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MAKING IT MAKE SENSE: BLACK UNDERGRADUATES' NEGOTIATION OF
SPIRITUAL AND LGBTQ+ CHRISTIAN IDENTITIES WITHIN THE BLACK
CHURCH

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion
Of the Bachelor of Science in Psychology, College of Liberal Arts
Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College
The University of Mississippi

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May 2020

Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

For Black LGBTQ+ individuals, spirituality and sexuality can often conflict as the Black community tends to be more spiritual than other demographics and historically exhibited exclusivity towards the LGBTQ+ community. This research examines how Black LGBTQ+ youth at the University of Mississippi handle the intersectionality of race, spirituality, and sexuality and makes recommendations about ways to improve the lived experiences of Black LGBTQ+ Christians and to promote LGBTQ+ positive attitudes within the Black church. This research study was conducted using qualitative methods with purposeful sampling. The data yielded results that discovered Black youth identify with Christianity, engage in oppositional identity work and identity synthesis, and have a mix of teachings from the Black church. The conclusions from this research found that the Black LGBTQ+ youth form an LGBTQ+ Christian identity and find churches that affirm them and support them. Future recommendations regarding evaluation and education can be made within the Black church to further inclusivity of the LGBTQ+ community.

DEDICATION

First, this thesis is dedicated to Jesus Christ, whom this work has been centered around and with whom my faith in has become stronger. Secondly, this work is dedicated to my dear family – my parents, Willie T. Davis, Jr. and Carolyn Davis, who are both ministers and raised me with the central themes of love, care, and appreciation for all God’s people, and my sister Sydni Davis, who is the inspiration and my “why” for everything I do. Thirdly, this thesis is dedicated to the Black student leaders, faculty, and staff at the University of Mississippi. This work was born out of my time and nurture within this community, and how this community shaped me individually, professionally, and spiritually. Your lived experiences and encouragement have largely influenced this thesis. Lastly, to the faculty and staff within the Sally McDonnell Barksdale College, who made the University of Mississippi home for me, and pushed me to be a better student, scholar, and person.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The Black community at the University of Mississippi has a strong connection to the faith community and constantly pushes for campus-wide inclusion efforts. Constant conversations regarding inclusion on the basis of class, sexuality, and various beliefs systems further these inclusion efforts. As a student at the University of Mississippi, I have witnessed these conversations and noticed how they followed the current research regarding Black millennials, sexuality, and Christian identities. Growing up in a strict religious household established my moral compass and compelled me to compassion, acceptance, and inclusion. However, the religious teachings I received did not always present those values of compassion, acceptance, and inclusion. In fact, the religious teachings I received condemned gay members, particularly those who did not fit the stereotypical mold. I noticed my peers grappling with the same internal battles. How do we make sense of what we have been taught versus what we see in reality? Through continuous collaboration and shared experiences with my peers, similarities and differences within our experiences arose. This study will explore those experiences of my peers at the University of Mississippi regarding sexuality and spiritual identity.

In this chapter, the research topic will be explored: Intersectionality between Black youth's spiritual and sexual identities and the Black church's response to those findings. This chapter will give background to the research topic, examine why this study holds significance, and present the need for this study. This research study examines the intersectionality of Black youth's attitudes and lived experiences with LGBTQ+ identities

and spiritual identities and presents these findings as recommendations to the Black church for LGBTQ+ inclusivity. To clarify, lived experiences relate to the culmination of spiritual development, socialization within religious and familial settings, religious conversion and the like. This study will present how Black undergraduate students perceive and live with LGBTQ+ identities in tandem with Christian and/or spiritual identities by engaging in oppositional identity work and Gay Christian Identities. Additionally, this study will present recommendations to the Black church based on the lived experiences of the participants.

Background of the Study

This study was chosen based on my personal lived experience with spiritual identity and my observations of Black undergraduates interactions with spiritual and sexual identities. I noticed how spirituality held great significance with my peers. I also noticed how my peers engaged in a state of constant education regarding LGBTQ+ identities and how those lived experiences apply to spirituality. The discussions of spirituality and sexuality are constant, and call into question how inclusivity within the Black church can be reached. This study researches my personal observations and makes broader recommendations and applications based on the lived experiences of my peers at the University of Mississippi.

Need for the Study

This study is important as it addresses a gap in the literature pertaining to sexuality of Black youth and spiritual identity, how Black youth engage in oppositional identity work, and how oppositional identity work is used in mitigating spiritual and sexual iden-

tities. A gap prevails in the literature regarding the experiences of Black youth's attitudes and lived experiences with LGBTQ+ identities in general because most sexuality research excludes those who are Black (Walsh, 2016; Quinn, et al., 2016). Additionally, studies suggest how Black LGBTQ+ individuals mitigate their spiritual and sexual identities (McGuire, et al., 2017; Means, et al., 2018), but these studies do not provide a comprehensive view into the interaction between spiritual and sexual identity.

Purpose of the Study

The present study aims to examine the attitudes of college-aged African Americans about LGBTQ+ Christian identity and offers recommendations for developing a more inclusive Christian eschatology and lived approach to the LGBTQ+ community in the contemporary Black church.

Significance of the Study

This study is important to the broader research of African American sexuality and Christian identity. A few stakeholders should be interested in this research: Black churches and their communities, Black college-age youth and millennials – both LGBTQ and allies.

Black churches should hold interest in this study, as insight to members' lived experiences and inclusive practices has positive benefits for the impact of the communities that they serve. Most churches provide services to their members based on the members' needs. By acknowledging the need for LGBTQ+ inclusion in the Black church, the church can further support a minority demographic within its walls. Inclusive practices not only have the chance to grow membership by attracting more members, but they also

hold the opportunity to foster more cohesiveness within the walls of the church and its surrounding communities.

Black LGBTQ+ youth and millennials, and those who are heterosexual and/or allies, can benefit from this research. The lived experiences of peers within an alike demographic can provide insight how to be inclusive socially, organizationally, etc. Although this research examines Black youth's attitudes and lived experiences, Black millennials can benefit from this research because of the close social connection to Black youth. Black LGBTQ+ individuals can benefit from this study by finding similar stories to their own, and this study adds to the literature of Black LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are: How do Black undergraduate students spiritually and sexually identify at the University of Mississippi? How does the intersectionality of race, sexual, and spiritual identities in the lived experiences of Black undergraduates present itself? How do Black undergraduates interpret and manage the intersectionality of sexual and spiritual identities? How can the Black church accommodate and form inclusive practices based on the lived experiences of Black youth?

Definition of Terms

This section will define terms that readers may or may not be familiar with to further understand this study. All terms are defined in relation to this study.

African American and Black – For the purposes of this study, the terms African American and Black are the same and will be used interchangeably. African Americans

are individuals who are descendants of African slaves brought to North America (Lynch, 2019).

Black church – The Black church is the broad umbrella term of the connected organizations of churches and faith communities that predominantly serve and are composed of African Americans.

Heteronormativity – For the purposes of this study, heteronormativity is the “dominant position of heterosexuality in society” (Herz and Johannson, 2015). This definition entails and implies that heterosexuality is the norm, and inclusion of those who are LGBTQ+ is not often considered.

Intersectionality – Intersectionality is the overlapping and multidimensional way that an individual or group’s identities interact (Crenshaw, 1989). For the purpose of this study, intersectionality is the compoundment of race, spiritual identity, and sexual identity.

LGBTQ+ – For the purposes of this paper, to identify as LGBTQ means to either identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (Collier, Beusekom, Bos, Sandfort, 2013). The + of the acronym indicates the other sexualities that exist in the spectrum of human sexuality, such as pansexual or asexual.

Spiritual identity – A spiritual identity is how a person identifies spiritually. For the purpose of this study, this can mean identifying with a particular religion/religious institution or simply identifying as spiritual.

Sexual identity – For the purpose of this study, sexual identity means sexual orientation. The APA defines sexual orientation as a component of identity that includes a

person's sexual and emotional attraction to another person and the behavior and/or social affiliation that may result from this attraction (American Psychological Association, 2015).

Research Design

The research used qualitative interview methods. Qualitative interviews provide holistic approaches to the research topic, give participants freedom, and provide deeper insights to how participants are responding to the research (Alshenqeeti, 2014). The techniques of qualitative interviews are useful for getting participants to provide more data than quantitative methods would or other qualitative methods would.

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions. It was assumed that the participants understood the basic concepts of the research study. It was assumed that each participant had some experience with the Black church, and identifying with a particular spiritual identity. An assumption was that each participant comprehended the interview questions and gave a full, accurate account of their lived experiences regarding their sexual and spiritual identities, and perceptions of those identities and the Black church. An assumption was also made that the participants had some opinion, regarding negative or positive, of LGBTQ+ identities whether that came from social interaction or lived experiences. Regarding the specific strategies that the Black LGBTQ+ participants could engage in with the interactions of the researched identities, it was assumed that those specific participants engaged in some variation of those strategies.

Limitations. Given limited funding, this research design only used participants that were in close physical proximity to the researcher. The limitations of that include no random sampling and limited data for the research. Participants known to the researcher and a small sample size limit the data that could be provided to the research. It also can limit the application of generality as this study adds to the literature. This study cannot assume that all Black youth in the South have had the same experience regarding spiritual and sexual identity, as the South is not a monolith and contains many diverse experiences. This study also cannot assume that all Black churches struggle with inclusive practices.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

This current chapter provided background information and context to the current research topic and problem. The remainder of this thesis will guide the reader through current literature, methods, results, and discussions and findings.

Chapter 2 will address the historical background of the research topic, provide a literature review that expounds on the topic and concepts. This chapter will further explain why this study fits into current literature and provide a more comprehensive context for the need and significance for this study. Chapter 3 will examine the methodology of this study by further examining every component of this research design including participants, data, and the importance of the selected method for this research design. Chapter 4 will examine the participants and themes resulting from the data. Chapter 5 will comprehensively examine the results and the implications that the results present. Finally, this chapter will yield recommendations based on the data results. There will also be appendix and reference sections following the conclusion of the results.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter serves as the foundation on which the study is built and as a basis for discussing results and interpretations. It reviews what has already been written in the field on the topic of the research.

Historical Background

The Black church. The Black church historically sits as a prominent institution within the community, and it serves as a central hub for the community (Patillo-McCoy, 1998; Walsh, 2016, pp. 1239). Mary Patillo-McCoy described the function of the Black church in the late 1990s as an “anchoring institution.” The church functions as many different things, as it is one of the few institutions that the Black community has complete control over. In many communities, the Black church historically functioned as the center of socialization and support for the community. Although statistics and research show that African Americans are still more religious than any other demographic (PewResearch; Chatters, et. al, 2008) scholars question if the Black church holds as much significance as it did previously. Eddie Glaude, a popular scholar on race and religion, has emphatically pointed out that “the Black church is dead.” However, this suggestion is not one that belittles the significance of the Black church historically, but rather points out that the role of the Black church in its community is shifting to one that is not as centralized as before (HuffPost, 2010). Makota Kurosaki further expounds on Glaude’s comments as he analyzes how the Black church currently occupies a different space in the community post-Civil Rights era than it did before (Kurosaki, 2012). Despite systematic

racism, African Americans continuously break barriers and integrate society, particularly politics. Black people occupy other social realms and spaces, so the need for a central hub is not as great as it was before. However, the drift from the church should be examined in the context of different identities Black youth hold.

In order to understand Black millennial and youth spiritual and religious identities, their relationship to the Black church, where these identities are conceived, is important. Also to further understand the importance of their spiritual and religious identities, it is critical to understand the generational gap between older Black adults and Black youth. When examining prayer lives in older Christian adults, Neal Krause and Linda Chatters (2005) found that African American older adults (age 66 and older) prayed more for others and about their daily lives in general than older white adults. These findings coincide with the findings earlier presented that African Americans are more spiritual and present more subjective religiosity than white Americans. However, when examining the Black church in a contemporary and historical context, a divide exists between older generations, boomers and Generation X, and Black millennials and young adults. Ashley C. Thomas examined Black millennials' connection to the Black church. One of her findings presented that Black millennials' connection to the church is not solely based on race (2017, pp. 154), but rather on communal and relational aspects of their church experience. Black millennials look for genuine connection to their church leadership, church community, and support for their wellbeing and endeavors (Thomas, 2017). The Black church occupying historical prominence does not translate to contemporary prominence. Black millennials and youth have constant redefinition of space and what constitutes insti-

tutional importance in social and religious spaces. Black millennials can find church homes in interracial congregations, and race is not always a deciding factor for where they choose to worship (Thomas, 2017; Glaude, 2010). The Black church's loss of centrality could affect how Black youth view their own spiritual and religious identities, which in turn could be a cause as to why Black youth are not as religious as previous generations.

The Black church and sexuality. The Black church has historically had a complicated relationship with sexuality (Parks, 2014). The Black church has often condemned Black lesbians and gays for their sexuality with homophobic rhetoric in the form of anti-gay sermons, or the lack of inclusive practices regarding LGBTQ+ issues. The Black church has not historically offered inclusion for its LGBTQ+ members, as the congregation may ignore growing LGBTQ awareness. Additionally, the heterosexual congregants may present anti-gay attitudes and exclude LGBTQ+ members, which can compound and expound on the negative attitudes that LGBTQ+ individuals may feel within the church (Anderson, 2012; Quinn et al, 2016, pp.2).

Review of the Literature

This section examines the current literature regarding the topics presented in the research problem

Religiosity in Black Americans. Black Americans are more religious compared to other races and ethnicities. (Taylor, Bullard, and Jackson, Chatters, et al., 2008). They exhibit higher measures of *subjective religiosity* and *institutional religiosity*. Institutional religiosity is the measure of religiosity that relates to institutions such as frequency of

church attendance (Pew Research Center, 2018). Subjective religiosity is an intrinsic aspect of religiosity (Hudson, Purnell, Duncan, Baker, 2008) that is thought to do three things: “assess intrinsic aspects of religious commitment, embody assessments of the centrality of religion to an individual, including self-characterizations as being religious, and be distinct from both public and private religious behaviors.” By being more religious, Black engage in those three tenets.

The results from Chatters, et. al’s study revealed that African-Americans self-rated themselves as highly spiritual or religious, while Black Caribbeans and non-White Hispanics self-ratings were lower (p. 729). For the purpose of this study, Black people’s higher religiosity holds significance as religiosity and spirituality are assumed to be inherent within the Black community. The inherent spirituality creates an identity for Black youth throughout development – one that can either be maintained, changed, or forsaken when adulthood and independence approaches. Additionally, religious/spiritual identity is a large component of self-identification for Black people and has pervasive effects in the perceived and lived realities of Black youth.

Black Church and LGBTQ+ Issues. Great generalizability is placed on the Black church and its stance on homosexuality. The Black church is very complex, and there are many different factors surrounding LGBTQ+ inclusivity within the Black church. Current research shows that the Black church is exhibiting more tolerance towards homosexuality, yet the tolerance is limited (Barnes, 2013; Quinn, 2017). Lesbian and gay members may not face open discrimination, but they are given politeness and strong encouragement to be apart of God’s Kingdom. LGBTQ+ congregants can hold

membership but cannot stand behind the pulpit or hold leadership roles in the church, which exhibits non-affirmation to the LGBTQ+ congregants. A common phrase used within religious settings is “Hate the sin, but not the sinner” (Lomash, Brown, Galupo, 2018). Lomash et. al describe the phrase as a microaggression towards LGBTQ+ Christians that provides a tolerance to those individuals based on their relationship with Christ, but the microaggression translates to an inherent belief that attacks LGBTQ+ identity and never accepts the full person.

Oppositionality Identity Work, Intersectionality, and the Gay Christian Identity. The concepts of oppositional identity work, intersectionality, and gay Christian identity all tie in to explain how Black LGBTQ+ individuals deal with the interaction between their spiritual and sexual identities. Because of the Black church’s conflicting relationship with the LGBTQ community, many Black Christian youth and millennials who do identify as LGBTQ struggle with their spiritual and sexual identities coinciding.

Research shows that LGBTQ Christian individuals grapple with these two identities using oppositional identity work. (McQueeney, 2009). Oppositional identity work appears in Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock’s contribution to *Advances in Group Processes* in 1996 and is defined as “transform[ing] discrediting identities into crediting ones and redefining those identities so they can be seen as indexes of noble rather than flawed character” (pg. 141). Krista McQueeney (2009) put this definition in context of lesbian and gay Christians and allies trying to make safe space in the church for the LGBTQ community. In the context of Black LGBTQ Christian youth, oppositional identity work is so-

cially and mentally working to make the reality of being homosexual more inclusive and palatable to their communities, especially within the church.

There are multiple strategies of oppositional identity work that lesbians, gay men, and other members of the LGBTQ community employ: minimizing, normalizing, and moralizing sexuality. (McQueeney, 2009). These strategies in essence work to alleviate the dissonance between sexual and spiritual identities. This dissonance can stem from the anti-gay sermons, and their homosexuality presenting itself outside the heteronormative Christian standards for relationships (Pitt, 2010). Black Christian lesbians use minimization of their sexuality in order to affirm their spiritual and sexual identities. Minimization is a technique of survival for Black LGBTQ individuals and gives them space to create a community within the church. While they do have to minimize or mask their sexual identity, doing so helps to validate their identity as a Christian and therefore, gives them a sense of place with Black people and the church.

Black lesbians and gay men normalize their sexuality by fitting within the heteronormative standards of monogamy. Monogamy and the societal definition of manhood are both prescriptions of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality. The church validates monogamous relationships because they align with Christian values. Many Scriptures condemn polygamy such as Exodus 20:17, 1 Timothy 3:2, and 1 Corinthians 3:2 (King James Version), but monogamy is praised and “blessed” by God. Black lesbians and Black gay men often use the point of their monogamous relationship in order to normalize it within the church and with heterosexual Christians. Black lesbian and gay men also moralize their sexuality by representing and witnessing to sexual minorities.

Moralizing sexuality involves using sexuality for the work of the kingdom (God's) and to positively identify with those in the community. It is a strategy that relies on good works and tries to equate those good works of LGBTQ+ people on the same moral level as those who are heterosexual.

Schwalbe and Mason-Shrock's theory of oppositional identity work refers to group processes. However, these strategies and the concept of oppositional identity work point to intersectionality within Black LGBTQ+ people. Black LGBTQ+ youth and millennials use oppositional identity work not just in group settings such as the church, educational settings, social settings, but also to mitigate the intersectional identities that they present. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is the overlapping and multidimensional way that an individual or group's identities interact. Race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identities do not consolidate within a person; they expound and create multiple layers with a person's identity. Intersectionality shapes how a person navigates through social and institutional structures. In the Black church, Black LGBTQ+ persons have to navigate their spiritual, sexual and racial identity within a supposed safe space, while simultaneously navigating that space outside the church's four walls.

Another approach to the interaction of sexual and spiritual identities is the Gay Christian Identity, coined by Richard Troiden (1989). The Gay Christian Identity involves synthesizing both the gay and Christian identities. Research demonstrates that Black gay men often engage in Gay Christian Identity to mitigate an assumed dissonance between their religious and sexual identities. The process of coming to a Gay Christian Identity is varied and it is not linear or uniform across Black gay men. However, using this identity,

Black gay men utilize the strategies of oppositional identity work such as normalizing and moralizing in order to maintain this identity.

Summary

This chapter represented the historical background and the current literature concerning the Black church and its relationship regarding LGBTQ+ issues and sexuality, and three different strategies that Black LGBTQ+ individuals use when grappling with the intersectionality of their spiritual and sexual identities.

When examining the contemporary perspective of the Black church and Black youth's spiritual identities, the research demonstrated that African Americans exhibit more religiosity than other races and ethnicities. It is difficult to find sources that dispute the religiosity of African Americans in comparison with other racial groups. Chatter et. al (2008) presented findings in their findings that showed 8% of African American are neither religious nor spiritual. Additionally, their data analysis presents that “men and younger persons were more likely than their counterparts to characterize themselves as spiritual only or neither spiritual nor religious” (pp. 735). Statistics from the Pew Research Center a decade later is in congruence with these findings. The data shows Black men are less likely to be religious than Black women (2018). They also present findings that show 18% of African Americans consider themselves unaffiliated or non-religious and non-spiritual (2018). These findings put the current literature into perspective, as the current literature presents a weakness in assuming African Americans as overall religious and spiritual beings.

When examining the current literature regarding oppositional identity work, intersectionality, and the gay christian identity, The current literature shows that Black LGBTQ+ individuals engage in different strategies to form an identity and recognize the role that intersectionality plays in forming that identity. These arguments are strong, however there are some weaknesses. First, there is a gap in the literature that puts oppositional identity work and sexuality in the same context. Second, the literature previously mentioned does not represent these strategies in the framework of intersectionality or connects the theory of intersectionality to theirs. Third, the literature examining the Gay Christian Identity does not wholly consider lesbian, bisexual, and other identities within the LGBTQ+ spectrum. The Gay Christian Identity can be broadened to include the other identities within the LGBTQ+ spectrum to further explore how these particular identities mitigate the interaction with their spiritual and sexual identities.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research process and design thoroughly and includes a detailed purpose of study, detailed explanation of the main research questions, and how the data was collected and analyzed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine and examine the attitudes of college-aged African Americans about LGBTQ+ Christian identity and offer recommendations for developing a more inclusive Christian eschatology and lived approach to the LGBTQ+ community in the contemporary Black church. This exploration started by qualitative interviews. The data was analyzed by using open coding. Themes and subthemes were next developed and analyzed. From this analysis, recommendations to the Black church regarding LGBTQ+ inclusive practices were derived.

Research Question

This first research question this study aims to answer is: How do Black undergraduate students spiritually and sexually identify at the University of Mississippi? This question is foundational to this study and provides the necessary data for the questions that further explicate this topic. The second research question for this study is: How does the intersectionality of race, sexual, and spiritual identities in the lived experiences of Black undergraduates present itself? This question is critical as the purpose of this study is to examine the attitudes and lived experiences of a Black LGBTQ+ Christian identity. This question guides the latter portion of this research. The third question for this re-

search is: How do Black undergraduates interpret and manage the interaction of sexual and spiritual identities and LGBTQ+ Christian identities? Since this study examines a mix of participants regarding sexual orientation, it is important to understand how the participants both interpret and manage this information. The interpretations will provide insights as to how the heterosexual participants view LGBTQ+ Christian identities, and the management will provide insight to the lived experiences regarding a Black LGBTQ+ Christian identity. The fourth research question is: How can the Black church accommodate and form inclusive practices based on the lived experiences of Black youth? This question will be answered in Chapter 5 based on the results presented in Chapter 4.

Participants

The target population of this research were Black undergraduate students at the University of Mississippi who have a spiritual identity and either have a LGBTQ+ sexual identity or have knowledge on a LGBTQ+ identity. The sample population for this research was eleven participants from the ages of 19-23 and were currently enrolled as undergraduate students at the University of Mississippi.

The participants were chosen due to convenience and purposeful sampling methods. The limited funding for this research required participants to be selected from the researcher's current environment. Additionally, the target population required prior knowledge of the participants' sexual and spiritual identities. They were selected by the researcher based on the criteria mentioned for the target population. These participants were chosen by the researcher as they are campus leaders on discussions regarding race and LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts, and often present a lived experience of spiritual identity.

Participants identified as being from the state of the Mississippi, but grew up in various regions of the state. The different regions helped to present a broader scope of their experiences within the Black church.

Research Design

Method of Study. This study involved very personal topics that could not be fully explored using quantitative methods. Spirituality is innate, emotive, and a part of the human experience (Fisher, 2011); therefore, the subject of spiritual identity and religious identity can invoke deep feelings and thoughts with participants. These thoughts and feelings cannot be quantified, so qualitative interviews were used in order to fully represent the participants' thoughts, attitudes, and lived experiences.

When reviewing qualitative methods, Alshenqeti (2014) found that qualitative interviews provide holistic approaches to the research topic, provides freedom for participants to answer fully and open-ended (Fisher, 2011), and provides a deeper and full scope as to how participants are responding to the research. The open-ended aspect of qualitative interviews is crucial in order to gather data that is unrestricted. Qualitative interviews remove pre-determined or targeted answers from the results (Sofaer, 1999). For this particular study, the use of semi-standardized interviews encouraged open-ended responses and for participants to give as much information as possible (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2009). Given the list of benefits of qualitative interviews, qualitative interviews presented as the most appropriate method for this study as it provided open-ended, rich, and accurate data.

Research design. For this study, the researcher conducted eleven in-depth semi-standardized interviews to Black undergraduate students at the University of Mississippi. The interviews asked targeted yet open-ended questions about spiritual identity, sexual identity, attitudes and management of the two identities. Since this research was qualitative, the participants were able to think through the questions and provide as much data to the questions they were asked. Given the nature of the research topic, the participants were guaranteed anonymity. The interview questions are provided in Appendix A.

Data Sources and Collection

Procedure. The researcher conducted the semi-standardized interviews face-to-face. Participants were asked to sign consent forms, informed of the study, and were asked a series of questions. Because of purposeful sampling and the existing relationship to the participants, the researcher was able to ask clarifying questions or extra questions based on their experience to the research topic.

Collection method. This data was collected using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allows for the collection of data to yield rich results and information (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, et al., 2015). There were two collection sites, based on the availability and preference of participants: the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College and the Black Student Union Office. The interviews were recorded on a voice recorder, uploaded to the researcher's computer, and transferred to a transcription site. The researcher then reviewed and edited the transcripts for accuracy.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using open coding. According to Strauss and Corbin, open coding involves “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data.” The data was taken through these five steps to reveal themes and sub-themes.

Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability. Due to the qualitative nature of this study that involved purposeful sampling, generalizability was not a factor in this study.

The researcher ensured reliability by conducting the interviews in the same settings. The validity of the study was ensured by the participants having known experience and/or knowledge with the research topic.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board. The IRB Letter stating approval is included in Appendix B.

This research was based on my own personal observations and personal experiences, and the participants in this research were known to me and are colleagues, friends, and peers; therefore, bias does exist within this research. Having a similar background as some of these participants, there was a chance to misinterpret data or project my own feelings and experiences in the data as well. However, this study presented the experiences of the participants accurately and with integrity. Research concerning deeply personal topics such as identity and sexuality, require less of an objective lens and more empathy and intentionality when recording and presenting their experience as findings. Additionally, my similar background as these participants – African American, Christian, undergraduate – provide strengths to interpret this research, and present it with honesty and deeper interpretations than someone from another demographic could.

Summary

This research was conducted using qualitative interviews, and used purposeful sampling to identify and collect data from the targeted population that were selected as participants. The data was analyzed using open coding. The researcher ensured protection for the participants, considered bias and ethical considerations. Results from the data that resulted from this methodology will be presented in Chapter 4. A full analysis and discussion of the results will be presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

This chapter will present the results and show evidence of answers to the research questions for this study. This chapter will give participant profiles so the reader can understand the demographics of the participants. This will help to further interpret the data analysis that will be given in Chapter 5. Next, a section of the data organized into themes derived from the research questions will be presented. The complete analysis of the data will be given in Chapter 5.

Participant Profiles

Participants for this research included eleven Black undergraduate students at the University of Mississippi who ranged from ages 19-23. For the sake of securing participants' trust, their names are not used, but identifiers and letters are used to identify them. See Table 1 for an overview of the participants and their demographics. These participants are listed in the order that they were interviewed.

Table 1. Overview of Participant Demographics

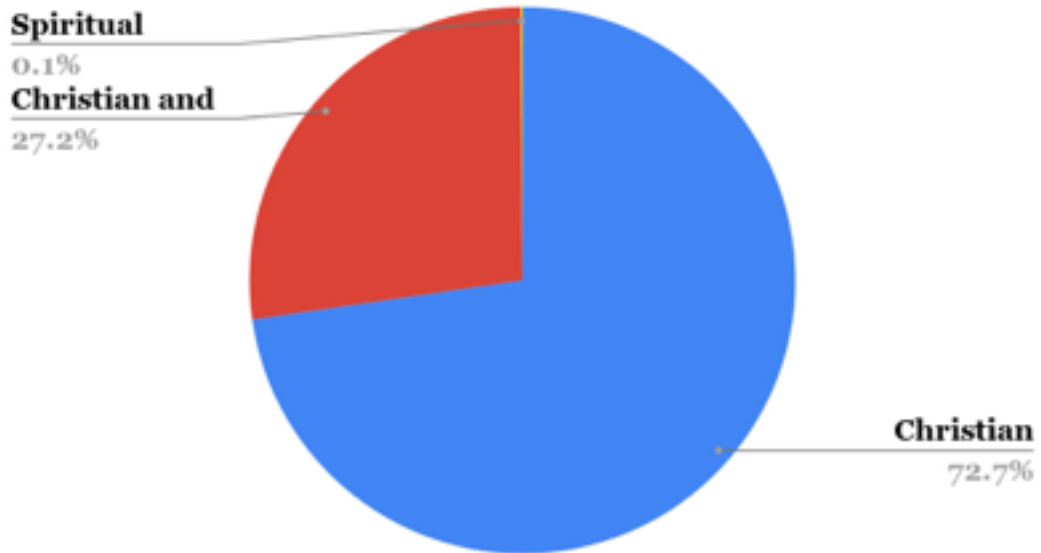
Participant	Spiritual Identity including Denomination	Sexual Orientation	Region of Mississippi
A - Female	Christian - Missionary Baptist	Bisexual	South Mississippi
B - Male	Christian - Missionary Baptist	Heterosexual	Mississippi Delta
C - Male	Christian - Nondenominational	Heterosexual	Central Mississippi

D - Female	Christian - Missionary Baptist	Heterosexual	Mississippi Delta
E - Male	Christian - Missionary Baptist	Homosexual - Gay	Central Mississippi
F - Male	Christian and Spiritual - Nondenominational	Bisexual	Mississippi Delta
G - Female	Christian and Spiritual - Nondenominational	Heterosexual	Mississippi Delta
H - Female	Spiritual but doesn't identify with any religion	Pansexual	South Mississippi
I - Male	Christian - Missionary Baptist	Homosexual - Gay	Central Mississippi
J - Male	Christian - Missionary Baptist	Homosexual - Gay	North Mississippi
K - Female	Christian - Nondenominational	Homosexual - Lesbian	Central Mississippi

Demographic details. Of the participants, 55% were male and 45% were female. Regarding spiritual identity, 72.7% identified as solely Christian, 27.2% identified as both Christian and spiritual, and .1% identified as spiritual with no religious identity. Figure 1 represents the religious demographics of the participants. Additionally, the only two denominations that participants identified with were either Missionary Baptist or nondenominational. Figure 3 shows the demographics of denominations.

Of the sexual identity demographics, 36.3% identified as heterosexual, 27.2% identified as gay, 18.2% identified as lesbian, 18.2% identified as bisexual, and .1 identified as an-

Figure 1. Spiritual Identity Demographics



other sexuality in the spectrum, which in this case was pansexual. Figure 2 gives the sexual identity demographic.

Figure 2. Sexual identity demographics.

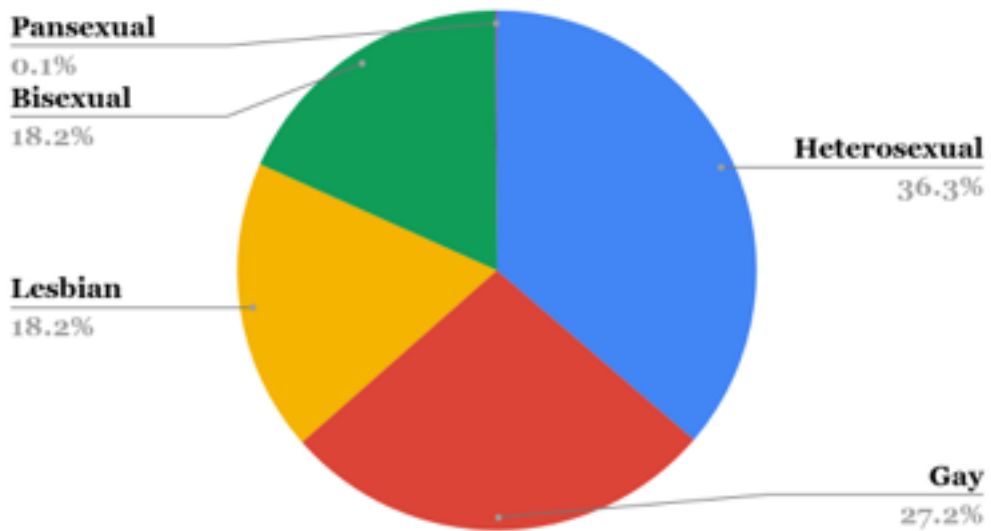
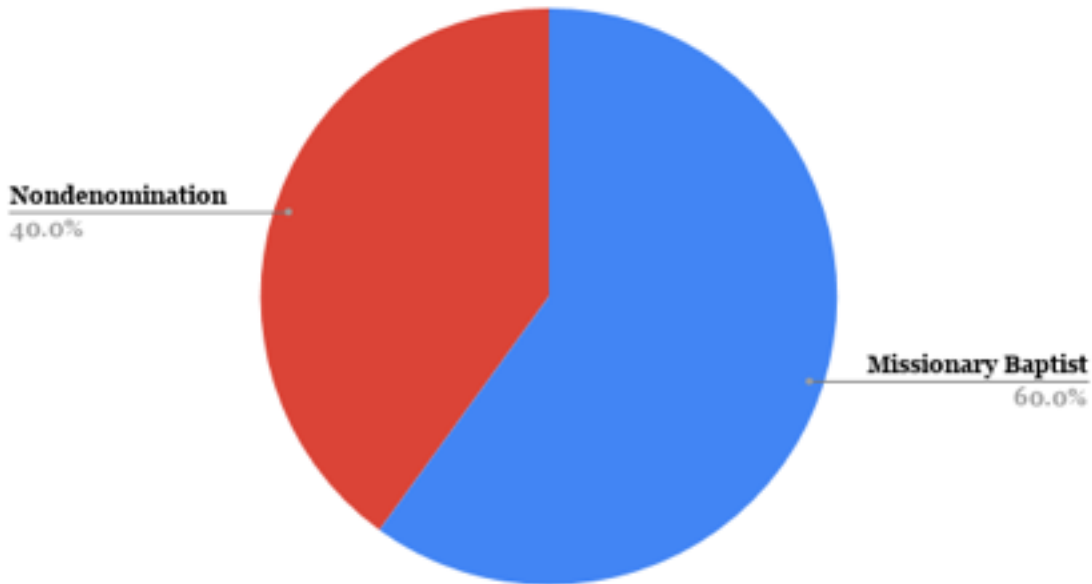


Figure 3. Denomination Demographics



Themes

The themes presented in these results with evidence from the interviews are in order according to the research question. The interview questions were organized according to the research question as well.

Spiritual identity. The eight out of the 11 participants identified as Christian. This spiritual identity is a culmination of the participants' own subjective religiosity and of family influences. Participant C discusses how his family had an influence on his spiritual identity.

Participant C: Specifically for my mom, I know both her parents were pretty, pretty religious and so not necessarily from my parents, but just speaking to my

grandparents and hearing how, how heavily it was a part of their life growing up. It just, just kind of became a part of my life. You know, it was always in the back of my head just knowing that my people who came before me were Christian.

Participant G discusses how her mother influenced her spirituality during her childhood, and how it has affected how she spiritually identifies now.

My mom. Definitely, being a church girl was not an option for me. I was forced into the choir when I was like eight. And we separated on bad terms and I was like, 17 from me from the choir. But yeah, I think honestly, the way that religion was kind of forced and instilled in me has really, really affected the way that I can have like a spiritual kind of relationship right now.

Participants E and K discuss how their spiritual identity is a personal and emphatic choice.

Participant E: I was more of a church person, the church goer in my family. I was basically the one that made my family go to church, like my mother, she wouldn't go to church. So when I started to go to church, she started going back to church.

Participant K: I feel like everything is now my choice, so that makes me feel a lot more relieved that I'm able to go on a spiritual journey by myself and not be influenced by that...Just everything is based off of my decision. It's just, you know, free will. Like you have to choose whether or not you get up in the morning versus your mom waking you up, or your dad waking you up to go to church or saying, 'hey, there's something we have to do because we just have to do it'. It's actually a desire now.

A few participants described how they identified with Christianity, but also identified as being spiritual as well, and one participant just described as being spiritual and not identifying with any particular religion.

Participant F: Yes, I identify as Christian. I still got like mixed views on religion.... My whole thing about this religion and all of this...I wrote a paper

about this in freshman year, but how like it's the different versions of like the same story. So you can just choose whatever one you want. Most of them pretty much teach, like, different ways to get into like the same thing. And just because of that, I feel more spiritual, but Christianity is my way of getting to that.

Participant G: I guess I will say that religion and spirituality are very subjective. You know, even the way that I speak about spirituality with myself, I kind of confused myself, and I had that discussion. To me, religion is like the practice of church. It's the practice of convening with a group of people, and deciding that, you know, this is how we worship, this is what we should worship. And spirituality, I think should more so be where people exist in the world. I don't think spirituality has the same kind of structure that religion does and spirituality should be between an individual and the world, the world around them. And I can't help but think that religion makes it harder for us to speak our own spiritual language.

Participant H: I don't identify with like any religion, but I think spirituality and religion are like it's just one in the same. And so yeah, I have spiritual practices. And I pray to God and you know, God can be like, what I think, you know, whatever people refer to like, the reaches or like ancestors of the earth, the universe like all this the same thing to me.

Sexual identity. Four of the participants identified as heterosexual. They did not provide any insightful data about their sexuality. Three identified as gay, and three identified as lesbian. Two participants identified as bisexual, and one participant identified as pansexual. Out of the participants that identified as LGBTQ+, the bisexual participants gave particular insights into how they feel about their sexuality.

Participant A: The word that is correct I don't like [nervous laughter]. So in my head, I just say gayish. Because I don't like saying bi for some reason. And I don't know why. But the word gay is more cool with me. But I'm not gay. I'm gayish.

Participant F: I'm bisexual. I'm not open. Well, I think it's something that's just accepted. And I'm open about it now. Like, if somebody asks me, I'm bisexual, it

is what it is....When I got to college, that's when I actually had to sit down and just like ask myself, all right, 'I'm not 100% straight. That was the first thing, I'm not 100% straight. I'm just not, but I'm not gay.' ...And I was like, 'Okay, I'm bi.' And then when I said it, it felt so good. It felt so good. Wow it felt good, it was like a sigh of relief.

Intersectionality of identities. The second portion of this study involved determining how the participants saw the intersectionality of their identities. This theme and subthemes resulted directly from the questions that the participants were asked during the qualitative interviews. These themes are organized into race and spiritual identity, and spiritual and sexual identity

Race and spiritual identity. Some of the participants felt that being Black influenced their decision to be a Christian. Participant C expressed how he felt pressured that his decision to be a Christian would be inherent.

I think as a certain part of me being African American, sometimes it can. I can feel pressured to be a part of like the Black church and to really embrace that spiritual side. It is real easy to feel left out of the conversation when everybody seemed so in tune with, you know, their church side, and then you're still like kind of finding your way.

Participants D and J expressed that their racial identity influences their spiritual identity definitively.

Participant D: Cause I think that African Americans view Christianity a little differently than white Americans or even other demographics of people. So just growing up, I mean, I grew up in all African American churches, I still go to pretty much an all African American church.

Participant K: Yes. I do feel like Black people are just very spiritual to begin with. I feel like I've never been any other race. So I can't really compare any differences but I do feel like Black people are more religious, or just more likely to be religious.

Spiritual identity and sexual identity. This portion of the results yielded more data that applied to the third portion of this study, as participants provided data that dealt more with attitudes and management of the interaction between spiritual and sexual identity. However, the LGBTQ+ participants stated that there was intersectionality with their spiritual and sexual identity. They just stated that there was some confliction. Participant K expressed this confliction.

For a while, I thought, like, God just wasn't gonna like me. I thought like, there was no way that I was going to even see heaven or even see the gates or anything. Like there were times where I would be praying and wondering like, you know, 'is this sin really more detrimental than other sins that are in the Bible?'

Interpretation and Management of Intersectionality of Identities. This third portion of the study provided the majority of the data that guided this study. This theme is organized by sub-themes regarding attitudes towards homosexuality from heterosexual participants, and the management of being LGBTQ+ and Christian.

Attitudes towards homosexuality. All of the heterosexual participants indicated positive attitudes towards homosexuality. However, they did explain that they have not always held positive views and attitudes. Participants B and G expressed this:

Participant B: It's changed it a lot, but I still find myself not accepting people's friend requests because they're homosexual. I mean like we all do,

but I do it with just a certain group of people like I feel like I judge people sometimes. Because they identify as being gay.

Participant G: I think it's why I just decided that I don't have the right to judge anybody for being homosexual. Especially now as I'm trying to get a more practical understanding of religion. The job of just existing without having biases or negative energy towards anything around you is such an important part of being able to coexist with a world that has all these different things. And maybe I'm not saying it as eloquently as I would like to, but um I think my spirituality since coming to Ole Miss has made me a lot more tolerant.

Some participants expressed that their attitudes on homosexuality were positive because of their spiritual identity. Participant C expressed this:

And so everything I've learned about my Christian, the everything I learned about the aspects, identify with in terms of my Christian side have taught me to be loving, be as caring, open as I can, when I'm interacting with people. And so if anything it's strengthened my relationship, I would say, with students who identify as homosexual because it's allowed me to come and, just being African American students as well, it allows me to come like open, open hearted without any type of bias, or preference, or prejudice. You know, I see people as they are holistically and not, you know, by certain aspects of their life. And I think that comes from just what I've learned, you know, in a small part of my life that has been in the church, just to be open and caring and loving.

Additionally, more positive attitudes were revealed in the data when participants were asked if LGBTQ+ rights were an important social justice issue. All of the participants, particularly heterosexual, stated that LGBTQ+ rights were extremely important. Some even stated that LGBTQ+ rights were critical for Black members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Management of sexual and spiritual identities. More than half of the LGBTQ+ participants expressed that some conflict, past or present, existed with being LGBTQ+ and a Christian. However, most of the participants expressed that they have resolved conflict with an LGBTQ+ Christian identity by just owning those sectors of their identity.

Participant E: I just have to remember that your faith is in God, and He wouldn't have made you, that's how I feel, that he wouldn't have made you. I feel like He already knew this is what I was going to be, even though it's a sin. It's hard to explain. But like your religion or your faith is in Him, not by what you are. You shouldn't let what others feel about it dictate your belief in Him and your love for Him and Him love for you.

Participant I: Because I've made my spiritual practice something that not only works for me, but something that it's something that I believe in. it's something that's like it's, it's become my foundation and I feel like I can have a foundation that is against me. You know what I'm saying? So if it's something that is against me or not here for me then I can't you know, I'm not gonna give myself like to that. I can't be a part of it. And so for me, I made my spiritual journey, something that is about what I believe in and so yeah.

Participant J: 'I am who I am. If it's anybody's fault, it's God's. So you know, this whole Christianity thing is something that I can still be a part of.'

Participant K: I don't separate them; I express how I want to strengthen my relationship with God despite my choice of lifestyle. I think that it's a part of me and who I am, and if God created us, you know, in His image, I don't think that He's angry with me. So I've kind of moved away from thinking that He is angry with me, or I'm not worthy of just being with him, you know...usually I'm just trying to stay strong in my faith as I can and better myself. I don't try to separate the two.

Homosexuality teachings in the Black church. In order to provide recommendations to the Black church concerning inclusive practices, the participants were asked about the religious teachings they received. Additionally, participants were asked to pro-

vide data on the Black church's negativity towards homosexuality. Many participants said they never heard specific negative things about homosexuality in religious teachings, but knew that their church would not be as accepting of homosexuality members. Some participants had experienced overt negativity. Participant I shared his thoughts:

Because it's just like, even the Bible says that no man can judge the next. So for you to stand in the pulpit, I understand that you're preaching the Bible. You're preaching God's word and everything, but that doesn't give you the authority to stand in the pulpit and publicly tell someone that they're going to hell because he likes a man or she likes a woman. Like that's just not right to me.

Participant H also shared her experience with overt negativity:

The only negative thing I heard about human sexuality growing up was my pastor. His son, came out as gay, he was very close to his son when I was growing up in church. And when I reached high school, his son came to church just like completely feminine. It was just a whole change in the pastor. He decided to change his sermon like I knew that wasn't like he did change his sermon in the middle, just like whatever he was talking about and just started preaching like this anti-gay, and everyone in the church was like agreeing with him.

Many participants also explained that while they do feel that the generalization of exclusion could be applied to the church, they did not have that experience. However, they knew of LGBTQ+ individuals who had negative experiences in the church, and churches that were negative towards those in the LGBTQ+ community.

Participant K: I think certain areas of the church, certain areas of the Black church, certain areas of like, Southern church can definitely be offensive to the LGBTQ community. I think it can teach you not to love yourself. If God doesn't love you, then how can you love yourself?

Participant F: So my church, the one I go to now, non denominational. It is not that toxic. And so like we don't really talk about sexuality at all. Not like a nega-

tive way. It's a very like accepting church. I feel like the other ones definitely were, especially like the one I was going to with my friend. It was really old and traditional. They probably wouldn't play that, but the one I go to now - it's very accepting.

Summary.

These results indicated several themes according to the research questions presented: spiritual and sexual identities, intersectionality of spiritual and sexual identities, interpretation and management of those intersections, and teachings of the Black church. From those themes, sub-themes emerged and presented detailed results regarding how participants identified spiritually and sexually, heterosexual attitudes towards LGBTQ+ identities, and experiences within the Black church on negative teachings about homosexuality. Chapter 5 will discuss these results, give implications, and finally provide recommendations based on this data.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final chapter, the results are discussed in relation to the research questions, and the results are interpreted and compared to the current literature. Recommendations to the Black church and for future research are given.

Discussion of Results

The results of this study showed that all of the participants identified with a spiritual identity, either in the form of Christianity or spirituality. Within Christianity, Missionary Baptist and Nondenominational were the two denomination categories that were present. The different sexual identities studied were heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual. All of the participants were raised in an environment that ignored homosexuality or were nonaffirming of homosexuality. The religious teachings that the participants received were either overtly negative or indifferent towards homosexuality. The following sections interpret the results according to the research questions, themes, and sub-themes discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

Spiritual and Sexual Identities. In reference to research question one, Black youth do have spiritual and sexual identities. The participants found importance in spirituality and maintaining their spirituality. Subjective and institutional religiosity were both important aspects of the participants' lives, as many of them regularly engage in spiritual practices of prayer, going to church, listening to Christian music, and having a community and social circle that espouses the same values. Many of the participants came from religious households that taught Christian values and practiced institutional religiosity in

the form of regular church attendance. Their spiritual background influenced their spiritual identity, but as quoted in the results, many of them make a conscious and personal decision to maintain their spiritual identity. In Chapter 1, spiritual identity was defined as both identifying with spirituality or a religion/religious institution. Many of the participants identified as either one or the other, but a few made personal and separate distinctions regarding the definition of spirituality versus being religious.

Regarding sexual identity, many of the participants exhibited confidence in their sexual identity, despite having some questions or not being completely open with their sexual identity. Their sexual identity was personal and established prior to coming-of-age.

Intersection between spiritual and sexual identities. In reference to the second portion of this study and the data, Black youth recognize there is an intersection between their spiritual and sexual identities. The intersectionality is either between spiritual identity and sexual identity, or race can have an influence on the interaction as well. Many of the participants recognized that the three identities were equal parts of who they were and comprised them as a whole person. The participants that identified as LGBTQ+ recognized that the intersection between their spiritual and sexual identity caused a conflict. This was influenced by the teachings they received at home, church, and just socialization in general. This conflict caused low self-esteem, internal identity conflicts, and questioning their self-worth. Many of those conflicts were mediated at the time of this study.

For the heterosexual participants, there was not a significant interaction between sexual identity and spiritual identity. They identified race as being a significant factor rather than their sexual identity. The heterosexual participants recognized that their het-

erosexuality was not marginalized and therefore, it did not have an effect on their identity as a whole because it followed heteronormative standards.

Interpretation and Management of Intersectionality. In reference to the third portion of this study, the heterosexual participants expressed LGBTQ+ affirmation. They overwhelmingly reported that homosexuality is a personal choice and not one that they could “judge.” They also reported that LGBTQ+ Christian identity should be normalized due to the LGBTQ+ individuals having a right to be involved in church and have a relationship with God.

The LGBTQ+ participants reported having an LGBTQ+ Christian identity. This identity was formed using the moralizing strategy of oppositional identity work and using the identity synthesis of Gay Christian Identity. These participants based their belief that God predestined them to be LGBTQ+ so therefore, His love should be inherent and without complications or shame. The combination of the two strategies was presented emphatically and plainly, as the participants often stated the conflict was either God’s fault or the assumption of other people. Ultimately, the participants reported that their relationship with God and identity was personal and self-determined, which influenced the combination of identity synthesis and moralizing.

The Black church’s role. All of the participants had been raised within a predominantly Black church, so they had much familiarity with the culture and impact of the Black church on individual lives and communities. The heterosexual participants had heard overtly negative teachings about homosexuality either directly or indirectly from the church, and they recognized that those teachings contained harmful and discriminato-

ry rhetoric LGBTQ+ Christians. Even if they had previously agreed with those teachings and internalized them, they reported to currently reject those teachings and be individuals that were LGBTQ+ affirming.

An important distinction within the results emerged concerning the different sectors of the church. Participants that attended Missionary Baptist churches, found that the churches showed either tolerance or indifference to the LGBTQ+ community. They found that the indifference was either uncomfortable or “weird” as they felt the indifference signaled they could not be their authentic selves. However, participants found that nondenominational churches had the most welcoming and affirming environments.

Implications

The Black church. The findings from this study support the prominence of the Black church, but also support the decentralized role of the Black church in Black youth’s lives (Thomas, 2018; Glaude, 2010). Black youth recognize the importance of the Black church, but do not always find it to be inclusive. They also recognize that they can have spirituality and a relationship with God without a relationship to the church. They do not need the church to be spiritual. As the Black church once provided communal, political, and social support for Black Americans, Black youth are finding those sources elsewhere. These findings do not suggest that Black youth are less religious than previous generations, it only suggests the decentralized role of the Black church and religious identity.

The results from this study found nondenominational churches to be more accepting of LGBTQ+ congregants than other denominations (Missionary Baptist). Current literature demonstrates that evangelical Christian denominations are the most outspoken

and conservative denominations politically and socially (Black, 2017). Therefore, LGBTQ+ inclusivity is not assumed to be inherent within these churches. Very little research is available that has studied nondenominational churches and their beliefs and practices concerning LGBTQ+ issues and inclusivity. However, these results do suggest that nondenominational churches may be more accepting and affirming of LGBTQ+ individuals than Evangelical and Protestant churches.

Spiritual identity. The results from this study support that Black Americans and particularly Black youth are religious. As many of the participants reported high subjective religiosity and spirituality, these results are in line with current research (Chatters et al., 2008; Pew Research Center, 2018; Thomas, 2018). Current literature is still examining the spirituality of Black millennials and Black youth, and these findings implicate that spirituality is still an important part of Black youth's identity. Black youth recognize that spiritual identity is integrated into their lives and enmeshed with other aspects of their identity. How they maintain their spiritual identity, such as regularly attending church services, prayer, etc, may differ from previous generations. Therefore, spiritual identity is integrated, but not necessarily central. This helps for Black youth to find balance and harmony between other aspects of their identity and not derive support from one particular source. Additionally, Black youth are self-defining what spirituality is to them. They are taking their personal feelings, thoughts and attitudes, and synthesizing them into personal definitions for their own spiritual beliefs. They recognize tradition and religious practices, but ultimately, their spirituality is a combination of traditions that specifically

applies to their life and what works for them. These findings support and expound upon research by explaining Black youth's spirituality.

Intersections and Management of identities. The results from this study support current research in the terms of conflicts with sexual and spiritual identities. Black LGBTQ+ youth past or presently struggle with their spiritual and sexual identities. However, these results support both the literature concerning oppositional identity work and Gay Christian Identity.

McQueeney describes puts the concept of oppositional identity work in the context of identity by demonstrating that LGBTQ+ and affirming individuals uses strategies of oppositional identity work to make space for marginalized identities. These findings add to that literature. These results mainly support the minimizing strategy. The results from this study show that in an indifferent religious environment, Black youth minimize their sexuality in order to blend in with other congregants. Other literature mentions Black youth doing this within the church by changing their appearance or mannerisms in order to fit the heteronormative standard (Quinn, 2016). The participants minimized their sexuality by just mentioning it to their religious community; they keep it private or under the radar. By minimizing their sexuality, they seem to fit in with heteronormativity and receive validation from the church.

The literature discusses Gay Christian Identity, as an "identity synthesis" of sexual and religious identities. The results from this study overwhelmingly support the Gay Christian Identity and suggest it to be inclusive of all the LGBTQ+ community. Black LGBTQ+ youth do not separate the two identities. They see themselves as Christian and

LGBTQ+ and realize that the two can live in tandem. This required some mitigation of negative religious and home teachings. The results show that Black youth believe the more accepting and open religious teachings that support love, acceptance, and inclusion. They combine these beliefs with predestination and state that God knew their sexuality from creation and would not reject an individual He created.

The LGBTQ+ Christian identity is in tandem with the oppositional identity work strategy that Black LGBTQ+ youth use. Black LGBTQ+ youth minimize their sexuality in public religious environments, but realize that their LGBTQ+ Christian identity is self-determined and not subject to others' beliefs and opinions. Overall, these results support current literature in both Gay Christian identity and oppositional identity work, by showing that Black LGBTQ+ youth combine the two concepts in order to identify as LGBTQ+ Christians.

Recommendations

LGBTQ+ inclusivity in the Black Church. Based on the results of this study, a recommendation can be made to the Black church to adopt inclusive practices and be welcoming for the LGBTQ+ community. In order to adopt inclusive practices, practices within the church must be evaluated, churches must examine if LGBTQ+ individuals feel comfortable and included, and educational practices must be implemented. When making these recommendations, the researcher assumes that all churches are not LGBTQ+ exclusive and that the Black church is complex and not a monolith. However, these recommendations are generalized for the sake of this study and its purpose.

To evaluate practices, Black churches should evaluate what specific practices in their services and other dealings are exclusive to the LGBTQ+ community. Sermons that preach and spread anti-gay and homophobic messages or label LGBTQ+ individuals as deviants should be evaluated to see if they are truly making the church an inclusive environment. Messages that make LGBTQ+ individuals feel less than or not adequate Christians should be revised to accommodate those individuals and affirm that they are equal with other members of the faith community.

Churches can gauge how comfortable LGBTQ+ individuals are by first determining their LGBTQ+ population. Although some LGBTQ+ community members prefer not to be open about their sexuality, which is their preference and right, other members who are open tend to find churches that openly state LGBTQ+ inclusion. Those individuals feel they can be their authentic selves and freely express their sexuality and spirituality within the church. A church that does not have an LGBTQ+ population or finds that LGBTQ+ congregants leave, might have exclusive practices and create an unwelcoming environment. Recommendations from the data point to churches being openly inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community, not just indifferent. Indifference still tends to breed uncomfortability and uncertainty about the environment.

Lastly, the church should be educating its congregation about LGBTQ+ issues in order to foster inclusivity and encourage acceptance. Several myths and homophobic beliefs regarding homosexuality exist within the Black community and reflect in the Black as well. Even though leadership might be tolerant and/or accepting of the LGBTQ+ community, intolerant members can lead the environment to become hostile. Education

tends to breed acceptance, and this can be taught in the church. A 2013 study found that HIV education in Black churches fostered more positive attitudes and tolerance towards those who were HIV positive (Berkley-Patton et. al, 2013). While education about sexuality and the LGBTQ+ spectrum should not necessarily focus on HIV education, the study does show that education in a faith-based setting can help to foster inclusion.

Recommendations for future research. This data added to several gaps in the literature, but further research is still needed to get a full, complete scope of the research topic.

Further research should expound upon the theory of Gay Christian Identity and oppositional identity work. Gay Christian Identity can be broadened to the larger LGBTQ+ community to discuss LGBTQ+ Christian identity and how other sexualities form their Christian or spiritual identity. Additionally, very little research exists about oppositional identity work in the context of sexuality. Further research should explore how LGBTQ+ individuals use oppositional identity work and its strategies in order to create a LGBTQ+ Christian identity.

As churches and different denominations influenced this study, further research should be done to examine nondenominational churches. A large gap in the literature exists concerning these organizations, and more people are identifying with nondenominational churches instead of Protestant and Evangelical identities.

Because of convenience and purposeful sampling, this study did not include individuals who are transgender. Further research should be done to determine how transgender individuals spiritually identify and their experience within the Black church.

Conclusion

The topic for this research was formed by personal observations of Black college-aged youth at the University of Mississippi, where research phenomena of sexuality and spirituality is reflected. This study sought to determine how Black youth spiritually and sexually identify, how they manage that intersectionality, and the influences of the Black church in order to present recommendations for inclusive practices. The study was conducted qualitatively in order to get the full details of the participants' attitudes and lived experiences. The results yielded data that supported current literature. The results found that Black youth are spiritual and find spirituality to important, and that the intersection between sexual and spiritual identity is compounded to form an LGBTQ+ Christian identity. The results also yielded that heterosexual youth are affirming of their LGBTQ+ counterparts and support an LGBTQ+ Christian identity. The results did find that Black youth can experience negative or indifferent teachings about homosexuality. However, despite those negative teachings or negative influences, Black LGBTQ+ youth successfully and positively form an LGBTQ+ Christian identity and find churches that affirm them and are not discriminatory towards them.

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APPENDIX A:

1. What is your major and hometown?
2. How long have you attended the University of Mississippi?
3. What religion were you taught during your childhood?
4. If Christian, what denomination were you raised in?
5. What was your spiritual identity before attending the University of Mississippi?
6. How do you feel your parents/guardians or family influenced your spiritual identity before attending the University of Mississippi?
7. Has your spiritual identity changed since attending the University of Mississippi?
8. If so, could you describe what events led to that change and how that change occurred?
9. How do you feel that your experience at the University of Mississippi has influenced your spiritual identity?
10. What is your sexual identity?
11. If you identify as heterosexual, what do you know about homosexuality?
12. How do you feel about homosexuality?
13. What were you taught about homosexuality growing up?
14. What have you learned about homosexuality since attending at the University of Mississippi?
15. How do you feel your spiritual beliefs affect your view on homosexuality?
16. Do you feel that Christianity and the church is offensive to those in the LGBTQ+ community?

17. Do you feel that homosexuality is an important social justice issue? Why or why not?

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL

PI:

This is to inform you that your application to conduct research with human participants, "Religion, Sexuality, and Activism in Black Undergraduates" (Protocol #20x-245), has been approved as Exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(#2).

Please remember that all of The University of Mississippi's human participant research activities, regardless of whether the research is subject to federal regulations, must be guided by the ethical principles in The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.

It is especially important for you to keep these points in mind:

- You must protect the rights and welfare of human research participants.
- Any changes to your approved protocol must be reviewed and approved before initiating those changes.
- You must report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others.
- If research is to be conducted during class, the PI must email the instructor and ask if they wish to see the protocol materials (surveys, interview questions, etc) prior to research beginning.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the IRB at irb@olemiss.edu.