

THE IMPACT OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES ON THE IDENTITY
RECONCILIATION OF QUEER CHRISTIANS

by

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This thesis examines how interactions with online social networks shape queer American Christians' identities—more specifically, their abilities to negotiate and/or reconcile their sexual and religious identities. Christian denominations have historically discriminated against the queer (LGBTIA+) community and left those identifying with both spaces to feel conflicted. Research on the identity reconciliation of queer Christians remains limited but has shown that this community uses several strategies to reconcile their conflicting identities, such as redefining their theology and seeking out a community of fellow queer Christians (Craig et al., 2015; Doty et al., 2010; Foster et al., 2015; Lytle et al., 2016; Radojcic, 2016; Wedow et al., 2017). Receiving support from a community with shared identity plays an especially important role in the identity formation process (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Now, with advancing digital technology comes necessary exploration of how this group receives support from online spaces specifically, as younger generations turn there increasingly often.

By interviewing queer Christians from organizations and chat groups across the nation, I analyze how these networks affect their sense of identity and belonging within queer and religious spaces. From discussions with 10 participants aged 22-45, I found that these online spaces provided them with necessary answers and interpersonal connection that facilitated reconciliation. While many people preferred physical community over online spaces, these

groups were easily accessible and often boosted in-person interaction by making them more comfortable openly embracing their identities. They also provided a safe space for members to seek answers and even inspired some to take on leadership roles. Participants reported that the strategies they used for reconciliation primarily involved redefining and individualizing their faith to match their values, such as separating the church from God, seeing queerness as entwined with spirituality, and seeking out more affirming spaces. From this research, I conclude that online communities with shared identities provide queer Christians with the support and affirmation they need to reconcile—or, for some, simply negotiate—their sexual and religious selves.

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Introduction¹

Both sexuality and religious identity (or lack thereof) are critical to people's self-expression, their interaction with others and the building of relationships, and their sense of place within society (Stryker & Burke, 2000). However, non-heterosexuality and devout religiosity have been considered to contradict each other, especially in the case of same-sex attraction and Christianity (Fuist, 2016).

From conversion therapy to the use of Church doctrine and Bible theology as weapons of discrimination, the queer community has received much hostility from Christian denominations and the Catholic Church. This leaves those identifying with both communities struggling to negotiate and ultimately reconcile their two contradictory but central identities, making it difficult to feel secure in either one or to achieve a sense of self-worth (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Expanding on the small body of research in this area provides an understanding of the factors that help queer Christians successfully reconcile these identities. This is especially important during a period where the queer community's efforts toward visibility and acceptance in America are once again stifled by harmful—and often Christian-backed—legislation, such as those banning gender-affirming care and queer education (Cole, 2023; Izaquirre, 2023).

Additionally, with advancing digital technology comes an increasing level of social interaction and relationship-building online. The influence of these media on younger generations with longer access to the Internet—particularly social media—provides insight into how this interaction affects the reconciliation process for queer Christians during a critical time of identity development.

¹ This introduction is a revised expansion from a research paper I completed for the HC232: Policing Masculinities class through the University of Oregon, in which I wrote on the existing research that examines queer Christians' abilities to reconcile their identities.

To clarify, I distinguish reconciliation from negotiation in that the former is often the end goal, where one finds harmony between two previously conflicting identities. Negotiation is (typically) the process it takes to get there, as people work through what simultaneously inhabiting both identities means to them and how to do so. However, this is not always the case. I argue that negotiation is ongoing, even continuing even beyond reconciliation, because there are often disruptions to that coexistence along the way. Negotiation could also be at work without the need for reconciliation at all, as was the case for some of my participants. I expand on this later when discussing my findings.

I hypothesized that the ease and accessibility that accompany interaction with these online communities support this process for queer Christians, and that building connections to and receiving support from others with shared identities would provide them with a secure foundation for further exploration of their sexual and religious selves. This thesis examines how interaction with online social networks (e.g., via social media, organizations, etc.) shapes queer Christians' abilities to negotiate and/or reconcile their sexual and religious identities. By interviewing queer Christians from organizations and chat groups across the nation, I analyze and explain how these networks affect their sense of identity and belonging within queer and religious spaces.

“Queer”

Transformed from a homophobic slur to a reclaimed term of identification—and even a political statement—*queer* has historically been used in many ways (Perlman, 2019). My definition and perception of the term *queer* has been informed through my own use of the term in identifying myself and through my participants' definitions. Upon asking them how they would define the word, most were initially reluctant or hesitant to attach one specific meaning to it.

While most mentioned its common use as an “umbrella term” for being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, almost none stopped there. In fact, some immediately described the political aspect of the term, using phrases like “activism,” “challenges boundaries,” and “outside the norm.” The myriad meanings associated with *queer* make it an “elusive and slippery term,” as John described it, a word as fluid as the definition itself. However, Morris (1998) does summarize the key aspects of it in her chapter about queer curriculum, and she organizes the word *queer* into three parts: as a subject position, as a politics, and as an aesthetic sensibility. Occupying a queer position places oneself outside of heteronormative, gender-conforming standards, whether that be through sexual orientation, gender identity, or other behaviors that transgress sexual and gender norms. Queer as a politic takes this one step further and challenges these standards themselves as they function in society, through actions like activism, the re-definition of norms, and resisting assimilation into what is “normal.” Thirdly, queer as an aesthetic employs a “queer reading” of a text, looking for content that takes on these radical or subversive meanings (Morris, 1998, as cited in Shlasko, 2005).

In the context of my paper, I use *queer* both for its utility as an umbrella term for LGBT+ members of the Christian community and for its ability to define queer Christians as those who take on any form of queerness described above, whether that be directly confronting and challenging the norms and homophobic/transphobic values set forth in Christian spaces, redefining and individualizing Christianity in their own way, or simply occupying both positions at the same time.

Historical and Conceptual Context

Within the past few decades, perceptions toward homosexuality and gender non-conformance both nationally and internationally have evolved. The World Health Organization

(WHO) and American Psychiatric Association (APA) have since de-pathologized homosexuality, and general attitudes toward these identities—particularly homosexuality—have improved in the US (Masci, Brown, & Kiley, 2018).

But despite increased acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community within both medical discourses and society more generally, there continues to be a significant divide between this community and those with Christian beliefs. Using Biblical text and church doctrine to justify their beliefs, Christians have systemically discriminated against non-heteronormative identities and behaviors. This Biblical evidence appears throughout both the Old and New Testament and includes passages like the creation story of Adam and Eve (Genesis 1-3), Leviticus 18-20, Corinthians 1 6:9, and Deuteronomy 22:5 (among others), which appear to argue that the union between a man and a woman (and sustaining gender roles) is natural and even necessary for living a fruitful and proper Christian life, and that any alternative lifestyle is an “abomination” (*English Standard Version Bible (ESVB)*, 2001, Lev. 18:22; *ESVB*, 2001, Deut. 22:5). Along with weaponizing these verses, Christians (and even non-religious healthcare professionals) have employed conversion therapy techniques to change people’s sexual orientation or gender identity to fit heteronormative standards. While this has since been banned by many national and international health organizations, as well as states, 698,000 LGBT adults in the US today had experienced some form of conversion therapy as of 2019 (Mallory, Brown, and Conron, 2019).

Therefore, the intersection of queerness and Christian identity can be complicated by this standard of heterosexuality and historical discrimination as people try to claim both identities. And although many liberal and moderate Protestant congregations (e.g., United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church, United Methodist Church, etc.) have shown support for queer individuals in recent years, most conservative Christian institutions (e.g., Roman Catholic Church,

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Seventh-day Adventist, etc.) have yet to be as welcoming. Even many queer members of Christian churches may be churchgoers but struggle to fully incorporate themselves into the belief system (Sherkat, 2016).

Despite these roadblocks, queer Christians have found many ways to reconcile their identities, one being a redefinition of their theology. In his book *Unclobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality* (2016), Colby Martin examines the verses within the Bible itself commonly used as weapons against this community, which he calls the “clobber passages.” Attempting to “unclobber” them, Martin explains how Christians misinterpret their historical contexts and mistranslate the original Hebrew in order to justify homophobic and transphobic beliefs. He then provides what he considers a better and more accurate way to understand these passages. This act of “myth debunking” and theological redefinition is often featured in studies as a tool for queer Christians who have learned to reconcile their sexuality, gender, and faith (Foster et al., 2015; Radojcic, 2016; Wedow et al., 2017).

Another significant factor contributing to identity reconciliation is seeking communities and receiving support from fellow queer Christians. The role of community in the identity formation process is crucial; in their book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue that “self-production is always, and of necessity, a social enterprise” (p. 48) and that receiving support from a group or population of people who share one’s identity—what they call a “plausibility structure”—is a key component in defining one’s reality (p. 142). As will be expanded on in the following chapter (and in my analysis), queer Christians have benefited greatly from receiving support from a community that shares the same struggles—and the same joy—regarding faith and queerness.

My focus on the role of online communities specifically in the identity process comes from research on queer (and sometimes simultaneously Christian) spaces online, which is outlined in my literature review. The ability for queer Christians to access communities with shared identities where they would otherwise be restricted—whether through geographical location (Gray, 2009) or social limitations (Taylor et al., 2014)—may allow them to find a deeper sense of connection and/or belonging.

Additionally, analyzing how these digital spaces impact queer Christians of different ages provides insight into how formative social media has been for younger queer Christians. While many Americans grew up with the Internet, a much smaller portion grew up with social media where digital communities are formed. Social media is distinguished from the Internet (which became mainstream in the 1990s) by being referred to as “Web 2.0”: the more interactive phase of the Internet starting in the early 2000s with the popularization of networking platforms like MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019; “Who Invented the Internet,” n.d.). While the majority of the American public uses some form of social media today, only 5% used platforms like these in 2005, according to a Pew Research study (2021). Those who were experiencing adolescence and young adult life while social media became an increasingly common method of communication, then, might attest better to the impact of online communities on their identity formation. Therefore, looking into the use of online communities by younger generations of queer Christians (i.e., Millennials and younger) who had prolonged access to social media illuminates this process during a critical period of identity development, including how that shapes their lives during adulthood.

Literature Review

The body of research on queer Christians and the reconciliation of their sexual and religious identities remains limited and focuses primarily on a broad range of factors that contribute to the process of identity shaping. Few studies focus on the impact of social networks on this community, and even fewer analyze online communities. With the rise of the digital age and the indisputable importance of social support and relationship-building, the exploration of this area of research would add more contemporary and social understandings of these mechanisms to the field of queer and religious studies. Still, the current body of literature does not set up such an inquiry by offering a broader look into the ways that queer individuals navigate their identities depending on many factors, such as support from peers and professionals and redefining their theological beliefs.

Expanding on Berger and Luckmann's book on the significance of community in identity formation, different types of social networks seem useful to queer people in navigating and coping with sexuality-related issues, which depends on the nature of the support needed. Lytle et al. (2016) examined how queer youth seek support in times of crisis, such as when experiencing suicidal thoughts or during depressive states. They found that those who received support from adults, family members, and professionals had lower rates of suicidal behaviors and attempts. Yet, while Lytle and his colleagues emphasized the importance of professional help for immediate crises, other research suggests that support from like-minded and similarly identifying communities not only helps queer people navigate sexuality and gender issues that non-queer people may not understand, but it also allows them to foster community and build connections for issues not related to sexuality or gender (Craig et al., 2015; Doty et al., 2010). These

networks allow them to share experiences and offer each other a safe space to work through the identity process.

For many queer Christians specifically, these spaces have been an integral part of reconciling their sexual and religious identities. Among Radojcic's (2016) findings, members of a national queer Catholic organization, DignityUSA, reported that building a collective identity as queer Catholics allowed them to encourage each other to redefine their theology and restructure their mindsets, primarily by directing doubts about their identities outward toward harmful Church doctrine. This security and community allowed these members to feel belonging as queer members of the Catholic faith while also promoting change within the Catholic Church.

Research on Online Communities

Studies on queer Christians have provided substantive information but remain limited, and even fewer studies analyze the impact of online support networks on this community. Those that do study queer Christians often focus on offline communities, such as national organizations like DignityUSA (which also studied older participants) (Radojcic, 2016) or social groups on college campuses (Foster et al., 2015; Wedow et al., 2017). My study will focus primarily on the importance of online networks, as they often provide better access to such richly connected spaces where queer people of faith can support each other in their identity development. In one of the few studies involving queer Christians online, DeHaan and colleagues (2013) found that many queer youths turn to online social networks to compensate for the lack of support and community found in offline physical spaces. By seeking fellow LGBT youth, information about sexual health, and even offline events geared toward their queer identity, they have been able to use the Internet as a resource for finding community and identification with others. Another study conducted by Yvette Taylor and colleagues (2014)—which has followed the most similar

focus to my research—acknowledges the emerging body of research regarding social media and its impacts on queer Christian youth. They contribute to it by analyzing the role of Facebook and other online communities in the negotiation of these users’ sexual and religious identities. In doing so, they found users formed an “online embodiment” in these spaces, where disconnection from the physical restrictions of time and space aids queer religious youth in seeking support online, especially during the coming out process.

Research has also shown that online spaces are important outlets for those living in rural areas. In a 2009 ethnographic study, anthropologist Mary Gray spoke to rural queer and questioning youth and analyzed their use of the Internet over the course of 19 months to explore the role of digital media in the process of identity formation and coming out. She found that many of the youth had struggled to fully explore their identities due to family ties and inaccessibility to other queer youth offline. Therefore, the online space served as a gateway for their continued exploration of queerness. Their identity has been defined and shaped by their consumption of media as one of the few (or only) places to learn more about that part of themselves. While this was not a study of queer Christians, it adds a crucial addition to the discussion of accessibility to the Internet and how its impacts on queer people can be affected by geographical location. Many of my participants came from small and/or rural towns, so research like this speaks to their experiences more specifically.

However, it is important to acknowledge that not every queer person online has experienced the benefits of replacing physical communities with these digital spaces. Kay Siebler’s book, *Learning Queer Identity in the Digital Age* (2016), examines how digital networks impact the queer community’s self-acceptance and inform their identities by working with intergenerational focus groups. Siebler found that the overall sentiment was a feeling of

discontentment with the digital space and a longing for more offline connections. While participants acknowledged the increased access to queer imagery, knowledge, and like-identifying people online, they still felt isolated from their community. The older generations reflected on these physical spaces with nostalgia and longing, while the younger members reported a “loss of the communities they have never known” (pp. 40–41). These findings present a different side of the digital space, which can be undoubtedly harmful and limiting. My hope with this research is that I can uncover both the benefits and drawbacks of these communities for those grappling not only with their queer identities but their religious ones as well.

Another counterpoint to consider is that these queer Christian communities do not always offer identity reconciliation support; for many, they often serve as a space simply for connecting with like-minded others and upholding a sense of self-acceptance already established on their own. In an ethnographic study of two Southern Californian congregations of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC)—an international LGBT-affirming Protestant denomination—Melissa Wilcox interviewed lesbian and gay Christians about their involvement in the church and their sense of identity (2003). She found that the majority of those attending the MCC “sought support for their combined identities” rather than reconciliation (p. 119). While some members did require the role of a supportive religious community to achieve reconciliation, they made up a minority. For most, the MCC simply offered extra assistance in connecting with their spirituality under the knowledge that their identities are also accepted, as they had found the tools to resolve the contradiction between their faith and sexuality beforehand (or did not need them entirely).

Regardless of how these affirming church communities impact queer Christians, they still make up a special sphere that allows room for this population to seek spirituality without

constantly having to bring into accord their sexualities and gender identities—a “new world ... where the congruence of LGBT identity and Christianity is never in question, where the identity of LGBT Christians never needs to be negotiated but is simply taken for granted” (Wilcox, 2003, p. 119).

Levels of Acceptance from American Christians

The increasing trend of acceptance toward homosexuality and queer rights among younger American Christians in recent decades also demands a more contemporary exploration into the ease with which these queer Christians navigate their identities. A 2014 Pew Research study revealed this delayed—but nevertheless increasing—trend showing that younger generations of Christians are more likely to support gay people, about 20 to 30% more than older Catholics ages 50 and up (Lipka). And yet, even a majority of Catholics aged 65 and older (57%) said they supported homosexuality, contradicting the assumption that most—especially older—Catholics do not support the queer community based on historical discrimination and methods of conversion therapy, as stated earlier. This trend opens more opportunities for queer Christians to work with their “opposing” identities and may contribute to the ease with which they reconcile their sexual and religious identities overall. Adding to these findings, Wolff and colleagues (2012) surveyed students at a private evangelical Christian university in California to uncover their sentiments toward gay rights, and they found that the students with connections to or knowledge of a queer person in their life had more positive sentiments towards gay rights such as same-sex marriage and relationships. While this study does not provide much evidence for the increasing amount of support for the queer community, it offers insight into the factors that may help this younger generation of Christians understand and support them.

Yet while the previous survey shows an increased trend of Christian acceptance toward homosexuality in America, the same cannot be said for the acceptance of transgender and genderqueer identity. Results vary widely across different denominations, according to a recent 2022 Pew Research study on Christian attitudes regarding transgender issues in America (Lipka & Tevington). An increasing number of Protestants and Catholics believe that sex at birth determines one's gender identity over the past few years, with a majority of white evangelicals topping the list at 87% in 2022. Since 2017, these numbers have increased anywhere from 3 to 11 percent. These groups are also more likely to believe that society has "gone too far" in accepting transgender identities, with white evangelicals making up the majority again (para. 2). Additionally, half of white evangelicals said their religious beliefs have "a great deal" of influence on their views toward gender and sex (para. 10). Meanwhile, non-religious Americans are much more likely to accept gender non-conforming identities and support efforts to be more inclusive towards this population.

Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Christians

Many of the aforementioned texts focused primarily on lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians rather than transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) Christians. Therefore, research demands a deeper look into not only the ways that non-heterosexual Christians reconcile their identities but how genderqueer Christians do. Transgender Christians make up a smaller portion of the population than do non-heterosexual Christians, constituting about 0.17% of the American Christian population (Apostolacus, 2018). Therefore, the body of research on their experiences reconciling their sexual and religious identities is even more limited.

Still, those that have studied this group have found that they reconcile and interpret their identities similarly to other queer Christians: by restructuring/re-interpreting biblical text,

individualizing their faith, and finding community support to make room for their own identities within the faith system. Some methods for interpreting the Bible are “establishing a hierarchy of texts, resolution through historical and redaction criticism, and changing the subject” (Apostolacus, 2018, para. 1). Others have found it necessary to personalize their beliefs as an individual faith separate from Church doctrine or denomination. Levy et al. (2013) states that this is itself an act of “queering notions of faith and gender,” as these individuals remain determined to combat the notion that one cannot be both transgender and Christian (p. 23). As for TGNC Christian youth, students on Christian college campuses in the US experience “interpersonal rejection” and conflict between their religious and sexual identities but have also found support through community during this difficult process, as have other queer Christians (Wolff et al., 2017, p. 336).

While current research provides me with foundational knowledge on this subject, several limitations demand my expansion of the research, such as a focus on older participants—aged 65 and older in Radojcic’s (2016) study—or lack of discussion regarding transgender and gender non-conforming Christians. These previous findings also lack the insight that a focus on online support and connection specifically would provide. Many of my participants have spent their formative years during the era of mainstream Internet, which adds a more comprehensive look into the effects of social connection during an era of increased reliance on the digital world.

Therefore, as an amalgamation of these different areas of study, my research will examine the benefits of social networks and communities for younger queer Christians (those born around the 1980s and after), the role of digital technology in building these communities, and the interaction between queerness—or non-heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality—

–and Christianity. These combine to form a holistic understanding of how online social networks may impact the identity formation of queer Christians.

Methods

This qualitative study addresses the question: *How do online social networks and communities alter or shape queer Christians' abilities to reconcile their apparently contradictory sexual and religious identities?*

I explored this question through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 self-identifying queer Christians aged 22-45. While I was initially interested only in young adults (18-25) who grew up with social media, I expanded that range to include individuals in the later stages of their lives, who were still living through their formative years (i.e., adolescent to young adult range) when the Internet came into existence. This change was to include varying perspectives on the role of social media in their processes of identity reconciliation.

Questions involved their usage of social media, how they navigate it, which communities they frequent, and how they have interacted and built connections with other queer Christians via these online groups/organizations. I also asked about their religious upbringing, comfort with identifying as queer and/or Christian, and connections to queers and Christians offline to take external factors affecting their perceptions about sexuality/gender and faith into account. This includes other demographic questions such as their geographic locations and how their access to communities has been affected by that (i.e., living in rural versus urban areas). The most important inquiries, however, involved how these online communities have helped or hindered their ability to feel belonging within the queer and Christian communities and to accept those identities.

In gathering subjects for these interviews, I researched over 20 informal chat groups online (through Facebook) and larger organizations across the United States dedicated to providing a space for queer Christians. Reaching out to administrators/leaders of the groups or

using contact information provided on websites, I explained my position as an undergraduate, queer Christian researcher looking to interview fellow queer Christians virtually. To make sharing my information with participants easier, I sent out a Google Form that prospective interviewees could use to consent to my contacting them and to also share with other queer Christians who might be interested in an interview (as a way of snowball sampling). As an incentive, interviewees received financial compensation of \$10 in the form of an e-gift card. My research methods were approved in advance by the University of Oregon Institutional Review Board (IRB). As for anonymity, some participants consented to me using their real names for the research, and some provided pseudonyms. I sent my first draft of this thesis to participants who wanted to review their portion before finalizing and subsequently fixed any errors they addressed.

Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom and transcribed through Otter.ai to allow me to analyze patterns in responses. When analyzing my transcripts, I used a framework based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step guide on thematic analysis with a more theoretical approach, as explained by Maguire and Delahunt (2017). A theoretical thematic analysis is "concerned with addressing specific research questions and [analyzing] the data with this in mind" (p. 3355). With a more deductive focus on the data that was relevant to or interesting regarding my research question, I generated initial codes, modifying or adding as I went along. From there, I was able to identify where participants generally agreed on a certain topic or differed widely, and I organized the themes to encompass answers to my research question and any other relevant patterns I came across.

Myself as a Queer Christian

I feel it important to discuss my identity as a bisexual Christian who was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church, because this research was largely possible due to my own identity conflict and being vulnerable about that with my participants. As a queer Christian who felt more secure in my sexual identity than my faith and therefore left the church—and religion as a whole—for some time, I sought to know how others had been working through that difficult process once I found a queer Christian community in college. The relationships I made and strengthened from my time in that group convinced me that finding and committing to a community was the most significant step I took to facilitate the negotiation process, which ultimately led to my own reconciliation.

I believe these personal experiences positively influenced my research in numerous ways. I had mentioned being a queer Christian to my participants in every stage of the process—from recruitment to informed consent to interviews—to make people feel more comfortable speaking with me, and I received more detailed and honest answers because of that. For instance, most people who preferred to call themselves “queer” over more specific labels like “asexual” or “polyamorous” mentioned that preference partly because they were talking to another queer person. When speaking in a more general setting or to non-queer people, they tended to use more definitive labels to avoid having to explain the word “queer” or from feeling the need to specify their queerness. I struggled in this way with placing the facets of her queerness into separate boxes with limiting labels: “Although they're helpful descriptors when trying to explain it to different people, they're just not how I personally identify.” I was also able to connect more deeply with participants, many of whom asked me questions about my own reconciliation journey and who then shared more about theirs. Like the benefits participants received when

joining a community of like-identifying people, speaking with a fellow queer Christian such as myself allowed many to be more open about their identity and experiences.

The demographic data for participants is shown in Figures 1–5. See footnotes about the use of the term “queer”² in Figures 2 and 3:

² For both gender identity and sexuality, those who identified as “queer” named more specific labels (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, polyamorous, asexual) but preferred “queer,” because they would have only specified their identity in certain contexts.

Denominations

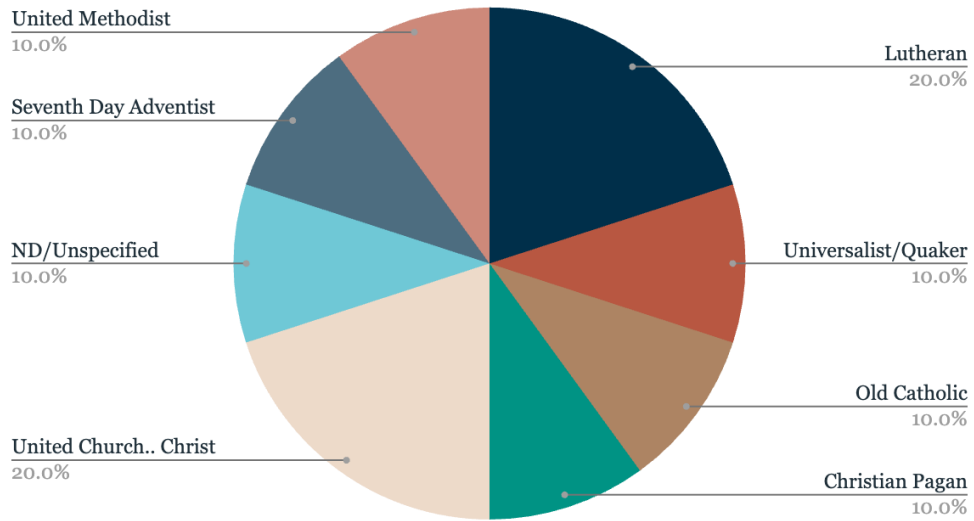


Figure 1: Demographics – Denominations

This figure shows the different denominations participants were currently affiliated with at the time of the interview. “ND” stands for “non-denominational.” Many had been raised into or had joined other denominations in the past, which are addressed in Table 1.

Gender Identity

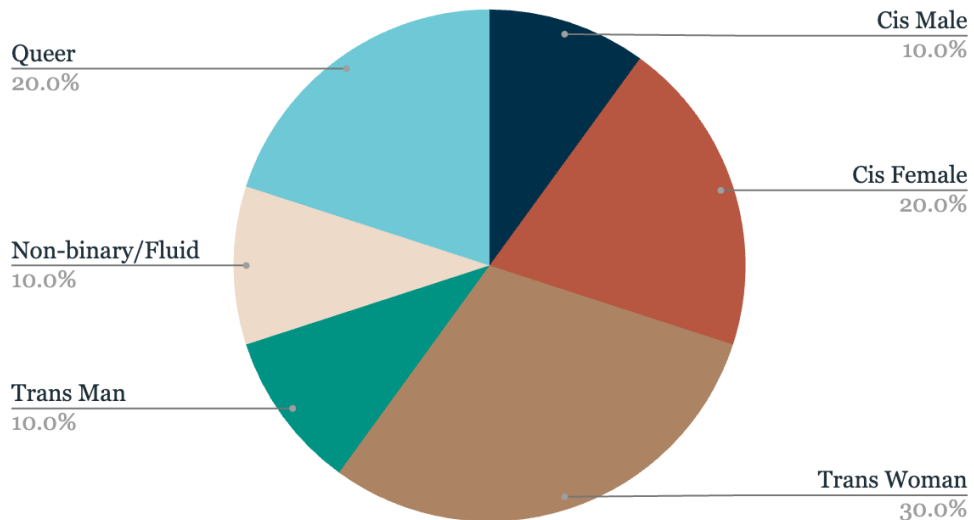


Figure 2: Demographics – Gender Identity

This figure shows the gender identities participants currently identified with at the time of the interview.

Sexuality

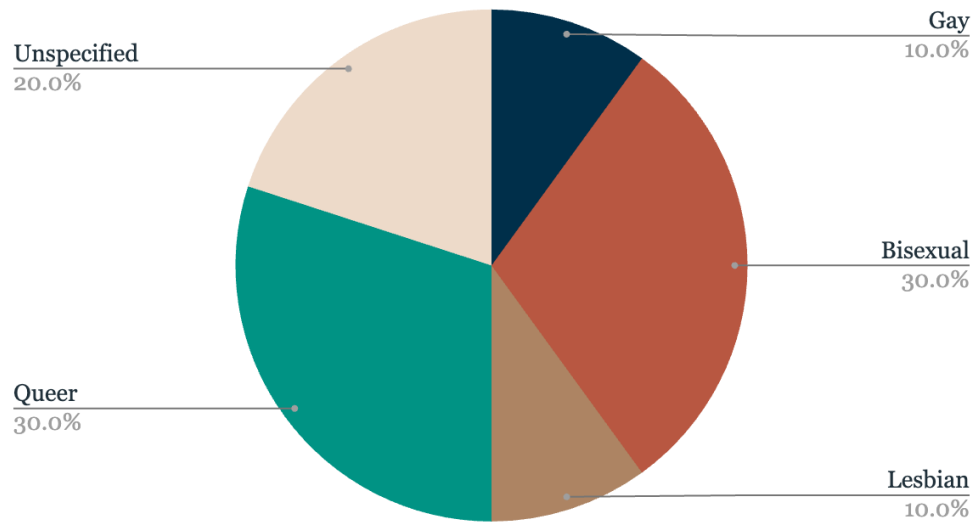


Figure 3: Demographics – Sexuality

This figure shows the sexual orientations participants currently identified with at the time of the interview. “Unspecified” either meant the participant mentioned queerness only in relation to gender identity, or they were unsure of their sexuality.

Race

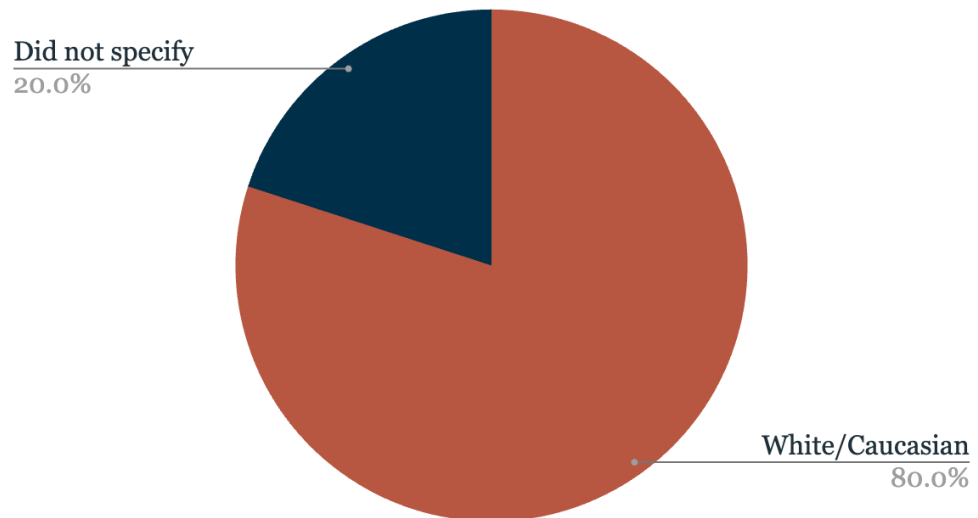


Figure 4: Demographics – Race

This figure shows the participants’ races. The fact that two people did not specify their race is due to a lack of specific demographic questions, which is addressed later as a limitation of this research.

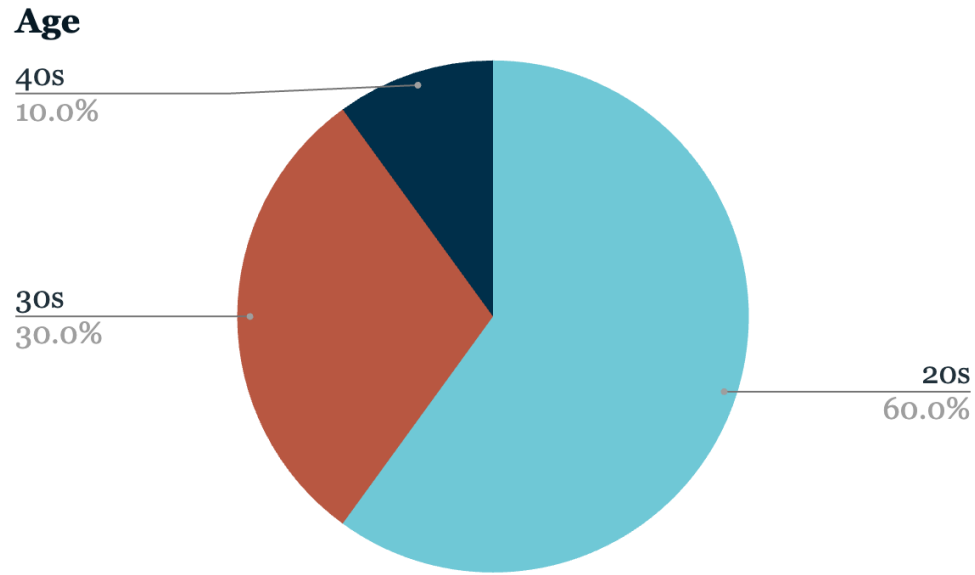


Figure 5: Demographics – Age

This figure shows the current age ranges of participants at the time of the interview.

The following table lists the demographic information for each participant to provide context and allow the reader to follow along when participants are referenced during the Discussion section.

Name	Age	Race	Sexuality	Gender Identity	Past Denomination	Current Denomination
Abigail	34	White	Queer	Queer	Roman Catholic	Old Catholic
Ellis	23	White	Queer	Trans Man	Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod	United Church of Christ
J	27	White	Queer	Cis Woman	Non-denominational Baptist	Universalist / Agnostic Quaker
John	45	Unspecified	Gay	(“Primarily”) Cis Man	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	Lutheran

Julia	25	Unspecified	Bisexual	Trans Woman	Non-denominational / Atheist	Lutheran
Kayla	31	White	Bisexual	Cis Woman	Seventh-Day Adventist	“Socially” Adventist / Complicated
Lucy	22	White	Unspecified/Unsure	Trans Woman	Christian (Unspecified denomination)	Christian (Unspecified denomination)
N	35	White	Bisexual	Nonbinary / Genderfluid	Catholic	Christian Pagan
Rowan	22	White	Lesbian	Queer	Presbyterian	United Methodist
Taylor	29	White	Unspecified	Trans-femme	Baptized into Catholic Church / Not very religious	United Church of Christ

Table 1: Demographics for Each Participant

This table alphabetically organizes the demographics according to each participant. The denominations participants grew up into (“Past Denomination”)³ are included along with data from the Figures.

³ The category “Past Denomination” does not include the denominations or religions that participants explored in between their upbringing and now (or are currently exploring). These include Buddhism, Mormonism, the Episcopal Church, and more.

Discussion

I begin my analysis by discussing participants' experiences with different levels of acceptance within their communities. This provides context for understanding where they had received negativity within their interpersonal relationships before joining an online community, which informs the rest of the discussion. Then, I explain how these experiences could be explained by their upbringing, and how factors like geographical location, level of exposure to queerness, and access to social media shaped their worldview coming into the identity reconciliation process. Next, I describe this process and what strategies they used to reach a sense of peace with their often-conflicting identities. These strategies included criticizing the structure of the church instead of God or individual Christians; finding queerness as “entwined” with spirituality itself; and seeking more affirming spaces, including other religions and communities. The latter is a major strategy as it includes online communities; I close out the discussion by bringing the focus to how these communities impacted reconciliation, including their benefits and drawbacks.

Acceptance from Queer and Christian Communities

All 10 interviewees reported witnessing some level of hostility toward queerness in their lives, whether they experienced it firsthand or had simply known it existed. For instance, Rowan talked about other Christians denying their identity as a 22-year-old queer lesbian:

People have tried to be very invalidating that, like, my experience isn't a real experience. And so emotionally, that's been hard to kind of keep going when people say that who you're made or how you're made is by definition, not allowed or not possible. And so that has been definitely very challenging.

And while Kayla—a 31-year-old bisexual Adventist woman—did not receive direct hostility, she still felt unsafe while working for an Adventist organization:

I made friends, people liked me, people respected me. But there was always this underlying idea that if they actually knew me, or if they actually knew anything real about me, all of that would go away ... And when I worked in that space, I had to filter, everything I said, but also what I did and how I did it. How I responded to things ... It just stifles you. It's harder to breathe.

It is difficult to assess which denominations seem more or less hostile, as most participants explored multiple other denominations or religions aside from the one they grew up in, and yet they recalled a general air of hostility within the Christian-American sphere. Many denominations also have different branches of their own that are more affirming than others, so I could not discern simply from the denomination whether this hostility was influenced by their affiliation. For instance, both John—a 45-year-old gay genderqueer man—and Ellis—a 23-year-old transgender bisexual man—grew up in the Lutheran Church but had very different experiences; John specified being raised in the more progressive Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, where one could “dance on the margins of possibility as far as faith is concerned,” whereas Ellis had non-affirming experiences being raised in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod branch, which he considered conservative and fundamentalist.

However, some participants did share sentiments on certain denominations and their levels of acceptance. Taylor—a 29-year-old transgender woman—and Ellis both turned to the United Church of Christ (UCC) due to its progressivity and affirming theology, “one of the easier denominations to be a queer Christian in,” according to Ellis. Both have also pursued (or are pursuing) ordination through the UCC. In the same way, multiple participants commented on the Catholic Church’s exclusionary and non-affirming nature. “If I went to a Catholic church, I would sit there and enjoy the service, but there's no way I would bring up my sexuality,” said N, a 35-year-old bisexual and nonbinary Christian Pagan who was raised Catholic. Reasons that some had left certain denominations also did not always relate to conflicts with their queerness but instead to broader injustices regarding political decision-making within the church. N and

Abigail—a 34-year-old queer Old Catholic—reported feeling disillusioned with the Catholic Church for their exclusionary theology and lack of attention to other injustices aside from homophobia and transphobia.

Interestingly, many participants also received negative reactions within queer and non-Christian spaces when being open about their Christianity, and some even said these were more prominent than reactions from Christians. Both N and Julia—a 25-year-old bisexual, Lutheran, transgender woman—said they received “more pushback” from the Pagan and transgender communities (respectively) about being Christian than the other way around. Julia noted that this may reflect her “more liberal upbringing” as someone who had already been exposed to affirming Christians from a young age. Given the well-known historical discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community and the promotion of heteronormative values, it makes sense for there to be some hostility or confusion when a queer person mentions their Christianity. Rowan noted this when talking about meeting other queer people who have been ostracized by their Christian families or communities, and how they may be “more apt to close down or shut themselves off because you’re using that label [“Christian”] to identify yourself.” Abigail added onto this in her defense of negative reactions from the queer community:

There’s a tendency—[from] American Christians, no matter what denomination—there’s a tendency to look for ways to feel persecuted. And so in terms of queer spaces ... for those of us that are queer Christians, even if you’re really super enthusiastic about Christian faith, then it’s also very important to be knowledgeable that the queer people that have hostility towards Christianity have very good reasons to be that way. And that’s no excuse to be personally rude to a random person, but when you say they’re hostile to your Christianity, are they hostile to *your* Christianity? Or are they hostile to you proselytizing to them?

Some participants had nuanced experiences in queer or Christian spaces due to their specific identities. N, for instance, said they “don’t feel queer enough” as a bisexual nonbinary person, because they sit in more ambiguous spaces of the sexuality and gender spectrums as being “not

gay” nor “super androgynous either”. “So personally,” they continued, “I feel like the odd man out in a queer-only space.” Recognizing the more fluid or in-between positions of these spectrums is important because these identities can be isolating even within queer spaces. Another example is J—a 27-year-old queer Universalist/Agnostic Quaker woman—who received very different reactions from her father when coming out as bisexual versus later coming out as polyamorous. While his reaction to her bisexuality was affirming and supportive, he was more uncomfortable with the prospect of her dating others while being married due to its disruption of his Christian views on relationships:

When we talked about it, he did ask, like, "Does this mean you're not Christian anymore, either?" And I was like, "No, I still am." And he was like, "Well, how does that work?" And so ... we haven't talked about it past that. Because he [is] kind of just like, "I would rather just not know."

Overall, receiving negativity from both communities can be—and has been—extra isolating for queer Christians, as they feel a lack of belonging within either space. Taking the nuances of certain queer identities into account, there are a multitude of ways that queer Christians can feel ostracized and unaccepted by those they consider supportive otherwise, such as fellow queer people and family members. However, Abigail later added a more optimistic perspective to this struggle:

I would think it would be better if all churches would become affirming of all types of queer people. That would be better. But I also feel like what I went through was valuable to me, in terms of becoming a whole person who pays attention to injustice in the world, and is able to thoughtfully question how things are, and how things might be in the future.

Upbringing

How these queer Christians experienced acceptance (or lack thereof) and later worked through reconciling their identities depended significantly on their upbringing. Whether their environments were religious, affirming, or rural shaped how they later perceived their own

identities and interacted with others. At what point in their lives they gained access to the Internet also had an impact on how they were educated about queerness and its connection to Christianity.

Geographical Location

For the four participants who grew up in small towns or rural areas, many said that this contributed much to the beliefs about queerness imposed upon and instilled in them—particularly where there were more conservative and Christian values. For example, Ellis, who grew up in a “tiny rural town,” called it an “interesting place to grow up queer” and explained why:

It's very much an environment where no churches are affirming, the school doesn't really have your back if you're a queer kid going through something. So it's kind of like the people who are out [as queer] down there are living in spite of bad circumstances.

He went on to compare his hometown to the more urban environment in which he lives now:

I'm in a very progressive suburb near [a large Midwestern city] right now, so there's a wealth of queer-friendly churches, other queer Christians you can find and talk to. But I'm sure if I was somewhere a little more suburb-y, or like a smaller town, even within the same denomination, it could be a different story.

Lucy—a 22-year-old transgender woman—highlighted the struggles for living in a rural area while not openly queer: “It [the challenge of being queer and Christian] has a lot to do with where I've lived. In terms of struggles, it isn't something that can be expressed, it's not something you can be frank about, it's not something people can know.”

While living in small towns and rural areas did not necessarily correlate with having Christian or conservative values (although for many it did), those who did grow up in predominately Christian and/or conservative areas often reported that Christianity heavily influenced their worldview. “And that's pretty much all I knew growing up with, that's what I

believed, that was my whole life,” Lucy said. Because of that, many had little to no knowledge of queerness beyond what non-affirming Christian beliefs had taught them.

Limited Exposure to Queerness

Growing up, I knew that there was—I would never say that God hated gay people. But I always knew that being gay was bad, right? ... Like all of these gay people, I knew there was something very wrong with [them]. I don't think I really knew that two men and two women could be together until I was like, fully a teenager.

Kayla’s thoughts here reflect much of what my interviewees told me about having limited access to knowledge regarding what it means to be queer and what behavior was acceptable. This was mainly due to lack of exposure, where what they had learned about queer identities during their upbringing limited their vocabulary and knowledge until they got older. This did not necessarily come from living in non-urban areas or Christian households. N summarized many participants’ sentiments well despite living in a more urban area and surrounded by an affirming community: “So there was no way for me to really understand who I was until I left home and found the vocabulary for it.” A leading factor in learning more about queerness, therefore, was access to the Internet.

Participants’ introduction to queerness (aside from themselves) was partially dependent on when they had access to the Internet—particularly social and entertainment media. Many of the participants in their 20s, who had prolonged access from a young age, had used the Internet as a means to educate themselves about queer identities. For instance, three people used Tumblr to both find the language to describe the nuances of queerness and to discover queer or progressive Christianity. Ellis (aged 23) said he has “always been online” and has been using Tumblr since his early teenage years, even calling it “its own online community.” Other means were used as well, such as taking online quizzes to see if one was queer or seeing queer representation in the media. While these were not the most educative outlets, they still had an

impact on how these queer Christians viewed queerness. Abigail (aged 34), for instance, had read fanfiction centered around a queer relationship with a large fanbase, and it was enough to encourage her to “look into how sexuality—and sexual activity of all sorts outside of just the marriage box—how that could be considered good, and the idea of all of that as something to be celebrated.”

Meanwhile, John’s knowledge as a 45-year-old was much more limited. Having spent much of hys⁴ childhood without the Internet and virtually all of it without social media, he described hys exposure to queer people during that time:

Pre-Internet, I grew up with the stereotypes around me about queer folk, as I was end of grade school. You know, the AIDS epidemic was all over the news. The only time we ever saw or heard about queer people was when either a mom of a dying son or a gay person with AIDS visited the health class in Jr. High. So the "equating sex with death" was real.

While many of my interviewees reported having a dearth of knowledge regarding queerness, this generational gap demonstrates how the severity of that increases when hearing from older participants. And yet, as highlighted by N (aged 35), older queer Christians could perhaps learn from younger generations who had gotten that exposure at an earlier age, thanks to the Internet:

I think we [millennials] look, to your generation, grateful that you promoted this vocabulary and the identity stuff to us, because for me ... it's like, this exists? Like it was my younger friends who helped me figure out my identity, because I didn't have the words to describe it.

How Upbringing Shapes Perspective

These aspects of their upbringing—geographical location, exposure to queerness, and access to the Internet—largely shaped how these queer Christians perceive their identities and interacted with others later in life. Those who grew up in more progressive or affirming

⁴ John uses he/hym/hys pronouns to “hold space for queerness” within his gender identity and to honor feminist political spellings from the 1970s “when ‘women’ was frequently spelled with a ‘y’” (i.e., “womyn”).

environments claimed to combat homo/transphobia more easily either outwardly or within themselves, as Julia explained:

I think being raised in like a more liberal Christian family, I came to understand that if I see a co-religionist saying something really vile, I can't just move along with my day and think to myself, "Oh, well, that's just how Christians are," because I've known from a young age that, no, not all Christians are like that. That's not an inevitable result of being Christian. I'm not willing to accept that behavior as a given. Yeah, I mean, it gives me a low tolerance for bullshit, I guess.

Julia attributes her “low tolerance” to her liberal upbringing, which provided a strong foundation for resisting and rejecting hateful statements from other Christians. In a similar way, rather than seeking out other theologies or committing to a certain denomination, Abigail decided to focus on finding a Catholic community that was affirming of her queerness because of her Catholic upbringing:

There is still so much of Catholicism as I grew up in it that I feel tied to and still shapes my spirituality ... That's the framework that I will always have in my past when I start to read about any new theology, or when I start to read about, and maybe try to start, new spiritual practices. It's so foundational for me, so I feel like in the terms of the broadest sense of the word, I'm a queer Catholic—the sort of unusual and undefinable sort of version of whatever that is.

Upbringing, in turn, affected whether or not people had already reached reconciliation coming into an online community and what strategies—if any—they used to do so.

Strategies for Identity Reconciliation

As expected, many of those who had been raised in progressive or affirming spaces felt little to no conflict between their queer and religious identities later in life. They simply did not accept Christianity as a justification for homo/transphobia, because their connection to their inner spirituality was too strong. A common sentiment among them was that God had created them this way and loved them all the same, so there was no need to question whether the two identities could coexist. These individuals, I argue, only negotiated their identities insofar as they

contradicted with *others'* perceptions of them, not their own. Here, participants did not need to reconcile their identities at all. Julia summarized this experience well:

I don't see anything in it that needs to be reconciled. Like if somebody asked me how I could be trans and Christian ... I'd just ask them like, "Well, who do you think made me that way?"

J felt that her identity as a queer polyamorous woman was in line with the values that Christianity promotes—another shared sentiment among reconciled queer Christians:

I was focusing on the positive values that I think are important, like, loving my neighbor, and promoting peace and things like that. And I didn't feel being queer was in conflict with that.

Another reason reconciliation came easily (or was nonexistent) had to do with a lack of conflict regarding a specific queer identity, which Abigail could attest to as an asexual person. Because depictions of same-sex (or otherwise queer) sexual activity have been considered a sin and used to justify queerphobia within Christian spaces, she did not feel conflicted because “if I didn’t have sex with anyone then I wasn’t doing any sexual sin.” (Asexuality is often left out in discourses surrounding queerphobia within the church space likely for this reason. Nonetheless, its disruption of heteronormative Christian values is a topic worth addressing, as it leaves asexual Christians like Abigail isolated from these spaces where procreation is often an expectation.)

While most had come to a point in their lives where they could accept both sides of themselves, that was not the case for everyone. Lucy, for instance, still struggles with her queerness as someone who grew up transgender in a non-affirming environment and felt forced to repress that part of herself:

Lucy: It is not something I'm very comfortable expressing at all still. It's something I know that I have to do. Because it's just, things in my life would get worse if I didn't ... If I could change it, I honestly think I would. But being realistic, I know that I can't. So I just have to deal with it the best that I can.

Melina: Do you mean if you could change your sexuality or gender?

Lucy: Yes, absolutely. I wouldn't even hesitate.

Lucy's desire to rid herself of this inner conflict shows her desperation to feel at peace within her sexual/gender and religious identities; therefore, finding a community of other queer Christians has been a necessity for her. Ellis also struggled at first before transitioning into a man, because the worry of going against the Christian value of self-acceptance delayed the process of physically expressing his gender identity:

I kind of dragged my feet a little bit on the physical transition thing, because I think there was a lot of questioning, like, "What does it mean to change the body that God gave me?" Like that kind of thing, and I had to deal with that.

Reaching reconciliation did not come easy for many, even for those without hostile or non-affirming experiences. To do so, they made use of several strategies, such as criticizing the structure of the church instead of God or individual Christians; finding queerness as "entwined" with spirituality itself; and seeking more affirming spaces, including other religions and communities. These strategies can be characterized by an overall redefinition and individualization of their faith.

Separating the Church from God

Whether due to a sense of security within their faith, positive interactions, or something else, some participants blamed the church as an institution for their struggles in an effort to separate that from their personal faith. Those who only negotiated their identities without needing to reconcile them were most likely to report using this strategy. Ellis explained how he felt a strong connection to God and his own spirituality, and the problem lied with the churches:

I always felt like and I always knew that God loves me, God created me the way that they did, but like the church was kind of telling me otherwise as someone growing up queer, so I kind of like struggled with churches more than I ever struggled with God.

Additionally, Rowan explained that individual Christians were oftentimes not the problem either, as they tended to be more “loving and accepting” than the “structures” of the church itself, which “hold people back” from expressing their queerness safely.

By “structures,” they are referring to the exclusionary theologies and systematic discrimination often led by churches, such as conversion therapy programs or anti-queer teachings. Church members, which are less involved with the workings of the church, tend to be more tolerant or accepting, according to Rowan. Unfortunately, the status that churches hold as positions of ultimate authority within a denomination make it difficult for queer Christians to confront them. Kayla pointed this out: “It's not ever that there's something wrong with the church, it's always that there's something wrong with you that's preventing you from God, or the church, or whatever.” However, people have been able to successfully stay connected with their faith by viewing it as separate from the institutional religion.

Finding Queerness in Spirituality

Another important strategy queer Christians used was realizing that queerness was inherently spiritual, and that their two identities were not only non-contradictory but were “entwined,” as Abigail put it. She attributed her interconnected faith and queerness to the affirming online community and resources she sought out after becoming disillusioned with the Catholic Church. Many participants believe that one cannot follow Christian values without accepting queerness. “Being Christian does not obligate you to be homophobic or transphobic,” Julia said. “Quite the opposite, really.” Julia was an atheist until she realized she was transgender, a journey that went in tandem with her journey towards Christianity:

I tried really hard to not be like this ... And the recognition that there was part of myself that I had no control over that I could not change ... necessarily implied a higher power than myself.

The realization that she was made in God's image led Julia towards accepting her gender identity and simultaneously connecting with her spirituality. She now identifies as Lutheran. J also talked about finding the "divine" in queerness after becoming a Quaker due to its inclusive teachings about love:

Once I became a Quaker, something I really connected to was finding the inner light, or like the divine in other people and then everything around you. And to me, I felt like that there's this light about queerness also, and about people being able to show or teach others about love not having boundaries and things like that, that I felt connected really well with my faith.

Overall, those who intertwined queerness with their faith had felt that their sexuality or gender was purposeful and "just a part of this spectrum and diversity that God created" (Rowan).

Seeking Affirming Spaces

The last significant strategy that queer Christians have used to reach reconciliation is seeking out more affirming spaces, and not all of them have been Christian. As mentioned before, most participants explored other denominations and religions, and some also left religion entirely for a period due to feelings of discontentment. John, for instance, explored Quakerism, along with Buddhist and Taoist meditation, before returning to the Lutheran Church within which he was baptized. He called himself a "seeker for profound questions of faith and meaning" and explained that those who have experienced religious trauma look elsewhere "trying to find, essentially, safety, welcome." Because of this need for a spiritual space where he feels welcome, he considers himself "denominationally promiscuous" in searching for one that agrees with his beliefs, as do many of the queer Christians I talked to. Rowan had also moved from the Presbyterian church within which they grew up to the United Methodist Church, despite positive and affirming experiences within the former; the difference was that their identity was "more celebrated and it's not something that is just tolerated."

Part of seeking out other spaces was turning to online environments, which Abigail did when she felt disillusioned with the Catholic Church. She began leaving the sanctuary (worship space) during the homily to read articles from QueerTheology.com, a queer, transgender Christian-run website that offers community and resources for other queer Christians. This shift to looking online was oftentimes not accidental, and the next main section focuses on these communities and why queer Christians turned to them for support.

Redefining and Individualizing Faith

Overall, the underlying theme of these strategies is that queer Christians took their spirituality into their own hands. While some did return to—or remain in—their denomination of origin, like Abigail, John, and Kayla, almost all of them found ways to redefine their theology and therefore personalize their faith to match their beliefs, particularly those related to their queerness. Taylor, who began looking into the “clobber” passages (as termed by Colby Martin, the author of *UnClobber*) and their refutations when strengthening her spirituality, was then able to confidently disagree with homo- and transphobic messages from Christians by saying, “No, I’m Christian, and my Christianity is not your Christianity.”

Reasons for Joining an Online Community

The expectations and goals participants had when joining a community of other queer Christians depended on their level of reconciliation with their identities coming into it and how they had used these strategies. Was the space more for guidance and shared community, or did they still need answers and extra support to reach reconciliation?

I found that most participants had reconciled their queer and religious identities before joining an online community. Therefore, their intention in seeking out a community was mainly to know that they “weren’t the only one.” Finding a group of like-identifying others was often

enough to assure them that their experiences and identities are valid, and this was even more important for those with more specific combinations of identities. “I really just wanted to put the idea of being a queer Christian and a pagan all together, like, all these things that seem contradictory, into one place and see who would care,” said N, who created a casual chat group on Facebook to affirm that these three identities can coexist. And while these people mainly hoped to find and build connection with others who understood what it was like to be queer and Christian, for other reconciled queer Christians, it was more of a space to pop in for “question[s] about practical matters,” according to Julia. “You know, [if] there's a piece of scripture that I'm trying to puzzle out.”

On the other hand, a few participants needed these spaces to feel more comfortable within their identities, and some even used it to start the reconciliation process, like Lucy:

I chose an online community specifically because it was the only option that I had, it's still the only option that I have. And I was desperate for some sort of answers, or clarity, or something to help resolve the issues that were going on ... So I found them, and that was probably the first place where I actually started to get answers to some of my questions. And probably when I first started becoming at all capable with admitting what my situation is. And then things just kind of progressed from there.

These answers that Lucy sought were different from what she had known most her life as someone who lives in a religious rural environment, and necessarily so, because the fact that they “actually made sense” to her showed her how to begin coming to terms with her identity. Taylor also said that her group—a space specifically for transgender Christians—solidified for her the idea that her identity actually exists and is not just “a thing I’m trying to forge myself,” even though she had reconciled it beforehand. Queer Christians often need the reassurance and encouragement to either start the reconciliation process or to feel more comfortable within their identities beyond reconciliation.

After establishing what participants hoped to gain from these communities, knowing why they chose an online community specifically allows us to understand the advantages that an online space may have over a physical one. The most common reason is due to a lack of connection to a physical community, and this mainly came from those from rural and/or conservatively religious areas. Being online removed the physical restraints of time and space, as participants found it difficult to find a local community that was sufficient for their needs. This way, they had much more luck using the Internet to connect to others. These limitations were also simply convenient for people regardless of their environment because the community was always there, as Taylor explained:

So I chose an online community because that was something that I could go to for support, and actually find something and not need to worry about travel time and not need to worry about when it was happening so much, it was just a space where I could be like, "Yes, I have this space. And I can go and talk to these people. And we can all talk about our experiences of being trans and of being Christian."

For others (especially the younger participants), joining an online space was simply a more straightforward route due to being "chronically online," as Julia put it. Many people already spend a lot of time connecting to people online, and seeking out a community there is more comfortable.

A couple people also said that the digital community allowed them to connect to people they would not have otherwise met, especially those from other countries or who could not travel. Rowan said they preferred an online space for this reason after joining the group:

The possibilities of an online youth group—and I didn't know this before I joined—are so limitless and expansive, because you can meet with people all over the world, people from different cultures and communities, just get such a diverse group of people together.

One important thing to note, however, is that not all participants chose an online community for its convenience; in fact, many had no alternative. This did not only have to do with the lack of

physical community; the COVID-19 pandemic also disrupted and shaped the way some people engaged with such communities. Kayla, for instance, had joined a group of other queer Adventists with a regional chapter in her state and who met frequently for in-person meetings before the pandemic started. The transition to online after that was difficult and made relationships harder to keep:

It was a really active community. We'd go to church together, some of us, like it was really, really good. It was my family. Absolutely. So when COVID hit that all got a lot harder .. Since they were already my community, and my family, I did what I had to stay connected with them during COVID.

This transition has been quite difficult for Kayla, a point to be expanded on later when discussing the disadvantages of connecting online. Others, like N and Ellis, had joined online spaces during the pandemic and did so to fulfill a need for connection and socialization that they could not do physically. Despite this, these spaces still provided participants with the necessary interpersonal connection and answers during their journeys navigating their faith and queerness.

Benefits of Online Communities

The impacts of finding such community with like-identifying queer Christians were largely beneficial for interviewees. All participants reported feeling more comfortable with their identities after joining these groups. Some indicated they gave them more meaning to their identity—“as opposed to just kind of being this anomaly,” as J put it—which motivated them to work on reconciling or feeling more secure in themselves. “I think I would have walked away much faster if I hadn’t been surrounded by people who said, ‘No, you can be Christian and queer. God still loves you. And you can still love God, even,’” said Kayla. The space also broadened their perspective on how other queer Christians navigate their own journeys: “There's just so many different life experiences that people have and different traumas people bring, different ways they engage with Christianity and politics and queerness and everything,” said

Ellis, who joined a Discord server dedicated to supporting transgender Christians. Among these experiences, I discovered three main benefits these online spaces provided for participants: offering a safe space, boosting in-person interactions, and inspiring leadership.

Safe Space

All participants felt that their community was a safe space for them to ask questions, connect with others, learn more about affirming Christianity, and simply exist as a queer Christian. For Abigail—who joined the community associated with the queer Christian website she frequented—the confidence that she would not receive backlash when bringing up potentially controversial topics was significant, because other members understood the importance of integrating queerness and faith:

I feel like it's important to sort of question and argue about how a lot of things have been ... It's a safe space to say, "This is where I had a problem in my Christian experience," and the people will not say, "Well just leave [Christianity], then."

This security brought them solace in a time of uncertainty with their surroundings and within themselves. Lucy, who also joined a trans Christian group, called it a place to “retreat to whenever things get too much” and that brought “relief from the pressure that was continually building up in my mind” over the years. Kayla feels like she “can breathe” there, a direct opposition to her feelings about the Adventist organization she worked for. “Because they get the conflict there of trying to exist in two spaces, where one of them doesn’t want you,” she said.

These communities also make space for those who need to strengthen their connection to one of the two identities in particular—whether they are more secure in just their queerness or just their faith. For instance, J, who joined a polyamorous Christian coaching circle, mentioned others who are hesitant to call themselves Christian. The response to this has only been affirmation and welcome, “because the definition of Christian here is a lot looser than some other

places would have it,” she said. In these spaces, queer Christians feel safe knowing their identity is “taken for granted” (Wilcox, 2003, p. 119), allowing them to focus on building community instead of justifying who they are.

Boosting In-Person Interactions

Another significant benefit of these groups has been opening opportunities to meet people in person, or making queer Christians more comfortable with physical communities, because many still value such interaction. For John, who is part of a Facebook group for queer Christians in his region, has noticed that other online groups for queer Christians have been more of an “assist” to in-person meetings, merely a “bridge between online engagement for people to find each other and then an in-real-life component.” These spaces, mostly on social media platforms like Facebook and TikTok (but also through organizations), facilitate physical meetups and activities through an online means.

Groups based in specific regions like these offered crucial support for those in need. Kayla, for instance, was able to depend on her fellow queer Adventists when she moved to another state and needed a place to stay, being part of a national organization with local chapters. After the regional director emailed members in the area asking if someone could accommodate her, she met a lifelong friend who housed her for almost a year. “And she didn't have me pay rent, she dropped me off at work, like she took me to the metro,” she said. “Yeah, [she’s] the reason my life is where it is right now.” Meanwhile, none of the Adventist churches in the area had responded to this request or could accommodate her. “But my queer Adventists came through for me,” she said. This community gave Kayla support when no one else was able or willing to, which showed her she could rely on them.

These spaces could also lead to increased comfort interacting with people regarding their queer Christian identity. After speaking with others in the group who had come out to their Christian parents about being polyamorous, J felt inspired to come out to her dad as having a girlfriend in addition to her husband, eventually doing so several months later. Those conversations had taught her that her experience was not unusual and that others were able to overcome that fear themselves. Overall, these experiences allowed many to feel more comfortable openly embracing their queer Christianity as they go about their physical lives.

Taking on Leadership Roles

Many participants had assumed positions of leadership within their queer Christian communities. These include a diverse array of roles, from starting a college club to pursuing ordination as a pastor. While some had already taken on these positions, finding community with others aided them in the process or inspired them to go even further as a leader.

Before Ellis made the commitment to attend seminary school and pursue ordination, he had joined the trans Christian group partially to talk this out with others. Ultimately, he found the support he needed to follow through with it after meeting other queer Christians in ministry. It helped “to see that there are people like me who are pursuing leadership in the church and that like, it can work out and it will be okay.” Taylor, who graduated from seminary in 2020, was inspired through her group to take on more leadership and create a better space for its members that reflects an affirming theology:

I started out as a participant, and it grew over time to actually being a moderator ... and like actually a leader of the community ... And as it stands right now, [the group] doesn't really have a worship space. I'm trying to create that ... I really wanted to cast a vision for the future of like, what does an affirming theology look like and sound like? And where can we actually go with this?

Rowan also became a leader of the queer Christian youth group they had initially joined for support and has been leading it for over two years.

In the end, these groups have been a necessary component of these queer Christians' journeys, and the connection and support given have provided them with the strength they need to keep going. However, they were not the ideal communities for many participants, who also shared with me the struggles and restrictions of being online.

Drawbacks of Online Communities

These spaces were not without their limitations, and many participants expressed being unsatisfied with what they could offer despite their necessity. The most common complaint was that they preferred offline connections, and a couple of people also mentioned significant age gaps between them and other group members that hindered their ability to connect.

Preferring Offline Connection

Lucy, Kayla, Taylor, and John expressed valuing in-person interactions over those online. Even though they received support in their current groups, some considered it insufficient but good enough for the time being, and others saw these communities simply as avenues to creating affirming queer Christian communities. Lucy and Kayla expressed the former, saying that offline communities are irreplaceable, but this has “served a very needed purpose” and is “better than nothing,” given the options they had. Taylor and John saw online spaces as a channel that knowledge and affirmation into making physical connections and even creating change within the church. Taylor argued that remaining exclusively online limits the possibilities for what an affirming theology can do in the physical church space:

It's just to refuel, and then go out and be part of the church communities and to make change happen by our presence ... I really don't want it to replace what we

have, because then we've just siloed ourselves off, and we're not actually ... being visible, and we're not causing change within the church systems that exist. We're not changing the mainstream parts of Christianity; we would just be away from them.

On the other hand, Ellis found it difficult to put a value on either offline or online connection, saying he needs both communities. Perhaps for some people, like Ellis, the limitations that offline connection brings—time, transportation, and interpersonal conflicts—balances out the limitation of being online—lack of physical connection—in this way.

Complications with Age Gaps

The other drawback was the lack of younger members in these communities. While this is not an issue exclusive to the online space, it is worth noting here, as multiple participants pointed it out as reasons for not making strong connections with other members. While exploring groups for queer youth, Lucy (aged 22) had found that some were not easy to integrate into, partially due to the sense that they were “not for [her] age group.” This seemed to be the case for those within older organizations, where a “generational conflict” arises with long-time members who, according to J, “have different understandings of things like what it means to be queer or what it means to be Christian.” This hinders their ability to find common ground at times, as “it’s harder to go against established norms.”

Still, others noted that intergenerational connection could be beneficial as well. As mentioned earlier, N (aged 34) had a younger transitioning friend who helped them see “what I was missing in terms of my gender expression and identity,” as that friend likely grew up during a more progressive and Internet-based generation. And even J (aged 27) added the benefits to meeting older polyamorous Christians, who encouraged her to feel more secure in her identity:

In a lot of ways, it felt like really helpful to meet people who were like in their 30s and 40s, who were polyamorous and Christian and even had kids and things like that, and were just kind of living their lives doing both of these things. And

that made me feel a lot better about it, I guess being in some ways, like a choice I've made to be actively polyamorous and Christian.

Experiences within intergenerational communities, therefore, seemed to vary, and whether they were helpful was not clear-cut. While some benefited more from connecting with queer Christians within their age group—as do those that chose youth groups—others appreciated the diverse experiences they could learn through meeting older or younger queer Christians.

Conclusion

With this research, I explored how online social networks and communities shaped queer Christians' abilities to reconcile their sexual and religious identities. The information I gathered from interviewing these 10 queer Christians supported my assumption that building connections with and receiving answers from others with shared identities would provide them with a secure foundation for further exploration of their sexual and religious selves. Drawing from information about participants' upbringing, experiences within queer and Christian spaces, and strategies used for reconciling their identities, I learned that this community support was ultimately necessary for all participants—whether they were just beginning the reconciliation process or had already done so (or did not need it at all).

While most preferred an in-person connection but were limited due to physical space and time constraints (including those that came with the pandemic), or they struggled with age differences within their communities (both online and offline) that prevented them from building strong connections with members, these online spaces were more beneficial than unfavorable. With each drawback came another reason for people to benefit from it, such as using the digital space to gain easier and safer access to other queer Christians, and learning from those at different stages in their lives. Despite such challenges, participants overall felt well-supported by their communities, as represented by Rowan's sentiments:

And so as a queer Christian, or using that label, I've come to accept it and celebrate myself and celebrate others in the group even more, because of the general attitude and goal of our group, which is to celebrate, not just tolerate, the identity of queer.

The next steps for many were to expand their leadership influence, continue building (and maintaining) relationships with community members, get out into the physical church space, or simply be more comfortable within their queer Christian selves.

Limitations

Despite the detailed responses I received and thorough analysis conducted, my study still has a few significant limitations. One is that while most participants identified openly as queer Christians and had come a long way in their reconciliation process, this group would be most likely to feel comfortable reaching out and/or talking to me. Being willing to discuss sensitive topics and be exposed in this way takes a sense of security and comfort that not all queer Christians have. This may also explain why at least half of my participants were (or had been) leaders in their communities and even pursued ordination within their churches. Therefore, this leaves out queer Christians who have not yet reconciled their identities or are not out as queer (as was the case for only one participant) and whose experiences joining an online community would add more to the discussion. I may also be missing experiences from those who are less secure in their religious or queer identities and who may feel unfit to participate to avoid the definitive labels of “queer” and “Christian.”

Another limitation is that the demographics of my sample were heavily skewed toward White participants, so I missed the opportunity to discuss the intersectionality of race, queerness, and faith with those from racially marginalized communities. I also did not ask questions about economic class, even though that greatly affects who has reliable and consistent access to the Internet and therefore who may benefit more from these communities. My study not only lacks the consideration of class differences but also those who have little-to-no access to online communities. While those without Internet access would not be included within my sample anyway, they would have been worth mentioning within my interviews. By asking more about economic class and Internet access, I would have left space for participants to add to that

discussion—particularly those who grew up in rural areas and/or know queer Christians with limited access.

As an undergraduate student, I was also unable to conduct a fuller study with more participants, other researchers to check for inter-coder reliability, and better data analysis software. This may have limited my scope and left out some nuance to the experiences of American queer Christians. With more time, resources, and consideration for demographic and circumstantial differences (e.g., race, class, comfort reaching out to me), this more thorough study would be possible. Future researchers should consider these limitations and work to minimize them—such as broadening their recruitment scope and asking more demographic questions—when expanding on the body of research regarding online communities, especially as digital technology advances and more spaces emerge.

Despite these limitations, this current research not only adds to the limited body of research on queer Christians, but it informs how this community is using the digital space and reconciliation strategies to reclaim its sense of identity—a necessary process to understand during a time when governing bodies across America are abusing their power against the queer community to uphold Christian values (Cole, 2023; Izaguirre, 2023). For this reason, it is crucial to uplift queer voices, particularly those who inhabit two frequently-opposing communities, to show how they can not only coexist, but intertwine.

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