2023

Afraid to Come Out: A Qualitative Examination of Concealing and Negotiating Gay Sexual Identity

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Afraid to Come Out: A Qualitative Examination of Concealing and Negotiating Gay Sexual Identity

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A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Graduate College of Communication
of
The University of Texas at Arlington
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts, Communication

Approved:
December 2023

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Acknowledgements

I want to thank my committee chair, Dr. Karishma Chatterjee, for suggesting I enter graduate school and for her mentorship, patience, kindness, and guidance. Dr. Shelley Wigley for her support and encouragement in authoring this thesis. Dr. Dustin Harp for her knowledge, words of wisdom and support during this journey.

Thanks to my family and extended family for cheering me on to complete this research. I could not have made it through without you.

Lastly, I want to thank my husband, Kevin, my biggest cheerleader. Your patience, understanding, constructive criticism and unwavering support have allowed me to pursue this academic challenge. You encouraged me when I thought I could not go on. You listened to me when I was frustrated. Your love and inspiration motivated me to finish this important research.

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Abstract

Identity development is a fragile process for any individual but even more complex for individuals who identify as gay and who cannot openly and freely express or communicate their sexual identity for fear of rejection and hate. Acceptance of gay sexual orientation has undergone a backlash in recent years. Legislation aimed at silencing gay individuals has increasingly been passed in several states, which, in effect, could silence the gay community's discussions and communication. The resurgence of homophobia may lead to the gay individual concealing their identity or assuming a straight identity in other social settings, resulting in the inner turmoil of cognitive dissonance and internalized homophobia. Self-discrepancy theory and communication theory of identity were used as conceptual frameworks to understand the difficulties of establishing a homosexual self-concept within a heteronormative culture. Via interviews with gay individuals, the study examined the consequences of concealing and negotiating sexual identity at a time when homophobia and hostility are possible. Study findings suggest most if not all, participants experienced fear when deciding to come out to their friends and family. Most participants revealed they had first come out to their friends and subsequently to their families. Many of them had not come out to workplace colleagues. It seemed that most participants realized they were gay early in their lives yet hid their personal identities until they reached adulthood. The relational and communal layers of identity had an influence on the acceptance of their personal gay identity. They enacted a straight identity for periods of time, which led to internalized homophobia and cognitive dissonance. Participants managed the dissonance by using drugs, experiencing mental illness, and sometimes even getting married to an opposite-sex partner.

Introduction

In some parts of the United States, due to more acceptance, rights, and visibility of the LGBTQ community, we are seeing a backlash in the acceptance of gay individuals. Some U.S. elected officials, right-wing conservatives, and clergy have expressed disdain for gay individuals. For example, a clergy member in Texas has said to line up all the gay people and shoot them in the back of the head (Collett, 2022), and a right-wing conservative said to send all the gay people to concentration camps to stop the spread of monkeypox (Ring, 2022). The "Don't Say Gay" bill, passed in Florida in 2022, prohibits classroom instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity from kindergarten through grade 3 (Diaz, 2022). The consequence of this legislation, and individuals who support this type of rhetoric, is to silence the discussion and communication of gay individuals. Labeling gay individuals as groomers and pedophiles has a profound negative impact on the gay community, and this rhetoric may be indicative that gay individuals are a threat, in turn leading gay individuals to conceal their identity and live in fear (Ruiz, 2022).

The "Don't Say Gay" Law and similar legislation in other states substantially alter the ability of educators to present teachable moments that encourage understanding and inclusion of gay individuals, negatively affecting young people's mental and physical health (Perry-Lunardo et al., 2022). In 2022, sixteen laws restricting gay individuals were passed. Alabama and South Dakota passed similar laws to the Florida "Don't Say Gay" law, prohibiting teachers and institutions of higher learning from teaching about issues of gender or sexuality. Alabama's law includes fourth and fifth grades, whereas Florida's law is from kindergarten through third grade. The South Dakota law goes further than the Florida or Alabama laws, restricting colleges, universities, and professional training (USA Facts, 2023). On January 19, 2023, an ACLU press release noted there were over 120 bills restricting LGBTQ rights introduced nationwide. In

Texas, HB1686 and HB14 limit healthcare to gay individuals for religious reasons. In Texas, SB12 was signed into law, which limits Free Speech and Expression of gay individuals. The bill's language is so overly broad that it threatens and criminalizes constitutionally protected expression (Schneid & Melhado, 2023), and similar bills are advancing or already passed into law in Alabama, Alaska, Utah, Arizona, West Virginia, Arkansas, Georgia, and other states. When a person's identity becomes politicized and debated, it can dehumanize, increase stigma and stress, and damage impressionable, vulnerable young people (Mastroianni, 2022). This renewed hate of gay people has increased fear in the gay community. This fear may result in hiding one's gay identity or assuming a straight identity in other social settings, resulting in the inner turmoil of cognitive dissonance (Meyer, 2003). By returning to the closet for acceptance, the gay individual is conflicted (Drescher, 2004).

Over recent decades, with the advancement of rights and laws protecting gay individuals, studies have shown that American society has become more welcoming or accepting to members of the gay community (Statista Research, 2023). In the middle of the AIDS epidemic (1981 to early 1990s), the American public had not eased its profound disapproval of gay individuals. However, during this time, there was a growing sympathy toward the gay community. Two in five Americans believed it is a "sick society," and 73% said sexual relations between members of the same sex are morally wrong. In a 1985 *Los Angeles Times* Poll, these findings were virtually unchanged from 1973 (Balzar, 1985). In 1985, 89% of parents indicated they would be sad if they found out their child was gay, while by 2015, it was down to 19% (Kane, 2022). Contrast this to a Pew Research Center study in 2013 noting American attitudes about gay individuals dramatically changed over the past decade. Gay individuals felt more accepted by society, and there was a sense of optimism for the future of the gay community (Pew Research, 2013). Even

with a more accepting society, gay adults still felt there is discrimination against the gay community (Pew Research, 2013). Many gay adults see major religious institutions as not welcoming (Drake, 2013). If society has become more accepting and progress is being made during this period, in 2022, with laws being passed in many states across the nation demonizing gay individuals and the gay community, there is concern that the American public has become anti-gay (Kane, 2022). This renewed movement of hate, channeling itself through overheated rhetoric, threatens to undo much of the progress the US has made on gay rights and acceptance over the last 15 years (Kane, 2022).

The presence and depiction of gay individuals and couples in mainstream movies such as *Love, Simon* and *Call Me by Your Name*, television and streaming shows like *Will and Grace*, *Love Victor*, and advertisements for brands such as Budweiser, Kohls, Ikea, Coca Cola, and other companies, has led to more visibility of gay individuals in society. As the presence of gay characters in media has been progressively growing, and as the topic of sexuality becomes more tolerable in our society, some have questioned whether these depictions are precise and enough to exemplify a whole spectrum of people inside such a large community (Thomson, 2021). With the legalization of gay marriage nationwide in the U.S. in 2015 (Pew Research Center, 2019), 63% of adults in the U.S. support gay marriage, and there is increasing support for same-sex marriage in nearly all demographic groups (Pew Research Center, 2019). Although this support for marriage and the inclusion of more gay characters in media is positive news for the gay community and gay individuals, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is still a serious concern in the United States. The recent anti-LGBTQ+ legislation passed in some states in the U.S. now threatens to undo much of the progress America has made on LGBTQ rights over the last 15 years (Kane, 2022). The draconian laws being passed in these more

conservative states and the rolling back of freedoms for gay individuals, which are fueled by misinformation that gay individuals want to corrupt children, are turning these states anti-gay and could turn the U.S. anti-gay. Which has the potential to have detrimental effects on gay individuals (Kane, 2022).

Gay individuals may not openly and freely communicate their true sexual identities to others for fear of rejection or persecution. The significance of this silencing and negative attitudes may result in mental and physical stress, which can sometimes lead to drug addiction, suicide, or thoughts of suicide (AACAP, 2022; Hesse, 2022). The inability to communicate identity can result in self-hate, cognitive dissonance, and internalized homophobia (Pereira & Rodrigues, 2015). Internalized homophobia represents "the gay person's direction of negative social attitudes toward the self" (Meyer & Dean, 1998, p. 161). In its extreme forms, it can lead to the rejection of one's sexual orientation. Internalized homophobia is characterized by an inner physical conflict between experiences of same-sex attraction or desire and feeling a need to be heterosexual (Herek, 2004).

Studying how gay individuals struggle with mixed messages regarding their identity is essential. This includes examining the presence of cognitive dissonance in coming to terms with their true identity and negotiating attempts to hide and conceal their true identities. The origin of cognitive dissonance theory dates to Leon Festinger (1957), who theorized that mental discomfort occurs in an individual when they experience conflicting attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and values. It is natural for individuals to seek consistency in these areas of cognition (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). When dissonance or conflict arises, uneasy and uncomfortable feelings occur (Cherry, 2020). When inconsistency or dissonance is felt, something must change within the individual to eliminate or reconcile the dissonance (Egan et al., 2007).

Grappling with discrepancies between self-states and ideal states leads to emotional states, which cause discomfort (Higgins, 1987). Self-discrepancy theory helps us grasp the challenges of establishing a gay self-concept in a heteronormative culture. The self-discrepancy theory posits that individuals strive to align their self-perception with their socially realized standards and goals. According to self-discrepancy theory, if these prerequisites are not met, a person will be prone to fear, shame, rejection, and guilt, and significant self-discrepancy would result in low self-esteem and a negative self-concept (Higgins, 1987). Youth development and psychological adjustment may be significantly influenced by their social environments (Garofalo et al., 1998). Perceiving people as generally hostile frequently results in internalized homophobia, skewed self-perception, and lowered self-esteem, impeding the formation of a healthy self-concept (Rosario et al., 2011).

The ideology of heteronormative sexuality may inform adults to appear heterosexual. Because gay individuals' same-sex attraction orientation has been and remains to be stigmatized or condemned by society, if an individual departs or does not conform to heterosexual standards, they place themselves in jeopardy of social segregation and physical violence against them (Rich, 1980). If a gay individual cannot express or communicate their true self for fear of retribution, their true identity can be dismantled. Cognitive dissonance can result, and the individual communicates a socially acceptable identity of being heterosexual. The projection of a heteronormative identity can increase the opportunity for inner conflict. Suppose communication is stifled for fear of rejection by family and society. In that case, this will cause the gay individual to assume a heterosexual identity, begin living a lie, and hide their identity. It is imperative to understand how gay individuals' inability to communicate their identity openly and freely can manifest into prolonged cognitive dissonance and internalized homophobia, causing

the gay individual to reject their identity in favor of projecting an image to society that is considered normal to fit in.

It is significant to give society an understanding that gay individuals are human beings, not pedophiles, groomers, or monsters. This study will have both theoretical and practical impact. In this study, I will examine the connection among the affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of sexual identities. Specifically, I will examine the expression and silence of sexual identity (behavioral) and, cognitive dissonance, and internalized homophobia (cognitive). In the process, I hope to uncover how perceived judgments and evaluations (affective) of being gay influence individuals coming out experiences.

Literature Review

Communication Theory of Identity

Hecht's communication theory of identity (1993) is used to understand how gay individuals communicate their identity in society and family where there is potential for hostility and homophobia. It is a theory that features communication as a central element of identity rather than simply a product of identity management or a progression that creates identity. The theory posits identity is based on self-perception, encompassing self-concepts and self-definition (Hecht, 1993). Communication is a crucial element in the development of an individual's identity. Individuals' identities influence the formation of their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Hecht & Choi, 2011). The theory suggests that individuals internalize their social interactions, connections, and sense of self utilizing communication. Through communication, identity is continuously conveyed or enacted. Communication and identity have a common connection (Hecht & Choi, 2011).

Previous studies have used Hecht's theory in their examination of identity structure. The studies explore how the theory relates to identity development and suppression among third culture kids (Pang & Hutchison, 2018) and international graduate students and their spouses (de la Serna, 2022). The difficulties experienced in coming out and acceptance (Kim et al., 2021; Wolf, 2016), fabricating and communicating a false identity for acceptance among LGBTQ Jewish individuals (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011), and the parental aspect of accepting a gay child (Kim et al., 2021).

There has been an increase in the geographical mobility of families and individuals. The rise in this level of mobility has resulted in families moving to different nations. Cultural

identities and boundaries, previously characterized by simplicity and distinctness, are currently muddled. Third Culture Kids is a phenomenon that encompasses the emergence of these complex cultural identities. A 2018 study by Pang and Hutchinson focused on studying the identity development of Third Culture Kids and how they merge the multi-layered identities through three of the four identity layers of Hecht's communication theory of identity: personal, relational, and communal. This was to understand better the complexities for investigating the relationship between the layers of identity during identity negotiation and how the experiences in the relational and communal layers strengthen the personal layers of identity. Third culture kids' complex identities required constant negotiation between the identity gaps that communication theory of identity proposes. In dealing with the multifaceted reality, third culture kids struggle with communicating their identity wholly and effectively to themselves and others. In the study, it is seen how identity is a fluid and continuous process of formation through the interpenetration and identity gaps of the personal, relational, and communal layers.

de la Serna (2022) examines international graduate students and their partners' diverse experiences using the communication theory of identity. In the study, the identity layers of the international students and their spouses showed that while there are some similarities, the people in the student-dependent relationships rarely share a path of identity restoration with their spouses. The study identified the obstacles the students and their married partners encountered in identity formation in a new context. The obstacles included such things as immigration laws, the dependents not being allowed to work or study, not being eligible for social security numbers, and legal immigration status is dependent upon their partners. The students have a greater abundance of resources in comparison to their spouses during the process of redefining their personal identities. The students opted to pursue their studies in an international setting. This

granted them a greater degree of autonomy and control compared to their marital partners. The married individuals began discerning their respective personal dimensions as either supporting or sacrificial. The personal layer of the pupils grew interconnected with their chosen profession. A similar occurrence transpired within the enactment layer. The students and their spouses developed novel communication skills that were more aligned with their respective relational identities. To maintain an undisturbed academic environment, spouses refrained from sharing their personal issues, thus ensuring that students' concentration on their studies remained uninterrupted. The spouses had limited opportunities to establish their communal layer or structure, but the students had the school as a communal setting. The study's participants' narratives illustrate the challenges faced by both individuals and partnerships in their quest to establish their identities.

Young males who have sex with men may have additional complications in developing their identity, especially if they face rejection from their parents. Parental rejection of coming out can have negative impacts. Kim et al. (2021) examined the relationship between self-disclosure and emotional intimacy. The findings suggest that romantic bonding and intimacy can help young men overcome identity-based shame from parental rejection and distance. This rejection and distance could lead the young men to self-devaluation.

Hecht defines identity as containing personal, enactment, relational, and community layers. These layers act together and are affected by each other (Hecht, 1993). Communication with family, friends, and others helps structure identity (Hecht, 1993).

Personal Layer

The personal layer proposes the individual as a frame of identity. It may be considered comparable to one's self-concept, self-image, self-cognitions, and attitudes about the self (Hecht & Choi, 2011). The personal layer of identity provides an "understanding of how individuals define themselves in general as well as in particular situations" (Hecht et al., 1993, pp. 166-167). However, if there is a barrier or roadblock in truthful communication to self, society, or family, in that case, identity gaps arise from these barriers, and internal and external identities become progressively more problematic (Wolfe, 2016). The personal layer enables gay individuals to understand how their gay identity interacts with other identities with which they align.

Using semi-structured interviews, Wolfe (2016) found that gay individuals need to learn how to navigate their identities in various relationships. Younger male participants described the reconciliation of their gay identities like flipping on a switch. These individuals discussed the confusion they experienced up to the point of becoming aware and accepting their gay identities. Being able to communicate their gay identity led to greater satisfaction in their romantic life. Once they became comfortable with accepting and acknowledging their gay identity, some participants still found it difficult to express their true selves. The participants in the study also shared that they selectively expressed communicating their gay identity. When unsure of the situation or when there was fear, they hid or suppressed their identity, whereas when they perceived acceptance, they communicated their gay identity. Just as the participants hid their identity in some interactions because of the uncertainty of acceptance, the need to feel comfortable in oneself and communicate one's true identity was critical. A common theme throughout was the ability to adapt their identity in specific situations where a heterosexual performance of identity was necessary. Some participants removed themselves from those

situations to stay true to their gay identities. When there was a fear of communicating their true self, the gay identity was suppressed, and a heterosexual identity was expressed. In all instances, identity choices were complicated. For gay individuals, in this study, selecting the identity that creates the most acceptance in a situation is what was found to be necessary, even if it was at odds with their true self.

Enactment Layer

In the enactment layer, identity is observed as being presented in communication through messages. This layer looks at identity as an act, performance, or message conveyed. In this layer, communication is the center of identity. Our identities are communicated to others in the words we say and how we act in various circumstances. Identities are not communicated only through the actions of people and societies; the performances can distinguish identities (Golden, 2015). Because all people are presumed to be straight when born, gay individuals trying to conceal their identity to fit in will do their best in a situation to perform in a way that communicates their identity as a straight person. A widely held belief that individuals are presumed to be straight unless proven otherwise is known as compulsory heterosexuality (Manning, 2016). Gay children are more likely to be open about their identity when they do not fear rejection, ridicule, or adverse reactions from family and friends (Ryan, 2009).

Faulkner and Hecht (2011) interviewed thirty-one gay Jewish-American individuals to study their decisions around identity negotiation, which demonstrated how the interconnections between different layers of identity and critical factors led to transformations and conflicts in the lives of individuals, therefore requiring them to engage in negotiations with their LGBTQ Jewish identity. The analyses conducted unveiled tensions pertaining to self-perception, personal experiences, views of others, and expressions of one's LGBTQ and Jewish identities. These

conflicts frequently centered around the theme of isolation. The findings indicate that the interpenetrations of identity layers and crucial factors caused conflict and changes in the lives of the participants, causing the participants to negotiate their gay-Jewish identity. In the study, many of the difficulties linked to self-perception, experiences, perceptions of others, and enactments of being gay and Jewish centered on issues of alienation. As they sought supporting networks for one or both identity parts, the possibility of identity gaps arising and producing primarily adverse effects was ever-present in their lives.

Communal Layer

In the communal layer, identity exists as a characteristic of communities or groups that share common characteristics. The members establish common identities based on religion, beliefs, ethnicity, and characteristics. The commonalities form group identities (Hecht et al., 2004). Unfortunately, negative stereotypes can be formed from the communal identity layer (Hecht & Choi, 2011). Conflict from religious ideology and a lack of support for those conventions are instrumental to the challenges of identity for gay youth, which are far beyond the other stress-related issues they face (Page et al., 2014). When gay individuals cannot openly communicate their true identity for fear of retribution or hate, they may hide their true selves and assimilate into a group of heterosexuals. In the assimilation process, the individual sees their self-categorized as a member of that group (Sindie & Condor, 2014). Most gay individuals are not raised in a community of other gay individuals where they learn about their identity and where the group can support and strengthen that identity. Instead, gay individuals are often brought up and become associated with communities that are blatantly hostile toward homosexuality. In this instance, the gay individual characterizes their identity into the heterosexual, normal group, losing their identity to self and society (Rosario et al., 2006).

Relational Layer

The relational layer focuses on identities in our relationships with others, such as family. Our identity is a common product, equally negotiated and jointly developed in relationships through communication. Individuals are constantly changing or adapting their identities based on their relationships and interactions with others (Hecht et al., 2004). Social roles determine which identities appear in encounters (Hecht, 1993). Social ties and others define people (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004). Identifying oneself begins with communication, and the ability to communicate openly and freely is a crucial source of connection in all relationships (Harris, 2012). Research indicates that as many as 52% of parents may initially react negatively to their child's disclosure of same-sex attractions (D'augelli et al., 2008). The damaging side effects of parent rejection can span from depression, negative identity, substance abuse, and, in some extreme cases, suicide (Baiocco et al., 2015). Children who do not disclose their true selves to their parents fear rejection, violence after disclosure, verbal abuse, or suffer other adverse outcomes that threaten their well-being (Savin-Williams, 1994). Children in families who reject gay individuals are more likely to encounter increased levels of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, internalized homophobia, and suicide or thoughts of suicide (Pereira & Rodrigues, 2015).

Kim et al. (2021) explored adolescent identity formation and parental rejection in coming out. Identity development is fragile and can be made more difficult by parental rejection after coming out. Citing the Trevor Project, 2019, and using Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity, the study indicates that core to youth development is the formation of self-identity: "Who am I, and how can I express this to my family and friends?" Love plays a vital function in such identity building. In other words, "Do my parents love me?" and "Can I share love with a partner?" While most adolescents struggle with identity formation, sexual minority youth and

young men who have sex with men often encounter more multifaceted psychological complications due to parental and societal rejection, resulting in a reluctance to disclose their gay identity. The study found the link between young gay individuals' emotional detachment from their fathers in response to coming out and the embarrassment of their sexuality was made bearable by the positive emotional connection, closeness, and understanding of a more caring partner. There was the potential for repairing the damage of denunciation and identity-based shame from parental refutation and detachment, which would otherwise be a source of self-devaluation for gay individuals.

The four layers of identity are not distinct from one another. They are intertwined and work in sync with each other. At times, the layers can conflict with each other. When this happens, there exists an "identity gap" (Jung & Hecht, 2004). A person's identity can differ from their enacted identity and between personal and relational layers. The gaps may cause psychological and behavioral issues, causing individuals to experience cognitive dissonance (Hecht, Warren, et al., 2004; Hecht, 2009).

The ideology of heteronormative sexuality may inform young adults to appear heterosexual. Because gay individuals' same-sex attraction orientation has been and remains to be stigmatized or condemned by society, if an individual departs or does not conform to heterosexual standards, they place themselves in jeopardy of social segregation and physical violence against them (Rich, 1980). To understand identity development and social roles, it seems important to examine whether an individual perceives they can communicate their gay identity. An inability to do so for fear of retribution could result in their identity being dismantled. Cognitive dissonance can result, and the individual communicates a socially

acceptable identity of being heterosexual. The projection of a heteronormative identity can increase the opportunity for inner conflict.

Cognitive Dissonance and Internalized Homophobia

Most dissonance occurs when an individual must decide on two incompatible beliefs or actions. As in gay individuals who achieve balance, although temporary, by hiding their identities and deciding to try to pass as straight because of societal and internalized homophobia. This can lead to poor self-concept, a type of cognitive dissonance. A state of unbalanced equilibrium ensues, and the gay individual tries to change in order to reconcile the dissonance. If the belief and behavior inconsistencies continue and the individual chooses to continue the behavior, the belief changes to agree with the behavior. The gay individual's belief that it is okay to be gay, but if it is okay, I would not have to hide my true self, is the conflict. Cognitive dissonance theory would lead the gay individual into thinking, "I am bad," and then develop a poor sense of self (Berger, 1982).

If the conflict cannot be reconciled, gay individuals may ultimately hate themselves for being different and regress into internalized homophobia (Meyer & Dean, 1998). Homophobia and internalized homophobia are a source of conflict for a person. In other words, homophobia and internalized homophobia shape a communicative blockade that prevents gay individuals from interconnecting authentically (Eguchi, 2006). Hiding the shame of being gay is a survival strategy aimed at circumventing the negative outcomes of stigma; however, this management strategy can have unwelcomed repercussions and emerge as stressful (Meyer, 2007).

Internalized homophobia, the most destructive of the minority stress mechanisms, is the gay individual's management of hostile social attitudes toward self, leading to a deterioration of

self, centralized conflicts, and valueless self-regard (Meyer & Dean, 1998). In a gay person, internalized homophobia is the collapse of the coming out process (Meyer & Dean, 1998). Feelings are internalized, and self-hate materializes. These feelings manifest into negative self-perceptions and homophobic attitudes toward themselves and others in the gay community (Walsh, 2022).

Homophobia impacts how gay individuals view their homosexuality. They often internalize homophobia while living in a heterosexist society. Due to internalized homophobia, gay individuals struggle with their sexual identity, and they communicate their identity differently with members of the principal society and the gay community (Eguchi, 2006). Gay individuals with a high concentration of shame and internalized homophobia have difficulties in connecting, are more likely to postpone coming out, or often do not come out at all (Brown & Trevethan, 2010).

Summary

There remains a fear of acceptance of gay individuals in society. This acceptance has been exacerbated by rules, legislation, and hate-filled rhetoric aimed at erasing the dialogue and identities of gay individuals. This renewed hate of gay people has increased fear in the gay community. This fear may result in hiding or assuming an identity of straight in other social settings, resulting in the inner turmoil of cognitive dissonance (Meyer, 2003). By returning to the closet for acceptance, the gay individual is conflicted (Drescher, 2004).

Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity is used in understanding how a gay individual communicates their identity in society and family where there is potential for hostility and

homophobia. The theory is the door to a better understanding of gay individuals' communication of self and the potential for cognitive dissonance and internalized homophobia.

Suppose communication is stifled for fear of rejection by family and society. In that case, this will cause the gay individual to assume a heterosexual identity, begin living a lie, and hide their identity. It is imperative to understand how the inability of gay individuals to communicate their identity openly and freely can manifest into prolonged cognitive dissonance and internalized homophobia.

To summarize, the communication theory of identity is used to examine gay individuals' identity negotiation in the context of legislation and public discourse around silencing sexual identity, which may contribute to an identity crisis, cognitive dissonance, and internalized homophobia. This study will examine the presence of identity gaps during the process of coming out or deciding not to come out as gay to family and friends. In addition, I will examine the (re)negotiation of sexual identity among different generations of gays. I will also interrogate the link between hiding one's identity and cognitive dissonance. Finally, the connection between expressed cognitive dissonance and internalized homophobia will also be explored. The following research questions are set:

RQ1: How do gay individuals perceive the coming out experience with family?

RQ2: How do gay individuals perceive the coming out experience to friends?

RQ3: How do gay individuals navigate their sexual identities in interactions with (a) family members, (b) friends, and (c) co-workers?

RQ4: Do gay individuals who have not come out experience internalized homophobia?

RQ5a: Do gay individuals who have not come out experience cognitive dissonance?

RQ5b: How, if at all, do gay individuals manage their cognitive dissonance?

It is vital to hear directly from gay individuals about their experiences in coming out and their experiences navigating the realization of being gay.

Method

Design

A qualitative method with in-depth semi-structured interviews was used to understand the coming out experiences of the participants. Inherently, the design method of this study is phenomenological. Due to the volatility of the current social issues involving gay individuals, the related issues of coming out, and the (re)negotiation of identity for already out gay individuals, phenomenology will allow one to gain insight into the lived experience of gay individuals. The results of a phenomenological investigation extend the mind, improve the modes of thought used to view a phenomenon and help researchers to foresee the future and define their position via the deliberate study of actual experiences (Qutoshi, 2018).

According to Pelias (2011), qualitative research entails an intricate dynamic between the investigator and the subject of investigation, wherein the researcher's rapport with the participants and the research methodology may exert an impact on the results obtained. Therefore, this researcher acknowledges my position as a gay man having difficulties coming to terms with being gay and coming out. As a gay individual raised in a small conservative, religious rural area, and conservative thinking parents, I experienced the internal confusion of hiding and trying to live as a heterosexual for acceptance. In the interview process, it was imperative to understand the truths, or the reasons of how cognitive dissonance relates to hiding behind a mask of straightness, loss of social identity, and loss of self. It was important to understand if other individuals had experienced these same types of feelings, but did not know, or realize what they were going through. If, in the interview process, the participant expressed they had confusion, fear, or difficulties in the coming out process, this researcher's history in experiencing the effects of cognitive dissonance and internalized homophobia allowed for more

empathetic and compassionate interviews, more in depth questions and answers, as well as seeing a true picture of what may, and often time does happen to a gay individual when forced to hide behind a mask of deception. The effects that cognitive dissonance had on my life, and not being comfortable or able to communicate my gay identity as a young man, into adulthood by the constant fear of rejection, fear of not being wanted, loved, or accepted for who I am was important in hearing the stories of the participants. The dissonance became the truth. Until I was 24 years old, I internalized my homosexuality and felt I was losing my identity while mentally struggling to outwardly be accepted as a straight person. Finally, the imbalance became too strong, the denial, the depression, and the inner turmoil so great, I had to come to terms with my gay self. For inner peace, I had to accept my true self. Acceptance was not easy, and the lingering effects of the cognitive dissonance and internalized homophobia lasted for several years, never fully comfortable with revealing myself to others. The infighting experienced was mental devastation and a loss of cognitive control. This personal experience did not affect the outcome of this research paper, nor did it influence or lead the participants in the answers to the questions. It is important to reveal and understand this researcher's background and the relationship it has to this study.

Participants

Participants in the study were the ages of 18 years and over. Prior to the interview, each participant completed and signed a consent form. Each participant was offered a $10 gift card once the interview was completed. This research is about gay individuals and coming to terms with sexual identity. For this reason, only cis-gender gay individuals, identifying as men and women, were recruited for the study. For transparency, the researcher was familiar with and

knew one participant from the workplace; however, the researcher did not know the participants coming out story.

Given the perception of changing attitudes toward the gay community over the last four decades in the United States amidst epidemics, laws, and political discourse (E.g., Pew Research, 2013; Kane, 2022), it is important to study participants from four generations: Baby Boomers (1946 – 1964), Generation X (1965 – 1980), Millennials (1981 – 1996), Generation Z (1997 – 2012), to fully understand the impact these changes may have had in the coming out process of gay individuals. Exploring these shifts in acceptance and non-acceptance of society, as well as hearing the stories of the participants, could lead to a more thorough understanding of coming out, when to come out, or hiding their gay identity.

After securing IRB approval, individuals were recruited from a large public University in Texas through the Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies Program. In addition, a snowball sampling technique was utilized to recruit participants from social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, and recruitment flyers were distributed through gay professional and specialized online social media groups. The goal was to recruit as many participants as possible from each generation for the study or until the time the data reaches saturation (Saunders et al., 2017).

Eighteen participants, all from different parts of the U.S., were interviewed as part of the study. The participants responding to the request for interviews ranged in age from 25 to 75 years, with an average age of 52.94 years. Four of the participants were African American, 1 Native American, and 13 Caucasian. The gender identity of the participants was 1 woman, 17 men, and all identified as gay. Eight of the participants grew up or were raised in an urban area, 10 participants grew up in a rural area. The number of participants for each generation included 10 Baby Boomers, 5 Millennial, 2 Generation X, and 1 Generation Z.

Interviews

Participants completed semi-structured virtual interviews in English. This type of interview allowed for learning about the participants' experiences in negotiating their sexual identities at the personal, enacted, communal, and relational levels. In preparing for the interviews, McNamara's eight principal stages of interviewing were applied, which included the following steps: select a setting with little distraction, explain the purpose of the interview, address terms of confidentiality, explain the format, indicate how long the interview will take, tell everyone how to contact you later, ask if they have questions before getting started. Eighteen people were interviewed over three weeks, using Microsoft TEAMS. The video interviews were video recorded and transcribed during the interview process by Microsoft TEAMS. The transcription was then manually checked for accuracy.

Each interview was between thirty minutes to one hour, averaging approximately forty-five minutes per interview. The participants were asked predetermined questions, allowing each participant to answer and openly discuss their feelings, thoughts, and reactions on coming out. Some participants had more to say than others; however, each participant answered the questions completely and thoroughly. This type of one-on-one interview allowed each participant to contribute as much or as little detailed information to the discussion as desired (Gall et al., 2003). The complete list of questions is in Appendix A. Thematically, the questions touched on family and friends and the coming out process, with questions formulated to gain insight into and answer the research questions. Sample interview questions supporting the first three research questions were:

RQ1: How do gay individuals perceive the coming out experience with family?

RQ2: How do gay individuals perceive the coming out experience to friends?

RQ3: How do gay individuals navigate their sexual identities in interactions with (a) family members, (b) friends, and (c) co-workers?

- Explain when and how you first knew you were gay.
- Who did you tell first? Were you afraid to tell them?
- Tell me about the first time you came out.
- Is it difficult to express your sexual identity to family and friends?
- Were there acceptance issues in coming out?

RQ4: Do gay individuals who have not come out experience internalized homophobia?

RQ5a: Do gay individuals who have not come out experience cognitive dissonance?

RQ5b: How, if at all, do gay individuals manage their cognitive dissonance?

- How did you come to terms with being gay?
- How did / do you feel mentally?
- How do you think hiding your identity affects your mental health?
- How did / do you feel physically? How do you think hiding your identity affects your physical health?

Analysis

The transcripts of the interviews were read numerous times to re-familiarize myself with each transcript's content and aid in coding and thematic analysis. A thematic analysis allows one to find recurring topics, concepts, and meaning patterns (Caulfield, 2022). As a gay man, this researcher, tried to avoid confirmation bias in the analysis by employing a multi-stage approach in analyzing the collected data. A popular method of conducting thematic analysis consists of six steps: familiarization, coding, topic generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report writing (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Familiarization with the data prior to analyzing individual items involves getting a thorough overview of all the data collected from the participants. When coding the data, I highlighted sections of the transcribed text to identify words and phrases to describe the content. Then, I generated themes by studying the recurring words and phrases and identifying patterns in the data. I then reviewed the themes to ensure they were useful and accurate data representations. This step is critical to ensure the data's themes are present. Defining and naming the themes is the next step. This step involves formulating precisely what each theme means and how it helps to understand the data. The write-up of the data analysis is the last step (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

The transcripts were sorted by the four generations, then by age and finally by religious or non-religious upbringing. Thematic analysis and coding of the volumes of transcribed data were assisted by using MAXQDA 2020 software. The software helped in the coding process of organizing and analyzing the transcribed interview data. All transcripts were saved as PDF documents and then exported into the software. Once codes were assigned, the software helped identify the codes in all the transcripts. After coding, the analysis tool of the software was used to identify the recurring codes throughout the transcripts. During the interviews, and in answering the questions related to the RQ's in the study, there was a commonality to some of the words that were being used by the participants. After reviewing the transcripts, these words were put into the coding software to see how extensively they were mentioned. Some of the more recurring words throughout each of the interview transcripts were, gay, family, hiding, acceptance, struggles, afraid, mental, straight, and confused. Six recurring themes were identified, including confusion in what was felt, not understanding why they were gay, conflicts between religion and being gay, family acceptance, afraid of telling anyone, and fear of the loss of support were assigned to the data.

Although it seemed like saturation had occurred with the interviews, it is important to acknowledge that all stories were unique and different in context. The participants all talked about some degree of difficulties they experienced with their gay identity and in the coming out process. Each participant hid their gay identity from friends and family. Each participant experienced the uncertainty of how they would be accepted prior to revealing their gay identity. Their stories were unique in how they finally faced the reality of being gay.

Results

Essential to this research was to gain insight into the coming out stories of gay individuals as well as the issues or non-issues related to understanding and the realization of being gay. It was also important to understand the implications of not being able to communicate an authentic identity to others and fully accept a gay identity.

In the research interviews of the 18 participants, it was surprising to find the similarities in the coming out stories. Despite the age difference, the coming out experiences were the same generationally. Older participants and younger participants both shared difficulties in understanding and communicating their sexual identity. Not everyone came out the same way; some participants experienced more difficulty than others. Collectively, the data suggests all participants hid or tried to hide their gay identity in some way from family, friends, and others. Reasons included wanting to fit in, not being bullied, and being considered normal or not to be condemned by the church. All participants in the study expressed some type of emotional and physical stress in trying to be who they thought they were supposed to be and who they truly are.

All participants expressed their personal identities at an early age. The personal layer of identity theory provides an "understanding of how individuals define themselves in general as well as in particular situations" (Hecht et al., 1993, pp. 166-167). The personal layer may be considered comparable to one's self-concept, self-image, self-cognitions, and attitudes about the self (Hecht & Choi, 2011). Although they did not know what to call it until a much later age, they knew they were different. Ken (70, Boomer) who came out when he was 21 years old, said, "I knew I was different by about five or six years of age. Did I know the term for gay? No, not until I was probably 21." Blake (27, Millennial) who came out when he was 13 years old said, "Middle School age and being at the age of sexual development I found pornographic websites

and my attention centered on gay porn. That is when the first realization of this is interesting, I think I'm different." Kate (47, Gen X) who came out when in therapy when she was 44 years said:

> So, growing up, I was aware I was different at a fairly young age. I had an aversion to traditional gender roles. In kindergarten, at playtime I didn't want to wear the dress and do the dishes. I didn't have much of an understanding of what all of that meant.

Participants reported coming out for the first time to friends or people they felt more comfortable with, not their immediate family members. This coming-out experience happened between the ages of 13 years and 47 years, with an average age of 25 years. In the analysis of the interview transcripts, there was no discernible difference in the coming out experience or the age the participant came out, or the difficulties experienced in coming out. From the interviews, it was discovered that living in an urban or rural area made no difference in the struggles the participant's experienced in coming out and coming to terms with being gay. Religion and religious beliefs of the family were mentioned and discussed as having an effect on coming out in 10 of the 18 participants in the study. Eight of the 10 felt guilt in being gay because of religious beliefs while 2 of the participants said it did not affect them and had some positive support.

Coming out Experience with Family

Research Question 1 asked how do gay individuals perceive the coming out experience with family? A common theme was that of being fearful. Participants had mixed emotions when responding to questions regarding their perceptions of coming out as gay to family members.

Participants used words such as terrified, afraid, worried, unsettled, uncomfortable, and fearful. In 10 of the 18 interviews, religion and conservative family values played a significant role in the coming out experience to families, not just parents, but to wives and children. Gymnas (30, Millennial) who came out when he was 27 years old mentioned religion, and his race played a role in his coming out:

> I was afraid; I didn't' know what they would think about me. My mom was disappointed. Coming from a Christian background and my African American ethnicity, it's kind of forbidden to be gay. They still do not accept me.

Relational and communal layers of identity seemed to intersect for many participants. Per communication theory of identity, layers are not separate from each other in defining our identity (Hecht, 1993) The relational layer posits that relationships are the key to identity. The relationships we have with our friends, family, and coworkers help to define our identity. The communal layer is the context in which identity arises and becomes evident at the group level. Various groups possess collective identities that are shared by their members. Our sense of self is intricately connected to the social groups we align ourselves with. Our identity is that of the group. This intersection of layers was described by Mark L. (48, Gen X) who came out when he was 47 years old:

> Again, it was intermingled with the church. My wife knew I was not feeling the church for a while and that led to conflict because we couldn't communicate with each other because I was afraid it would turn into something else like coming out about my homosexuality. That lasted about a year and then she just asked me point blank. She was understanding, we told the kids a couple of months later. I didn't realize how unhappy I had become.

Not all members within a family were unaccepting of participants' gay identity. Glynn (67, Boomer) who came out when he was 21 years old said he was terrified to confront his parents and family but did so on a holiday with them all there. His parents were accepting but disappointed and wanted him to be happy. His younger brother was not accepting but eventually came around. Some participants experienced negative reactions from family members when they came out. This is seen in Wayne L.'s (68, Boomer) story. He has two older brothers and finally came out to one of them when he was about 21 years old:

> Having to tell somebody was a hard thing. My brother got really angry when I told him. He was very religious and thought he had to save my soul. He told my mother after I asked him not to. My mother offered to pay for counseling. She thought it was a mental illness.

A participant, David (41, Millennial), came out when he was 17 years old, via a letter to his mom. That was the first time he accepted he is gay. He said he started going to church a lot trying to pray the gay away. He felt guilty and homophobia, until it got to a breaking point. He felt like this is not going away or going to change. It is not a phase and fighting it is going to be a lifetime of fighting it or repressing it or a lot of anger. The letter started with to whom it may concern and said it could be a suicide note or a goodbye note, but to take it for what it is: a letter. The letter talked about having doubts about religion and the Bible, doubting his sexuality, then saying he is gay. Asking why he is gay, he didn't know, but he is, and the Bible says he is a wicked person. People around him would be better off without him. David's experience shows the gap between the communal identity connected to religion and his own personal gay identity. Not being able to reconcile the two led him to have suicide ideation. His mom's reaction was instant love and acceptance.

Gymnas's (30, Millennial) story also shows how individuals strive to address identity gaps. He shared that his mom and dad started hating him for being gay and what he had to do to cope with their negative response to him coming out to them: "I tried so hard to please them, and it was difficult living two lives. Being straight in front of my parents it was very stressful. I came out and told them who I really am. I had to move out because of their reaction." As Communication Theory of Identity explains, identity gaps emerge when an individual's personal and enacted identities seem to clash. The presence of identity gaps may result in psychological and behavioral issues, causing individuals to experience cognitive dissonance (Hecht et al., 2004; Hecht, 2009).

In the interviews, it was discovered the families were not always the first to be told because of fear of rejection. Participants discussed other issues they had in being afraid of coming out. One of them being fear of God's rejection as articulated by Kate (47, Gen X):

> I was at a church retreat several months after coming out in therapy and a friend suggested I talk with the priest. I was terrified. I told him I was there because I don't think God can ever love me. The priest said that God does not make mistakes. Why would he make someone and then disqualify them from his love. That was the beginning of being able to deconstruct my theology and say to myself wait all of these things I have been taught, what if they are not true? I can be exactly who I am and still have a relationship with God. That was a pivotal moment.

She also said because of her upbringing, she tried to appear to be heterosexual for many years. She had a concern she was going to be alone for the rest of her life. Therefore, heteronormativity and fear of loneliness led her to marry a man:

> When I was in my early twenties, I married a man, and we were married for fifteen years, but it wasn't necessarily because of the attraction. It was very dysfunctional. I don't see things getting better, and I don't want to be alone for the rest of my life. Being alone and not having anyone else was terrifying to me. I thought okay, this person provides some kind of attention, so here we go.

Because Kate's family assumed she was heterosexual, her relational identity was to try and appear straight. By doing this, she enacted a straight identity to conform to the expected norm. In doing so, she hid her gay identity.

Finally, participants reported not enacting their gay identity because of the relational consequences of doing so in the family. For example, Jake (68, Boomer) who came out when he was 26 years old, expressed his fear of coming out. His fear of being found out he is gay was driven by having witnessed a gay relative being physically assaulted:

> I always had a fear that I would be found out. I kind of feel part of the fear I had in not coming out earlier is because I remember my dad beating the crap out of my uncle, who was gay. All of the anger in the Indiana area about gay people and even the people I thought were gay were not coming out.

Coming Out Experiences with Friends

Research Question 2 explored how gay individuals perceive the coming out experience to friends. Participants reported they were more comfortable with coming out to friends than family members, but the apprehension and the fear of the unknown were still there. Participants were able to navigate their gay identities with friends; thus, their personal and relational layers of identities seemed to co-exist. In Hecht's communication theory of identity (1993), the personal

layer of identity is our sense of self and how others see us or how we want them to see us, while the relational layer of identity is defined by the relationships we have with others.

Across the generations, participants said there was no particular order to whom they came out to; it was more of who they felt more comfortable with knowing their "secret." Deacon Mark (62, Baby Boomer) came out at age 39 years old to his best friend, who was totally accepting. However, his best friend's wife was concerned since he and her husband were best friends. He said all the worrying and anxiety he built up about coming out was for nothing. He lost no friends coming out to them. Mitch (64, Baby Boomer) who came out at 21 years old said his old first-year college roommate was the first person he told. His roommate was gay, but he was still nervous to tell him, but not afraid to tell him. Mitch said in school, he often wondered why he wasn't a jock, but some of the male athletes were in the choir so he was friends with them. He said he never felt different than the other guys because of that.

Mason (28, Gen Z), who came out when he was 15 years old, first told his friend Emily. He said that it was September 2014, and they were at a little diner eating burgers. He told her he had something to tell her. It took him ten to fifteen minutes to get the courage to tell her he is gay. Her response was she already knew. He was okay with the answer at first then he really hated it because "there is something that you tried really your best to hide and keep it under wraps, then you realize you are not doing a good job of that." He was then more concerned with what others would think about the people in his life associating with him. Mason's story perhaps is indicative of the pressure gay individuals may put upon themselves for not being successful at enacting a straight identity. This may add another layer of stress when considering how other individuals would view his friendship with a straight friend.

Blake's (27, Millennial) story shows how the confusion around one's personal identity plays a role in the coming-out process: "I first told my best friend. When I told him, I wasn't apprehensive, but still, I was confused. I felt that I could tell them and felt I could be completely honest with them. I wasn't scared." In addition, heteronormativity also plays a role in coming out to friends as illustrated by Tony (25, Gen Z) who came out at age 20 years old and shared at first, he was afraid to tell anyone, even friends:

> We live in a world where everyone is presumed to be straight, so I chose who to tell. I told my friend first. Not every friend is understanding. Only close friends are. I was afraid to tell my parents. I don't think my parents can understand me being gay.

All the participants' experiences seem to suggest they were able to enact their personal gay identities in their relationships with friends. Communication Theory of Identity posits relational identities are equally negotiated and jointly developed in relationships through communication (Hecht et al., 2004). Being able to enact their personal gay identities seemed to be a crucial source of connection in their friendships (Harris, 2012).

Navigating Sexual Identities in Interactions

Research Question 3 asked how do gay individuals navigate their sexual identities in interactions with (a) family members, (b) friends, and (c) co-workers? Participants, in their earlier years, did not attempt to come out as being gay to their family or friends. Heteronormativity, or the preconceived idea that everyone is heterosexual, seemed prevalent because most participants tried to blend in or maintain a low profile. Expressing and negotiating one's sexual identity or the enactment of one's gay identity depended greatly on the type of environment they were brought up in and the friends they had. Blake (27, Millennial) who came out to a friend when he was 13 years old, and later came out to his parents when he was 16 years

old, mentioned, "I didn't have peace at home. I could not be myself." He said when he finally did come out his mom started questioning his every move. DG (27, Millennial) came out at age 23 said that when he would get drunk, he came out to his friends, and if they didn't accept his sexuality, he moved on. He said you can tell by their faces the following day if they accept you or not. Tony (25, Gen Z) said, "It is very difficult to have to hide but sometimes to come out to others, it leads to self-isolation." Mark L. (48, Gen X) similarly shared his experience and, in the process, illustrated the intersection of enacted and communal layers of one's identity:

> Growing up it was not something I ever shared. It was not something I talked about or felt comfortable with, and it was not something anyone assumed about me. I didn't have the mannerisms or outward indications that people would think I was gay, and I was cognizant of making sure that was the case.

Because the Baby Boomer generation had more longevity in their work history, their comments, to this researcher, seemed to be more relevant in the discussions on coming out in the workplace. Participants indicated they were low-key with their sexuality, hidden, or were fully out in some instances. The communal layer often overshadowed the enactment of one's gay identity. Explicit and implicit rules operating at the workplace affected the participants' enactment of their personal identities. For example, Glynn (67, Baby Boomer), who was a teacher, said when he signed his first contract, there was a moral kind of clause in it. You could be dismissed, so he says he interpreted it as keeping his sexuality and his relationship hidden from his co-workers. It was going to work, making money, and going home. In addition, some participants did not develop close relationships at work so they could conceal their gay identity. Wayne L (68, Baby Boomer) who came out in college at 19 years said, "I would not get close to people I worked with. Even when I worked in Chicago and then got a job in the suburbs, I just

didn't become close with most of the people I worked with." However, he did become close with one person who had a gay friend, and he eventually came out to her. Here, we see how participants supported their communal identities, *describe* it, over their personal identities.

Some participants mentioned although they didn't go to lengths to hide their gay identity, their co-workers may have known about them being gay. Tom (69, Baby Boomer) who came out when he was 40 years old revealed he never told his employer but was sure everyone knew. He had been married, divorced, had kids, and had a male partner. He didn't try to hide the fact. He would tell guys in the courtroom they were very attractive. Finally, one participant, Wendell (70, Baby Boomer), who came out when he was in college around 19 years old, was an exception to the other Baby Boomers interviewed for this study; he said he has always been open about his sexuality to his co-workers and managers. He said he felt zero discomfort in them knowing; however, in one job, he said it was like "an open secret." You never said it, but there were not too many who had not figured it out. Except for one or two participants, most participants supported their professional communal identities by either hiding their personal identities or not enacting their personal identities. In the workplace environment and in the interactions with others the participants relational, group and communal layers of identity intersected and created gaps they each had to deal with. They hid their personal identities to fit in to the communal group. They enacted an identity they wanted others to see.

Experiencing Cognitive Dissonance and Internalized Homophobia

Research questions 4 and 5 examined cognitive dissonance and internalized homophobia. Specifically, the questions were:

RQ4: Do gay individuals who have not come out experience internalized homophobia?

RQ5a: Do gay individuals who have not come out experience cognitive dissonance?

RQ5b: How, if at all, do gay individuals manage their cognitive dissonance?

I weave in responses to the above research questions because they are all connected. Participants shared that by hiding their gay identity, they experienced mental and physical effects of having to conceal their true "gay" identity. The participants' answers, no matter the age range or their generation, suggested they all experienced some type of mental and physical effects from hiding and pretending to be someone they were not. In other words, cognitive dissonance, which in this case, occurs due to incompatible beliefs or behavior, may lead to poor self-concept. This is because the individual belief of being gay or having a gay personal identity is mismatched when they enact a straight identity (Berger, 1982). Gay individuals were not able to resolve this dissonance; they often experienced several mental and behavioral maladaptive behaviors such as suicide ideation, and drug addiction. A few participants even got married to a straight person to try to manage the cognitive dissonance and internalized homophobia. Blake (27, Millennial) explained how repeated hiding of one's gay identity along with self-hate exacerbated internalized homophobia, and the resulting dissonance may have led to suicide ideation:

> Regardless of where I was or who I was with, I remained hidden. It was an incredibly dark time in my life. I was in a deep depression; I had a lot of suicidal ideations. I had plans, I knew exactly how I would execute them. I constantly hated myself. I felt like a constant burden. Overall, it has truly affected me and my mental health in a negative way. It all gets internalized and negatively affects your mental health and physical health. Overeating, emotional stress, chronic back pain. In high school and early college, I still had all of the internalized hate, homophobia, all of those things. I realized I don't like this. Once moving past the trauma, things became clearer.

Participants noted the mental toll of being in the closet. DG (27, Millennial) said he kept battling being gay for a long time. He was in denial. The pressure of his friends questioning why he was never with a girl started to pull at him. He saw himself as not normal. He said, "Hiding kills you every day." Another participant, Mason (28, Millennial), spent time in treatment for mental illness. He talked about conflicts between his identities as resulting in dissonance:

> Hiding my sexuality was not a good thing, especially after experiencing what I wanted. People suffered because of my insecurities. I have depression because of hiding and not being able to communicate my true feelings. I was in a mental hospital a couple of times. I tried to be open, but secretive at the same time and that just doesn't do it. You have to be all of yourself or none of yourself. There was a conflict between my real self and my fake self. Between my Christian identity and my sexual orientation that was the big thing. There was a lot of self-hate. A lot of crying and asking God why am I like this? Why do I have these feelings? So, in the end, it was either my mental health, my sexuality or my religion. I ended up choosing my mental health and my sexuality over religion.

In the previous excerpt, it seems the gap between the participant's personal layer (how one defines oneself) and communal layer (identity exists as a characteristic of community or groups- in this case religion) led to internalized homophobia. Some participants felt guilt, and it took time for them to realize that being gay is not a choice or a phase. During the time it took to reconcile their personal and communal identities, they experienced self-hate, as expressed by David (41, Gen Z):

> Until I came out, life was very torturous. I was questioning myself. Conscientiously very concealed, and I started going to church a lot and started trying to pray the gay away. All of these little games in my head with like, God, if I do this, you know, like make this go

> away. I was trying to not think about it and repress it and hoping it was a phase. I just got to make it over the hill, and everything will be better. I felt a fair amount of guilt being gay and some intrinsic homophobia. It's not something you would choose like you wouldn't choose to walk on broken glass. I finally realized or felt this is not going to change. It is not a phase, and fighting…it is going to be a lifetime of fighting it, repression, anger, or what if this is who I am? I didn't talk to anyone; I tried my best to hide. Physically, I had a lot of anxiety and depression. This led to drug addiction and other stuff, but I got better at dealing with it and accepting it and moved on from there. Now I'm just happy.

Finally, a participant, like others, got married to hide his gay identity. Deacon Mark (62, Baby Boomer) was married and had to hide his sexuality and authentic self. He could not communicate his sexual identity, and this affected his mental and physical health. His response also illustrates the cognitive dissonance as he attempted to reconcile his personal, relational, and communal layers of identity:

> Anxiety and depression, lots of depression and drinking a lot, there was a mental fight within his head. He went through his entire marriage feeling like I can't be gay, I am not gay, and I won't be gay. I would find and look at guys off on the side, but I couldn't do anything. I had to be straight. At some point like I have to get out of this. I wish the religion I was brought up in would have been more about the accepting and loving God instead of the punishing God. I finally came to terms with being gay and I felt good, like I could be myself. I'm never going through this crap again and I'm going to be honest and be myself.

There are other recounts like this in each of the 18 interviews. The mental and physical struggles of hiding and not being able to communicate a gay identity. The realization this is who I am, then having to come to terms with being gay, not hiding and loving yourself. Regardless of age or generation, the identity struggles were prevalent. They may have manifested differently, but the similarities and the sameness in not understanding what the feelings are, yet to make peace within oneself to be happy is still there.

Discussion

This research study explored the coming out experiences of gay individuals. Four generations (Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z) of participants shared their rationales for deciding when and how to reveal they are gay to family, friends, co-workers, and themselves. The main goal of the study was to understand how gay individuals navigate their identities and the consequences of hiding one's gay identity from oneself and others.

Study findings suggest all participants experienced fear and anxiety when deciding to come out to their friends and family. Most participants revealed they had first come out to their friends and subsequently to their families. Many of them had not come out to workplace colleagues. It seemed that most participants realized they were gay early in their lives yet hid their personal identities until they reached adulthood. They enacted a straight identity for periods of time, sometimes even getting married to an opposite-sex partner, given the presence of heteronormativity.

Hecht (2009) has said that identity is a social process and identity is constructed in and through communication. If there is a barrier to the communication process, such as fear, gay individuals altered their identities to fit into the social constructs of a situation. The negativity felt by them, the fearfulness of losing friends and family, and the heteronormative ideals played a role in enacting alternative identities. Participants' personal identity (self-image and self-concept, how people perceive us), enacted identity (how we act in situations, what we want people to see), and relational identity (relationships we have with our families, friends and others) seemed to intersect. This sentiment was expressed by Mitch S, (64, Boomer) who came out at 21 years old said he was called a sissy when he was a young kid. He was much more into theater, music and sang in the choir. He said he tried out for every sport he could think of but never made a single

team. He mentioned his brother was Mr. Jock. Mitch said, "I played baseball because my dad wanted me to." Jake (68, Boomer) was very shy as a young man and was afraid of any interactions. He felt like he was one sentence away from being shunned. He turned to sports for a "shelter." He felt comfortable in sports, and he did whatever events there were and kept to himself. He was pretty good, and it gave him acceptance. People perceived him as being straight because of being in sports. He stated, "I went into sports because there I had a purpose and an in group of friends, a common bond. Before sports, I was called faggot and other slurs. Sports stopped that because I was hanging with the sports guys. It was my "in" to being a normal person." He added that he internalized his homosexuality just to be accepted.

In addition to viewing participant identities as intersecting when they navigated their various identities, many participants revealed the relational and communal layers' influence on the acceptance of their personal gay identity. Many of the participants discussed how religion affected their decisions on coming out and coming to terms with being gay. As Kate (41, Millennial) stated, "I think that is why it took so long for me to accept it. Partially because of my religious upbringing. It was taught that being gay is an abomination and that is very hard to overcome." Mason (28, Millennial) stated, "I started to accept myself once I left the church." Many participants also said they had gotten married to a person of the opposite sex because that is what you are supposed to do. The majority of participants came out later in life, not in their teenage years.

Much like the study by de la Serna (2022) on international graduate students and their spouses, the relational and communal layers of personal and enacted layers do not differ significantly from the coming out experiences in this research. The de la Serna research found that the student participants had more resources than their partners when they re-defined their

identity. The spouses began to identify their personal identity layer as supportive, and that support meant the decision to sacrifice jobs, family, friends, or economic status. Their personal identity became linked to their occupation, but the link was not there for the spouses. Because of this, the spouses' enacted layer of identity was linked to the support of their partners. This led to a re-negotiation of roles in their relational identity.

Bergquist et al. (2019) found communication theory of identity useful as a framework for assessing self-concept during times of challenge among refugees. The gay individuals in this study, through the interviews, found it necessary to re-negotiate their personal identities to fit in and be accepted by family, friends, and others in the communal layer. Much like the spouses in the de la Serna study, the communal layer related to their enacted layer of identity, which affected their personal layer identities. It was more important to hide and be accepted than to face the fear of rejection in coming to terms with exposing their gay identity.

A gay individual who is having to hide their identity is going to communicate what they want you to see (a straight identity). Our self-identity is influenced largely by how others see us, and we form our self-identity in the process of interacting with other people (Hecht, 2009). Unfortunately, hiding one's personal identity and enacting a heterosexual identity makes evident identity gaps, which have severe mental and physical consequences. Hecht (1993) argues all layers are interconnected and not isolated. This interconnectedness can cause harmony and disharmony. As with gay individuals who cannot fully communicate their identities, the layers become misaligned, causing a disagreement and tension in the layers. When this contradiction in the layers develops an identity gap occurs. The ensuing cognitive dissonance and internalized homophobia led several participants to turn to drugs or alcohol as coping mechanisms. Mason (28, Millennial) stated, "By hiding my identity, it definitely affected me physically. I was

drinking a lot more. Six days a week, I go to the bar at seven and leave at four in the morning. Go to work and do it all over again." David (41, Millennial) mentioned, "So for me it [hiding gay identity] manifested with a lot of anxiety, a lot of depression, and that lead to drug experimentation and stuff, and drug addiction."

The participants in this study survived the dissonance and self-hate by accepting themselves as gay with the help of therapy, surrounding themselves with accepting friends, or facing it head-on in the acceptance of their self. David (41, Millennial) said it took a long time for him to figure out that you can be gay and not go to bars or do drugs. “You can just be you.” He and his partner are figuring everything out together. Kate (47, Gen X) felt being around people who love God and with the support of her partner has truly helped her fully accept herself. Mason said, “It was either my health, my sexuality or my religion and I chose my mental health and sexuality over religion.” Wayne (68, Boomer) said even though there are still some internal struggles to deal with, he is incredibly grateful for everyone that has helped him accept and be himself.

Similarly, Camp et al. (2020) found that, in general, self-acceptance of sexuality was negatively associated with stress-related symptoms of mental health difficulties and lower psychological well-being due to a lack of acceptance by friends and family and not disclosing a gay identity to others. As Beatty et al. (1999) found the phenomenon of social isolation among LGBT individuals resulting from societal rejection constitutes a notable risk factor that has the potential to contribute to the development of alcohol and substance abuse. The utilization of these substances may progress into a pattern of misuse when individuals who identify as gay depend on them as a means to sustain a state of denial regarding their sexual orientation, manage

the social rejection they encounter, adapt to the unique aspects of gay lifestyle and culture, and alleviate the emotional experiences of isolation, remorse, unease, and despondency.

The findings from this research have theoretical and practical implications. The current and ongoing negative rhetoric and legislation aimed at gay individuals may exacerbate the fear of coming out and communicating a gay identity. Until this ends and society sees and understands gayness is not a disease, is not a choice, and is not evil, gay individuals will continue to be afraid of revealing their true identity. Theoretically, when gay individuals assume a straight identity, it seems to be the beginning of the undoing of their psychological well-being. There is a fear of communicating their personal identity, resulting in fear of coming out of the closet, fear of opening up to family and friends, and fear they will be outcast and alone. Internalizing one's identity to "fit in" is dangerous, yet it continues to happen in our society. The development of identity in gay individuals suggests cognitive dissonance and internalized homophobia are most commonly experienced in the process of gay identity development. Essential to developing a healthy self-image and identity is triumphing over internalized homophobia (Cass, 1979). Supporting the tenets of self-discrepancy theory, when gay individuals are forced to align their self-states with heteronormative (ideal) states, they feel shame, rejection and fear which results in a negative self-concept.

Practically, this study provides an understanding of the struggles faced by gay individuals and reinforces previous research indicating the harmful effects of family rejection (Kim et al., 2020) and societal rejection (Beatty et al., 1999). Homophobic behavior makes the gay child and gay adults devalue their existence and lose their identity. As we have uncovered, gay individuals who fear communicating their true identity, and continue to hide behind a heterosexual façade can experience the inner conflict and turmoil of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Some

gay individuals become so good at lying to themselves and rationalizing the reasons to remain in the closet, they are more likely to encounter increased levels of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, internalized homophobia, and suicide or thoughts of suicide (AACAP, 2022; Hesse, 2022; Pereira & Rodrigues, 2015). It is extremely important for gay individuals to recognize and resolve the identity issues, conflicting attitudes and beliefs within themselves. They must accept their true self before the dangers of unresolved cognitive dissonance reach an extreme resolution .

This study could also aid in opening the lines of communication in families to better equip the family to understand acceptance and tolerance of their gay children, reject the societal norms of heterosexualism, and embrace the gay child's uniqueness. Because 15 of the 18 participants came out later in life, earlier acceptance could allow younger gay individuals to improve social interactions, achieve more self-acceptance of their gay identity, and allow them to grow into young adults without the burden of hiding behind a pretend identity of straightness.

There needs to be an improvement in society's acceptance of gay individuals. While gay individuals indicate society has become more accepting, only 19% say there is a lot of social acceptance. Many individuals say they have been victims of discrimination, slurs, jokes, or rejection by family (Drake, 2019). A major step in eliminating the stigma a gay person has in the coming out process, is to open the lines of communication, not shutting them down with legislation and laws that are being passed in many states against the gay community.

Therefore, allowing teachers to acknowledge and discuss identities and how they may differ in everyone is key because it may allow students to understand why they may feel different. Finally, it is also important to educate parents in recognizing their child may be different. The interviews indicate the harm that can occur when families do not accept their

children. Work needs to be done in the education of all families in acceptance and tolerance of a child who is different, and to educate them in how to openly talk with their child about their feelings. We must acknowledge and accept the children for who they are, not who you want them to be. Until then, the study findings suggest there will always be identity issues, acceptance of self-issues, hiding, internalized homophobia, cognitive dissonance, and the fear of coming out.

As Tom W. (69, Boomer) said in a follow-up email to this researcher, "Happiness is self-inflicted. No one can make anyone else happy. Of course, you can try to help, but at the end of the day it's the recipient who decides how he or she should respond." Not being able to communicate with others a true self and true identity out of fear or for other reasons and hiding behind a façade can cause internalized homophobia and cognitive dissonance. Until gay individuals can realize change, acceptance by society and truly accept themselves, happiness is an illusion.

Limitations

This study has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, this was a study of cis-gender gay men and women only. It did not include trans individuals, bisexual or non-binary individuals. Further research could include these groups. Second, despite repeated efforts to recruit more individuals for the study, they declined or were no-shows once interested participants understood the interview would take place in person or over video conferencing. Another approach could be with a questionnaire or written answers to the questions. A more anonymous approach could gain more participation. Third, for this study, men and women were classified as gay individuals. There was no distinction between lesbian and gay. Only one female accepted the interview. This study could be conducted again using lesbian for female participants. This could draw more gay females to participate in the study. Fourth, participants

were asked to recall the past events of coming out and recall bias could occur. However, the younger and some older participants who had more recently gone through the coming out experience, their stories were remarkably similar in content to those older participants who had disclosed their coming out process years prior to this research interview.

Appendix A

Interview Questions for Participants

Questions asked prior to the actual interview questions

1. What pseudonym would you like me to use in case we refer to your responses in the study report?
2. What city/town are you from? Would you consider this a rural area or urban area?

Demographics related questions

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender? How do you identify (to ensure participant meets study criteria)?
3. What is your ethnicity?

Interview Questions

Family

Q1. Tell me about your hometown where you grew up. Was it urban or rural?

Q2. Tell me about your sexual identity. How do you see yourself?

Q3. Explain when and how you first knew you were gay.

Q4. Who did you tell first? Were you afraid to tell them?

Q4b. Tell me about the first time you came out.

Q5. If you have come out to your family, Tell me that story. To whom have you come out?

Q6. Were there acceptance issues in coming out? Please elaborate.

Friends and other networks

Q7. Have you come out to your friends? Why? Why not?

Q8. What makes you decide who to come out to and who to hide your identity from?

Q9. To whom else have you come out? (co-workers, community members, etc.)

Q10. Was/is it difficult to express your sexual identity to family or friends?

Q11. Did/do you hide your sexual identity from family, friends, or co-workers? Why/Why not?

Q11a. How did you feel hiding your sexual identity?

The next set of questions will be asked to the respondents who hide or those who have hidden their sexual identity.

Q12. Questions to tap into internalization of feeling.

Q12a. How did /do you feel mentally? Do you think hiding your identity affects your mental health?

Q12b. How did/do you feel physically? Do you think hiding your identity affects your physical health, and if so, how?

Q13. Describe how you cope and what it feels like not to be supported by family and friends.

Q14. Tell me the story about how you came to terms with being gay. Or, if you have not come to terms, talk to me about living with internal struggles of being gay.

Q15. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience of being gay?

Appendix B.

Letter of introduction of research

My name is Michael Cheves, and I am asking you to participate in a UT Arlington Graduate research study titled "*Afraid to Come Out: A Qualitative Examination of Concealing and Negotiating Gay Sexual Identity*." This research study is about gay individuals' coming out process. You can choose to participate in this research study if you are at least 18 years old and older, male, or female, and gay.

If you decide to participate in this research study, the list of activities that I will ask you to complete for the research are: 1. Committing to an in person or teams interview answering questions, 2. Being recorded for transcribing the conversation. It should take about 30 minutes to an hour of your time. Although you probably won't experience any personal benefits from participating, the study activities are not expected to pose any additional risks beyond those that you would normally experience in your regular everyday life or during routine medical / psychological visits. However, some of the questions that I will ask may be about sensitive or uncomfortable topics.

You will be paid $10 (either cash or gift card) for completing this study. There are no alternative options to this research project. If you are interested in participating, please email james.cheves@mavs.uta.edu.

APPENDIX C.

Minimal Risk Form

My name is Michael Cheves, and I am asking you to participate in a UT Arlington Graduate research study titled, "*Afraid to Come Out: A Qualitative Examination of Concealing and Negotiating a Gay Sexual Identity*." This research study is about gay individuals coming out process and identity suppression. You can choose to participate in this research study if you are at least 18 years old and older, male and/or female and gay.

Reasons why you might want to participate in this study include sharing what it was like when you came out. What it was like when you realized you are gay, and the difficulties or ease in adapting to your identity, how you communicated your identity to others, and sharing your thoughts on being gay. You might not want to participate because of a potential risk of recalling a negative or stressful experience of coming out as gay, or if you are not comfortable sharing this information with me in a one-on-one conversation for 30 minutes to an hour. Your decision about whether to participate is entirely up to you. If you decide not to be in the study, there won't be any punishment or penalty; whatever your choice, there will be no impact on any benefits or services that you would normally receive. Even if you choose to begin the study, you can also change your mind and quit at any time without any consequences.

If you decide to participate in this research study, the list of activities that I will ask you to complete for the research is 1. Committing to an in person or teams interview answering questions, 2. Being recorded for transcribing the conversation. It should take about 30 minutes to an hour of your time. Although you probably won't experience any personal benefits from participating, the study activities are not expected to pose any additional risks beyond those that you would normally experience in your regular everyday life or during routine medical / psychological visits. However, some of the questions that I will ask may be about sensitive or uncomfortable topics.

You will be paid $10 for completing this study. There are no alternative options to this research project

The research team is committed to protecting your rights and privacy as a research subject. We may publish or present the results, but your name will not be used or shared. While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the research team will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records as described here and to the extent permitted by law. If you have questions about the study, you can contact me at jmcheves23@gmail.com, james.cheves@mavs.uta.edu, or 817.269.5914. For questions about your rights or to report complaints, contact the UTA Research Office at 817-272-3723 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

You are indicating your voluntary agreement to participate by signing on the line below and returning this form my email.

_____ _____ _____

Participants Signature Date Birth Year

_____

Printed Name Contact Number and email

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