COMING OUT QUEER: A NARRATIVE REFLECTION ON HETEROCHRSITIAN ENVIORMENTAL INFLUENCES ON QUEER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND DISCLOSURE

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Background: The current coming out literature discusses the relationship between society's rejection of queer identities and how that plays into an individual's understanding of themselves and when/if they disclose their identity. It is suggested that in communities and environments that are less welcoming and tolerant of queer identities and individuals, queer individuals feel more at risk and vulnerable in comparison to affirming areas with visible queer communities. **Aim:** This narrative study aimed to collect coming out stories and experiences of individuals from the heterochristian South to better understand how concentrations of rejection and hostility can impact a queer person's understanding of their identity, as well as their disclosure process. **Participants:** Nine participants were recruited through snowball sampling, one male, one genderfluid individual, two non-binary individuals and five women who self-identified as a part of the queer community. **Method:** Participant stories were recorded via Zoom in one semi-structured interview, lasting up to 80 minutes. A narrative analysis was used to contextualize individual experiences and understand how these experiences interacted with Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). Analysis: The structural analysis shows that tolerance and affirming communities in the heterochristian United States South are intrinsically linked to early identify development and disclosure, whereas environments without tolerance individuals are less likely to realize their identity while in the community, thus delaying the disclosure process. Additionally, the stories construct an understanding of the multiplicities of coming out and the stages it can occur in. They spoke of their coming out story, before exploring the community narratives and their impact to identity development and disclosure. The use of CTI enhanced the understanding of the nuanced components of identity construction as they relate to

individuals, groups, and relationships around them. **Conclusion and Implications:** Research literature demonstrates the direct impact that a community can have on an individual's identity, as well as when they choose to disclose their authenticity to those around them. Socio-relational factors, such as heterochristian values being the only narrative, have to be considered a vital part of an individual's identity and their ability to actualize it. This study isolated nine queer voices in order to amplify the understanding of how their environment impacted their relationship to their queerness.

Keywords: communication, narrative, sexual identity, LGBT, queer, coming out, heterochristian, United States South, identity development, identity disclosure

DEDICATION

To the queer community who came before me and fought for my voice

To the queer community who stands with me as we use our voice to fight for rights

To the queer community who come after me, you are loved, valid and seen. We are trying to make change.

To the general public, silencing our voices does not make us go away. We are here and will always be here. Love can't wait.

To Alyssa, thank you for getting us to here and paving the way for me to find who I am. I'll take it from here.

- Sage

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NOMENCLATURE

In order to facilitate a clear understanding of the research ahead, an abridged version of PFLAG's National Glossary of Terms has been included. This is done as an effort to bridge the gap of queer language, slang and abbreviations that may not be widely understood without previous interactions with the queer community.

BIPOC: Acronym for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. It acknowledges the specific histories of Black, Latinx, Asian Pacific Islanders (API), and Native people within the United States without collapsing them into a homogenous category of people of color.

Biphobia: Animosity, hatred, or dislike of bisexual people (see *Bisexual*) which may manifest in the form of prejudice or bias. Biphobia often stems from lack of knowledge about bisexual people and the issues they face and can sometimes be alleviated with education and support. PFLAG does not use this term as it frequently prevents such educational dialogue. Related to homophobia (see *Homophobia*) and transphobia (see *Transphobia*).

Bisexual: Commonly referred to as bi or bi+. According to bi+ educator and advocate Robyn Ochs, the term refers to a person who acknowledges in themselves the potential to be attracted--romantically, emotionally and/or sexually--to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or in the same degree. The "bi" in bisexual can refer to attraction to genders similar to and different from one's own. People who identify as bisexual need not have had equal sexual or romantic experience—or equal levels of attraction—with people across genders, nor any experience at all; attraction and self-identification determine orientation.

Butch: Also referred to as Masc. A person who is masculine of center in dress, attitude, and/or presentation. It is often, but not exclusively, used in a lesbian context. Often on a spectrum from butch to femme (see *Femme*) or stud (see *Stud*) to femme.

Cisgender (pronounced sis-gender): A term used to refer to an individual whose gender identity aligns with the one associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. The prefix cis- comes from the Latin word for "on the same side as." People who are both cisgender and heterosexual are sometimes referred to as cishet (pronounced "cis-het") individuals. The term cisgender is not a slur. People who are not trans should avoid calling themselves "normal" and instead refer to themselves as cisgender or cis.

Closeted: Describes a person who is not open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. A closeted person may be referred to as being "in the closet." There are many degrees to being out/closeted; closeted individuals may be out (see *Out*) to just themselves, close friends, or to their larger network, or not publicly open about their status as LGBTQ+ people.

Coming Out: For LGBTQ+ people, coming out is the process of self-identifying and self-acceptance that entails the sharing of their identity with others. Sometimes referred to as disclosing (see *Disclosure*). Individuals often recognize a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/gender-expansive, or queer identity within themselves first, and then might choose to reveal it to others. There are many different degrees of being out and coming out is a lifelong process. Coming out can be an incredibly personal and transformative experience. It is critical to respect where each person is within their process of self-identification, and up to each person, individually, to decide if and when and to whom to come out or disclose.

Femme: A person who is feminine of center in dress, attitude, and/or presentation. It is often, but not exclusively, used in a lesbian context. Often on a spectrum from butch (see *Butch*) to femme or stud (see *Stud*) to femme.

Nonbinary: Refers to people who do not subscribe to the gender binary. They might exist between or beyond the man-woman binary. Some use the term exclusively, while others may use it interchangeably with terms like genderqueer (see *Genderqueer*), genderfluid (see *Genderfluid*), gender nonconforming (see *Gender Nonconforming*), gender diverse, or gender expansive. It can also be combined with other descriptors e.g., nonbinary woman or transmasc nonbinary. Language is imperfect, so it's important to trust and respect the words that nonbinary people use to describe their genders and experiences. Nonbinary people may understand their identity as falling under the transgender umbrella and may thus be transgender as well. Sometimes abbreviated as NB or Enby, the term NB has historically been used to mean non-Black, so those referring to non-binary people should avoid using NB.

Nonbinary Lesbian: A term to describe a nonbinary person whose primary romantic, emotional and/or sexual attraction is to women. Lesbianism has historically included people of varying gender expressions (see *Butch, Stud* and *Femme*) and people with varying relationships to the lesbian community (before bisexual and pansexual came into common use, any woman who felt romantic, emotional and/or sexual attraction to women was considered a lesbian). This combination of terms came about due to the lack of a specific term for a nonbinary person who is only attracted to one gender.

Outing: The deliberate or accidental sharing of another person's sexual orientation or gender identity without their explicit consent. Outing is disrespectful and presents a danger for many LGBTQ+ individuals.

Passing: With sexuality, the act of presenting as straight (see *Beard*). With gender, the act of presenting as cisgender or gender-typical, which is generally accomplished through conforming to gender roles (see *Gender Roles*). People may try to pass in anti-LGBTQ+ environments to ensure their safety. People who pass as straight or cis have the choice to either talk about their LGBTQ+ experience or to "fit in" to a cis- and hetero-normative world. Passing is not required for LGBTQ+ people to deserve respect and love. (PFLAG, 2021)

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CONTENT WARNING

Coming Out Queer is a narrative-based research project breaking down the heterochristian impact the United States South has on queer individuals and their relationship to their queerness. While eye opening, this thesis includes unedited first-person experiences as a queer person that may not be suitable for all individuals. Mentions of homophobia, sexual assault, religious trauma, compulsory heterosexuality, and familial outrage are present throughout these narratives. Individuals who may be sensitive to these subject matters, please take note and take care of yourself.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Individuals that are of non-heterosexual sexual orientations and socially divergent gender identities make up a marginalized group within the United States who are ignored and face blatant discrimination in American culture and conversation. The UCLA Williams Institute School of Law did one of the first studies to look at LGBT employment discrimination—one of the most comprehensive pictures of discrimination across the country—and found that despite the 2020 US Supreme Court ruling in Bostock v. Clayton County discriminatory practices in the workplace are alive and well (BOSTOCK v. CLAYTON COUNTY No. 17–1618, 723 Fed. Appx. 964). Of the queer individuals who experienced discrimination or harassment in the workplace, thirty-one percent of individuals reported an experience in the past five years, an additional fourteen percent said that had their experiences more than five years ago. Further, since Bostock (2020) the nondiscrimination protections that have been extended nationwide individuals still are not experiencing safety within the workplace—nine percent of queer employees reporting they were fired or not hired because if their sexual orientation to gender identity in the past year (Sears et al, 2022).

Despite the historical progress that has been made for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) in regard to rights access and social discourse, the discussion that happen surrounding their identities in vastly conservative and heteronormative societies undermine an individual's perceptions of self and safety in these environments. This thesis follows the ways members of the LGBTQ community navigate disclosing their gender and/or sexual identity in communities that are anything but welcoming and understanding of their identities. Through my

study, I find a new understanding of the way the LGBTQ community experiences unwelcoming social environments that compound the reality of discrimination they face in their lives, thus impacting their daily life and relationship to the community. Specifically, I share the stories of individuals who have realized their identities in the heterochristian United States South—to understand how these environments impact and potentially delay the disclosure of queer persons.

It is critical to highlight the voices of LGBTQ individuals imbedded into environments where they are consistently rejected to further understand the relationship between environment and identity, thus introducing an understanding of how disclosure of gender and sexuality can be impacted by environments. Wilkins develops the necessity for storytelling as a way individuals are able to find themselves and define their identity and attributes by constructing their knowledge in relation to a group or groups of people. She says, "Stories are means by which cultural meanings are accessed, reproduced, and challenged, [sic] they are important resources for intersectional identity work" (Wilkins, 2012, p. 175). Throughout interviews, I gathered stories about individual experiences in a predominantly heteronormative environment, thus creating a greater understanding of how queer individuals reconcile their identities and presentation of it in an environment that has not been welcoming to them.

Aside from adding to the cultural understanding of the queer community, this study adds to the relationship between queer individuals and interpersonal and organizational communication. With interviews focusing on the relationships between individuals and the community they are surrounded by, as well as how these communities expressed their perceptions of the queer community indirectly, I was able to see how the organizational structure of the regions impacted perception of self and interactions with the community. Finally, I discuss the impact different environments have on individuals, thus developing a more nuanced

understanding of how an individual's identity presents and interacts with the world around them. I have used a Social Identity perspective to best understand the way that these community interactions influence the queer individual's ability to disclose their identity safely.

This chapter introduces the project, describes the queer community's cultural context, and explains my personal relationship in relation to the research and the queer community.

Cultural Context

In partnership with the Equality Federation Institute, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation evaluates the cultural climate in an area for queer individuals based on the region they have or are living in. This Municipal Equality Index, updated in 2021, takes into consideration a city's "laws, policies and services" offered towards queer individuals that live and work in their community. Cities are evaluated on six different measurable scales: non-discrimination laws, relationship recognition, municipality as employer, municipal services, law enforcement and relationship with the queer community. Each of these scales has been issued a variable point number where the HRC goes and verifies the status of inclusion efforts via municipal paperwork reflecting the legal enforcement of these issues. Issues evaluated span from legal protections to inclusion, including protection of youth from conversion therapy, same-and different sex domestic partner benefits, city services that support queer individuals that are experiencing houselessness, and a public position on LGBTQ equality. Each city is scored out of 100 points, with 506 cities studied in 2020. Overall, there is certainly an upwards trend being experienced in most states with 38 state averages increasing since 2019 and 94 cities earning the maximum 100 points. Important findings show the increase of progress across the United States South; however, several selected cities only gain points from the state required protections, such as College Station, Texas—scoring a twenty-two out of one hundred (HRC, 2021)

Another critical contextualization of the environments queer individuals is introduced to and growing up in is the voting and legislation that provides explicit discrimination based on gender identity and/or sexual orientation. As of January 2021, 21 states and Washington D.C. prohibit the discrimination against queer individuals in employment, housing, and public accommodations (Movement Advancement Project, 2021) despite the typical application of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to sexual orientation and gender identity. A large majority of municipalities have elected to take action to protect the queer persons in their areas due to the absence of federal and state nondiscrimination policies; however, others rely on the federal precedent that allows queer individuals to have secondary recourse after the initial discrimination has happened. Bostock v. Clayton County (2020) provides the secondary legal recourse for individuals who experienced employment discrimination on the basis of their gender identity or sexual orientation; however, this precedence was established only to allow for remedies instead of prevention of discrimination. Most recently in federal nondiscrimination legislation, H. R. 5: Equality Act was passed and signed into legislation by President Biden. However, the passage of this legislation does not necessarily engender a feeling of security for individuals across the United States, especially for those represented by Republican legislators. In the House, 206 out of 211 Republicans voted against the passage of the Equality Act almost eliminating the ability for this to become law, thus gutting the confidence queer individuals have for their elected officials to advocate for their rights. Simultaneously, there are many local ordinances that are continuing to undermine the recent passage of the Equality Act. Montgomery City Council (AL) struck down the proposal of Nondiscrimination Ordinances by local mayor in August 2021, Mayor Walter Bietsch (PA) vetoed an already passed ordinance in October 2021, while other

areas are passing these ordinances on very narrow margins despite federal law supporting the notions.

Another test for the safety of the queer community is by tracking the amount of hate crimes that are experienced by the community and the regions that have the heaviest amount of these crimes. The 2020 Hate Crime Statistics by the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program found that Hate Crimes have increased by approximately six percent from 2019 to 2020. This increase reflected a decrease in the targeting of individuals with a minority sexual orientation, but an increase in the crimes motivated by gender identity. This data from 2020 continues to alarm advocates, considering that at least 44 gender nonconforming and transgender individuals were killed in 2020 (HRC, 2020). However, estimates form the FBI and other equality agencies say that estimates for transgender and gender nonconforming violence are likely under representative of the number of crimes reported. The executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality contends that "Many transgender people do not feel comfortable or safe reporting crime to the police. In fact, according to our U.S. Transgender Survey, more than half (57%) of respondents said they would feel uncomfortable asking the police for help if they needed it" (Yurcaba, 2021). The distrust in local law enforcement to keep transgender individuals safe is a microcosm of the environment that are living in, one where they are targeted and cannot trust the individuals who are tasked at preventing the community, due to the large amount of queer ignorance or intolerance that happens in their communities—the concern increases when trans individuals of color are expected to interact with the police with "67 percent of Black trans people, 59 percent of Latino/a trans people and 59 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native trans people reporting discomfort turning to the police" (Yurcaba, 2021). A current barrier that shows further distrust in the system designed to protect the lives of

queer people is with the stark absence of state and local legislation protecting individuals from violence related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Across the United States, there are 17 states with no hate crime legislation or legislation that does not cover sexual orientation or gender identity, 11 states that only include sexual orientation, 1 state with an open interpretation to be able to include either in situational context and 22 states that include both sexual orientation and gender identity (Movement Advancement Project. "Equality Maps: Hate Crime Laws). These legislative lapses are a clear environmental barrier that have the potential to impact the hope of an individual to be able to present as their preferred gender identity or sexual orientation in addition to feeling like their safety can be compromised by the disclosure.

Research Framing

Although some compelling research on the experiences of queer individuals has been produced, the discussion on how the environment shapes their identity and the disclosure of their identity is largely undiscovered. This thesis shifts the focus of LGBTQ centered research from a generic approach of how the United States on whole impacts persons to a discussion about the implications of unwelcome environments on identity development. Through my study, I develop a detailed and personal understanding on the way that environments impact LGBTQ persons and their relationship to their lives and how they perform their sexuality or gender identity. Specifically, I share narratives that develop the interactions of LGBTQ persons in heteronormative environments. This thesis intends to develop the experiences of different queer individuals as they disclose their gender and/or sexuality in pockets of the United States that predominantly ascribe to, project, and enforce a heteronormative lifestyle. By developing a thread of narratives, the primary objective is to characterize the current influence heteronormative cultures have on queer individuals and the delay it may cause on their

gender/sexuality disclosure. Hopefully through the exploration of these narratives, the research will be able to gauge the impact of growing up in a heteronormative area, as well as determining how much an environment impacts the individual's willingness to disclose. Heteronormative environment is define by an environment that presents heterosexuality as the normal sexual orientation and only recognizes the gender binary (APA, 2022) By doing a retrospective study, this will aid the individuals in thinking back on the way they were raised and allow them to assess whether or not they were directly or indirectly impacted by the predominant cultural views of their upbringing. Thus, the research hypothesizes that there is a direct relationship between the staunch heteronormative environment an individual is raised in and the age they feel comfortable disclosing.

Two research questions guided this study, informing my method choice and participant population. These overarching questions are:

1. How being in a heterochristian southern environment influence an individual's development of their sexual or gender identity?
2. How being in a heterochristian southern environment impact an individual's willingness to disclose their identity?

Personal Positioning and Intersectionality

My relationship to the queer community exists in an intersection between my lived experiences and the lived realities of other members of the queer community; however, coming from a position of privilege—, white and upper middle class—has created a unique position in which there is both privileged and marginalized components of my identity (Combahee River

Collective, 1982). Considering how intertwined my individual identity is with the group I am working with; it is imperative to recognize that my perceptions of the embrace of queer individuals guided and informed the way I approached the following research. Being raised and educated in the South informs my perspectives, as well, especially considering how I align myself with members outside the queer community. In conjunction with my queer identity, my political perspectives existing outside of the Republican norm, as well as my lack of religious beliefs continues to inform my relationship with the heteronormative majority.

My identity continues to shape my interactions with cisgender heteronormative individuals, as well as the queer community especially considering I preform my queerness in an open fashion when going out into the community. The queer community encompasses an incredibly diverse profile, including different demographics, sexual orientations, and gender representations (Pew Research, 2013). However, within every community, orientation, and gender representation the natural evolution of these groups leads to subgroups and can also engender different jargon. Some developments of jargon are universal within the queer community, such as 'ace' and a colloquialism for asexual; however, there are regional or community-based developments of jargon, such as 'two-spirit' which is a direct translation of the Ojibwe term which refers to an individual who performs both, socially perceived, components of masculinity and femininity (Balsam, 2004). Considering the differences, a community may have in their relationship with their queerness, it is imperative that I respect the different experiences I may encounter given the different lived experiences of regional groups of queer persons. Continuing to be reflexive in the research I am engaged in and adopting regional jargon when needed, I was able to build deep relationships with the respondents and overcome the intersectional differences.

An essential component of this research is understanding intersectionality as a premise and how it functions with the interpretations of lived experiences, because intersectionality is more than just a descriptor for multiple layers of identity within an individual. Instead, intersectionality moves to approach the different inequalities and consider how they shape the interactions of people from different race, gender, class, and other bodies. Crenshaw (2014) addresses the way that individuals of different experiences interact:

> The conjoining of multiple systems of subordination has been variously described as compound discrimination … intersectionality addresses the way that specific acts and policies create burdens that flow along these axes constituting the dynamic or active aspects of disempowerment. To use a metaphor of an intersection, we first analogize the various axes of power, i.e., for instance, race, ethnicity, gender, or class, as constituting the thoroughfares which structure the social, economic, or political terrain. It is through these avenues that disempowering dynamics travel. … In fact, the systems often overlap and cross each other, creating complex intersections at which two, or three or more of these axes may meet. Indeed, racialized women are often positioned in the space where racism or xenophobia, class, and gender meet. They are consequently subject to injury by the heavy flow of traffic traveling along all these roads (Crenshaw, 2014, 17-8).

Approaching intersectionality from a perspective that enables the essential interaction that the identity has with the oppression that individuals experience. Structures of power and how that interaction created facets of understanding the unique lived experiences each person has. Without viewing these identities in the different contexts, they present and focus only on the discrimination that happens as a result becomes counterproductive and enables the oppression to continue. Thus, by utilizing an individual identity in comparison with the heteronormative presentations in different communities the research enables the development of a more comprehensive perspective of life experiences.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the thesis project, reviewed the national and local protections for queer individuals and the cultural context in which these provide, and explained my identity in relation to the queer community, my own queerness and the United States heterochristian South. As previously discussed, literature exploring the lived realities of queer individuals is abundant, but there are few retrospective approaches to contribute to the understanding of the role's communities play in shaping presentation and disclosure of identity for queer individuals. Through this study, I have come to better understand how an unwelcoming community can stimy the development of an identity, as well as the implications of this stymieing on an individual's future presentation of their identity, across the United States in predominantly heteronormative communities. The following chapters contextualize the research process and research findings. The aim of the current chapter, Chapter One, is to introduce the study and its position to communication scholarship. I also introduce the research purpose and research questions that guided this research. I finish with a reflection on my personal relationship with the research and how that relationship informed the development of the study.

Chapter Two summarizes the existing literature relevant to this study. Initially, I introduce the historical background of queer liberation and social discussions surrounding queer bodies. I then consider Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity and how it interacts with queer bodies and their identity development and disclosure. I offer a brief reflection on the foundation of queer theory and its interaction with communication scholarship. I then consider the discussions surrounding coming out and the different perspectives scholar's approach. Finally, I discuss the cultural relevance of this research and the social conditions that queer individuals confront.

Chapter Three begins by introducing the research design and the methodological rational behind the employment of narrative structures within this thesis. I then discuss the recruitment process for research participants, the participant's demography and a methodological reflection on the use of the remote interview process. I also offer discussion around the ethical considerations taken and the interview procedure and content analysis used to assist in the accuracy and trustworthiness of this research.

Chapter Four presents my analysis my analysis of identity development and an individual's environment. I weave in sections of interviews from participants in order to amplify their voices and utilize their rational and justification as opposed to risking subconscious researcher intervention. I isolate three key themes that presented when I asked the participants specific questions about their identity discovery in their heterochristian southern environment: existence, visibility and norm setting. The existence theme explores how heterochristian environments suppresses an individual's ability to know about queer individuals and queer identities, thus delaying their own identity realization. Visibility discusses the ways in which communities change their discussion about queer issues and individuals that are visible in the community to discourage an understanding of the queer community, again delaying identity realization. The last theme discussed in this chapter will be norms setting and how the heterochristian norms present in their environment discourage identity realization. Throughout the three themes, as well as at the end of Chapter Four, I will use Communication Theory of Identity to further contextualize the relationship between identity development and heterochristian environmental influences.

Chapter Five continues the analysis, this time, on identity disclosure and the individual's environment. Just like Chapter Four, the participant stories are interwoven to maintain cohesion

throughout the thesis, as well as continue the amplification of participant perspectives. The relationship between identity disclosure and an individual's environment: visibility and tolerance. Visibility in Chapter Five discusses how an absence of queer representation in an individual's community plays a role in their delayed disclosure. The tolerance theme isolates how community discussion about queer individuals impacts their willingness to disclose their identity. Throughout both themes, as well as at the end of Chapter Five, I will use Communication Theory of Identity to develop further how delayed disclosure impacts an individual's relationship to their queerness.

Chapter Six presents the conclusion of the research and considers the future research implications brought forward throughout this research project. Then I offer a reflection on the methods used and present a personal reflection regarding the personal impact that the research and research process had on me, the researcher.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Background

The Stonewall Riots marked the moment where the queer community chose to not hide in isolated communities, but instead began the discussion and fight for equal rights. However, years earlier queer coming out models were beginning to be produced as a response to the removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1977 (Clendinen & Nagourney, 1999). Often called the Hairpin Drop Heard Around the World, a name given after the use of a "hairpin drop" as a code for letting another person know you were gay without saying it explicitly (Gioia, 1969), Stonewall is what started the nationwide decision that there was a right to be able to be openly queer is about their identity and it was a right the community deserved.

As advocacy movements spread across the country, individuals in the media felt one of the best ways to fully encompass the queer experience—showing the discrimination that queer bodies experiences—was to tell their individual stories (Clendinen & Nagourney, 1999). However, as the rights movement was beginning to gain national traction, the HIV/AIDS epidemic was in full swing across the United States. Thus, was born the narrative that this medical crisis, experienced across all sexualities, as a punishment from a religious authority and contrasting the attack that queer individuals were a threat to the American family values—the nuclear family (Eaklor, 2008). This narrative framing left, only, the queer individuals who were out to fight for rights alone while allies and closeted queer folx were worried about being labeled as immoral and become a social outcast (Clendinen & Nagourney, 1999).

The public consensus about the queer community was codified across the United States though "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," a 1994 Clinton administration policy for the United States military in which queer individuals would not be asked if they were queer and as a result, they should not say they are queer (Eaklor, 2008). Despite this policy being overturned during the Obama administration in 2011, ramifications of that policy were felt during the Trump administration in 2019 when the administration restricted transgender military service (Johonson, 2016). This was later overturned by President Biden in 2021 (BBC, 2021).

While previous legislation shows the hostile environment, more recent legislative decisions have shown the shifting social perception of the queer community. June 16th, 2015 marks the day that the United States Supreme Court established the federal right for same sex couples to marry (Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015). This decision came only two years after the ruling that Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act violated the 5th Amendment through the definition of marriage as a union by man and woman (Windsor v. United States, 2012). Through a combination of legislative review and public opinion, there is an evident shifting sentiment about the presence and tolerance of the queer community across the United States—the culture has clearly shifted from the perception in the early 1990's and earlier.

Communicating about queer identity is one of the only efforts that has been proven to legitimize queer identities, even if it is slow progress (Clendinen & Nagourney, 1999; Cusick et. Al, 2020). By centering queer voices in this research, though having them lead the narrative, the intention is to continue the campaign for cultural acceptance across the United States for the queer community.

I started this review by exploring the historical discussions that have surrounded the queer body throughout United States and the importance of discussing queer identities in relation

to equity. I decided to start with this area in order to appropriately situate the social conditions that have normalized the rejection of the queer body on face. Then I present literature surrounding the theoretical background for the research—Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity. I then introduce a foundational understanding of queer theory and the application of queer theory as a resistance to the heteronormative pressure inundating queer folx. Following the theoretical background, I explored southern heterochristian culture and the resistance mechanism used in the United States South through queer liberation strategies. I then reviewed literature of identity disclosure, or coming out, to oneself and one's community, including disclosure response trends and the conflicting experiences. Finally, to conclude the review, I provide the essential cultural context surrounding disclosure. Throughout each of the literature subsections, I demonstrate gaps in existing literature and provide justification for the study done. The following sections will explore and present literature and findings.

Communication of Identity Theory

To understand the relationship between the identity of someone and how they develop their identity, it is essential to understand how the interactions someone has with a community become central in their identity negotiation. Thus, I use the Communication of Identity Theory as the theoretical framework for an analysis of queer individuals living in the United States South. By using CTI as the framework for queer communication analysis, I add to an understanding of how queer individuals decide when to present each component of their identity and if they perform them separately or interdependently. This framework creates the space to analyze the varied factors from the same environment that influence queer identities differently. CTI contends that identity is constructed through four different identity pieces: personal, relational, communal, and enacted (Hecht, 1993). Hecht began by exploring "enter ethnic" communication

and isolating the way an individual's identity can influence social consequences. While their focus was on inter-ethnic communication, they also discovered that an individual's identity and their communication have a direct relationship, instead of the indirect impact, in how social outcomes occur (Littlejohn, 2009, p. 139-141)

CTI creates an understanding of identity through discussing the four components the go into managing and negotiating which part of a community you fall into. The personal frame is the way an individual perceives themselves in relation to themselves. This often comes in phrases that use 'I' language—showing the individual's concept of self through their own framing. Second, the enacted frame is the performative component of an individual's identity. The way an individual performs is an identity independent of the way they see themselves—communication is an identity, thus the way an individual communicates themselves to the individuals around them is identity, not just necessarily cause or influenced by the identity itself. The enactment frame shows how individuals, both, consciously and unconsciously communicate their identity to individuals around them (Hecht, 2009a). For the queer community, this can be dressing to appear cisgender or heterosexual, removing PRIDE items from their bags or person, or strategically changing their physical appearance—removing piercings or covering tattoos—all in an effort to develop an identity that is not going to be blatantly rejected by society for safety. Queer identities, in strategy thus, can be covert or overtly displayed (Nicholas, 2006), by wearing clothing items or following a flagging trend, that covertly show they are a queer person.

Next, the relational frame is how identities are presenting in different relationships, as well as how those who wear PRIDE apparel are overtly displaying their identity and disclosing to the community around the different identities can converge in settings with multiple groups of people. The relational frame also, encompasses how different individual's identities intersect,

such as a parent and child—the parent's identity exists because of the child. Lastly, the communal frame exists as how individuals contribute to the perception of a community via distinctive characteristics. Communal identities are identities that are developed in common by groups or is a cultural touchstone that presents across an entire group, instead of by individuals. These overarching attributes being assigned to a singular group create a risk: someone that does not identify with the community being assumed a part of the community and experience the discrimination of a group they are not a part of. While Hecht contends this can increase the empathy across community boundaries, there is an additional risk of animosity towards the community they are being presumed a part of. It is crucial to understand that CTI defends the interdependency between these four components and how each of these builds off the other (Hecht, 2009a). Consider that one's perception of self as a nonbinary individual—their personal identity—is different from how they are viewed by relatives as the queer family member—relational identity. In addition to these, the way that one's community is perceived in a region frames the social status and privileges they experience—communal identity. When individuals are creating their individual identity, one of the main development mechanisms is contingent on how they express it though average interactions with others (Hecht, Collier & Ribeau, 1993). Thus, since CTI contends that the four layers of identity are interdependent, cultural, and interpersonal interactions inform the way an individual interacts and communicates with the individuals around them (Hecht, 1993).

The use of CTI when looking at the environmental pressures places on queer individuals it allows the communication field to have a clearer understanding of the relational dynamics' experiences. This is in line with the original application of CTI consider the goal is to "encourage a broader definition consisting of multiple frames of identity" (Hecht, 2009b, p.141)

Additionally, CTI posits self-concept and identity as an interactive social experience that is dependent on the context in a given environment or time (Hecht, 2009b). Much like this thesis contends, the perception of queer individuals has changed over time, as have their environments, however the queer body is the reactive party to adapt to their environment. By having this perspective contextualized through queer voices offers an essential picture of context-specific communication and social interactions (Hecht, 2009b). Since CTI is centered on managing the way identity is understood and presented (Hecht, 2009b), using it to look at the way that a queer person's identity is impacted by an environment it satisfies the core concept of communication satisfaction. Before the application of CTI, marginalized groups were often seen as homogenous groups, instead of the diverse experiences encompassed in the same identity as CTI does (Hecht, 2009b).

Additionally, this research aims to bridge some of the current gaps of CTI though the use of it as the theoretical framework of this thesis. By having an intersectional participant pool, there is an inclusion of the political complexities experienced by different persons in a community (Tracey, 2013). As a result, this research begins to lay the groundwork for discussions on the root cause of bi-erasure, as well as some analysis on the religious undertones in the United States South Muslim communities instead of the traditional focus on the Anglo-Christian centers of the Bible Belt. Further, an intersectional criticism of Hecht's theoretical background is the absence of the indigenous and mestiza traditions that many Latinx folx use to develop and inform their identity (De Los Santos Upton, 2019, p. 123-142). This research intends to use, CTI as support for the contention that heterochristian environments lead to identity suppression in a majority of cases. Lastly, the research uses CTI to see how Queer identities interact with more precaution in heterochristian environments regarding disclosure

decisions—directly or indirectly. Therefore, this research grants a more complete picture of queer experiences in unwelcome or intolerant environments via CTI. Understanding the identity frames is critical to then highlighting the complexities related to queerness, identity development and identity disclosure.

Queer Theory

The basis of a majority of queer concepts exists in a root of queer theory. Queer theory initially began when Michel Foucault discussed the premise of cultural control, exclusion and selection and the way these issues place all persons into sexual and gender binaries leading to systems of cultural oppression on micropolitical levels. Via the emphasis on everyday engagements, we see that the queer identity is reduced to the levels of control that can be placed on the body 'in the institutions of marriage, motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality, in the 'private' relations between the sexes and in the everyday rituals and regimens that govern women's relationships to themselves and their bodies (Sawicki, 1998). Beyond this realization, individuals began to attempt to subvert the norms being placed on the by the heteronormative structure. This led to a more empowered understanding of how gender and sexuality operate in a way to increase an individual's power and control over their own environment. Queer theory as a premise focuses on more than just discuss gender and sexuality, instead it looks at the ways individuals can challenge the social norms and the expectations of society placed on them as a result of the way they preform gender and sexuality. As a response to gender and sexuality exploration, society began to push concepts of heteronormativity significantly farther than they were pushed in the past.

One of the most powerful forms of normalization in Western social systems is heteronormativity. Through heteronormative discourses, abject and abominable bodies, souls,

persons, and life forms are created, examined, and disciplined through current regimes of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1978/1990). Heteronormativity, as the invisible center and the presumed bedrock of society, is the quintessential force creating, sustaining, and perpetuating the erasure, marginalization, disempowerment, and oppression of sexual others (Yep, 2003).

As a response to the normalization of heteronormative pressure, queer theory developed into a critical study forcing people to ask of themselves what it means to be an individual, as well as part of a group of people. For this study, I use queer theory as the starting threshold for the way individuals fulfill and perform themselves. Queer theory breaks down the way non-heterosexual identities and nonnormative gender identities are embedded and normalized into queer/LGBTQ+ spaces, evolving the interpersonal discussions and frameworks of communication. Queerness is at the root of individuals as they embrace themselves and how they interact with all persons. Queering spaces and activities generate an increased breadth of unity even in places that are not necessarily considered queer. This research takes into account the various places and events that can be queered, while understanding the regional resistance to queerness and how they impact an individual's relationship with the area and themselves.

Southern Heterochristian Culture

Within the commonly accepted queer narrative, Stonewall was the watershed moment that pushed queer liberation fights to the edge. However, it is often presented and understood as a random event and attack, not a result of the night after night raids on New York City bars—arrests being shown on the news. In an interview, activist Tom Carr explains "The riots didn't just happen, you know, one night. Over the course of many months leading up to the riots there were raids on all these bars and as a teenager you know, night after night, I would see on the evening news coverage of people being busted in bars and dragged away in paddy wagons"

(Hooper, 2019), Regardless, the drive and motivation growing out of liberation organization's spread quickly and rapidly.

In the fall of 1976, the first Southeastern Gay conference was held and had over three hundred persons in attendance, but *The Daily Tar Heel* chose to report that there were only twenty attendees then they corrected the following day (Hooper, 2020). At the end of the conference, the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA) offered to host the following year's conference, a task that they were familiar with after hosting the 1975 Great Southeastern Lesbian Conference (Hooper, 2019). "The conferences have been described by some attendees as being important for the formation and coalescing of the nascent gay and lesbian community of the Southeast — a place where young gay men and lesbians met for the first time, learned about each other, and recognized their common political and social goals" (Hooper, 2020, p. 20).

In a direct response to the surge of activism across the country, the "traditional family values" movement was championed by Anita Bryant—a Christian leader and activist (Fingerhut, 2011). Bryant actively waged political attack campaigns to repeal the anti-discrimination practices and laws across the country. In 1977, Save Our Children Inc. spearheaded the anti-queer rhetoric in an effort to repeal a Florida anti-discrimination policy, thus pushing the debate around queer equity and rights into national spotlight with the Christian Church as the main voice (Fingerhut, 2011).

By the 1980's the focus of the queer community came onto the legal protection of their relationships—this push was due to the reality of living in the wake of the AIDS epidemic. Queer couples realized that there was no protection for queer partnerships if their partner was in the hospital or they died and there was a division of assets. They could not make decisions for

their partners if they were medically incapacitated, nor did they have any legal claim to any funds or property in the other partner's name after death (Klarman,2013).

Moving into the 1990's, more states began to define marriage as between a man and a woman, as did several states, such as Hawaii, rule that same-sex couples have the right to marry (Chauncey, 2013) and Vermont who declared civil unions to have the same legal rights as a married couple (Eaklor, 2008). These state movements led to the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) being passed in Congress in 1996, only to be overturned in 2013, stating that the federal government only recognized marriage between a man and a woman and states were not obligated to honor queer marriage that were performed in other states (Chauncey, 2013). In 2015, queer couples were granted the federal recognition of marriage through Obverfeller v Hodges (2015). However, federal protection does not create an inherent safe feeling across the country.

Conservative religious views, which are heavily concentrated in the United States South, continue to play a significant role in the disruption of queer equity. A Pew Research Report found that "two in three people who attend religious services on a weekly basis oppose same-sex marriage" while "two in three people who attend religious services less than monthly favor it" (Connelly, 2012). In a 2014 report by Southerners on New Ground (SONG) establishes a queer voice and perspective about being Black and queer in the South:

Small town and country life is defined by networks and cultures of familiarity and kinship offered to those seen as an "authentic" part of whatever insider culture has been created in a particular place. In the South this has been defined by white and Christian supremacy deeply invested in promoting whiteness, standards of morality, and norms of gender and sexuality as measures of an authentic and acceptable culture. This insider culture which breeds conditions of

violence, isolation, silence, criminalization, and poverty has created mass exile of small town and rural Southern Black gender non-conforming bodies into urban areas both in and out of the South (Cortes, 2014, p. 8)

Coming Out

Coming out is the colloquial phase used to define disclosing one's gender identity or sexuality. One of the first contextualization's given about the coming out process is in 1971, Dank found that unlike other marginalized groups, queer individuals do not have the benefit of socialization to support their experience. Less often do queer folx have queer parents, so unlike racial and ethnic individuals, queer children do not grow up hearing about what it is like to be queer (Dank, 1971). However, the most productive conceptualization of coming out is the way an individual develops their queerness and then chooses to integrate this identity into their personal and social lives (de Monteflores & Schultz).

Coming out is often seen as one linear path where an individual is hiding their identity to someone fully living their queerness to the performance of their desire (de Monteflores & Schultz, 1978); however, as more research has come out and more stories have been told about the identity disclosure process, it is clear that most individuals do not come out in a linear fashion, but in a more nuanced way that can include self-identification and disclosure, thus a more complex understanding of coming out was at least two significant events (Harry, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1996)

Self-identification, or coming out to oneself, encompasses a deep understanding of queerness and then the cognitive change that leads to a queer label. This realization of queerness and understanding their relationship, the personal frame of identity negation. The personal frame

provides direct insight into the fundamental components in identity construction (Hecht, 2009a). In comparison, disclosure of identity, or coming out to others, involves the interpersonal interaction and exchange of information. This interpersonal interaction pulls in an individual's relational frame from CTI (Hecht, 2009a). Whether that is the change in how an individual exists in a relationship—someone being disowned after disclosure changes their identity as a child, considering that relational identity is dependent on having a parent—or the identity that others ascribe to them is disrupted because of their disclosure—a singer in a Christian band losing a fan base because their queerness conflicts with the religion, considering their relational identity as a famous Christian singer is dependent on having a fanbase. The delineation of these two concepts as two different coming out events has yet to be developed and explored, thus the research establishes some precursors for this conversation. By looking at the environmental impact to how someone finds and explores their identity as a separate communicative touch point than the environmental impact on identity disclosure, the causation for delays can be isolated in order to track the two separate experiences.

Current communication and queer theory support that the willingness for an individual to come out is related to how concerned they are about the responses they would get upon disclosure, as well as their perceptions on how their community perceived queer individuals (Frank &Leary, 1991; Oswald et. al, 2018; Kauffman, 2022; Harvard Youth Poll, 2022). While the natural inclination would be to assume individuals who feel attached to their queer identity would be comfortable disclosing their identity, Frank, and Leary (1991) found that a willingness to disclose was more closely related to the assumed reactions of their environment than it was their degree of self-acceptance. Harvard Youth Poll (2022) found an identical result—individuals that feel like their community will accept their queerness are most likely to come out.

When an individual is concerned about the environmental responses, they begin to practice a high degree of caution and selectivity in who they are disclosing to due to a fear of the unknown repercussions that may result from the disclosure. Some fears among queer individuals who waited to disclose were long-term detrimental impacts to relationships with their family, fear of rejection, and physical abuse (Savin-Williams, 1996; Wells & Kline, 1987), as well as potential economic sanctions, social rejection, loss of status and overt discrimination (Harry, 1993) “It is these potential negative reactions which affect being out among most homosexuals regardless of where they are in any hypothetical sequence of stages." (Harry, 1993, p.28).

Cultural Context

When individuals are contemplating disclosing their sexuality, there are a plethora of costs versus benefits for the individual to consider. While there is a significant layer of increased self-acceptance and confidence associated with disclosed sexuality (Zaikman, 2020), the drawback of rejection reactions from family members and friends led to potential increases of internalized sexual stigma and anxiety (Pistella, 2020). Evaluating the layering of individual perception of changes as well as how a disclosure as a new sexual orientation changes the dynamic of a family and all social relationships that people have. Less than one out of five queer people felt as if their relatives were fully accepting of their disclosed identity and about half felt as if they were tolerant but not fully accepting—these figures are a product of the potential to “revolutionize the family relationships” (Zaikman, 2020). As an individual is wrought with fear about the responses they may receive from family members, their disclosure process may be stunted or halted all together in an act of emotional preservation. Further, due to the longevity of self-discovery process any stunting of the disclosure process can result in later in life disclosure to an individual’s support network—an action that can even further reduce the amount of support

they have (Katz-Wise, 2016). Having a safe network allows for individuals to rehearse their disclosure for the less safe and secure environments, because there will be a routine and it will feel less daunting for an individual. In addition to having practice, there are less risks and disclosure around safe groups allows people to gauge the responses they will get from others, this comes from the "comfortable environment and psychological support already associated with the relationship" (Pistella, 2020). This familiar disclosure often comes before any other disclosure (Zaikman, 2020), because there is less likely to be severe repercussions, if any, on the individual disclosing. Disclosure on any part becomes a relief to the individuals because they are able to reduce the stress and negative psychological experiences associated with concealing an individual's identity (Pistella, 2020).

Current Study

Even with all of the connections and growth current research is making about the queer experience, researchers do not yet have a clear picture of how an environment impacts an individuals' identity development. The coming out process involves coming out to oneself, then considering the potential reactions and impact of community rejection, which previous literature contends is one of the more cumbersome components of identity development and disclosure. Therefore, the current study wanted to situate these coming out stories in the center of the environmental narratives projected upon them, in particular how their relationship with their queerness changed with heterochristian conversations. The current study aims to address some of the gaps in coming out literature by focusing on a specific section of the United States and addressing common themes experienced through identity development (Chapter 4) and identity disclosure (Chapter Five). These factors resulted in identity suppression, delayed disclosure and

the change in self and communal relational patterns, the degree of disclosure, as well as the mode of disclosure will be explored within their relationship to their identity and community.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I explored the literature that has informed the research, as well as discussing identity, identity formation and identity disclosure. In order to maintain research focus, I sought out literature specific to the coming out process and connected this to the application of identity development through Communication Theory of Identity. I also made sure to focus on the community messages that are dispersed to the queer individuals as they are coming out and forming their identity. I conclude with discussion about the paths of the research study and the gaps this thesis fills through the following research questions:

1. How being in a heterochristian southern environment influence an individual's development of their sexual or gender identity?
2. How being in a heterochristian southern environment impact an individual's willingness to disclose their identity?

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

As previously mentioned, this research explored the ways that a heterochristian Southern community influences an individual's comfortability with their identity and their willingness to disclose their sexuality. More specifically, I looked at individual perspectives and understanding of how their social environment impacted their gender identity or sexuality in a community that is staunchly heteronormative environment. This chapter outlines the research methods, design and discusses the ethical undertakings germane to such sensitive work.

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative methodology, with a reliance on individual interviews. The use of interviews felt most appropriate with the goal of gathering narratives and stories based in lived experiences of individuals who formed their identity in these southern heteronormative environments. Southern States are framed and defined by the United States Federal Government as: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia (USFG**)**. By keeping all other intersecting identities as open as possible, the research was approach with a goal to amplify as many queer voices as possible. Because queer individuals are naturally occurring across the United States, it was not necessary to interview a control group of heterosexual individuals to have a baseline perspective to compare. While a quantitative research approach may have given a more board perspective of the queer community's insight on developing a queer identity in the South, a survey loses the detail richness that comes because of interpersonal communication. A qualitative interview was

necessary to understand the communicative relative of queer individuals throughout the United States South as they develop and navigate their identity

Use of Narrative Methodology

Using a narrative approach enables me to work towards the research aims of the study, given the personal nature of disclosing gender identity and/or sexuality. It is believed that the use of narrative methodologies "may give new and deeper insight" (Riley & Hawe, 2005, p.227) by centering the voice of the individual.

Research is partial to this approach because it allows for people to contextualize their experiences into meaningful stories, sometimes allowing for individuals to recognize the significance of the events in their lives. Narrative methods work to produce knowledge from the social and emotional consequences of life in comparison to an objective true and false perspectives (Polkinghome, 1988). Interviews position the power in the hands of the participant as they walk the researcher through their perspective and recall how significance is created within different contexts having the power to create themselves (Crossley, 2000). The use of a narrative method also positions the researcher to consider their active role in the research process while interacting with the research participants. Especially in interview context, there has been a growing awareness of the impact a researcher has on the perceptions of the participant and the way they construct their narratives in the context of an interview setting (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). In addition, researchers must be mindful of their own biases and how that can impact the analysis of data, exploring my personal positionality will be discussed further in this research.

Centering the research on the narratives of individuals allows for me, as a researcher, to focus on the experiences of individuals, help the participant make connections that they had not previously made and shows that reflective consideration of experience can change over time

(Duff, 2002). Thus, approaching the research from a narrative focus gives meaning though a systemic analysis and representation of lives though stories (Andrews, 2008). This focus allows for the researcher "to retain the complexity of the situation in which an action was undertaken and the emotional and multination meaning connected to it (Polkinghome, 1995, p.11) while conducting analysis. As discussed in Chapter Two, literature supports the overarching marginalization of the queer community in the South and the exploration of this non-heteronormative identity. By creating the space for amplification of a queer individual's voices, the research allows for to not lose any of the nuances of their stories and decisions (Polkinghome, 1995).

Approaching the research from a narrative perspective allowed me to consider and interrogate the experiences of individuals after the interviewee much simpler because their dories allowed me to get details they thought may not have been as significant. By giving an objective listening party, the researcher is being given the opportunity to look at an individual's immediate reaction to an event, as well as their perception of the event changes over time and how those actions and events impacted [perception of individuals (Duff & Bell, 2002). Since the research conclusions were guided by the stories of participants, I as a researcher was able to look deeper into formative life experiences of the participants (Chase, 2005).

Narrative inquiry then asks researchers to understand and give meaning to lives and experiences of individuals through stories and see how individual stories can interact (Andrews, 2008). In this research, I was motivated by how individuals came to understand themselves and disclose their identity to an unwelcoming community. Since the use of storytelling and narratives allow for a more nuanced understanding of environment and identity interactions and the relationships that exist in between the two conflicting realities these people are placed in.

Approaching the research from a narrative approach allows for the participant to feel more comfortable in the exchange, especially given the sensitive nature of the research. A narrative focused framework is set up to "retain the complexity of the situation in which an action was undertaken and the emotional and motivation meaning connected with it" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.11) as the focus of the research implications and analysis.

The use of narrative methods as the driving frame for research allowed for the amplification of the otherwise marginalized queer voice (Lieblich, 1998). I sought out a method that would amplify the queer voices and give them space to tell their stories instead of selecting a method that risks further marginalization of the queer body. Riesman outlines the important of narrative analysis is to "think beyond the surface of the text" (p. 13) and towards the larger discussion of coming out and the litany of influences. The narrative perspectives gave me more contextual details and nuance than any other mean would in the exploration of environmental relationships.

Participant Recruitment

In considering participant recruitment, the below inclusion and exclusions criteria were applied for this study.

Inclusion Criteria

1. A part of the LGBTQIA+ Community
2. Individuals grew up in the United States South

Exclusion Criteria

1. Individuals are cisgender and heterosexual

The participants for this study were recruited based on availability through convenience and snowball samplings. Prior approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (Appendix Six). Interview participants were chosen on the basis that they self-identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ (Queer) community, are over the age of 18 and lived in the United States South. Stories and data collected from interviews were analyzed and synthesized to generate a clearer picture of the research at hand. Interviewed individuals were recruited though social media platforms, personal contacts, word of mouth and email listserv. Information germane to the research was posted online in a flyer format to make the information easily shared between different potential research participants.

Once the research study was given approval from the Instructional Review Board**,** the researcher posted the information on social media platforms and distributed the information to queer organizations across the United States South via email or direct message so individuals interested in participating in the research process could contact the researcher. Once the individuals established primary contact with the researcher, they were sent a set of pre-screening questions in order to determine their eligibility. Interview participants were, then, chosen on the basis of meeting the criteria set for the study in terms of age, identity, and location. Once they were selected, the research participants were provided with a scheduling link for the interview and a copy of the informed consent document**.** Informed consent was confirmed with participants, and they were told they were able to discontinue their participation in the research process at any time.

Judith Butler (2008) discusses the relationship between the researcher and the research participant and the need for balance and an egalitarian relationship with the study participants. The participant is positioned as the storyteller and thus the expert on their lived experiences. The

role of the researcher is to, then, document those lived experiences as wholly as possible. The use of transcripts was a supplemental support to the researcher in order to accurately detail the experiences. A specific attention to the emphasis on anonymity was made to the research participants throughout the research process—this is especially critical because of the involvement of individuals who have not chosen to identify openly as queer outside safe spaces. Individuals from marginalized communities are often skeptical to be involved in research, because of the personal nature of the content, as well as the inherent risk to being outed in an unwelcoming area (Lee 1993). I wanted to create as many safety layers and mechanisms in order for the participants to feel as safe as possible with participation. The researcher went over the steps that are taken to keep their information confidential with each research participant. These steps included, but were not limited to: the use of pseudonyms in writing, the use of participant codes in place of identifiable names in registration and researcher documentation; the use of a verbal consent in order to avoid having the individual sign their legal name; keeping all interview documents in an encrypted file on a fingerprint protected laptop; and in line with Texas A&M IRB guidelines identifying a timeframe within with any identifying documents, including email correspondence, will be destroyed.

Participant Demography

I conducted individual interviews with ten individuals who self-identified as queer who grew up in the United States South. While small, the sample was large enough to create space for a wide variety of lived experiences and backgrounds to be shared. These interviews were conducted via Zoom and provided the participants with an additional layer of comfortability to aide in their story telling. Focusing on a group of this size allowed me to successfully look at common trends and notions, while ensuring a diverse population of lived experiences, variety of

races, cultures, sexual orientations and gender identities across the LGBTQ+ spectrum (Baker, Edwards and Doidge, 2012) write that "the deep and profound relationship often established between the researcher and respondent can often make up for a lack of varieties of people" (p.8). Working with marginalized groups, Baker continues, can be done in single case study situations., but sampling a small number, from six to twelve, may be more valuable if those participants can be reached (Baker, 2012).

The nine interviews represented a broad range of sexual orientation and gender identities, including racial, religious and class diversity. There were several individuals who spoke to their uncertainty in labels or their displeasure of the social expectation of needing labels but provided the one they are currently using or the one they feel is most applicable. The demographic details of each participant can be viewed below in Table One:

Name	**Age**	**Location (Current; Adolescent)**	**Gender Identity**	**Sexuality**
Stevie	**29**	**Texas**	**Female**	**Pansexual**
Loren	**23**	**Texas; Missouri**	**Female**	**Lesbian**
Robbie	**60**	**Texas**	**Male**	**Gay**
Shae	**26**	**Virginia**	**Female**	**Pansexual**
Jayden	**23**	**Arkansas**	**Gender Fluid**	**Pansexual**
Wren	**23**	**Iowa; Texas**	**Female**	**Queer**
Charlie	**28**	**North Carolina**	**Non-Binary**	**Queer**
Jody	**50**	**Florida; South Carolina**	**Female**	**Lesbian**
Page	**19**	**Texas**	**Non-Binary**	**Lesbian**

Table 1. Participant Demography

Setting

Each interview was conducted via Zoom to maintain accordance with an abundance of COVID-19 precautions; this modality also enabled an increased participant pool for the research. By using a remote form on interview, the research was about to have participants from across the United States to participate in the interviews. By increasing the distance and regions that are represented within the sample study, a more accurate picture of the queer interactions and experiences across the United States. The use of a digital style interview may increase amount of disclosure since individuals are in their own environment (Mathers, 2000); however, the inverse may occur since some respondents may feel like it is a violation of their privacy to have a researcher seeing into their personal space and personal life. While there are challenges to video call interviews, the results are comparative:

> When examining the quality of those words, arguably the most important point, it was apparent that the number of codes used in the open coding and the amalgamated coding was almost identical. This strongly indicates that both methods produced a comparable breadth of understanding. However, the number of statements on which those codes are founded was quite different, being 23.7 and 19.3% higher for the in-person interviews, open coding, and amalgamated coding respectively. This appears to suggest that for these interviewees at least there was a greater spread of distinct opinions, insight and viewpoints expressed within the topics by the in-person group, even if they did not move far from the core point of discussion (Krouwel, 2019).

The above literature tells us there is an ease related to face-to-face interviews, in this case being able to identify key topics and issues, that is lost with the utilization of video conferencing. However, there is still clear similarities in understanding and comprehendible data coming from the video interviews. Zoom simulates a face-to-face interview style allowing researchers to read

many nonverbal cues given by the participant without the risk of disease transmission, given the current state of society.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting research centered on a marginalized group of people in an unwelcoming and intolerant environment carries risks—the most serious of which is the potential to out individuals who are not open about their sexual orientation or gender identity away from the community spaces they feel safe in. To limit this risk, pseudonyms were adopted, as well as editing any details that would put their anonymity at risk.

For this study, participants were required to be over the age of 18, thus parental participation is not necessary. For each of the participants, the researcher provided the interviewee with an informed consent form and reemphasized that they would not disclose their identifiable information of the individuals. Aside from the selected pseudonyms and state the participant lived in, no personal identifying information of the participant was recorded in the analysis, synthesis and resulting text from his study. The researcher selected pseudonyms from an online random name generator to eliminate any biases in pseudonym selection. There was/is the small chance that someone reading the study that knows the participant intimately, might be able to guess the identity of the participant. The researcher disclosed this risk in the informed consent form. Any identifying information was stored on a password protected device and will be stored on an encrypted password protected server for the duration required by Texas A&M Institutional Review Board with all identifying information destroyed after that period. To maintain consistency with research goals, the final analysis of the data has been made available to the general public through Texas A&M to the general public in order to contribute to the academic conversation about queer individuals.

Data Collection: Semi Structured Interview

Before the interview, participants were given an informed consent document that detailed the topic of research. For my research, after the basic demographic questions, I began every interview with the phrase "So, tell me you're coming out story." This allowed for the participant to control the tone and pace of the interview from the beginning, as well as ensuring that my words or tone did not dictate their storytelling from my verbal or nonverbal input. I allowed the interviewees to tell their coming out story uninterrupted until there was a pause in their telling, or they came to what they felt like was the end to their coming out story, at that pause I tried to encourage more detail without having much verbal input. For example, if they were discussing their experience coming out to an aunt and had an extended pause, I may say something like:

1. How did that make you feel?
2. Are there other moments that you felt the same way?
3. Tell me more about that

These were only used to offer additional guidance to the participants when there were these pauses in the participant's coming out story.

Once the individual felt like they told their story completely, I moved to a more specific questioning approach in hopes of allowing the participant to make connections they previously had not. First, I went back and followed up on any details form stories, importantly what happened and when to correctly relay their story in the research. Second, I walked through specific questions related to their experiences in the South while discovering their identity and coming out to the people around them. In the last moments of the interview, once all questions had been covered, I asked the participant if there were any other moments or stories that they felt were critical in their identity development that they did not already bring forward.

The study consisted of nine virtual interviews by the researcher which was recorded on Zoom and transcribed by the researcher. These transcriptions and raw data, as well as any identifying information, on a fingerprint protected laptop device in an encrypted folder.

Information Analysis

The interviews were individually analyzed for common themes to aide in trend analysis of all the interviewees. Each interview has been paired down and quotations will be selected to be used in the analysis. All identifying information, except for the location individuals were raised, has be anonymized. The research centralizes on common themes and narratives coming out of each interview, while isolating differences that make each experience unique to provide each individual the autonomy of their stories.

The researcher began by looking for word repetition—using the words that come up multiple times in an interview show that these are the salient issues in the mind of the respondent. D'Andrade contends that "perhaps the simplest and most direct indication of schematic organization in naturalistic discourse is the repetition of associative linkages" (1991, p. 294); further, they develop "indeed, anyone who has listened to long stretches of talk, whether generated by a friend, spouse, workmate, informant, or patient, knows how frequently people circle through the same network of ideas" (1991, p. 287). Whether these words come up explicitly or in description, it shows that there are recurring themes in the individual's life that they think are important. Once the words are developed and isolated, relationships between the words were able to be mapped and connected in a conceptual way with explanations of the significance of the relationships. The main goal of utilizing word repetition is to enable a focus without the researcher making things overfit the products of the interview and create patterns

they want to develop within the research. This mapping engenders accurate results and provides a comprehensive review of the interviews providing workable data.

Once the initial coding and mapping was complete, the interview data was sectioned out into the two main chapters and sub structure was developed visually with sticky notes on the researcher's front door. This approach allowed me to move evidence pieces around to unite the nine different narratives into a cohesive story of queer identity development and disclosure. This approach allowed me to explore how individual coming out stories can interact to structure a full narrative approach, despite having nine primary sources. While taking a more directed questioning style would have produced a more structured and sequenced methods process, I believe it would have compromised the integrity of the coming out stories I was told.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I revisit the research aim and consider the interactions necessary to produce this research. I introduce narrative analysis and the goals of utilizing narratives and small scope interviews instead of panels or surveys. I then broke down the participant recruitment process, the sampling method and introduce the participants and their demography. I also discussed the justification for using Zoom as the format for interviews. I then discuss the data analysis process of the stories and offer ethical reflection of the interview and analysis process.

INTERLUDES

To establish a clear picture of the participants and how their experiences came to be, their disclosure experiences are essential context. Before each of the Analysis and Discussion chapters—Chapter Three and Four—five coming out stories will be introduced. The five introduced will be five of the most heavily involved participants in the chapter, along with their age, gender identity, sexuality, and their location—both during critical identity development times, as well as if they have relocated. The five stories introduced in Chapter Three: Robbie, Wren, Jody. Shae, and Page. The other four participants will be introduced in Chapter Four.

Robbie

I was living in Dallas, after college. Actually, I left college a semester away from graduating, had a nervous breakdown and said screw it I'm moving to Dallas and coming out, so I did that and came out with a gusto [in Dallas].

Then I met someone, and we decided to move to Chicago, and I always told myself I would not tell my parents unless they asked me, and that was back in the day. And then they asked. So, I told them, and they freaked out.

I didn't talk to my dad for three or four years and didn't talk to my mom for almost a year. Mom finally got over it, and dad learned to live with it. And that is it.

Wren

The first person I told was the guy I was dating at the time, he identified as bisexual, so it was not a big deal to tell them and that was how I identified as well as the time. And then slowly, as you know, things went on, I told other people I nobody really cared when I got to college, it was basically a I would tell anybody that would ask, or if it would come up naturally I would not just like tell people. I only told like a few of my best friends, just like straight up because it felt necessary.

I told my dad and my stepmom on the same night over text message. It was the It was a day or two after trump got elected. And so, I was just venting about trump and how dangerous I felt he was, and everybody was like I just do not understand why you care so much, I was like well guess what I like boys and girls and my stepmom told me as long as you keep everything else straight. My dad just was like I have known still love you all that.

And it was not until like two years later, that I told my mom is national coming out day. I told myself I would finally do it because I was just kind of waiting to have a girlfriend to be like hey mom look. And I just was not getting one so. I have only told her.

And then I came out on Facebook. 4 years exactly after telling my dad and stepmom it felt like an important anniversary so and again, nobody cared so.

Jody

I came out when I was 19 or 20 after I had been going to bars and hooking up with women for a couple of years, but I met somebody. We started a relationship. I was staying at her place, and then she lived with her brother, then we decided to get our own place, so I was buying a house, but in between leaving her brother's house and buying our house, we has to stay with my mom and step-dad for about a month, and by then I hadn't come out yet.

I felt like I has to explain why we were staying in the same bedroom, so I sat them down and I was like *well I just need to tell you that she's more than a friend,* and both of them confirmed that they already knew.

So that was not a huge deal, my little sister was incredibly supportive. My three stepbrothers were varying degrees [of supportive], but the oldest one did stop speaking to me. I found out later though that to mutual friends at parties he would trash me and call me a dyke and things like that.

My real or biological father. He. He was a very hardcore southern Baptist, highly active in the church and he is an ordained chaplain. He told me that I was an abomination in the eyes of God. And we didn't speak for years and years, when we did start speaking I remember he had called me and we were just sort of chatting about ran a one point he got around to my sexuality, he kept asking me will, if you could change would you and he just kept harping I was like dad you know I've been this way from this is just how I am I can't even answer that question, this is how I am but he just kept harping on things and I thought we were going to kind of try and put things back together.

Like if I could just tell him that I hated myself or that I would change if I could. Then he would be okay with me, so you know that phone call did not really go anywhere, and we have been really sort of standoffish ever. But all of my friends were pretty supportive and, you know, like I said, my mom and my stepdad were great.

Shae

For context, I grew up in a very Catholic household. So, I never grew up around like any kind of gay people or any kind of sexuality that was not straight. The idea of being gay was not okay—it was very frowned upon in my circles.

Looking back, I remember having crushes on girls, but at the time I thought they were friend crushes. When I got to college, I started to question my identity more. I branched out and started to have friends that were not catholic and a lot of them were queer. Knowing them, it made me question if those were friend crushes back in the day and realized that they may have been more.

In college you meet a wide variety of people and I started to meet people who were my type, I had not met many women who were my type before. I knew I was really attracted to them, and I was not ashamed of that, but I did not do anything with [that knowledge]. I still heavily identified as catholic and it had been my identity for 18 years, so I stuck with it.

But by 20 or 21, I fell away from the church for my own personal reasons, was sexually assaulted shortly after and that solidified my fear of men. I do debate with myself whether my sexuality has something to do with my fear of men, and I guess I will never really know.

Eventually after abstinence until around twenty-one, I experienced sleeping with men and women. Being around a lot of queer people in college, I had questioned myself a lot. Like just naturally questioning myself I keep saying the word natural but that is the only word I can think of, I like I very naturally came to the conclusion that, yes, I am not straight and, yes, I am okay with that, but not now.

Everyone around me accepted it by action and without any question, but I lived it at college like two hours away from my family, so I never told my family because of like the whole them being Catholic thing, and I was very afraid of how they would take it. I went on summer break between my senior year and my last semester, I had to take an extra semester, and I went to like a family reunion with my parents.

The only way I could do it was that I got kind of tipsy, and I was sitting on a bench with my mom, and I guess I had told her in the past. That I liked women because she must have brought it up, I remember her bringing it up, she asked to have you figured out this whole gay thing yet. I was like huh what are you talking about. I told her the whole story of me like falling in love with this girl and her rejecting me and how awful it was, and I was like no this is not going away now. I like women and I like men, and I think I told her directly that I was pansexual, and it was very freeing, and I think she just kind of accepted it for what it was.

My mom keeps my dad up to date about these things, to be honest. So, he knows and so does my family at this point because I have a girlfriend and I live with her. I do not know how accepting they or, but they live with it, they deal with it.

Page

I did not know gay was a thing until like fifth grade—growing up in a small Muslim community it was a very taboo subject. I realized in sixth grade that I liked girls and then I was very scared, so I repressed it for a while. Then I moved to high school, with different people, and I came out and it was nerve wracking. But no one cared and it was really nice.

Then, it was ninth grade as well, where I decided to tell my best friend from my childhood and her reaction was not as good as I expected and she kind of just like okay well as long as you marry, a man you will be okay. Getting older, it was something I would tell the important people in my life if I felt it mattered to, but I also did not tell everyone because I did not want it getting back to my family

Near the end of high school, I started like carrying less because I was leaving soon, so it did not really matter. I came out to my sister in senior year, which was nice she was really good about it. Really at this point, the only people who I see and talk to that I am not explicitly out to are my parents.

CHAPTER FOUR

Identity and Environment

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

My research was particularly focused on the impact a heterochristian environment has on an individual's identity. As previously highlighted in Chapter Two, there is a current gap within the literature evaluating the intrinsic link between these two development factors. There is also little known about the role those specific kinds of messaging, direct like discussions and conversations or indirect like the absence of visible queer representation in the community in reflecting on the research design, I took an inherent interest in the rich details of participant experiences. Looking at the specific scenarios and how those are compounded by external factors provides the ability to act reflexively and ensure the accessibility of the environment and how to resist the rejective messaging. As these rich details give increased context about the environment, they also provide additional insight into the formative moments of identity development. By using a focus on the narratives from participants, I was able to gain strategic insight about the coming out process detailed in Chapter 5 through the participant's own words and the details surrounding their experiences. The following research questions guided my study:

1. How does being in the heterochristian south impact an individual's development of their sexual or gender identity?

2. How does being in the heterochristian south impact an individual's willingness to disclose their identity?

These questions were explored through the narrative approach with all nine participants within the study. My discussion and analysis chapters, therefore, focus on the presentation and

contextualization of themes that were consistent with multiple participants in order to tell a singular story from nine perspectives—living in the United States heterochristian South created an environment that supported identity suppression instead of identity exploration.

In my discussion, I first offer an overarching analysis of CTI in the context of environment and identity development before providing a more nuanced analysis of identity and environment through the narrative of participants. Second, I visit the environment that individuals are forming their perception of the world within—often individuals are not presented with the existence of the queer body until later in their life. Without the early presence and understanding of the queer community, individuals view themselves as someone who falls into the gender binary or continues to present as such to be safe. Additionally, while evaluating the visibility within communities, a recent development of media, both, popular culture, and current events, as an individual's first exposure to the queer community. Next, this research study considers the way what little representation is had within a community impact someone's willingness to move from identity development to identity acceptance. These introductions are explored by looking at the isolated representation one does have and the negative tones surrounding the representation, the language used, directly and indirectly, about the queer community as well as the blatant rejection visible queer individuals experience within their community. Lastly, this chapter considers the social expectations that are engrained in everyday interaction and the resistance individuals felt toward that. This is done through two different lines of analysis from the participants: first, the research will look at how strict social norms, often based on the heterochristian gender roles, encouraged an individual to suppress their identity. Second, the research will analyze narratives of religious rejection and how those messages, also, encouraged identity suppression. The discussion and analysis chapter concludes

with a concise reflection on how Chapter Three serves as the answer to Research Question One. The chapter will make specific references related to the literature, but generalized thoughts will be discussed in the "Future Implications" section of Chapter Five

Communication Theory of Identity and Identity Development

The environment and the interactions one has within their community help shape how an individual relates to their discovered identities. One of the limiting community factors is the fear of perception of their authentic identity—"identity is established, by being recognized in and through such contexts; thus, such recognitions carry performative power, as they themselves are engaged in the complex exchange of information leading to a set of identifications which result in the composition and establishment of individuality (Xinaris, 2016, p 59). Identity exploration, as previously explained, has an intrinsic link to the representation of queer bodies in communities and the community perception of their queerness. If queer people are not treated with respect and compassion, there is a better chance that the person will be resistant to their identity, or unaware of the queer existence. For example, if two queer people grow up in different states within the United States—Colorado and Louisiana—and the conversation and exposure to queer individuals is starkly different. The identity that seems the safest and is presented in the positive treatment is most likely to be adopted in that community until it is less threatening. This idea ties into performance of identity, exploration, and social tolerance. These concepts follow the personal and enacted frames from Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). A queer person performs certain behaviors and learns about queerness from the community and its tolerance of the group.

In environments with little exposure to the multiplicities of the queer community, one may not know what they identify with, nor do they have the support to realize their identity.

Exploration and realization of identity is interconnected with the experiences someone has and how the identity materializes is contingent on their ability to explore that in an environment (Xindaris, 2016). Communication in this situation is one of the main retardants to identity exploration, because it causes rejection of identity by self or community, triggering less disclosures. CTI contends that identity is developed through the communication with others; however, in the heterochristian south self-exploration is stymied by the negative messaging being produced. Even in environments with pockets of support and tolerance, individuals can still delay learning and understanding their identity because of the associated risk of exploration.

Considering the personal frame is how someone sees themselves, looking specifically at how an environment can influence this perception is critical to understanding the relationship between the two of them. The personal layer is the relationship that an individual has with themselves, their opinion of self and their own definition of self. As a queer person in the heterochristian south, especially before identity comprehension, the personal frame goes through major changes. Through discussion and exploration, individuals learn who they are and their relationship to the queer community, as well as how to present in their community. They are learning to read the verbal and nonverbal tones of their surroundings and how to appropriately response.

The way an individual changes their presentation, interaction, or participation within a community, is their enacted identity. In unwelcoming environments, once an individual is aware of their identity, they begin to present fragmented components of their identity. When an individual is presenting these fragments of their identity, they are working on reputation management (Davis, 2017). The lesbian who presents more masculine thorough their short hair may capitalize on their more feminine features and wear a dress to maintain a covert status.

Identity expression in conjunction with reputation management leads to an individual's acquired identity (Davis, 2017). An acquired identity is the identity that encompasses the parts of an individual they are willing to share with the individuals around then. Enacted queer identities not as simple as being who one is, but instead developing the lowest risk presentation of oneself. Thus, identity in heterochristian environments is performance, as well. These heterochristian anti-queer messaging's contributes to this as they are a catalyst to identity concealment or manipulation

Jung and Hecht (2004) explain how the different frames can compete in an individual's identity, "a discrepancy or a contradiction can arise between the personal and relational frames, or between the persona and enacted frames. Even when these frames contradict each other, they coexist and work together composing an individual's identity" (p. 267). For example, a gay man may go into a sports bar wearing a football jersey in order to fit into their environment, avoid calling attention to their other queer attributes, and maintain an appearance of social cohesion, despite not having interest in the belief they are supporting—this shows the competition between the person and enacted frames discussed in this chapter. Even when an individual is experiencing the conflict between different frames, their identity evolves and remains intact when they have marginal support to accompany their latest information and understanding of self.

CTI and Identity Development

The four frames of identity as defined by CTI are all inter-related rather than independent or interdependent. An individual's personal identity and how they relay and relate information cannot be considered without evaluating the way the community defines their relationship with their identity. Through CTI, it is clear that the personal frame of identity being forward and present in a compromising environment poses a threat to an individual's safety, emotional

wellbeing and welfare. Even how the queer community perceives and interacts with other queer individuals in an effort to maintain solidarity without detection and the level of comfortability someone finds in owning their own identity directly interact with their perception of self, further encouraging the suppression of queer identities.

Communication builds, maintains and changes the identity an individual holds—both personal and their relational identity. CTI contends that communication about queer identity impacting an individual's relationship with self, with their community, and with their perception of identity. When an identity is being regularly suppressed, communities underappreciate the queer individual's relational identity with other community members of majority identities as a part of their overall identity. Because CTI recognizes the overlapping of the four frames of identity, I approach identity formation in a multi-factected approach inclufing the realization of one's identity, the ability to safely explore and confirm their identity and the understanding that their identity and presentation of said identity might be in conflict with their identity. Identity suppression or enactment play directly into disclosure and development of this identity and is a reflective process of getting to know oneself in the context of their relationships and the environment they may not be directly supportive of their identity development and expression. I reserve specific discussion about identity disclosure for my analysis in Chapter 5.

Queer Visibility

One of the integral components of developing and contextualizing one's identity is seeing representation in the area around the individual. However, in situations where there are inaccurate representation or no visibly queer people, individuals questioning their identity have no reference for queer adults and how to navigate this identity development. The first component of queer visibility I am discussing is specific to how an individual understands the queer

community. Heterochristian conversations often focus on the conversation of straight or gay, thus individuals do not have a full understanding of what queerness can be. Without an understanding of the full spectrum of gender identity and sexuality, an individual is likely to know they are not straight, but they are unsure beyond that label, thus suppress their identity.

Incomplete Understanding of Community

Jody's experience growing up in an area where queer individuals were rejected on face and the expectation was for queer individuals to exist and grow in silence resulted in fear from their own identity realization. With such a negative view on queer individuals, their fear that any act of kindness would be classified as a sexual or romantic advance regardless of if the community members knew they were queer. Jody internalized the community narrative, suppressed their identity and feared the perception of their actions. This is important to note because it shows how quickly an environment can cause this identity suppression:

> Being a kid in middle school and high school, kids were always calling each other names like faggot and queer bait—and it was always used as a derogatory term whether they were using it to be really mean or if they were teasing their friends to just put them down jokingly. It was always meant to be derogatory. I knew what I was at that point, and I knew I couldn't say anything. (Jody).

Having an area only reflect on the negative and stereotypical components of queerness, often only focusing on the sexualization of queer individuals reinforces the absence of safety felt by queer people across the US South. Wren shares remarkably similar experience in locker rooms that reinforced her decision suppress her identity in high school to the general community, despite being out to selective friends:

> The only comment I ever overheard, that impacted me coming out in high school, was about a girl on my soccer team. She came out after she graduated from high school, and I remember overhearing in the locker room *oh what if she has been looking at us* and comments like that. I thought to myself *well this is a group of people I can never come out to because that's their attitude towards this one person being gay,* and there were multiple gay people in the locker room. We were just not out to anyone in that group (Wren).

Both individuals decided to suppress their identity, completely or situationally, based on their current environment. Individuals are so concerned about being perceived as a threat, or their normal actions and conversations being misinterpreted or sexualized based only on their queer identity if they are identifiably queer—in locker room. In order to address the absence of diverse male bodies within the research population, I felt it critical to draw upon the discussion established above from the cisgender queer women and expand the discussion based on previous research done on gay men in these environments. This decision was made in order to increase the intersectional discourse within this thesis. Gay men, in external research (Herrick, 2020), explain how they will use different skills to emphasize the lack of threat they embody from using a higher conversational tone than one normally would, go with a friend so they "provide cover" for the masculine presenting person (Herrick, 2020, p. 23). Increased awareness of the way they are perceived as queer people, leads to more desire and effort to act, and look straight so they are safer. This sentiment is amplified as a gay man in a locker room; however, instead of being worried about being perceived as the aggressor individuals make a concerted effort to pass as heterosexual (Herrick, 2020). However, within these heteronormative spaces, even passing as straight leaves them at risk for "indirect homophobia and, in some cases, bearing witness to the discrimination of others" (Herrick, 2020, p. 233). Understanding the way other men describe their efforts to conceal their identity, the research turns back to its own participants to evaluate

how this impacts identity development. Robbie mentions in passing how “toxic masculinity really made me feel like gay was not an option”—the straight men “were always trying to prove they were dominant or more important” (Robbie).

Due to the absence of diverse and accurate representation, additionally, individuals can have an incomplete understanding of what encompasses the queer community. Much like the straight men assume that all gay men in the locker rooms are effeminate, without seeing a diverse population of queer individuals, an individual may not be sure if they are queer based on the representation they have in their community. If an individual is only presented with gay and straight as identity options, it establishes identity suppression because they feel like they do not fit into either of the, already socially rejected, options. Even in moments where an individual has realized their identity, the decision to suppress their identity is still a component of identity development. This is because the identity they feel tied to at the moment, has the potential to change with a more direct understanding of the queer community and confirm their identity as something different. Because identity development is closely tied with exploration, not being able to explore their potential identity or seeing queer individuals stops individuals from complete identity realization. Growing up without complete representation of the queer community delays the identity realization of individuals, because they are limited in knowing what queer is and how queer individuals can live and function within society.

The strategies associated with the enacted identity frame of CTI—ways in which individuals consciously and unconsciously communicate parts of their identities to others as they interact with them—are conscious efforts to disassociate themselves from the prevalent stereotypes. To discuss the locker room example, again, if a transwoman was selecting a locker room, they are asked to weigh the social risk of either locker room or how to emphasize those

parts of their identity to maintain safety. Considering how they present to the cishet community, the community tolerance level and other factors in order to manage risk and combat the stereotypes associated with trans folx. Conversely, the enacted identity frame also feeds into the delayed identity realization on top of the identity suppression caused by selecting locker rooms based on the primary physical traits instead of identity discussed above. CTI's enacted frame discussed the importance of exposure to intricate identities. When individuals are actively suppressing their identity, there is not the exposure and representation others need to feel safe operating outside of the relational heterochristian norms.

A bisexual identity is one that is often criticized as an identity to avoid the social stigmatization of gay or is for attention seeking purposes; because of these assumptions, bisexuality is often ignored in social conversation as an identity—either positive or negative social conversation (Kirby, 2021). Discussions about bisexuality become increasingly significant in the identity development of queer individuals because bisexual individuals self-report more identity confusion than lesbian and gay individuals (Balsam, 2007):

> I knew something was different with me in terms of my sexuality. I just didn't have the language for it. So, once I figured out the language [on internet chat rooms] … I thought to myself *oh, I'm bisexual* (Stevie).

Later in the interview, she expands on this moment:

> When I was 15, I started talking to girls online, MSN or chatting online. And it was in those moments that I picked up the language where I was talking with a girl and then she mentioned the word bisexual and I said *What does that mean?* And then she explained it to me. And after she told me that's what she was. And she explained what it what it meant. … I just felt so happy. Having a word for it. Like it made sense. Everything just made sense (Stevie).

Because there is identity denial and rejection from the queer community, as well as the cishet community, bisexual individuals tend to realize their identity later in life (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). In addition to environments being one of the main ways communities develop the language used to describe them, the prevalence of word choice and use within a given environment can be a predictor of community diversity and structure (Brayden, 2013)**.** Without having the language to appropriately relate and identify, this can delay identity realization. The local heterochristian conversations surrounding the queer community is an oversimplification of who encompasses the queer community because the conversations are about gay and transgender individuals having social and moral shortfalls, instead of giving a comprehensive picture of identities. Living in a place where it was okay to be a lesbian, instead of just having to be bisexual so people would not ask too many questions allows for the validation of identity specificity and confirmation.

Further, even if the entire environment is not supportive, seeing some representation allows for individuals to feel as if they do not have any social expectations to fulfill.

> Two of my mom's good friends from high school are queer: one of her very good friends Molly is a lesbian and she was out in high school, which was very rare for their small town in the 1970's. Then Mark came out later in their friendship in college. [My family mainly had the narrative of] *oh that's such a hard choice.* But it wasn't ever a topic of discussion (Charlie).

Having the supportive presence can allow for an individual to feel like there is less risk if an individual's identity was not a "topic of discussion" a colloquialism for an issue not being a big deal or worth any conversation within the family or community. The visibility of queer friends along with an environment that does not heavily consider the heterochristian norms can be traced all through Charlie's coming out story as to produce an individual who feels like their identity

development is safe and preservable. This perception and relationship with their community allows for a closeness in an individual's personal and communal identity frames—allowing the identity they relate to and see themselves as being the same identity being presented to the community. Without the presence of support and positive queer visibility like Charlie has, individuals end up discovering life changing information through less emotionally adept avenues such as the media.

Media Exposure

The second layer of the queer visibility analysis—media exposure—highlights how insular heterochristian environment can be by showing an individual that there are "more people that feel the same way as me" (Robbie). Heterochristian environments, by driving queer individuals out of the community or through social rejection, establish an environment where queer individuals are not discussing queer issues and queer individuals are trying to stay as covert as possible. These discussions support the contention that identity suppression occurs in these unwelcoming environments.

Heterochristian environments actively discourage the presence or discussion of queer populations until there is an essential reason to do so, such as a landmark United States Supreme Court decisions Hollingsworth v. Perry, 570 U.S. 693 (2013) and Obergefell v. Hodges, 576 U.S. 644 (2015). In these moments where queer presence cannot be ignored, the community conversation works to demonize these queer individuals to discourage identification or shield adolescents from this coverage.

> [Having no exposure to queerness except for the bad things in the news] delayed my relationship with myself and my concept of queerness for myself. I wasn't even exposed to what pansexual meant or what other sexualities and gender

> identities were. I didn't even really have a good idea until I was in college. I know I had those feelings, but I didn't know how to name them and so I didn't really know how to explore them fully until I knew what they were [after starting to see it in the news before college] (Jayden).

The above sentiments are from someone who was expose to a singular queer person in their early adolescence. Despite having the exposure to a queer relative, queerness was not considered an option because of an absence of community representation and language. The relative in Jayden's life was presented to her as an outlier, because of the low visibility of queer folx in the Arkansas area. However, the low exposure still introduced the existence of a queer identity in comparison to others who formed their identity during a period where the existence of queer individuals was blatantly ignored: "I didn't know [queer people] existed. I thought it was just me, didn't realize until 25 I wasn't alone" (Robbie).

Jayden's experiences and exposure to queerness happened 28 years after Robbie realized that he was not the only person who felt an attraction to the same sex. This change shows the community shift in language to and about queer individuals—from ignoring their existence to displeasure but tolerant. Changes in tolerance over time also presents in the potential for individuals to reevaluate their enacted identity. Seeing the visibility in other queer people as attitudes slowly soften, in some areas, allows for individuals to open themselves up a little bit more and embracing their identity. However, even with the softening attitudes queer individuals still feel the risk of any outward identity performance within their enacted frame compromises their personal safety when they are in company of individuals of mixed tolerance in the community. Attitudes about a group of individuals can be directly relative to the existence and aging of queer people, which influences the social policy change and the general increase of queer individuals across the United States population, as well as the world (Poushter, 2020).

As public opinion changes and evolves, advocacy for the same access and rights to marriage as heterosexual couples grew. Productive and affirming conversations in the United States show a positive relationship with landmark legal decisions due to the increased wellbeing and feelings of happiness in the queer community (Flores, 2020). Living as the national coverage, of the rejection of the Defense of Marriage Act or protection of same sex marriage, evolves and breaks has the potential to be the first exposure that an individual in an insular area in heterochristian south has about the prevalence and community surrounding queer relationships.

> It was near the time [of the Supreme Court] gay marriage bill, … I remember being very confused because I didn't know what [same-sex relationships] were, but then I had a lightbulb moment where I was like, *oh! Boys can be with boys and girls can be with girls. You can do that.* ...so I was watching YouTube videos of people finding out the decision, secretly of course (Page).

The media exposure of same sex couples celebrating their federal protection of marriage was the first exposure Page had as a confirmation of the feelings they were working to ignore were experienced across different people—a critical moment in identity development. However, Page, also, knew this celebratory media consumption had to be done in secret because of the conversations and tones their community members were taking about queer individuals and the federal protection of same sex marriage. The national coverage of same sex marriage created a wave of out and proud queer individuals, along with the legislative demonstration of queer representation and inclusion, allowed for individuals to perform and their queerness more frequently—especially in online spaces. Similar to the experiences of Page and Stevie, many queer individuals use the internet as a method of identity exploration in environments. This contextualization shows the reality of individuals seeking information outside of their

community when they are not seeing an accurate picture of the world around them. Beyond queer visibility, however, to appropriately evaluate the way an environment understands and accepts queer individuals the research must also evaluate the how different individuals are perceived within their community—the individuals that are out and visibly queer within the community.

Queer Representation

Another critical component of developing an identity is knowing that an individual is not alone in these experiences and that there is a vast type of individuals that embody the queer community. When areas only have discussion around the moral shortcomings of queer people, the logic established is that all queer individuals have moral failures, thus discouraging the development and understanding of an individual's identity. To contextualize representation further, there are three main narratives the research traced. First, the research approaches the way individuals remembered, or if they remembered at all, interactions with openly queer individuals and how the adults in the situation were responsive to said queer individuals. Second, the research traces the linguistic patterns and language trends within communities and the isolation individuals felt as a result being a closeted queer individual. Lastly, I introduce the rejection cycle that participants felt was one of the main contributors of minimal queer representation in their communities.

Exploring the way individuals were introduced to the visibly queer individuals within their heterochristian community informs the way an individual perceives themselves and the life they ought to expect if they do not continue to suppress their identity. Additionally, these narrow presentations and perspectives limit the ability for individuals to see themselves as a part of the queer community.

Negative Representation

As there is a rising presence of queer individuals in a community, there is the conflicting risk with visibility—negative representation as the only representation within a community and the impact that has on individuals that are developing their own identity. While they are granted the possible understanding that they are not alone in the feelings they have, these individuals are instead combatting the message that says everyone that is queer has these harmful attributes. If discussions are had surrounding the queer individuals in their communities, they tend to be in isolating and negative circumstances

> Everyone was very much not okay with queer people. I only remember growing up knowing of a couple of gay men and interacting with only one. I remember, he had worked at the local grocery store, and I just remember thinking that this is part of growing up. It was ingrained in me that gay people were bad— [the grocery store cashier] had a criminal record that dealt with pedophilia, and he was a gay man. Everyone in the community would talk about him and say things like, *it happened because he was gay… his sexuality goes hand in hand with [being a pedophile]* (Loren).

The social message of queer individuals being inherently bad constructs the personal frame as a negative one when an individual begins to realize their queerness. Loren later in their interview discusses how they felt like their feelings were bad, because they was all they knew (Loren)—they associated their feelings and worth directly to the way their community perceived a crucial component of their identity. By establishing the narrow perspective of queer people, this limits the ability for an individual to understand how they fit into the community or feel like they can belong to the queer community at all: “I remember being young and being curious, but also knowing that they gay people were not okay people to be” (Loren). Narrow views and

presentation of queer individuals only creates confusion and limits an individual's ability to realize their own identity confidently.

Consider the personal frame of CTI—founded on the suggestion that identity is derived from feelings, self-knowledge, and sense of self—developing without a full understanding of the community they believe they may be a part of. Instead, an individual begins to internalize the majority identity as a part of their own personal frame (Crosby, 2012). This creates more harm because an individual is further distancing themselves from their identity, as well as any supportive environment they may find to support their identity development. Individuals begin feeling like the consistent resistance of community expectations and social norms is exhausting and never ending; however, instead of participants like Wren who come out despite their desire to bring a partner home just as a heterosexual individual would, individuals feel tempted to fall into the identity being ascribed to them. An example of individuals feeling the inherent temptation to meet social expectations can be seen with Page and other participants having the desire to be bisexual and marry someone of the opposite sex in order to avoid ever disclosing to their family.

Especially in the context of individuals that are socialized as women, due to the heterosexual pressures, queerness exists only after the conditions of explanation are met (Rich, 1980, p. 17). Individuals continue to either justify their existence or choose to not live their truth.

> Being queer is just so unsafe I didn't want to let myself think I was gay. …one of my old teachers who worked at my Islamic school, she was gay… she told me she was choosing her faith over her sexuality, because she can't be queer (Page).

Environments and social settings maintain and perpetuate an absence of disclosure by continuing the cycles of avoiding disclosure within communities with an underrepresented queer population.

Concerns of safety associated with queer existence are compounded as individuals see other queer community members denying their identity because it competes with another part of their identity and/or it compromises their safety—an intersection seen for many queer Muslim individuals as seen through Paige's interview and coming out story. Other issues born out of underrepresented queer populations is the rampant use of hate speech and other problematic discourse directed to the queer community.

Language Use

The use of language is a dividing mechanism within society and is a targeting mechanism directed towards marginalized bodies to maintain a social divide. The use of slurs, microaggressions and other intolerant communication mechanisms create an environment that tolerates discrimination and risks silencing marginalized persons. Change in language tolerance over time, led to more negative language used in casual ways and the negative phrases and terms became more prevalent in society—thus increasing the unwelcoming vibes of the community. Just like other homophobic phrases, "no homo" and "that's gay" are used in negative contexts—often in relation to behaviors that are considered out of the norm or subverting gender norms.

> Growing up, *that's so gay* was a common insult tossed around and while I was trying to figure out if I was bisexual or gay, it felt like there was just such a negative feeling to being gay. It makes me feel like my feelings were invalid and how unwanted in the spaces I was (Wren).

Foundational exposure to context about queer people from educational and religious backgrounds continue the systemic rejection of queer bodies. Systemic barriers, such as the lack of environmental support of the queer community, can lead to identity suppression and ignoring the queer community until all identities become invisible (Henriquez, 2021). Additionally, the

mistreatment of the selective openly queer people can further isolate the individuals who are actively suppressing their identity.

Social Rejection Via Visibility

As individuals become more aware of society around them, the desire to sort and label individuals into their distinct groups presents in daily life, thus reinforcing "an accentuation of group differences and of within group similarities" (Saguy, 2021, p.4). Society places such intense value on gender stereotypes that it pervades into the way that children decide to treat each other—creating friend groups based on girls and boys, especially in elementary school—once again reinforcing the binary and social divide through boy clothes and girl clothes. The challenge is when a child is not comfortable within the binary:

> It was ostracizing [being teased for dressing and acting like a boy]. Like there was something wrong with me (Jayden).

Rejection based on gender norms from a very young age continues into the workplace, because it falls into the defense that women and men have "inherent, meaningful, and inevitable [differences, which] render role-separation and power disparities logical and justified" (Saguy, 2021, p. 5) environments that fall into this mindset are often office settings that sustain group-based power structures and essentialist perceptions of gender (Saguy, 2021).

> I feel like I am more masculine, but that is something I haven't really been able to explore about myself. Mainly because I don't know how to be taken seriously in the professional world if I am not presenting female or femme. Working for the state government in the southern, I'm afraid I won't excel. I am afraid that the raises I have gotten or being able to be someone's supervisor wouldn't be possible if I didn't wear makeup and present as female (Jayden).

However, presentation in the workplace considers more than just how the community perceives them, but also how these complicated binary systems compete with an individual's goals and happiness. Recent global circumstances gave individuals the space to not be bound to the social expectations of gender performance. During the COVID-19 lockdown, people felt like they could experiment with their gender, as well as connect with other queer individuals and see the diverse ways that queerness can present in social situations (Arel, 2021)

> Finding who I was, I feel like I have been compensating for not acting gay but through COVID I felt like I dressed very gay and now I've kind of gone back to my normal style and what I actually feel comfortable in. I feel like I need to dress masc now, but that is probably because I have to dress so much more femme at work… I just want to be comfortable and wear what I want to wear (Wren).

Looking at how integral time and space can play into identity development and confirmation is part of why the heterochristian south can amplify identity rejection. If an individual is focused on passing in society, then removed from daily social interactions—like most individuals experienced during the COVID-19 quarantine—they have the time and space to experiment with their physical presentation to feel more authentic via nonverbal communication. This time and space away from social standards and projections of expectations breeds a shift in an individual's enacted frame. CTI establishes that an individual's enacted frame is a direct byproduct of the interactions one has with other individuals in their community, but situations like COVID-19 removed individuals from a large portion of those expectations. By removing the social pressure from their heterochristian environment, an individual has the freedom to intermingle their enacted frame and personal frame—allowing the personal frame to take priority. While the COVID-19 pandemic is an interesting microcosm of how being away from society allows for

identity expression and exploration, the daily social norms perpetuated by the heterochristian South also have vast implications on queer identity development.

Social Expectations

One of the main pressures an individual experience on a regular basis is about confirming to social norms. This section places some direct attention on the ways that resisting the gender binary can also cause conflict within the heterochristian environments, as well as isolating an analysis related to the religious pressures to conform to these ideologies.

Subverting Social Norms

Community norms and standards are an issue individual are confronted with early in life and breeds conformity to the gender binary. Considering that marking reflects the social position, current marking and reflection of genders establish an echo of current sentiments. Having gender-stereotypes marketing, clothing items creates a natural resistance unless the individual is falling comfortably with the binary. These social representations can influence how others are perceived (Akestam, 2018), as well as psychological apprehension towards these representations if they do not feel representative of the viewer (Dahlen, 2014)—consider gendered clothing, colors, toys, activities etcetera. This norm projection appears as it is taught to adolescents that those are the normal presentations and any other presentation is different, leading to the teasing and bullying of individuals that do not conform to those social standards. Consider Jayden's preference for more masculine clothing as an adolescent, after the teasing received by their peers, along with pressure from individuals outside of school, they felt like dressing to the social, feminine, standard felt like it would be easier and make their differences "less detectable" (Jayden), thus suppressing their ability to explore their identity.

Experiences like this continue into adolescence and high school until the individual learns ways to dress and reject the community norms and embraces their queerness in ways that is less discernable to the cisgender heterosexual population. Choosing to dress outside of the social norm and prioritizing comfort engages with the enactment frame of CTI; however, the social pressure experienced leads to a conscious decision to become consistent with the social expectations in order to avoid attention and potential detection. What makes binarized roles and the social pressure to ascribe to them important is because it presents so early in an individual's life. In combination with note seeing queer bodies in their community, feeling like falling in line with social expectations early in life limits the likelihood an individual explores their identity. This identity suppression is disrupted by a change in environment or increase in information about the queer community, both things that directly oppose the messaging given in heterochristian environments. In some situations, embracing an individual's identity is only safe in covert displays—something only detectable to individuals within the queer community and privy to the socially relevant covert disclosure tools.

Often referred to as flagging, subtle, but demographically popular and distinct, visual or fashion choices signal from one queer to other another queer that they are not the only queer person in the vicinity. Flagging tools reinforce the safety in numbers notion among queer individuals while still ensuring that individuals appear as heterosexual to the heterosexual community. From the use of the color violet, referent to Sappho's poem where their female lover uses a violet to represent their sexuality and the popularity of the allusion after 1926 play *The Captive* (Sova 2004), the inclusion of an upside-down pink triangle on apparel to reclaim the use of the symbol after queer persecution in the Holocaust (Jensen, 2002), to a technique called femme flagging. Femme flagging was the process of painting two fingernails a distinct color as a

covert way to signal to other queer individuals they are a part of the community. Once accent nails became a part of mainstream fashion, there was a need to adapt the signaling so there was a new distinction between the heterosexual women and lesbians who look like heterosexual women—straight passing lesbians. As these trends become more mainstream, it allows for queer people to use the trendy one, in addition to more subtle cues, to be able to tell others they are straight, despite the queer fashion choice.

The use of clothing or stylistic choices can function as a visual note that there is another queer individual in the space, showing that they are not the only queer person in the spaces—projecting a sense of safety and security in not being alone. These visual cues and so many others allow for queer people to find ways to develop and construct their identity, as well as resistance mechanisms by rejecting the social requirements projected onto them (Zimmerman, 2018).

However, the use of flagging tools is exclusive to individuals who are straight passing. While individuals that pass often feel like passing is a privilege because it can lead to less discrimination, the ability to be straight passing reinforces an absence of safety in an environment that requires someone to hide their identity (Pfeffer, 2014). Someone who is medically transitioned or a femme presenting lesbian in comparison to a more masculine presenting lesbian or someone pre-transition is more likely to fly under the radar and not be detected by the community.

> Sometimes I will purposely keep distance between us if I ever feel like there are unsavory characters or people who look unsavory…I'm white and don't look gay but us as a couple, an interracial lesbian relationship. I'm white and she's black. And she's definitely a stud. So, I have worried about [her being visibly queer] in the past (Shae).

Feeling an obligation to blend in for safety measures shows the inherent safety barriers queer individuals experience on a regular basis. Just as the communal frame establishes how an individual bonds with people and develop their identity, the communal frame also establishes the start of the conversation of about how relationships and identity ties can begin dissolving because of community interaction. Instead of developing bonds, queer individuals are losing their bond with their heterochristian environments and seeking bonds with affirming communities; however, until an affirming community is located an individual continues to suppress their identity**.** In environments where the precision to norms and tradition is incredibly important, such as churches or other faith-based organizations, queer identities experience direct rejection from all authority levels.

Religious Rejection

The United States South is often classified as the Bible Belt—a term referring to the prevalence of Christian values and principles being highly prevalent in the communities and states (Norman, 2021). These values often emphasize queerness as something that is unnatural or impure (Yip, 2005). Even though the following of organized religion seems to be losing global traction, there are other contributions, such as an emphasis in society on religious text, which contribute to the continued resistance of the queer community (Yip,2005).

Being exposed to this messaging early on allows for queer individuals to see the environmental association between religious rejection and the risk of rejection from families after coming out. If a highly religious family has immersed themselves in the heterochristian environments, the social messaging around queer individuals causes more concern and hesitation about their identity:

> [W]hen I was a senior in high school my History and Bible teacher told me that. God does not love gay people. That came from his mouth in the middle of class. A Bible class in fact. Because the Supreme Court had passed same sex marriage… it happened in June of 2015, so we came back to school in August of 2016 and some people in the class had questions about like well why is this legal the Bible says that it's a sin and what happens to some people who say that they're Christian and also say are gay and he just, He heard all these questions and he kind of went off on this rant about how it wasn't the Supreme Court's right to make it constitutional for same sex marriage to be a thing so and then he also said, and you know what based on what it says in the Bible, God doesn't even love gay people. From moment, I just felt paralyzed and then completely and totally dehumanized on so many levels. It also made me feel completely silenced because. I felt differently, and I was sitting there in a classroom of like twenty-five people and I didn't know what the fuck would happen if I said something. And then, it just made me angry. Made me, really, really angry. (Jayden)

Even in situations where there is not blatant rejection, religious undertones will color the responses individuals give when they are met with an identity disclosure. Especially in early moments of disclosure this can cause an issue because early disclosure is often directed towards people that are considered safe individuals.

A queer individual may reconsider who in their circle is safe and how they are evaluating what makes someone safe—this can delay any further disclosure until they are more confident in the responses they are going to get, thus encouraging identity suppression despite being confident in their identity:

> I was surprised when I came out to one of my really close best friends that I was nonbinary. He said *I want you to know that I still love you.* I felt like that was a

> really weird reaction I wasn't expecting. It sounds like I'm telling you I have cancer and I'm dying, and you say *it's okay I'm still here for you* (Charlie).

In addition to delaying disclosure, it can also cause queer individuals to suppress their identity based on their religious background. When the messaging is that queer individuals are inherently harmful, teaching of the moral failures, individuals are more inclined to believe this is something that will change, or they can grow out of, therefore deciding to reject the potential for their queerness or continue identity suppression until finding a safe environment for exploration.

> I thought it might be something that I would grow out of. Since I knew that I liked girls from about the time when I was around ten. I thought, well, maybe once I maybe it's just because I haven't dated a boy, and so maybe once I data boy I will realize that I just want to be with them because that's what is (Jayden).

Additionally, individuals will continue to delay the exploration of their queerness because of their own religious identity, thus resulting in suppression of their queer identity in favor of their initial identity.

> [My potential queerness] popped in my head and I don't want to say that going to college really gave me a chance to explore, who I really was because I don't feel like that's true. Because Catholicism was really part of who I was for sure and I didn't want to do a disservice to that part of me, but also that part was chosen for me—I was a cradle catholic. But there was this new part of me that I needed to explore that was competing with my catholic identity (Shae).

Shae's realization that they have competing identities is not an uncommon experience, when queer people have intersecting identities, especially multiple marginalized identities, they often feel like there is an obligation to choose a singular identity to allow to surface as the socially visible identity.

Queer individuals, also, are learning what their feelings and perception of individuals mean and that they are not alone in their feelings. Individuals who had no exposure to queer individuals learned they were not alone in their attractions, similar to Robbie who did not know there were other gay men until he was 25 (Robbie). Even as time passed, Robbie aged and became more ingrained in his queer identity, the narrative about queer individuals that gained popularity as queer folx gained visibility— their immoral lifestyles and compromises to American family values. The community perception continues to reject the queer individuals, instead of ignoring their presence, verbalizing these sentiments through words and legislation. Loren remembers "putting [queerness] on the backburner" to her Catholicism (Loren). Queer individuals are less likely to disclosure if they feel like their safety or position in society may be at risk, these conclusions are drawn from the community around them.

This denial and avoidance lead to an eventual disclosure, in most cases, and learning how to adapt to the unwelcoming environment—in other cases learning that the prejudice was surface level and community members are willing to learn, much like Wren's stepmom has apologized for the microagressive comments and learned the meaning of allyship (Wren). This eventual disclosure leads to another shift in the personal frame as a queer person in their environment, sometimes as the first visibly queer individual in their area. This last shift in personal framing is uncovered by the disclosure of an individual's identity, explored in Chapter 4. Individuals now have the power to reorient themselves in society as a queer member of society and they can shape the discourse in an area if they choose to.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter explored the relationship between an individual's understanding of their identity, as well as how it develops, in a heterochristian environment. It is evident that an absence of awareness of the queer community, the openly negative discussions surrounding queer bodies, and minimal queer representation create an environment where queer individuals are limited in their ability to understand and contextualize their identity. Finally, two of the four frames of Communication Theory of Identity—personal and enacted frames— were explained and applied to the queer experience in the heterochristian South and how these two frames inform identity development. It is integral to consider the intricacies and nuances that geography encompasses, and that includes the United States South. Individuals have different lived experiences that craft their queer identity including their religious identity, exposure to media, introduction and immersion into the queer community and the support of friends and family. Although most individuals struggled within this heteronormative environment, the United States South remains a complex environment for folx to realize who they are and how that interacts within society.

INTERLUDE

Stevie

When I think of a coming out story, it just seems noticeably big, like a significant moment or period in time where you felt like this, like I'm coming out. And I don't feel like I've had that I've come out to different people throughout my life.

The most recent person that I came up to with my mom, before that, I've come out to my sister, I've come out to my closest friends, and people within my cohort.

I was 15 and I admitted it to myself aloud that I was bisexual. And I remember going into the kitchen, getting something to drink or eat—my sister just happened to walk in the kitchen also. I just looked at her and said, I realized that I am bisexual. And then she just said, okay, and I just said, okay and that was it. We went out about our days. After that, I came out selectively to people who I felt were important in my life, so I wasn't openly out yet. I told my first partner ,about, I think a year into our relationship that I was bisexual. I told my best friend in high school at the time. And then after that, I just kept the same protocol. It would be people who were very close to me, who I came out to.

Coming out to my mom was the final person before I could live openly. I debated telling her not because she doesn't have, I don't think that she had a big understanding of sexuality, and my first partner and my only partner was a man. So, prior to telling her, in my head, I said, I will tell her, if my partner is anything other than a man, then we will have that conversation. But we were, this spring break, we were road tripping back home. And we were in the car and I don't remember what brought the conversation on. But we were just talking about her relationship with my dad. And then there was a pause in conversation and then I just, I was driving like, Mom, when you told me something about me. And I said, I identify as pansexual. And this is what

pansexuality means. then I also fall somewhere on the like, Demi sexuality spectrum. So, we talked about that. And if she understood completely what I was talking about, and then that was it. She was happy that I knew the words for my sexuality at a young age, because her journey with sex and her sexuality has been completely different than mine. But after that, I realized this is the last important person to whom I hadn’t told this. I think I've just existing as out now.

Loren

I came out in high school to like close friends, then joined and subsequently left the Army. Once I started college, I realized how clear it was, so I came out to my family in October of 2018. I, actually, come out in an Olive Garden, which was the worst choice ever. I was just like hey there's this girl that I want to go on a date with like, and the story that's it and it was the most awkward dinner that had ever happened. They didn't talk for the rest of dinner and were texting each other back and forth.

There was kind of a rift in the family for a little bit and then I'll probably say about six months later, they kind of had like a complete change of heart. and completely like you know one at like completely turned around and what they had been saying, and so, probably about six months mark, they were like hey you know it's okay like we don't really care.

Jayden

I probably knew, when I was 10 or 11 when I had a crush on a girl named Lydia in my class. And we were friends, but like I didn't really know what any of that meant beyond friends.

So, around about the same time [as I had a crush on Lydia], My cousin Raven came out to our family—she was probably in her early 20s, I can't know for sure. And so, I combined that knowledge of what was going on in my cousin's life, from what she shared with us, with the feelings I was having towards Lydia, and I was like holy shit I think I am gay, too. But I also like boys, but that was as much as I knew about my sexual orientation until I was probably 13 or 14 and I knew that applied to liking all people and then as I got older into high school and especially into college—I learned more about the LGBTQ+ community because that wasn't really talked about a whole lot where I came from.

I learned more about my sexuality and the depths of my attractions to all people. I didn't know what the word pansexuality was until I was probably 19 or 20. But I knew as soon as I heard the word, and I knew what it meant that that it described me in a way that bisexual hasn't in the past. And so that's whenever I technically came out to myself as pansexual, but it was kind of a journey, with different milestones along the way.

For my gender identity, I knew from a very early age, probably around 5 or 6, by the time I first started school, that I got along better with the people in my class that were boys than I did girls, and I didn't really know why. But one day, someone told me I acted like a boy in 2nd grade and I thought a lot about what that meant and I didn't like it because I knew that anatomically I was a girl and my mother cut my hair short and she wanted me to wear bows in my hair and skirts instead of shorts. I never identified with those things.

It wasn’t until I was a preteen until I was a preteen and trying so hard to fit into school that I presented female at all. I refused, I was not interested in skirts, or anything typically associated with being feminine, especially in a Christian school and a very straight Christian home.

I didn’t always identify completely female of feel feminine. As I’ve gotten over and learned more about gender identity and have been exposed to more people who have more fluid gender identities. I notice on some days I feel more masculine and on other I feel more feminine.

Charlie

I can remember two distinct moments where I told people, but it was always more I realized wasn't straight like I was kind of just going on, or like I was rather than being like oh I'm queer I was like oh like I've never considered myself straight like my whole life. Ever since I was really young people always like said, my like really close female friends were like oh they're like always on little dates awe y'all are so close.

In high school, I was like oh I'm going to join the GSA as an ally and then one of my friends was like you're not an ally, I was like what are you talking about. And he was like you're about as gay is I am gay and so, then I was like yeah, I think I am, but I still like guys and I like girls so, then I told my best friends at the time, which were definitely like homoerotic friendships because I spent every waking moment with them, I was like hey I think I'm bisexual their first question was do you think we're hot.

And then they were offended that I didn't want to have sex with them. And that was just kind of how I existed. when I was in elementary school, I was convinced, I like I wanted to be a boy, and I dressed like a guy all the time. Which ironically or coincidentally my mother was the same way, and then in high school I would always say like oh I'm not a girl like I wouldn't say what it was, but I wasn't a girl, and then I think like sometime after undergrad I was officially like oh, I'm just. going to like to claim this label. which I kind of called nonbinary at the time, I think I was using the term age, gender, a lot and then just running around screaming gender is a myth. Until someone told me that that is offensive to trans people who still believe in the binary, so I stopped saying that, but I know.

The second key coming out moment was when my mom. Actually, I had to come up twice to my mom because at first, she thought it was like something similar to being bisexual she

thought it was like a sexuality thing and not a gender thing. And so, then I called her again after liking sometime last year after my dad died, to be like hey you do realize this is what I mean right so.

[My mom explained her understanding of non-binary] as if people are Bisexual and they only like two genders, maybe this is how you explain you like, more than two kinds of people, and I was like good guess, but no that's what I'm getting at and she was kind of sad she was like you know oh you're like my daughter, and my baby girl but she's come around to it. Slowly but surely, she still gets my pronouns wrong all the time, but she'll be like this is my child I don't say daughter because she's now married so she's working on it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Disclosure and Environment

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

My research was particularly focused on the impact a heterochristian environment has on an individual's identity. After exploring the relationship between an individual's environment and how their identity develops, it is necessary to explore the way in which this environment can change the way the individual discloses this realized identity. Consider, again, the second research question:

How does the environment impact an individual's willingness to disclose their identity?

These questions were explored through the narrative approach with all nine participants within the study. My discussion and analysis chapters, therefore, focus on the presentation and contextualization of themes that were consistent with multiple participants in order to tell a singular story form nine perspectives—living in the United States heterochristian South created an environment that bred delayed disclosure to preserve relationships and safety.

In this discussion and analysis chapter, I first bring forwards another overarching analysis of CTI in the context of environment and identity disclosure before breaking down the environment-disclosure relationship through the narrative of participants. Next, I visit the communities' individuals interact in and how visible queer identities are in the day-to-day life—often times individuals find themselves making an effort to blend in with the heterosexual norm. By discussing the different ways queer individuals seek safety, by performing their queerness in overt and covert ways, this research generates a more nuanced understanding of the thought process that queer individuals take on a regular basis to stay safe. Additionally, with this

perspective of the community visibility theme, the development of strategic invisibility is prevalent across the queer community in order to avoid disclosure. Next, this research study considers how queer individuals adapt with in their community in three different ways, then concluding with an analysis of a workplace encounter Jayden had and the different disclosure avoidances they see in their workplace. First, the community adaptation theme contextualizes how individuals suppress their identity by avoiding disclosure. Next, the narratives walk through individuals avoiding disclosure and just presenting their queer relationship just as individuals present heterosexual relationships—without announcement. Lastly, the community adaptation theme addresses how queer individuals navigate relationships after disclosure—especially those relationships where individuals are resistant to an identity disclosure because of their subscription to the heterochristian norms. This discussion and analysis chapter concludes with a reflection on Research Question Two and how Chapter Four serves to develop an answer through participant narratives. This chapter will make specific references to previous literature and CTI, but generalized thoughts will be discussed in "Future Implications" in Chapter Five outlining how these answers develop potential research for the future.

Communication Theory of Identity and Identity Disclosure

The environment and the interactions one has with their surrounding area is one of the determinant factors in identity disclosure (Butler et al 2002). Once an individual has realized their identity and are considering disclosing, safety becomes a side constraint in the ability to do that comfortably. Even if there is no overt rejection of an individual's identity, the minor comments and general feeling of the environment can lead to feeling unwelcome and isolated (HRW, 2020) Due to the lack of role models, resources and support heterosexual individuals are afforded in the community, queer individuals are more hesitant to disclose because there may not

be positive receptions. During the Human Rights Watch's interviews of queer folx in the south about queer visibility and inclusion, a participant condenses these feelings into a simple sentiment about being out in the south and their experiences. They remark "It's nothing you can hit with a hammer. You know what they're doing, and it hurts you, but they know it's just small enough that it'll slide" (HRW, 2020). Communities that ostracize queer individuals facilitate environments that encourage no disclosure—either about their identity or the harassment they experience after disclosure.

Identity disclosure, as previously explored, is linked to the safety that a queer person feels in relation to their area. If someone has watched a family member disclose, or a protest about a transgender individual participating in homecoming (HRW, 2020), they are confronted with the reality of seeing someone be rejected on the base of their identity. These reactions and responses establish a clear narrative of hostility towards the queer community. For example, Paul Hard, a counselor and professor in Alabama, recalled a case "[w]here the school counselor, upon a student coming out as a lesbian, took it upon herself to accost three of the girl's closest friends and drag them into her office and suggest they should rethink who they're friends with, because the girl was going to hell and they would be judged by their association" (HRW, 2020).

The HRW research furthers that in situations where a student is interacting with a school professional in a capacity related to their identity, there is often a concern that the nature of these interactions and conversations can get back to family or other unsupportive community members (HRW, 2020). This is an excellent case study for looking at interacting with affirming individuals in an unwelcome community. The pocket of support an individual is getting in an unwelcoming environment can cause additional stress and anxiety about disclosure. This idea ties the disclosure of identity, disclosure timing and the selectivity of disclosure. These concepts

follow the relational and enacted frames from Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). A queer person takes in the perceptions of the community and then change how they present and how they interact with the community.

The relation frame of CTI breaks down how the individual relates to the community around them, with a specific emphasis on how others view them (Hecht, 1993). The relational frame goes past general ascribed identity to include how individuals define themselves respective to their interactions with others. The relational frame has three main levels. First, the presentation of identity and the subsequent identity emerges in relation to other people. Second, the way identities are enacted in relationships and third how the relationships develop into a social identity.

Looking at the first part of the frame and understanding that identities develop and become fixed by their interactional partners. Consider the parent-child relationship in the context of coming out. When Wren was considering coming out and an off handed comment was made about not having "anything to worry about" from their parent, this delayed their willingness to disclose (Wren). CTI contends that even in identity denial, the identity is formed through these interactions. Wren comments that they were so close to coming out until that comment, and that comment was a contributing factor to delaying the formal disclosure for two more years to their parents (Wren). Understanding the delay in identity disclosure can establish a comprehensive understanding of the queer experience, because this avoidance leads to selective disclosure to safe individuals.

Second, identity is developed through an individual's relational roles, such as spouse or child and an individual finds themselves defined by those relationships. For Robbie, being able to be in a queer space created the identity development that they were seeking. Prior to 25,

Robbie did not know other queer individuals were in the world, by becoming a part of the queer community, their identity was bolstered and affirmed (Robbie). However, this shows that there was identity rejection prior to the move to a more inclusive space. Robbie felt it necessary to meet the expectations of a straight cisgender man, so that was how they presented within their initial community. CTI contributes further to the discussion about identity rejection, by isolating just how significant community interaction is. As soon as Loren found a more supportive space that was safe to begin to disclose to people, she did. Until there was that perception of community safety, there is less risk in developing a false relational frame in order to maintain safety.

Lastly, identity becomes relational as an individual finds themselves in a group of people and are being perceived as a unit. One of the clearest pictures of identity as a social entity is to look at a queer individual in their family unity. Consider Sage's experience coming out. Their parent made a specific note about how hard them being queer would be on the family (Sage). This family unit has an identity of their own, in Sage's example a politically involved devout Muslim family. These social perceptions of the family impact an individual's disclosure, aside from the explicit rejection of a potential queer identity, in order to avoid tarnishing the family reputation. By understanding an individual's identity relative to their social entities, CTI contends that these identities manifest individuals may deal with rejection or witness rejection from other family members, like Jayden did watching their cousin come out as a lesbian. The reactions of the unit towards another individual's disclosure sets a precedence for the perception of queerness in the unit, as well as a threshold for safety evaluation.

The current research found that there is a shift in presentation when queer individuals are uncomfortable in an environment. The enacted frame also focuses on the meanings that are

created through and by this enactment, CTI furthers that identities manifest as a social behavior, social role, or symbol. Identity enaction can be covert or overt, depending on the safety of the environment.

Covert identity enaction is one of the mechanisms employed by the queer community in order to avoid disclosing their identity in unsafe situations, while still performing in a way that is detectable by other queer folx. Flagging, previously known as hanky code, is a way to covertly signal to other queer individuals that you are queer. Some queer flagging is more detectable than others, such as wearing pride pins or a t-shirt that says 'Alphabet Mafia'—a colloquialism for the LGBTQ+ community—or it can be significantly more innocuous. Some of the more innocuous flagging mechanisms are eyebrow slits (lesbian), cuffed jeans (bisexual), wearing keys on a carabineer (gay men and lesbians) or having two fingernails painted a distinct color than the rest/having two plain nails in an acrylic nail set (lesbian). Both covert options allow for the queer individual to be detectable by other queer persons, despite not being visibly queer. This form of identity expression is related to the absence of safety. Codes such as this developed while queer individuals were under regular attack, physically and legislatively.

During the 1970's and 1980's queer men started to put a bandana in their back pocket for sexual signaling. Not only did the pocket placement make a statement—about whether an individual was a top (left pocket) or a bottom (right pocket—but the coloring signaled different sexual acts or fetishes. As the hanky code gained traction, queer businesses across the United States began to distribute a decoder list as the code gained colors and more popularity within the queer community. Hanky code has gone out of use with the HIV/AIDs crisis but has been replaced by the physical flagging tools aforementioned. In addition to visually covert flagging, the queer community also introduced as a way to come out and disclose an individual's identity

only to queer individuals. One of the examples that has stood the test of time is “are you a friend of Dorothy?”

> It might work like this: one man is attracted to another but isn’t sure if the feeling is mutual. To test the waters, he’ll ask, “Are you a friend of Dorothy?” If the response is a puzzled “Dorothy *who*?” he’ll know it’s wise to move on. But if the response is “Oh, yes, I’m a *very* good friend of Dorothy,” he’ll know it’s safe to proceed (Deutsch, 2016).

Folk speech, like this, allows for individuals of a certain group of people to share expressions and pronunciations and often originates from being surrounded by unsafe individuals, thus necessitating coded language (Michel, 2018). Moving into 2022, some of the popularly used folk phrases throughout the queer community are: “do you listen to girl in red?” to ask a woman is they are into women, “do you listen to sweater weather?” to see if someone is bisexual (Kim, 2021). The development of visual and spoken communication in order to form a group identity—the communal frame of CTI—shows how unsafe queer individuals perceive the world around them in regard to them being out. CTI contends that by not expressing their authentic identity, except for in covert fashions, stimies an individual’s willingness to fully immerse themselves into their authentic community, because they are so focused on being undetectably queer.

However, individuals that are detectably queer have choices about how they can live their enacted frame. They can change approaches and try to be more passing if they are met with an environment that is not welcoming of their identity, they can choose to continue their presentation or they can adapt to be “deniably queer” (Sage). When they shaved half of their hair, they felt like they were visibly queer to queer individuals, but Sage felt like they had enough deniability that they could tell their parents it was a stylistic choice (Sage). These choices open up the risk of an individual being interrogated about their identity, forcing them to deny

who they are in order to maintain safety. This enactment frame of uncertainty creates an unstable environment for queer individuals to come out in because there is a plethora of ways community members can react to an out-enactment frame.

CTI creates a framework in which the different interactions an individual has can be looked at in an isolated context, as well as looking at the way each interaction influences other components of an individual's life. In order to look at the interaction between each framework, I will look at the two themes of community visibility and adaptation.

Community Visibility

In order to understand the implications of visibility, one must first understand the significance of it to the queer community. Seeing individuals that represent the possibilities and potential of living a life that is more consistent with the feelings that they hold. Having this potential creates a sense of affirmation in the feelings an individual is having, as well as potentially boosting their perception of self—messaging that is directly oppositional to the heterochristian narrative being pushed onto queer individuals. Seeing individuals that feel the same way, or even just sort of similarly, also dispels the feeling that queer individuals are invisible.

Safety and Representation

Disclosure of gender identity or sexuality, including deciding when and how to come out, are related to the homophobia, stigma and discrimination that is created by limited queer visibility and discourse within the area. This evaluation shows the entrenchment of the good/bad dichotomy of the queer community (Higginbotham 1994)—good and bad responses to disclosure, good and bad representation in the queer community, good and bad moral

implications of the queer community. Some queer individuals use this dichotomy to their advantage by unequivocally performing their queerness as a form of resistance; however, this rhetoric also leads to the separation of themselves from the community or denial of their identity.

An integral component of individuals evaluating the safety of their community or organization stems from the representation and visibility of queer people—Jayden saw another relative's disclosure and watched the hesitation and rejection come from their family:

> Somewhere around nine or ten or somewhere around in there, and my cousin Tate came out. She actually sent an email to my grandmother—this big, long email—because she was like I understand if you don't want anything to do with me anymore or anything like that, and so. My parents told my sibling and me. They said something along the lines of *Tate has shared with the family that she is attracted to women, and she wants to date women.* And I can't remember if they were like we think this is wrong… And I was just I was really admired. You know I really admired the courage that she'd had to tell my family that and I was just kind of like *hell yeah* you know (Jayden).

This representation presented conflicting feelings: there is affirmation—seeing someone has similar experiences as you—and second, conflict—hearing the displeasure in tone and message coming from their parents.

Hearing negative messaging impacts an individual's communal identity, mainly because their identity is at odds with the general expectation, even with they see individuals going against the grain. The majority of participants recognized delaying their disclosure because of the community perception of queer individuals and the comments family members made about other queer family members. They commented that seeing the nice comments to their faces but the disapproval behind closed doors made knowing who was safe to disclose to even more challenging. Thus, by maintaining a straight appearing identity to their community and providing

no information to the contrary there is the identity gap between an individual's personal frame and their communal frame—without disclosure there is no way to close those identity gaps.

Additionally, if there is not diverse representation of queer individuals in a community, queer individuals continue to be partially visible (Berlant & Wanerner, 1998). When Berlant discusses partial visibility, this speaks to the simplification queer identities have in communities (Berlant &Warner, 1998). As Jayden negotiated their identity, they realized that the disclosure of bisexuality was simpler than pansexuality, because a bisexual identity is more commonly understood and accepted sexuality instead of having to explain pansexuality and "any extra questions about identity" that come from a result of the broad potential partner (Jayden).

This simplification of identity or fear of being viewed as queer creates an intentional avoidance of scenarios where being detectibly queer is concerning. In environments where queerness is not acceptable or are oppositional to the heterochristian narrative, individuals assume an invisible identity to stay safe. Once again, this is trying to an individual's communal identity through CTI. The participants agreed that it was easier to disclose a simpler identity in order to appeal to the binarized approach to relationships the heterochristian south, where a bisexual identity may be hard to accept but "at least they think it is just two genders still" (Jayden). Jayden's comment addressed the narratives that are missing in many heterochristian southern communities, showing why disclosure continues to be single noted. This additionally ties back to an individual's personal frame, because they risk internalizing this perception and identity, thus serving to potentially stunt their identity development again. This avoidance of disclosure shows the direct relationships between environmental tolerance and individual disclosure. Loren explains that if they go out and feel like they are visibly queer, "I will avoid

any scenario that could be risky," but if she feels like she passes as heterosexual, there is "less risk and things to avoid" (Loren).

This risk evaluation, in some cases, does not feel like enough in order to avoid attention and risk. Where Loren feels like it is safe and potentially avoidable to be placed in risky environments—aside from the inherent risk of queerness in nature—Robbie finds that there is always a concern and knows that visibility can bring out more harm than it would create benefit.

> I'm probably 75% comfortable [in public, but] there are situations where I don't deal well with people. And I don't deal with straight men, particularly. Who does? I'm always afraid I'm going to get beat up and I'm afraid I sound to queer and blah blah blah blah blah and so I'm really insecure about that (Robbie).

In response to being met with feeling unsafe or unwelcome, a lot of queer individuals relocate in order to feel safer. This relocation aligns with previous research conducted about queer individuals in rural environments.

There are commonalities that amplify the feelings and impacts of discrimination towards the queer community. "Firstly, with smaller populations, differences become more noticeable, secondly, when communities are closely connected, rejection and acceptance in one area of life (e.g., faith community) can impact other areas (e.g., work) … the social and geographic isolation results in few supportive resources and limited opportunities to create a supportive community that helps individuals withstand difficulties, including discrimination" (Henriquez, 2019, p. 9). In addition to recognition and social overlap, there is the risk of their identity getting back to individuals that will not have a positive response:

> Yes, absolutely [I feel more comfortable here in comparison to Missouri]. The size different matters too, because when I go back home you see so and so's daughter, and I'm standing there with my wife saying Hello … I could walk into a

> gas station and see every single person in that building that knows me or I know them in some way. So, being in a bigger area, I think. Is a lot easier because I don't know a single person? (Loren).

Which supports the same sentiment as Robbie who realized what a difference made being around other queer individuals:

> I got to get away from the small town and be around other gay people. It was liberating I finally felt whole and complete, and I felt immediately better about myself. It was safe (Robbie).

However, in some areas, even a glimmer of representation impacts the way the queer community develops over time and how the individual presents themselves to the community around them.

Research participants discussed how being in areas that had more queer representation and queer acceptance increased their confidence in their identity—this is a direct link to the personal and relational layers of CTI. Discussions of identity disclosure being simpler and safer is a confirmation of an individual's personal frame. However, since this comfortability is directly related to other's comfortability in presenting as discernably queer rather than be openly and individually queer. This aspect hints at the relational layers of identity and the important of peers. The increased comfortability of disclosure is directly related to the queer individual's ability to relate and identity with their queer peers. Environments that explicitly discourage queer disclosure and queer identity lead to strategic disclosure avoidance: "I have been performing all of my life. I act straight to stay safe" (Stevie).

Without being sure that the environment is safe, most queer individuals will be covert in order to not draw attention to themselves. This can happen often where there are a wide variety of opinions in a relatively close geographic area. When there are pockets of tolerance, but they

are not always detectable. That means individuals within the same zip code, may have vastly different experiences. Environments like this establish an even greater layer of uncertainty.

> At least in my high school, there were a few like we had gay kids and gay couples. And it wasn't completely like horrible, but I think it just depended on where You were because I know in like my friend from middle school, they also work kind of in the same city, but different high schools than me and they had a lot tougher of a time as queer people (Page).

Social support is one of the largest signifiers of queer folx feeling safe in their area. Queer individuals that have social and familial support are more comfortable and open about their gender identity or sexuality (Wilson, 2019). The rate in which state legislatures are passing anti-queer bills, as of April 8, 2022, is disproportionate to previous years.

Across the United States, 325 anti-queer bills have been proposed, including Florida's "Don's Say Gay Bill" passed in 2022 (Butler, 2022). Watching a successful edict of oppression pass in Florida, then in Alabama has empowered other lawmakers to discuss legislation that models the restriction of conversation relative to queerness (Jones, 2022). Communities that show otherwise are communities that facilitate the environment for individuals' disclosure:

> We had a new principal at our high school and I went to public school and she got rid of same sex prom dates and you're also not allowed to go with like a friend and there was no way to really police this except for the fact that it meant people could not get a ticket for a date outside of the school that was the same sex…We are the kind of our public school that had a more liberal background than some of the other ones, and so the rule ended up getting tossed out before prom happened. But that was just kind of shocking that that was happening at our school because we had this huge GSA, but this scenario is just crazy (Charlie).

In comparison, when there are areas that are predominantly unsafe, individuals work to pass as straight for safety.

> I feel like just constantly showing off that you are queer is just scary in the South, because you never know who is going to be against it. And then, like I had heard about hate crimes in the area, while I was a student, and so it was just not a place that I wanted to show [my queerness] (Wren).

Having one moving experience that had safety concerns, when considering moving elsewhere research into queer tolerance became a deciding factor in job decision making. Orienting oneself outside of the south, or to a more queer-friendly area, such as a metro area, allows for the exploration that has not been facilitated in their area of origin

> I feel very comfortable in Tampa has a huge gay population which, like I said I don't really hang around with them, but it's Pretty socially accepted here which it is in Charleston now to (Jody).

In order to contextualize the difference between these two cities, the 2021 Municipality Equality Index Scorecard gave Tampa, Florida a 100/100 and Charleston, South Carolina an 81/100 (HRC, 2021).

Visibility allows for safer exploration. In environments where queerness is accepted as a fact of life, individuals feel like there is “no real reason to come out” (Charlie) or “can come out by just bringing a girlfriend home” (Wren). This ease in disclosure is related to seeing queer individuals being welcomed and an absence of pressure to conform to the social expectations:

> I did not often feel pressure to be like other people, some of my friends were like excelling at school and I almost failed junior year, so I didn't have much expectation for other people's opinions of me ever which is probably why I never felt like I needed to come out. I was like I’m going to be whoever I want to be.

> I'm not sure what about my environment, made me like that, especially because mostly straight friends surround me, [except my mom's two friends and] Brian so (Charlie).

By being willing to come out and having a supportive environment, there is less concern about the reactions. However, in environment without support, queer individuals are hiding in plain sight in order to avoid disclosure and detection.

Community Invisibility

When communities do not have a presence of queer people individuals start to contort themselves in order to guarantee their safety. Whether or not an individual discloses is more than just the verbal disclosure—it is how an individual performs in society and whether or not their queerness is readable. The "southern stigma" of queerness makes you assume there are no other queer people (Wren) unless you have confirmation of their relationship to the queer community—member or ally:

> I want to say, like yes and no [I feel excluded from society] because in some parts of Texas, I do feel excluded and other parts, you know, obviously, in queer friendly bigger cities. I would say, I would say yes or no, I think it just depends on where you're at and comfort level, and all of those things (Loren).

However, sometimes there can be images within the area that signal safety levels to the queer person. Seeing a political item that is representative of divisiveness and hate signals the absence of safety in an area. Counties that hosted a presidential rally for former United States President Donald Trump saw a 226 percent increase in hate crimes in comparison to counties that did not host a rally (ADL 2018; Feinberg et all, 2019). Knowing an area supports one of the proponents of divisiveness and attacks against the queer community, as represented by the political decisions of the Trump administration discussed in "Historical Context" section of Chapter Two, directly informs an individual's willingness to disclosure their identity.

> I don't think I would I don't think I care enough at this point [to pay attention to my surroundings], unless I saw some Trump flags waving about, I wouldn't care. But do I feel excluded um yeah, I especially in today's political climate, I don't see you gave bill was literally just signed into law, this morning, and it just sucks. um I feel like a lot of people come up with excuses to hate minority members. They're trying to show that, of course, these people are to be hated when there's just no reason (Wren).

Environments with no representation because the community has pushed out all of the queer folx create the cycle of queer people leaving. Hateful symbols, messages and propaganda trigger a larger distance between the individual and their initial community. The majority of participants interviewed reported seeing heterochristian messaging and political campaigns that support the devolution of queer rights and feeling like that put them at odds with their community. This messaging shifts an individual outside of their communal frame, thus increasing feelings of rejection—a concern that is often linked to poor mental health amongst the queer community. The role of community directly encourages an absence of disclosure.

As individuals realize their identity in an unwelcoming environment and then experience a supportive environment by moving away, they realize they are coming out in their original community is not a safe or viable option, because there are such significant differences in tolerance. Thus, they suppress their identity or choose not to return to their original community because the feel unwelcome.

> I don't think people recognize there are queer Muslims in the community; it's just not something that people have even considered as a thing. I know I've met a lot of other queer Muslims and they all say the same thing, like people don't believe that's the thing. … that's a very unsafe place to be and I don't think I've ever met anyone who's openly queer and Muslim like in some religious committee.

> Although there is a TEDx Talk by Blair Imani (2019), I remember I watched her when I was like in high school and she's a queer Muslim and she like talked about it in public. I broke down crying because I've never seen anyone who was like wearing hijab and was a young queer (Page).

Situations are further entrenched by cultural and religious standards

> My mom is very liberal. she's she works in politics, for a nonprofit and she's a hardcore democrat so, she's a very liberal person. But she's also very religious so it's kind of like a tossup people kind of thing she would be okay, with it, but I like it's just you know. She has gay friends it's just when it comes to me, I feel like she's just not going to be okay with it and she's made that pretty clear over the years (Page).

There is a fear of community rejection despite an individual being socially liberal because there is no representation of families in their communities that did not disown their Muslim queer child.

> I'm trying to imagine myself being 30 something and my moving into my childhood area with my wife and I feel like that would be the biggest scandal in the neighborhood. Like it would be something that everyone talks about … I feel like a lot of immigrant communities like even second gen immigrants just don't really have much perception of like the gay community Even if they're accepting or whatever still like you know kind of talk like *oh my God, did you hear so and so's gay*. … this area would be not a place, I would want to have my future just because, other than the fact that you know I hate the suburbs, it's just not a place where I would feel very comfortable (Page).

Page recognizing that they felt uncomfortable enough to not return to the area shows the entrenchment of the invisible queer individuals within the community.

Remember the interconnectedness of CTI and the relationship between each. An individual's personal identity of how they relate to their queer identity cannot be discussed without considering how the culture and community define other parts of their personal identity. Even how a community views the individual impacts their identity as a queer person, such as whether or not they are visibly queer and the community provides a safe place for them to exist, whether they feel like they have no obligation but to avoid disclosure and the level of advocacy and engagement fostered by the community. It must additionally be considered how the social and religious cultures have defined good and ethical members of society and how this may cause an individual to feel like avoiding identity disclosure is a more strategic decision regardless of the cost to identity suppression. Queer individuals feel unwelcome and relocate, thus fostering more queer individuals feeling unwelcome and continuing the relocation cycle.

There are circumstances in which individuals begin to choose if and when disclosure is possible, as well as providing insight on what relationships were like after disclosing to individuals who hold strongly to heterochristian ideals. By exploring the adaptation and paths individuals take, the following theme seeks to outline some of the influences that played into the time and place of identity disclosure.

Community Adaptation

In order to isolate the different measures of adaptation queer individuals take in heterochristian environments, once must fist understand the different layers of identity negotiation that go into this moment. Regardless of disclosure status to family and friends, some individuals feel like the safest option in general day-to-day interactions. Others are confronted with the direct rejection of their potential identity, thus delaying disclosure until the individual is out of the community. Additionally, some individuals feel like the have the freedom to not

disclose their identity at all, instead they proceed and treat the relationship as heterosexual individuals do or they at least make the effort to; however, sometimes the indirect disclosure may not be at the behest of the queer individual. Finally, within the adaptation theme, the research looks at how the relationships individuals hold within the community changes after their disclosure.

Avoiding Disclosure

Individuals that are met with community intolerance make a concerted effort to avoid any disclosure of their queermess. Loren explains that when they visit home "I avoid all PDA [Public Displays of Affection]" so that they do not call attention to their relationship (Loren). This caution and avoidance are a direct result of concern for a litany of negative implications that come as a result of being in an unwelcome environment: violence, prejudice, discrimination; harassment; discrimination directed at them or their partner; unwanted stares and other negative comments (Brady, 2017). Even in something that is so openly tolerated for heterosexual couples, queer couples avoid it, citing safety as the main concern for avoiding this PDA

Sometimes the environment can be more direct. Despite being in a liberal environment and having liberal parents, who actively advocate for social change in their community, the social implication of having a queer child is still too much for individuals and families in areas with low community tolerance.

> I came home from school one day to my mom on her phone and she was crying. So, I asked why she was crying, she cries very easily so no surprise. She showed me and a video of a boy coming out to his mom, and it was very emotional. I start crying too. And then I like looked over at her, and I internally, decided it was the perfect moment to tell her. And when she turned to me and she's like you know *I*

> *love you, no matter what right*, I was like yeah and then she was *like just please don't turn out to be gay it'd be really hard for our family* (Page).

These comments innately push someone into knowing there is no tolerance, and they are in an unsafe environment to disclose, but statements of tolerance also give queer folx an insight into the additional repercussions that can come from disclosure. “Coming out to my parents will happen once I am not financially dependent on my parents. They know, but they are denying it, so I need to be independent first” (Page).

Being able to meet basic needs in your environment is integral, so often queer individuals will avoid disclosure in order to ensure basic needs are met, whether it be knowing an individual can meet their basic needs independently or deciding an environment may not be safe and there being a risk of losing stable and secure housing:

> I don't remember exact comments, but my mom's boyfriend was also just openly, but very subtly, he would just make comments that make you *think I can't come out while I’m in this house*, because I don't know what the reaction is going to be, so that’s the reason why I waited until I got to college to come out (Wren).

And being unsure of what tolerance level is in their direct family, individuals will avoid even exploring their identity in the event that the news makes it back to their family members. Even when there may not be a direct concern to safety and livelihoods but still are concerned about the absence of support, indirect discrimination or non-violent prejudice, individuals will come out to the safe individuals. These safe individuals have proven that the queerness will not get back to the risky community individuals.

> I came out selectively to people who I felt were important in my life, so I wasn't openly out yet. I told my first partner about a year into our relationship, that I was bisexual. I told my best friend in high school at the time, and then after that I just

> kept the same protocol. It'd be people who were very close to me, who I came out to and who I knew would make sure the information did not get back to my family. I didn't want her to find out by accident [that I was queer]. And I have her on social media and I didn't want to post something and then have her be like, what does this mean? Or So-and-so told me this. Why didn't you tell me first? And now that. Everybody who matters in my life knows. I'm like, okay, well, now everybody else can know (Stevie).

Coming out can be done in stages if that is what is most comfortable for individuals. In some situations, being met with rejection early in disclosure can discourage an individual from fulfilling their truth.

Action without Disclosure

A sentiment shared between several participants was that they are bothered by the social requirement to come out, since everyone is assumed heterosexual until otherwise by society, so some individuals chose to perform their identity and let everyone realize they are queer. This can be done in an effort to normalize queerness much like heterosexuality is normalized. Even this desire to treat queerness as a similar conceptual component to heterosexuality shows the influence heteronormative culture has on society and how intentional actions to normalize queermess is a resistance mechanism (Butler, 2002)

> When I first came out I had just posted a picture of my wife, then girlfriend, and just kind of said y'all can read between the lines, I'm not going to publicly say oh *I'm gay this is what's going on in my life I just posted a picture of us* … but once my family knew that was kind of. pretty much all I had to not all, but you know, I was just really close with my family so just kind of circulated around the family (Loren).

Sometimes it is just the process of coming out to specific individuals that makes an individual try to avoid the disclosure. As individuals progressed in their understanding of identity, they also recount their challenges in their identity journey, because they felt like the social obligation of coming out is an undue burden placed on the queer community. Coming out and the process of disclosure is positioned within society as something in which a queer individual has to do in order to be given the same social benefit and guarantee within society. Queerness can significantly impact an individual's communal and personal frames, thus grappling with those changes creates a desire to be "normal" in any way that heterosexual individuals often do. Wren explicitly notes how frustrating it is to "HAVE to come out" but identified that the process of coming out to their mom created moments of clarity and enhanced their perspective of themselves in a way that would not have happened if they did not experience the coming out process. This additional insight gained through the explanation and self-exploration through coming out, an individual's disclosure continues to enhance their personal identity frame.

Especially through a staggered coming out process, telling different individuals when it was most appropriate for them, sometimes avoiding it and waiting for it to come up organically like Wren did, and when it didn't a different approach was taken to avoid having to out to their parent directly:

> I told my [younger] sister hoping that she would spill the beans and be the one to tell my mom… I told my little sister, *hey guess what she's like what like I'm going on a date* today and she was like with who I was like this girl I know. … And so, I was 100% telling my little sister something that way she would spill the beans to my mom since I did not think a 7–8-year-old could keep a secret. And being the amazing little sister, she is she didn't tell my mom. So, when I came out to my mom I said, *I told Chloe like a month ago, maybe not a month ago, maybe like two weeks ago and I went on this date. Thinking she would spill the beans and tell*

> *you, so I didn't have to do it myself* but no. My little sister is just an OG, and she can keep it secret (Wren).

This approach demonstrates a comfortability with identity, but a concern about the comments individuals may make in smaller group settings or the likelihood of a public altercation or disclosure from a different person. However, sometimes it feels easier to just stop coming out to people on a regular basis and live their life—this only comes with the safety in knowing the community

> I'm not out to the general public but. I'm fine with holding hands in public (Robbie)

Considering the overall messaging that has been observed from the participants is negative nature of queerness, however negative messaging does not always equate to an openly hostile environment. Sometimes the comments are microagressive or they are kind to your face, but will openly disrespect your existence if you are questioning yourself:

> I got super religious when I was sixteen, but it was the same summer that I was coming out. I really loved this church; it seems super progressive. But then there was one day and youth group there was a girl that I had never seen before she came, and she was in our age group, so she came and sat with us. And she talked about how she was a lesbian and had you know acted upon it, and she felt guilty and that's why she was at church again because she is trying to turn away from that lifestyle. Instead of everybody being all like. it's Okay, they were like *yeah you really should do that I'm glad you came to church, so you can. Like change your lifestyle* and that was the same summer I was coming out, and I was like *well shit like this isn't the place for me either* (Wren).

Religious bodies often employ a 'love-the-sinner-hate-the-sin' approach where they will be nice to someone's face, but then talk about how deviant their choices are and how they need to reject their "perversions" or just talk about it behind your back.

> This is an area that votes more conservatively, usually, but in terms of LGBTQ community, I would say they are tolerant. They're not super accepting, but even the people that aren't accepting will be nice to your face. (Page).

Exploring, both, the heterochristian and heteroMuslim environments seen in the United States South reinforces the multiplicities of communities reinforcing the same premise that heterosexuality is the superior identity. That is, there is rejection directly related to any oppositional identity, many queer individuals continue to search for the affirmation, instead of rejection being directed at them. Part of why queer visibility (Chapter 4) maintains a critical role throughout the disclosure component of identity development and how visibility shapes the perception of queerness and the ability to disclose. There is a change that Page may have been able to disclose early and safely to their parents, had there been previous Muslin queer representation—a critical marker Page outlined as something they feel like would have made their identity disclosure to friends easier and family possible. Thus, the religious influences and negative messaging of the heterochristian south had a direct relationship to an individual's person frame and how they perceive themselves as worthy of acceptance from all community members. Most queer individuals do face the eventuality of disclosure and the relationships they have with individuals after disclosure continues to shape their identity and their relationship to their community.

Relationships After Disclosure

Coming out to individuals also tests the threshold for community tolerance because individuals see the unconditional support, they have associated with these individuals be potentially compromised by disclosure. If a disclosure to an individual who is, supposed to be, objectively supportive—such as a parent—does not go well or they hear comments that push back the disclosure a queer person was ready to give. When an individual hears microagressive comments, their concern of receiving less support after the disclosure is heightened (Nadal., 2017)

> When I was first coming out and had finally accepted it, I was a book with a lesbian main character. And my [step] mom offered to take the books to the library. So, I didn't think about the context, or like the contents of that book. I don't even think it said it on the back cover or maybe it did. [Later at dinner] my stepmom asked me at dinner *do we have anything to worry about. After mentioning the contents of the book* and that was one of those moments, I was like I can't come out. And I was very close to it, and I might have come out publicly sooner if it hadn't been for that comment (Wren).

Wren continues,

> I told my dad and my stepmom [I was bisexual] over text message. It was the day or two after Trump got elected and I was just venting about trump and how dangerous I felt he was, and everybody was like I just don't understand why you care so much; I was like *well guess what I like boys and girls* and my stepmom told me *as long as you keep everything else straight.* My dad just was *like I've known still love you* all that (Wren).

Since coming out, Wren says:

> [My stepmom has] since apologized my she's told me that. her and my dad had a huge fight over that comment because he thought it was unacceptable to say, and she was very religious when we first met (Wren).

In order to avoid the uncomfortable comments or unpleasant reaction, queer individuals choose to disclose in public settings, such as coffee shops and restaurants. The appeal to coming out in public is that reactions will be managed and scaled to an appropriate threshold to maintain a positive public image, often resulting in an uncomfortable and awkward environment.

> I actually came out at am Olive Garden, which was like the worst choice ever, but I was with my parents, and I was just like hey there's this girl that I want to go on a date with like… I thought Oh, they can't get mad like we're in public…They kind of said, *okay*, and then didn't speak the rest of the dinner, just they were texting each other back and forth…they didn't really say anything until a couple days later, like my parents sat me down and was like. So, let's talk about this, you know so at first, they didn't have a really great reaction. There was kind of a rift in the family for a little bit and then probably say about six months later, they kind of had like a complete change of heart. and completely like you know one at like completely turned around and what they had been saying, and so, probably about six months mark, they were like hey you know it's okay like we don't really care so (Loren).

Loren later remarks that they remember regretting coming out because of the response to their disclosure to their parents, which "made me not want to come out to anybody else" (Loren). The main concern in disclosure seems on face to be directly related to their families and parents; however, this seems to only cause pause to the individual when their families subscribe to the same heterochristian ideals present in their communities. Sometimes, because of the supportive environment individuals do not feel like they need to come out or if they do, they feel like they can do it in a casual way. Much like how Charlie never felt like they needed to come out except

to clarify their parent's understanding of their identity, some individuals feel like coming out is not something that should have to be done. When making coming out decisions, Wren felt like she should not have to come out, because heterosexual individuals don't have to come out, they just bring their new partner to introduce them. So, she wanted to wait and just be able to bring a same-sex partner home to avoid the normal awkward coming out experience, just like if they were bringing home someone of the opposite sex.

> I told my mom on national coming out day. I told myself I would finally do it because I was just kind of waiting to have a girlfriend to be like hey mom look. And I just wasn't getting one so then I only told her (Wren).

There is the common theme of wanting to be accepted for who they are. These situations and this despite for acceptance shows that there continues to be an inherent risk to disclosing identity to individuals who are not safe people

> I do feel unsafe when I think about disclosing to my parents … I fear for my personal wellbeing. If I were to come out to my parents and my grandparents and if their reaction was not supportive, I genuinely fear for my personal safety because I grew up in an abusive environment. My father abused me physically and while I'm not afraid that he would hit me; I'm afraid he would be verbally abusive, emotionally abusive psychologically abusive and I fear that. Both of my parents would refuse to help me financially anymore, and since I don't make a whole lot of money, and I live in my mother's house that's just like not an option for me. I don't know what would happen if my mom said *oh, you're queer you can't live here get out tonight*. And so that's what causes, most of the fear is just that basic need that I would have but then also. It scares me not because I feel that I wouldn't have their love, and more I need financial support, just to be able to take care of myself, but also you know parents love is nice too, I think a lot of people consider that to be essential. And so, I'm definitely afraid that I will lose it (Jayden).

When an individual is forced to choose between their basic needs and being out, basic needs often will outweigh. This concern bleeds into the workplace and making an effort to hide their identity.

Workplace Fear

Informal or indirect discrimination, such as comments about a group of people or something says that was not said directly the queer individual. Often these unsafe environments continue, because individuals feel like in some environments, disclosing at any point is not worth the risk it can cause of someone's position or employment. Most times, these indirect forms of discrimination present through discriminatory jokes and inter-office animosity (Deitch 2004). However, even when a comment feels innocuous, these small moments of discrimination establish a fear of more direct and hateful discrimination thus leading to a decision to never disclose in the workplace (Ragins, 2003). Both authors also recognize the prevalence of informal discriminatory practices being the most common, this includes the conversation about an individual even if they are not in earshot.

> [There was a client what] didn't want to give up their medical records because if you file a claim with this department, you have to sign away your rights to all medical records, even a psychotherapist is what the discussion was this time. This person wouldn't sign it and, basically, the one judge said we're not going to a hearing if you don't submit medical records. And then [after the individual walked away] these two judges literally started making fun of this person who was queer … They went to the hearing, and they were making fun of them. I was just so. flabbergasted I literally had to remove myself from the situation, because I was about to throw up. And they started making fun of this person's fingernails saying that they were so long they called them a he-she-they and then they referenced the Saturday night live … I just had to remove myself from the situation because I

> literally felt ill. And I wanted was to Ask both of them if they ever even had a conversation with somebody outside of that experience, who was queer (Jayden).

Levine and Leonard make this intrinsically clear noting that while formal discrimination frameworks directly impact the achievement or status of an employee, informal discrimination undermines the individual's understanding of self and feelings of safety, thus leading to an environment where an individual does not feel like they have the option to safely disclose.

> I work for like a really political state agency and I've noticed, there is one person I have known since I was a small child and I know that she's lesbian because she's told me about her girlfriend. Well, she doesn't refer to her as her girlfriend in front of other people [at work], she refers to her as her roommate, not her partner, not her girlfriend, as her roommate. And it's been this way for years, they've been together for like 10 or 20 years and she still won't say my girlfriend and my partner. She's told me she feels like it would be used against her, and she said, *you know I already present more masculine than people expect me to. I get called Sir sometimes and I already have to deal with that, and so I know that people, not everyone is accepting of that lifestyle,* is I think how she put it?
>
> So, I straight up asked her, I was it your girlfriend because she had talked about breaking up and I was assuming they had broken up or no, no, no, no, I didn't say she or girlfriend I said digital breakup, because I had heard them fighting. she said *no we're okay* and another coworker came up and asked who we were talking about, and she said, *my roommate* and I asked Your *roommate? Isn't she a little bit more than your roommate*? And that's when she said *I just feel like it would be used against me*, which, I think is really sad and I think that speaks to the state government, and so it may not represent Arkansas as a whole, I know it doesn't because there are definitely pockets of people who are good people and who are supportive and. I would consider to be allies, but whenever you think about where power is situated especially in like state government and schools and all that kind of stuff… Not only is it suppressive it's archaic (Jayden).

Especially when working for a state's government that aligns with the predominate values which reject the identity of individuals, the likelihood an individual is going to disclose at work is low. Factoring in the presence of an employee who has been there for over a decade who is unwilling to disclose their identity just reaffirms the absence of safety in their workplace. Being in a workplace that is directly rejective of an individual's identity recreates an identity gap between the personal and relational frame. While they know that they are queer, they are making conscious and strategic decisions for their relational frame to present as the heterosexual coworker. These actions can cause emotional distress as the individual feels like they have to hide who they are.

Disclosure in unsafe workplaces can lead to exclusion, threats, violence, and reduced opportunity. However, disclosure in safe environments has been associated with many positive outcomes" Hill (2001). This perspective informs the disclosure process for other queer folx in this office space, because if an individual does not feel safe, their experiences are informed by the previous concerns they have experienced, thus giving an individual who is considering open disclosure to their office environment have more risk and concern associated with the disclosure. This risk and concern can cause a delay in disclosure or no disclosure at all.

Chapter Summary

In this current chapter, I circle back to the purpose of this study. I follow with brief statements of analysis, then looked at the implications this research has on communication scholarship. I, also, reflect further on the potential follow up research needed to fully understand the implications of queerness and community, offered a brief reelection into the methodology and personal positionality this has provided me and the impact on me as research. I end the

chapter by offering a final reflection and moving beyond this research into the potential application for my professional future, as well as the application for academia.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present a summary of the research, provide an overview of the conclusions made and consider the future implications this research has provided for communications scholarship. The limitations of this study and for the future research will also be addressed. Finally, I look back on the ways that this research process has impacted me.

Research Purpose

This current study was looking at the interactions between an individual's environment and how that impacts their identity development and disclosure. It collected stories from nine individuals and their experiences finding out their identity as well as the processes they took to disclose their identity. The purpose of this research was to explore what ways a heterochristian environment impacts the way a queer person develops the different components of their identity. I was particularly interested in how approaching the research process from a participant centric focus would shape the research conclusions and enhance the narratives. I expected the use of stories to provide rich detail and context of the experiences of each individual in order to better understand their experiences in development and disclosure. The following questions guided my study:

1. How being in a heterochristian southern environment influence an individual's development of their sexual or gender identity?
2. How being in a heterochristian southern environment impact an individual's willingness to disclose their identity?

These questions were explored using the narrative interviews with the nine research participants within this study. They were recruited through social media flyers and word of mouth. Using narrative interviews, information and experiences were collected via semi-structured interviews to get to the root of the individual's coming out story and their experiences as a queer person in the United States South. As discussed in Chapter Three, the question "tell me your coming out story" was the start of the interview. This question prompts the individual to start from their first memory and recognition of their own queerness, as well as how they disclosed their identity.

Following their stories, in order to gain richer context and detail, I asked questions in order to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. The utilization of a narrative methodology allowed for me to see the complicated evolution of their identity, which compounds the premise that coming out is not a singular event. I discovered many complicated experiences that participants held for years before disclosing to their family. By breaking down the analysis into identity realization and identity disclosure, Chapter Four and Five, respectively, I was able to isolate the implications of different experiences and how those moments influenced an individual's experience. The following section presents the conclusions I reached from the narrative analysis of the nine participant stories.

Conclusions

The individuals within this study all noted early realizations of their differences but were not sure what the difference was. These realizations result in an individual questioning who they

are and began questioning their identity—in discussing the discovery of identity, all but one participant experienced identity rejection at some point during their identity exploration.

Environmental settings and conversation as an individual are discovering and learning about their identity has an impact on how they perceive themselves and their identity. Society becomes a place where isolation and victimization are prevalent, thus encouraging individuals to hide their identity. This realization of safety that comes from community organizations is lost because the queer individual is more worried about how individuals perceive them instead of living their authentic life. Further, in communities with little queer presence, individuals may not understand the viability of queerness as an identity, because they are constantly met with rejection. This perception of their identity establishes an essential need to reject an individual's feelings and identity.

The secondary conclusion this research makes is about the application of disclosure. By looking at how the queer community is perceived by society, an individual realizes that heterochristian society blatantly rejects queerness as an accepted identity. Instead, they learn to disclose their identity in covert ways to be safe from the cishet society but still develop their chosen community. Additionally, individuals may elect to not overtly disclose and let everyone deduce from social media posts their queerness.

By using CTI, a communication principle that has been limitedly applied outside of cultural communication—Hecht traced ethnic communication—this research has looked at the ways that identity development and disclosure impact the four identity frames. In some environments, mainly the supportive pockets of the heteronormative south, individuals found their identity frames moving closer together, but when individuals were focusing on passing for

heterosexual and avoiding the detection of the cis and hetero community their identity gaps were widened.

General United States culture and organized religion were significant influences that appeared to establish conflict between an individual's lived identity and their public identity. However, because these environments in the United States South place such an emphasis on the Christian principles, this difference is further expanded and creating and us versus them mentality.

Limitations

The study conducted had a small sample size and this could be viewed as a limitation to the study, thus the argument may be made that this sample is not large enough to view generalizable experiences. However, the small sample size was chosen in order to add increased detail to research and the analysis. My research focus evolved into an emphasis of the details and nuanced interactions from each participant in order to provide a platform for the nine queer voices I had the privilege of studying. This focus also prioritized the accessibility of the research by placing an emphasis on the story telling of the queer individuals, perhaps creating the environment for other queer individuals in the south to learn from the experiences of queer individuals who came before them.

The other limitation this research experienced was the lack of gender diversity—most of the participants were female, with two non-binary participants and one man. Therefore, this sampling of coming out stories establishes an under-representation of the gay male voice. This representation has the potential to reflect the uncomfortable nature of discussion of sexuality within queer men.

Future Research Implications

This research was interested in hearing the personal stories of how heterochristian messaging impacted the identity development and disclosure of individuals across the United States South. As the findings of this research indicated, there are a multiplicity of influences that appeared to impact the process and decision on when and how to come out to the general public. Coming out is not a singular event or even a onetime process, but instead there is the progressive obligation to come out over and over again. From the participant stories, I learned the different ways an individual negotiates their identity, but there was an absence on the discussion about how an individual determined when to disclose to specific individuals in their lives. Further research to understand the nuanced decisions of disclosure to have a fuller picture of how the decisions are made about when and who to come out to. As the conversation of a layered coming out process was developed through interviews, as participants explained who they disclosed to and when, there would be an inherent benefit to analyzing the decision-making process an individual undertakes.

Additionally, a handful of comments made by participants brings the internet and new media into the discussion of identity development and disclosure. Little research has been done on the impact the media and internet have on identity development (Craig, 2014), thus I suggest that exploring the implications of internet on identity development and disclosure.

Chapter Summary

In this current chapter, I circle back to the purpose of this study. I follow with brief statements of analysis, then looked at the implications this research has on communication scholarship. I, also, reflect further on the potential follow up research needed to fully understand

the implications of queerness and community, I end the chapter by offering a final reflection and moving beyond this research into the potential application for future research.

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APPENDICES

Appendix One: Interview Questions

Demographic Questions

- City, State
    - Current
    - Adolescence
- Age
- Gender Identity
- Sexuality

Coming Out

- Tell me your coming out story
    - How old were you when you realized your identity?
    - How old were you when you first told someone?
    - Did you plan it?
    - Do you remember exactly what you said?
- Are you out at/in/to____?
    - Community
    - Work
    - Friends and family
    - Neighbors
    - Church
    - With new people
- What factors were behind your decision to come out?
- Were there any reactions that you were disappointed in?
    - What did they say?
    - Your relationship with them (aunt uncle etc.)
    - What was your relationship like before?
    - Relationship After coming out
    - Relationship Now

Environment and Identity

- What do you know about the attitudes of local schools, pediatricians, neighbors, faith communities, youth organizations, etc. in relation to LGBTQ community?

- How would you describe the community you grew up in with its relationship to the LGBTQ community? (Friendly? Hostile?)
- Do you remember interacting with openly queer people regularly while living in the south?
    - Specifically, during adolescence
    - Young adult life
    - Mid adult
    - Etc.
- How did your community/area change how you understood your identity?
- Did the environment influence your willingness to accept your identity?
- Are there antidiscrimination policies at schools and work in your community?

Environment and Disclosure

- Are there moments where you felt unwelcome or unsafe?
    - Did that happen even if you were blending in (acting straight)?
- (If they have moved away from their original community) do you feel more comfortable being out in your new area?
    - What are the main differences you notice?
- Are there any moments where you felt unwelcome or unsafe, even if you were blending in and were not in active danger?
    - Can you think of specific comments made?
    - Actions?
- Did being in the south influence when you came out?
    - To whom?
    - How?
- Did you come out to different people at different times?
    - Why did you do that?
    - Did your environment influence this decision?
    - Who?
        - Does this person hold ideas that reflect your community?

    - How did you differentiate the people in your life on who was safe to come out to at what time?

Identity and Disclosure

- When you are in your community alone or with your partner: do you:
    - Pay attention to your surroundings closely?
    - Worry about discrimination?
    - Feel excluded from society?
    - Feel like your family struggles to be recognized (IE a lesbian couple with their children and someone asks where the dads are while moms have the kids)
- As a child, did you hear negative messages about the queer community?
- Have you ever been told to dress or act different so you could better hide your identity if you were with someone?
- Were you confident in your identity label when you came out or were you unsure about the "right" label?
- Do you have a label you feel most comfortable with?
    - If this has changed, did you come out each time you felt confidence in your identity?
- Does having a clearer understanding of your identity/label make you more comfortable preforming your identity publicly (revisit so I can make this more lay for the interview)?

Appendix Two: Social Media Recruitment Flyer


The Effect of
COMING OUT QUEER
A study at Texas A&M is looking for queer folx to participate!!
"I BELIEVE THAT TELLING OUR STORIES, FIRST TO OURSELVES AND THEN TO ONE ANOTHER AND THE WORLD, IS A REVOLUTIONARY ACT.
-Janet Mock
-Did you grow up in a heteronormative environment?
-Did you have an easy disclosure?
-Did you have a complicated disclosure?
-Are you not out and your environment is impacting your ability to live your authentic life?
WHO
Queer folx who grew up in a heteronormative enviornment. You don't have to be out!
WHAT
An interview based research study
WHERE AND WHEN
1-2 Hour Zoom Interview
This study works to look at how heteronormative environments impact an individual's willingness to disclose their identity. If you think this is you, please contact us!!
EMAIL
ALYSSA_HOOKS@TAMU.EDU
DM ME ON THE PLATFORM YOU ARE SEEING THIS ON!
IT IS TIME FOR QUEER VOICES TO SHINE AND DISCUSS THE ENVIRONMENTAL STRUCTURES THAT IMPACT US

Appendix Three: Participant Screening Email

Hello! And thank you for your interest in my research study!

This study is exploring how the Heteronormative South's culture and language impact queer individuals as they are exploring their identity and deciding if they are safe enough to disclose their identity.

I hope that by interviewing queer folx from across the country, this thesis becomes another way to amplify the queer voice.

This study will practice a strict confidentiality protocol, which will be further detailed in the informed consent document.

After completing the screening questions, you will be given a document that explains the research process in detail as well as additional information from Texas A&M's Institutional Review Board. Along with that document, there will be a scheduling link that will enable you to select the most convenient time for the interview.

The screening questions are here to ensure you fit the study population that has been designated for this research project.

Screening Questions

1. Do you identify as queer and/or a part of the LGBTQ+ community?
2. Did you disclose your identity to friends' families' coworkers etc.?
3. Did you grow up in "south"?

Again, thank you so much for your interest and I look forward to being given the opportunity to hear your story,

Sage Hooks

They/them

Appendix Four: Participant Registration Email

Thank you so much! You meet the inclusion criteria.

The next steps are nice and easy! I have attached the informed consent document. This explains all of the tiny details of the study, as well as our confidentiality practices.

From here on out, anything that asks for your name, you will now use your confidential participant ID: COQXXX22. First Name COQXXX Last Name: 22

Once you have read the consent document, you can register for an interview time that works best for you. If you have any questions about the consent document, please let me know by email and I will help to clarify.

Interview Registration-

I am so excited to get to hear your story and greatly appreciate the time you are setting aside to help me amplify queer voices,

Sage

Appendix Five: Participant Information Sheet/Informed Consent Form

Title of Research Study:

"Coming Out Queer: An Ethnographic Evaluation of Queer Theory and Heteronormative America"

Investigator: Antonio La Pastina and Alyssa Hooks:

Supported By: This research is supported by Texas A&M University

Why is this research being done?

We hope that this study may help understand how people are affected by living in the South and how it can delay gender and/or sexuality disclosure.

How long will the research last?

We imagine that you will be in this research study for about two hours

How many people will be studied?

We expect to enroll about 30 people in this research study

What happens if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research"?

The researcher will reach out to you to make sure you can participate in this study. Once you know you are a good fit, your interview will be scheduled.

Once your interview is scheduled: time and date, you will be sent a Zoom link with a password in order to maintain privacy.

The researcher will ask you to answer questions about your coming out story, including details about yourself, your and, how your environment impacted you.

The interview will take between one (1) and two (2) hours depending on the length of replies and follow ups. Your location will not be changed and coded within the study.

The Zoom interview will have the camera on, and video and audio recorded. These video and audio recordings will be saved for the researcher to look back on.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You are not required to participate in this study.

What happens if I say "Yes," but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time, and it will not be held against you.

Upon leaving the research study, all contact will be coded and filed but not used in the research.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

If the interview gets overwhelming, you can skip the question, take a break or the interview can be postponed.

An additional risk is a loss of privacy. Since there will be audio and video recordings saved, there is a chance your privacy can be compromised. The encryption of the video file and password protection work to avoid this risk as much as possible.

There may be uncommon or unknown risks that might occur. You should report any problems to the researchers.

Resources provided to help process challenges will be publicly available resources. Including resources available online:

> The Trevor Project Confidential Crisis Line:
> https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help/
>
> The LGBT National Help Line: 800-246-7743

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Your personal information will be collected sparingly but is available for record keeping purposes and to people who have a need to review this material. We cannot promise total privacy.

Groups that may inspect and copy your information include the TAMU HRPP/IRB and other agents of this institution.

We will have code names for participants. All notes, recordings and records will be saved on a password-protected computer. Participant data will be kept private except in cases where the researcher is legally required to report specific cases. These cases include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

In the event of publication, information and quotes can be used in aggregated, combined, presentation or de-identified presentation, easily identifiable information is removed from analysis.

An individuals' name will be used for researcher and participant communication but will not be utilized in the research.

Appendix Six: IRB Approval Letter

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

APPROVAL OF RESEARCH
Using Expedited Procedures
(Common Rule – Effective January 2018)

March 22, 2022

Type of Review:	Initial Review
Title:	Coming Out Queer: An Ethnographic Evaluation of Queer Theory and Heternomormative America
Investigator:	Antonio La Pastina
IRB ID:	IRB2021-0251
Reference Number:	121958
Funding:	Internal
Documents Approved: *copies of stamped approved documents are downloadable from IRIS	Coming Out Queer Interview Questions 3.0 - (Version 3.0) Informed Consent 5.0 - (Version 5.0) Recruitment Email - (Version 1.0) Social Media Recruitment Flyer - (Version 1.0) Alyssa Hooks Proposal - (Version 5.0) Screening Questions - (Version 1.0) Telephone Screening Script - (Version 1.0)
Special Determinations:	Waiver approved under 45 CFR 46.117 (c) 1 or 2/ 21 CFR 56.109 (c)1
Risk Level of Study:	Not Greater than Minimal Risk under 45 CFR 46 / 21 CFR 56
Review Category:	Category 6: Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes Category 7: Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or

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http://rcb.tamu.edu

	research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Dear Antonio La Pastina:

The IRB approved this research on 03/22/2022.

Before 01/21/2023, you are to submit an Administrative Check-In Form to the HRPP/IRB. If the HRPP/IRB does not receive the form, there will be no approval of new research after 03/21/2023.

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In conducting this research, you are reminded of the following requirements:

- You must follow the approved protocol;
- Any changes to the research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to implementation;
- Unanticipated problems or other reportable events (including protocol deviations) as described in "HRP-029 Reportable New Information" must be reported to the IRB within 5 working days of learning of the incident;
- You must notify the IRB of study completion.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Administrative Office at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636.

Sincerely,
IRB Administration

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