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## Queering Performative Face Theory: Analyzing Coming Out Narratives


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**QUEERING PERFORMATIVE FACE THEORY:  
ANALYZING COMING OUT NARRATIVES**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of  
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfilment

Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts, Communication

By

Dominic Andrew Pecoraro

May 2019

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**QUEERING PERFORMATIVE FACE THEORY:  
ANALYZING COMING OUT NARRATIVES**

Communication

Missouri State University, May 2019

Master of Arts

Dominic Andrew Pecoraro

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis focuses on performativity of sexual minorities in interpersonal interactions. Specific attention is placed on concepts of privacy, performance, and face negotiation. This study not only focuses on how individuals who are open about their sexuality manage face, but also how individuals manage face while going through the process of coming out. Concepts of normative gender roles, heteronormativity, and homophobia are analyzed when considering privacy and face negotiation. Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory and Performative Face Theory are employed as theoretical foundations for this thesis work. I discuss how queer individuals may negotiate their face differently due to specific face-threatening acts, whether overt or covert, in interpersonal interactions. This study explains on how such interpersonal interactions affect communication and performativity of one's identity.

**KEYWORDS:** performative face theory, communication privacy management, critical interpersonal communication, queer autoethnography, sexual identity

# QUEERING PERFORMATIVE FACE THEORY

By

Dominic Andrew Pecoraro

A Master's Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate College  
Of Missouri State University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts, Communication

May 2019

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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## INTRODUCTION

I stand seemingly motionless as I let the hot water smack against my shoulders in the shower. I am in a trance. I was eighteen, and I had just gotten back to my parent's house after my first experience with another man. I regretted every moment of it. From that goofy smile on my face as I pulled up next to him in the parking lot, to me telling him to pull over his car so we could kiss for the first time. I scream with disgust as I snap out of my trance and scrub my body, face, and arms with soap as if I could rub off his gay touch. I smack my hand violently against the shower wall and slide to the bottom of the tub. What had I done? Why did I have to be gay?

I thought that something was inherently wrong with me. I excelled at my high school classes, and I seemed to have a great friend group. Why did this one thing about me have to be off? I felt that my parents would be accepting of my sexuality, but I still felt like I had to fight it and fend it off as if it was a challenge that I could win. Generally, society had socialized me to think that straight was normal and gay was abnormal. I wish that there was more representation of queer voices for me to relate my experience to others, but there weren't enough for me to find any solace in my identity.

When I started my own communication research, I thought that it would be too stereotypical or vain to study myself or phenomena that were closely related to my past and present struggles with identity formation. There is a decent amount of pushback against the notion of me-search as research, but others argue that it is a valid approach to research motivation (Nash & Bradley, 2012). I dabbled in both qualitative and quantitative research methods. During my undergraduate career, I studied self-discourse of college students in

differing residence hall styles. Additionally, my partner and I co-authored a study about self-disclosure despite the lack of nonverbal cues in computer-mediated communication.

During my first semester of graduate school at Missouri State University, we read a piece by Julia Moore (2017a) in a seminar course on communication theory and research. Concepts of interpersonal face had always fascinated me, and I saw parallels to the ways women in Moore's (2017a) study faced face-threatening actions to my own experiences as a sexual minority. These experiences include ones that socialized me to be afraid and in denial of my own sexuality and those that I now face as someone fully aware of and comfortable with my queerness.

Although there is a rich amount of literature that explores sexual identity and communication, I noted the lack of critical interpersonal communication research (Braithwaite, Schrodt, & Carr, 2015; Moore, 2017b) to critique such discourse; thus, there seemed to be a need for more interpersonal communication research that highlighted the interpersonal interactions and experiences of muted or traditionally marginalized groups. In this case, I saw the need for highlighting the experiences of sexual minorities. How does being queer alter, influence, and affect interpersonal communication exchanges and experiences? I decided then that I needed to interrogate this question to satisfy both my scholarly intellection and personal qualms while contributing research to a burgeoning subfield of the discipline.

According to a 2018 study released by the organization Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), support of equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) equal rights has held steady over the past year at 79% among Americans polled. Is this really enough? It seems not. LGBTQ folk reported discrimination based on their sexual or gender identity eleven percentage points higher than the previous year, equaling 55% of polled participants in the study (GLAAD, 2018). Non-LGBTQ Americans noted that they were very or

somewhat uncomfortable in the following situations: 27% when seeing an LGBTQ co-worker's wedding pictures, 31% when knowing a child would be placed in a class with an LGBTQ teacher, and 31% when seeing a same-sex couple holding hands (GLAAD, 2018). Certainly this mindset affects communication, but to what extent and to what extreme?

I set out to learn more about critical interpersonal communication and queer theory, and I ultimately decided that this topic was what I wanted to pursue for my thesis study. In my review of literature, I noted that Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management theory (CPM) in addition to Moore's (2017b) Performative Face Theory were the best theoretical foundations for understanding the phenomena that I wished to interrogate. I wanted to share the stories of other queer folk, so my thesis utilizes a multi-methodological approach that layers personal narratives with follow-up interviews to study experiences of "coming out." Because I was asking others to be vulnerable and share their personal narratives, I only found it fair that I be equally as vulnerable and reflexive as the researcher. Additionally, it was my struggles with identity formation that sparked my interest in this topic, so I wrote my own narratives to add an autoethnographic element to the thesis. My closeness to the topic of research was not a fault, but rather a strength if framed and executed appropriately (Brinkmann, 2018; Denzin, 2015). This thesis shares many moments of queer sorrow, frustration, and pain, but it also includes elements of queer triumph and pride. Just as importantly, I was able to understand more about facework, identity, and sexual minority status. Now, I hope that my thesis research can not only expand the literature of critical interpersonal communication and queer theory, but also provide a clear representation of queer voices for others to relate with and grow from.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Queer Applications of Facework

Brown and Levinson (1987) define face as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for [oneself]” (p. 61). Publicly, individuals of varying queer identities must negotiate how to share their identity whether it be overtly or implicitly, pertaining to the notion of Goffman’s expressive elements, which go beyond word and nonverbal cues (Williams, 1980). First and foremost, face is considered to be public (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Additionally, face is social, which means that it can be negotiated and judged by others in the public arena (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, because queerness alone has varying social consequences, many individuals likely think about their facework and image outside of social situations. Queer folk must cope with their expression of self being objectified, fetishized, or criminalized. Face is also something that we want and claim (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For people who are coming out or negotiating their queer identity, they must balance social acceptance with their own autonomy. The identity performance of face can contextualize why queer folk must balance positive face, which values social acceptance, with negative face, which values individual autonomy not being imposed upon, of pride in being a sexual minority (Goldsmith & Normand, 2015).

Concepts of face weave together uniquely with identity formation and maintenance. Goffman (1967) defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for [oneself] by the line others assume [one] has taken during a particular contact” (p. 5). Ting-Toomey (1988) discuss how individuals negotiate their face. Regarding face negotiation, certain cultural differences can lead to conflicts (Ting-Toomey, 1988). Similarly, I propose that many face conflicts can stem from a disconnect between queer culture and heteronormativity. Conflicts

may also be influenced by gender identity and gender norms. A disheartening connection between the intercultural basis of face negotiation theory and facework of queer individuals is the face-threatening act. As we know, intersectional identity is paramount to understand critical applications of interpersonal communication theory, and sexual minorities may not only face derogatory comments about their sexual identity but also their race, ethnicity, religion, or class (Archer, 2015).

Individuals seek confirmation or acknowledgement for the face that they present to others (Goffman, 1967; Moore 2018a). For some, sexuality feels central to their identity, so they may be extremely vulnerable when presenting their face to others for acceptance. Presentation of one's face is not frozen in one single moment, but rather diffused over many different interpersonal interactions over an undefined time frame (Goffman, 1967). The process of coming out is also not frozen in one single moment but negotiated over an undisclosed or unknown timeline. It is also important to note how face is threatened, negotiated, and retained.

Firstly, there are many ways that face can be threatened. Face-threatening tactics could be blatant, covert, intentional, or microaggressive. When face-threats are blatant and intentional, they may come as disparaging remarks. Such threats are clear attempts by the sender of the face-threatening message to deprecate the target (Archer, 2015; Croom, 2014). These tactics are attempts to undermine the legitimacy of a minority's face when taking advantage of their vulnerability while searching for belongingness (Archer, 2015). One of the central fears stemming from cultural dispositions is fear of isolation (Ho, Chen, & Sim, 2013). Such blatant face-threatening acts may influence the level of comfort for those who are trying to negotiate their queer identity not only for others but also for themselves. For example, a blatant and intentional face-threatening act would be utilized to other a queer individual. Other attacks on

face may be less noticeable by those who aren't affected by them; however, many smaller acts that threaten face will still chip away at the legitimacy of one's face. Microaggressions, although seen as less severe or perhaps harmless by members of the majority, still create a hostile environment for sexual minorities (Woodford, Howell, Kulick, & Silverschanz, 2013). Microaggressions include comments that subvert queer identity by imposing heteronormative rhetoric (Nadal et al., 2011; Nadal, Whitman, Davis, Erazo, & Davidoff, 2016)

Lim and Bowers (1991, p. 420) posited three distinctive types of face including "fellowship face," the want to be included, "competence face," the want of one's abilities be respected or revered, and "autonomy face," the want not to be imposed upon. Queer folk may engage in positive facework to fulfill the need of fellowship by adhering to the dominant discourse as much as possible. On the other hand, the same individuals must still appease their autonomy by engaging in negative facework to avoid impediments on their happiness due to sexual identity. Hastings & Castle Bell (2018, p. 98-103) proposed three additional elements of positive face including "character face," the want to be as having integrity, "social face," the want to appear well-manner and moral, and "status face," the want for your role within society to be valued and included. Sexual minorities must cope with face-threatening actions (FTAs) that can damage many aspects of face.

Secondly, there are many strategies and tactics individuals utilize when negotiating their face with others. Negotiations of face may take place over many different interpersonal interactions before a clear understanding is found (Moore, 2018a). Some facework strategies that may have relevance to this study include remain calm, private discussion, avoid, pretend, or express feelings (Cho & Sillars, 2015). These tactics were chosen because they were used in situations where personal or family secrets were revealed. Discussions about sexual identity and

gender expression have ties to privacy and may be viewed as highly personal information about identity.

Lastly, there is relevant past literature that pertains to the way that face is managed, maintained, and asserted. Sometimes, members of the queer community must assert their ownership of their autonomous face, which is exemplified in a narrative provided by Lannutti (2013):

My dad and I got in a huge fight one day and he said, “You are going around telling people my private business.” I said, “What f\*\*\*ing business?” He said, “that my son is gay” I screamed, “Dad, it’s my marriage, my life, not yours.” (p. 69)

Other face negation strategies create a discourse about one’s identity being more than just one’s sexual identity (Jones, 2018). Proportioning one’s sexuality into face is another topic to be examined in this study.

### **Facework, Performance, and Internalized Homophobia**

A theme that I have noticed in my review of past literature is that sometimes performances aren’t about asserting one’s status as a sexual minority, but instead an assertion of straightness. Coming out can be difficult for individuals because it may be the first time that one is actually saying out loud that they are a gay (Chirrey, 2011). Cultural rigidity and gender norms may cause issues for those who do not align with gender and heteronormative expectations. Simply put, being gay or lesbian may cause such individuals to feel embarrassed or outcasted because of their identity:

Because of essentialist beliefs about gender, sex, and identity, often non-normative gender performance can be constructed as a choice to violate rules and norms. As a result, those performances of gender identity that may embarrass another because they

are nonconforming may be strongly attributed to the responsibility of the transgender [and/or LG] performer. (Wight, 2011, p. 84)

Many will likely consider ways not to avoid this embarrassment and feeling of otherness. Jones (2018) provides us with some narratives that show how individuals try to separate face from sexual identity. A participant in their study explains how he does not like to say that he is proud to be gay because he does not buy into the campiness and effeminacy of the stereotypical gay individual. Rather, he sees the ideal queer citizen to be someone who aligns with normative gender expectations with a different sexual preference instead of making a large statement of performance out of a sexual minority status.

The concept of gay pride is most commonly associated with not being ashamed of a queer identity. However, some associate a prideful view about sexuality as flaunting rather than being self-confident (Jones, 2018), which I argue connects to face and performativity. Fear of being viewed as too prideful in one's sexual identity or gender identity is a method to establish normativity of the heteronormative and cis-gender society that undermines the legitimacy of queer folks' face. Although one can say that they are gay, homophobia can still be internalized (Bianchi, Piccoli, Zotti, Fasoli, & Carnaghi, 2017). I believe that statements about not being an effeminate gay male or flamboyant about sexuality add legitimacy and foundation to my claim (Jones, 2018).

### **Performativity and Gender Expression**

Performativity of gender is a central focus of Butler's (1988) work along with many others. Specifically, this work discusses how specific acts are essential performances of peoples' gender expression (Butler, 1988). Extensive research has been done since the early works of



Butler that expands on the notion of gender as performance. Gender performativity has very important applications to my current study about sexual identity, gender identity, and gender expression. Certain performances are used strategically by individuals to negotiate their sexuality and gender identity with others.

Sometimes gender performativity is asserted as the individual expressing their personality rather than their sexuality (Jones, 2018; Chirrey, 2011). Other times, queer individuals will specifically engage in conscious performances to express their sexual identity, which they view a focal part of their identity (Bennett, 2003; Chevrette, 2013; Wight, 2011). Performances of gender expression are commonly coupled with sexual identity. Some individuals manage face when they perform, and some even privatize or compartmentalize where they authentically perform their identity. Above all, we must remember that gender expression and sexual identity and not necessarily synonymous or reliant upon each other.

### **Communication Privacy Management and Queer Identities**

Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory strives to “understand the tension between revealing and concealing private information” (Petronio, 2007, p. 218). Individuals set specific rules and partake in boundary work to keep highly personal information as confidential as possibly desired (Petronio, 2002; Lannutti, 2013). Queer identity, especially for those who are not “out,” may be considered highly personal information. When developing specific rules about privacy, individuals consider many different aspects regarding ownership and permeability. For example, queer educators must negotiate identity with their students, which causes tension when considering personal and professional boundaries of permeability. If they are “out” in the classroom, they permit co-ownership with their students about their sexual identity (McKenna-

Buchanan, Munz, & Rudnick, 2015). Shared experiences and identity create boundary linkages where individuals may be more likely to self-disclose (Aloia, 2018). For queer individuals, this may be sharing their identity with other members of the queer community, but not sharing their identity with family members.

Age and other demographic identifiers may also affect with whom sexual minorities share their sexual identity. Petronio (2002) asserts that culture, gender, motivation, context, and risk-benefit analysis are the most common criteria that people rely on when evaluating how to create privacy and boundary rules. Additionally, due to the availability and access of computer-mediated communication, sexual minorities may use online identities to embody their queerness (Taylor, Falconer, & Snowden, 2014).

Joint or co-ownership of private information applies to sexual minorities. Co-owners of private information must negotiate further disclosures of such information (Aloia, 2018). For queer individuals, these co-owners may be friends, sexual or romantic partners, or family members. Tension exists when parties disagree about disclosure of this information. For example, family members may want their queer relatives to be more private about their identity by keeping it a secret within the family (Breshears & Braithwaite, 2014; Breshears & DiVerniero, 2015; Lannutti, 2013). For individuals who are comfortable with their sexual identity, they may be hurt by others' wishes not to disclose such information (Lannutti, 2013). Those who are uncomfortable with their sexual identity will try to avoid breaches of privacy that may out their sexual identity (Wight, 2011; Chirrey 2011).

Intersections of privacy and queer identity are applicable in many different situations. For example, privacy rules for sexual minorities may influence the way they interact in the workplace and what is expected of them (Bacon, 1998; Helens-Hart, 2017). In fact, past policies

such as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” provide us with an example of how forced privacy rules can affect queer people in the workplace (Bacon, 1998, p. 249). Above all, past literature makes it abundantly clear that members of the queer community want to have ownership of their sexuality and identity, which means that they want to be agents who decide with whom to disclose their identity and when they disclose it (Taylor, Falconer, & Snowden, 2014; Breshears & DiVerniero, 2015; Chirrey, 2011; Bacon, 1998; Helens-Hart, 2017; Lannutti, 2013).

### **Coming out, Queer Identity, and Rituals of Face Negotiation**

There is a performative aspect of one’s coming out. Those who are grappling with their queer identity may seek out prescribed ways to talk about their sexuality. In certain performances of change in identity, individuals may participate in ritualistic activities. For example, Moore (2018a) provides us with narratives about couples engaging in pregnancy reveal rituals to indicate a change in status from “never having children” to prospective parents. I posit that certain practices for coming out a strikingly similar ritualistic basis.

Tidbits of this theme are seen in past literature. Those who wish to reveal their minority sexual identity in the workplace may wear ritualistically specific tokens to hint at their identity (Helens-Hart, 2017). For example, one may ritualistically wear clothing that augments their gender expression to indicate their sexuality, or they may ritualistically drop hints about their same-sex partner in phatic conversations. Participants in these practices indicated that they did not want to make a big statement or announcement about their sexuality, and they did not want to come out in grandiose style in the workplace (Helens-Hart, 2017).

Conversely, some individuals want to ensure that their coming out announcement is as perfect and flawless as possible. Like rehearsing for a part in a theatrical performance, members

of the queer community may practice for when they will come out in their personal lives. I posit that each rehearsal of coming out is an imagined interaction. Imagined interactions (IIs) are defined as internal talk that aid in the processing of anticipated communication exchanges (Honeycutt, 2015). Before coming out, queer folk may engage in a higher frequency of imagined interactions. The emotional valence, or how enjoyable or uncomfortable an II may be (Honeycutt, 2015), may either deter or encourage someone from actually coming out. Available literature and references show how frequent IIs and rehearsals for coming out are, which I believe shows how important queer folk view instances of coming out or expressing their sexuality in relation to the basis of their identity (Cooper, 2010; Cummings, Sproull, & Kiesler, 2002; Gray, 2009; Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Hamer, 2003; Hillier, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2012; Miller, 2016; Wuest, 2014).

Queer individuals may also seek out advice about coming out. Such advice may be found in online environments, where privacy is ostensibly maximized (Taylor, Falconer, & Snowden, 2014). Queer individuals will then personalize these prescribed scripts of coming out and attempt a masterful creation of their own monologue (Chirrey, 2011). I conclude from past literature that coming out is viewed as a skill – something to be done correctly or incorrectly. I argue that this notion simply creates more performative pressure on queer folk. “Coming out” is not a single gestalt in one’s life, but rather a collection of continuing discursive and nonverbally acted performances that result in social and political consequences of status and face.

The cliché statement of “practice makes perfect” may have some relevance when discussing narratives of coming out. When individuals come out, they are more likely to be confident with their body image (Bianchi et al., 2017). Perhaps, the continued performance of coming out can aid in confirming one’s sexual identity to themselves and others. Advocating that

one's personality remains unchanged before and after coming out is also key to satisfaction with coming out. This concept aligns with what Chirrey (2011) indicates as continuity of the self. Continuity of oneself is likely more complicated than it first seems. Past literature solidifies this indication that coming out is more than just a single process event of saying "I'm gay" (Bacon, 1998).

Rather, the process of coming out occurs over a much larger time span. The act of coming out occurs in many different places with many different people (Bacon, 1998). It seems that the act of coming out is an entire performance of many different acts. These performances may not have a true or clear end, which Butler defines as "performance accomplishment" (1988). This could be what makes the continued performance of coming out and the facework that comes along with it so subversive. Queer individuals are commonly having to assert their sexual identity to avoid microaggressions or misidentification.

### **Queering Performative Face Theory**

Moore's (2017a) performative face theory highlights the overlaps between Goffman's (1967) definition of face and performativity regarding one's identity (Butler, 1990, 1993). Moore defines performative face theory as:

A critical interpersonal communication theory of identity, difference, and power. It retains scholars' attention toward the individual and relational functions of identity work (i.e., maintenance of identity and interactional harmony) while simultaneously asking and answering questions about how negotiations of face constitute and/or reconfigure relations of power (i.e., how rigid identity categories are created, sustained, disciplined, and sometimes reconfigured). "Power" in this theorization is the reiterative force of discourse to construct, maintain, and subvert norms of socially intelligible identity categories (Allen & Moore, 2016; Brickell, 2005; Butler, 1990, 1993; Foucault, 1980). Consequently, performative face theory is a framework that can be used to examine and critique how individual, relational, and/or familial identities are sedimented and/or troubled across interpersonal moments of identity work.

The focus of this current study, the “particular contact,” as defined by Goffman (1967, p. 5), is the communicative acts and performances associated with coming out. Queer individuals will manage face when others have prejudiced dispositions about their sexuality. Chirrey (2011) provides us with data that contextualizes this application of performative face theory in the excerpt, “How can I deal with people who *hassle* me because they *think* I am gay, lesbian, or bisexual?” (p. 293). The participant’s face negotiation regarding their status specifically deals with managing face-threatening actions by others who assume sexual identity based on gender performativity. Similarly, the individual’s concern with such hassling could be an indication of facework that is fueled by internal homophobia. For example, homophobia influences discourse of sexual minorities in both health communication and identity formation (Eguchi, 2006).

Members of the queer community may also negotiate face to avoid being othered or to clearly divide themselves from heteronormative culture. Some individuals may wish to attend gay pride events to express pride in their otherness while others will not attend such events to avoid being labeled (Jones, 2018).

### **Queer Intersections of Privacy, Performance, and Facework**

Past literature and research shows the intersections of privacy, performativity, and face negotiation in queer identity formation and movement. Individuals will be strategic with whom they share their sexual identity during the process of coming out (Breshears & Braithwaite, 2014; Breshears & DiVerniero, 2015; Chirrey, 2011; Hegna, 2007; Helens-Hart, 2017 Lannutti, 2013; Taylor, Falconer, & Snowden, 2014). In addition, sexual minorities may have to negotiate privacy and boundary rules regarding their sexual identity with partners or family members, which heightens emotional tension (Aloia, 2018; Breshears & Braithwaite, 2014; Breshears &

DiVerniero, 2015; Lannutti, 2013). Queer individuals are strategic with performative communicative acts regarding their sexual identity (Bennett, 2003; Chirrey, 2011; Jones, 2018). Lastly, sexual minorities participate in performative facework to assert their sexual identity to others when encountering face-threatening interpersonal communication events (Bennett, 2003; Chirrey, 2011; Jones, 2018; Lannutti, 2013; Wight, 2011).

Overall, face-saving acts or acts that negotiate face are performative in nature for sexual minorities because face-threats attack a central part of their identity. Based on Moore's 2018(a) study, I assert that an entire process of coming out is a repetitious performance of identity. During this performance, many instances of face negotiation will be performed and navigated by members of the queer community. Such performances are deeply rooted in identity; thus, many aspects of communication theory apply. Although the study is post-qualitative in nature, I still posit the following research questions:

RQ1: How, if at all, do queer folk manage privacy regarding their sexual identity in interpersonal interactions?

RQ2: How, if at all, does queer identity affect face negotiation in interpersonal interactions?

## **METHODS**

### **Overview**

My study employed a total of three qualitative and post-qualitative methods – autoethnography, narrative interviewing, semi-structured interviews. I engaged in autoethnographic reflection to unpack my own experiences and understanding with the performative and repetitious process of coming out. The latter two methods were coupled to strengthen discovery and affirmation of certain themes. The use of all three of these methods is a way for me to act as a critical and reflexive researcher (Denzin, 2015). After obtaining institutional IRB approval, I set out to recruit participants for the latter two methods (IRB-FY2019-207, 11/1/2018; Appendix A). All participants recruited for the study participated in narrative interviewing and follow-up semi-structured interviews.

This particular study aims to approach interpersonal communication events critically. In recent years, there has been a shift to analyze performativity and power structures regarding interpersonal and intercultural communicative intersections (Baxter & Asbury, 2015; Busch, 2015; Eguchi & Roberts, 2015; Manning & Denker, 2015; Moore, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b; Suter & Faulkner, 2016). To this end, I analyze the intersections of gender, sexuality, and performativity in interpersonal interactions. The themes that have emerged from the data showcase these intersections well.

### **Autoethnography**

I employed autoethnography to better understand my standpoint and experiences regarding the topic of this study. Writing my autoethnography was a vulnerable and cathartic



process, but it was used purposefully (Ellis, 2004). It helped me relate to participants in my study, better understand the studied phenomena, and grow as an individual and a scholar (Marvasti, 2005).

Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2016) tell us that “autoethnographies comment on/critique culture and cultural practices,” (p. 22) and that is one of the main reasons that I utilized this method in harmony with my others for this study. I aim not only to show the subversion and attack on queerness in interpersonal interactions, but also to critique this discourse and show example of queer perseverance, growth, and pride. Autoethnography is innately critical (Holman Jones, 2016). Autoethnography is also innately queer (Adams, 2011; Adams & Holman Jones, 2008; Adams & Bolen, 2017; Berry, 2015, 2016; Eguchi & Roberts, 2015; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005). Thus, autoethnography is utilized in this study to critique the cultural notion that coming out must be a performative and repetitious process due to normative societal rules about gender, gender expression, sexuality, and sexual identity.

## **Participants**

Eleven individuals ages 20-41 participated in the study. Eight identified as gay or lesbian, one identified as queer, and two identified as bisexual. Ten participants were white, and one was Hispanic. Seven identified as cis-gender males, and four identified as cis-gender females.

Participants resided in either Missouri or Illinois and were recruited via social media (Facebook), text message, or email. Snowball sampling was used to establish a pool of individuals that would be available to take part in the study (Keyton, 2014). Purposive sampling was then utilized to narrow down the pool to individuals that matched criteria appropriate for the study, which aids in finding reasonable themes among participants (Keyton, 2014). For this

study, individuals who identified as queer, pansexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian were the criteria and focus. All participants signed an informed consent form and were promised anonymity (Appendix B); thus, all names mentioned are pseudonyms either chosen by the participant or assigned by the researcher. Letting participants select their own pseudonyms was a way to make research participants feel more involved in the research process rather than simple test subjects, which relates to Kamberelis, Dimitriadis, and Welker's discussion of viewing research participants (2017).

### **Procedure**

Participants were prompted to write personal narratives about times they had disclosed their sexuality to others or times that others had asked about their sexuality (Appendix C). Submitted narratives totaled 20 double-spaced pages. Past literature explains how useful narratives can be in providing context and examples regarding individuals' experiences with certain phenomena and research topics (Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Moore, 2017a; Warriner, 2013), especially when it comes to queer identities (Bacon, 1998; Hegna, 2007; Lannutti, 2013).

After each participant submitted their narrative, I met with them to discuss the process of writing the narrative. I met with participants face-to-face or through mediated channels such as Facetime or Google Voice. Interviews lasted an average of 27 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded with the informed consent of participants and transcribed for a total of 79 single-spaced pages of data. Eight semi-structured interview questions were used to guide the follow up interviews. This method of interviewing was utilized as different participants submitted narratives of various lengths that covered differing experiences (Appendix D). The participants

discussed what emotions they felt while writing the narrative. I also asked follow-up questions to elaborate on the information shared.

By using this mix of methods, I was able to feel more confident in the many themes that emerged through such data triangulation. Additionally, narratives mostly covered stories of participants' past experiences, and follow-up interviews included information about the participants' pasts experiences and present stances. Consequently, some results mirrored aspects of a longitudinal study, which enhanced prevalence and strength of themes.

### **Data Analysis**

I used narrative analysis to analyze submitted narratives and thematic analysis to analyze the follow-up interviews as influenced and outlined by past literature from Chase (2017), Corbin & Strauss (2008), and Langellier & Peterson (2004, 2006). The narratives were combined into a single document. Theory was used to conceptualize and understand themes within the narratives. While interviewing, initial themes were charted; however, final themes were based on recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Keyton, 2014).

Not all themes were strong or prevalent enough to be included in the results section of this thesis study. Some themes were unrelated to the research questions and eliminated. My intention was not to eliminate participant voice but include themes with clear connections to theory. To further this claim, I included one less theoretically tied theme in the conclusion. Other themes were combined and separated to form more concise and focused themes. Themes from the two methods were then compared and contrasted while applying relevance to current and past literature.

## **AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: 12 QUEER INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS**

### **Prologue**

I have already died. Died a “death by a thousand cuts” (Nadal et al. 2011). I wasn’t what they wanted. I wasn’t what they expected. I wasn’t the norm. I wasn’t imperfect in the perfect ways prescribed, but I am not alone on this path. The repetitious journey paradoxically embodied and disembodied of “coming out” (Adams, 2011; Adams & Holman Jones, 2008; Berry, 2013, 2015, 2016; Gust, 2007; Manning, 2015; McDonald, 2013).

So, as they poke, probe, and prod this body slain by a thousand unseen cuts, somehow my cuts begin to heal. These scabs and sores are still felt, but I am alive once again to take the blunt of the cuts. In hope, that one day no one else will die a death by a thousand cuts.

### **One Check**

My partner and I consider ourselves to be major foodies. Veganism entered our relationship for nine months, we’ve tried nearly every local restaurant in Springfield, and it is assumed that we are eating out multiple times a week. Consequently, many similar experiences have occurred during our various dining experiences. These comments could be regarded as microaggressive, which may occur in daily interactions for queer folk (Nadal et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2016).

At Cheddar’s, Dylan and I have yet to complete our meal, and the server comes by while our mouths are full. She tosses each of our individual checks on the table and walks away before we can say a word. At Mudlounge, Dylan and I say we’d like to close our tab. The server looks puzzled and questions why we are not on two tabs. At Chipotle, the cashier looks at me and says

the total. I balk and say, “I think he has a chicken bowl with guac – we’re on the same check.” A smile radiates across her face. “Wow that’s sweet of you for paying for your friend,” she says as she pivots to face Dylan, and she continues with, “You’re gonna pay your buddy back by getting the next meal, right?” At Houlihan’s, we’ve been waiting for a couple of minutes since finishing our food before the server comes by again. “Two checks, right?” “No,” I reply, “One check.” She cracks a huge smile making the highlighter on her face shimmer. “Oh my god! I love this!” She remarks. “Let me get your one check.”

The cashier at Starbucks tells me my total without asking Dylan for order. The cashier at McDonald’s reports amount owed without asking for Dylan’s order. The countless number of Chinese restaurants in Springfield, Missouri all have cashiers that inform me of the total before even looking at Dylan for his order. The cashier at Panera tells me I can swipe whenever before taking Dylan’s order. The cashier at Chick-fil-A? Well, what did you expect?

### **Hometown Thanksgiving**

Last Thanksgiving, Dylan and I went home for Thanksgiving. The year before, we had travelled to St. Petersburg, Florida to visit Dylan’s favorite aunt, Amy. I clarify Florida, and not Russia because there would have to be a different queer theory piece about that. As a result, my mother claimed all of our time for this Thanksgiving. For the first couple of years that I lived in Springfield after moving away from Illinois for my undergraduate degree, my parents seemed to fight with me over the label of home.”

My parents were afraid for me to go away to college. I had recently come out, and they feared for my safety as a gay male. Similar to other parents who voice concern for their departing children (Turley, 2006). As such, our relationship and the way we communicated changed.

Parent/child communication behaviors can be severely altered once the child departs for college (Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018; Smith, Nguyen, Lai, Leshed, & Baumer, 2012). I believe that my “coming out” followed by my insistent departure to college wounded our previously healthy relationship.

I always labelled both Springfield and my hometown of O’Fallon, IL (a suburb of St. Louis) as home, both simultaneously and separately. However, each home is totally different. Nostalgia envelops the concept of home that I have for O’Fallon. I remember the person I was in high school - extremely social and connected yet not living as my authentic self. I think of Springfield, a place where I feel that I am myself despite the conservative political climate, yet I haven’t found a lot of people outside of Dylan to share it with. In Springfield, being gay is something that doesn’t define me, it is just something that comprises my self-image. In O’Fallon, I was gay, am gay, but never lived as gay. The uncertainties of sexual identity ate away at my self-image at this home. Perhaps, I avoid going home despite my deep love for my family because it is painful to go to a place where I was afraid to be fully myself. The nostalgia stabs me each time I go on drives around my hometown to reminisce about my wonderful times in high school. My fears remind me of Glave’s (2003) explication of difficulty of confiding in straight friends. So, I hold on to my secret, having barely told anyone from high school that I have a partner despite the fact that I am open about it in my second home of Springfield.

So I began to tell my closest friends from high school that I am gay and that I have been dating Dylan since the second half of my senior year of high school. I begin to finally give in to the fact that I have been negotiating my queer/cultural identity this whole time (Berry, 2013; Jackson, 2002). I meet Lizzie for breakfast at Saint Louis Bread Company, and casually discuss my life as a gay male with a partner. She seems unphased - three years I’ve been ignoring her

because I was scared she'd end our friendship because I was gay. I had created my own privacy rules about my sexuality that were not overly rationale (Lannutti, 2013; Petronio, 2002). I was scared that I would lose all the good feelings surrounding our memories together. Nostalgia snickers because I didn't realize that I had already lost too much by cutting her out due to fear.

I message Carson on Facebook to tell him that Dylan and I will be traveling to Colorado over the summer to explore some potential schools for my Ph.D. program. He messages back and says he'd like to meet us for dinner or drinks. After summiting Pike's Peak via car of course, Dylan and I meet Carson for dinner at a brewery in downtown Colorado Springs. He is far more curious about our vegan diet than my sexuality. How could summiting a literal mountain be a harder climb for me than talking to my friends from high school about my sexual identity? Carson whispers to me while Dylan goes to the bathroom, "are you happy? Does he make you happy?" I reply that I am, and Carson replies, "well I'm really happy that you've found the right guy for you! I wish you guys would move here!" I feel like I barely know one of my best friends anymore because I was too busy worrying about if he'd accept me or not. Nostalgia grips at my neck.

I tell Annie via Snapchat about my boyfriend Dylan. She seemed delighted to hear about my relationship and asks me questions. She says she hopes that we can get together the next time both of us are home. I lash back at nostalgia by saying, "see you haven't taken everyone I knew from my old home from me." Dylan and I decided to drive up from Thanksgiving a day early to get dinner with some members of his family before my mother's full day of mediocre food. I'm sorry, Mom, you're British, what did you expect? I message Annie to let her know that we are in the area, and she mentions that she is going to be at a bar in O'Fallon that evening. O'Fallon isn't very small. My graduating class in high school exceeded 600 students, but there aren't many

places to drink. Annie says that she is at a sports bar downtown. I know from Snapchat stories that this sports bar is the place to be in O'Fallon during breaks from schools. It is the epicenter of all activity for college students who are home for the holidays. Little did I know that the Wednesday before Thanksgiving is referred to as "Black[out] Wednesday," so the very sober Dylan and I find ourselves traversing a barrage of drunk college students to find Annie in this bar. Annie greets us both with a hug. "I love you guys!" she exclaims. Hugging both of us simultaneously, "I love this!" She turns to Dylan stating, "I always knew!" Gesturing to the whole bar, she proclaims, "we all always knew!"

She always knew, as it is a thing to know. Something to be guessed and speculating with over. A scientific proof or perhaps the queerdratic equation. It feels paradoxical and makes me feel uncomfortable. Sure, she is accepting, but it feels as if a central piece of my identity that I have struggled with has been fetishized, almost like people placed bets on the authenticity of my sexuality. Nostalgia sneaks in and grabs me from behind whispering menacingly into my ear, "nothing would have been the same if you came out in high school, and you've already waited too long to change the present." My first home and all the people I shared it with are forever frozen in time as a relic. I am somewhere between there and now that will never let me fully connect with that home again, so I will have to keep searching for a new home to be myself.

### **Snapshots of Me at Pierre Marquette**

In December of 2017, I was officially inducted into the Walker family, which is Dylan's father's side, via family photos. The day after Christmas, we drove up to Pierre Marquette State Park, which is perched scenically above where the Mississippi, Illinois, and Missouri Rivers meet in Grafton, Illinois. I am familiar with the area. It is about an hour away from where I grew



up. My mom would plan a trip for my brother, dad, and I to come up to the area to take the ferry across the river, go for a walk in the park, go eagle watching, or go the nearby waterpark called Raging Rivers. I also vividly recall the time the we had a Boy Scout camping trip to this state park when I was in middle school. The same camping trip where one of my fellow scouts removed his underwear and shoved it in my face while another watched and laughed.

“Dominic, are you gay yet?”

When I first began truly interrogating my sexuality in high school, I always worried that this experience had indeed turned me gay. I struggled with rationalizing my supposedly homosexual actions with my previously straight sexual orientation like many sexual minorities do in adolescence (Cass, 1979). My blood boiled and raged like the three great rivers that meet near Pierre Marquette each time I thought of the experience. How could my scout friends be so cruel as to turn me gay?

But today, the water is calm and the scenery is picturesque. Snow is gently falling as Dylan drives our car towards the Park’s hospitality lodge. I am definitely a much different person arriving today than I was over 10 years ago. Honestly, the conditions were ideal for your stereotypical white family photoshoot. We are all in our color-coordinated outfits, and Aunt Amy is pleased because she had arranged this photoshoot as a gift for Dylan’s grandmother’s birthday. Each individual sector of the family gets pictures, and I feel an indescribable sense of clarity and belonging by being included in both the pictures with Dylan’s father, step-mother, brother, and sister, as well as the large family portrait.

There is some extra time left with the photographer, so Amy suggests that Dylan and I take some photos together. I feel very grateful that she’d allow time she paid for to be used for Dylan and me to take some photos. At this point, we had been together almost 4 years, but the

majority of our pictures together were just selfies. Maybe I'm nervous about taking pictures, but I must admit that I'm more nervous about asking strangers to take a picture of a gay couple in public.

The photographer positions Dylan and I together, and she seems shocked that we decided to touch each other. I wrap one of my arms around Dylan and the photographer remarks, "wow you must really like each other." Then, I decide to give Dylan a more romantic embrace. The photographer pauses, and she says "this is the closest that I've ever seen two brothers get in a picture, but perhaps we could make a play on that dynamic and try to have you guys separate a bit and act angry at each other like most brother do? You know, like cross your arms and look a bit more masculine and competitive?" Amy looks a bit uncomfortable and chimes in as if she didn't hear the photographer, "you two are such a cute couple!" The photographer looks blindsided. It is as if she would have been more expecting of Dylan and I to be incestuous brothers than a gay couple. Dylan and I now share a very awkward and timid embrace. Today, the photo now sits on Dylan's desk, the ice glimmering on the raging rivers in the background. Am I gay enough yet?

### **The Bachelorette Bucket List**

Dylan and I went out for a drink at one of our favorite spots downtown. We are sitting at a high-top near the bar when we are approached by a girl wearing a makeshift sash labeled "Maid of Honor." The Maid of Honor squeal, "hi boys!" Dylan and I timidly reply, "Hi" back. She gets closer and questions, "do you see that hottie over there at that table?" She grandly gestures towards another sashed women, and she continues with, "that girl is going to be a Mrs. soon, so we are taking her out for a fun night."

As this happens, sashette #3 finishes the fish bowl of turquoise liquor, and the remaining members of the glitter group engage in a sequence of “woos” I thought was only possible in that one episode of *How I Met Your Mother* (Bays, Thomas, & Fryman, 2008). The Maid of Honor resumes talking to us, “so we’re kinda doing a bucket list and scavenger hunt for her bachelorette party, would you guys like to be a part of it?” Dylan and I look at each other. “Sure, maybe,” I say, “what’s next on the bucket list?” The Maid of Honors smiles, “Well, the next thing is to get a cute, single guy or guys to buy us a round of shots! Don’t you want to buy a drink for a girl that gorgeous?”

“Um,” Dylan says, “we aren’t really the right guys to be asked.” The Maid of Honor pleads with a wink, “Oh come one! I’d be super grateful.” I apologize and reply, “We’d rather not be a part of the scavenger hunt.” The Maid of Honor groans and storms off. I hear her as she goes back to her table “they said no - no wonder they’re single and drinking together!” Yet another of a thousand cuts for the gay couple in public (Lev, 2015; Nadal et al. 2011).

### **That’s So Gay**

We were eating in the cafeteria my freshman year of high school when one of my friends approaches. “They’re out of Bosco Sticks! That’s so gay!” she whines. I’m hanging out at a friend’s house my sophomore year of high school when one friend remarks to another, “you look hot bro” I laugh and state, “Whoa dude, that’s gay.” He laughs back, “ah! No homo though! While driving my car during my junior year of high school, I fume, “They didn’t use their turn signal” My friend in the passenger retorts, “They’re so gay!” My senior year, I caution one of my friends in the hallways by saying, “heads up, there’s a pop quiz next class.” She moans back, “damn, that’s so gay!”

It is the summer my high school graduation. I recently came out to my parents, and I'm sitting on the couch with my mom. She remarks, "oh look at your dad cutting the weeds in the backyard again," Without thinking, I exclaim, "Ha! That is so gay!" Immediately, the color drains from my face. My mom looks at me, tears welling in her eyes. She gets up and leaves the room without saying another word, and I sit stoically in silence. "That's so gay" is a commonly used to undermine gay identity and autonomy (Chonody, Rutledge, & Smith, 2012), and my habitual sayings to help me play straight did not cut me this time but my mother.

### **The Poncho**

The way we dress and adorn ourselves can signal to others our gender identity and sexual orientation (Dellinger, 2002; Helens-Hart, 2017), and I was always afraid to show my sexual identity on my sleeve. Nervousness flows through me as I scroll through the Black Friday sale for Banana Republic. I have never owned this type of poncho like this one online. Just the ponchos considered acceptable for men, bright yellow, or clear with a company logo on the back, but nothing like this. My eyes dart back and forth, weaving from the hotel computer to the lobby around me and back to the screen. I'm waiting for someone to catch me. My eyes are weaving like the gray and black fabric on that poncho I like online.

Swiftly I click to add it to my car, checkout, and purchase. Like that, it is done. The package arrives quicker than I expected. Now, I must wear the poncho I liked online. I present my new garb to Dylan, and he remarks "I wouldn't wear that but maybe you'd pull it off" So, I wear it, and I walk down the street as I weave in and out of passersbyers But, I wonder if they are looking at my poncho? Now, I just want to pull it off. What was I thinking? I can be gay, but not this gay.

Now, my identity is on the line, and nervousness flows through my body. It flows like the fabric of the poncho. The one I liked so much online. No! I've wanted a poncho, or a cape, or a long cardigan. I've wanted something that I can wrap around my body. Something I can wrap around my body's insecurities. Now, I can't really hide. I just always wanted something like that. I just always wanted something like that poncho. I just always wanted something like that poncho with the weaving gray and black fabric. I just always wanted something like that one I liked online.

### **The Jacket**

My parents told me that others would comment about how I was a different type of child. When adults would be driving, I would lean around the seat to observe if they were going over the speed limit. Rules and order were something I heralded as the ultimate truth as a child. However, I did not follow many normative rules for a male child in elementary school (Epstein, Kehily, Mac An Ghail, & Redman, 2001). I always found more comfort in spending time with female classmates, but, paradoxically, I was one of the first students my age to grow any sort of body hair.

One day, a male classmate, Tanner, approached me and asked me "why are you such a hairy boy but you talk like a girl and play with girls?" From then on, I felt that I needed to veil my symbol of masculinity to avoid dissonance. My voice and mannerisms were betraying the supposed sanctity of me prepubescent boy body. For the rest of the second grade, I hid a lightweight jacket in my backpack. Once my parents dropped me off, I would adorn myself with the jacket to avoid bringing attention to my hairy arms. Then, the boys made fun of the "girly" turquoise blue on my jacket, so I hid from boys at schools instead of hiding my body.

## **Public Dissatisfactions of Affection**

It's late, and we have been traveling for quite some time now. I want my rest my head. I want to rest it on your shoulder and touch you, touch you like the "cute" straight couple standing right in front of us. Would they coo at the sight? The sight of my head on your shoulder? Would they coo at us like they do, like they do for that cute straight couple? No, they'd see headlines that make us fear (Taylor, 2019).

It's been a fun night, and I want to feel closer to you as we walk back to the car. Will I ever feel our hands intertwine? Can we hold hands, or shall we fear? Shall we fear like all the others (Furlotte, Gladstone, Cosby, & Fitzgerald, 2016)? Yet, I want to feel them. I want to feel them weave together without the sweat from my nervousness. The nervousness present since our first date, when I held your hand in the park. It was that one park where the little girl yelled at us. She yelled, "ew! Ew, boys don't hold hands!" Her mom smiled at us, but she didn't smile at us the same way they do when they coo. The way that coo at those cute straight couples. No, they say. "ew." They say, "ew" instead of cooing.

## **A Queer Interception**

My dad and I always bonded over sports, and I genuinely felt like I enjoyed the events. Once I came out and stopped having to play straight, I realized that I enjoyed the opportunity to talk with my dad about something rather than the subject itself. Now, my dad still talks to me about sports like we used to, and I feel the tension of appeasing him to maintain some sort of connection yet also feeling that being able to relate with him could reclaim my masculinity.

My dad informs me that Missouri State's baseball team is seeded very well this season, Dominic. I have never been to a Missouri State baseball game, and I won't be going this season

either. My dad asks if I caught any of the World Cup games yesterday. I haven't watched a soccer match since we watched the 2014 World Cup together, Dad. My dad informs me that there is a big game coming up for the Cardinals. He wants to know if I'll be able to catch it before work. I haven't watched a Cardinals game since we went together to Busch Stadium. My dad informs me that the Bears got clobbered yesterday, and that it doesn't look this season is going to be any better. I haven't been to a football game since I was trying to impress some frat guy I was attracted to.

### **Dominique**

I found my mom in the basement; the humming of the washing machine signposted her hiding spot. I was roughly 10 years-old. "Mom," I stammered, "why did you name me Dominic?" You see, I hated my name in elementary and middle school. I was called Domino's Pizza, how original. My mom defended her and my dad's choice of name by stating, "It is unique and Italian," my mom proclaimed. "Well," I replied, "I don't like it, and my middle name is Andrew, which is my brother's first name, so I can't change it to that! Can I be Nick?" My mom told me that she thought that I would come to love my name, and she was mostly right.

I like the name Dominic because it disassociates me with common white boy names. Thus, I am able to escape the masculine expectations that come along with white boy names. John plays soccer. Michael is into violent video games. Chad is in a frat. Dominic provides me with reprieve from these expectations. It is oddly more digestible for Dominic to be queer than Chad.

Conversely, my name bolsters and fetishizing my identity as a gay male in some situations. Sadly, this motif is performed by queer allies and fellow queer folk along with other

individuals, which shows issues with intersectionality within our community (Alexander, 2010; Eguchi, 2011; Eguchi & Roberts, 2015). Mostly, I am afforded white privilege, but occasionally I am mistaken as an individual of Hispanic descent. In these cases, I may still be afforded privilege as people erotize and sexualize the capability of me adhering to a machismo stereotype (Ortiz, 1994). I'm asked if I am Latin or Mexican. Others sexualize my name when discussing how I am hairier than other gay men. Other times, my name is mispronounced as "Dom-uh-nique," which then results in more feminine assertions about my gender expression. I use my name as a retreat sometimes, but other times people use it to objectify my performance of my gender and sexual identity.

### **Second Class Mail**

As a new year began, Dylan and I decided to move to the outskirts of Springfield so our dogs could have a yard. We leased a house in a quaint older neighborhood, where most of the residents owned their homes. We didn't speak with our neighbors often as many of them were retired couples, and our schedules varied. I was careful about displaying affection when Dylan and I were outside, and it seemed to be working because our next door neighbor asked me if my brother and I could help her move an armchair.

Summertime approached quickly that year, so Dylan and I relished in the opportunity to take the dogs on some walks. One day shortly after we began this routine, I went across the street to see if the mail had arrived and was surprised to find a lone paperback book in the mailbox. I looked down and froze when reading realizing what the book was, essentially an ode against homosexuality. I couldn't stop looking at the box, stuck in trance as I ran my hands against seams across the front cover, indicating that the book was used like a prized possession



something that someone had very much intended to pass along to us. Dylan yelled over at me asked why I was just standing in the middle of the road, and I slowly shuffled back to the driveway. I was reminded once again that I was not a creator of my own identity and the connotations that come along with that, but rather a subject of discourse and I was simply a lessee (Jackson, 2002; Moore 2017b).

For a few days, we proudly displayed our new antiquated book on a magazine shelf on our living room end table. But then on day, it started really getting to me. It was no longer an outlandish story but a simple reality. One that I could and likely will face again in some form as a clearly gay man. I paused and glanced back at the cover. The authors eyes staring into my queered soul, jet black, yet gleefully mocking me. That night, I burned the book in the firepit, and we made s'mores.

### **My Forever in Progress Coming out Story**

Dylan and I met online when I was a senior in high school, and he was a sophomore in college. This was pre-Tinder, so the app that we met on was called "Hot or Not." Romantic, right? I happened to be in Springfield for a college visit when Dylan and I ended up on each other's radars. Dylan wanted to meet up that day while I was on campus, but I was too nervous to meet him. I had never personally met a guy I was interested in before, which caught Dylan off guard because he had been "out" for a while and was a treasurer of his university's allies club, which is similar to a gay-straight alliance.

We talked for about a month long distance and decided to meet up shortly after that. Dylan drove to O'Fallon from Springfield, and I met him in a McDonald's parking lot. I didn't want anyone to know that I was 40 minutes away from my suburb, so I told my parents I was

hanging out with three of my friends. Shortly into hanging out with them, I faked a stomach-ache to leave and drove to across the river to meet Dylan. Our first meeting went well. I felt rebellious and satisfied as we sat and talked on the steps of the church near his dad's house.

We continued to talk for another month long-distance until Dylan took a week of vacation to come visit me again. We spent a lot of time together, and the week was going well, but I kept having to evade my parents' suspicions about my whereabouts. I was in bed one night after getting back home, when my parents came busting through my door at 1am. My mom was crying and my dad looked really angry. Somehow, they had found out that I had been hanging out with Dylan. How? Facebook suggested him as a friend to one of my parents, and they found a photo trail and evidence of us together on his public profile.

They took away my phone, my car keys, and any sense that I was developing that it was okay to live as my authentic self. I was surprised by my parents' quick actions, but I thought that maybe they'd be accepting of my sexuality because they were liberal. My parents insisted that this had ruined their trust in me, so we needed to go to family therapy. At this point, I'd do anything to leave the house.

The therapist met with my parents first. I sat awkwardly on a chair in the hallway. Listening the murmurs of my parents speaking in between the creaks of the old house the office was located in. After some time passed, my parents switched spots with me, and I was instructed by the therapist to tell him everything because he was a neutral party. I wasn't buying it. Something did not seem right. He talked to me about how two men in a relationship will never find happiness and that being gay can cause your brain to go bad. He insisted that I needed to rethink my life decisions. I felt betrayed, why had my parents taken me here?

The therapist called my parents back into the room and lied about what we had been talking about. He then claimed that he had a relative who worked for the government that had looked Dylan up in his system. He insisted to my parents that he had already told me the charges against Dylan, and that I had tried to tell him that I didn't care. What charges? He was just telling me about gay brain rot. I now think about the others who have gone through rigorous conversion therapy, many with their parent knowledge (Bennett, 2003).

He informed me, supposedly a second time, and my parents that Dylan had a history of going after younger men, and that he had a pending charge for statutory rape. When I tried to interrupt, he cut me off, and told me parents it would be best to take me home to process this heavy information. I started to worry. Who was lying to me? Was Dylan actually a covert pedophile? My parents used this information along with other stats about the dangers of being gay in their plea for me not to go away for college and to live at home and go to community college. I was eighteen, and I made my own decision to leave for college.

It's been nearly five years since my parents took me to that therapist, and I just recently confronted them about the experience. My parents were shocked to hear what the therapist had said to me, but why were they surprised? Were the documents I garnished during my first semester in college showing Dylan's clean record not enough? I felt like I had failed my first performance of coming out, and that will always be on my record.

## **Epilogue**

As I still stand scarred by a thousand cuts, I recall the pain that I've felt. The things that have been said. Yes. Yes, I am gay, and I have always been. I was not what they wanted, but I'm here anyway.

So, I will stand. I'll parade with my scars. I'll hold his hand. I will because I want to as I walk the path. I will be memorializing those who died a death by a thousand cuts.

## RESULTS

Both narrative analysis of submitted typed narratives and thematic analysis of follow-up interviews aided in answering the research questions of the thesis study. Each method was analyzed separately. First, I discuss themes noted through the analysis of submitted narratives. Next, I explore themes found in the follow-up interviews. Lastly, I compare and contrast the themes found for these participants in this multi-method thesis study.

### **Narrative Analysis**

I utilized this unique method of gathering participant narratives so the individuals would be able to carefully consider their experiences with coming out or expressing their sexual identity. Similar to how autoethnography allows us to be reflexive when considering and coping with past experiences, I wanted my participants to work through their coming out experiences on their own terms before sharing them with me. I posit that this process paradoxically mirrors the way that we plan coming out utterances as queer folk. After reading through and analyzing the participants' narratives, I arrived on six prevalent themes, which are each detailed below.

**Queer Privacy Rules.** Participants felt that they were constantly negotiating privacy rules surrounding their identity as a sexual minority before coming out, while coming out, and after coming out to others. Sometimes privacy rules were initiated by the participants and other times, they were initiated or negotiated with family members or peers. Sexual identity can be considered to be highly personal information to some, especially those who are “in the closet” while others who are “out of the closet” may have less privacy rules regarding their sexual identity (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). Regardless, sexuality seems like a divisive topic when it comes to privacy and disclosure.

Stephen, a 20-year-old gay male, discussed how he did not want to share his sexual identity with others by saying, “So it was a very personal thing that I didn’t share with my family because I was afraid I knew how they would respond, and I didn’t share it with my peers because I had no reason to.” Ross, a 23-year-old queer male explained how he viewed privacy rules:

As a queer person, you choose to set your own boundaries. I can choose to come out to whomever I want, and I can choose to confront people regarding my sexuality and microaggressions whenever I want. That is one of the small privileges that being queer allows.

Ryan, a 24-year-old male, created a group on Facebook called “In the Light of Me” for peers with whom he had come out to:

I wrote a status update about it [the group] and let those in the group know I was gay – or let the people who already knew that I had created this group. With the settings, I was able to post about being gay and only those in the group could see it. This allowed me to let down my guard and share and post things about myself.

This example also notes how powerful computer-mediated communication can be when discussing intimate aspects of one’s identity, and how online means of communicating can alter the way that we share private information with others (Gray, 2009; Miller, 2016; Taylor, Falconer, & Snowden, 2014).

Sometimes, participants regretting disclosing their sexual identity with others. For example, Harris, a 25-year-old gay male, exemplifies this phenomenon:

My coming out experience was stripped from me. Trusting my brother with my secret [sexual identity] had been the worst idea I had ever had. I should have known it would turn against me in the long run. . . Never in my entire life did I think my brother would turn his back on me, especially in this manner.

In this example, Harris explains how he disclosed that he was gay to his brother. He lived in a family where being gay had “consequences,” and he was kicked out of his parents’ house at age 17 because of his sexual identity. Harris felt betrayed by the fact that his brother had neglected the privacy rules of his co-ownership of this information, which caused boundary turbulence (Aloia, 2018).

Participants also noted in their narratives how they still did not talk much with their family, especially their parents even after coming out to them or others:

Even now, I still haven’t had a real conversation with my parents about my sexual identity. - Monica, 22-year-old bisexual female

I realized as I got older that everything stayed at a certain level of superficiality with my family. We tried to avoid anything that made us uncomfortable, as a general rule, so when conversation would steer toward politics or anything opinionated, someone would change the subject...when I come home for the holidays or visits, I keep it all inside. I put up with the silence for the few days I’m home, I just go along to church and try not to make a big deal, because it isn’t a big deal. I wish my family would be more accepting...  
-Stephen

My parents had always been very good about keeping my sexual almost anonymous. They didn’t talk to their friends about it and rarely spoke about it in general. I came out to my friends when I was 20-years-old but never had a formal conversation with my parents. – Alicia, 41-year-old lesbian

These examples how privacy rules varied based on with whom private information is shared with. Additionally, it shows that queer folk are not always in control when it comes to disclosures about their sexuality identity. Even if they openly share their sexuality with others, queer folk’s families may still try to restrict the co-ownership of this information or deny the authenticity of such information, which brings us to the next theme of assumptions or denials of disclosures.

**Assumptions and Denials of Queer Disclosures.** When communicating with others about their sexual identity, participants experiences a variety of actions. Receivers questioned the authenticity of participants' sexuality identities while some tried to rationale such disclosures. Participants explained that these instances made them feel like others were always adding their input or opinions to what would normally be phatic communication for straight individuals.

Some comments went as far to undermine sexual identity such, which is exemplified the following excerpt from 23-year-old bisexual female Allie May's narrative:

When I announced my relationship with my then-boyfriend, many people reacted in a very hurtful way. The majority of [members in] my sorority believed that I had only pretended to be lesbian for the attention, and that I was now straight. Rumors spread, and I was constantly asked questions. My friends from high school though that I was never gay to begin with, only confused...

These statements were not only face threatening actions against Allie's "competence face," "fellowship face," and "autonomy face," but also made her feel like her disclosures about her sexual identity and new relationship were somehow not valid enough with whom she shared the information (Lim & Bowers, 1991, p. 420), which hinted at another theme discovered in the narratives.

Other times, participants experienced discomfoting statements of denial when coming out to family members. Danny, a 22-year-old gay male, shared his struggle with his mother about coming out in his narrative:

So I said, "Mom, I am gay." My mom is an agnostic, gently liberal women. I expected her to handle it relatively well. She did not. She scoffed "No you're not! No you can't be!" You've always complimented women." I tried explaining that while women are *pretty*, I never felt sexual attraction toward them. The cultural knowledge surrounding me at 16 was shallow, naïve, and unable to form a rational rebuttal against my mom's hurtful word. I couldn't explain...it [sexual identity] being innate or a moment where I scream "I'm born this way bitch!" in a righteous embrace with Lady Gaga herself.



For others, such as Monica, the authenticity of her sexual identity was questioned by attacking the motives of queer folk close to her. She explains this in her narrative by stating, “Both my mom and dad thought that I had chosen to not be straight, and that [my] decision had been influenced by the fact that both of my best friends are queer.” Denials of coming out utterances create a double bind for queer folk who are fighting to make sense of their transitioning sense of public identity.

As I mentioned in my story two regarding my friend Annie from high school, I faced an awkward rationalization of my coming out. I noted that some of participants had similar experiences to me:

“Oh Chandler. Trust me, we know. We kind of figured...think about it. How many of the guys in your class were obsessed with *The Wizard of Oz* and the Nancy Drew books growing up? She [Mom] asked with a chuckle. “I mean, come on. The signs were there; I just knew that you would tell me whenever you were ready so there was no point in forcing it out of you.” – Chandler, a 22-year-old gay male.

I text my step mom “surprise” [regarding coming out]. She tells me that she always knew and I soon got a text from my dad. My dad was the person who I was worried about the most. The message said “no surprise here my boy. I love you.” – Ryan

My coming out was anticlimactic in the sense that most people knew and made assumptions about my sexual orientation before I could confidently articulate it. – Danny

These examples show an awkward paradox. Of course, participants were overjoyed that their family members were accepting of their sexual identity, but at the same time, it seemed discomfoting that their sexual identity had already been assumed based on gender expression. As we know, the two are not synonymous (Keener, 2015).

**Blatant Face Threats.** Excerpts from participants’ narratives showed blatant face-threatening actions that damaged or jeopardized all elements in face discussed in Lim & Bowers’ (1991) piece defining fellowship face, competence face, and autonomy face. Additionally,

participants experienced FTAs that threatened the three additional faces purposed in Hastings & Castle Bell's (2018) work, which include social face, status face, and character face. Such examples show that queer folk often experience face threats about their identity and because of their identity. All of which attempt to alienate them or control their sense of authentic identity.

Such blatant and painful FTAs can occur so quickly in interpersonal interactions. Allie May discussed a threat to her character face in saying, "I was [called] as a liar, an attention-seeker, and a fake" about coming out as bisexual after only previously dating women and identifying as lesbian. Harris experienced an even more blatant attack to his status face when his brother called him "faggot" loudly near his parents when they were arguing over a pair of headphones.

Other times, blatant face threats regarding sexual orientation can happen repeatedly in one conversation or over time. Some narratives detailed experiences with members of the clergy or therapists that threatened and undermined their sense of identity. These FTAs came from individuals who have a particular ethos to them, so it is interesting to analyze how positions of power and used to subvert queer identities:

But later on, my mom asked me to go to the seminary and talk with a priest about my "homosexual tendencies." I told her no, that it sounded like conversion therapy and I wouldn't gain anything from it. She kept brining it up over and over...so I finally said ok, a conversation wouldn't hurt. It did Honestly, I couldn't believe it when it happened. The priest said, "gay people don't exist," "you're selfish for saying you're gay, and "gays are like terrorists. You're the type of person who does what happened in Orlando." – Stephen

I remember she [Mom] sent me to a therapist shortly after [my coming out] to explore my potential attraction to women. In hindsight, it was a casual conversion therapy. The counselor tried isolating parts of a women's bodies that I *could* be attracted to if I had the willpower. It was uncomfortable, unethical...What kind of counselor would do that? – Danny

As past research has shown, conversion therapy can have greatly negative affects on queer folk (Bennett, 2003). Indeed, the FTAs show in these narrative excerpts show potential damage to status face, character face, autonomy face, and competence face.

**Microaggressive Socialization and Microaggressive Face Threats.** Microaggressive comments may be intentional or unintentional, but they serve two damaging roles in the negotiation of queer identities. Firstly, microaggressive comments socialize queer youth to view straight as normal. Queer voices and queer representation are also silenced and hidden through the dominant discourse that promotes heterosexuality. Even after being open about their sexual identity, queer folk still face microaggressive comments that cause them discomfort regarding their status as a sexual minority.

Some comments socialized queer folk to be unaware of the authenticity of queer identities. Other comments may have even caused internalized homophobia. Many narratives shared helped illuminate this discursive issue. Ryan shared that, “Growing up...My mom and step-dad were very religious and frequently made comments about gay people – usually in a negative manner [by] making fun of them or point[ing] out their feminine qualities.” Adam, a 26-year-old gay male shared, “ I remember growing up and watching Ellen and her [Mom] saying ‘I love her show. I just wish she wasn’t a lesbian’” and “faggot was dropped all the time as a ‘joke’.” Hearing their parents and peers talk about queer people in a negative way not only hindered identity formation for these gay men in their youth, but it also made it more difficult for them to accept and share their identity with their parents in the future.

Queer folk face microaggressive comments regarding their sexual identity in daily interactions from both those close to them and random strangers (Nadal et al., 2011; Nadal et al.,

2016). Participants voiced their concerns and frustrations with microaggressive comments they faced when communicating with others:

I often had to explain that no, just because I'm dating a boy doesn't make me straight. Yes, I have always been gay, and I still am. Dating a man doesn't make me any less bisexual. I had to answer questions about "which gender I like more" and "if I'd have a threesome." I had to defend my bisexuality...even after I explained, those around me still did not understand. – Allie May

While my immediate family is on board with me being queer, I cannot state the same regarding my extended family. While many of them have reached out to me and offered a form of superficial, politically correct support, I can see right through it and recognize that they do not understand or even want to understand the challenges of being queer. For example, during Thanksgiving whenever I am around my extended family, I typically have to deal with some form of microaggressions at the time. This Thanksgiving, I dealt with my family inquiring about whether my sister was dating anybody and her relationships but not asking about mine. Now whenever I was in the closet, they asked every Thanksgiving if I had a girlfriend or not. After I came out, they simply stopped asking. Even the "supportive cousins who are supposed to be allies do not ask me the same simple questions they ask my sister regarding relationships. – Ross

These microaggressive comments exhibit how queer identities make individuals feel like outsiders due to expectations enforced by the dominant discourse. In these situations, queer individuals have to push back against normative expectations to assert their sense of autonomy.

**Preparation and Persistence.** The narratives all described coming out as a process that included preparation. Something also noted was that coming out occurs many different times in many different situations. Ultimately, coming out can lead to a sense of relief for some people who have been not been disclosing this part of their identity.

Coming out was seen as a repetitious process by participants. Participants also noted that coming out was a process that was not executed in a single instant. Danny

explicates this notion by stating, “my acknowledgment of being gay was not an ‘aha’ moment, but a gradual transition from knowing I did not feel any attraction toward women to acknowledging that I did find men attractive.” Ruth echoes Danny’s coming out process by explaining, “I don’t really have a big story of my own...I took a more subtle route and came out to people in my life bit by bit.” Monica and Ross discuss the strain yet persistent nature of having to come out multiple times to multiple people by sharing, “Coming out was difficult, and even though, I’m still not full out to my family, I’m happy to continue working at it a little bit at a time” and “ One thing that coming out has taught me is that it is a never-ending experience,” respectively.

Participants discussed in their narratives how they felt a need to prepare for coming out or sharing their sexual identity with peers and family members. Some individuals prepared specific coming out performances for specific recipients of the information. Ruth explained how she prepared to come out to her dad, one of the last people close to her she needed to tell about her sexual identity:

The one person I still needed to tell was my dad, but I kept pushing it off. I knew he would be okay with it...However, I was afraid he wouldn’t full believe me, so I decided to wait until I had a girlfriend so that I had some sort of “proof” that I really am gay...Right before we all went to bed, I asked him [Dad] if he’d come upstairs to my room to say goodnight. Once he was up there, I said, “Can I talk to you about something [my sexual identity].”

Ruth’s narrative shows how she was afraid to come out to her dad because of how she feared how he would react but rather that she wanted it to be a prepared and perfected utterance about her girlfriend and sexual identity. Ross expands upon this notion by stating, “I view coming out as something very special,” which indicates that there has to be some performative perfection to come along with coming out.

This notion of there being a correct, perfect, or right way of coming out was seen across many narratives. Alicia discussed how she used computer-mediated communication to officially come out to her parents:

I was too scared to call my dad, so I texted him. I wrote the text after a long run. In the text, I wanted to let my dad know I was engaged, but I also wanted him to know he didn't have to come nor walk me down the aisle. My heart was pounding as I hit send. I almost didn't want to see his response. I was afraid of the pain and rejection. I was afraid even after being out for so many years.

Alicia's nervousness about coming out dealt specifically with fear of rejection, so she detailed in her narrative how she could make the process value both her and her father's autonomy. Adam discussed similar fears about telling his family:

It was still in the back of my mind that I needed to tell the most important people in my life about my sexuality, my family. I can remember saying, "Mom, I am coming home because I have to tell you something." It was a 45 minute drive home, the whole way I just cried and tried to pull myself together and find my courage...I was saying over and over "I just don't want you to stop loving me." She got all serious and said, "I would never." I turned to her and said, "Mom, I am gay." The rest of the conversation was a blur...it was me rambling and defend myself and crying and her just listening. I don't really remember leaving or how I exited the house...Three weeks had gone by without any contact from my family. Me being the person I am, I did not want to give up on my relationship with my family and wanted the last word. I had been rehearsing what I was going to say to them for two to three days. I made the drive back out to the far: sad, angry, but also strong. I went inside and gave my family an ultimatum: Love and accept me for being gay or don't plan on seeing me again.

Other participants had created a formula for themselves for coming out to peers:

*Same Love* by Macklemore came out. I hadn't heard it, but my friend was obsessed with it and played it for me one day. Of course, it hit home harder than any song before. She [my friend] liked the song and mentioned that she didn't think anyone should have to hide who they are. She said that she had friends who were gay and that song made her think of them. After she played the song, she asked me what I thought, and I finally told my first friend I was gay. I proceeded to use the song to tell my other friends. They'd listen, then I'd ask them how they felt about it. If they said they liked it, I'd tell them.

Hah. I remember I was driving around with my [male] suite-mate, and I told him I found a new song. He said he liked it, and I said, “that’s cool, man – I’m gay, then turned the song back up. Shortly after, I had [used the song to] tell all of my close friends.

Coming out is a repetitious and persistent process for queer folk, but something that was also noted was changes in emotions before and after coming out.

Some participants felt a sense of relief of guilt after coming out to others. Stephen exemplifies this notion by saying, “So I came clean, told her everything I felt. And she cried and hugged me and said she would always love me.” Chandler explained coming out to his mother feeling like “An enormous weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I finally felt like I could breathe again, like I had just been given the green light for being myself.”

The narratives indicated that coming out included proper preparation that mirror the back region/stage defined by Goffman (1959). After careful consideration of how to come out and when to come out, individuals would then bring their coming out story to the front region/stage to share with their peers, family members, and various others. Overall, the process seemed to have three main features: preparation/practice, persistence, and relief/release.

**Downplaying.** When disclosing their sexual identity with others. It was noted that participants felt I need to downplay or reduce the intensity of valence regarding their coming out. Ruth explained that she “wasn’t really sure if he [Dad] knew, but I phrased it that way with the hope that it would ease any suspense and lessen any shock value.” Chandler also employed this strategy while coming out to his mom by saying, “I’m just gay. That’s all.” Allie May speaks about her sexuality nonchalantly to others by stating, “I explain that sexuality is a spectrum that it is fluid.” Ross explains how he simply just states if he is or is not dating someone, and he uses gender-specific pronouns when appropriate to do so. Ryan made the focus on “Same Love” by Macklemore rather than his queerness.

I believe downplaying coming out is a strategy for queer people to normalize their sexual identity. By speaking about it nonchalantly, they reclaim the power in the conversation by not allowing a strong react to be elicited by the recipient of the information. Downplaying coming out makes it more normal, natural, and acceptable. It is a way queer people are coping with having to come out when straight people don't have to come out to announce their sexual identity.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Semi-structured follow-up interviews were utilized to extrapolate initial themes noted in the submitted narratives. These interviews allowed me to make a more personal connection with participants, clarify comments made in the narratives, and expand the scope of the study. After analyzing the transcribed interviews, I arrived on five focal themes.

**Queer Privacy Rules.** Privacy rules about queer identity were co-constructed by participants and the co-owners of the information. Some participants noted how they were still timid about coming out based on past and present experiences:

Growing up in an environment where you didn't talk about it [sexual identity]. You didn't talk about it with your friends, and you didn't talk about it with your family. You talked about it with on one and you kept that inside. – Alicia

I'm in a selling context...there's a lot of conservative customers that come into my retail space, and I have to be very masked in front of them if I want to make money...I just keep the language very neutral. I don't really use masculine language referring to him as in a boyfriend, but them as in a person. Just to kind of not compromise on my identity but subvert what they think is acceptable. – Danny

But I'm not super, I guess, open about it where I work...I really discuss my sexual orientation with people who tend to be more receptive and more respectful and try to not ask questions like that [overly personal questions]. – Monica



Queer folk are guarded with their privacy rules because they are worried that misconceptions or bias may hinder their personal and professional development. This supports past literature that indicates that sexual minorities will be strategic about revealing their sexuality in the workplace (Helens-Hart, 2017); the results indicate that queer folk mirror this practice in other sectors of their lives. By being strategic about coming out, participants were able to avoid awkward or unwanted conversations that could include FTAs. However, some participants noted that privacy rules became laxer over time. Allie May said, “There’s no rules on who I don’t tell and who I tell [now].”

Participants also discussed having to negotiate co-ownership about their sexuality with whom they disclosed such information. Communication about sexual identity was discussed by numerous participants:

And she [Step-mother] was like, “He [Dad] had not gotten it into his head that you do not like girls, so I essentially told him to stop asking you when you’re going to bring a girl over because frankly it’s not going to happen.” She just felt really bad about that. She just wanted to make sure that I knew it wasn’t done in any malicious way or anything like that. She just wanted me to not feel as uncomfortable whenever I was over. – Chandler

Negotiation co-ownership of sexual identity may be difficult for queer folk and their peer, family, and others as it may cause boundary turbulence (Lannutti, 2013; Petronio, 2002). In this situation, despite intent, such a shared disclosure may have led to unintended tension through turbulence.

**Consumption and Assumptions.** Participants discussed instances where they felt that their sexuality was commodified, fetishized, or discounted by others. Ross, Ruth, and Ryan were frustrated that when they came out to their mothers a lot of emphasis was placed on them not

being able to procreate to provide their mothers with grandchildren. Queer folk also asserted that their sexuality should not be used without their permission as a talking point:

People who are not part of the LGBT community come to me with questions about the community. My stepdad asks me, “So what’s with the animal names within the gay community? Because there’s bears and otters?” And I was like, “Well do you really want to know?” My mom is just so blissfully ignorant about it, she was like, “Yeah. I want to know. Tell us everything.” And I was like, “No, we’re not having this conversation.” – Chandler

I am the fifth in my generation, so there’s this huge pressure for me to have children, and so it’s kind of awkward to have a conversation about family that is built into the idea that straight people have children. When in reality, I don’t really want children. That doesn’t really work for me, and it would be hard for me to have children. I feel in a lot of family circumstances, I just kind of subdue my identity...And [my aunt] was like, “Well, I’ve heard some rumors.” And it was really irritating in that moment because coming out should be on my terms. Assumptions are one thing, but you can’t just force someone to come out. – Danny

I’m not very flamboyant...That’s just not me. I don’t really like whenever co-workers or even friends, that [previously] treated me straight, or more masculine acting, kind of turn on the “hey girl” [gay slang]...because I feel unnatural when I do it. – Ross

Participants felt extremely comfortable when highly personal questions were asked of them. Other times they felt sexualized or fetishized, like many minorities do (Jackson, 2006). Ultimately, queer participants feel strain negotiating between non-acceptance and commodification of their identity in discourse.

Other times, queer folk were frustrated by assumptions undermined the authenticity of their coming out experiences:

And so on National Coming Out Day this past year, I posted...and so many different people that I’ve known my entire life, all of my aunts and uncles, they commented and they’re like “Yeah. This wasn’t a shock to us. We figured.” – Chandler

So typically, I never have to come out because it’s always assumed that I am [gay] anyways. I think that’s really visible in my voice and the way that I dress. I mean, I’m

described as flamboyant, and I'm sassy, and I'm dramatic. So, all of those things kind of feed into this cultural idea of being gay. Which I do resent in some ways. – Danny

Although these participants may feel relief that their queerness is accepted, they feel simultaneously frustrated that the stereotypical coming out experience has been stripped from them due to assumptions. Ultimately, queer folk feel a tension between feeling too stereotypically gay and shocking receivers of their queer disclosures, which is an intriguing phenomenon.

**Blatant Face Threats.** In follow-up interviews, participants shared many more examples of when their face and sexual identity was intentionally threatened. Some face threats came from those close to participants. For example, Stephen's mom said "I thought this was my last chance to save your soul" when brining him on religiously centered trip abroad. This FTA damaged Stephen's character face (Hastings & Castle Bell, 2018). There were many more examples of family members or peers the face of participants in this study:

And I think the problem is for me, I kind of fall into that stereotype category. My brother even said to me one time, he was like, "Are you chill with being the gay cliché?" And I was like, "I'm not trying to. I'm just doing what makes me happen." - Stephen

My mom brought up about how I choose to be gay, and I hate that word, choose. She talked to me about sin, and I felt like I kept having to rationalize my sexuality and defend myself to her. – Adam

Such FTAs are extremely hurtful when coming from individuals close to them. These examples indicated how undermining autonomy, character, and competence face can make queer folk uncomfortable about their sexual identity or decision to disclose their sexual identity (Hastings & Castle Bell, 2018; Lim & Bowers, 1991).

Other times, blatant face threats come from random senders. As Allie May mentioned her bisexuality to a colleague, someone in the bar turned around and said, “Fucking queers” at her, which threatened her status face (Hastings & Castle Bell, 2018). Participants noted the pain of having co-workers, customers, community members, and colleagues threaten their face and sense of identity:

I remember being in one of the parent-teacher conferences, which a teacher never looked at me, never even acknowledged that I was there, and I was sitting literally right next to me wife. She never even said, “Do you have any questions?” – Alicia

So, I mean I have a co-worker, and she’s extremely religious, and I remember the first time that I mentioned a boyfriend, and she just looked at me wide-eyed and then immediately laughed...so I knew that after that I really wouldn’t talk about anything like that with her. – Danny

And I was like, “Oh yeah. It’s a good thing I don’t have to worry about that [having kids], and the customer was like “Oh really? Why?” And I [because I couldn’t find a way not to tell him] was like, “Oh...I’m gay,” and he was like, “Oh really? That’s disgusting,” and just walked away. – Ross

These examples exhibit threats to autonomy and fellowship face; autonomy and fellowship face; and status, autonomy, and social face respectively (Hastings & Castle Bell, 2018; Lim & Bowers, 1991). Blatant face threats make queer individuals more cautious about their performing their sexuality in both public and personal settings.

**Microaggressive Socialization and Microaggressive Face Threats.** Participants expanded upon the concept that discourse muted the possibility of legitimizing queer identity.

Microaggressive comments further subverted a sense of identitqueerness. Participants noted such socialization during there childhood and adolescent years:

I went to a small, private Catholic school, so I grew not thinking that being gay was an option. I was essentially taught that it was wrong, so I never pictured myself actually growing into that and realizing it was okay. – Chandler

My dad said, “Oh good [when I lied about not being gay] because women are not supposed to be with other women, and you will just never be happy or just never find happiness with another women.” Comments like that really made it difficult for me to have an authentic relationship. – Alicia

Alicia’s comment attacks the character face of queer women, but other microaggressive comments directly damaged participants’ face.

Microaggressive comments served as FTAs for many participants. For example, someone saying, “Alicia is so pretty. She could find a guy” is a threat to her autonomy face. Ruth echoes this by commenting, “One of my biggest pet peeves in when someone asks me if I have a boyfriend.” Allie May has similar qualms with people using blanket statements such as, “You guys can bring your husbands or boyfriends.” Danny commented that he felt uncomfortable when a groomsman at his friend’s wedding did not speak to him for the entire event despite the fact that they were paired together. Ross explained how a friend asked him “are you going to die a virgin,” which implied that sex is only comprised of male to female vaginal penetration. Overall, such microaggressive comments can make it hard for queer folk to initially recognize the authenticity of their identity and comfortably express said identity once actualized.

**Subtly Coming Out.** Participants explained how they attempt to come out nonchalantly and casually to normalize the experience. I noted a theme among participants that their coming out stories became less grandiose over time. Stephen explains the change by stating, “At first, I did make a statement. But since then, I don’t come off the bat and tell them. I don’t know. It matters [less] to me.” Ross even described it as his “postmodern” way of coming out. He elaborates:

Even though I said that I don't believe we live in a society like a post-modern sexuality society or anything like that, I kind of try to be near that because that's the type of society I want to live in. So typically, I won't really tell anyone. [I'll] just talked about ex-boyfriends or [mention a guy] is attractive. That's my coming out now. So I kind of don't make a big deal out of it because it shouldn't be a big deal, in my opinion.

Ruth explains how she comes out now in this "postmodern" way that Ross described by saying, "If I want to tell a story with my girlfriend, I don't hesitate to say, 'girlfriend.'" Allie May notes how does a similar practice by purposefully brining up stories that involve past boyfriends and girlfriends to assert her bisexuality.

Overall, participants voiced a need for becoming more relaxed about coming out. It seems that the performative, persistent, and prescriptive nature of coming out described by Bacon (1998) may cause additional stress on queer folk. Despite this realization, many participants still participated in this process originally, but there was a shift over time to make coming out a more normalized and subtle process.

## DISCUSSION

### Comparing Themes

Narrative analysis of submitted narratives revealed six themes while thematic analysis revealed five themes. The first theme, privacy rules, for each method yielded similar results. The main difference was that participants were less strict regarding privacy rules as time progressed but had to negotiate with more co-owners of information. The second theme of narrative analysis of assumptions and denials was related to the theme of consumption and assumptions in thematic analysis. As queer folk became less concerned with denials of their sexual identity (likely because they came out to their closest family members and peers earlier), they were more concerned with the ungranted usage of their identity. The third theme of blatant face threats was fairly consistent across methods, which shows the unfortunate prevalence of discriminatory and intentional FTAs. The fourth theme of microaggressive socialization and microaggressive face threats was also consistent among methods. The sixth theme of narrative analysis, downplaying, was closely related to the fifth theme in thematic analysis of subtly coming out. When originally coming out, participants rationalized why their coming out was not a big deal, but as time progressed, participants eliminated this warrant in their discourse and began simply eluding to their sexual identity.

The only theme that was not consistent across methods was the theme of preparation and persistence from the narrative analysis. Although participants mentioned the prevalence of having to come out in their follow-up interviews, they were fairly numb to process because of its cyclical nature. Instead, participants were more focused on moving beyond their sexual identity as a focal point of their interpersonal interactions. Additionally, the narrative prompt specifically

asks for participants to share a story about coming out, and the semi-structured interview guide did not include a question that would elicit a similar response.

## **Research Questions**

Both research questions were answered after reviewing and analyzing the results of this thesis study. The research questions asked about privacy rules and face negotiation in connection with queer identity. The results of the study in combination with past literature showed a strong link between both of these items and sexual identity. All themes from narrative analysis and thematic analysis had some relevance to both research questions asked.

Privacy rules are heavily influenced by queer identity. There were multiple overlaps between Face Theory and Communication Privacy Management Theory in relation to this first research question. Before coming out, queer folk will employ extremely strict privacy rules to shield their queerness from public view and potentially FTAs of others. Once an individual has come out to another party, they then negotiate privacy rules regarding this highly personal information. Boundary turbulence is very common during this time (Aloia, 2018). Once queer identity becomes considered less intimate and private by the original owner of the information, they will become far more lenient with boundary and privacy rules surrounding their sexual orientation.

After researching this topic, I find that sexual identity and face negotiation are even more related than originally thought. Not only does the performative, personal, and persistent nature of coming out relate to Moore's (2017b) Performative Face Theory, but also seminal and contemporary elements of Face Theory (Hastings & Castle Bell, 2018; Lim & Bowers, 1991). Dominant discourse is integral to the subversion of authentic queer identities before and during



coming out. The results revealed both blatant and microaggressive face threats in discourse that undermine or threaten the authenticity and autonomy of queer identity.

### **Future Research**

This study was not without limitations. The participants for the study were mainly white and from the same area of the country. The study would have benefitted from a more diverse sample, especially when considering that the study is rooted in an issue of diversity. Future research should recruit queer voices of more varying and diverse backgrounds. Additionally, more participants would have been beneficial to the study.

In addition to demographic limitations, there was a sole researcher for the study, which inhibited the chance for researcher triangulation on themes, which is a beneficial element of rigor for qualitative research (Keyton, 2014). The sole researcher was also personally connected to the topic, which has both benefits and pitfalls. Other viewpoints could have been beneficial for analyzing the data and establishing any additional themes.

Further critical research is needed in the subfield of interpersonal communication (Moore, 2017a). I echo this call in hoping to see more critical research that acknowledges communicative experiences and the discursive effects of and for diverse populations. Additional research will enrich the literature to forward such conversations about privilege, power, difference, and discourse.

## CONCLUSION

The use of autoethnography, narrative analysis of coming out stories, and thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews helped illuminate issues faced by queer folk regarding their sexual identity in interpersonal interactions. The study served a critical purpose, but also expanded applications of preexisting theory and literature in the discipline.

As a participant researcher, I was closely connected to the topic. I resonated with my participants in many ways. I was fearful and very closed off about my sexuality. My privacy rules were extremely strict and untrusting regarding my sexuality. Now, I view coming out as never-ending but necessary in order to live my life with as little restriction as possible. As noted in my autoethnography, I experienced blatant and microaggressive attacks on my queerness, and I empathize with them.

In closing, I would like to share a final theme of pain, pride, and power voiced by my participants in this study. Because the results and implications of the study were co-constructed and not possible without the participants outside of the researcher, I feel that it is important for them to participate in the conclusion of this piece. Participants such as Chandler described the process of writing his narrative as “cathartic.” Other participants like Allie May and Danny discussed the emotionality of writing the narrative. Alicia explained writing the narrative made her feel more self-actualized about her past experiences with her sexual identity. Lastly, Ross explained feelings of “pride” and “serenity” when writing his narrative.

Coming out is not an easy task. It is an ongoing process that takes a mental and emotional toll on queer folk. All participants discussed a time that they felt rejection. Allie May explains:

I'm not thankful that this happened [having friends reject her because of her sexual identity. I'm proud of who I was then, and who I am today, but that pride doesn't erase the pain I suffered to get here.

Harris describes affirmation of certain personality traits by experiencing coming out by saying, "My story isn't much of a happy one, but every day I work really hard to change that by showing compassion for others and to show them that you are not alone." Alicia discusses the joys of patience and persistence:

I felt I had to tell him [Dad] I was going to be okay if he decided not to attend [my wedding], knowing fully I was not going to be if he didn't show up. His text was a shock to my system. He replied, "We love you, and we are with you." The day of the wedding came, and my dad showed up with his nicely pressed suit...and walk[ed] me down the aisle."

Adam shared his thoughts on what he's learned about the repetitious process of coming out:

There is no timeline on when you should come out or how, but remember this is your life, and you need to be you. Life is so much easier, a lot more fun, and it's yours. So why not be the true, unapologetic you? Family doesn't always have to be blood, and there is a great, big loving community waiting for them.

Although coming out resulted in pain, participants noted that it was necessary on the path to living their happiest life as their most authentic self. We must assist in making the results of this study an ancient relic by limiting the silencing of marginalized voices. I'd prefer the results of this be outdated and outlandish sooner than later.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A. Institutional Review Board Approval

Date: 6-5-2019

IRB #: IRB-FY2019-207

Title: Queering Performative Face Theory: Analyzing Coming Out Narratives

Creation Date: 9-25-2018

End Date: 11-1-2019

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Daniel Simmons

Review Board: MSU

Sponsor:

### Study History

|                 |         |             |           |          |                 |
|-----------------|---------|-------------|-----------|----------|-----------------|
| Submission Type | Initial | Review Type | Expedited | Decision | <b>Approved</b> |
|-----------------|---------|-------------|-----------|----------|-----------------|

### Key Study Contacts

|        |                  |      |                        |         |                                 |
|--------|------------------|------|------------------------|---------|---------------------------------|
| Member | Daniel Simmons   | Role | Principal Investigator | Contact | dsimmons@missouristate.edu      |
| Member | Dominic Pecoraro | Role | Primary Contact        | Contact | dominic7@live.missouristate.edu |
| Member | Dominic Pecoraro | Role | Investigator           | Contact | dominic7@live.missouristate.edu |



**Missouri State**  
U N I V E R S I T Y

## Appendix B. Informed Consent Form



**Missouri State**  
U N I V E R S I T Y

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**  
**Missouri State University**  
**College of Arts and Letters**  
**INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH**

Title of Study: Queering Performative Face Theory: Analyzing Coming Out Narratives

Researchers: *Jake Simmons & Dominic Pecoraro*

**What you should know about this research study:**

You are being asked to participate in a research study for a master's thesis research project at Missouri State University. You have every right to choose whether or not to volunteer as a participant in this study. At any time, you have the right to rescind your offer of participation without any penalty. The following contents of this consent form shall provide you with adequate information pertaining to this study and your potential participation. If you are unsure or have questions about the provided content, please do not hesitate to ask for assistance or clarification at any time.

**What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this study is to understand how individuals negotiate their identity when coming out or expressing their sexual identity.

**What will happen if you take part in this study?**

If you choose to consent to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer a writing prompt. You will be asked to write about a time that you revealed or had to defend your sexual identity. Pertinent information may include, but is not limited to, demographic information; information about your personal, family and romantic relationships; information about how you communicate about your sexual identity, and information about your personal behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and values pertaining to the research topic. Narratives may take 15 minutes to 3 hours for you to complete. After submitting your narrative, you will be asked to have a follow-up interview with one of the researchers. Interviews may take up to 2 hours to complete.

**Risk:**

Participants may experience some discomfort when recalling difficult communication events pertaining to their sexual identity or coming out. Otherwise, there are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in the study. Your name will be recorded for statistical and sorting purposes only. Any identifiable information will be stripped before publication of the results.

**Benefits:**

Your participation may not yield any direct benefits. Participation in this study provides a platform for participants to better understand and explain their own communication experiences.

**Confidentiality**

Your responses given during participation in this study may be publicized. However, the information pertaining to your identity will be kept confidential. All published information will not disclose any personal identifying information.

**What if you have questions about the study or your rights as a participant?**

Please do not hesitate to ask any of the researches listed above at any given time during your participation. If you feel like you have not been treated fairly by the researchers in accordance with this consent form, you may contact Dr. Jake Simmons, the adviser for this research study.

**Consent to Participate:**

I have read and understand all of the above information about this research study. I have been provided with a copy of this consent form for my reference. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I have a choice not to participate, or to stop participation at any given point during the research without penalty. By signing below, I give my consent to be a participant in this study.

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix C. Narrative Prompt**

Please share a narrative about how you “came out.” The timeline for the narrative can be as short or long. You may share one experience or a group of many different experiences about your coming out. There is no minimum or maximum word requirement. Be as honest and genuine when writing your response. Your personal information will be kept confidential by the researcher and will not appear in the published research. Thank you for your participation.

### **Appendix D. Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

1. What emotions did you feel when writing your story?
  - a. Why did you feel this way?
  - b. How do you feel after writing the narrative?
2. Do you share your sexual identity with other people?
  - a. If so, who do you share it with?
  - b. How do you decide whether to share your sexual identity with other people?
3. How open would you say you are about your sexual identity?
  - a. How do you stand-out because of your sexual identity?
  - b. How do others react to your expression of your sexual identity?
4. At what time do you feel you are your most authentic self?
  - a. Who are you around?
  - b. Where are you?
  - c. What do you respond to people who aren't accepting of your authentic self?
5. Tell me about a situation when you had to defend your sexual identity.
  - a. What did the other person say?

- b. How did you respond?
  - c. How did it make you feel?
  - d. Did it make you act differently or more carefully in the future? If so, how and why?
6. What are some of the biggest pet peeves you have about people being inconsiderate about your sexual identity (i.e. microaggressions)?
- a. Was this person a total a stranger, an acquaintance, or someone close to you?
  - b. How did you respond to the microaggression or annoying comment?
7. Tell me about a situation that made you uncomfortable because of your sexual identity.
- a. Did you feel physically, mentally/emotionally, or socially threatened in this situation?
  - b. How did you respond to this situation?
  - c. Did this situation change the way you acted in the future? If so, how and why?
8. Is there anything else that you'd like to share about the narrative you shared?