religion factor in? Though my father did come from a deeply religious family and my mother from England, who grew up in the church, both agreed that they would not try to assign us a religion because this was something we should find and feel on our own. So, though there was no religion in my household, living in The South, God and Jesus were everywhere. Bumper stickers, the church's that appear on every street, other kids, and teachers. My earliest, clear memory I have of religion comes from my middle school years. My principal at the time would begin every school gathering with "ain't God good?" A neutral experience in my memories. But on the negative end, I once said "oh my god" in class and my teacher yelled and turned red to tell me that he would send me to the office if I used The Lord's Name in vain ever again. This shocked me as a little twelve or thirteen-year-

old. Interestingly, my high school principal had a "coming out" of his own when it came to religion. I can remember the talk of the town being that my principal is Muslim.

Throughout my years, I knew there were a lot of religious groups of condemned who I am and people like me, but I had never experienced these groups first hand. Perhaps the occasional "are you okay with going to hell?" from my classmates in high school, but I never experienced anything outside of verbal abuse, though a lot of my friends had. Ranging from having to leave home or being kicked out of the church, they had experienced situations different from mine and that difference always sat in my mind. That is why I wanted to conduct this research, to hear stories, to understand different perspectives, and to start a conversation.

Limitations

I have self-identified two limitations while reflecting on this research. The first being distance and time. Because I choose to take an interpersonal approach, I am primarily engaging in face-to-face interviews. This method is time-consuming and, depending on how far I am traveling, costs money, which lowers my ability to gather a larger sample size. However, this method yields better information as it is easier to engage with the participants, note their nonverbals, and experience their environment and surroundings. The best way to gather good observation notes is to explore an area and note the way people move through spaces. and surroundings. The best way to gather good observation notes is to explore an area and note the way people move through spaces.

The second limitation is the participant population. As explained in both the methods and discussion section, my participants were mostly white, mostly gay, and mostly cisgender. All of these identities, though still valid and valuable to this study, cater to cisgender, male-centered, and white identities in society. A deeper, more colorful array of individuals would have likely

yielded more complex and insightful data. Additionally, a number of the interview questions probed for memories as well as their current outlook on their identity. Relying on recollection can be harmful as human memory are not always as clear as we would like. Memories are often altered by external stimuli like media content, experienced behavior in and around the formative years that overwrite prior experience, and biases.

Future Research

While I am interested in furthering this study, I want to lay out my desires for this research path. The first being addressing the adolescent population. For this study, I focused on how queer individuals were living today and how they got to where they are now. As previously mentioned, this method relied on the recollection of memories and experiences. Studying the adolescent population would yield interesting results as they likely are still exploring identity, still heavily reliant on family, and possibly involved in religious practices. As social media expands, youth are exposed to diverse identities at younger and younger ages and can articulate and question their thoughts on the subject. However, the eighteen and younger age population, minors, are considered a protected population and would require a lot more supervision and process that could damage the authenticity of the results.

The second path of research would be to explore the federal sector. From my perspective, government employees, even at the local level, tend to follow apparent heteronormative, male-controlled, white, and, in The South, religious standards. To look into the intricacies of identity at the government level would be able to put a magnifying glass on how more serious sectors of the labor field can force identities to be conformed or silenced.

Conclusion

In this study, I asked, "what expressive freedoms or hindrances exist within the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia." Georgia, like any state, is a complex tapestry of emerging, converging, and dying cultures. Being one of the first thirteen British Colonies, lasting roots like religion and race are deeply intermingled with the state and its position in The Bible Belt. This study served to reinforce several points. First, the idea that the more urban the area the more diversity in identity (Johnston & Longhurst, 2010, p. 80; Knopp, 2005, p. 151). Second, rural-raised individuals tend to experience more crippling hindrances on their sexual expression, citing a variety of abuse from a variety of people. Third, a conclusion cannot be formed on the sub-question concerning race as there is not enough supporting data. Fourth, religion has a deep tie to the south, thus, Southern queer individuals are connected to this religious barrier in some way; actively or passively.

Paired with these four conclusions is the intermingling of SIT and proxemics in queer individuals. In SIT, family and church for a lot of Southerners are part of their foundational identity, their ingroup, while sometimes conflicting identities like sexuality, the outgroup, is primed to be rejected. In proxemics, I concluded that negative environments and symbols that limit freedoms are facilitated in the state, but the converse is just as present in more deeply urbanized areas. How we identify ourselves, social identity, and the environments we are submerged in, proxemics play key roles in our internal gatehouse to express our identities. Who we associate with is just as telling of how much we limit ourselves and are limited by others in a given social situation.

It is important to urge readers to think critically before applying this research to one's own experience. The experience of seventeen Georgians is far from representative of thousands

of lived experiences of Georgians of diverse backgrounds. As I make my conclusions, I do not intend to apply these conclusions to groups in any way, rather, I intend to create and add to dialogue and perspective that may have previously been missing. The experiences reported by me and the participants are only our experiences and can only be related to, not replicated.

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Appendix A:

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approved Research Form

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04115-2020 **Responsible Researcher:** Matthew Rorer

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Kimberly Kulovitz

Project Title: *Narratives in the American South: LGBTQ+ in the Bible Belt.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is Exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption Category 2. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of this research study all collected data must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *Exempt guidelines permit the recording of interviews, provided the recording is not shared nor stored, and the recordings must be deleted from all devices immediately after creating an accurate transcript.*
- *If you decide to recruit on social media sites, please contact this office prior to initiating the modification.*

☒ ***If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.***

Elizabeth Ann Olphie *12.23.2020*
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.

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Appendix B:

Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1) How would you identify your sexual orientation?
2) How would you describe your freedom to express your sexual/gender identity?
3) Are you comfortable pursuing a relationship openly?
4) Are there meeting places/online spaces specific to your town that are LGBT+ positive?
5) What is your experience as an LGBT+ individual in the South?
6) Do you actively practice religion?
    a) Is your church LGBTQ friendly?

Later added

7) Is your workplace friendly?
8) How did your family react/how are they now? Are they accepting
9) Do you find yourself code-switching/living a double life?

Added

10) Thinking back to middle school, how did you interact with other kids, how did they interact with you? Are there any memories involving your identity (not necessarily sexuality) that stick out?
11) Are there any figures in your past, or present, that have influenced your identity in any way?

Appendix C:

Coding Sheet

Coded Interview Questions

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6. Do you actively practice religion?
    a. Is your church LGBTQ friendly?
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8. How did your family react/how are they now? Are they accepting?
9. Do you find yourself code-switching/living a double life?
10. Thinking back to middle school, how did you interact with other kids, how did they interact with you? Are there any memories involving your identity (not necessarily sexuality) that stick out?
11. Are there any figures in your past, or present, that have influenced your identity in any way?

Interview Themes

Identity (65 -> 9.3)

1) Mentioned identity's role in comfortability.

    a. Gender Expression

    b. Gender identity directly impacts comfort and perception of judgement internally and externally.

c. A lot of explanation came with presentation, i.e., gender expression, sexual expression.

2) Describes growth of comfortability over time.

a. A positive relationship between age & comfort.

3) Pre-emptive rejection of self; who's fault is that?

5) Able to easily self-identify sexual identity/gender identity.

12) Race place a key role in outlook on acceptance.

20) How "out" are you; what's the cost-benefit of presenting each day? "Outness;" easier to be straight.

22) Identifies own privilege in relation to LGBT+ identity.

Space (51 -> 10.2)

4) Engage in code-switching.

6) Able to pinpoint LGBTQ+ safe spaces and name safe space events.

a. "Self" as safe space.

b. Video Games as a safe space.

c. Relationship between available events and acceptance.

d. Relationship between military bases and acceptance? Sometimes not.

I. Statistical improbability of 100% heterosexuality.

e. Universities as "Blue Zones" and accepting

7) Accepting workplace

a. Businesses tend to be more socially responsible.

b. Experienced business rejecting identity due to “family-friendly” nature.

8) Careful of PDA; cites “perception.”

26) School bullying victim as a pre-text to not come out.

Geography (83 -> 16.6)

9) Majority declared neutral position on experience as LGBT in The South

14) Mentions growing up in a very rural area; isolated.

a. No relationship between rurality and current comfortability.

16) Reported that people in small towns “figure out” sexual identity; outed.

21) Relocated searching for acceptance; LGBT+ location.

23) “South is slower to evolve.”

Family & Church (118 -> 16.8)

11) In-church slurs; negative church experience

13) Experienced negative family relationships because of sexuality

a. In cases of repaired relationship, some reported family member’s denial of their negative behaviour.

15) No active religious practice

a. Most still claimed to be of faith

17) Positive family reaction

18) Experienced familial friction with other people’s family; friends, colleagues

19) Experienced abuse; physical, emotional, one reporting parental suicide threat.

25) Distance from religious self because of how ‘political’ it’s become.

a. Religion is a political force.

Behaviour (34 -> 17)

10) Toleration vs. Acceptance

24) “No Home Training;” ignorance

Observation Themes

1. School campus relatively homogenous; predominantly white and black. *U *GE
2. Gender conforming space; little-to-no obvious variations in gender-expression. *U *GE
    a. I would identify my outfit as the most gender on-conforming in the area.
3. Chick-Fil-A appears to be the most popular eatery. *U *B
4. Observed a girl tie another girl's shoe; not necessarily anything but platonic. *U *QP
5. A university holds a ceremony that recognises LGBTQ+ and ally students. *U *QP
6. Offices in the university generally were devoid of non-normative memorabilia. *U *GE
7. A “masc” presenting woman driving in a minivan *C *GE
8. At a concert, wide variety of gender expression present and seemingly promoted. *E *GE
9. I was wearing a more ‘feminine’ outfit, a girl confidently approaches me to say that her girlfriend loves my outfit. *E *QP
10. A male wears tight pants and a see-through shirt *E *GE
11. A male wears a dress confidently *E *GE
12. Rainbow flags, flamboyance, and celebration *E *QP
13. Merch that reads “fag” is present. *E *QP
14. A female couple (one “butch”) hold hands and kiss. *E *QP
15. A man asks to take a photo with me then, afterward, put his hand on my chest *E *QP

16. In a metropolitan area, specifically in a news building that is open to the public, there is an suprising lack in variation of expression. *C *GE

17. Chick-Fil-A, again is the most popular eatery in a large food court filled with people *C *B *SP

18. A masculine presenting female walks with a swagger *GE

19. A smiling trio (2M, 1F) wears non-norm fashion confidently: one guy has make-up and a crop top, the other sports long hair style not traditional "for a male," girl has shaved "butch" buzzcut style. *E *GE

20. Male with 'outrageous' rainbow outfit walks by *E *GE

21. At a drag show, the emcee does a "LGBTQ+ roll call:" 2 gay men, a large amount of gay/lesbian women, 1 trans individual. *C *E *B *GE

22. Some "overtly masculine" military men present as well as traditional presenting "southerners;" appear both interested and uninterested, keeping distance (not physically). *C *E *B *QP

23. A woman sits on her partner's lap; same couple – the more masculine presenting proposes; "Yaaas!" and applause *C *E *B *QP

24. The men who self-identified as straight are open to dancing with the queens. *C *E *B *QP

25. Outside the venue, I overheard a women talking about her recent first date with a woman. *C *E *QP

26. A "butch" presenting woman is walking around. *C *GE

27. A woman proposes to another woman in front of a crowd of people, accepting response *C *E *QP

28. Arriving at an interviewee's personal home, they tell me to just walk in because they leave the door unlocked; indication of comfort? *C *SP

29. In a public food court style business, there isn't much display of non-norm behavior; "family atmosphere" *C *B *GE *QP

30. "Obvious" same-sex couple present *C *B *QP

31. An employee tells me that an older white man refused to be served by a feminine black male but accepted service from a "normal" white female employee. The owner often refuses to serve people who are outwardly ignorant with employees. *C *B *QP

32. While in Athens, GA, there is a clear and obviously celebrated place safe for queer individuals very close to UGA. Drag queens, feminine men, masculine men and everything in between appear comfortable. *C *B *GE *QP

33. Both homosexual and heterosexual kiss freely. *C *B *QP

34. A well-dressed man comes in to dance, he's holding a book or journal of some kind that has gold trimming on the pages. Thick enough to be a condensed version of the Bible, but could easily be a notebook. *C *B *QP

35. The same man doesn't *appear to be* queer; a little stiff. *C *B *QP

*U = University | *C = City | *E = Event | *B = Business

*GE = Gender Expression | *QP = Queer Performance (interpersonal) *SP = Space