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Starlin Astacio

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**AN EXPERIENTIAL QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS EXPLORING THE SEXUAL IDENTITY EXPERIENCES OF  
LATINO CARIBBEAN CISGENDER GAY MEN**

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Antioch University New England

In partial fulfillment for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

Starlin Astacio

ORCID Scholar No. 0009-0006-0869-861X

July 2023

AN EXPERIENTIAL QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS EXPLORING THE SEXUAL IDENTITY EXPERIENCES OF  
LATINO CARIBBEAN CISGENDER GAY MEN

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Antioch University New England  
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **AN EXPERIENTIAL QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS EXPLORING THE SEXUAL IDENTITY EXPERIENCES OF LATINO CARIBBEAN CISGENDER GAY MEN**

Starlin Astacio

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This qualitative study aims to explore the unique experiences and challenges faced by Latino Caribbean cisgender gay men within their cultural and social contexts. Using focus group and thematic analysis, the researcher examines the narratives and perspectives of a diverse sample of Latino Caribbean cisgender gay men ( $n = 6$ ) to gain insights into their sexual identity process, cultural influences, family dynamics, and support systems utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the methodological framework. The researcher's findings highlight the themes of Awareness of Sexual Identity, Visibility Management, Spanish Caribbean Families Influences, Being True to Oneself, and Positive Experiences & Role Models as key factors influencing the participants' experiences. These findings underscore the importance of understanding the intersections between sexual and cultural identities for Latino Caribbean cisgender gay men. The participants navigate the complex process of self-acceptance and disclosure while balancing cultural expectations and societal norms. The role of family and community support emerges as both a source of strength and potential challenge in their journeys of self-exploration and acceptance. The findings shed light on the need to research the sexual identity process for Caribbean LGBTQ+ individuals, couples, and families within a social justice framework. These findings highlight the importance of creating inclusive spaces,

promoting visibility, and providing culturally sensitive support services to address the unique needs of this population. And contribute to the existing literature on sexual identity development, cultural diversity, and family dynamics, and provide insights that can inform interventions, policies, and practices aimed at promoting the well-being and empowerment of Latino Caribbean LGBTQ+ individuals.

This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu>) and OhioLINK ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

*Keywords:* Latino gay men, sexual identity process, Latinx LGBTQ+, cultural influences, family dynamics, thematic analysis.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Caribbean Cisgender Gay Men Sexual Identification Process

Over the past decade, the North American society, policies, and public attitudes toward sexual minorities have become more accepting (e.g., Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016; Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015). In 2015 the United States (US) Supreme Court ruled in favor of marriage equality for same-sex couples across the nation (Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015). This national decision led to increased visibility and acceptance of the sexual identification process for many sexual minority members in the US (Cravens, 2019).

The sexual identification process is a complex and ongoing process that sexual minority individuals endure throughout their lifespan. As noted by Cass (1979) and Plummer (1975), sexual identification is primarily described as a non-linear process for people who identify with a non-heterosexual label (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, LGBTQ+). Likewise, D'Augelli et al. (1998) agree that sexual identity is not a finite process; instead, it has been shown that some individuals will change their self-label as they develop and choose to disclose it to different people at different times (D'Augelli et al., 1998; Remafedi et al., 1992). Recent scholars continue to agree with this process being non-linear and one that impacts the different intersecting identities of an individual (Twist et al., 2022). As researchers continue to increase their scrutiny of the sexual identity process, visibility management continues to be an important aspect of minoritized sexual identities (Twist et al., 2022).

Early research and models about the process of sexual identity formation conceptualize sexual identity in different stages. For instance, Cass (1979) and Troiden (1982) models claim that the initial stage of this process is when an individual feels same-sex sexual attraction,

followed by confusion because the attraction is different from their heterosexual peers. Then, as individuals continue to feel attracted to their same-sex peers, more exploration of the community and networking with people with similar sexual identities happens (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989). Cass (1979) also points out that as long as individuals have a positive experience with other members of their community and can fully integrate their sexual identity as an essential element of their whole identity, the individual will be able to reach the final stage in the sexual identity process, which is the full acceptance of their sexual identity (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989). Although Cass (1979) and Troiden (1982) address significant stages in the sexual identity formation more research is needed in the area of identity visibility management.

Moreover, Blumer and Green (2011) relational systemic model is based on the intersection of individuals, which includes relationship identity development and visibility management. This model represents how individuals merge “unique cultural factors, attachment styles, levels of queer identity development, and their management of these respective identities” (Blumer & Green, 2011, p. 203). Blumer and Green’s (2011) relational model describes important stages including the acknowledgement of individuals intersecting identities and visibility management, the latter being an important strategy for the population in this study.

Another significant milestone for the majority of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or Queer (LGBTQ+) is the *coming out process*. Greenfield (2015) describes this process as one where the individual openly recognizes and shares their sexual identity, which Greenfield points out as one of the most important processes for personal

identity development. However, Twist et al., (2022) describes coming out as “inexact [as] it implies a single, all-encompassing event” (p. 196). Likewise, other researchers have identified that individuals commonly realize their different sexual identities during their teenage years and tend to come out multiple times in many situations (D'Augelli, 1996; Hunter & Mallon, 2000). Overall, coming out it is not a monolithic process and people do not just come out once—it is repeatedly over time— rather is more seen as a process of visibility management (Twist et al., 2022).

Regardless of the US progress in accepting same-sex relations, the sexual identification experience creates significant stress and mental health problems for many LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly those from underrepresented racial backgrounds (e.g., Latinx, Black, and Asian). Studies that address the sexual identification experience for LGBTQ+ individuals (e.g., Díaz et al., 2001; White et al., 2010) report that members of marginalized communities are at a higher risk for mental health issues, including depression (Mitrani et al., 2017), anxiety (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2015), trauma, paranoia, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors (Baams et al., 2015), and suicidality (King et al., 2008; Russell & Fish, 2016).

Some empirical research has examined the timing of the sexual identity process for gay individuals of color (Parks et al., 2004; Rosario et al., 2004); however, there is still limited research on the specific processes by which racial minority gay men, more specifically from Latinx heritage, develop their sexual identity. For instance, no published empirical research directly examines the processes of being a gay man of Latinx Caribbean descent and navigating the sexual identity development process.

In the focus groups the researcher will qualitatively explore the experiences of cisgender gay men from Caribbean Spanish-speaking countries (i.e., Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico) living in the US. The study explores the sexual identity processes including visibility management of one's sexual identity.

### **The Problem**

In the United States pop culture, the term *coming out* is used very loosely to address the first-time a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer person discloses information about their sexual and gender identity as they become more comfortable talking about it to others (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). According to some researchers, coming out is primarily a phenomenon of middle and upper-middle-class white people (Cohen, 1996; Kenamer et al., 2000; Ryan & Futterman, 2001). Therefore, we cannot assume that Caribbean gay men necessarily adhere to this process or terminology. Furthermore, many studies on the process of coming out as gay, and the research literature on the subject, are predisposed toward the Euro-American experience (Cass, 1979; Rosati et al., 2019; LaSala, 2000). Thus, there is a need to understand the process of homoerotic identities in a multicultural context (Merighi & Grimes, 2000). As stated by Mosher (2001), "more research is needed for inclusion of racially, ethnically, culturally, and economically diverse samples" (p. 167).

The minimal research conducted with the Caribbean gay population and family reactions to their sexual identity examines only the experiences of English-speaking Afro-Caribbean immigrants living in the United States (Ferguson, 2020). Despite the progress in researching the experiences of English-speaking Afro-Caribbean men and their sexual identity process, the major problem of generational, cultural, and regional differences among this



population has not been researched. Although studies have been conducted with participants' family members raised in the US (Garcia et al., 2008; Gilbert et al., 2016; Li et al., 2017; Gattamorta & Quidley-Rodriguez, 2018), these studies suggest that individuals in the US do not necessarily adhere vigorously to Latinx cultural values. These differences may likely impact the disclosure and identity formation experiences of those born and raised in the Caribbean islands. Therefore, specific research focused on Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities is needed.

Simultaneously, Caribbean-Americans' experiences are often inaccurately viewed as monolithic and inclusive of all Latinx persons, despite ethnic variations (e.g., Afro-Latinx, Caribbean-Latinx; Logan, 2007; Waters et al., 2014). The lack of acknowledgment of cultural differences in systemic literature has, in part, resulted in the underrepresentation of Latinx-Caribbean immigrants in the US within empirical research, which can contribute to therapists' and other mental health workers' under-preparedness to work with this unique and growing population (Williams et al., 2007). In addition, questions have been raised about how LGBTQ+ people of color navigate their marginalized intersecting identities, and the different factors therapists should consider when working with this population (Ghabrial, 2017).

Given that researchers have failed to examine the experiences of Latinx LGBTQ+ adults from the Caribbean living in the US and assumed that most Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals experience similar coming out and sexual identity processes, the primary goal of this study is to understand this population by examining the unique sexual identity process, explore visibility management, and ultimately provide mental health practitioners the knowledge and skills necessary to work with Latinx Caribbean LGBTQ+ individuals. This research will provide the marriage and family therapy (MFT) field a greater understanding of how cultural upbringing,

messages, and intersecting identities affect individuals from Spanish Caribbean territories when reconciling their sexual identity, sexual development, and mental health.

### **Study's Purpose and Research Questions**

Based on the research presented earlier, most of the previous literature perpetuates the assumption that gay men from all Latinx regions experience similar coming-out and the evident lack of mental health resources for Latinx gay individuals in the US. This study was significant for several reasons. First, it addressed the fundamental problems in healthcare, specifically mental health, including the need to provide specific treatment for a growing minority (i.e., the Latinx community) in the US. Second, it helped mental health workers in becoming more aware of the different intersecting identities that affect this population and the ways in which the Caribbean cisgender gay men manage these identities. It also provided knowledge to improve culturally and linguistically responsive services to Latinx gay individuals by increasing the visibility of the unique factors that contribute to this population's sexual identity process.

Although my primary purpose was to understand the sexual identity process for Caribbean cisgender gay men, I also presented data highlighting reasons for disclosing and not disclosing sexual orientation and the perceived consequences of such decisions. In addition, I explored the cultural and traditional family elements that impact Caribbean gay men's sexual identity formation.

### **Research Questions**

The central question in this research study examines *how Latinx Caribbean cisgender gay men, who live in the US, experience the sexual identification process*. In addition to the main research question, five questions were developed for the focus groups (see Appendix A) to

better understand the participants' experiences during the sexual identification process. These research questions were descriptive and interpretative to explore the meaning of sexual identity management, which can hopefully develop a greater understanding of the Caribbean gay community.

## **Summary**

This chapter includes an abridged literature review that focuses on the American acceptance of LGBTQ+ persons, the stages of sexual identity, and the mental risk factors endured by LGBTQ+ individuals. I also provided an argument to address the gap in research by introducing the problem statement, the purpose, and the research questions. Lastly, I presented a social justice and innovation focus and the methodological research design, which included recruitment, data collection, and data analysis methods. Finally, in chapter two, I present a thorough analysis of the literature that is currently available on this study issue, as well as the antecedents of gay Latinx-Caribbean men in the Caribbean and the US.

## **Definition of Terms in the Study**

Before diving into this study's literature review, methodology, and design, it is imperative to define critical terms mentioned throughout the study. The following terms are an adaptation from the HRC Foundation (2003) and Tucker (2009). As defined by the Human Rights website, *LGBTQ+* stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer. *Gay* is a self-identified male who forms romantic and sexual relationships primarily with other male-identified people. *Bisexual* is a person who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender, or gender identity, though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way, or to the same degree—sometimes used interchangeably with pansexual. *Lesbian* is

a self-identified female who forms romantic and sexual relationships primarily with other female-identified people. *Transgender* is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and expression differ from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. *Queer* is another umbrella identity term used by people who do not conform to norms of heterosexuality and the gender binary. A reclaimed slur is often used with a political connotation (Bianchi, 2014). *Coming out* is when a person first acknowledges, accepts, and appreciates their sexual orientation or gender identity and begins to share that with others—self-disclosure of the sexual identity or gender identity. *Sexual identity* is the sexual, emotional/spiritual attraction one can feel for others, generally labeled based on the gender relationship between the person and the people they are attracted to (HRC Foundation, 2003; Tucker, 2009). *Latinx* is a person of Latin American origin or descent (Ingoldsby, 1991). *Caribbean* is a person of Latinx descent born or living in a Caribbean nation. *Sexual Minority* is a group whose sexual identity, orientation, or practices differ from the most surrounding society. *Familism* is the Hispanic and Latino cultural concept that holds the family unit as the most important in one's life (Ingoldsby, 1991). *Machismo* is a social construct set of behaviors that reinforce male gender roles in Hispanic and Latino culture (Ingoldsby, 1991).

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Historical Trends of LGBTQ+ Latinx Individuals in the United States

Although LGBTQ+ research in the US is growing (Ahuja, 2016; Blumer & Murphy, 2011; Blumer et al., 2012; Dynes, 1987; Greteman, 2012; Hanckel, 2016; Twist, 2016; Twist et al., 2017), a review of the literature reflects that only a few studies have focused on the sexual identification process for Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals (Fankhanel, 2004; Garcia, 1998; Phillips et al., 2003; Savin-Williams, 2000; Villar et al., 2019). Further, an in-depth exploration reveals that research has only examined the experiences of Latino gay and bisexual men primarily of Mexican, Central, and South American descent (Carrier, 1995, 1976; Guarnero, 2007; Li et al., 2017; Murray, 1995; Pastrana et al., 2017; Tajon, 2009). Although a few studies have been conducted with individuals from Spanish-speaking Caribbean regions (Borrero-Bracero, 2012; Fankhanel, 2004), the majority of the studies representing Latino LGBTQ+ individuals may not support the experiences of gay men from Spanish-speaking Caribbean regions (e.g., Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba).

Approximately 7% of young adults identify as LGBTQ+ in the US (Gallup Organization, 2022; Gates, 2017). As most of these individuals often rely on family networks for support, they also have to navigate family-based processes surrounding reactions to their LGBTQ+ identities (Savin-Williams, 2005). Navigating an LGBTQ+ identity can be difficult for people living in unaccepting family environments. Family rejection is linked to mental health challenges such as depression and suicide ideation among LGBTQ+ Latinx people (Craig & McInroy, 2013; Ryan et al., 2009).

Schmitz et al. (2019) outline the familial processes of LGBTQ+ Latinx youth and their interpretations of how these dynamics can shape stressors across multiple intersecting marginalized identities (i.e., age, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity) by using an intersectional minority stress framework. It is evident that ethnographic studies have also highlighted the role of familial gender beliefs and their impact on constraining LGBTQ+ Latinx people's gender expansiveness when they do not conform to stereotypical societal standards (Acosta, 2013; Ocampo, 2012; Robinson, 2018); however, Schmitz et al.'s, (2019) findings suggest that people with various intersecting marginalized identities are more likely to experience psychological stress. Furthermore, the stress experienced is a source of systemic racism, gender policing, and religious viewpoints. Therefore, Schmitz et al. (2019) suggest an intersectional minority stress scale to continue examining how stigmatized identities and statuses impact health outcomes.

### **LGBTQ+ Sociopolitical Context in the Caribbean**

Latin America has distinguished itself over the previous decade for embracing LGBTQ+ rights. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights determined in January 2018 that the American Convention on Human Rights recognizes same-sex marriage as a human right (Malta et al., 2019). As a consequence of this development, the following nations—Barbados, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Suriname—have been compelled to make the legalization of such unions a requirement; however, not much progress has been made in certain nations (i.e., Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Suriname). Other countries (e.g., Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay) have been more open about same-sex unions even before the

American Convention on Human Rights recognized same-sex marriage as a human right by allowing marriage between people of the same sexual orientation before the court issued the judgment.

Most nations in Latin America, except some Caribbean countries, have decriminalized same-sex sexual conduct between consenting individuals. In Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, and Mexico, the constitutions protect LGBTQ+ persons from discrimination based on sexual orientation. In addition, many other regions' constitutions now include extensive non-discrimination sections that allow LGBTQ+ residents some protection (Contesse, 2019; Sheridan, 2022). Since 2010, eight nations have passed legislation outlawing sexual orientation-based discrimination (Corrales, 2015).

Argentina was the first country in Latin America to legalize same-sex marriage in 2010. In 2019, the Mexican Supreme Court declared bans on gay marriage unconstitutional. In Chile, President Sebastián Piñera vowed to advance a marriage equality bill stalled in congress since 2017. However, numerous barriers continue to prevent further advancement in the Caribbean region. LGBTQ+ campaigners encounter opposition from social and religious conservatives and certain authorities, such as El Salvador's and Brazil's current presidents (Nayib Bukele & Jair Bolsonaro), who are openly antagonistic to LGBTQ+ rights.

Likewise, the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals on the small islands in the Caribbean have been captured in the report *"I Have to Leave to Be Me"* (Berreta, 2018). Issued by Human Rights Watch, this study highlights discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals living in the Eastern Caribbean islands. It also presents the narratives of people harassed by their family members and their worries about being alone, facing violence, and homelessness (Berreta,

2018). As a result, Human Rights Watch (2020) has criticized “discriminatory legislation” in the Eastern Caribbean that leaves LGBTQ+ persons “vulnerable to discrimination, assault, and abuse” (Berreta, 2018, p. 3).

To illustrate this issue from each Spanish-speaking Caribbean country of interest in this study, it is important to recognize that each of the following islands experience different levels of tolerance of LGBTQ+ individuals. Notably, Cuba is the most liberal country in the Caribbean, followed by Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic is less tolerant due to its major Catholicism influences. The following section provides an overview of how Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic tolerate the experiences of LGBTQ+ people, which can serve as an important piece of information for clinicians working with LGBTQ+ immigrants from these islands.

### ***LGBTQ+ Rights in the Dominican Republic***

LGBTQ+ citizens in the Dominican Republic do not have access to the same rights as Dominicans who do not identify as LGBTQ+, and they confront unique legal and societal obstacles that other Dominicans do not share. For example, while the Dominican Criminal Code does not explicitly outlaw homosexuality or cross-dressing, it does not address discrimination or harassment based on a person's sexual orientation or gender identity (Penal code of Dominican Republic, 2007). Likewise, same-sex unions are not recognized in any capacity, including marriage and partnerships. In other words, households led by married couples of the same gender are not eligible for any privileges granted to married couples of the opposite gender (Kurtz, 2009).



Moreover, the Independent Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) surveyed 65 countries in 2016, including the Dominican Republic, on the personal and political attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people worldwide. Most participants were heterosexual individuals. They were asked a battery of questions on their perceptions of LGBTQ+ people. The researchers found that 64 percent of Dominicans agreed that gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals should have the same rights as heterosexual people, while 22 percent disagreed. In addition, 65 percent of respondents concurred that they should be shielded against job discrimination.

On the other hand, 20 percent of Dominicans believe those in relationships with others of the same sexual orientation should be prosecuted for criminal offenses. In comparison, 61 percent disagree with this viewpoint. Concerning people who identify as transgender, 67 percent of respondents agreed that they should have the same rights, 65 percent believed that they should be protected from employment discrimination, and 45 percent thought that a plurality of transgender people should be allowed to change their legal gender (ILGA-RIWI, 2016). Unfortunately, the results of this study support the notion that the LGBTQ+ community is still subjected to prejudice in the Dominican Republic, in addition to its institutionalized racism, ableism, and ageism practices.

### ***LGBTQ+ Rights in Cuba***

There has been a significant expansion of LGBTQ+ rights in Cuba. After the Cuban Family Code vote in 2022, Cuba's regulations for LGBTQ+ people are now among the most progressive in Latin America (Sheridan, 2022). In May 2019, the Cuban government released a statement that the Union of Cuban Jurists was working on a new Family Code that would include marriages between people of the same gender (Alfonso, 2018). On September 7, 2021, the

government announced that the new Family Code would be presented to the National Assembly for approval. Then it would be placed to a popular vote to legalize same-sex marriage if it was successful in the referendum (Robbio, 2021). The referendum was granted permission in April 2022 and was held in September 2022, after which it was determined successful (Frank, 2022). Today, it is against the law in Cuba to discriminate against someone based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

### ***LGBTQ+ Rights in Puerto Rico***

Puerto Rico has had a significant historical impact on the legal rights of LGBTQ+ individuals living on the island. In 2008, the Legislative Assembly attempted but failed to put a referendum to voters to change Puerto Rico's Constitution to define marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman and to prohibit same-sex weddings, civil unions, and domestic partnership benefits (HRC Responds to Rash of Anti-LGBTQ+ Violence in Puerto Rico, 2020). In 2009, similar legislation was proposed but defeated, and in 2010 Governor Luis Fortuño agreed with a group of evangelical ministers. He told them he supported changing the Puerto Rican Constitution to limit marriage to one man and one woman (Towle, 2010).

Today, in Puerto Rico, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) people have nearly the same protections under the law as heterosexual people. The public debate and discussion on sexual orientation and gender identity issues have significantly impacted, and specific legislative reforms have been implemented (American Civil Liberties Union, 2000). Indeed, conservatives' and liberals' views on the laws that safeguard the rights of LGBTQ+ Puerto Rican people can still be found in both major political parties. Although there has been much progress at the federal and state levels, public hostility towards LGBTQ+ individuals

persists, primarily due to the Roman Catholic church's and socially conservative protestants' considerable influence on the island (HRC Responds to Rash of Anti-LGBTQ+ Violence in Puerto Rico, 2020). However, since July 2015, when the United States Supreme Court declared in the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) that same-sex marriage restrictions are unconstitutional, same-sex marriage has been lawful throughout Puerto Rico.

### **The Coming Out Process**

Floyd and Bakeman (2006) state that coming out, in its simplest definition, is a process by which LGBTQ+ individuals become aware of their sexual orientation and gender identity and disclose it to others. During this process, individuals often experience stress, rejection by family members and friends, stigmatization, discrimination in different environments (e.g., school and work), verbal, physical, and emotional abuse (Bonet et al., 2007; Cox et al., 2011). On the other hand, recent research suggests that coming out can promote peoples' self-identity and positively affect their lives (Vaughan & Waehler, 2009), in addition to being related to a significant reduction in anxiety and sadness, higher self-worth, and better quality of life. This is directly related to the post-coming out experience when individuals experience a sense of being their true authentic selves (Cornett, 1995), along with courage and resilience (Vaughan & Waehler, 2009).

One important aspect of coming out is visibility management (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007). Twist et al., (2022) describes visibility management as the process in which people make the conscious decisions to expose or not expose their minoritized identities. Twist and colleagues explain that people make the choice to be visible in certain sub-groups within the larger group due to patriarchal assumptions and ideologies that keep sexual minority individuals outside of

cultural norms. For instance, individuals chose to be “visible to members of their family of origin but invisible at work, and others completely visible while their partner may not be, and some are invisible to some or all of the people in their lives” (p. 196). Essentially, visibility management not only involves the disclosure of one’s intersecting identity, but how, when, and where people engage in this practice.

It is essential to mention that LGBTQ+ individuals are coming out up to ten years earlier than 30 years ago, with approximately 5-6 percent of adolescents in grades 7-12 identifying as LGBTQ+ (Rossi, 2010; Savin-Williams, 2005). Nonetheless, coming out is and maintaining that visibility management are complex ongoing processes and practice. Rivers (1995) describes this process as “incremental and non-linear” (p. 37), which LGBTQ individuals experience throughout their lives in new personal, social, and family settings. Likewise, Blumer and Green (2011) support that individuals are often faced with the decision to maintain on-going visibility management mainly due to issues related to safety all throughout their lives.

### **Latinx Caribbean Gay Coming Out Experiences**

Gattamorta and Quidley-Rodriguez (2018) were the first authors to publish research focused exclusively on Latinx parents and their experiences of having a child disclose their sexual identity, which acknowledges the importance of studying Latinx parent-child relationships during the identity formation process. Likewise, other research studies done with Latinx families on how cultural beliefs may influence family members' responses to sexual minorities indicate that family can provide a supportive role during the sexual identification process (Pastrana, 2015; Swendener & Woodell, 2016). However, research on familial reactions during individuals' sexual identity development from Caribbean regions has not been

conducted. Researchers have identified psychosocial stressors (i.e., dysfunctional family relationships, verbal or physical abuse, and eviction) as risk factors for mental health issues for Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals in the Caribbean islands (White et al., 2010), as well as other risk factors for gay men of color (Bowleg, 2013; Hunter, 2010). However, only a few studies addressing the coming-out experiences (Munoz & D'Aniello, 2020), sexual identity and family reactions have been conducted with individuals from Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries (Borrero-Bracero, 2012; Fankhanel, 2004).

Meanwhile, the vast majority of the studies representing sexual identification only explore Latinx individuals' experiences from regions different from the Caribbean (i.e., Mexico, Central, and South America) (Carrier, 1995, 1976; Guarnero, 2007; Li et al., 2017; Murray, 1995; Pastrana et al., 2017; Tajon, 2009). Therefore, it is crucial to understand better the unique and differing sexual formation experiences of Spanish-speaking Caribbean gay men. Without this research, there is a perpetuated assumption that gay individuals from all Latinx regions experience similar coming-out processes, mental health issues, and sexual identity formation, both inaccurate and potentially harmful. Moreover, in the past decade, several studies conducted in the United States have determined that members of marginalized communities, such as LGBTQ+ and Latinx individuals, are at a higher risk for mental health issues (White et al., 2010). These issues include depression (Mitrani et al., 2017), anxiety (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2015), trauma, paranoia, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors (Baams et al., 2015), and suicidality during the coming out process (King et al., 2008; Russell & Fish, 2016).

## Latinx Population in the United States

As the Latinx population continues to grow in the US, so does the lack of resources (i.e., mental health services, community support, and linguistically appropriate services) for Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals. Data from the United States Census Bureau (2019a) reports that the Hispanic or Latino population, which includes people of any race, was 62.1 million in 2020. In 2020, the U.S. was more diverse than it was in 2010. In 2020, the white (non-Hispanic) group made up 59.7% of the population, compared with 63.8% in 2010. The Latinx population grew by 23%, while the population that was not of Latinx origin grew by 4.3% since 2010, representing 18.9% of the total population.

Similarly, as this study examines the experiences of individuals of Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Dominican descent, it is crucial to examine the most current population data from the U.S. Census. Today, nearly 70% of all Cuban Americans live in Florida. Cubans represent 3.5% of all Latinx, and 0.58% of the U.S. population, while Puerto Rican represent 9.6% of the Latinx population, which makes them the second largest Latinx group nationwide, after Mexican Americans, and they are 1.78% of the entire population of the United States. Puerto Ricans are also the largest Caribbean-origin group in the country, representing over one-third of people with origins in the geographic Caribbean region (United States Census Bureau, 2019a). Immigrants from the Dominican Republic are the fourth-largest Hispanic immigrant group in the United States, after Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Cubans. The Dominican foreign-born population increased by 33 percent from 2010 to 2019, making its nearly 1.2 million people close to 3 percent of the overall U.S. immigrant population of 44.9 million (United States Census Bureau, 2010). The Dominican diaspora, the 18th largest in the US, comprises approximately

2.4 million U.S. residents who were either born in the Dominican Republic or reported Dominican ancestry or origin (Gibson & Kay, 2006). It is important to mention that by 2060 the Latinx population is expected to reach 111 million, with Mexican Americans representing the largest group with 66.1% of the total Latinx population (United States Census Bureau, 2019b; Census Bureau, 2020).

### **Latinx Critical Theory (LatCrit) and Acculturation**

In 1995, a group of legal scholars attending a meeting about Latinx communities and critical race theory created Latinx critical legal theory (LatCrit; Bender & Valdes, 2011). LatCrit was founded upon “critical legal studies, feminist legal theory, critical race theory, critical race feminism, Asian American legal scholarship, and queer theory” (Bender & Valdes, 2011, p. 415). LatCrit is a subfield of critical race theory (Yosso, 2005), and its goals are to promote the interests of the Latinx culture in America. Two main aims of LatCrit are to a) develop and encourage interdisciplinary discourse in law and policy focused on Latinx individuals and b) develop and access law and theory to be used for social and legal transformation (Iglesias, 2001). In addition, LatCrit theorists aim to promote socially just activism and awareness about Latinx in a broader multi-diverse framework.

A literature review illustrates how LatCrit theory conceptualizes the intersectionality of the numerous Latin nations and the different race, class, and gender issues in the Latinx community. Psychosocial issues related to U.S. legal, social, and economic policies impact second-generation families living in the U.S. From a social justice lens, LatCrit theory gives clinicians a more culturally accurate and sensitive framework to assess, treat, and evaluate Latinx families (Guajardo et al., 2020). In addition, LatCrit theory reflects an anti-essentialist

view because Latinx people come from various nations, classes, ethnicities, and races (Truyol, 1994). Therefore, intragroup differences are essential to understand in the Latinx community and family. LatCrit theory continues to develop as a collective work with many scholars and activists (Iglesias, 2001).

Latinx individuals' ethnic, immigration, and acculturation processes are often overlooked in society and research. The Latinx immigrant community is frequently underrepresented in empirical research (Gleeson & Bloemraad, 2013) due to this lack of appreciation for cultural distinctions, which further leaves clinicians unprepared to engage with this unique population. Therefore, clinicians working with the Latinx immigrant group should consider any acculturation difficulties this population may encounter. Indeed, gay Latinx-Caribbean immigrants experience problems due to acculturation concerns, which could lead to harmful behaviors (e.g., promiscuity, substance abuse, and suicide).

### **Sexual Identity Process in the Caribbean**

As previously mentioned, the lack of research on the sexual identity process for LGBTQ+ Latinx Caribbean individuals is scarce; however, Perez's (1993) was the first descriptive study regarding the attitudes, interests, activities, interpersonal relationships, and personal descriptions of gay youth in Puerto Rico. Most participants in this study were from the San Juan Metropolitan area. Perez's study significantly affected the distinction between Latinx-Caribbean religious and family values. In this study, 40% of individuals indicated they were Catholic, 10% Protestant, and 50% other or none. However, at the time of the survey, 46.7% stated that they did not consider themselves religious, 33.3% considered themselves moderately religious, and 20% considered themselves highly religious. This indicates that less than half of Caribbean gay



men consider themselves non-religious, potentially linked to religious trauma experiences from their family of origin.

Likewise, in the area of sexual identity awareness and acceptance, Mercado-Martinez (2000) found that most of the participants, most of them gay youth of Puerto Rican descent, became aware of their sexual orientation between the ages of 6 and 10. One reported becoming aware between the ages of 16 and 20, and seven (24.1%) said becoming aware between the ages of 11 and 15. When asked how they felt when they recognized their sexual orientation, among the multiple feelings each could have reported, the majority expressed fear and confusion. Mercado-Martinez also wanted to find out how Caribbean gay youth managed their sexual identity. Various participants' responses revealed that most attended gay support groups, while others attended psychotherapy and sought friends' support to process their queer identity.

Perez's (1993) and Mercado-Martinez's (2000) studies are the most recent specifically targeted studies of the sexual identity process for gay youth in the Caribbean. The findings are an excellent source for future studies on this population. Utilizing the majority of the variables used by these researchers and expanding from them will allow for a solid investigation that will target a sample of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean population.

### **Cultural and Traditional Family Elements in Caribbean Families**

Caribbean families are generally headed by women who assume economic and childcare responsibilities (Henry 1994; Lashley, 2000). In cultural contexts, family unity and cohesion gain much importance as the family is perceived as a protection, and thus transmission of filial respect is emphasized (Yearwood, 2001). Likewise, in immigration contexts, Latinx Caribbean

parents have high expectations for their children's education and want them to earn an academic degree to increase their chances of success in the future (Kasinitz et al. 2001). Although women take care of household duties and assume significant roles in the household, within the traditional Latino family, “the male head-of-household, whether living in the household or not, retains primary responsibility for family functioning, including the children” (Mayo, 1997, p. 53). The father covertly and overtly inherently is in charge, controls, and leads the household. Because of the patriarchal family structure evident in Latinx culture, the father is the authoritative figure of the family. The father is viewed as the main financial supporter, even though both parents, in many cases, now share this responsibility. As such, the father is highly respected and regarded. A machismo role further characterizes the Latinx culture. It is expected that every male portrays his masculine gender in all areas of the social domain by acting aggressively to conquer females and verbally and physically imposing his strength over others (Ingoldsby, 1991). Moreover, in the Latinx culture, there is a direct association that if you are a submissive male, you are most likely gay and are never applauded (Gonzalez & Castellanos, 2003). Therefore, there is an expectation that any male who hints that he is gay will be ridiculed and rejected. Ultimately, this belief is connected to the Spaniards' introduction of patriarchal social values, including machismo, to Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico (Cowan, 2017).

### ***Machismo***

As defined by De La Cencela (1986), *Machismo* is a “socially constructed, learned, and reinforced set of behaviors comprising the content of male gender roles in Latino society” (p. 291). Indeed, machismo is the commonly accepted manner for a Latino male to carry himself in

different settings. Sadly, machismo has usually been perceived as a cultural and social problem that leads to violence, drinking, prejudice, family dysfunction, dominance, and other unproductive behaviors (Carroll, 1980; Diaz-Guerrero, 1967; Jones, 1948; Lewis, 1961; Madsen, 1964; Ramos, 1962; Rubel, 1966). Aggression, sexual prowess, physical strength, dominance, control, and power are characteristics that have been externalized in the machista society and are, therefore, easier to seize (Perilla, 1999). It's crucial to realize that machismo can also be a beneficial quality that men might have, and that machismo has been an influential and critical factor in many Latinx families. Unfortunately, the positive side of machismo is rarely seen or emphasized. The positive traits of machismo include a sense of duty toward one's family and the conviction that one must uphold the honor of one's lineage over generations (Perilla, 1999).

Moreover, to safeguard and keep their family safe, machista males work to earn the respect of every family member. When men who seek respect do not get it and may react in the circumstance with anger, leading to abuse, this significant aspect of machismo can be quickly destroyed. At this point, machismo becomes more overt, and men start to assert their dominance over women and other men. Men start acting aggressively toward their partners or other family members to assert their masculinity. Since machismo is frequently linked with men, decisions made by men can change how machismo is perceived, from positive to bad, which can result in abuse (Perilla, 1999). The males in the family expect the dominant notion of machismo. However, most Latino gay men do not adhere to the expected masculine ideologies, behaviors, and values of a machista culture. Indeed, gay Latino men are treated differently because they do not show the hyper-masculine idealization of men in the Latinx community (Hardin, 2002). The idea of not carrying yourself as a macho man in the Latinx culture

automatically takes away the manhood of gay men. According to Dube and Savin-Williams (1999), “The rigid gender roles among Latino families may lead to higher rates of internalized homophobia and feelings that their same-sex attractions are reprehensible” (p. 1397).

Therefore, gay Latino men are seen as feminine, weak, and devalued (Cantu, 2011), stripping away gay men of their manhood.

### ***Religion and Anti-LGBTQ+ Family Dynamics***

The Latinx cultural strong conservative Christian beliefs and religious values—predominately Judeo-Christian, with Catholics representing 85% of the population in Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries—are also factors that cause concern in Caribbean gay people during their self-acceptance and coming-out process (Burgos & Diaz-Perez, 1985). Hence, gay Caribbean men are often confronted with multiple stressors from parents, traditional cultural values, and religious views (Pastrana, 2015). These directly affect their perception of sexual behavior and the coming-out process.

Implications of family relations in gay male identity formation have been studied by several researchers demonstrating how familial and religious ideologies can fracture family systems and the formation of a secure sexual identity for LGBTQ+ individuals (Armesto & Weisman, 2001; Beaty, 1999; Broido, 1999; Cass, 1984; D’Augelli & Patterson, 1995, 2001; Elizur, 2001; Garcia, 1998; Green, 1998; Herdt, 1989; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Morales, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1998). Thus, Latinx-identifying LGBTQ+ individuals face unique life challenges, such as heightened exposure to prejudiced religious affiliation (Barnes & Meyer, 2012). Although religion is often influential within Latinx families (Pastrana, 2015) and can shape family dynamics (Page et al., 2013), little is known about how intersecting familial

resistance processes, including anti-LGBTQ+ religious beliefs, shape LGBTQ+ Latinx young adults' sexual identity and mental health.

Nonetheless, coming out to parents causes the most significant emotional and psychological turmoil among gay individuals (Pastrana, 2015). Research confirms this no matter the ethnic group to which the gay person belongs. As such, a study of this issue among Caribbean gay men should focus on those family issues, more than just repeating what has been done elsewhere; the emphasis should be placed on the peculiarities of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean culture, with religion, family, and gender roles being key areas to include.

### **Mental Health Protective Factors in the Latinx Community**

Despite Latinx families experiencing risk factors that impact psychological distress, families also encounter protective factors that help mitigate the effects of acculturation and related stressors. Bailey et al. (2015) defined protective factors as noticeable characteristics within a single family, group, or population that strengthen human development or health recovery. Conclusively, protective factors are life factors that protect the family from risks and promote resilience (Garnici et al., 2021).

Generally, Latinx families experience a variety of protective factors. Organista et al. (2017) explained that Latinx families adhere to either surface or deep protective factors. Organista and colleagues identified surface protective factors in this article as people, culture, locations, familiar clothing, and music. Contrarily, a deeper understanding of protective factors includes environmental, developmental, psychological influences and intrapersonal interactions. Deep protective factors include appreciating surface protective factors such as religion, economics, and ecological systems that foster resilience and protection (Maldonado-

Molina et al., 2021). Incorporating culture into interactions with Latinx families is also a profound protective factor for families. Language is another vital protective factor. For instance, community resources targeted toward Latinx families are perceived as culturally competent, respectful, and capable of serving the needs of Latinx families and problem-solving if they provide services in Spanish (Organista et al., 2017).

Overall, Latinx families encounter many protective factors on a surface level that assist with the relational and psychological distress experienced while coping and building resilience not otherwise experienced by other populations (Maldonado-Molina et al., 2021). For example, Latinx families at low risk for child maltreatment encounter several protective factors, such as social support during challenging circumstances, parental resilience, parenting skills, improved child development, and a healthier understanding of emotional development for youth (Bailey et al., 2015). In addition, families with more protective factors experience greater family cohesion (i.e., affective closeness, loyalty, collective decision-making, and interdependence).

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher provides an extensive literature review on this research topic, including a historical overview of the LGBTQ+ Latinx community in the US and the sociopolitical contexts in this study's three focus regions. The researcher distinguishes the general coming out process from the Latinx Caribbean coming out experiences. In addition, he discusses the Latinx population in the US and the acculturation process and introduced LatCrit theory. Finally, he highlights how the sexual identity process is different for Caribbean gay men, the cultural and traditional elements that influence Caribbean families, and the mental health protective factors in the Latinx community.

Without a doubt, much research has been done. However, it is still being completed with LGBTQ+ individuals' sexual identity processes, coming out experiences, and the consequences of accepting a minority sexual identity. In addition, as presented above, most research concentrates on LGBTQ+ individuals born and raised in the United States, leaving out the Latinx immigrant group. As a result, it is important to note that more research on the immigrant LGBTQ+ Latinx population that examines experiences and variables directly related to cultural heritage and regional location is critical. The next chapter presents his study's methodology, procedures, and data analysis.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter summarizes the research methods and procedures the researcher used to answer the overall research question: *how do Latinx Caribbean gay cisgender men who live in the US experience the sexual identity process?* Furthermore, the chapter introduces a qualitative phenomenological design, which helped the researcher create a flexible process to analyze and immerse himself in the data. Creswell (2007) defines qualitative phenomenological research as one that provides an in-depth of a social phenomenon or event that promotes comprehension and awareness. A phenomenological approach not only depicts the essence of an experience but also concentrates on the lived experiences of particular individuals in a population (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Hence, this study explicitly follows a descriptive phenomenological research methodology.

Using data-gathering techniques, such as conducting focus groups and extrapolating themes from participants' discussions, helped achieve the goal of a phenomenological approach by describing and interpreting participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). In alignment with the goals of the phenomenological approach and qualitative data collection method, this study used focus groups as the primary qualitative method to collect data and investigate the experiences of gay men from Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries. The following components comprise the method and methodology of this chapter: research design, qualitative procedures to collect data, and data collection.

A single focus group was considered to be the best suitable method for this study, where participants interacted in a rich discussion of the primary topic as one group in one place (Morgan, 1996). The use of a single focus group method suits the phenomenological theoretical



framework (Palmer et al., 2010), and one of the benefits of using a focus group in an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) qualitative research study is that it can facilitate the exploration of shared experiences and meanings among participants. Focus groups provide a group dynamic that allows for the emergence of group-specific themes and perspectives, which may not have emerged in individual interviews. According to Morgan (1997), focus groups provide a context in which participants can explore their own and others' experiences and perspectives, leading to a more in-depth understanding of the research topic. In an IPA study, this can be particularly valuable as it allows for the identification of shared themes and meanings among participants, which can then be further explored in individual interviews.

Another benefit of using a focus group in an IPA qualitative research study is that it can enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. According to Krueger and Casey (2000), focus groups allow for the triangulation of data, as multiple sources of data are gathered within a single session. This can help to increase the reliability and validity of the findings, as multiple perspectives are gathered and analyzed. In addition, focus groups can also provide an opportunity for member checking, where participants can review and verify the accuracy of the findings. This can increase the credibility of the study and ensure that the findings are grounded in the perspectives and experiences of the participants.

Overall, the method and theoretical framework in this study were consistent with my goal of better understanding Latino Caribbean gay men's experiences by “[understanding] the phenomena in [the] terms to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person allowing the essence to emerge” (Cameron et al., 2001, p. 34). More importantly, to allow participants rich experiences to emerge, Gliner and Morgan (2000) state that the first

stage of acquiring descriptive data is imperative and the study's unique needs must be identified, as well as having full comprehension on the group being researched. This study's unique needs are explained in the introduction chapter, and to immerse myself into the participants experiences engaged in reflexivity (see reflexivity statement). My hope was to examine the experiences of cisgender gay men from Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries in a single focus group.

### **Methodological Design**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Latino Caribbean cisgender gay men during their sexual identity process. In order to capture the rich and complex nature of these experiences, a phenomenological approach was used as the methodological framework (Giorgi, 2009). This approach emphasizes the subjective experiences of individuals and aims to uncover the underlying meanings that inform their perspectives and actions. The use of phenomenology allowed for a deep and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, as well as the experiences and perspectives of those affected by it.

Recruitment for this study was done through social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. This approach allowed for a wide reach and access to individuals who may have been affected by the phenomenon under investigation. Participants were selected based on their experiences related to the phenomenon and were invited to participate in a focus group. The use of a focus group allowed for the exploration of shared experiences and meanings among participants, which is a key aspect of the phenomenological approach.

Data collected from the focus group was examined using a phenomenological data analysis method. This involved a thorough and systematic analysis of the data to identify

common themes and underlying meanings that emerged from the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The use of a phenomenological data analysis method ensured that the findings were grounded in the subjective experiences of the participants and provided a rich and detailed understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual framework designed for this study helped me focus and shape the research process, informed the methodological design, and influenced the data collection instruments used (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). As noted previously, my decision to choose a qualitative research approach was in line with the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009) to investigate the phenomenon associated with Caribbean gay men and their experiences during the sexual identity process.

As defined by Creswell (2009), “phenomenology is a research strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). IPA aims to explore how particular people in specific contexts make meaning and interpret their experiences. The focus is primarily on the participants' perspectives on their own experiences rather than explaining their experiences in transcendental ways.

van Manen (1990) describes phenomenological research as an interplay of different research activities. While conducting the study, my first focus was on the lived experiences and concerns of the participants. Second, I took a reflective stance by reflecting on important themes that emerge from the participants' lived experiences. Third, I then wrote descriptions of the phenomenon and maintained a solid relationship to the researched topic.

The primary purpose of the phenomenological approach is to explore the meaning of the lived experience of people and identify the commonalities that humans or research participants have. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding and provides insight into how individuals maintain more significant contact with the world (Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 1990, 2016). This idea is further confirmed by Groenewald (2004) as he states:

The operative word in phenomenological research is *describe*. The researcher aims to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, to refrain from any pre-given framework, but to remain true to the facts. The phenomenologist is concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved (p. 44).

Although various methods can be used in phenomenological research, including interviews and focus group meetings, I used a focus group to address the research questions. It is essential to mention that by using a phenomenological approach with a focus group, I was able to collect rich data due to the proximity, prolonged engagement, and the relationship I built with the participants. Rather than using the notion of *bracketing* my own experiences as the primary researcher, I decided how and in what ways my understanding could be introduced to the study and usefully incorporated into the analysis, which helped in understanding the participants' experiences, and created an interpretative rather than descriptive methodology (van Manen, 1990, 2016).

### **Qualitative Methodology**

Unlike the quantitative approach, the qualitative approach is well known for providing a human voice to the results of a study by deeply analyzing individual experiences with a certain

phenomenon (Smith, 1983). I decided to use the qualitative approach over a quantitative one because its research explanatory components and unique data collection tools (e.g., focus groups; Smith, 1983). Also, a qualitative approach would help me discover and capture the authentic experiences of Caribbean gay men from Spanish regions, providing a voice for those experiencing the complexities of the sexual identity process.

Finally, the use of a qualitative phenomenological approach provided a sense of humanity in the data I collected, rather than numerical data, to make conclusions about the participants' experiences. Overall, my passion for research with Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals, family members that identified as LGBTQ+ while growing up, the negative experiences I and others have gone through while living in the Caribbean during our former years and going through the sexual identity discovery process, and the lack of research on the therapeutic treatment for Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals sparked my interest in choosing a qualitative phenomenological approach for this study. My hope is through this study, mental health professionals, family members, and community leaders gain a better understanding of the unique experiences of Latinx gay individuals and become culturally competent and sensitive to serving the Latinx LGBTQ+ community.

### ***Role as a Phenomenological Researcher***

Prior to conducting the study, I understood that my responsibility as a qualitative phenomenological researcher was to investigate and further evaluate the factors contributing to the participants' lived experiences. My role was to explore and describe the lived experiences of individuals who have been affected the sexual identity process. In this approach, I aimed to understand the subjective experiences of the participants and uncover the

underlying meanings that informed their perspectives and actions (Giorgi, 2009). To achieve this goal, the I engaged in the process of bracketing, which involved setting aside preconceived assumptions and biases in order to approach the data with an open mind (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) recommends that the researcher bracket themselves away from the participants' experiences to elicit the core of a genuine research investigation. Gearing (2004) defines bracketing as a “scientific process in which a researcher suspends or holds in abeyance his or her presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to see and describe the phenomenon” (p. 1430). In a sense, the whole purpose of the phenomenological approach is to have the reader reflect on the participants' lived experiences so they can also engage in reflection and perhaps “understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46).

Throughout this process, I also maintained an empathetic and non-judgmental stance towards the participants and their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). I was able to consider the pros and cons that emerged during and after the study. As I explored the participants' experiences, I also amplified their unique, authentic lived experiences through the data analysis process. I was responsible to “focus on context analysis, explore the deeply rooted causes of phenomena, and highlight the explanations of what happened” (Wu & Wu, 2011, p. 1305). I was also conscientious about the freedom to share lived experiences by allowing participants to share their stories without any fear of distortions. Moustakas (1994) states that phenomenological researchers should maintain an open approach to analyze the “underlying dynamics of the [participants'] experience” (p. 135). More importantly, I was attentive to the ways in which my own experiences and perspectives influenced the research process and

findings. This required a high level of reflexivity, which involved reflecting on and acknowledging my own positionality in relation to the research (Finlay, 2002). Overall, my role as a phenomenological researcher in this study was to provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of sexual identity process through a rigorous and empathetic exploration of the participants' experiences.

### **Participants**

Regarding the research population and sample size of this study, Creswell (2012) states that “it is vital to estimate the size of the sample you will require when choosing participants for a study” (p. 146). Similarly, in the tradition of phenomenological study, the number of participants ranges between 2 and 25. The selection of these people should reflect and depict the homogeneity in the sample pool of participants. The goal of doing an IPA research study with homogeneous individuals is to “better gauge and better understand the overall perceptions among the participants lived experiences” (Alase, 2017, p. 13). Likewise, Creswell (2013) confirms that “it is critical that all participants share [same lived] experience with the issue being examined” (p. 155).

Although 95 people were curious about the study, 45 were fully interested in taking part, and 6 met full criteria. Particular attention will be paid to the challenges experienced during the recruitment process in the recruitment section. The population in this study was purposely selected and consisted of adult Latino Caribbean cisgender gay men from Spanish-speaking countries.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Purposive sampling is one type of sample selection in IPA, which is used to select participants

based on their unique characteristics that are relevant to the study's research question (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants who can provide rich and diverse data that are relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This method of sampling enables researchers to capture participants' experiences and perspectives that are meaningful to the study's objectives. Purposive sampling can include criterion sampling, which involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, that are relevant to the research question (Gill et al., 2008). By using purposive sampling, researchers can gain a deep understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives, which can lead to a rich and nuanced interpretation of the data.

The participants in this study were selected because of their shared experience of being Caribbean gay men who have experienced the sexual identity process while maintaining Spanish Caribbean traditional values. Specifically, the study's participants were from a homogeneous sample of six adults at different adulthood developmental stages (i.e., young adults & middle-aged adults; Erikson, 1950).

In this chapter, I present the methodology used to collect and analyze data for this study. Before diving into the details of the methodology, it is imperative to provide a brief overview of the participants involved in this research.

It is important to note that all participants in this study were recruited through social media platforms, which may have implications for the generalizability of the findings. However, I believe that the use of social media allowed me to reach a diverse group of individuals who may not have been accessible through other recruitment methods.



Overall, the participants in this study represent a diverse range of ages, educational backgrounds, and occupations, providing a rich source of data for exploring the phenomenon under investigation. The demographic table (see table 1) serves as a useful reference for understanding the characteristics of the participants in this study.

The participants in this qualitative study are six males of different ages and ethnic backgrounds who work in various professions including military, sales, therapy, law, retail, and finance (see table 1). The participants in this qualitative study share some similarities and differences.

As an IPA approach highlights, the participants' unique experiences and perspectives shape how they understand and interpret the topic. For instance, one of the participants who works in the military, may have a different viewpoint than another one, who is a therapist. Additionally, while some participants have bachelor's or master's degrees, others have only a high school diploma, which may influence their language use and how they express their thoughts and feelings (Gill et al., 2008). Nonetheless, I aimed to explore the commonalities and differences among the participants' experiences and perspectives, rather than making generalizations based on their demographic characteristics.

### **Informed Consent and Sample Selection**

Creswell (2013) states that it is “important [that the phenomenological researcher] obtains participants’ written permission” (p. 154). Creswell (2013) also suggests that “[the researcher should] select people or sites that can best help [the researcher] understand the central phenomenon” with proper informed consent (p. 206). Moreover, according to Smith et al. (2009), “samples [should] be selected purposively (rather than through probability methods)

because they can offer a research project insight into a particular experience” (p. 48).

Therefore, it is possible to get better and richer data when selecting participants purposively from a homogeneous sample. Indeed, Smith et al. (2009) mention that “IPA studies are conducted on relatively small sample sizes, and the aim is to find a reasonably homogeneous sample, so that, within the sample, we can examine convergence and divergence in some detail” (p. 3).

As noted before, an IPA research investigation should use a homogenous sample pool. As a result, there are several approaches to choosing and inviting people to a research project in an IPA selection and invitation process, which will be covered later in this chapter.

During the recruitment process I used the Enterprise SurveyMonkey version (Waclawski, 2012), with appropriate ethical approval from AUNE IRB committee, as the main platform to gather the signed demographic questionnaires and consent forms from the participants. Upon receiving participation inquiry, I sent a link directly to the participants’ email address with specifications on the importance of reading, signing, and dating the full consent form. Prior to the focus group, participants reviewed and signed the university approved informed consent form that described the scope of the study and how collected data would be used (see Appendix C). In addition, I gave the participants an opportunity to contact him prior to signing the consent form if they had any doubts or questions about the study.

## **Procedures**

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

In qualitative research, inclusion criteria are crucial in defining the sample to be studied. For this study that utilizes the IPA framework, the inclusion criteria play a significant role in the

analysis and interpretation of the data. IPA aims to examine how individuals make sense of their experiences and how they construct meanings from their unique perspectives (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Therefore, it is essential to carefully select the inclusion criteria to ensure that participants can provide rich and diverse data that can shed light on the topic under study. For this study, I included only adult men who identify as cisgender gay Latino or from Spanish Caribbean descent who live in the US. The inclusion criteria were chosen to ensure that the participants' unique experiences and perspectives were captured, while also maintaining some degree of homogeneity to facilitate analysis and interpretation. Hence, all participants in this study self-identified as English-speaking cisgender gay adult (18+) males of Latino Spanish-Caribbean descent (i.e., Dominican, Cuban, Puerto Rican). The participants needed to be fluent in English due to the primary language in which the focus groups were conducted and the content of the material that was disseminated to them.

### ***Exclusion Criteria***

Exclusion criteria are used to ensure that the participants selected for a study are suitable for the research question being investigated (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In this study, exclusion criteria were applied to ensure that the sample of participants was appropriate for the IPA framework used. Participants who did not identify as cisgender gay Latino or from Spanish Caribbean descent, or who did not live in the US were excluded from the study. Exclusion criteria also included individuals who were not willing to discuss their experiences and perspectives on the sexual identity process and those who had mental health issues that could affect their ability to participate (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

During the exclusion process, I ensured that the participants' experiences and perspectives were relevant to the research question and could be analyzed effectively using the IPA framework (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This approach helped to ensure that the data collected were meaningful and relevant to the study's objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this study, out of 45 participants who expressed interest in participating, 39 were excluded based on several criteria. The reasons for exclusion included 10 participants who did not identify as cisgender, 15 who did not identify as gay, 5 who identified as female, 5 who skipped multiple questions on the demographic questionnaire, and 4 who did not sign the informed consent form. The remaining 6 participants were included in the study sample.

### ***Social Media Recruitment***

Many scholars have established that social media can be an effective platform to recruit participants from underrepresented populations (Barratt et al., 2015; Masson et al., 2013; Palys & Atchinson, 2012). However, it is important to note that in this study there was a potential of ethical concerns related to the relationships between participants and the researcher when recruitment was conducted while using my personal social media platforms.

To recruit the participants, I used my professional private Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn profiles to disseminate the study's flyer (see Appendix D) and social media blurbs (see Appendix E). Oakley (1981) supports this strategy as one that promotes the benefit of a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and participants. Oakley argued in favor of a strategy in which the researcher ties their own identity to the research in all aspects. Although there were not any safety issues in relation to the use of my social media platforms, giving full access to my social media platforms, rather than just face-to-face interactions, might have

presented some safety concerns (Morse, 2007). Moreover, being completely reciprocal, inclusive, and open could have exposed all of my personal content which could be seen by the participants.

Although researcher's safety is not often addressed by many scholars, Morse (2007) agrees that the researchers' safety is the most important consideration in a qualitative project. Therefore, during this study I took considerable precautions when recruiting participants online. Although it was not my intent to create a private social media solely for this study as an alternative to using my professional accounts, I had online engagement limitations to participants who shared interest. As a reflexive researcher, who values the reciprocal nature of sharing in social media environments, which also promotes joining with participants as one of the main aspects of high-quality research, I thought that using separate social media platforms would promote a sense of depersonalization that might create distance between the participants and myself.

Although the joining process with participants is important to me, I was transparent with participants who share online interest in participating in the study. I made clear to participant that a social media and personal friendships are separate from their participation in the research study. Participants were made aware of this statement through the initial online contact and the inform consent. Participants were highly encouraged to contact the me via call, text, or email if interested in taking part in the study. I also made clear that I was not going to engage in conversation that was not pertinent to the study with any participant through any of the social media platforms. This was clearly stated in the Social Media Blurb.

### ***Community Recruitment***

Although Yancey et al. (2006) note that community involvement or community-based organizations' utility is critical to recruitment success, prior to starting the recruitment process, I initially considered some outpatient behavioral health community clinics in Connecticut (i.e., Community Mental Health Affiliates, Community Health Center in Torrington, and Hartford Gay & Lesbian Health Collective) as a secondary recruitment strategy; however, since all of the participants were recruited online, the community recruitment strategy was not part of this study.

My thoughts around including a community recruitment as a secondary strategy were in case the primary recruitment strategy did not work. With this in mind, my intention was to keep the study to a regional scope by reaching out to the undergrad and master's programs at the two major state universities in Connecticut (i.e., Central Connecticut State University and the University of Connecticut) and other LGBTQ+ community organizations in Connecticut (i.e., True Colors and New Haven Pride Center).

### ***Study's Recruitment Process***

The initial recruitment locations were programed to be at gay bars and night clubs in Hartford and New Haven, Connecticut (i.e., Chez Est, Gotham Citi Café, and Partners Café), however, I did not recruit any participants from these locations due to an overwhelming number of participants sharing their interest through the social media platforms.

The study's flyer was the primary tool used to catch participants attention through social media. The flyer included the inclusion criteria, time and duration of the study, incentives, QR codes to the demographic questionnaire and consent form, pertinent

information about the researcher, and additional contact information. In addition to the flyer, I created a long and short version of social media blurbs, which I shared across all social media platforms with information regarding inclusion criteria, incentives, and contact information.

Upon Antioch University New England (AUNE) IRB approval, I shared the study flyer on the following social media platforms: Facebook groups, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Snapchat. Interestingly, once I posted the flyer on social media, I received more than ninety-five inquiries about the study within the same week. People shared their interest in knowing more about the study and requested access to the demographic questionnaire which led to my ultimate decision to recruit all of my participants online only.

Subsequently, I expanded the geographical recruitment process from my initial desire to recruit in the Northeast region of the US (i.e., Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire) to the Southern part of the US (i.e., Texas, Florida, and Georgia). Participants location was not particularly a part of the inclusion criteria due to the adaptability of a flexible recruitment strategy by adding an online recruitment component. More importantly, having this flexible recruitment strategy with an online component allowed participants outside of the Northeastern region to participate in the study, captured a national sample, and increased visibility and engagement with other individuals at a national level.

### ***Challenges During Recruitment Process***

Although having more participants in the study would have been beneficial and allowed for more detailed and thicker descriptions of experiences (Sandelowski, 1986), Morse (1994) suggests that a minimum of six participants was appropriate for a phenomenological study.

During the recruitment process, after AUNE IRB approval, I uploaded the study's flyer to Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. After the flyer was accessible to the public about 95 individuals reached out with interest in learning more about the study. The number of interested participants was overwhelming, and I found myself paying closer attention to the interest of many of these individuals, since most of them asked about compensations upon completing the study.

Through the virtual recruitment process and a preliminary overview of the information provided in the demographic questionnaire, I noticed discrepancies between the participants' names and IP addresses. As I investigated these discrepancies further, I came to find out that many of the interested participants were spam and individuals trying to get multiple gift cards. Nonetheless, I decided to contact the participants via email who completed the demographic questionnaire and informed consent. This raised a red flag and triggered my decision to conduct an identity verification process prior to the focus group. To conduct the identity verification process, I reached out to each of the interested participants via email (see Appendix G). In this email, I stated that a virtual identity verification video call needed to take place a week before the focus group to verify individuals' identities. In the video call I verified audio and video quality, explored answers provided in the demographic questionnaire, and the participants genuine interest in the study.

Surprisingly, during the identity verification video calls, most of the interested participants did not have their video on and stated having issues with their connection and video. During and after conducting these calls I became skeptical mainly because the majority of participants did not share interests related to the focus of the study, most did not have their



video on, and their names and answers did not match some of the information in the demographic questionnaires. I asked questions related to family and country of origin, which most were not able to provide. I also picked up on accent, urgency around compensation upon completion, description of their ethnicity, and personal experiences within the LGBTQ+ Latinx community. I noticed some participants did not respond to questions related to Latino gay experiences, family upbringing, and cultural values. These were important clues that led to the exclusion of many interested participants because many did not match the inclusion criteria around sexual and cultural Latinx values. After completing the identity verification process, I created two new copies of the informed consent and the demographic questionnaire with different links from the original, which were directly sent to the verified participants.

### ***Focus Group Process***

As previously stated, this research study used virtual focus group discussions as the main procedure to obtain data from the participants. It is important to mention that participants needed to have some proficiency in understanding, reading, and speaking English due to the primary language in the material and the focus group discussions.

Although Hennink et al. (2019) say that “two to three focus groups are sufficient to capture 80% of themes, including the most prevalent themes, and three to six groups for 90% of themes in a homogeneous study population using a semi-structured discussion guide” (p. 1484), their research also demonstrates that “saturation is achieved at a relatively small number of focus groups, compared with typical guidance given in methodology textbooks that are not empirically based” (p. 1484).

A common process and recommendation when conducting qualitative research with focus groups is to have at least two focus groups in the study to reach saturation (Barbour, 2007; Fern, 2001; Greenbaum, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997); however, due to time constraints and recommendations from the AUNE dissertation committee, it was agreed that one focus group would be appropriate for this type of study. Although Hennink et al.'s (2019) results demonstrate that conducting "two focus groups provide a more comprehensive understanding of issues, in particular, to fully capture nuances of conceptual codes" (p. 1493), I was able to extrapolate significant themes and subthemes while conducting one focus group.

To adhere to academic appropriateness and achieve data saturation, the focus group met several key elements. First, it was essential to have clear research objectives and questions that guided the focus group discussion (Jones & Brown, 2020). The predefined questions were useful to produce robust data that provided insights into the participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Next, to maintain consistency and comprehensiveness, a structured discussion guide was developed (see Appendix A; Taylor, 2021). This guide outlined the key questions to be addressed during the focus group, ensuring that all relevant aspects of the research topic were covered. These questions provided a clear direction for the conversation and facilitate in-depth exploration of the research topic.

As the only researcher, I also played the moderator role in the focus group. My skills in guiding the conversation, encouraging participation, and managing group dynamics ensured a productive and engaging session. In this role I created an environment that fostered participants engagement. It was also important to me to establish a supportive and comfortable atmosphere that encouraged open dialogue, respected diverse opinions, and

ensured equal participation for all group members. To achieve data saturation, I define criteria that determine when new data no longer provide significant insights using a thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2023). This criterion helped determine the point at which enough information was gathered to answer the research questions comprehensively.

Recording the focus group discussions using audio or video was a key process (Brown & Davis, 2019). This allowed for accurate transcription and later analysis. It ensured data reliability and enabled the identification of nuanced responses from participants. After recording, the transcription and analysis were crucial steps. Verbatim transcription of the focus group recordings was necessary, and qualitative analysis techniques such as thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes within the data.

Incorporating these elements, the focus group ran in this study adhered to academic appropriateness, enhanced data saturation, and provided valuable insights into the research topic (Johnson et al., 2022; Taylor, 2021). To reach code saturation I implemented Hennink et al.'s (2019) description of the two ways to reach saturation in the analysis of their data:

[The first one is code saturation, where they] reviewed each focus group discussion transcript in the order in which groups were conducted and documented the development of codes. [They] recorded all new codes developed and their characteristics, including the code name, code definition, type of code (inductive or deductive), notes about issues with new codes (e.g., clarity of the issue captured, completeness of the code definition), and whether any previously developed codes were present in the transcript. Code definitions included a description of the issue captured, instructions for code application, and an example of text relevant to the code

(p. 1486). The second is meaning saturation, to assess meaning saturation, [they] traced codes to identify what [they] learned about the code in each successive focus group discussion. This involved using the coded data to search for the code in the first focus group discussion and noting what [they] learned about this issue from this focus group, then searching for the code in the next focus group and noting any new aspects or nuances of the code from that group and continuing until all focus groups had been reviewed. This process was repeated for [every single] code that was traced. For each code, [they] noted at which focus group there were no new aspects of a code raised and no further understanding of the code, only the repetition of earlier aspects. [They] deemed this the point of meaning saturation for that code. (p. 1487)

Although I only conducted one focus group, the process facilitated a rich group discussions of participant experiences and observations (Borbour, 2018; Liamputtong, 2011; Piercy & Hertlein, 2005). As stated by Piercy and Hertlein (2005), “focus group results are usually practical, and participants typically enjoy the focus group experience” (p. 85), and it was evident that each of the participants in this study shared their genuine interest and excitement during the discussion.

### **Focus Groups**

In their article, Santhosh and colleagues provide some strategies for conducting focus groups using a video platform software such as Zoom. First, they suggest setting the stage by addressing the IRB and regulatory issues regarding using an electronic video platform. For the participants, they encourage the “researchers to carefully consider the timing of planned focus groups to maximize participation” and to “seek input on optimal timing and duration from

potential participants” (p. 177). Finally, they highly recommend focus groups be conducted over video rather than audio due to “[misinterpretation] of tone and body language” (p. 177). This recommendation aligns with Opdenakker (2006) statement, “focus group discussions, offering synchronous communication, can take advantage of social cues. Social cues, such as voice, intonation, the body language of the [participants] can give the [researcher] a lot of extra information that can be added to the verbal answer of the [participants’] on a question” (p. 3).

Following Santhosh et al.’s (2021) strategies, I first sought approval from AUNE IRB committee to conduct an online focus group. I then proceeded to conduct a pre-session or identity verification session to test the platform I wanted to use during the study. I let participants know about their pre-session via an email invitation with the link to the consent form and a password-protected calendar invite.

Similarly, I followed Gray et al.’s (2020) suggestion around sending a calendar invite. They present this strategy as an excellent way for participants to synchronize the meeting’s date and time with their electronic calendars, which helped prevent participants from missing their focus group session.

Prior to the initial meeting with participants, I reviewed the Zoom’s security and privacy settings, practiced remote hosting, and recorded a practice session “to become familiar with recording logistics and file storage locations, and to ensure the device’s microphone record enough for participants hearing and transcription” (Santhosh et al., 2021, p. 181). It was highly suggested that “this preparation [took] place on the computing device that the researcher intends to use for research sessions to ensure that video, audio volume, and internet speed are adequate to host a successful video conference meeting” (Santhosh et al. 2021, p. 180).

The day of the focus group, participants waited in the Zoom waiting room. I allowed and greeted each participant one by one into the meeting. Soon after all the participants were in the group, the meeting was locked to avoid “Zoom-bombing” or uninvited attendees (Santhosh et al. 2021, p. 181).

Once all participants were in the group, I introduced them to the focus group where I first obtained verbal consent for the discussion to be recorded. Within the first ten minutes of the focus group, I oriented participants to the Zoom features: chat, mute, hand raise, and other functionalities (Santhosh et al., 2021). Although all participants were on time, I followed Santhosh et al.’s (2021) suggestions around allowing participants “1 – 5 minutes at the session’s beginning to account for late arrivals and to address technical issues if any are apparent” (p. 180).

Once all participants were acquainted with the Zoom features, I began the group by addressing confidentiality, discussing a summary of the focus group objectives, and “an explicit statement of the [group’s] grounding rules” (Santhosh et al., 2021, p. 180). During this time, I obtained full verbal permission to record the focus group and explicitly provided the opportunity for participants to leave the group if they did not consent to the recording.

I also considered some final suggestions from Santhosh and colleagues before the discussion started. I asked participants to turn on their video for better capture of their facial expressions and assigned another individual to record the meeting in my private AUNE Zoom account to “ensure redundancy” (2021, p. 180), so that if I had recording issues a second copy was preserved. I briefly described the nature of how participants’ experiences would be solicited (e.g., unmuting or using the hand raise options in Zoom). I finally explained the reasons

why I limited the private chatting between participants to encourage participants to verbally share their experiences.

While conducting the focus group I used “follow-up probing questions” (Santhosh et al., 2021, p. 181) to encourage participants engagement in sharing their unique individual experiences and perspectives. I was also cognizant to “avoid sharing [my] own opinion, asking closed or leading questions, and other missteps that contributed to bias” (Santhosh et al., 2021, p. 181). In addition, while participants shared their experiences, I was sensitive to their anonymity as required by Antioch’s IRB protocol. This included any protected health information, and if the participant required complete anonymity in the focus group, I avoided stating their names during the recording.

Finally, I was thoughtful about ensuring a successful remote focus group by conducting a proper session ending to the group discussion. At the end of the discussion, I thank the participants, ended the recording, and ensured the file was saved. This is in line with Santhosh et al. (2021) recommendations around an appropriate closure of the group. According to Santhosh et al. (2021), a focus group discussion should be concluded by acknowledging the participants’ time taken and perhaps the emotional vulnerability presented within the group. I also followed the recommendation around providing the option of a possible follow-up discussion and made available emotional support resources for participants. In the end, the file should be saved and secured in the Zoom cloud.

Using Santhosh et al.’s (2021) strategies, I was able to conceptualize the focus group process in three different stages: a) pre-focus group, b) during focus group, and c) post-focus group. The following is a description of each of these stages in the study.

In summary, normally focus groups are composed of six to twelve people. In this section I acknowledged the benefits of having a smaller group with the intention to have a more intimate space, so each participant could contribute from a more in-depth approach (Krueger, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

### ***Pre-focus Group***

Prior to engaging with participants, I completed the Antioch University's IRB ethics training, obtained proper informed consent, and made sure the demographic questionnaire was completed by participants. When potential participant showed interest in participating in the study, I contacted the participant via email to discuss the study and answer any questions they had. If the participants continued to show interest and met inclusion criteria, they were offered the identity verification video call.

Two weeks before the focus group I sent an email to those individuals who shared interest or curiosity in the study ( $n = 95$ ). The email (see Appendix G) stated that a one-on-one five-minute Zoom verification video call needed to be conducted a week before the focus group to confirm the participants' contributions to the study and their demographics (e.g., name, age, sexual identity, location in the US, phone number). Upon sending this initial email out, I only received confirmation from forty-five individuals. Due to the amount of skepticism around participants' authenticity, I created two new copies of the informed consent and the demographic questionnaire with different links from the originals and sent them directly to the interested participants ( $n = 45$ ). Majority of these participants ( $n = 39$ ) replied to my verification email stating that they had issues with their video and audio, or that they could not participate in the pre-focus group identification call due to time and personal constraints.



After conducting the verification calls and reviewing all interested participants' demographic questionnaire and consent forms, 39 participants were excluded due to not meeting full criteria. Only 6 participants were left who met fully criteria to be in the study. My next step was to communicate with the 6 participants in the study. I communicated with them via email and text messaging. I sent an initial email stating their acceptance in the study. Next, I sent reminder emails and text messages a week prior with details about the focus group (see Appendix F). The night before and the morning of the focus group I sent a second round of emails and text messages. The first reminder email went out seven days before the focus group and the second email was sent a day before the focus group. Included in the emails were the five focus group questions as well as the Zoom link. It is also important to mention, prior to sending text messages I obtained full consent from participants to send text reminders. The first text reminder was sent the morning of the focus group and the second one post focus group. The text reminders included the direct Zoom link with the date and time of the focus group.

Finally, though my communications with the 6 participants I explained the focus group date and time. Once they all agreed to the date and time of the focus group, I added them to the research roster. The focus group was agreed upon to take place virtually at 11 am Eastern Standard time on Saturday February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023. None of the six participants who met criteria failed to attend focus group; if that would have been the case, I would have followed up via email and a phone call to offer another time. If the participant would have failed to show up for the second time offered, it would have been assumed that the participant no longer wanted to participate in the study, and no additional emails and phone calls would have been made.

### ***During Focus Group***

The morning of the focus group, I reviewed security and privacy settings, practiced remote hosting, and recorded a practice session, on the same computer intended to be used for the focus group, as suggested by Santhosh et al. (2021). I also made sure all participants had the forms completed and that they were aware of the focus group structure.

I initiated the focus group by welcoming and letting each participant into the Zoom meeting, verifying their names, then proceeding to ask for permission to record to review the inform consent. I then allowed participants to have a moment to process questions and concerns they might have about the inform consent and the study's requirements. After participants questions were answered, I went over the five semi-structured questions that were asked during the focus group and offered an opportunity for participants to decide if they would like to continue in the focus group or remove themselves. I finally provided the option of a free therapy consultation in case anyone needed it at the end of the focus group, discussed confidentiality, and laid the foundation to creating a brave space.

### ***Post-focus Group***

After the focus group ended, I put aside the transcripts and took the rest of the day off. The next day, I sent a post focus group text message (see Appendix F) with the \$10 virtual gift cards attached. The participants replied with appreciation and excitement to this text message. As I began the process of pre-analyzing the data through the initial review of the transcripts, I noticed that out of the six participants who were present only four actively participated and contributed to the group discussion. After this discovery, I started highlighting the participants answers to my questions and began the process of immersing himself in the data and the

participants' experiences which will be further discuss in the data analysis section of this chapter.

### **Video Recording Software**

In today's busy and hectic world, virtual methods have become more appealing than in-person settings for research participants due to convenience, cost-effectiveness, and flexibility (Hewson, 2008; Horrell et al., 2015; Santhosh et al., 2021). For this study, Zoom © (Version 5.11.6), a collaborative, cloud-based video-conferencing service, was used to conduct the online focus group. The Zoom platform provides online audiovisual and audio call meetings, recording of audio and video, and can hold unlimited meetings with up to 100 participants.

In addition, Zoom's ability to securely record and retain sessions without third-party software is a significant benefit. This function is especially useful in research, where sensitive data must be protected. Hence, I used my student/faculty Licensed Zoom account through Antioch University, which provided access to all premium tools. In addition, the Licensed version of Zoom provides chat functionality, breakout rooms, waiting rooms, and HIPAA compliance (Gray et al., 2020). Likewise, the Licensed Zoom account allows for electronic calendar integration and unlimited data storage in the Zoom cloud, which was a function I used to send calendar invites and reminders to participants.

To safeguard the recording, I took the following steps: a) created a private meeting room with a password enabled, b) set a new link and password that automatically generated for each participant, c) enabled the waiting room, and manually approved each participant to join the video call, d) established the ground rules at the beginning of the focus group, these included not taking screenshots or recording the session, and e) verbally shared with the

participants when the session was being recorded and set the meeting room to alert participants when the recording began.

### **Transcription**

Transcription is a notoriously time-consuming and stressful task; however, transcription is a commonly used method to convert the raw audio data collected during a qualitative study (Poland, 2002). McMullin (2021) states that “despite being a highly interpretive process, transcription is frequently depicted using positivist norms of knowledge creation” (p. 2). In addition, transcription may sometimes include serious ethical considerations and problems, mainly when dealing with underprivileged populations, because determining how to portray the participant in written form can increase ethical concerns (McMullin, 2021).

To minimize ethical concerns around privacy, the Zoom platform uses HIPAA-compliant Artificial Intelligence (AI) automated transcription. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers have been using this platform to transcribe recorded audio and video (Dodds & Hess, 2020). Although Zoom’s AI capabilities provide clear audio, video, and accurate transcription, McMullin (2021) encourages researchers to “meticulously check by the researcher to ensure accuracy, fill in missing details or edit for context and readability” (p. 142). Due to the amount of transcripts, the Zoom AI capabilities did not produce a clean version. Therefore, it was necessary to obtain an additional transcription software to review and clean up the audio transcripts already in the Zoom cloud by transferring those to Otter.ai (Corrente & Bourgeault, 2022), for a final cleaner version of transcription.

Otter.ai is a speech recognition and transcription service that has become increasingly popular in both academic and professional settings. The service uses machine learning

algorithms to generate transcriptions of audio recordings, making it an ideal tool for capturing and organizing notes during meetings, interviews, or lectures. According to a study by the University of Central Florida, the use of Otter.ai led to a significant increase in the accuracy and completeness of transcriptions compared to manual note-taking methods (Anderson et al., 2020). Additionally, the service allows users to easily search and share transcriptions with others, making collaboration and information sharing more efficient (Otter.ai, 2021). Another benefit of using Otter.ai is its ability to integrate with other productivity tools, such as Google Drive and Zoom, further streamlining workflow and organization (Otter.ai, 2021). Overall, the use of Otter.ai saved an immense amount of time and helped in improving data accuracy.

Once the transcript was clean and reviewed, Otter ai divided it into sections, each with a timestamp that showed how far into the recording that portion of the text was recorded. Next, I only had to edit the text to capture the words more accurately, add capitalization and some punctuations that were not captured by the transcript.

### **Data Collection**

Creswell (2013) describes data collection as a process that involves “conducting a good qualitative strategy, developing means for recording information both digitally and on paper, storing the data, and anticipating ethical issues that may arise” (p. 145). In this study, the data collection process began once participants meet the criteria for the study and were informed of the purpose and procedures for them to filled out the demographic questionnaire and signed the inform consent willingly. Creswell (2013) acknowledges that “in a phenomenological study in which the sample includes individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, it is

important to obtain participants' written permission" (p. 154). The data collection process occurred through SurveyMonkey and the 90-minute virtual semi-structured focus group.

To capture participants unique experiences during their sexual identity process, the "Tell me, explain to me, describe to me" (TED) approach was used. The TED approach is not a formal or widely recognized approach in any particular field. It is a phrase commonly used in everyday language to request clarification or more information on a particular topic. This approach facilitates open dialogue and aims to expand participants' answers.

Although the TED approach opened up a cohesive space for participants and supported the five structured questions, I was flexible in my approach to asked questions and leave room for participants to expand on their responses. During this process, I played an active role, asking follow-up clarifying questions, helping participants make personal meaning, and being mindful of how questions were constructed and asked.

Each of the five non-leading questions (see Appendix A) were presented twice to participants and asked in a semi-structured way. Some questions were based on the participants' demographics and collected from the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). Others were related to the participants' individual experiences throughout the sexual identity process, family cultural values, and friends' support. For example, the focus of each question pertained to individual's sexual identity and the factors that shape it. The first question asked about the individual's awareness of their sexual identity, while the second question focused on disclosure and the reasons for sharing or withholding this information from others. The third question explored the impact of cultural values on the development of an individual's sexual identity. The fourth question sought to understand the individual's

experiences following disclosure or non-disclosure of their sexual identity. Finally, the fifth question addressed the role of influential people and experiences in an individual's acceptance of their sexual identity. These questions were relevant in understanding how the participants form and express their sexual identity within the context of their personal, social, and cultural experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

The “analysis of qualitative data essentially begins with the process of immersion in the data” (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 204). This process allows the researcher to become family with the dataset content and notice relevant themes connected to the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2013). In addition, Clarke and Braun (2013) recommend keeping a record of reactions and thoughts the researcher might experience during data reviewing. Although I kept a separate file or research journal (see Appendix H) to note my ideas and observations, in IPA it is recommended to set those aside, so that the “researcher remains as analytic as possible and focuses on participants’ meanings and experiences” (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 206). It is also recommended to read data as data, which means “reading the words actively, analytically, and critically” (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 205), and to only revisit personal notes and ideas later in the research-interpretative stages.

It is important to note that this study’s data was handled confidentially during the analysis process and was only available to people who needed to review it, such as the Antioch University’s IRB and participants who opted to obtain a copy of the transcript. All confidential data, including audio/video recordings, transcriptions, and emails with the participants, were securely filed in a private, password-protected computer and stored in a secure, locked cabinet

in my office. Alase (2016) presents the following measures for securing and safeguarding the research data from outsiders, and states that:

As an added protection, an IPA research study should destroy through deletion of any video, audio and/or taped recorded information after it has been transcribed for the safety and protection of the participants. Additionally, IPA study should also provide a safe and sturdy storage system for the safekeeping and management of the research data. Rubin and Rubin (2012) advised that researchers should have a sturdy safety system that protects the data collected from the hands of any outsider, i.e., providing a protected password system for the filing and storing of research data. (p. 85)

While analyzing the data, pseudonyms were used to replace the names of participants. In qualitative research, it is common practice to use pseudonyms to replace the names of participants to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Using pseudonyms protects the participants' identity and ensures that their personal information is not revealed in the study findings. This practice is particularly important in studies where sensitive information is collected, and participants could be at risk of stigmatization or discrimination if their identities were known (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

In the current study, pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' anonymity and confidentiality during the data analysis phase. This approach helped to ensure that the participants' voices and experiences are the focus of the study and that their privacy is maintained throughout the research process (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In addition, a statement was made to participants that they would receive notification if the results of this study were



published in a scientific journal or book, and that all identifiable data would be kept and destroyed after dissertation completion.

Likewise, the use of focus group discussion inherently provides qualitative and observational data where data analysis can be daunting, yet this process was the heart of this study. Creswell (2013) explains that the analysis portion “involves organizing the data, conducting a preliminary read-through of the database, coding and organizing themes, representing the data, and forming an interpretation of them” (p. 179).

In qualitative research, accurately analyzing and representing data is a crucial process that requires careful attention and adherence to specific steps. Smith et al. (2009) outline six significant steps in the data analysis process for a qualitative study using IPA. These steps are interconnected and interdependent, contributing to the comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the data.

The first step in the data analysis process is reading and re-reading the collected data. This involves immersing oneself in the participants' narratives, observations, or interviews to gain familiarity with the data. By engaging in multiple readings, I was able to identify significant points, capture the essence of the participants' experiences, and develop a deep understanding of the data.

Next, Smith and colleagues suggest the step of initial noting. During this stage, I began to jot down initial thoughts, impressions, and ideas that emerged from the data. These notes included descriptive phrases, key concepts, and interesting patterns that caught my attention. Initial noting helps in organizing thoughts and identifying potential themes or connections within the data.

As the analysis progressed, I moved on to developing emerging themes. This step involved identifying patterns, similarities, or recurring ideas within the data. I began to group related initial notes and developed preliminary themes that captured the essence of the participants' perspectives. This iterative process allowed for the refinement and evolution of themes as the analysis continued.

The next step was searching for connections across the themes that emerged. During this step I explored the relationships, overlaps, and intersections between different themes that emerged from the data. This process involved critically examining the data and considering how the identified themes related to and influenced one another. By identifying connections, I was able to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and uncover deeper insights.

Moving to the next case is a crucial step in qualitative data analysis. This is the step where I repeated the entire process. This iterative approach ensured that the analysis was thorough and captured the nuances and diversity within the data. Each revision added new perspectives and contributed to the overall understanding of the participants experiences.

Finally, I engaged in looking for patterns across individuals. This step involved examining the themes and connections identified across multiple cases to identify broader patterns or commonalities. Comparing the experiences of different participants, I was able to uncover shared themes, variations, and unique aspects of their experiences.

These six steps in the data analysis process for qualitative research using IPA are interconnected and build upon one another. They provide a systematic framework to analyze

and represent the data accurately, ensuring a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

The process of data analysis in this study also consisted of describing, making the data available for participants if they requested it, and making any changes based on participants' feedback (Colaizzi, 1978; Shosha, 2012; Wojan & Swanson, 2007). The last step of descriptive phenomenology is fully breaking down the phenomenon so anyone who has experienced it can relate to or recognize their own experience in that description (Wojan & Swanson, 2007).

During the final phase of the analysis, a qualitative research technique called content analysis was used to identify the existence of specific words, topics, and concepts (Morgan, 1988). This technique was helpful in examining the occurrence, significance, and connections of specific words, themes, or concepts in the data collected. Also, a collective thematic analysis with a mix of open or selective coding was used to organize the data upon the conclusion of the focus groups (Braun & Clarke, 2012.) First, the primary data was collected and recorded using codes to develop descriptions/themes, presenting findings in narratives, interpreting the meaning of results by reflexively looking at findings and literature, and validating findings (Creswell, 2014). Next, themes were identified by “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). Finally, conclusions were drawn from patterns that emerged with specific examples of evidence.

### ***Data Coding Using Microsoft Word***

Initially I was going to use the data analysis software MAXQDAS, which is a qualitative data analysis computer-based software and one of the most influential and intuitive research software for organizing, storing, analyzing, and gaining insights from diverse data (Marjaei et

al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2016). However, the cost of MAXQDAS was \$250, which is considerably affordable compared to other qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo (Welsh, 2002). Yet, since the data in this study was manageable with enough information from each participant, but not so much that added complexities to the data management and analysis, I decided to analyze the data using Microsoft Word.

In qualitative research, effectively structuring and analyzing data is essential for gaining meaningful insights. Ose (2016) explores the potential of using Microsoft Excel and Word as tools to support the organization and analysis of qualitative data. The author particularly highlights the versatility of Word in coding qualitative data, as it offers a user-friendly platform for the coding process. To maximize the benefits of using Word for coding, Ose suggests a step-by-step approach.

To begin, I followed Ose (2016) suggested steps by a) stating a new Word document and importing the qualitative data that needed to be coded. This allowed for easy access and manipulation of the data within the Word document. The I proceeded to b) creating a table of contents, which enabled me to track and navigate the coding categories efficiently. The table of contents served as a guide, which helped me locate and review specific sections of the data. To code I utilized c) the highlighting function. By applying different colors to sections of text that corresponded to specific codes or categories, I visually distinguished and categorized the data. This approach allowed for a flexible and adaptable coding process and enabled me to modify or add codes as needed.

To ensure clarity and consistency, I followed step d) creating a legend that links each color with a specific code or category. The legend served as a reference point, providing me

with a clear understanding of the coding scheme and facilitating future analysis and interpretation. In addition to e) using the “Find” function in Word as a powerful tool that can be employed to locate all instances of a particular code or category. Using this tool, I easily searched the document for specific codes, allowing me to examine how a particular theme was represented throughout the data. Finally, step f) suggested to refer to the table of contents. By looking at the table of contents I was able to navigate between different codes and categories, effectively viewing all the coded text in one place. This comprehensive overview helped to identify patterns, connections, and relationships across different codes, facilitating a deeper understanding of the data.

In summary, Ose (2016) steps were valuable in using Microsoft Word for coding qualitative data. By following a step-by-step approach that includes importing data, creating a table of contents, using highlighting, establishing a legend, employing the “Find” function, and utilizing the table of contents, I was able to effectively structure, easily manage, and organize the data. Word's flexibility and functionality made it a reliable option for organizing and interpreting the data, ultimately contributing to insightful research findings.

### ***Peer Reviewing***

According to Tracy (2010), using peer review of themes in qualitative data analysis can enhance the rigor and credibility of the finding. Also, Kvale (1996) suggests that choosing peer reviewers who have expertise in the topic being studied is essential for successful peer review of themes in qualitative data analysis, and Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that using peer review of themes is one of several strategies for enhancing the trustworthiness and credibility of qualitative data analysis.

In order to ensure the rigor and credibility of the research, a thorough peer review process was undertaken. The first step involved carefully selecting peer reviewers who possessed a strong understanding of qualitative research methods and expertise in the topic of LGBTQ+ issues. For this study, I chose esteemed individuals from my dissertation committee, including Kevin Lyness, PhD, LMFT, who is a professor and program director of the CFT PhD program at Antioch University. Additionally, Markie Twist, PhD, LMFT, a teaching fellow at Antioch University, and Alex Iantaffi, PhD, MS, SEP, CST, LMFT, the Director of the Edges Wellness Center, were also identified as peer reviewers.

To start this process, I reached to Dr. Lyness, Dr. Twist, and Dr. Iantaffi to ensure validity in the analysis process (Hash & Cramer, 2003; LaSala, 2003). There are numerous benefits to reaching out to the dissertation chair and committee members to conduct a peer review of the data. Firstly, this process helped to identify any biases or errors in the data analysis, leading to more accurate and reliable research findings (Patton, 2015). As committee members are typically experts in the field, they can provide valuable feedback and insights that can help to improve the quality of the research and ensure that the research meets the standards set by the academic institution. I then followed Braun and Clarke (2006) useful guide for using thematic analysis in qualitative research, which can be adapted for the peer review of themes process.

Once the peer reviewers were identified, I proceeded by providing them with detailed instructions and materials via email. These instructions encompassed a comprehensive overview of how to review the themes and transcripts. In order to facilitate their

understanding, I furnished them with a codebook and clear directions on how to identify and categorize themes, supplemented by examples extracted from the transcript.

Subsequently, the committee reviewed and approved the themes without any conflicting feedback or concerns. This consensus among the peer reviewers provided a firm foundation to proceed with the themes and coding. With the valuable feedback received from the peer reviewers, I diligently refined and fine-tuned the themes and coding scheme. The insights garnered from their expertise contributed to a more comprehensive and robust analysis.

Although the peer review process was not repeated in this case, it is noteworthy that the absence of discrepancies and the unanimous agreement among the peer reviewers regarding the themes and coding scheme provided reassurance of the accuracy and validity of the research findings. This alignment among the reviewers further validated the themes and coding, reinforcing the confidence in the results obtained.

Moreover, peer review can help to improve the overall quality of the dissertation by providing constructive criticism and feedback to the researcher (Creswell, 2013). The feedback from the committee members helped me refine the research methodology, analysis, and interpretation, ultimately leading to a more comprehensive and insightful dissertation. Additionally, committee members provided guidance on how to effectively present the research findings and identify potential areas for further research, leading to a more impactful and significant contribution to the field.

## **Researcher Reflexivity**

Throughout the research process, I critically examined my own subjectivity and biases in order to be transparent about my role as a researcher and how my perspectives may have influenced the data collection and analysis. Specifically, I engaged in ongoing reflexivity by continually questioning my assumptions, preconceptions, and considering how they may have impacted the research process (Finlay, 2002). This allowed me to identify and address any potential sources of bias or distortion, ultimately strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

To incorporate reflexivity into the study, I employed a number of strategies. For example, I kept a research journal (see Appendix H) where I documented thoughts and reflections throughout the research process, which allowed me to trace the evolution of my thinking and identify any potential biases or areas of inquiry that needed further exploration (Charmaz, 2006). I also engaged in regular meetings with my research committee members and chairperson, soliciting feedback and critique on my ideas and interpretations. By incorporating reflexivity into the study in these ways, I was able to acknowledge and address the role of my own subjectivity in the research process, ultimately strengthening the quality and rigor of the findings.

This study was significant to me. As a Latino gay man from Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands, since a very young age like the participants in the study, I also knew that time when I was gay, which meant I also had years to process what it meant to be gay in my culture, family, and personal life. I went through all sorts of shame and embarrassment to hide my identity from the world, which did not bring pleasant feelings during my sexual identity process.



However, walking through this queer path and journey helped me understand the significance of processing Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals' sexual identity experiences. Throughout this study it was in my awareness that some cultures in the Caribbean have historically embedded views and attitudes regarding homophobia. Being the primary researcher in this study who identifies as a Latino gay Caribbean man, I fully acknowledged the biases that arouse around homophobic beliefs and participants' individual experiences. To mitigate these issues, I was able to use the bracketing process to reduce the risk of potentially influencing the study due to his similar intersecting identities. In this process, I put my own experiences aside and listened to the participants' experiences without judgments and preconceptions. I was able to establish this process before meeting with participants to set aside preconceived notions regarding the phenomenon and, at the same time, integrate it throughout the process.

Smith et al., (2009) states that "one will not necessarily be aware of all one's preconceptions in advance of the reading, and so reflective practices, and a cyclical approach to bracketing, are required" (p. 35). I described my bracketing process as a systemic interwoven one of reading, reflecting, and emotion checking that cultivated and promoted my curiosity for a deeper understanding of the experiences told by the participants. To establish this reflective process of bracketing throughout the study, I used journaling to document reactions, questions, and biases. Likewise, Alase (2016) states that *self-reflection* should be more than just a regular exercise, but more of a step-by-step detailed and descriptive journey of what it took for the researcher to get to their final destination. In his reflexivity statement, Alase (2016) points out that:

More importantly for an IPA researcher, it is vital that a postscript reflection be added to the research as a way to cumulating [with] what the journey and the process were like before the research became what it is. It is important for researchers to tell the twists and turns of the process by giving a brief narrative of the researcher's journey. As a qualitative research study where subjectivity and interpersonal actions and experiences interplay with everyday life nuances, it is very important that a thick [and thoughtful] personal reflective description be included in the narrative of the research study, so that the audience can see for themselves the journey that the research study has gone through. As a matter of fact, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research study holds that it is important that every research study give a detail account of the mountains each study has climbed to get to their individual final destinations. For a research study to be authentic and credible, telling a narrative of the journey should be part of the research study's narration. The truth of the matter is that life is nothing, but what we make of it as participants in this experiential life journey; it is up to each research study to tell their stories and allow the audience to partake in the journey with them (p. 146-149).

In summary, journaling was an essential practice for me due to the IPA approach focusing on exploring individuals' subjective experiences and interpretations of events, which requires researchers to be self-reflective and acknowledge their own biases and assumptions throughout the data collection and analysis process. Keeping a journal allowed me to document my reflections, thoughts, and feelings about the research process and which might potentially influence my interpretation of the data. By writing down these insights, I identified and

addressed biases, questions, and preconceptions, leading to a more in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. Additionally, journaling helped me keep track of my progress, maintained organization, and identified patterns and emerging themes within the data. Overall, journaling was an important tool, which promoted reflexivity and enhanced the rigor of this research process.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

Credibility is an essential aspect of any qualitative research study, as it ensures that the findings are trustworthy and dependable. As an IPA qualitative researcher, I used various techniques to ensure credibility in this study. One way I did this was by ensuring a thorough understanding of the research topic through an extensive literature review. By doing so, I provided a comprehensive analysis of the research topic to avoid any biases that may have affected the credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2013).

Another way I ensured credibility in the study was through the use of peer reviewing. As previously described, this process involved having colleagues who were familiar with the research topic and qualitative research to review the findings and identify any flaws or biases that may have impacted the credibility of this research (Patton, 2015). Peer review was a valuable process that allowed me to receive constructive feedback to help improve the quality of the study and ensured that the findings were reliable.

Furthermore, I used a qualitative strategy called triangulation of data sources. This means using multiple sources of data to corroborate the findings and ensure that they were consistent and accurate (Creswell, 2013). To employ this strategy I used observations and document analysis, to cross-validate the data and ensure that the findings were consistent

across sources (Denzin, 1978). This strengthened the validity and reliability of the data and increased the credibility of the study. By using multiple sources of data, I was able to increase the credibility of the research findings and provide a comprehensive analysis of the research topic.

Likewise, dependability is an essential aspect of qualitative research, particularly in studies that aim to explore the experiences and perspectives of minority populations. As a Latino Caribbean gay man, myself, I took several steps to ensure dependability in the study. Firstly, in this study I included a structured research methodology, which included a comprehensive literature review, research questions, and data collection methods (Creswell, 2013). This approach ensured that the research was systematic and transparent, and helped ensure that the findings were consistent and dependable.

Secondly, to ensure dependability, I employed a rigorous data analysis process. I used the IPA process that involved reviewing the data multiple times to identify themes and patterns (Patton, 2015). I also used a coding system designed to be reliable and consistent, which helped to ensure that the findings were dependable and that they accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives of the participants. By employing these measures, the study was dependable and that it accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives of Latino Caribbean gay men.

Similarly, to maintain the trustworthiness of this study, I utilized several strategies. First, I engaged in prolonged engagement with participants, reaching out to them via email/text messaging and conducting pre-focus group identity verification video calls to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives (Charmaz, 2014). This helped establish

rapport and build trust with participants prior to the focus group, which increased the validity and reliability of the data collected.

Secondly, I conducted member checking by returning to participants with preliminary findings and interpretations to verify the accuracy and completeness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This allowed me to incorporate participants' feedback into the analysis and ensured that their voices and perspectives were accurately represented.

Finally, I engaged in reflexivity by critically examining my own biases, assumptions, and preconceptions throughout the research process (Finlay, 2002). This allowed for transparency about my role as a researcher and how my perspectives may have influenced the data collection and analysis, thus increasing the trustworthiness of the study.

Overall, these strategies helped me establish the trustworthiness and credibility of my qualitative research by ensuring that the data collected was accurate, complete, and representative of participants' experiences and perspectives.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is an important consideration in qualitative research as it refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts or situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, I sought to enhance transferability by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the methods and findings, as well as contextual information about the setting and participants demographics. I aimed to provide readers with a clear understanding of the study's scope and limitations, as well as the factors that may have influenced the findings. This, in turn, enhanced the ability of others to evaluate the relevance of my findings to their own context, ultimately enhancing the transferability of the study.

To further enhance transferability, I also employed a purposive sampling strategy that sought to include participants with diverse perspectives and experiences related to the research topic. This study captured a broad range of views and experiences, which may be more representative of the experiences of individuals in other contexts (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, I engaged in peer reviewing by sharing the findings with the dissertation committee to ensure these accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives shared in the transcripts. This helped to ensure that the findings were grounded in the perspectives of participants and increased the potential for transferability.

Overall, transferability is an important consideration in qualitative research and requires careful attention to methods, sampling, and data analysis. By taking steps to enhance transferability, such as providing detailed descriptions, employing a purposive sampling strategy, and engaging in peer reviewing, the study increased the relevance and applicability of its findings to other contexts and situations (Anfara et al., 2002).

### **Ethical Considerations**

When conducting a qualitative study using the IPA methodology, there are several ethical considerations that must be taken into account. Firstly, the issue of informed consent is crucial, as participants must be fully informed about the nature and purpose of the research, as well as any potential risks or benefits associated with their participation (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In order to obtain the informed consent, researchers must provide a clear and concise explanation of the study, including its purpose, methods, and anticipated outcomes, and must also ensure that participants have the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback before agreeing to participate.

Secondly, confidentiality and anonymity are key ethical considerations in qualitative research. Given the personal and often sensitive nature of the data collected, it is important that participants' identities and personal information are kept confidential and that their privacy is respected at all times (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To adhere to these ethical concerns, I took steps to protect the confidentiality of participants, such as using pseudonyms to protect their identities, and storing data securely to prevent unauthorized access or disclosure.

Ethical considerations were critically considered as an important aspect of conducting this study. I prioritized informed consent, confidentiality, and other ethical principles to ensure that the research was conducted in a responsible and ethical manner, ultimately promoting the well-being of participants and the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Furthermore, since research often involves a great deal of cooperation and coordination among different people in different disciplines and institutions, ethical standards promoted the values essential to collaborative work in this study, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness (Orb et al., 2001).

The intimate interaction between the participant and myself was evident throughout the study. At the forefront of this relationship, I considered my biases and attended to ethical concerns from the planning stages of the research project and throughout. Furthermore, I maintained confidentiality and anonymity as the utmost importance to the participants due to the nature of the study and the method of data collection.

Also, there was a possibility of this study's holding bias issues in the context of my beliefs, experiences, and values as Latino Caribbean cisgender gay men. Since the study covered

part my personal experiences as a Latino gay man, I was careful to not project my personal views onto the participants or the data analysis.

To overcome this ethical concern, I used my researcher journal (see Appendix H) and worked closely with the dissertation committee throughout the process. While conducting the study and when presented with the data collected and analysis the dissertation committee did not raise any ethical concerns. Finally, to double check on my biases, I used peer reviewing before and after running the focus group.

### **Summary**

Chapter three of this study provides a detailed description of the methodology employed in the study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a framework. The chapter begins with an overview of the research design, then discuss the study population and sampling strategy, including how participants were recruited and selected based on their experiences related to the research topic. The data collection methods are then described in detail, including the use of a focus group. The chapter lays out a clear and detailed methodology that allows readers to understand how the study was conducted and how the data was analyzed within the framework of IPA, ensuring the transparency and credibility of the research.



## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results section in this chapter serves as a crucial component that presents and analyzes the findings of the study. It provides a detailed account of the data collected and their analysis. Additionally, it plays a vital role in connecting the results to the relevant literature and conceptual framework, offering a comprehensive understanding of the research outcomes.

According to McMullin (2021), researchers are encouraged to meticulously check the results section to ensure accuracy, fill in any missing details, and edit the content for context and readability. This attention to detail helps to maintain the integrity of the findings and strengthens the connections made between the results and the existing literature and conceptual framework. By connecting the results to the relevant literature, I aim to establish the significance and implications of the findings within the broader academic context (Johnson et al., 2020). This allows for the synthesis of previous research with this study's results, highlighting similarities, differences, and potential contributions to the field.

Furthermore, the connection between the results and the conceptual framework helps to validate and refine the theoretical underpinnings of the research (Luft et al., 2022). It enables researchers to assess the extent to which their findings align with the theoretical expectations and research question set forth in the study.

Chapter four presents the findings of this study exploring the experiences and perspectives of the sexual identity process of six Latino cisgender gay men of different ages and ethnic backgrounds. The chapter highlights the common themes and subthemes that emerged from the data and presents a discussion of the findings in the context of the existing literature.

An analysis of the data collected from the participants' responses to the five semi-structured questions in the virtual focus group is provided. The findings are organized into several sections by themes and subthemes, which include the participants' perceptions of the research topic, their personal experiences, and the strategies used to manage the challenges encountered during the sexual identity process. Overall, the aim of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the six Latino cisgender gay men who participated in the research.

To maintain the anonymity of each participant, I changed each of their names and introduce them as follows: Rick is a 27-year-old Puerto Rican male who works in the military and holds a bachelor's degree. Jose is a 31-year-old Dominican male with a high school diploma and works in sales. Jason is a 37-year-old Puerto Rican male who works as a therapist and holds a bachelor's degree. Harry is a 39-year-old Puerto Rican male with a degree in law and works for the State. Alex is a 39-year-old Cuban male with a high school diploma who works in retail. And Lucas is a 59-year-old Puerto Rican male who works in finance with a master's degree.

### **Overview of Themes**

The themes presented in this chapter are critical to understanding the experiences and perspectives of each participant. There were five themes, which included Awareness of Sexual Identity, Visibility Management, Spanish Caribbean Families Influences, Being True to Oneself, and Positive Experiences and Role Models.

During the data analysis process, sub-themes also emerged within each of the main themes. From the theme of Awareness of Sexual Identity, three sub-themes were identified: *early awareness*, *confusion*, and *early exposure to gay culture*. The theme of Visibility

Management revealed a single sub-theme, which was *navigating different environments*. The theme of Spanish Caribbean Families Influences uncovered several sub-themes, including *family influence on sexual identity acceptance, religious beliefs and self-identity, gender roles and expectations, gender roles and machismo, and family acceptance*. The theme of Being True to Oneself had one sub-theme, which was *self-acceptance*. Finally, from the theme of Positive Experiences and Role Models, four sub-themes emerged: *positive experiences with close friends, positive experiences with family acceptance, positive experiences with successful gay people, and positive role models*.

To provide a clear and concise overview of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis, a figure has been included. Figure 1 displays each of the five main themes and their corresponding sub-themes. This figure serves as a helpful visual aid to guide readers through the various themes and sub-themes that emerged from the participants' experiences and perspectives.

### **Theme One: Awareness of Sexual Identity**

The first theme highlights the participants' experiences of becoming aware of their sexual identity, including the challenges and opportunities that come with this realization. Essentially, this theme captures participants' reflections on how they became aware of their sexual orientation. This theme sheds light on the participants' struggles to accept their sexual identity in a culture that stigmatizes homosexuality (Fernandez et al., 2021). This theme is comprised of three sub-themes: *early awareness, confusion, and early exposure to gay culture*.

### ***Early Awareness***

According to Savin-Williams (2001), early awareness of same-sex attraction is not uncommon, as many gay and lesbian individuals report recognizing their sexual orientation during childhood or early adolescence. The experience of early awareness can vary, but it can be a critical factor in shaping one's sense of self and sexual identity. As noted by Harry, one of the participants in this study, "little 11-year-old me knew all about" his sexual identity. This quote reflects the idea that early awareness can be an important aspect of the sexual identity process. Harry also mentioned:

I became aware of my sexual identity at an early age. I knew that I was gay when I was in sixth grade. I think I been knowing about it since probably when I was 11 and 12. That was the first time I realized what I was into sexually and who I was. It just took many years, for many different reasons, for me to fully accept my sexual identity, and to just be my authentic self.

Similarly, Jason shared, "I became aware of my sexual identity at an early age I just knew that I was different. I felt different from everybody else. Being so young, I couldn't pinpoint why I was different, but I knew that I was different from my peers." Jose also mentioned, "I was very young when I knew about my sexual identity. I realized that I was different, but I didn't know what kind of different I was."

These quotes illustrate how participants had a clear sense of their sexual orientation at an early age, even if they did not fully understand what it meant. It is noteworthy that participants acknowledged their sexual identity at such a young age, considering that sexuality is a complex and multifaceted aspect of human identity.

The experiences shared by Harry, Jason, and Jose regarding their awareness of their sexual identity at an early age are consistent with previous research. According to Rosario et al., (2006a), many individuals report becoming aware of their same-sex attraction during childhood or early adolescence. This awareness can result from feelings of difference or discomfort around peers of the same gender or from an early attraction to individuals of the same sex (Rosario et al., 2006b).

Moreover, researchers have found that acceptance of one's sexual identity is a process that can take years (Russell & Fish, 2016). In line with Harry's experience, Russell and Fish (2016) found that individuals who identify as sexual minorities often experience internalized stigma and negative societal attitudes towards their sexual orientation. This can result in a prolonged process of self-acceptance and can also impact individuals' mental health and wellbeing. In conclusion, the experiences shared by the participants in acknowledging their sexual identity at an early age and their journey towards self-acceptance are consistent with previous research on sexuality and sexual minority identity.

### ***Confusion***

The experience of confusion is a common aspect of the sexual identity process, particularly during adolescence (Diamond, 2003). This can be related to a lack of understanding about what it means to be gay or bisexual, as well as fears of rejection or stigma from peers and family members.

The theme of confusion describes the internal conflicts and uncertainties participants faced during their sexual identity process. Jason shared:

The first time I was attracted to a guy was so confusing to me. I'm not sure if I wanted to be like him or wanted to be with him. I don't know if I wanted to be his friend, be him, or be with him. That was like almost like a little battle I had in my head at 10 or 11 years old. I was like, I don't know if I want to be his friend, be him, or be with him. So, for me it was an internal battle because I always questioned if I wanted to just hang out with him because I like him, or I just want to be his friend. That was another telltale sign during my sexual identity process, which I can see as an adult now and realize how that process was for me.

Notably, Jose makes clear how significant it is to have supportive friends and how it can be helpful in navigating this confusion and uncertainty:

I came out to a friend, a really good friend. I was so nervous talking about that with him because we been friends for 19 years. I was really confused too. I had nobody to talk to about it. He kept encouraging me to just be myself.

Moreover, Jason's experience of confusion is supported by the work of Savin-Williams and Diamond (2004), who argued that sexual identity development involves navigating “ambiguities, contradictions, and complexities” (p. 77). The authors suggest that these ambiguities can create confusion and uncertainty for individuals as they attempt to understand their sexual orientation. Similarly, in their study of sexual identity development in adolescence, Rosario et al. (2006b) found that confusion is a common experience among individuals who are questioning their sexual orientation.

The importance of support systems, as stated by Jose, in navigating sexual identity confusion is also supported by research. In a study of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth,

Ryan et al. (2009) found that having supportive friends and family members was associated with greater psychological well-being and less risk for mental health problems. Similarly, in a study of LGB college students, Mohr and Kendra (2011) found that social support was an important factor in reducing the negative effects of stigma and discrimination on mental health.

Overall, these quotes indicate that participants experienced internal conflicts and uncertainties related to their sexual identity. These struggles highlight the importance of having support systems and resources available to help individuals navigate the complexities of their sexual orientation.

### ***Exposure to Gay Culture***

The final sub-theme, early exposure to gay culture, describes participants' early exposure to representations of gay culture. Exposure to gay culture can be an important factor in the sexual identity process, particularly for those who do not have access to other resources or support (McLaren, 2018). This exposure can come through various channels, such as media representation or social networks, and can play a significant role in shaping one's understanding of their own sexual orientation. As noted by Rick, one of the participants in this study, his early exposure to gay culture was through seeing "guys making out" on TV, which may have contributed to his confusion and uncertainty about his own sexual identity, he shared:

I think people's idea of homosexuality is what they see on TV or what they read in the paper. My first exposure was when I was like 11 years old. I was flipping through the channels at night, and I saw guys making out and it was the first time in my life I was

exposed to gay culture. I was just hot on the inside during all of it. That was the first time I discovered what I was into and what I liked.

Likewise, Harry shared his early exposures to gay culture were significant as he discovered what he was into:

I saw all these commercials on TV for a male pageant for Mr. Venezuela. The men were all walking in their speedos and I'm like, yeah! this is what I'm into. And then I remember looking forward to watching it on TV, in my room, *escondido* (hidden) from everybody.

As noted by Harry and Rick, exposure to male beauty pageants and TV shows featuring gay people and same-sex relationships were important aspects of their early exposure to gay culture. Likewise, Jose expressed that he started “reading stuff around 15 and 18 years old about sexual identity to get to know me more because I had not had any sexual experience. It was very early for me.” Similarly, Jason shared “the first time I was attracted to a guy it was so confusing to me, because I was like, I'm not sure if I want to be him or I want to be with him. That was like almost like a little battle I had in my head at 10 or 11 years old.”

It is interesting to note that participants' early exposure to gay culture was not always positive, as some participants described feelings of confusion and uncertainty as a result of these experiences. However, the participants' experiences suggest that exposure to gay culture can play a significant role in shaping one's understanding of their sexual identity. Jose's experience of reading about sexual identity from a young age highlights the importance of access to resources and information about sexuality. Research has found that early exposure to information about sexual orientation can help individuals develop a more positive sense of their



identity and reduce feelings of confusion and isolation (Rosario et al., 2011). The participants' experiences suggest that early exposure to gay culture, whether through reading, TV, or personal experiences, can have a significant impact on an individual's understanding and acceptance of their sexual identity.

Likewise, Jason's experience of being attracted to a guy at a young age and feeling confused about his feelings demonstrates the potential impact of early exposure to gay culture. Exposure to representations of same-sex attraction in media, literature, or personal interactions can help individuals recognize and understand their own sexual orientation (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012). In summary, the Awareness of Sexual Identity theme highlights the experiences and perspectives of Latino cisgender Caribbean gay men regarding their sexual identity process. The sub-themes of *early awareness*, *confusion*, and *early exposure to gay culture* provide insight into the complexities of this process and the challenges participants faced. These findings contribute to the existing literature on sexual identity development and provide valuable insights into the experiences of underrepresented populations.

## **Theme Two: Visibility Management**

The second theme explores the strategies that the participants used to manage their visibility as gay men in the Latino Caribbean culture. This theme is critical because it provides insight into the unique challenges that the participants faced in navigating their identity within a culture that is not always accepting of gay men (Carter, 2019).

This theme refers to the experiences of individuals who must navigate and manage their visibility as a sexual minority in different environments. For Latino gay men, this process can be particularly complex, as they must navigate intersecting identities and cultural expectations.

Research has highlighted the challenges that Latino gay men face in managing their visibility in various settings. For example, in a study on Latino gay men's experiences in the workplace, researchers found that participants often felt the need to hide their sexuality in professional settings to avoid discrimination and negative consequences (Fassinger et al., 2000). Similarly, a study on Latino gay men's experiences in the family context found that participants often had to negotiate their visibility and acceptance within their families, given cultural expectations and traditional gender roles (Torres, 2004).

### ***Navigating Different Environments***

The sub-theme of *navigating different environments* speaks to the experiences of Latino gay men in managing their visibility in various contexts. This can include navigating different cultural contexts, such as the workplace or family settings, as well as different social environments, like gay bars or LGBTQ+ community events. It can also involve managing visibility within different identity communities, such as the Latino community and the LGBTQ+ community.

The experiences of Jose and Harry illustrate the challenges and complexities of managing visibility in different environments. Jose stated:

It's different when you're out with your gay friends and then you go with your straight friends. You have to change your persona or your attitude or be less flamboyant. So you have to manage your personality, your character, and your demeanor. In my work

environment, people have thoughts about my sexuality, but they never talk about it. And it's fine with me, because I don't like to be explaining to people how I feel about my sexuality, because that doesn't identify me all the time. Because how I think and how I carry my life it doesn't have to be attached to my sexuality all the time. It's really awkward sometimes, because people don't realize that my sexuality doesn't have to represent who I am all the time. I don't have to give people an explanation on how I decided to be gay, how I feel about my family's acceptance. I just be me all the time. I am 100% sure that I'm not the only gay person in my workspace. In other spaces, people always ask me if I am or not. People always ask because they see me acting too fem or not too masculine. Is really awkward sometimes. When it comes to being within family spaces, for me it's more awkward because your family always going to judge you, and that hurts. Even though I make myself believe that I am who I am in any space, I always think about how my family is views me.

Jose's and other participants experience of navigating different environments aligns with the broader topic of identity development and visibility management in the LGBTQ+ community, as discussed in the *Handbook of LGBTQ+-Affirmative Couple and Family Therapy*. Twist et al. (2022) explore how individuals who identify as gender, sexual, erotic, and relational minorities navigate their identities in various contexts and environments. The authors highlight that for many LGBTQ+ individuals, managing visibility and identity can be a challenging and complex process that varies depending on the context, culture, and social norms of the environment. Similarly, Harry shared: "It's tough to navigate different environments because

you don't want to be too flamboyant in front of some people. You have to be mindful of your environment and who you're with." He also stated:

I have my law degree, I'm constantly in the public eye, and that also hinders me in many ways because I have to restrict different parts of me in the work environment. I cannot be a flaming queen working in a courtroom, I'm just being a professional man. Some of my closest friends are men who work in law enforcement, big muscular masculine state troopers, and I always questioned how they'd view me as. If they'd view me as just this gay man and didn't pay much attention to the other parts of me. The friends that I have opened up to have been fully loving and accepting and nothing has ever changed with any of them. That has allowed me to continue to just be me, live my life regardless of what others may think, what my family may think, whatever their thoughts and values are, I'm just living my life and being my authentic self.

Everyone knows who I am in my area, even though most of the time I don't know who any of these people are, which is why I don't like going out in my area. Because professionally, I have to comport myself in certain ways. I'm not allowed to go to certain places, I'm not allowed to do certain things. So, I often have to put up a facade in every way possible. Like aside of my sexuality, like I just have to be the utmost professional in my area. Now outside of work, I'm just me, you know what I'm saying? But professionally, it's very different.

Now outside of work. I'm just me, you know what I'm saying? But professionally, it's very different. So, my boss recently, couple of months ago, hired someone who was very open about his sexuality, like in his interview, so my boss was super excited, and he

said to me “Oh, we finally have an openly gay employee,” and I looked at him, I was like, are you crazy? Like, hello. And we've never had that conversation. I'm like, we don't need to have that conversation. Like, you know me, you know what I'm saying? So, it was just very interesting.

I'm like, hello, I'm openly gay, I'm not hiding it. I'm just, you know, I'm in management, I'm keeping my professional facade. This is very interesting point of view, where it kind of made me think, am I really hiding that much? I don't mean to, but I'm just trying to maintain professionalism, and not disclosing anything about me, really, and just keeping my true self covered up so that I can be in management and be this professional. So, it made me really think about a lot of different things.

Harry's experience and quotes are closely related to the sub-theme of Visibility Management in *navigating different environments*. As a Latino gay man who is also a professional in the legal field, he faces the challenge of balancing his professional image with his authentic self. In his workplace, he must follow certain behavioral and dress codes to appear professional, which requires him to cover up certain aspects of his identity. He points out that being a “flaming queen” is not acceptable in a courtroom and that he must be seen as a professional man. This situation is a common experience for many LGBTQ+ people in various work settings.

Harry's experience of having to hide his identity in his professional environment reflects the concept of visibility management, which involves managing and controlling one's visibility or disclosure of their LGBTQ+ identity in different settings. It is a coping strategy used by many LGBTQ+ individuals to reduce the risk of stigma, discrimination, and harassment. As Twist et al.

(2022) note, the process of identity development and visibility management can be complex, particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals who live in multiple identities or hold positions of power in society. They also point out that the intersection of race and ethnicity can further complicate the process of visibility management.

In Harry's case, his intersectional identity as a Latino gay man who is also a professional adds an extra layer of complexity to his visibility management. He has to navigate multiple social contexts, such as his workplace, his community, and his family, each with its own set of expectations and norms. As a result, he must conceal or reveal his LGBTQ+ identity selectively, depending on the social context and the level of risk involved. The fact that his boss was unaware of his sexual orientation despite being openly gay in his personal life reflects how challenging it can be to manage visibility in different environments.

Moreover, Harry's experience illustrates the complex process of visibility management in navigating different environments, which is a common experience for many LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly those with intersectional identities. The literature on identity development and visibility management sheds light on the challenges that LGBTQ+ individuals face in managing their visibility and underscores the need for affirming and inclusive spaces in all social contexts.

Similarly, Jason also highlights how he presents different versions of himself in different environments. He emphasizes the importance of being himself in every aspect of his life but acknowledges that he alters his behavior and communication style based on the setting. For example, he behaves differently with his family than with his friends or coworkers. He shared:

First and foremost, I kept [my sexual identity] hidden from my parents, I think out of shame, especially my father. Just being shameful. And secondly, I would say a lot of my straight male friends, I was nervous that they would reject me. To articulate that I'm gay to my parents has been challenging. I hid it from my brothers as well because our age gap, they're in their 50s. I just kept it to myself, because it was easier that way, just to bottle it up inside, and not even discuss it.

I try to be myself in every aspect of my life, my true self. But let's be honest, who I am at work, who I am in my social life, and with my family are all different. For example, I wouldn't say things to my family that I would say to my friends, I wouldn't say things to my friends that I wouldn't say to my coworkers. So, I just feel like being gay is a part of me, but it doesn't define who I am completely. So, the best way I could put it is that in all aspects of life, I tried to be Johnny, this is me, take it or leave it. But it's an altered version of myself, because I'm not going to sit in a meeting with psychiatrists, and doctors and all that, and be the same silly person I am when I'm at the bar with my friends. So, I may become a little bit more animated and what not, and looser than what I say. But overall, I like to remain myself and have that core self, and just have different variations of it. And just like everything else in my life, you know, being a therapist is a part of me, it doesn't define who I am, being a gay man doesn't define me, it's a part of me, being Latino, once again, these are all things that when you put them all together, yes, that is who I am. But I like to be my authentic self in all these settings, so people know who I am and what I stand for. There tend to be altered versions of myself in each setting I put myself in.

Jason's experiences also highlight the challenges that LGBTQ+ individuals face in terms of managing their visibility in different settings, as they may feel pressure to conform to social expectations and norms to avoid discrimination or negative reactions. Ultimately, Jason emphasizes the importance of being his authentic self in all settings, while also acknowledging the reality that different versions of himself may emerge in different contexts.

Jason's experiences of visibility management and navigating different environments can be connected to the findings of Blumer and Murphy's (2011) study on the coping mechanisms of Alaskan gay male couples in the face of societal non-support. I found that societal non-support led to the creation of "families of choice (p. 283), as a coping mechanism, where couples formed close relationships with friends who accepted and supported them. Jason also mentions the importance of his close friendships in accepting and supporting his identity. He states:

The friends that I have opened up to have been fully loving and accepting and nothing has ever changed with any of them. That has allowed me to continue to just be me, live my life regardless of what others may think, what my family may think, whatever their thoughts and values are, I'm just living my life and being my authentic self.

Moreover, Blumer and Murphy (2011) found that therapy was another important coping mechanism for the couples in their study. They found that therapy helped couples navigate societal non-support and develop strategies to cope with the stress it caused. This is reflected in Jason's comment about being a therapist himself and using it as a coping mechanism for himself and others. He states:



Being a therapist is a part of me, it doesn't define who I am, being a gay man doesn't define me, it's a part of me...I like to be my authentic self in all these settings, so people know who I am and what I stand for.

In summary, Jason's experiences of visibility management and navigating different environments align with the coping mechanisms found in Blumer and Murphy's (2011) study on Alaskan gay male couples coping with societal non-support. The importance of “families of choice” and therapy as coping mechanisms are also reflected in Jason's experiences.

In contrast, Rick's experience differs from the other participants as he did not experience shame or fear in expressing his sexual identity. In fact, he takes pride in his identity and is confident in who he is becoming. This is in contrast to Jason's experience, where he felt a lot of shame and kept his sexual identity hidden from his family and friends. Rick hared:

Since coming out, I've never hidden my sexual identity. Everyone I interact, fucking says I'm gay, but almost because I think I take pride in that. I was part of the military, and even there, it was illegal to be openly gay five years ago. I was just so confident in who I was becoming that I didn't care.

In the military, everything's based on a scorecard. So, you could be as flamingly gay, and at the end of the day, everything is based on your physical PT score. How good can you shoot, And your overall score. You are not judged on your sexual identity.

I think there's a constant battle between femininity and masculinity and caring yourself in different spaces. I think just being comfortable with your sexuality is a process because even straight people go through this in the workplace, like what's appropriate to talk about and what's not. I've grown so comfortable with the people I work with that

when someone says something to me, it's my natural response to respond with "guurrl!" That's just how comfortable I am within my workspace, and they all just kind of laugh it off. I think just how I carry myself and how a lot of my friends carry themselves in and out of work. Again, I think it's just how you read the room. Some straight men enjoy you being like, damn, he looks good. You know, they kind of like feed off. Again, I think how we carry ourselves just signs back to what I was saying about exposure. I remember when I got married in this state, they were going over my paperwork and kept referring to my partner as "your wife, your wife, your wife, wife," and I said to them, "Yes my wife is a six two-foot man with a mustache." In that moment that broke the ice because they realized that I was dating a man.

Rick's experience of being in the military, where he was not judged based on his sexual identity but on his physical and overall score, could have contributed to his confidence in expressing his sexual identity. Additionally, Rick mentions that there is a constant battle between femininity and masculinity, and that being comfortable with one's sexuality is a process that everyone goes through, including straight people in the workplace. However, Rick has grown comfortable with the people he works with and feels that he can be himself around them.

Blumer and Murphy (2011) suggest that societal non-support can impact the experiences of gay males. While Jason, Harry, and Jose experienced shame and rejection in expressing their sexual identity, Rick's experience of being accepted in the military and growing comfortable with expressing his identity in the workplace suggests that societal attitudes towards homosexuality are changing. As Rick states, how people carry themselves and respond

to different situations is based on how they read the room, suggesting that societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals can impact the extent to which gay individuals feel comfortable expressing their sexual identity.

These quotes highlight how Latino gay men must navigate different social contexts and manage their visibility to avoid discrimination, judgment, or negative consequences. It is important to acknowledge the challenges that Latino gay men face in managing their visibility and to promote supportive environments that allow for full expression of their sexual identity.

In the case of Latino gay men, navigating different environments can involve managing visibility and identity within both the Latino community and the LGBTQ+ community, as these two communities may have different norms, expectations, and levels of acceptance for LGBTQ+ individuals. This can lead to unique challenges for Latino gay men in balancing their cultural identity with their sexual orientation and managing visibility and disclosure in different environments. The experiences shared by the participants in this study reflect these challenges and highlight the need for culturally responsive support systems and resources to help individuals navigate this complex process.

### **Theme Three: Spanish Caribbean Families' Influences**

The third theme highlights the significant influence of the participants' families on their experiences as gay men. This theme sheds light on the ways in which the participants' families have shaped their perceptions of being gay and their ability to be true to themselves (Sánchez & Cárdenas, 2020).

The theme of Spanish Caribbean Families' Influences on the acceptance of sexual identity has been explored in previous literature. According to Díaz et al. (2016), Latino culture

views homosexuality as a taboo, and it is often perceived as a threat to traditional family values and machismo. As a result, many Latino parents struggle with accepting their child's sexual identity, which may lead to rejection, ostracism, and emotional distress in their children. The following sub-themes emerged from the data:

### ***Family Influence on Sexual Identity Acceptance***

Family acceptance is crucial in Latino culture. According to De La Cancela and Binson (2004), the family's response to their child's sexual identity has a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of the child. Positive family acceptance has been found to promote resilience, self-esteem, and a positive self-image, while negative family reactions can lead to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Moreover, Fankhanel's (2004) study explored the coming-out experiences of gay youth in Puerto Rico and found that family support and acceptance were essential factors in promoting a positive self-image and sexual identity. Similarly, D'Augelli et al. (1998) found that family support was crucial in the disclosure of sexual orientation and in the overall well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. The authors found that positive family support was associated with better mental health outcomes and positive self-esteem. These studies highlight the importance of family support in promoting positive sexual identity development and mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ individuals in Spanish Caribbean families.

In this study, the participants experience with the sub-theme of family influence on sexual identity acceptance suggests that family support plays a critical role in the coming out process and the development of a positive sexual identity for LGBTQ+ individuals within Spanish Caribbean families. For example, Jason shared:

The fear of rejection, also the fear of overall shame, kept me hiding my sexual identity from family and straight male friends. So first and foremost were my parents, I think out of shame, especially my father. Just being shameful. And secondly, I would say a lot of my straight male friends, I was nervous that they would reject me. And, you know, that whole notion that if you're gay, and you're hanging out with a guy, you guys must be attracted to each other, you must like each other. So, it was the biggest fear was to be rejected, and just rejected in general, whether it was from my family, friends, or having nobody else in my family that was gay. It was hard for me to identify, or to even articulate it to my parents. I kept it to myself, because it was just easier that way, just to bottle it up inside, and not even discuss it. So, I would just say the fear of rejection, also the fear of overall shame from family.

My brothers have been more accepting of my sexual identity. I remember when I told them it took everything out of me to tell them this. But one day, I finally got the courage, and I told each one of them at separate times because I wanted it to be a one-on-one conversation. Luckily, I got the same responses from all of them. They said to me, "Listen, you're our little brother, and we love you no matter what, as long as you're safe." And they also said, "Who are we to judge," which was a huge relief for me. They said to me, "You're saying that you're gay; we've also done things that were hard for us to tell people that we love." For me, having told them was a huge, huge relief.

My belief is that most of our families know before we articulate it to them. My brothers relate to my life, or what I do as a gay man, as "your lifestyle," they always say that word, "your lifestyle," but they never would come out and say, "You're gay." And they

say things like, “Oh, that's probably difficult for you to do in your lifestyle.” However, within the last year, they have actually acknowledged the fact that I am gay, and it has been a huge relief for me to just hear the words coming out of their mouth. For them to be very much Machista and masculine men with wives and families –your typical Latino man. To have them say that they accept me, and they care about me, and who are they to judge me, meant the world to me.

...another powerful statement from my brothers was, “You're the same person you were yesterday, today after telling us this, nothing will change.” For me, that was an eye-opening statement. It reassured me that they were right; nothing in our relationship has changed. Our respect for one another hasn't changed. So yeah, that was also big for me, just the fact that they said, “We didn't know this yesterday, and you just told us this today. And look, nothing's changed.”

The experience of Jason, as mentioned in his quote, highlights the fear of rejection and shame that comes with revealing one's sexual identity to family members and friends (Fankhanel, 2004). He felt ashamed of his sexual identity and was nervous about how his family and friends would react. Fear of rejection was one of the significant reasons why he decided to keep his identity hidden from his family and friends.

However, when Jason finally came out to his brothers, they were supportive and accepting of his sexual identity, which brought immense relief to him. According to Jason, his brothers' acknowledgment of his sexual identity changed the dynamics of their relationship positively.

Overall, Jason's experience indicates that even when families may know or suspect their children's sexual identity, the fear of rejection and shame can prevent the child from coming out to them. However, the acceptance and support of family members can positively impact one's mental well-being and improve their relationship with their family members. Similarly, Harry's experience highlights the family's influence on an individual's acceptance of their sexual identity. He reveals that he has come out to most of his mother's side of the family, but he has not fully come out to his father because of his father's religious beliefs, he expressed:

My biggest fear was to come out to my family. I've come out to most of my mother's side of the family, however, one person that I still have not fully 100% come out to is my father. And it's all because of religious reasons. I have a cousin who's a transgender man and has been living as a trans for 28 years now, and my father still refers to him by her dead name. It's just the level of disrespect, and how I see father treat my cousin really scares me as to how he's going to treat me if he was to know that I am gay. On the other hand, I had a mixed experience when I came out to my mom because it was positive and then negative, in which she tried to backtrack everything. So, at this point in my life, I'm like, I don't need to come out to anybody in my family. I am who I am; you accept me if you accept me, I don't care. That's where I'm at, except for with my dad.

Once I was on my way home, and I told my mom we needed to talk and what I needed to talk to her about was just a surprise that I had for her because I had just bought a new car. So, I get to the house, and I'm going to tell her this, and she was so relieved and said to me, "Ahi gracias a Dios que era eso [oh thank God it was that], I thought you were going to tell me you had a boyfriend and I'm not ready for that." And she said,

“Pero no te apures yo me muero pronto [don’t worry, I’ll die soon, and then you can live your life].” So, I’m like, I can’t have a boyfriend until you die, like you’re not comfortable enough with my gayness. So that’s part of the issues that I have with my mother regarding my sexuality.

In my family, it’s okay to be gay, just not too gay. My experience with my mother was a positive acceptance at the beginning, and then it can become kind of negative. My mom once told me, “Oh, you know I love you, no matter what.” She even told me that out of her three boys, she said, “You know, you’re my favorite.” And then she said to me, “It’s okay; I’m going to love you no matter what. Just don’t come home dressed like a woman; don’t wear a wig and makeup.” I’m like, not that I have any interest in doing drag, but shit! What about if I wanted to be a drag? Like, let me be, but that was the first thing, and again, it’s like it’s okay to be gay, just not too gay.

When it comes to sexuality, do I carry any of my family’s values, beliefs, or thoughts?  
100% No! I’m going to be me; I’m going to live my life. The only person that I’m not open to and 100% clear with this is my father, for the reasons I discussed earlier. Aside from that, I’m going to be me whether you agree with me or not; I’m just going to be me, even professionally.

Harry fears that his father would treat him the same way he treats his transgender cousin. Harry’s experience with his mother was mixed, and she had positive acceptance at the beginning, but she tried to backtrack later. Harry’s mother also made it clear that she is not ready for him to have a boyfriend and that he should not dress like a woman. Harry feels that his family’s acceptance of his sexuality is conditional and limited.



This finding is consistent with a study by Floyd and Stein (2002), who found that family members' reactions to a member's coming out can have significant effects on their well-being. In another study, Abreu et al. (2016) found that Latino families' cultural values often influenced their acceptance of their LGBTQ+ family members. They found that cultural beliefs, such as machismo, can make it challenging for family members to accept their LGBTQ+ family members fully.

Moreover, Harry's experience shows that families can also have different levels of acceptance for their LGBTQ+ family members. This finding is supported by a study by Katz-Wise (2016), which found that families can have different levels of acceptance of their LGBTQ+ family members. They also found that some families have more significant challenges accepting their transgender family members than their gay or lesbian members.

Likewise, Jose's experience highlights the ongoing struggle for acceptance and support from his family regarding his sexual identity. Despite his efforts to introduce his mother to different perspectives and become more open-minded, he still feels like his mother sees his sexuality as something that will eventually change. This can be incredibly hurtful to someone who identifies as gay, as it suggests that their identity is not valid or that they are going through a phase. He shared:

My mom still struggling with the fact that I am gay. When we get together, we don't talk about anything gay, and in her mind, she still thinks that my sexual identity is something that will change at some point. At this point in my life, I have tried to introduce my mother to different things to see if she becomes more open minded and finally accepts me as a gay man. But in all honesty, I really don't care what my stepfather, other family

members, or everybody else thinks about my sexuality, because I will still be me all the time.

The first time I came out was to my grandmother; she accepted me all the time. When I first came out to her, I thought she'd have a different mindset because she's older, just like my aunts and brother. My mom's still thinks that my grandmother doesn't know about my sexuality.

It is noteworthy that Jose found acceptance from his grandmother, who is of an older generation. This challenges the stereotype that older people are generally less accepting of LGBTQ+ identities. Additionally, Jose's mother's perception that his grandmother does not know about his sexuality indicates that there may be a lack of communication within the family regarding this topic. This lack of communication can further perpetuate misunderstandings and misconceptions about LGBTQ+ identities. Jose's experience emphasizes the need for open and honest communication within families to foster understanding and acceptance.

On the other hand, Rick's experience appears to be different from the other participants in terms of the ease of coming out and the level of acceptance from his environment. He came out at a young age, and it seems that he has never faced any significant challenges related to his sexual identity. He stated, "I came out at 13; since coming out, I've never hidden my sexual identity. Everyone I interact, fucking says I'm gay, but almost because I think I take pride in that." His quote indicates that he takes pride in being gay and has a positive attitude towards his identity.

In contrast, Harry and Jose had a harder time coming out, and they still face challenges related to acceptance from their family. Harry's father's religious beliefs and his treatment of

his transgender cousin are significant barriers to his coming out fully to his father. Jose's mother is still struggling to accept his sexuality, and he has tried to introduce her to new things to be more open-minded. Overall, while Rick's experience appears to be more positive, Harry and Jose's experiences demonstrate the challenges that many LGBTQ+ individuals face regarding acceptance from family members.

The sub-theme of family influence on sexual identity acceptance highlights the various experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and their families. Some participants had positive experiences with their families, while others faced challenges in being accepted for who they are. Harry's fear of coming out to his father due to religious beliefs, Jose's struggle with his mother's lack of acceptance, and Rick's pride in his sexual identity despite potential stigma all demonstrate the impact of family attitudes and beliefs on LGBTQ+ individuals. These experiences demonstrate the importance of family acceptance and support for LGBTQ+ individuals' mental health and well-being.

### ***Religious Beliefs and Self-Identity***

Religious beliefs play a significant role in shaping Latino culture and influencing the acceptance of homosexuality in Spanish Caribbean families. According to Page et al. (2013), religious beliefs often create internal conflicts for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, leading to confusion and a sense of guilt.

Pastrana (2015) provides valuable insights that can help connect the participants' experiences regarding the influence of religious beliefs on their self-identity and acceptance. Pastrana's article explores the experiences of LGBTQ+ Latinx in relation to family support, identity, and religion. The findings emphasize the significant impact of religious beliefs within

the context of family dynamics and acceptance. It suggests that religious teachings and cultural norms can create a challenging environment for LGBTQ+ individuals to fully embrace their identities and be open about their sexual orientation. The participants experiences align with the findings of the article, as many of them highlight the struggle they faced in attempting to come out to religious/Catholic family members.

For instance, Jose expressed that while growing up in a Catholic family and being surrounded by religion made it difficult for him to identify and accept his own sexuality. He felt a fear of rejection from his family due to the religious beliefs that categorized his sexual orientation as sinful or taboo. He shared:

I grew up in a Catholic family, I went to Catholic schools, and religion was always around me. It was hard for me to identify myself because the belief was that I was going to hell, or something bad was going to happen to me if I decided to move forward with my sexuality. My family's religion made me think about how they'd treat me if I told them about my sexual identity. My fear was that they'd reject me. I tried to tell my family from my mom's side, that's who I grew up with. It was really hard for me because they are all Catholics. All my mom thinks is what people are gonna think about us and her when they find out about her gay son.

Jose expressed concerns about how his family, particularly his mother, would be perceived by others if they found out about his sexual identity, indicating the weight of societal expectations and the potential stigma associated with homosexuality within their religious and cultural framework.

Overall, Jose's account reflects the complex interplay between religion, family dynamics, and LGBTQ+ self-acceptance, as illuminated by Pastrana's study. It underscores the need for further exploration and understanding of the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals within religious and cultural contexts and the importance of fostering an environment of acceptance and support for their well-being.

Moreover, Perez and Sanchez (2019) examine the experiences of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth within their families and communities. The authors discuss the challenges faced by individuals when coming out in religious contexts and highlight the potential conflicts between religious beliefs and acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

Harry's experience involves navigating the challenges of coming out within a religious family context. He expressed:

My family is very religious; my father is a deacon at his church. He has for years made it very known to me and to everyone how he views homosexuality. He doesn't really accept it. He says things like "I don't have to agree with it, whatever they decide it's on them..." And he voices that because there are other gay people in our family. I have a cousin who's a transgender man and has been living as a trans for 28 years now.

I remember when my cousin moved to Florida and came out to his parents in a letter because it just wasn't a safe or comfortable space for him to come out. Seeing his experience, how his parents reacted, and then how it spread like wildfire within our family, everybody talking about it, and "Ahi Dios Mio (oh my God)" we got to pray for him. Seeing all of this just threw me back in the closet even more. My main worry was to come out to these crazy people. Even to this day he can't be his true authentic self in his

late 40s. He's been with his partner for 19 years, and his parents still haven't fully accepted the situation. They still haven't really had a conversation, like the letter was sent, they received the letter, and they acknowledged it, but they haven't really discussed anything about it. His father still to this day tells him "I'm going to pray for you and for your friends that are like you." We know that there's no reason to pray the gay away, but that's what they do. Unfortunately, in my family that's just the culture that it has been. Some are more open and progressive than others, or they pretend to be, but then still behind closed doors, they still have those same feelings. They are always inviting me to go to church, and I'm like "para que (for what)?" For somebody to pray over me and take the gay away from me.

We know that there's no reason to pray the gay away, but that's what [my family] do. Unfortunately, in my family that's just the culture. Some are more open and progressive than others, or they pretend to be, but then still behind closed doors, they still have those same [negative] feelings [towards gay people]. They are always inviting me to go to church, and I'm like "para que (for what)?" For somebody to pray over me and take the gay away from me!

Harry's father's position as a deacon at a church and his family's conservative views on homosexuality contribute to a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ acceptance. Harry shares his cousin's experience as a transgender man, who faced difficulties when coming out to their parents and continues to face a lack of acceptance. These experiences have influenced Harry's decision to remain in the closet to his father, fearing similar negative reactions and the inability to be his authentic self.

By comparing Harry's experience with the findings from Perez and Sanchez (2019), it becomes evident that his story aligns with the broader struggles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in religious contexts. The lack of acceptance, the reliance on prayer to change one's sexual orientation, and the pressure to conform to religious expectations are all themes that emerge. These experiences highlight the need for greater understanding, acceptance, and support within religious communities to foster an inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ individuals.

### ***Latinx Family Cultural Values***

The sub-theme of *Latinx Family Cultural Values* explores the influence of cultural values and traditions within Latinx families on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. It examines how these cultural norms, such as machismo, marianismo, and familismo, can impact acceptance, support, and the ability to live authentically. Jose's experience highlights the concern and preconceived notions his family holds regarding his sexual orientation, specifically focusing on his perceived femininity. He shares that his family tends to associate being gay with displaying feminine traits. He shared:

families are more worried about who you're going to become as a gay man. They think about the ways you are going to act if you're going to be too feminine or more masculine. They don't think of you as a masculine acting gay man, all they think about is the feminine side you are going to present to them. They always go to the fact that now that you are gay, you're going to act fem, you're going to wear wigs, dresses, all of those things, that's the first thing that comes to their minds.

It was really hard for me growing up with these messages from my family. My mom always said that I needed to act like a man. If they saw me talking to a girl, they

immediately believed that I had something with that girl. My aunts and the rest of my family members made a lot of bad comments about myself.

I still think about how I grew up and the values that have influenced my life. I don't want to make the same mistakes my parents made with me, hell no! I don't want to make the same mistakes. I want to do something different than what my family did with me. I still think about what my family wants for me.

Jose's experience reflects the impact of cultural values on his journey of self-acceptance and identity expression. He shares how his family's concern about his sexual identity primarily revolves around assumptions about femininity and the fear that he would adopt stereotypically feminine behaviors. This reflects the influence of cultural expectations and gender roles within his family.

Torres et al. (2011) provide relevant insights to Jose's experience. The authors discuss the cultural value of *respeto*, which emphasizes respect for authority and family hierarchy. This value may contribute to the tendency for families to hold specific expectations and stereotypes about LGBTQ+ individuals. Therefore, it is possible that Jose's family's concerns about his femininity stem from the belief that traditional gender roles should be maintained.

Also, Vega and Vanoss-Marín (2011) explore the cultural influence on sexual attitudes and beliefs of Latina adolescents. It discusses the impact of *marianismo*, which idealizes femininity, and *machismo*, which emphasizes traditional masculinity, on gender roles and expectations within Latinx families. These cultural values may contribute to the anxieties expressed by Jose's family regarding his perceived femininity as a gay man.



While Torres et al., (2011) and Vega and Vanoss-Marin (2011) do not directly address the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, they offer insights into the cultural context in which Jose's family's concerns arise. They suggest that cultural values and norms, such as respeto, marianismo, and machismo, can influence perceptions and expectations of gender roles and expressions within Latinx families. These emphasize the importance of strong family bonds. In the case of Jose, his family's focus on his perceived femininity and their expectations of his behavior can be seen as an expression of concern for the family's reputation and the fear of deviating from traditional gender roles.

On the other hand, Harry's experience reflects the dynamic of conditional acceptance within his family regarding his sexual orientation. He highlights that while his mother initially expressed acceptance and love for him, there are limitations imposed on his self-expression. The expectation to conform to certain gender norms and the discouragement of embracing a more flamboyant or expressive identity indicate a level of discomfort or resistance towards his full expression of queerness. He shared:

In my family, it's okay to be gay, just not too gay. Like my experience with my mother was a positive acceptance at the beginning and then it can become kind of negative. My mom once told me, "Oh, you know I love you, no matter what." She even told me that out of her three boys, she said "you know, you're my favorite." And then she said to me, "it's okay, I'm going to love you no matter what. Just don't come home dressed like as a woman don't wear a wig and makeup." I'm like, not that I have any interest in doing drag, but shit! What about if I wanted to be a drag? Like, let me be, but that was the first thing and again, it's like it's okay to be gay, just not to gay.

When it comes to sexuality, do I carry any of my family's values, beliefs, or thoughts?

100% No! I'm going to be me; I'm going to live my life. The only person that I'm not open and 100% clear with this is with my father, for the reasons I discussed earlier. Aside from that, I'm going to be me whether you agree with me or not, I'm just going to be me, even professionally.

Harry's experience aligns with the concept of conditional acceptance, where family members may show support for LGBTQ+ individuals as long as they adhere to certain expectations or limit their expression within predefined boundaries. This can stem from cultural and societal norms, including traditional gender roles, which may view deviations from these norms as a threat or challenge to the family's reputation or social standing.

The literature by Pastrana (2015) explores the role of family support, identity, and religion for LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals. It discusses how cultural and religious values can shape family dynamics and influence acceptance. In the case of Harry, the religious beliefs and cultural values within his family seem to contribute to the conditions placed on his self-expression and the limitations on embracing a more diverse range of gender expressions.

Additionally, the article by Vega and Vanoss Marín (2011) highlights the influence of cultural values, such as machismo and marianismo, on gender roles and expectations within Latinx families. This cultural context may contribute to the emphasis on maintaining traditional gender norms and the discomfort surrounding expressions that challenge these norms.

Despite the conditional acceptance he experiences within his family, Harry asserts his determination to live authentically and not be bound by their values, beliefs, or thoughts regarding his sexuality. This demonstrates his resilience and the strength of his individual

identity. He recognizes the need to establish boundaries with his father, indicating that he may anticipate further challenges in terms of acceptance from that particular family member.

Harry's experience highlights the presence of conditional acceptance within his family, where his mother's initial support is tempered by limitations on his self-expression. The articles by Pastrana (2015) and Vega and Vanoss-Marín (2011) provide insights into the influence of cultural and religious values on the dynamics of acceptance within Latinx families. Harry's resolve to be true to himself and defy familial expectations demonstrates his determination to live an authentic life, even if it means challenging the values and beliefs of his family members.

Next, Jason's experience reflects a shift in his relationship with his family's cultural values and beliefs as he has grown into adulthood. He acknowledges that living with his family, he was constantly surrounded by their thoughts and messages, which influenced his sense of self. However, as he branched out, pursued his own career, and gained other life experiences, he began to shape his own identity and create distance from the cultural values of his family household. He shared:

It is very different when you're living with your family, in which case you're constantly surrounded by their thoughts, beliefs, and these messages. when you branch out, become an adult, have your own career, had other experiences, that's when you start to create your own identity. The family cultural values and messages that I experienced as a child living in my family household are vanishing. Yes, from time to time, they do influence me, but not as before. I still hold myself close to certain things, such as family first and the love I experience when I'm with my family. However, there other things that I don't necessarily believe in, which I don't feel necessary discussing with my family.

If it doesn't fit me or contributes to my growth, I let it slide, it doesn't really affect me, unless it's something that directly affects me. Overall, I think with time and life experiences I've been able to just become my own person, and not really care about what others think of me. I say that loosely, because let's be honest, we always care about what people think about us. For me caring in general has become different in the way I see things, because I tend to care less about what people think of me now. I feel like as you get older, you tend to care less, become more of who you are, and have create your own set of values. I still do have a strong influence of my childhood and how I grew up, but I tried to be who I am, accept myself, and to be more comfortable with myself. I feel like you get to a certain age where you begin to live your own life, aside from what your family beliefs and values are.

Jason recognizes that while his family's values still have some influence on him from time to time, they no longer hold the same power over his beliefs and choices. He prioritizes certain aspects of his family's values, such as family first and the love experienced in their presence. However, he has also developed his own set of beliefs and values that may differ from those of his family, which he does not feel the need to discuss or justify to them. He has become more selective in accepting or internalizing ideas that contribute to his personal growth, disregarding those that do not align with his individuality.

As Jason has matured, he has grown into his own person and cares less about others' opinions of him, although he acknowledges that there is always a degree of concern for how others perceive him. This shift in caring is a natural part of personal growth and development, where he has become more comfortable with himself and less bound by external judgments.

He recognizes that as one ages, they tend to care less, become more authentic, and establish their own set of values.

Jason's experience aligns with the notion that individuals go through a process of individuation, where they gradually separate themselves from their family's beliefs and values to establish their own identity. This process can be influenced by life experiences, career choices, and exposure to different perspectives outside the family environment.

Unlike the others, Rick's experience is shaped by the cultural values and expectations within his African American family. He describes his father's upbringing in a hypermasculine environment where certain activities, such as playing the violin or pursuing musical theater, were considered gay and not aligned with the accepted norms of masculinity. This cultural backdrop instilled a rugged mentality in his family, emphasizing self-sufficiency and the ability to navigate the challenges of the real world. He shared:

My dad grew up on a super hypermasculine African American family where even playing the violin or going to school for musical theater was considered gay.

The culture in my family was rugged, like pull yourself up type of mentality. I think for parents, the biggest thing wasn't "will my kid be able to handle himself in the real world." And something that like my mom said to me stands out every time because I was still young, but she said to me, "Raymond, the world is a fucked-up place, don't make it harder for yourself." And that didn't resonate with me at the time. Was she right!?

Yeah, like the world can be pretty cruel and cold. I think that was the culture within my family. Everything going on in the world outside of myself definitely corresponds with who I am and how I carry my sexual identity.

Rick recalled his mother's advice, which resonates with the overall culture within his family. She warned him about the harsh realities of the world, encouraging him not to make things harder for himself. This perspective reflects a concern for his well-being and a desire to prepare him for the challenges he may face due to his sexual identity.

Rick acknowledged that the external world and the events taking place in society have an impact on his personal journey and the way he expresses his sexual identity. The cultural values and attitudes within his family are not isolated from the broader context, and he recognizes the interplay between external societal factors and his self-perception.

Rick's experience highlights the intricate relationship between cultural values, societal influences, and personal identity. He navigates the expectations of his family's cultural norms while also acknowledging the impact of the broader world on his self-expression. His story emphasizes the importance of understanding the intersectionality of identities and the ways in which cultural values can shape individual experiences within different communities.

The family cultural value's sub-theme reveals the profound impact that cultural norms, beliefs, and expectations have on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. Participants like Jose, Harry, Jason, and Rick shared their personal journeys within the context of their families' cultural values. Jose faced the challenge of conforming to traditional gender roles and stereotypes imposed by his family's beliefs, while Harry navigated the complex acceptance of his sexual identity within certain boundaries set by his family. Jason expressed how his own identity and values evolved as he ventured into adulthood, consciously choosing which aspects of his family's cultural values to embrace and which to let go. Rick's experience showcased the intersectionality of cultural and societal influences, highlighting how his African American

family's hypermasculine background shaped his understanding of self in relation to the broader world. Collectively, these experiences underscore the intricate interplay between individual identity, cultural values, and societal expectations, emphasizing the significance of acknowledging and understanding the role of family cultural values in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals.

### ***Gender Roles – Expectations***

Traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained in Latinx culture, and this can create a challenge for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+. According to García et al. (2016), Latinx families often have specific expectations for their children based on their gender, which can include heterosexual relationships and marriage. This sub-theme explores the influence of cultural norms and expectations regarding gender roles on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within the Latinx community. The sub-theme delves into the pressures and expectations faced by individuals when their sexual orientation or gender identity challenges traditional gender roles.

García et al. (2016) highlight the influence of gender roles within the Latinx community and how they impact individuals' behavior and expectations. Their findings align with Jason's experience of strict gender roles within his family. In his household, certain tasks were designated as “woman's work,” such as mopping, doing dishes, and laundry, while responsibilities like yard work were considered more suitable for a man. This reflects the traditional gender roles and division of labor often found in Latinx families. He shared:

I could start off by saying that gender roles are huge in my house. So, the fact that I am man, I wasn't allowed to mop the floor, do the dishes, sweep, do laundry, for my

parents that was a woman's job. All I had to be responsible for was to make sure the yard looked good, and all the outside stuff. So, gender roles are very prominent in my family, you can see them in the household. And God forbid, I would try to mop or wash dishes, I would be stopped in my tracks. My parents would say “no, you don't do that... Leave that for your sister... I'll do that later.” So, gender roles are huge in my family. As far cultural influences, I could just go back to the machismo thing. The belief of you're a man and you have more privilege than the women in the house. I remember going out to party in my early 20s, and many times I had girls talking to me and the message from my parents was that “if a girl talks to you, you need to give her attention because you're a man, and that's what a man does. A man gives a woman attention if she gives them attention. And if you don't, *tu eres bien Pato* (you are very gay).”

Garcia et al. (2016) also explore the concept of machismo, which Jason mentions as a cultural influence in his family. Machismo refers to the belief in male superiority and the expectation that men should display characteristics associated with dominance, strength, and assertiveness. Jason recalls being instructed by his parents to give attention to women who approached him at parties, emphasizing that it was his duty as a man. This expectation reflects the societal pressure for men to conform to the prescribed gender roles and validate their masculinity through their interactions with women.

By drawing on García et al. (2016), we can see how Jason's experience aligns with broader cultural patterns and expectations within the Latinx community regarding gender roles and machismo. The findings provide valuable insights into the cultural and social dynamics that



shape individuals' experiences and expectations surrounding their gender identity and behavior.

Similarly, Harry's experience reflects the influence of gender roles and expectations within his family, with a particular emphasis on being a gentleman and taking care of others. He mentions that his mom instilled values of raising a gentleman, which include paying for dates, holding doors, and displaying acts of kindness and respect towards others. These values align with traditional gender expectations that men should take on a provider and protector role in relationships:

Yeah, I was going to piggyback on what Jason was just saying. Everything that family kind of instills is influential. For instance, my mom was always very much about raising a gentleman. So, I still hold those values. For example, when I take someone out on a date, especially on the first day, I'm paying, because that's how I was taught to take care of someone else. Regardless of if it's a man or a woman, those are just my values as a man. For example, holding the door, opening the door for someone, you know, things like that. Those are values that I still carry near and dear to my heart. For me, it's just being a good person. That was always implemented in me while growing up. Aside from sexuality.

My mom had to be independent. She had three boys and she always taught us to do everything in the house. She used to tell us, "You're never going to rely on a woman for anything, you're going to help a woman out." But again, it was always about being with a woman, and "you need to treat women with respect, and you need to help a woman in the household you need to share responsibility.

So, for my mom, it was all about equality in the home, but again, with a woman like it was always instilled in me that this is what a man needed to do. As a man you need to take care of your woman and you need to share everything with your woman.

Harry highlights his mother's emphasis on independence and sharing responsibilities in the household. She taught him and his brothers to be self-sufficient and not rely on women for anything. While promoting equality within the home, there was still an underlying expectation that these values and responsibilities were specific to being with a woman.

Harry's experience reflects the complex interplay between traditional gender roles and expectations, as well as the influence of his family's values and teachings. While he upholds certain values of being a gentleman and taking care of others, he also recognizes the importance of equality and shared responsibilities in the household.

In Harry's case, his family's emphasis on being a gentleman and taking care of women reflects broader societal notions of masculinity and traditional gender roles. These experiences are important to consider in understanding the intersection of culture, gender, and identity within the Latinx community.

Jose's experience reflects the influence of differing gender roles and expectations within his family. While his grandparents were open-minded and did not impose strict gender roles on him, his mother held more traditional views. She discouraged him from engaging in activities typically associated with girls, emphasizing that it was not his responsibility and that his female cousins could handle those tasks. He expressed:

In my case, I grew up with my grandparents, they were very open about gender roles.

They didn't really care if I cooked, cleaned, or did anything around the house. However,

my mom, she used to say, “Oh, all you are doing is girl stuff. You don't have to do that all the time. You can help sometimes, but it's not your responsibility to do it. Your girl cousins are at home, and they can do it. They can cook, wash the dishes, and the other girl stuff you are doing.

When I moved to the United States, I realized that the skills my grandparents taught me helped me a lot. The fact that I knew how to cook, clean, and take care of my space really helped me a lot. Spanish families always think man has to do only man stuff, otherwise you will never become a man. Yeah, all of these cultural values and roles influence our own identity today.

Jose’s experience aligns with the findings of García et al. (2016), which highlight the existence of cultural beliefs that associate certain tasks and responsibilities with specific genders. Jose's mother's perspective reflects the traditional notion that certain household chores and activities are primarily the domain of women, and that men should focus on “manly” tasks.

However, Jose acknowledges that the skills he learned from his grandparents, including cooking, cleaning, and taking care of his space, proved beneficial when he moved to the United States. This demonstrates the practicality and value of having a diverse skill set, irrespective of traditional gender roles. Jose recognizes that these cultural values and expectations have shaped his identity, as they continue to influence his beliefs and behaviors.

Overall, Jose's experience underscores the complexity of gender roles within the Latinx community. It showcases the interplay between different family members' perspectives, cultural values, and the impact they have on personal identity and development.

Lastly, Rick's experience highlights the prominent role of gender roles within his family. He acknowledges that the rules were clearly defined, with specific expectations for men and women. Men were assigned tasks such as taking the side of the road when walking with a female, holding the door, taking out the trash, and handling heavy lifting. These expectations align with traditional notions of masculinity and gender roles. He shared:

I think in my family the rules were pretty defined. Men do this, women do that. I think gender roles were super big in my family. I don't think that was to combat my sexuality. For example, you're walking with a female on the sidewalk, a man takes the side of the road, you walk into a restaurant, as a man we hold the door, we take out the trash, if something needs heavy lifting, we grab another guy friend. I don't think that was to fight my sexuality. however how I can about my sexuality has a lot to do with just those expectations that were in the house and implemented throughout the family.

Rick did not perceive these gender roles as a direct response to him not accepting his sexuality, indicating that they were not necessarily imposed to combat his sexual orientation. However, he recognizes that these expectations have influenced his perception and understanding of his own sexuality. The presence of these gender roles within his family and their implementation throughout the wider family context have shaped his perspective on how he should navigate his sexuality. Rick's experience exemplifies how traditional Latinx expectations, although not directly related to his sexuality, have influenced his understanding of his sexual identity.

Comparing Rick's experience to the other participants, it is evident that gender roles have had varying degrees of impact on their lives. While Jason and Harry discuss specific gender

role expectations within their households, Jose's experience indicates a more relaxed attitude towards gender roles from his grandparents but a more traditional outlook from his mother. These diverse experiences showcase the complexity of gender roles within the Latinx community and how they can intersect with an individual's sexual orientation.

Overall, Rick's experience underscores the significance of gender roles in his family and their influence on his perception of his sexuality. It highlights the interplay between cultural expectations, family dynamics, and personal identity formation. The literature supports the notion that gender roles hold a significant place within the Latinx community, contributing to individuals' understanding of themselves and their sexual identities.

### ***Gender Roles – Machismo***

Machismo is a cultural norm in Latinx communities that emphasizes male dominance and power. According to Arreola et al. (2015), this cultural norm can lead to discrimination and negative attitudes towards individuals who identify as LGBTQ+. It encompasses beliefs and expectations related to male dominance, strength, and authority, often leading to the subordination of women and the reinforcement of gender inequalities. This sub-theme explores the impact of machismo on the participants' experiences and identities.

According to Arreola et al. (2015), machismo emphasizes male privilege and dominance within the household, which resonates with Jason's upbringing. He mentions that there was a belief that men had more privilege than women, and he was expected to give women attention if they showed interest in him. Failure to do so was associated with being labeled as “*bien Pato*” (very gay), reflecting the pressure to conform to traditional gender expectations.

there's a belief that if you're a man you have more privilege than the women in the house. I remember going out to parties in my early 20s, and many times I had girls talking to me and the message from my parents was that "if a girl talks to you, you need to give her attention because you're a man, and that's what a man does. A man gives a woman attention if she gives them attention. And if you don't, *tu eres bien Pato* (you are very gay)." Now as I think about this, it wasn't that I was "*bien Pato* (very gay)," maybe I was just being respectful. I just didn't want to give her attention because I didn't want to lead her on in a bad way.

But yeah, the whole theory of machismo was huge in my family. It was clear that as a man you work and if your wife doesn't want to work, she doesn't have to work, you maintain her, you are the breadwinner! all those messages were definitely ingrained in my head. So, it was difficult for me to branch away from that because my lifestyle and the way I live my life is completely different. It took me to make a huge change in my mentality, my ways of thinking. It was just very difficult to go from being in that household my entire life to being an adult in my late 20s early 30s and not agreeing with those gender roles. I respect the fact that this is the way my parents lived their life, and that they are older with an old mentality, but once again, it's learned behavior from their parents. So, the whole machismo and gender roles are still very prominent in my family.

Jason highlighted the ingrained messages of machismo regarding men's role as breadwinners and the responsibility to financially support their wives. These expectations conflict with his own lifestyle and values, creating a tension between the cultural norms he was

raised with and the choices he wants to make as an adult. This aligns with the findings of other literature that connect machismo with rigid gender roles and the challenge of breaking away from those roles (Arreola et al., 2015).

Furthermore, Jason acknowledges that these beliefs and behaviors are learned from previous generations, suggesting the intergenerational transmission of machismo. This echoes the findings of studies that emphasize the influence of family and cultural background on the perpetuation of traditional gender norms (García et al., 2016). Jason's struggle to reconcile his own beliefs with the machismo values in his family exemplifies the complexity of navigating cultural expectations and forging a personal identity.

Overall, Jason's experience reflects the impact of machismo on his upbringing and the ongoing presence of traditional gender roles within his family. It underscores the challenges he faces in reconciling these cultural expectations with his own personal values and lifestyle choices.

Next, Harry's experience contrasts with Jason's in terms of the presence of machismo within their families. While Jason describes a household where traditional gender roles and male privilege were emphasized, Harry's household had a different dynamic. According to Arreola et al. (2015), machismo often involves the valorization of male dominance and infidelity, which aligns with Jason's description of his father as a “mujeriego” (womanizer). This suggests that Harry's father embodied certain aspects of machismo, such as engaging in multiple relationships and being absent from the household. He expressed:

My house was a little different; my mom was always very progressive. Even though she was with my dad, she wasn't because my dad was a mujeriego (womanizer). He had

many different women, and he was never in the house, and my mom had to be independent.

In Harry's case, his mother's progressive mindset and independence served as a counterforce to traditional machismo. She had to take on the role of both parents, being responsible for herself and her children. This resonates with the notion that women may challenge or resist machismo by asserting their own agency and autonomy (Colón-Díaz et al., 2017a). Harry's mother's independence likely influenced his own perspective on gender roles and may have provided him with a more inclusive and egalitarian outlook.

Although Harry's experience differs from Jason's in terms of the presence of machismo within their families, both narratives highlight the complex interplay between traditional gender norms, family dynamics, and individual identities. The literature on machismo and gay men suggests that the presence of machismo can create conflicts and challenges for individuals who do not conform to traditional gender and sexual expectations (Arreola et al., 2015). In both cases, Jason and Harry navigate their own identities and beliefs amidst the influence of machismo, albeit in different ways.

Overall, these contrasting experiences demonstrate the diverse ways in which machismo manifests within families and its impact on individuals, particularly those who identify as gay. While Jason grapples with conforming to traditional gender roles and expectations rooted in machismo, Harry's household challenges certain aspects of machismo through his mother's progressive mindset and independence. These experiences underscore the complexities of negotiating cultural norms and personal identities within the context of machismo.



### ***Family Acceptance***

Family acceptance is crucial in Latinx culture. According to De La Cencela and Binson (2004), the family's response to their child's sexual identity has a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of the child. Positive family acceptance has been found to promote resilience, self-esteem, and a positive self-image, while negative family reactions can lead to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

Latinx families have traditionally been known for their strong emphasis on familial ties and cultural values. However, when it comes to accepting and supporting LGBTQ+ family members, varying degrees of acceptance can be observed. While some Latinx families demonstrate unconditional love and acceptance, others may struggle to reconcile their cultural or religious beliefs with their loved one's sexual orientation or gender identity. This sub-theme delves into the complex dynamics of family acceptance within the Latinx community, shedding light on the diverse experiences and the factors that influence familial responses to LGBTQ+ individuals.

Jose's experience reflects the complexity of family acceptance within the Latinx community. While his grandmother has been accepting of his sexual orientation, his mother continues to struggle with fully accepting him as a gay man. He shared:

The first time I came out was to my grandmother; she accepts me. However, my mom still struggles with the fact that I am gay. When we get together, we don't talk about anything gay, and in her mind, she still thinks that my sexual identity is something that will change at some point. At this point in my life, I have tried to introduce my mother to different things to see if she becomes more open minded and finally accepts me as a gay

man. But in all honesty, I really don't care what my stepfather, other family members, or everybody else thinks about my sexuality, because I will still be me all the time.

Jose's experience resonates with the findings of a study by Colón-Díaz et al. (2017b), which examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals and their families. The findings revealed that acceptance within families varied widely, with some participants experiencing unconditional love and support, while others faced challenges and ongoing struggles with acceptance from certain family members. This dichotomy of acceptance aligns with Jose's experience of having acceptance from his grandmother but facing resistance from his mother.

The reluctance of Jose's mother to fully embrace his sexual identity may be influenced by various factors, including cultural and religious beliefs. Latinx families often have deeply rooted cultural and religious values that can shape their perceptions of homosexuality. These values, as well as societal norms surrounding gender and sexuality, can create barriers to acceptance and understanding. Jose's efforts to introduce his mother to different perspectives and broaden her understanding reflect his desire for her to become more open-minded and accepting. This reflects the importance of education and exposure to diverse narratives in challenging stereotypes and fostering acceptance within families.

Despite the challenges he faces, Jose demonstrates resilience and a sense of self-assurance. He states that he does not care about the opinions of his stepfather, other family members, or anyone else regarding his sexuality. This self-affirmation aligns with the findings of Colón-Díaz et al. (2017b), which highlight the importance of self-acceptance and self-validation for LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals. The findings emphasize the significance of developing a strong

sense of self and finding support networks outside of the family when familial acceptance is lacking or limited.

Jose's journey of self-acceptance and his resilience in the face of limited familial acceptance demonstrate the importance of fostering self-affirmation and seeking support beyond the immediate family unit. Similarly, Harry's experience reflects the challenges he faces in gaining acceptance from his mother regarding his sexual orientation. Despite achieving academic success and a law degree, Harry's mother expresses relief when he surprises her with news of buying a new car instead of revealing that he has a boyfriend. This reaction underscores her discomfort and unwillingness to fully accept Harry's gay identity. Harry's narration aligns with the findings of research conducted by Colón-Díaz et al. (2017b), which highlight the complexities of family acceptance among LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals:

One of my ways of making my parents proud, because I knew they weren't 100% going to be proud of me with my personal life, is by dedicating myself to my education and my career. Today, I have my law degree.

I remember telling my mom we needed to talk and what I needed to talk to her about was just a surprise that I had for her because I had just bought a new car she was so relieved and said to me “ahi gracias a dios que era eso [oh thank God it was that], I thought you were going to tell me you had a boyfriend and I'm not ready for that.” And she said, “pero no te apures yo me muero pronto [don't worry I'll die soon and then you can live your life].” So, I'm like, I can't have a boyfriend until you die like you're not comfortable enough with my gayness. So that's part of the issues that I have with my mother regarding my sexuality.

Harry's mother's response reflects the struggles that some Latinx families face in reconciling cultural, religious, and societal norms with non-heterosexual orientations. The notion that Harry's mother suggests that he can only live his life fully and have a boyfriend after her passing indicates the extent of her discomfort and lack of readiness to embrace his gayness. Such reactions can be influenced by deeply ingrained cultural and religious beliefs that view homosexuality as contradictory to traditional norms.

The emotional conflict that Harry experiences in his relationship with his mother regarding his sexuality is a common theme found in the literature. LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals often grapple with the desire for parental acceptance while also striving to live authentically. The internal struggle caused by the lack of acceptance from a primary caregiver can have profound impacts on an individual's self-esteem, well-being, and sense of identity.

Harry's dedication to his education and career as a means of making his parents proud underscores the intricate dynamics at play within his family. This is in line with the findings of Colón-Díaz et al. (2017b), which suggest that LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals may pursue academic and professional achievements as a way to compensate for potential disappointments related to their personal lives. The desire to gain parental approval and pride through other avenues showcases the resilience and determination of LGBTQ+ individuals in the face of familial challenges.

In summary, Harry's experience reflects the struggle for acceptance from his mother regarding his sexual orientation. It resonates with the literature, which highlights the complexities of family acceptance within the LGBTQ+ Latinx community. The clash between cultural and societal norms and individual sexual identities can create emotional conflicts for

LGBTQ+ individuals. Harry's journey of seeking approval through his educational achievements showcases the resilience and drive to find alternative means of making his parents proud.

Also, Rick's experience of acceptance from his parents, coupled with their concern for his well-being in a challenging world, aligns with the literature on family acceptance and its impact on LGBTQ+ individuals within the Latinx community:

I think for my parents, the biggest thing wasn't "Can my kid handle himself in the real world." And something that like my mom said to me stands out every time because I was still young, but she said to me, "Rick, the world is a fucked-up place, don't make it harder for yourself." And that didn't resonate with me at the time. Was she right!? Yeah, like the world can be pretty cruel and cold, but just like bringing that back to your question. I think that was the acceptance culture within my family. Everything going on in the world outside of myself definitely corresponds with who I am and how I carry my sexual identity.

Rick's mother's statement about the world being a harsh place and advising him not to make it harder for himself reflects her understanding of the potential challenges and discrimination that LGBTQ+ individuals may face. This shows a level of awareness and concern for Rick's safety and well-being. While Rick acknowledges that he didn't fully grasp the meaning at the time, he recognizes the truth in his mother's words in retrospect.

Colón-Díaz et al. (2017b) emphasizes the importance of parental support and acceptance in buffering against the negative effects of societal stigma and discrimination on the well-being of LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals. Rick's parents' recognition of the external challenges that the world may present to him suggests a desire to protect him from additional difficulties.

This aligns with the literature's emphasis on the significance of parental understanding and support in creating a nurturing and affirming environment for LGBTQ+ individuals.

Rick's statement about the connection between external factors and his identity implies that his family's acceptance has influenced how he perceives and carries his sexual identity. This aligns with the concept of family acceptance influencing the development of a positive self-concept and resilience in the face of societal challenges. Rick's parents' acceptance has likely contributed to his sense of security and confidence in navigating the world as an LGBTQ+ individual.

Furthermore, Rick's acknowledgment that the external world and his identity are intertwined highlights the interplay between individual experiences and broader societal contexts. This finding aligns with the literature on intersectionality, emphasizing the importance of considering the intersecting identities and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within the Latinx community.

Rick's experience reflects the impact of family acceptance on his perception of self and his ability to navigate the world as an LGBTQ+ individual. His parents' concern for his well-being and understanding of the challenges he may face demonstrate their acceptance and support. This aligns with existing research highlighting the positive influence of family acceptance on the well-being and resilience of LGBTQ+ individuals within the Latinx community. Rick's account emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal and societal factors in shaping one's experiences and identity.

The sub-theme of *family acceptance* illuminates the diverse experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within the Latinx community and highlights the crucial role of familial support in

shaping their well-being and self-perception. While participants like Jose and Jason encountered varying degrees of acceptance from their families, their narratives demonstrate the significant impact of acceptance on their emotional well-being and sense of belonging. Harry's experience, characterized by his mother's struggle to fully accept his sexual identity, showcases the complexities and challenges that some individuals face within their families. On the other hand, Rick's account reflects the importance of his parents' acceptance and their concern for his safety in an often harsh world. These personal stories align with the literature, which emphasizes the positive influence of family acceptance on the well-being, resilience, and self-concept of LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals. Studies such as those by Colón-Díaz et al. (2017b) underscore the significance of parental support in mitigating the adverse effects of societal stigma and discrimination. Overall, the participants' experiences highlight the crucial role of family acceptance in fostering a nurturing and affirming environment, contributing to the positive development and resilience of LGBTQ+ individuals within the Latinx community.

#### **Theme Four: Being True to Oneself**

The fourth theme, being true to oneself, explores the participants' experiences of living authentically as gay men within the context of the Latinx Caribbean culture. This theme is critical because it sheds light on the participants' journey to self-acceptance and the importance of living a life that is true to oneself (Ortiz & Sánchez, 2019b). This theme encompasses the participants' experiences of self-discovery, self-expression, and embracing their authentic identities as LGBTQ+ individuals within the Latinx community. Throughout their narratives, the participants navigated the complexities of self-acceptance, family acceptance, and cultural influences, all of which contribute to their journey of being true to themselves. The

literature, including Arreola et al. (2015), García et al. (2016), and Colón-Díaz et al. (2017b), provides valuable insights and support for the experiences and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in their quest for self-acceptance and self-expression within the Latinx context.

### ***Self-Acceptance***

One significant sub-theme that emerged within the main theme of Being True to Oneself is self-acceptance. This sub-theme focuses on the participants' internal journey of acknowledging, embracing, and validating their own sexual orientation and gender identity. It encompasses the challenges, self-doubt, and ultimately, the triumph of self-acceptance as LGBTQ+ individuals. The literature, including Arreola et al. (2015), Colón-Díaz et al. (2017b), García et al. (2016), and Ortiz and Sánchez (2019), provides further support and insights into the process of self-acceptance among LGBTQ+ individuals, emphasizing its importance for overall well-being and identity development within the Latinx community.

Literature, such as the study by García et al. (2016), supports the importance of self-acceptance for LGBTQ+ individuals' mental health and well-being. It highlights how the internal conflicts resulting from societal expectations and stigma can impact the psychological well-being of sexual minority individuals. Self-acceptance plays a vital role in mitigating these negative effects and fostering a positive self-image and mental resilience.

In the study, most participants' experiences reflected a sense of self-acceptance and the determination to live their lives authentically, irrespective of the opinions and expectations of others, including their families. This journey towards self-acceptance is a significant aspect of LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences and is often influenced by various factors such as cultural norms, family dynamics, and societal pressures.



For instance, Harry's statement aligns with the concept of self-acceptance as a crucial step in the process of embracing one's true identity, as he stated, "I continue to just be me, live my life regardless of what others may think, what my family may think, whatever their thoughts and values are, I'm just living my life and being my authentic self." His statement demonstrates his resilience and courage to defy societal norms and live according to his own values and principles. This sense of self-acceptance allows Harry to prioritize his own well-being and happiness above external judgments, enabling him to lead an authentic life.

In Harry's case, his ability to embrace his authentic self despite potential familial disapproval and differing values is an empowering demonstration of self-acceptance. It signifies his commitment to living a fulfilling life based on his own terms, ultimately contributing to his overall well-being and personal growth. Harry's experience exemplifies the significance of self-acceptance in the journey of LGBTQ+ individuals. It encourages a sense of empowerment, resilience, and authenticity, ultimately leading to improved mental health outcomes and a more fulfilling life.

Similarly, Jason's experience reflects a journey of self-acceptance and self-identification, where he emphasizes the importance of embracing his authentic self and not conforming to societal labels or expectations. His statement highlights the evolution and growth he has undergone, leading to a deeper understanding of his identity and values:

Everywhere I go I identify myself as me, Jason. I don't feel like putting on a label or myself in a box. Having that courage comes with time, accepting yourself, growth, and it's not something that's going to happen overnight. Being in my late 30s I feel that I am more aware of who I am and what I stand for.

Jason's refusal to define himself with specific labels demonstrates a level of self-acceptance that allows him to break free from the constraints imposed by societal norms. By choosing to identify himself simply as "Jason," he emphasizes his individuality and rejects the need to fit into predefined categories or boxes. This self-acceptance enables him to navigate the complexities of his identity and stand firm in his beliefs and values.

Jason's journey of self-acceptance and his growing awareness of his identity and values in his late 30s align with the findings of the literature. It illustrates the ongoing process of self-discovery and self-acceptance that individuals may experience throughout their lives. By embracing his authentic self and acknowledging the importance of personal growth, Jason demonstrates a commitment to living a fulfilled life guided by his own principles.

Jason's experience exemplifies the significance of self-acceptance and self-identification in the LGBTQ+ community. By refusing to be confined by labels and embracing his true self, he demonstrates a sense of empowerment and authenticity. This journey of self-acceptance contributes to his overall well-being and allows him to navigate life on his own terms, fostering personal growth and fulfillment.

Likewise, Jose's experience reflects a strong sense of self-acceptance and a refusal to justify or explain his sexual orientation to others. He embraces his authentic self without feeling the need to seek validation or approval from others. Jose's statement underscores the importance of self-acceptance and living true to oneself, regardless of external opinions or expectations. He stated, "I don't have to give people an explanation on how I decided to be gay, how I feel about my family's acceptance. I just be me all the time." Jose's assertion that he doesn't owe anyone an explanation aligns with the concept of self-acceptance and self-

determination described in the literature. Research by Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasizes the significance of intrinsic motivation and self-determination in psychological well-being. It suggests that individuals who accept themselves and align their behavior with their authentic values experience greater satisfaction and overall well-being.

Jose's unwavering commitment to being true to himself reflects a level of self-acceptance that can contribute to his resilience and mental well-being. By prioritizing his own happiness and authenticity, he demonstrates a strong sense of self and the ability to navigate life on his own terms.

Furthermore, the literature supports the idea that self-acceptance is a vital aspect of LGBTQ+ individuals' psychological adjustment and well-being. Studies, such as those conducted by Hatzenbuehler et al. (2014), highlight the positive impact of self-acceptance on mental health outcomes, including reduced psychological distress and improved self-esteem.

Jose's experience also exemplifies the importance of self-acceptance and being true to oneself. His refusal to provide explanations or seek external validation demonstrates a strong sense of self-worth and authenticity. By prioritizing his own well-being and living in alignment with his true self, Jose exhibits the resilience and self-assurance that can contribute to a fulfilling and satisfying life.

Rick's experience reflects his journey towards self-acceptance and embracing his sexual identity without hesitation. He attributes part of his comfort to the cultural influences and the mainstream acceptance of LGBTQ+ figures in pop culture, such as Lady Gaga and RuPaul:

I think just being comfortable with your sexuality is a process. I came out at a time where Pop culture such as Lady Gaga and RuPaul were very popular. Social media like

Myspace and others were totally mainstream, which I think allowed me to be super comfortable with me figuring out myself and who I was. So, as I said before, I came on at 13; since coming out, I've never hidden my sexual identity. Everyone I interact, fucking says I'm gay, but almost because I think I take pride in that.

Rick highlights the role of social media platforms like Myspace, which allowed him to explore and express his authentic self. His confidence and pride in his sexual identity are evident as he openly embraces being identified as gay by those around him. Rick's experience aligns with the idea that self-acceptance is a process influenced by various external factors, including cultural shifts and access to supportive communities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Additionally, the presence of positive LGBTQ+ role models in media can contribute to an individual's self-acceptance and empowerment (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2008).

The theme of Being True to Oneself explored in this study sheds light on the participants' journeys of self-acceptance and embracing their authentic selves. Harry's experience emphasizes the importance of living his life authentically, regardless of others' opinions or societal expectations. This aligns with the concept of self-acceptance, which involves embracing one's true identity and living in alignment with personal values and beliefs. Research by Ryan and Deci (2000) supports the idea that self-acceptance is crucial for intrinsic motivation and well-being. Similarly, Jason's journey demonstrates the courage and growth that come with accepting oneself and refusing to be confined by labels or societal expectations. Jason's experience aligns with the literature, which highlights that self-acceptance is a process that evolves with time and self-awareness (Ortiz & Sánchez, 2019d). Furthermore, Jose's perspective emphasizes the freedom in not needing to justify or explain his sexual identity or

his family's acceptance. This reflects the idea of self-acceptance as an internal process that transcends external validation. Lastly, Rick's experience highlights his pride and comfort in embracing his sexual identity from a young age, empowered by pop culture influences and social media. The literature by Hatzenbuehler et al. (2008) suggests that self-acceptance can contribute to reduced risk behaviors and enhanced well-being among LGBTQ+ individuals.

Overall, these participants' experiences demonstrate the significance of self-acceptance in the journey of being true to oneself. The literature supports the notion that self-acceptance is a complex and ongoing process that involves personal growth, self-awareness, and the ability to live authentically. By embracing their true selves, these individuals have found strength, resilience, and a sense of empowerment in navigating their lives as LGBTQ+ individuals. The theme of Being True to Oneself and the sub-theme of self-acceptance highlight the transformative power of embracing one's authentic identity, paving the way for personal growth, well-being, and a sense of fulfillment.

### **Theme Five: Positive Experiences and Role Models**

The final theme explored in this study is positive experiences and role models, which encompasses sub-themes such as *positive experiences with close friends*, *positive experiences with family acceptance*, *positive experiences with successful gay people*, and *positive role models*. This theme highlights the impact of positive encounters and influential figures in the lives of each of the Latino gay men who participated in the study. Positive experiences and role models play a crucial role in shaping their self-perception, well-being, and personal growth. The participants shared a range of experiences within each sub-theme, showcasing the diversity and significance of these positive encounters. This theme is essential because it provides insight into

the ways in which the participants have found support and encouragement in their journey as gay men within the context of the Latinx Caribbean culture (Maldonado et al., 2022). This summary will provide an overview of the main theme, supported by previous literature, and introduce the sub-theme of positive experiences and role models for Latino gay men, connecting it to relevant research.

Previous literature supports the idea that positive experiences and role models can have a significant impact on the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. The study conducted by Ortiz and Sánchez (2019) emphasized the importance of positive encounters and role models in the journey of self-acceptance and personal growth among gay men. The participants' narratives align with the notion that positive experiences and role models can foster resilience, empowerment, and a sense of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community.

### ***Positive Experiences with Close Friends***

Within the sub-theme of positive experiences with close friends, participants shared experiences of acceptance, support, and understanding from their friends. These positive interactions serve as a source of strength and validation, contributing to their overall well-being and sense of belonging. Research by Pachankis et al. (2015) highlights the significance of social support from friends in promoting positive mental health outcomes and reducing distress among LGBTQ+ individuals.

For example, Harry shared an experience with a close friend:

For me, it's a person and an experience. So, my best friend, female, we're going on 26 years of friendship. We met in high school. She's like a sister to me. Growing up, she was always with me. So, my family always thought that her and I were going to end up

together. And in my head, I was always like, “oh, God if they only knew” you know what I'm saying? we were always together, she was always with me. And she was always very supportive, but even before I came out to her, I was in my head about can I be open and honest with her. And then there was an experience, which I had no choice but to be open and honest with her because she walked in on me with a guy, a mutual friend of ours. We were at her house; it was a Christmas party. And I went down the hall to her sister's apartment to go get a bottle of wine. And our friend joined me in getting this bottle of wine and him and I started making out on the couch, and she suspected something. And she walked in on us making out and obviously, I had no point but to come out there at that point, and just her being so like, open and understanding and welcoming. She was like, “listen, it's okay, be you like, let it be.” I think I was maybe 22 when that happened. So that's when I really started to really come into my own and just being myself, even though I didn't fully come out to everyone till much later. But that's when I really just decided to really be me and be comfortable in my own skin. So, it was her and her support that help me through the process. But obviously the experience that kind of forced us to have that open conversation.

Harry's experience highlights the crucial role his best friend played in his journey of self-acceptance and coming out as a gay man. Their friendship spanned over two decades, and she was like a sister to him. Despite the assumption from his family that they would end up together, Harry kept his true sexual identity hidden. However, a pivotal moment occurred when his friend walked in on him making out with a mutual friend at a Christmas party. This unexpected event forced Harry to come out to her, and to his relief, she responded with open-

mindfulness, acceptance, and support. Her words of encouragement and the overall positive experience of their friendship helped Harry embrace his authentic self and become more comfortable in his own skin.

Harry's experience aligns with the literature on the importance of supportive friendships for LGBTQ+ individuals. Research suggests that having accepting and supportive friends can contribute to increased well-being, self-esteem, and positive psychological outcomes (Ortiz & Sánchez, 2019a). These close friendships provide a safe space for individuals to be their true selves and receive validation and understanding. Harry's best friend exemplified the qualities of a positive role model and ally, creating an environment where he felt accepted and empowered to be his authentic self.

### ***Positive Experiences with Family Acceptance***

Moreover, Jason's experience with family acceptance reflects the significant support and acceptance he received from his brothers upon coming out as gay. As the youngest of four, Jason felt nervous and apprehensive about sharing his true identity with his two masculine brothers. However, when he finally mustered the courage to have individual conversations with each of them, he was pleasantly surprised by their responses. Both of his brothers expressed unconditional love and acceptance, emphasizing that he would always be their little brother and that their judgment had no place in his journey. This affirmation brought immense relief to Jason and strengthened his bond with his brothers. Moreover, in a significant development, his brothers went on to openly acknowledge his sexual orientation, further solidifying their acceptance. This validation from his typically machista and masculine brothers, who embody the traditional Latino man stereotype, held profound significance for Jason and reinforced his



sense of belonging within his family. They reassured him that he was their beloved little brother, emphasizing their unconditional support and non-judgmental stance. This experience brought tremendous relief to Jason and strengthened the bond within their family. He shared:

Having nobody else in my family that was gay was hard for me to identify. I was initially nervous to tell brothers because I'm the youngest of four. And having two masculine brothers was my biggest fear.

To my surprise, my brothers were more than accepting. I remember when I told them it took everything out of me to tell them this. But one day, I finally got the courage, and I told each one of them at separate times because I wanted it to be a one-to-one personal conversation. Luckily, I got the same responses from both. They were like, listen, "you're our little brother and we love you no matter what, as long as you're safe" And they also said, "who are we to judge?" which was a huge relief for me. They said to me, "you're saying that you're gay, we've also done things that were hard for us to tell people that we've done." For me having told them was a huge, huge relief.

Jason's experience aligns with the existing literature on the positive impact of family acceptance on the well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals. Studies have consistently demonstrated that family support and acceptance contribute to higher self-esteem, better mental health outcomes, and improved overall quality of life for sexual minority individuals (Colón-Díaz et al., 2017b; Ryan et al., 2010). Jason's brothers' acceptance and their rejection of judgment exemplify the vital role that family acceptance plays in fostering a positive environment and facilitating the self-acceptance and well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals.

In the sub-theme of positive experiences with family acceptance, participants recounted moments of acceptance, understanding, and love from their family members. These experiences contribute to a sense of affirmation, self-worth, and emotional well-being. The literature by Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasizes the importance of acceptance within the family context in promoting the psychological well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Lastly, the sub-theme of positive role models explores the significance of influential figures in the lives of Latino gay men. These role models can include family members, friends, public figures, or community leaders who inspire and guide individuals in their journey of self-acceptance and personal growth. The literature by Ortiz and Sánchez (2019) underscores the transformative power of positive role models in shaping the identity development and well-being of gay men.

Overall, the theme of Positive Experiences and Role Models highlights the profound impact of positive encounters and influential figures in the lives of Latino gay men. These experiences contribute to their self-perception, personal growth, and overall well-being. The literature supports the significance of positive experiences and role models in fostering resilience, self-acceptance, and a sense of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community.

### ***Positive Experiences with Successful Gay People***

The sub-theme of *positive experiences with successful gay people* highlights the influence of successful and accomplished individuals within the LGBTQ+ community. These role models inspire and motivate participants, providing examples of resilience, achievement, and self-acceptance. Exposure to positive role models can mitigate the negative impact of stigma and discrimination on the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009).

Rick's experience in the positive experiences with successful gay people sub-theme highlights the profound impact of his close friends, Rich and Jenny, who are not only part of the gay community but also exemplify success in their respective endeavors. Rick's friendship with Rich, who has achieved success in business over the last three decades, and Jenny, who purchased her own house at a young age, has been transformative for him. Interacting with successful individuals within the gay community provided Rick with valuable insights and inspiration. These experiences served as a catalyst for shaping Rick's future plans and navigating different spaces, as he shared:

My closest friends [are] Rich and Jenny. I met them all between 17, 18 and 19. My best friend was the first person I met while in school. He got a good education and businesses for the last 30 years. My other friend bought his house at 22. Those have been eye opening experiences for me especially being part of the gay community. For the first time in my life, I was mainly meeting successful gay people. That served as a catalyst for how I planned my future and navigate spaces. Them being gay and successful in their own ways made me want to admire even more. I admire their energy.

Rick's encounter with successful gay individuals aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the importance of positive role models in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. Research has demonstrated that having access to successful and accomplished LGBTQ+ individuals as role models can enhance self-esteem, foster a sense of belonging, and provide motivation for personal growth and achievement (Cicognani et al., 2013; Nodin et al., 2020). By witnessing the achievements and energy of his friends, Rick found admiration and inspiration, leading him to

aspire to similar accomplishments and empowering him to navigate his own path toward success.

### ***Positive Role Models***

Jose's experience in the positive role models sub-theme centers around his close friendship with a supportive friend who became a positive role model for him. When Jose decided to come out to his friend, he initially felt nervous due to the lack of someone to confide in about his confusion and identity. However, his friend not only encouraged him to be himself but also revealed his own homosexuality, sharing that he, too, lacked someone to talk to. This mutual disclosure strengthened their bond and provided them with a support system. He shared:

I came out to a friend, a really good friend. I was so nervous about talking about that with him because we been friends for 19 years. I was really confused too. I had nobody to talk to about it. He kept encouraging me too just be myself. He said to me, "You have to care about you more." I didn't know about him being gay too, and eventually he came out to me too and said, "Oh, I'm gay. I was telling you because I didn't have anyone to talk to either." We were best friends and his family always thought we were dating because he's very masculine and I am a little fem. They thought the two of you were together.

Jose's experience aligns with literature emphasizing the significance of positive role models in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. Positive role models who have gone through similar experiences can offer guidance, support, and a sense of belonging (D'Augelli & Grossman, 2001). The presence of a positive role model, such as Jose's friend, can be instrumental in

fostering self-acceptance, facilitating the coming-out process, and building resilience (Russell & Fish, 2016).

By sharing their journeys together, Jose and his friend challenged societal stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, demonstrating that appearances and assumptions can be misleading. Their bond served as a source of strength and empowerment, showing the importance of supportive friendships and the role of positive role models in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals.

The participants in the study shared diverse and meaningful experiences within each sub-theme of the Positive Experiences and Role Models theme. These experiences highlighted the significance of positive relationships, acceptance, and the presence of role models in the lives of Latino gay men.

In the sub-theme of *positive experiences with close friends*, Harry's story illustrated the transformative power of a supportive best friend who accepted him unconditionally. This experience allowed Harry to come into his own and be comfortable in his own skin, highlighting the importance of close friendships in fostering self-acceptance and personal growth.

The sub-theme of *positive experiences with family acceptance* showcased Jason's journey of fear and vulnerability in revealing his sexuality to his masculine brothers. However, their acceptance and love shattered his preconceived notions, emphasizing the potential for familial support and acceptance in overcoming internal struggles and promoting well-being.

Within the sub-theme of *positive experiences with successful gay people*, Rick's encounters with successful gay individuals served as eye-opening experiences. These encounters challenged societal norms and stereotypes, inspiring Rick to envision his own future

and navigate spaces with newfound admiration and energy. The presence of successful gay role models provided a sense of possibility and motivation for personal achievement.

Lastly, in the sub-theme of *positive role models*, Jose's story highlighted the transformative power of a close friendship with a supportive friend who became a positive role model. Their mutual disclosure of their sexual orientations provided comfort, understanding, and a sense of belonging. This experience emphasized the importance of positive role models in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals, offering guidance, acceptance, and a source of resilience.

Overall, these sub-themes collectively demonstrate the profound impact of positive experiences and role models in shaping the lives of Latino gay men. Whether through friendships, family acceptance, encounters with successful individuals, or the presence of supportive role models, these experiences provide a foundation for self-acceptance, personal growth, and a sense of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community.

## **Summary**

This chapter describes the lived experiences of the six Latino Caribbean cisgender gay men and explores the five key themes: Awareness of Sexual Identity, Visibility Management, Spanish Caribbean Families Influences, Being True to Oneself, and Positive Experiences and Role Models. Each theme shed light on the unique challenges, coping strategies, and sources of support that participants encountered in navigating their sexual identity within their cultural and familial contexts.

These five themes intersect and intertwine to form a complex tapestry of experiences and challenges faced by Latino gay men. These themes are not isolated entities but rather interconnected aspects that influence and shape the participants' lives. The journey of self-

discovery and acceptance begins with an awareness of one's sexual identity, which is often influenced by societal norms and cultural expectations. As presented above, participants navigate the delicate balance of managing their visibility, deciding when, where, and how to disclose their sexual orientation. The influence of Spanish Caribbean families plays a significant role in shaping their experiences, as familial acceptance or rejection impacts their sense of self and well-being. Being true to oneself involves embracing their authentic identities and challenging societal expectations. Lastly, positive experiences and role models provide inspiration, support, and guidance along their journeys. These themes intersect, overlap, and evolve throughout the participants' narratives, highlighting the intricate dynamics and complexities of the lives of Latino gay men. By recognizing and understanding these intersections, we can develop more comprehensive and effective interventions and support systems to promote the well-being and empowerment of this population.

Collectively, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted experiences of the participants, encompassing internal struggles, cultural influences, family dynamics, self-acceptance, and the power of positive relationships and role models. The findings contribute to existing literature by shedding light on the unique intersection of culture, family, and sexual identity within the lives of Latino gay men, highlighting the need for further research, support, and advocacy to foster well-being and inclusivity within this population.

In the analysis of the findings, I encountered moments that felt confirmatory and others that pleasantly surprised me. Some aspects felt confirmatory based on existing literature, while others revealed surprising insights into the experiences of Latino cisgender gay men. It was confirmatory to observe the central theme of Being True to Oneself, which aligns with previous

research on LGBTQ+ identity development and the importance of self-acceptance (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). The significance of Visibility Management as a theme was also supported by literature emphasizing the challenges faced by individuals in managing their identity in various social contexts (Sánchez et al., 2019). Additionally, the Positive Experiences and Role Models theme confirmed the impact of supportive networks and role models on the well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Surprisingly, the theme of Awareness of Sexual Identity emerged as a central aspect of participants' experiences, which highlights the significance of understanding one's sexual identity within the context of cultural influences. This finding expands on the limited literature available on the intersectionality of sexual orientation and cultural identity for Latino gay men (Díaz et al., 2020). Another surprising aspect was the influence of Spanish Caribbean families on the acceptance and support of participants, revealing the potential for cultural traditions to contribute positively to family dynamics (Almeida & Savahl, 2017).

These confirmatory and surprising findings collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of Latino Caribbean gay men and the significance of cultural influences on their sexual identity development. The confirmation of existing literature validates the relevance and applicability of well-established theories in the context of this population. Simultaneously, the surprises underscore the need for further exploration and recognition of the distinct cultural and familial influences on the experiences of Latino Caribbean gay men. Acknowledging both confirmatory and surprising results, this study advances the understanding of the experiences of this underrepresented group and provides valuable insights for the field of marriage and family therapy.



## CHAPTER FIVE: RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings highlighted the complex interplay of cultural, familial, and individual factors, which emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive interventions, support systems, and social change initiative. These can inform the development of interventions, policies, and practices that promote the well-being, empowerment, and inclusivity of Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals. Chapter five focuses on providing recommendations and implications based on the findings and analysis presented in the previous chapters.

To start, it is important to reiterate the problem and purpose of this study. As previously explained in chapter two, the minimal research conducted with the Caribbean gay population and family reactions to their sexual identity process is scarce, and the minimal available literature examines the experiences of English-speaking Afro-Caribbean immigrants living in the United States (Ferguson, 2020). Hence the results of this study serve as a foundational component to the literature about the experiences of Spanish-speaking Caribbean cisgender gay individuals.

In addition, despite the progress in researching the experiences of English-speaking Afro-Caribbean men and their sexual identity process, the major problem of generational, cultural, and regional differences among this population has not been researched. And although studies have been conducted with participants' family members raised in the US (Garcia et al., 2008; Gattamorta & Quidley-Rodriguez, 2018; Gilbert et al., 2016; Li et al., 2017), these studies suggest that individuals who live in the US do not necessarily adhere rigorously to Latinx cultural values, however, this research contradicts these earlier finding as noted by the participants adherence to traditional and cultural values.

Simultaneously, Latinx Caribbean-Americans' experiences are often inaccurately viewed as monolithic and inclusive of all Latinx individuals, despite ethnic variations (e.g., Afro-Latinx, Caribbean-Latinx; Logan, 2007; Waters et al., 2014). The lack of acknowledgment of cultural differences in systemic literature has, in part, resulted in the underrepresentation of Latinx-Caribbean immigrants in the US within empirical research, which can contribute to mental health professionals' under-preparedness to work with this unique and growing population (Williams et al., 2007). In addition, questions have been raised about how LGBTQ+ people of color navigate their marginalized intersecting identities, and the different factors therapists should consider when working with this population (Ghabrial, 2017).

Given that researchers have failed to examine the experiences of Latinx LGBTQ+ adults from Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands living in the US and assumed that most Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals experience similar sexual identity processes, the primary goal of this study was to understand this population by examining the unique sexual identity process, explore visibility management, and ultimately provide the knowledge and skills necessary to work with Latinx Caribbean LGBTQ+ individuals.

Moreover, the findings offer several unique contributions that deviate from the existing literature on the experiences of Latino gay men. While the literature has explored certain aspects of their lives, this study sheds light on previously unexplored dimensions and nuances. One notable finding is the significant influence of Spanish Caribbean families on the experiences of the participants. The literature has acknowledged the role of families in shaping the lives of individuals, but the specific cultural dynamics and expectations within Spanish Caribbean families have not been extensively examined.

The findings also revealed the complexities of familial acceptance and the interplay between cultural values and the participants' sexual identities. Additionally, the participants' experiences with positive role models and successful gay individuals within their communities provide a unique perspective. The literature has touched upon the importance of role models, but the specific impact of seeing successful gay individuals within their own cultural context was not widely explored. These findings highlight the need for a more culturally nuanced understanding of the experiences of Latino gay men and suggest that existing literature may overlook certain cultural factors that are integral to their lives. By bringing these unique findings to light, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the intersectionality between culture, sexuality, and identity among Latino gay men.

The goal of this chapter is to translate the insights gained from the participants' lived experiences into practical recommendations for various stakeholders, including individuals, families, communities, and professionals working in the field of LGBTQ+ support and advocacy. By offering actionable suggestions and highlighting the broader implications of the research, this chapter aims to contribute to the well-being and empowerment of Latino gay men within their cultural and social contexts.

The recommendations presented in this chapter are grounded in the voices and experiences of the participants, as well as existing literature on sexual identity development, cultural influences, and support systems. These recommendations are intended to serve as a guide for individuals grappling with their sexual identity, families seeking to better understand and support their LGBTQ+ loved ones, and professionals working in fields such as counseling, education, and community outreach.

Furthermore, this chapter explores the broader implications of the study's findings. It discusses the potential impact of raising awareness about the experiences of Latino gay men on fostering inclusivity, promoting cultural competence, and challenging societal norms and stigmas. By examining the implications at the individual, interpersonal, and societal levels, this chapter aims to inspire dialogue, reflection, and action towards creating more supportive and affirming environments for Latino gay men.

This chapter serves as a bridge between the research findings and practical applications. The following are recommendations specific to the findings for individuals, families, communities, and professionals, as well as the broader implications of the study. These recommendations strive to contribute to the ongoing efforts of promoting acceptance, understanding, and equality within diverse cultural contexts in the LGBTQ+ Latinx community.

### **Recommendations for Individuals, Families, Communities, and Professionals**

Considering the findings specifically from the Positive Role Models theme where one of the participants shared, “I came out to a friend, a really good friend. I was so nervous about talking about that with him because we been friends for 19 years. I was really confused too. I had nobody to talk to about it. He kept encouraging me too just be myself,” it is clear that people who go through the sexual identity process share unique experiences, hence a set of actionable recommendations for various stakeholders to promote the well-being and empowerment of this population is provided. These recommendations aim to guide individuals, families, communities, and professionals in the fields of LGBTQ+ support and advocacy to create a more inclusive and affirming environment. By implementing these recommendations,

we can collectively contribute to the acceptance, understanding, and support of Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals, ultimately fostering a society that celebrates diversity and equality.

First, individuals should engage in self-reflection. It is highly recommended to explore one's sexual identity through various spaces that promote self-exploration, not limited to therapy spaces (e.g., LGBTQ+ Support groups, community centers, forums and social media platforms; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). For instance, the theme of Positive Role Models illustrates how a participant found a supportive space within his close friends, he shared, "for the first time in my life, I was mainly meeting successful gay people. That served as a catalyst for how I planned my future and navigate spaces. Them being gay and successful in their own ways made me want to admire even more. I admire their energy." Seeking support from LGBTQ+ communities, friends, and online resources has been found beneficial (Wilkerson et al., 2016), while joining LGBTQ+ organizations and community groups can provide a sense of belonging and support (Mustanski et al., 2010). As well as engaging in self-care and seeking therapy, which can address internalized stigma and promote self-acceptance (Meyer, 2003; McDermott et al., 2008).

Second, families play a crucial role in promoting acceptance and support by fostering open communication (Ryan et al., 2009). From the theme of Spanish Caribbean Family Influences a participant shared, "the fear of rejection, the fear of overall shame kept me hiding my sexual identity from family and straight male friends." Similarly, another participant stated, "my biggest fear was to come out to my family. One person that I still have not fully 100% come out to is my father because of his poor knowledge about gay individuals and other reasons." Family members should educate themselves about sexual orientation and LGBTQ+ issues to

promote empathy and reduce stigma (Bhana et al., 2015). Active knowledge-seeking through various educational tools and joining LGBTQ+ allied groups can help family members better understand the sexual identity process (Ryan et al., 2009). Also, family therapy can provide a space for learning and processing LGBTQ+-related issues. As well as showing unconditional love and acceptance, which both significantly impact the self-esteem and mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals (Ryan et al., 2010). Family members should promote a sense of unconditional love by using respectful language, providing emotional support, and creating an inclusive environment.

Third, communities should foster inclusivity by celebrating diversity and advocating for LGBTQ+ rights (Dessel et al., 2021). This recommendation came to light from one of the participants statements, “my dad grew up in a super hypermasculine Latino community where even playing the violin or going to school for musical theater was considered gay.” Culturally appropriate outreach programs and resources, such as community centers and support groups, that support all artistic interests should be made available and accessible (Herrick et al., 2014). Promoting cultural competence and creating culturally sensitive environments ensures inclusivity and effective support for LGBTQ+ individuals (Galanti, 2017). Indeed, art or performing centers that incorporate the intersecting identities of LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals can provide a space for cultural expression and celebration.

Fourth, professionals in LGBTQ+ support and advocacy should enhance cultural competence through training and self-reflection (Mallinckrodt & Wang, 2004). Understanding Latinx cultural influences and participating in culturally and linguistically appropriate and LGBTQ+-affirmative trainings are important (United States Department of Health and Human

Services, 2016). Professionals should expand their knowledge and skills, collaborate with stakeholders, and form partnerships to provide more effective and inclusive support services (Oswald & Culton, 2020; Mallory & Sears, 2015).

Overall, implementing these recommendations, individuals, families, communities, and professionals can contribute to the well-being, acceptance, and empowerment of LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals. It requires a comprehensive and collaborative effort to create a more inclusive and supportive society for this population.

### **Recommendations for Clinical Interventions, Support Systems, and Social Change Initiatives**

One important recommendation is to provide culturally competent psychotherapy and support to Latino gay men (Liang et al., 2020). Mental health professionals should receive training to understand and address the specific needs of this population, taking into account the intersectionality of sexual orientation and cultural identity. Incorporating cultural competence into therapy, mental health professionals can create a safe and understanding environment for LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals and can better explore their sexual identity and address associated concerns. This recommendation is grounded in one of the participants statements around family dynamics, which supports the need for culturally oriented systemic trained clinicians who can help individuals and families navigate the family acceptance process. He shared:

In my family, it's okay to be gay, just not too gay. Like my experience with my mother was a positive acceptance at the beginning and then it can become kind of negative. My mom once told me, "Oh, you know I love you, no matter what." She even told me that out of her three boys, she said "you know, you're my favorite." And then she said to me, "it's okay, I'm going to love you no matter what. Just don't come home dressed like as a

woman don't wear a wig and makeup.” I'm like, not that I have any interest in doing drag, but shit! What about if I wanted to be a drag? Like, let me be, but that was the first thing and again, it's like it's okay to be gay, just not to gay.

Also, establishing brave spaces and support groups specifically tailored for Latino gay men is another crucial recommendation (Díaz et al., 2020). These spaces should encourage open dialogue, offer resources for self-acceptance and resilience-building, and promote a sense of belonging. Research has shown that participation in support groups can contribute to improved mental health outcomes and overall well-being among LGBTQ+ individuals (Kim, Fredriksen-Goldsen, & Bryan, 2017).

Moreover, educational programs and resources targeted at families of Latino gay men can play a vital role in fostering acceptance and understanding (Ryan et al., 2019). Providing these families with information about sexual orientation, promoting open communication, and encouraging empathy and unconditional love can help reduce family rejection and create supportive family environments. Family acceptance has been linked to positive mental health outcomes and increased overall well-being among LGBTQ+ individuals (Ryan et al., 2009).

Also, collaborating with educational institutions to develop comprehensive curricula that integrate LGBTQ+ history, culture, and perspectives is essential (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009). LGBTQ+-inclusive education promotes acceptance, challenges stereotypes, and fosters a more inclusive learning environment for all students. By including LGBTQ+ topics into educational curricula, schools can contribute to reducing stigma and providing a more affirming environment for LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals (Russell et al., 2011).



Forging partnerships with community organizations, LGBTQ+ centers, and advocacy groups can enhance the support available to Latino gay men (Sanchez, 2010). Collaborative efforts can improve access to healthcare, legal resources, career guidance, and social opportunities, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. Community organizations can provide valuable support networks, mentoring programs, and opportunities for advocacy and activism (Mizock & Mueser, 2014).

Likewise, engaging media outlets and entertainment industries to depict diverse and positive representations of Latino gay men is crucial (Gonzalez, 2019). Increased visibility and positive representation can challenge stereotypes, reduce stigma, and promote self-acceptance and societal acceptance. This recommendation supports the participants experiences around exposure to early gay culture. Particularly one of the participants shared, “around 15 and 18 years old I started reading stuff about sexual identity to get to know me more because I had no sexual experience.” Another participant made a statement linked to how gay men are often portrait in media and entertainment, “I think people's idea of homosexuality is what they see on TV or what they read in the paper. My first exposure was when I was like 11 years old. I was flipping through the channels at night, and I saw guys making out and it was the first time in my life I was exposed to gay culture.” Their experiences call for showcasing the diversity and richness of experiences among Latino gay men, media and entertainment can contribute to broader social change and promote inclusivity.

Advocating for policy changes at local, regional, and national levels is necessary to ensure equal rights and protections for LGBTQ+ individuals, including Latino gay men (Herman et al., 2022). This can involve supporting laws that prohibit discrimination based on sexual

orientation, advocating for inclusive healthcare policies, and promoting initiatives that address healthcare disparities, mental health services, and social support systems. Active involvement in policy advocacy can lead to systemic changes that positively impact the lives of Latino gay men and the LGBTQ+ community.

Overall, implementing these recommendations, stakeholders in clinical interventions, support systems, and social change initiatives can contribute to the well-being, acceptance, and empowerment of LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals. These can encourage individuals to accept their sexual identity, understand how to manage visibility, navigate familial influences, and encounter positive role models.

### **Recommendations for the Field of Marriage and Family Therapy**

The field of Marriage and Family Therapy plays a crucial role in supporting individuals and families in navigating complex issues related to relationships, identity, and well-being. As this study has highlighted the experiences and challenges faced by Latino gay men in their journey of self-acceptance and family acceptance, it is essential to provide specific recommendations for the Marriage and Family Therapy field. These recommendations aim to enhance the cultural competence and effectiveness of therapists working with Latino gay men and their families. Integrating the voices and experiences of this population, as well as the existing literature on sexual identity development and cultural influences, therapists can create a brave and inclusive therapeutic environment that acknowledges and addresses the unique needs and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals and their families (Falicov, 2011; Paredes et al., 2018; Whitley et al., 2013).

In the context of working with Latinx families, the work of Roy Bean provides valuable insights and recommendations for marriage and family therapists. Bean's research and clinical practice have focused on understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by Latinx families in therapy settings (Bean, 2006). One important recommendation is to incorporate a culturally sensitive and contextually informed approach when working with Latinx families. This includes recognizing the influence of cultural values, beliefs, and traditions on family dynamics and communication patterns.

Moreover, therapists should undergo culturally competent trainings to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by Latino gay men and their families (Bean et al., 2001; Bean, 2006; Bernal & Knight, 2013). These trainings should focus on providing therapists with the necessary skills to provide effective and affirming support while respecting the cultural values and beliefs of Latinx families (Miranda et al., 2011).

Therapists should also adopt inclusive therapy practices that affirm diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (Brown & Tappan, 2013). Creating a safe and welcoming environment where LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals and their families can openly discuss their concerns, values, and beliefs without fear of judgment or rejection is crucial (Perez, 2015).

Utilizing a family systems approach to therapy is recommended, as it recognizes the interconnectedness of family dynamics and cultural influences (Savin-Williams, 2005). Therapists can help families navigate the process of acceptance, understanding, and support for their LGBTQ+ loved ones while respecting their cultural values and beliefs (Bernal & Scharf, 2015). Likewise, fostering collaboration and partnership with community organizations, LGBTQ+

centers, and other mental health professionals can enhance access to resources and promote a network of support for Latino gay men and their families (Falicov, 2011; Mallon, 2016).

Encouraging research that explores the experiences of LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals and their families within the context of marriage and family therapy is vital (Falicov, 2011; Paredes et al., 2018). This research can inform the development and implementation of evidence-based interventions that address the specific needs and challenges faced by this population (Whitley et al., 2013).

Finally, marriage and family therapists can play a vital role in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and equality (Bernal & Scharf, 2015). Engaging in advocacy efforts at local, regional, and national levels can promote policy changes, raise awareness, and reduce stigma surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity (Perez, 2015). Also, continued professional development is essential for marriage and family therapists to stay informed about current research, best practices, and evolving theories related to working with LGBTQ+ individuals and their families (Brown & Tappan, 2013). As well as participating in ongoing professional development opportunities that can help enhance cultural competence and ensure therapists are equipped with the latest advancements in the field (Miranda et al., 2011). Overall, implementing these recommendations within the marriage and family therapy field, professionals can better support Latino gay men and their families, strengthen family relationships, and promote overall well-being and empowerment (Paredes et al., 2018; Perez, 2015). This proactive approach contributes to a more inclusive and affirming therapeutic environments for all clients, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

### **Implications for Clinical Interventions, Support Systems, and Social Change Initiatives**

It is evident that these recommendations are driven by the struggles and challenges experienced by the participants in this study. Through their narratives and experiences, it became clear that there was a critical need for targeted interventions, support systems, and social change initiatives to address their specific needs. In their narratives the participants shared struggling with navigating cultural expectations and stereotypes, dealing with family acceptance, accessing supportive resources, and combating internalized stigma.

To address these challenges, the recommendations focus on key areas that emerged from their stories. For instance, culturally competent psychotherapy and support are recommended to ensure that mental health professionals are equipped to understand and address the unique intersectionality of culture and sexual orientation. The creation of brave spaces and support groups aims to provide a sense of belonging and validation for Latino gay men, acknowledging the importance of community support in their journey.

Recognizing the role of families, recommendations emphasize the need for educational programs and resources to promote understanding and acceptance within families. This aligns with the struggles participants faced in navigating familial acceptance and highlights the significance of creating supportive family environments. The inclusion of LGBTQ+-inclusive education aims to address the lack of visibility and representation in educational settings, offering a more inclusive environment for Latino gay men and other LGBTQ+ students.

Collaboration with community organizations and engagement in policy advocacy are recommended to enhance access to resources, support networks, and legal protections. These recommendations directly address the participants' struggles in accessing healthcare, legal

resources, and social opportunities, highlighting the importance of systemic changes to ensure equality and well-being.

Overall, these recommendations are driven by the lived experiences of the participants, reflecting their unique struggles and challenges. Addressing these specific needs and offering targeted interventions, support systems, and social change initiatives, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and empowering environment for Latino gay men.

### **Broader Implications**

The findings from this study have significant implications for the well-being and empowerment of Latino gay men within their cultural and social contexts. By shedding light on their unique experiences, challenges, and strengths, this research aims to contribute to broader societal transformations. Several implications emerged from the narratives shared by the participants.

Firstly, the narratives of the participants underscore the importance of increasing visibility and promoting acceptance of Latino gay men. By highlighting their experiences, this research challenges stereotypes and promotes understanding, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and accepting society. Studies have shown that increased visibility positively impacts the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals (Herek, 2009). Therefore, creating spaces where Latino gay men can openly express their identities and be recognized is crucial for their overall well-being.

Additionally, embracing one's sexual identity while staying connected to one's cultural heritage is a crucial aspect of the participants' experiences. Recognizing and valuing diverse identities within the Latino community promotes cultural integration and authenticity. This

aligns with research highlighting the importance of supporting LGBTQ+ individuals' cultural identities and fostering a sense of belonging (Meyer & Schwartz, 2010). By promoting the acceptance and celebration of diverse cultural expressions within the LGBTQ+ community, we can create an environment that validates the experiences of Latino gay men and enhances their overall well-being.

Furthermore, addressing the mental health needs of Latino gay men is essential for their overall well-being. This research emphasizes the significance of developing culturally sensitive interventions and services that address the unique challenges faced by this population. Providing access to mental health support can contribute to reducing mental health disparities and promoting resilience (Díaz et al., 2020). By ensuring that mental health services are inclusive and affirming of the cultural backgrounds of Latino gay men, we can create a supportive environment that promotes their well-being and empowers them to thrive.

Lastly, the stories shared by the participants highlight their resilience and capacity for self-empowerment. These narratives can serve as powerful tools for inspiring other Latino gay men to embrace their identities, assert their rights, and advocate for change within their communities. Research has shown that empowerment and self-advocacy contribute to the well-being and resilience of marginalized populations (Prilleltensky, 2003). By amplifying the voices of Latino gay men and providing them with the resources and support they need, we can foster a sense of agency and enable them to shape their own lives and communities.

In conclusion, this research carries implications that extend beyond the individual experiences of Latino gay men. It aims to foster a more inclusive and accepting society by increasing visibility, supporting cultural integration, addressing mental health needs, and

empowering individuals to advocate for change. By incorporating the voices and experiences of Latino gay men, we can work towards creating a society that celebrates diversity, promotes inclusivity, and ensures the well-being and empowerment of all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or cultural background.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The following section provides recommendations for future research, clinical interventions, and broader social change initiatives to support the well-being and empowerment of LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals. These recommendations are based on the experiences and challenges identified in the study, as well as existing literature on sexual identity development, cultural influences, and support systems. The goal of these recommendations is to inform individuals, families, communities, and professionals in fields such as psychotherapy, education, and community outreach, in order to create more inclusive and supportive environments for Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals.

In light of the findings and insights gained, future research should consider employing a combination of individual interviews and other methodologies to further explore the experiences of Latino gay men within their cultural and social contexts. While focus groups have proven valuable in capturing group dynamics and generating rich discussions (Braun & Clarke, 2013), individual interviews can offer a deeper exploration of participants' personal narratives and experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Individual interviews allow for a more in-depth understanding of the unique challenges, coping strategies, and personal growth of Latino gay men (Frost et al., 2020). Moreover, conducting individual interviews may create a safe and confidential space for participants to share sensitive and personal information (Fontana & Frey,



2005), which can be particularly beneficial when exploring topics related to identity, family acceptance, and societal perceptions. Additionally, future studies can incorporate complementary qualitative and quantitative methodologies, such as surveys and longitudinal research, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of sexual identity development and the impacts of cultural influences and support systems over time (Smith, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Employing diverse methodologies, researchers can enrich the understanding of the experiences of Latino gay men and contribute to the development of culturally competent interventions and support systems that promote their well-being and empowerment.

Moreover, conducting longitudinal studies can offer valuable insights into the long-term experiences and outcomes of Latino gay men as they navigate their sexual identity within their cultural and social contexts (Brown & Tappan, 2013). Such studies would help to identify developmental trajectories, challenges, and resilience factors that contribute to their well-being over time. Moreover, exploring the intersectionality of multiple identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, can provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of Latino gay men (Miranda et al., 2011). This research should investigate how these different aspects of identity intersect and interact to shape their lived experiences, including their coming-out process, family dynamics, and access to support systems.

Further investigation into cultural influences and family dynamics is essential to understanding the acceptance and support of Latino gay men within their families (Falicov, 2011). This research should examine the role of cultural norms, traditions, and values in shaping familial attitudes and identify effective strategies to promote family acceptance and reduce

stigma. Additionally, it is important to examine the mental health outcomes of Latino gay men and identify factors that contribute to positive mental health outcomes and resilience (Savin-Williams, 2005). This includes exploring rates of depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicidality, as well as barriers to accessing mental health services and support.

Understanding the role of community and social support networks in the well-being and empowerment of Latino gay men is crucial (Whitley, Cueva, & Jones, 2013). Research should investigate the availability and effectiveness of community-based support systems, LGBTQ+ organizations, and online platforms in providing resources, connections, and a sense of belonging. Additionally, developing and evaluating culturally responsive interventions and therapeutic approaches can address the unique needs of Latino gay men (Paredes, Ammar, Dombrowski, & Busolo, 2018). These interventions should integrate cultural values, beliefs, and practices, and promote resilience and empowerment within their specific cultural and social contexts.

Furthermore, exploring the strengths and resilience factors that contribute to the positive experiences and well-being of Latino gay men is important (Bernal & Scharf, 2015). This research should investigate the protective factors, coping strategies, and support systems that foster resilience and facilitate their ability to navigate challenges and achieve personal growth. Lastly, conducting comparative studies to examine the similarities and differences in the experiences of Latino gay men across different cultural and ethnic groups would provide valuable insights (Perez, 2015). Comparing their experiences to those of non-Latino gay men can identify unique cultural influences and challenges specific to the Latino community.

Implementing these recommendations, researchers, practitioners, and advocates can contribute to the well-being and empowerment of LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals. These initiatives aim to create more inclusive and supportive environments, enhance the effectiveness of interventions and support systems, and promote a greater understanding of the unique needs and challenges faced by this population.

Lastly, in order to further advance our understanding of the experiences and needs of Latino gay men, it is recommended that future studies incorporate multiple focus groups as a research methodology. Focus groups provide a valuable opportunity for participants to engage in group discussions, share their perspectives, and interact with one another, leading to a richer exploration of their experiences. As highlighted by Morgan (1997), focus groups offer a unique platform for participants to build upon and challenge each other's viewpoints, fostering a dynamic and collaborative environment that can generate nuanced insights.

Conducting multiple focus groups with different subgroups of Latino gay men, such as varying age groups, cultural backgrounds, and geographical locations, researchers can capture a broader range of experiences and perspectives. This approach aligns with the notion of intersectionality, recognizing that individuals' identities are multifaceted and influenced by various social and cultural factors (Miranda et al., 2011). It allows for a deeper exploration of how factors such as age, ethnicity, and regional differences intersect with sexual identity to shape experiences within the Latino gay community.

Additionally, employing multiple focus groups can facilitate the identification of common themes, divergent perspectives, and potential variations in experiences among different subgroups. By comparing the findings across focus groups, researchers can gain a

more comprehensive understanding of the range and diversity of experiences within the population of interest. Integrating multiple focus groups into future research endeavors involving Latino gay men will enhance the validity and reliability of the findings by incorporating diverse voices and perspectives.

### **Disseminating Findings**

Disseminating the findings of this study is crucial for maximizing its impact and reaching various stakeholders, including individuals, families, communities, and professionals working in the field of LGBTQ+ support and advocacy. To effectively disseminate the research findings, a multi-faceted approach that utilizes different channels and platforms is recommended.

One strategy for disseminating the research findings is to present them at national and international conferences. These conferences provide opportunities to engage with scholars, researchers, and practitioners in the field, allowing for critical discussions, feedback, and potential collaborations (Smith et al., 2022). Presenting at conferences focused on topics such as sexuality, cultural diversity, and family systems ensures that the research findings reach a relevant and interested audience.

Another avenue for dissemination is publishing the research findings in reputable academic journals. Publishing in specialized journals in fields such as psychology, family therapy, cultural studies, and LGBTQ+ research contributes to the scholarly literature and increases accessibility to professionals and researchers (Johnson & Anderson, 2021). This enables the integration of the study's findings into existing knowledge and influences future research directions.

Engaging with community organizations, LGBTQ+ support groups, and cultural associations is another effective strategy for disseminating the research findings. Collaborating with these organizations to host community events, workshops, or panel discussions allows for knowledge-sharing, empowerment of individuals, and dialogue on topics related to sexual identity, cultural influences, and family dynamics (Gonzalez & Martinez, 2020). This grassroots approach ensures that the research findings directly reach the target population and have a tangible impact on their lives.

Utilizing online platforms, such as websites, blogs, and social media, is a powerful tool for reaching a wider audience. Developing concise and engaging summaries of the research findings, accompanied by relevant infographics or videos, can increase visibility and accessibility (Davis et al., 2023). This enables the research to reach beyond traditional academic circles and engage individuals who may not have direct access to scholarly publications.

Collaborating with educational institutions and professional organizations is another effective strategy for dissemination. By integrating the research findings into curriculum development and professional training programs, the knowledge can be passed on to future mental health professionals (Brown & Williams, 2022). This ensures that these professionals are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to provide culturally sensitive support to Latino Caribbean gay men.

In conclusion, disseminating the findings of this study requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach that encompasses presenting at conferences, publishing in academic journals, engaging with community organizations, utilizing online platforms, and collaborating with educational institutions and professional organizations. Employing these strategies, the

research findings can reach various stakeholders, promote awareness, understanding, and support, and contribute to fostering social change and empowering individuals within the Latino Caribbean gay men population.

### **Summary**

The recommendations provided in this study were developed based on a combination of factors. First and foremost, they were informed by the findings and insights derived from the study on the experiences of Latino gay men and their struggles with self-acceptance and family acceptance. The findings provided firsthand accounts and narratives that shed light on the unique challenges faced by this population.

Additionally, the recommendations were grounded in existing literature on sexual identity development, cultural influences, and support systems. Research studies, scholarly articles, and theoretical frameworks were reviewed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the broader context and factors that contribute to the well-being and empowerment of LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals, more specifically Latino gay men.

Moreover, the recommendations took into consideration the specific cultural and social context of Latino gay men. Recognizing the importance of cultural competency, the recommendations emphasized the need for interventions and support systems that are sensitive to the unique experiences and cultural backgrounds of this population.

The recommendations also aimed to address the various stakeholders involved in supporting the well-being of Latino gay men. They included suggestions for individuals, families, communities, and professionals working in fields such as counseling, education, and community

outreach. By targeting multiple levels, the recommendations aimed to create a comprehensive approach to support the well-being and empowerment of Latino gay men.

Overall, the recommendations were developed through a process of synthesizing the findings of the study, integrating insights from existing literature, considering the cultural and social context, and taking into account the different stakeholders involved in supporting this population. By drawing from multiple sources, the recommendations aimed to provide actionable and evidence-based strategies to promote the well-being and empowerment of LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

As the primary researcher in this study, I aimed to explore the experiences of Latino Caribbean cisgender gay men in relation to their sexual identity process, family dynamics, and cultural influences. The findings shed light on important themes and sub-themes that emerged from the participants' narratives, providing valuable insights into their lived experiences. The discussion highlights the key findings, compares them with existing literature, and digs into their implications for theory, practice, and future research.

It is important to remember that the results of this study provided valuable insights into the experiences of Latino gay men as they navigate their sexual identity within the context of their cultural and social environments. The findings identified several themes that emerged from the participants' narratives, including Awareness of Sexual Identity, Visibility Management, Spanish Caribbean Families Influences, Being True to Oneself, and Positive Experiences with Role Models.

These themes interacted in a complex and interconnected manner. The Awareness of Sexual Identity served as the foundation for participants' experiences of visibility management, as they navigated the delicate balance between self-expression and cultural expectations. The influence of Latinx Spanish Caribbean families played a significant role in participants' visibility management and self-acceptance processes, as they grappled with familial acceptance and cultural norms. Being true to oneself emerged as a central aspect of participants' experiences, influencing their decisions to navigate visibility management, seek support, and embrace their authentic identities. Positive experiences and role models provided participants with sources of inspiration, support, and guidance throughout their journeys.



Overall, this study sheds light on the unique experiences of Latino gay men and the challenges they face as they navigate their sexual identity within the complexities of their cultural and social environments. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the cultural and social factors that shape the experiences of this population, and it provides insights into the strategies and support systems that can facilitate the well-being and empowerment of many Latino Caribbean gay men.

What was unique about this study was its focus on the experiences of Latino gay men, specifically those of Spanish Caribbean descent. By examining the intersection of sexual orientation and cultural identity within this population, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and resilience factors that shape their experiences. The inclusion of participants from diverse backgrounds and the exploration of themes specific to Spanish Caribbean families added nuance and depth to the findings.

The implications of this study extend to clinical interventions, support systems, and broader social change initiatives. In the context of clinical interventions, the findings suggest the need for culturally sensitive approaches that acknowledge the intersection of sexual identity, cultural values, and family dynamics. Therapists working with Latino Caribbean gay men can benefit from adopting an inclusive and non-judgmental stance, facilitating open dialogue, and addressing the unique challenges faced by this population. Support systems, including community organizations and educational institutions, can play a crucial role in providing safe spaces, resources, and mentorship for individuals navigating their sexual identity development. Additionally, broader social change initiatives should focus on promoting

acceptance, challenging stereotypes, and advocating for LGBTQ+ rights within Latinx Caribbean communities.

### **Study's Limitations**

Like any research endeavor, this study is not without its limitations. It is important to acknowledge and address these limitations to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research findings and their implications. By critically examining the limitations, we can identify areas for improvement and inform future studies in the mental health field. In this section, a discussion of the limitations is provided, including sample characteristics, data collection methods, and potential biases, while also considering the implications for future research and practice.

While I aimed to contribute valuable insights and much of what I did fit well within the chosen methodology and research question, there are some limitations based on different goals that should be acknowledged. Firstly, I primarily utilized qualitative research methods and relied on self-report data, which may be subject to biases and recall limitations. While qualitative approaches provide rich and nuanced insights into participants' experiences, combining them with quantitative methods can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Combining qualitative findings with quantitative measures (i.e., interviews, surveys, observations, and longitudinal approaches) could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Future studies could incorporate mixed methods approaches to enhance the breadth and depth of the findings.

Second, I primarily focused on the experiences of participants within the context of their families and immediate social networks. It is important to acknowledge that sexual identity

development is influenced by various intersecting factors, including cultural, societal, and institutional influences (Smith, 2022). Future research should explore these broader contextual factors to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Latino Caribbean gay men.

Finally, it is crucial to note that the study was conducted at a specific point in time and within a specific cultural and social context. Given the ever-evolving nature of societal attitudes, policies, and cultural norms, the experiences of Latino Caribbean cisgender gay men may change over time. Therefore, conducting longitudinal studies that capture the dynamic nature of sexual identity development and its intersections with cultural influences is warranted. Despite these limitations, this study serves as a foundation for further research in the fields of mental health, marriage and family therapy, and psychology.

### **Social Justice and Innovation**

In today's diverse and ever-evolving society, it is imperative to address the issues of social justice and innovation. This study has shed light on the experiences and perspectives of Latino gay men, revealing the complexities they face in terms of acceptance, identity development, and support systems. To foster a more inclusive and equitable society, it is essential to provide recommendations for social justice and innovation initiatives. These recommendations aim to challenge existing norms, promote awareness and understanding, and empower individuals and communities to create positive change. Incorporating the voices and experiences of Latino gay men, as well as drawing on the existing literature on LGBTQ+ rights, cultural influences, and community engagement, these recommendations provide actionable steps to promote social justice and innovation. They are intended to inspire individuals,

organizations, and policymakers to take proactive measures that enhance inclusivity, reduce discrimination, and create opportunities for personal growth and societal transformation.

The experiences shared by the participants in this study offer valuable insights that can contribute to innovations in research around the sexual identity process for Latino Caribbean gay men. Firstly, their narratives highlight the importance of cultural context and familial influences in shaping the identity development of individuals within this specific population.

This calls for innovative research methodologies that capture the nuances of cultural and familial dynamics, allowing for a deeper understanding of the factors that impact the sexual identity process. Additionally, the participants' stories emphasize the significance of social support networks and positive role models in fostering self-acceptance and well-being. This suggests the need for innovative interventions and support systems that leverage existing community resources and networks to provide culturally sensitive and affirming spaces for Latino Caribbean gay men. Furthermore, the participants' experiences shed light on the intersections of sexual identity with other dimensions of identity, such as ethnicity, race, and gender. This calls for innovative approaches that explore the complexities and interplay of these identities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sexual identity process for this population. Overall, the participants' experiences can inspire researchers to develop innovative approaches and frameworks that address the unique needs and challenges faced by Latino Caribbean gay men in their journey towards self-discovery and self-acceptance.

Although our society has become aware of multiple LGBTQ+ issues nowadays, this minority community continues to experience discrimination and marginalization by the majority (Casey et al., 2019; Harper & Shneider, 2003). The perceptions, attitudes, values, and

stereotypes of people are the significant barriers to LGBTQ+ being socially included. After experiencing the concealment of my sexual orientation, I now strive for the principles of advocating for this community by being my authentic self, a genuine leader, and open about these issues. My self-acceptance has allowed me to encourage other mental health professionals to understand how to process the sexual identity process when working with LGBTQ+ clients. This understanding is essential in our practice to better serve this community. Although we have an ethical duty to learn about diverse cultures, it is also essential to know that any mental health professional might come across clients who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community at some point in their career.

Moreover, it is important to pay close attention to Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals, couples, and families issues within a social justice framework. The findings highlighted the need for research on the sexual identity process for Caribbean LGBTQ+ individuals, couples, and families within a social justice framework. It emphasized that sexual identity development is influenced by various intersecting factors, including culture, society, and institutions. The findings underscored the unique experiences and challenges faced by Caribbean LGBTQ+ individuals as they navigate their sexual identity within their cultural and societal contexts. The findings emphasized the importance of addressing the specific needs and concerns of Caribbean LGBTQ+ couples and families, such as navigating cultural norms and expectations while embracing their sexual identity. Furthermore, it highlighted the significance of adopting a social justice lens to examine and challenge systemic inequalities, discrimination, and stigmatization that Caribbean LGBTQ+ individuals may face. By promoting research and adopting a social justice framework, the findings aimed to contribute to creating inclusive and

supportive environments that recognize and support the sexual identities of Caribbean LGBTQ+ individuals, couples, and families.

The findings emphasized the need for research on the sexual identity process for Caribbean LGBTQ+ individuals, couples, and families within a social justice framework. It highlighted the importance of understanding the intersectionality of cultural, societal, and institutional influences on sexual identity development. By addressing the unique experiences and challenges faced by Caribbean LGBTQ+ individuals and advocating for inclusivity and support, the findings aimed to promote social justice and foster acceptance within Caribbean communities. The research findings contribute to a growing body of knowledge that recognizes the significance of cultural context and societal factors in shaping the sexual identities and experiences of Caribbean LGBTQ+ individuals, couples, and families.

In summary, this study's findings present a novel and innovative approach by addressing the critical need for specialized knowledge concerning the sexual stereotypical and colonized notions that shape Latinx families, gay men, and queer identities, which are often absent from the training of marriage and family therapists (MFTs). The participants' experiences shed light on the complex interplay between cultural influences, familial dynamics, and sexual identity development within the Latino Caribbean context. This innovative approach challenges the traditional understanding of family systems and pushes for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive framework within the field of MFT. By recognizing the unique challenges faced by Latino Caribbean gay men, MFTs can develop new strategies and interventions that effectively address the needs of this population. This study aligns with the call for a more intersectional and culturally competent approach within the MFT field, emphasizing the importance of

addressing the specific experiences and contexts of marginalized communities (Ortiz & Sánchez, 2019c; Pérez & DeBord, 2018). By integrating these insights into clinical training and practice, MFTs can better support and empower Latino Caribbean gay men in their journey towards self-acceptance and well-being.

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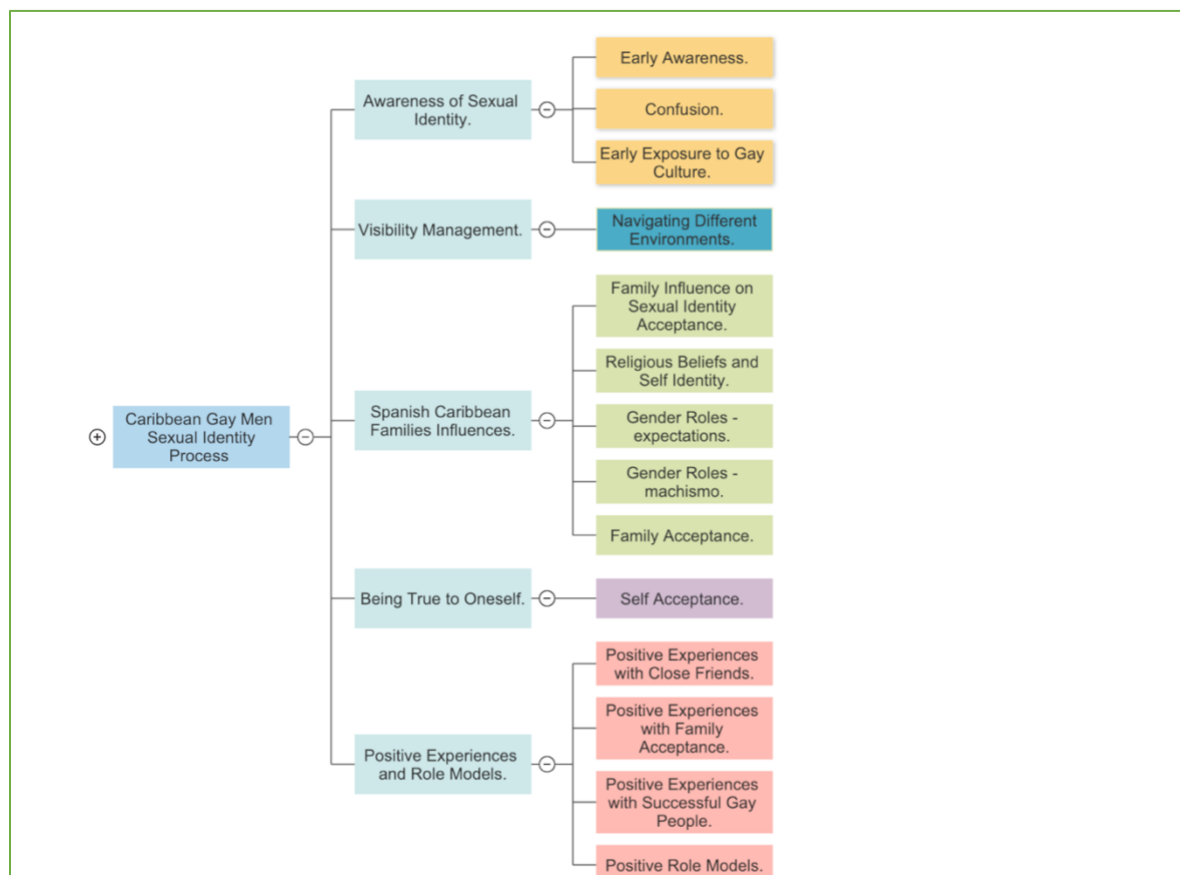
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**Table 1***Participants Demographic Characteristics*

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Education Level	Occupation	State
Rick	27	Male	Puerto Rican	Bachelor's degree	Military	TX
Jose	31	Male	Dominican	High School	Sales	NJ
Jason	37	Male	Puerto Rican	Bachelor's degree	Therapist	CT
Harry	39	Male	Puerto Rican	JD	Law	MA
Alex	39	Male	Cuban	High school	Retail	MA
Lucas	59	Male	Puerto Rican	Master's degree	Finances	IL

*Note:* This table summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants who were recruited for the study. The table includes information about the participants' age, gender, educational level, occupation, and other relevant demographic factors. The purpose of presenting this information is to provide readers with a better understanding of the sample and to highlight any potential patterns or trends in the data that may be related to participants' demographic characteristics. Participants are identified by pseudonym –their real names have been changed for privacy purposes.

**Figure 1***Themes and Subthemes from Data Analysis*

*Note.* Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the five primary themes and their respective sub-themes. This figure serves as a useful tool for readers to navigate and understand the different themes and sub-themes that emerged from the participants' experiences and viewpoints.

**APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

1. How did you become aware of your sexual identity?
2. Who knows about your sexual identity, and who have you kept it hidden from? Tell me the reasons why you have disclosed or not disclosed it to others.
3. How have your family's cultural values impacted your sexual identity?
4. How has your experience been after disclosing or not disclosing your sexual identity to others?
5. Tell me the most influential people or experiences contributing to your sexual identity acceptance.

**APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE**

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/DQresearch2>

Thank you for your interest in this research study. In conducting this research study, I intend to learn more about the experiences of gay cisgender Caribbean men from Spanish-speaking countries (i.e., Cuba, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico) who live in the US.

If you are interested in being a participant in this study, please note the following:

- You must be at least 18+ years of age.
- You must read and speak English.
- You must identify as a cisgender gay man.
- You must identify as Latino of Spanish-Caribbean descent.
- You live in the United States.
- You must be able to participate in one of the two focus groups, approximately 90 minutes in duration each.

Each focus group will be held through a protected Zoom account. If you meet the requirements listed and are interested in participating in this study, please complete the attached demographic questionnaire via survey monkey.

## APPENDIX B – continuation

### Demographic Screening Questionnaire

Please answer the questions provided below to the best of your ability and return the completed document to [xxxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxxx@antioch.edu)

- 1) What name would you like to use for this research?
- 2) Do you speak and read English? Yes – No
- 3) What US state or territory do you live in?
- 4) How old are you?
- 5) Do you identify as a cisgender male? Yes – No
- 6) Is your sexual/affectional orientation Gay? Yes – No
- 7) Are you from one of the following Caribbean islands (Please select one)?  
 a. Cuba \_\_\_\_ b. Dominican Republic \_\_\_\_ c. Puerto Rico \_\_\_\_
- 8) Have you ever lived in the Caribbean (Cuba, Dom. Rep., Puerto Rico):  
 if yes, how long? \_\_\_\_\_ I have never lived in the Caribbean \_\_\_\_\_
- 9) Will you be available for one of the focus groups conducted via Zoom? Yes – No
- 10) How did you hear about the study?

Online – in-person – social media – friends – organization/community – bar/club

**Please provide the following:**

Your phone number \_\_\_\_\_ (text and calls for group reminder).

Your email address \_\_\_\_\_.

Please use the space provided below to indicate any other identities you believe are important to your experience, such as your religion, disability status, academic degrees, etc.



## APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/latinoresearch2>

**Study Title:** *An Experiential Qualitative Analysis of the Sexual Identification Process for Latino Caribbean Cisgender Gay Men.*

**Study Number:** xxxxx

Hello, I am Starlin Astacio, a doctoral student at Antioch University in Keene, New Hampshire. As part of my doctoral dissertation, I am conducting a research study. Therefore, your voluntary participation is being requested, and the information on the purpose of this research and the informed consent is explained in detail below.

### **The purpose of this research:**

This study aims to understand the sexual identification process for Caribbean cisgender gay men and explore the cultural and traditional family elements that impact Caribbean gay men's sexual identity process.

### **What will happen while you are in the study:**

If you wish to participate in this study, you will join one of the virtual focus groups that will be videorecorded and available to you once the researcher has closed the recruitment process. Prior to the focus group the researcher will get in touch with you via email, text, or call to confirm your voluntary participation in the study. You will have to complete a screening questionnaire which will be provided to you via email. After full completion of the questionnaire, the researcher will provide you with dates/times when the focus groups will be held. You are only asked to participate in ONE of the 90min focus group. Once in the focus group, the researcher will ask 10 questions related to the process of sexual identity and open discussion will take place. After the discussion, if you need to process anything the researcher will remain on the call.

### **Process**

- If you meet the criteria, you will fill out the demographic screening questionnaire a week before the focus group.
- You will take part in one of the two planned virtual focus groups via Zoom video conferencing.
- You will receive a copy of the transcript of the recorded virtual focus group you participated in a week or two after.

### **Time:**

The demographic form should only take you less than 10 minutes to complete. The focus group will be 90 minutes in total.

### **What if I decide to quit the study?**

You may refuse to participate at all or choose to stop your participation at any point in the research without fear of penalties or negative consequences. The information/data you provide for this research will be treated confidentially. All raw data will be kept in a secured file by the researcher.

**How will results be shared?**

The research results will only be reported as aggregate summary data, and no individually identifiable information will be presented. You also have the right to review the research results if you wish to do so. A copy of the results may be obtained by contacting the researcher at the address below:

By email at: [xxxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxxx@antioch.edu).

**Benefits of your participation:**

This may include acquiring information about the sexual identity process for Latinx Caribbean gay men. This will address the fundamental need to provide specific treatment for a growing minority (i.e., the Latinx community) in the US. It will help mental healthcare workers with the knowledge needed to provide culturally and linguistically responsive services to Latinx gay individuals by increasing the visibility of Latinx gay men from Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries and their experiences throughout the sexual identity process.

**Risks:**

You may experience some risks or discomforts during the focus group. Risks may include loss of privacy, emotional stress, and negative feelings. If you feel discomfort during the study, you may choose not to answer the question(s) or exit the virtual focus group. If you feel discomfort during the discussion and want to talk to someone after participating in this study, you may use the list of resources offered by the researcher. The researcher will also assist in finding mental health resources in your area. All identifying information will be removed from the transcription and data. You can choose an alias to replace your actual name or nickname. This will further protect your identity. Before sending copies of the focus group discussion via email, all identifying information will be removed, and the transcription will be sent to you directly. All recordings will be destroyed after it is transcribed. Your identity will not be disclosed if the results of this study are to be reported in journals or at scientific meetings. You will have the opt-in option of receiving a copy of the transcript via email. If you decide to receive a copy of the transcript, you can let the researcher know if an email of the transcript is okay or if you would like to receive the document another way. There may be low risk in communicating and sending copies of transcriptions over email. Please note that emails are neither private nor secure. Though I will do my best to protect your privacy, you should be aware that a third party could read information sent through email. Though I will keep your identity private as it relates to this research study, if I learn of any suspected child abuse, homicidal ideation, or suicide plan, I am required by Connecticut state law to report that to the authorities immediately. All information provided during the focus group discussion will be stored in a secure location.

**If you personally know the researcher:**

It is important to understand that your participation in this study is solely for research purposes. You might have a personal relationship with the researcher; however, participants are highly encouraged to adhere to professional boundaries and understand that your relationship with the researcher is a professional one and different in nature.

**Limits to confidentiality:**

Due to the specific nature of the study, there might be limits to confidentiality regarding other participants in the focus group discussions. Although participants are encouraged to maintain confidentiality, the researcher cannot guarantee such confidentiality.

**Compensation:**

There is no financial gain from participating in this study; however, a \$10 gift card will be provided to participants who opt to receive it.

**Who will know that you have participated in this study?**

Your identities will not be linked to any presentation about this study. However, any quotes shared in the focus group discussion may be used publicly after all your information has been removed. I will keep that information private.

**Do you have any questions about this study?**

You may contact me directly at [xxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxx@antioch.edu)

You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Kevin Lyness, LMFT, at [xxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxx@antioch.edu)

**Do you have any questions about your right as a research participant?**

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please email the AUNE IRB Chair, Dr. Kevin Lyness, LMFT, at [xxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxx@antioch.edu) or Campus Provost, Dr. Shawn Fitzgerald, at [xxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxx@antioch.edu).

**Transcript Email**

I would like to receive an email transcript of my quotes and the focus group:

Please initial: ☐ Yes ☐ No

**Future Studies**

It is okay to use my data in other studies:

Please initial: ☐ Yes ☐ No

**Study Summary**

I would like to get a summary of this study:

Please initial: ☐ Yes ☐ No

**Gift Card Compensation**

I would like to receive a \$10 gift card: ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, please chose one: ☐ Dunkin Donuts/Starbucks ☐ Gas

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have read this form and agree to participate in the abovementioned project. Its general purposes, involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained clearly. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 or older and have received a copy of this consent form electronically.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print your name here      Sign your name here      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Principal Investigator      Signature      Date

## APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT FLYER

**LATINO CISGENDER GAY MEN WANTED  
FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY!****Study Criteria:**

- ✓ Are you at least 18 years old?
- ✓ Are you fluent in English?
- ✓ Do you identify as a Latino cisgender gay man?
- ✓ Do you have a Cuban, Dominican, or Puerto Rican cultural background?
- ✓ Are you available for a virtual conversation about your sexual identity?

If you answered YES to these and are interested in taking part in this study, please

**Contact me at:**

📞 TEXT or CALL: XXX-XXX-XXXX

✉️ EMAIL: XXXX

**The Researcher:**

Starlin Astacio is a PhD candidate at Antioch University New England who is currently looking for participants to meet for ONE 90min focus group virtual discussion to share their experiences during the sexual identity process.

**Incentive:**

You will receive a \$10 gift card upon completion.

## APPENDIX E: SOCIAL MEDIA BLURBS

### ***Social Media (Twitter, Jack'd, Grindr, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Websites, etc.)***

#### **RESEARCH STUDY ABOUT LATINO CISGENDER GAY INDIVIDUALS:**

I am inviting Latino adults living in the US who identify as cisgender gay men of Spanish-Caribbean descent to share their sexual identity process stories for a study titled “*An Experiential Qualitative Analysis of the Sexual Identification Process for Latino Caribbean Cisgender Gay Men.*” To participate, individuals must read and speak English, identify as gay Latino adults (18+) from Spanish-Caribbean descent (Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican). Participation consists of completing a demographic questionnaire and engaging in a confidential focus group discussion. The total time commitment for participating in this study is 90 minutes. The identity of all participants is protected. If you are interested in participating or have questions, please contact Starlin Astacio at xxx-xxx-xxxx via text/call or email [xxxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxxx@antioch.edu). If you do not fit the criteria for participating in this study, please help spread the word about this study for others who may be interested.

#### ***Social Media Short Version***

#### **RESEARCH STUDY ABOUT LATINO CISGENDER GAY INDIVIDUALS:**

I am inviting you to share your stories as a Latino individual living in the US who also identifies as a cisgender gay man of Spanish-Caribbean descent (Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican) for a study titled “*An Experiential Qualitative Analysis of the Sexual Identification Process for Latino Caribbean Cisgender Gay Men.*” Participation consists of filling out a questionnaire and participating in a confidential virtual focus group discussion. The total time commitment for participating in this study is 90 minutes. To participate, please contact Starlin Astacio at xxx-xxx-xxxx via text/call or email [xxxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxxx@antioch.edu).

*Participants are highly encouraged to contact the researcher via call, text, or email if interested in taking part in the study. The researcher will not engage in conversation that is not pertinent to the study with participants through any of the social media platforms.*

## APPENDIX F: REMINDER EMAILS AND TEXT MESSAGES TO PARTICIPANTS

### EMAIL #1 - Reminder sent a week prior focus group.

Dear --,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the virtual focus group that will take place this **Saturday (02/04) from 11 am to 12:30 pm ET**. I appreciate your cooperation and for being a part of this journey!

If you have not done so, **PLEASE sign the informed consent form before Saturday** so we can jump into our discussion.

Here is the link to it: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/latinoresearch2>

**Here is the Zoom link that we will use for the session:** xxxxx

*I will also send it again Friday night in an email and a reminder TEXT message Saturday morning.*

Also, if you are interested, here are the main questions I intend to ask you during the focus group. There are no wrong answers, so please do not feel anxious or overwhelmed; just speak your truth and from your own experiences.

#### **The Questions:**

1. How did you become aware of your sexual identity?
2. Who knows about your sexual identity, and who have you kept it hidden from? Tell me the reasons why you have disclosed or not disclosed it to others.
3. How have your family's cultural values impacted your sexual identity?
4. How has your experience been after disclosing or not disclosing your sexual identity to others?
5. Tell me the most influential people or experiences contributing to your sexual identity acceptance.

I look forward to seeing you all on Saturday!  
Starr

**EMAIL #2 - Reminder a day before the focus group**

Hello --,

This is a reminder to the virtual focus group that will take place Tomorrow, **Saturday (02/04/2023), from 11 am to 12:30 pm ET.**

**Here is the Zoom link that we will use for the session: xxxxxx**

If you have any questions prior to the focus group, please let me know. I'm looking forward to talking with you tomorrow.

Again, I genuinely appreciate your cooperation and for being a part of this journey!

Warmly,  
Starr

**TEXT MESSAGE REMINDER #1 - Pre-focus group**

Good morning!

This is a reminder for the Latino Research group discussion Today at 11am ET.

Please join the call promptly at 11am ET so we can start on time. Make sure you have audio and video working properly.

If you are experiencing any difficulties joining the Zoom call, please let me know.

I'll see you soon!

Below is the Zoom link:  
<https://antioch.zoom.us/j/xxxxxxx>

**TEXT MESSAGE #2 - Post focus group**

Dear ---,

Thank you very much for sharing your experience, ideas, knowledge, and time with me yesterday! Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions or need support around the topic we discussed.

It was great having you as part of this process!

- Starr??

*Virtual gift card attached to this text message.*

## **APPENDIX G: IDENTITY VERIFICATION EMAIL**

### **IDENTITY VERIFICATION PROCESS**

Due to spam/fake participants interested in the study, the researcher will conduct a 5-minute identity verification process in which he will ask questions related to the demographic questionnaire, verify audio and video quality, and your interest in the study.

### **ID VERIFICATION EMAIL TEMPLATE:**

Hello --,

The next step in the study is to verify your identity before the focus group. Please let me know which of these times work best for you for a quick 5 min Zoom call. You will need have your audio and video on during the identity verification process.

Wednesday, Feb. 1st 12 pm, 12:30 pm, or 1 pm ET

Thursday, Feb. 2nd at 1 pm ET

Friday, Feb. 3rd, 11am or 12 pm ET

Warmly,

Starr



## **APPENDIX H: RESEARCHER'S JOURNAL**

### **Recruitment journal entry:**

**01/29/2023**

Today, I am reflecting on the recruitment process of my research study. Initially, I began the recruitment process through various social media platforms. Within two days, I received an overwhelming response from almost 95 interested individuals. I reached out to Kevin, my chairperson, to discuss the validity and genuineness of the responses. We reviewed the IP addresses, names, and email addresses of each participant and found that most of them were either filling out multiple demographic questionnaires from the same computers to obtain gift cards, their emails did not work, or they had automatic responses when I tried to reach out to them. This experience has made me realize that recruiting research participants online can be challenging, and it's essential to validate the authenticity of the responses. According to researchers Sills et al. (2018), the use of online platforms can increase the risk of fraudulent responses, and it's crucial to identify and prevent these risks during the recruitment process.

### **Journal entry #1:**

**02/04/2023**

Today was an exciting and nerve-wracking day as I conducted my first-ever focus group for my research study on the experiences of gay Latino men from the Spanish Caribbean living in the US. As a novice researcher, I was a bit intimidated by the process, but I was also excited to have the opportunity to learn from the participants and gain valuable insights into their experiences. As a clinician, I was able to draw on my skills in creating a safe and supportive environment to help facilitate conversation and create a brave space in the focus group. I began the session by

introducing myself and explaining the purpose of the study, and I made sure to emphasize that this was a safe space where everyone's voices would be heard and respected. I started with some general questions to break the ice and create a comfortable atmosphere. The participants were a bit shy at first, but as the conversation progressed, they began to open up and share their experiences. One participant shared a personal story about coming out to his family and how difficult it was for him to reconcile his sexuality with his cultural and religious background. This sparked a deeper conversation among the group, and everyone began to feel more comfortable sharing their own experiences.

As the facilitator, I made sure to create a supportive and non-judgmental environment, where participants felt comfortable expressing themselves. I validated their experiences, listened actively, and asked follow-up questions that encouraged deeper reflection and discussion. By the end of the session, the participants were joking and laughing with each other, and it was clear that they had formed a sense of camaraderie and trust.

Overall, the focus group was a valuable experience that taught me a lot about the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment for research participants. I learned that my clinical skills can be just as valuable in research setting as they are in a therapeutic one, and I look forward to continuing to learn and grow as a researcher and clinician.

**Journal entry #2:**

**02/28/2023**

As I began the process of sorting through the data collected from the focus group for my study on the experiences of gay Latino men from the Spanish Caribbean living in the US, I quickly

realized just how complicated it was going to be. The transcript of the focus group was lengthy and contained a wealth of information that needed to be organized and analyzed.

At first, I tried using MAXQDA, a popular software program for qualitative data analysis.

However, I found the program to be overly complicated and difficult to use. I was spending more time trying to figure out how to use the software than actually analyzing the data. After some deliberation, I decided to switch to Microsoft Word to organize the data.

Using Microsoft Word allowed me to more easily sort through the transcript, highlight important passages, and create a system of codes to help me organize the data. It was still a time-consuming process, but it was more manageable than using MAXQDA. I was able to more easily search for key terms and themes, and the process of coding the data became more intuitive.

As a researcher, I learned an important lesson about the value of simplicity in data analysis.

While sophisticated software programs like MAXQDA may have their place, they can sometimes be more trouble than they're worth. In this case, switching to a more straightforward approach using Microsoft Word allowed me to more effectively analyze the data and gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of gay Latino men from the Spanish Caribbean living in the US.

### **Journal entry #3:**

**03/10/2023**

OK so today I started to clean up the transcripts. I have 6 participants and out of the six participants only four actively participated during the focus group. What I noticed about the focus group is that the four participants that were actively participating had many similarities. I

started by highlighting the participants answers to my questions. I started with the first question and highlighted important codes that were emerging from that question. I then transfer those sections to a different document and put them together in a section under a theme I believe it was emerging from that particular question. The first theme I noticed emerged was the self-awareness of each participant's sexual identity. They each responded with the time during they had been came aware of their different sexual attraction. This was surprising to me, as many of the participants stated that their first time they noticed a difference in their sexual attraction to other men was during middle childhood. There was a participant that stated that his first exposure to gay culture was when he was 11 years old. Some of the codes that emerged from the first question where early age, 15 years old, 11 years old, 8 years old. This leads to in emerging theme of the initial sexual identity awareness.

**Journal entry #4:**

**03/15/2023**

Today, I started analyzing the qualitative data collected from the interviews conducted with participants for my study on the experiences of gay Latino men from the Spanish Caribbean living in the US. As I delved into the data, I was struck by the depth and richness of the participants' narratives. Their stories were raw, emotional, and deeply personal. I was particularly moved by the themes of identity, belonging, and acceptance that emerged from the data. Many participants spoke about the challenges of navigating their intersecting identities and the impact that societal attitudes towards their identities had on their lives. At times, I found myself feeling overwhelmed by the complexity and depth of the data. I realized that working with qualitative data requires a great deal of emotional labor and

reflexivity. As a researcher, I must be mindful of my own biases and assumptions and strive to maintain an open and non-judgmental approach to the data.

Overall, I am grateful for the opportunity to work with such meaningful data and to learn from the experiences of the participants. I feel privileged to be able to amplify their voices and contribute to the existing literature on the experiences of gay Latino men from the Spanish Caribbean living in the US.

**Journal entry #5:**

**03/29/2023**

As I continued to analyze the data from my study on the experiences of gay Latino men from the Spanish Caribbean living in the US, I began to notice several emerging themes. One theme that stood out to me was the early awareness of their sexual identity that many participants expressed. Many of them discussed feeling different from a young age and struggling to understand and accept their sexuality.

Another theme that emerged was the importance of role models in shaping their identities and experiences. Many participants spoke about the impact that seeing other gay Latino men, particularly in media or entertainment, had on their own self-acceptance and understanding of their identities. They also discussed the lack of representation and visibility of gay Latino men in mainstream media and how this contributed to feelings of isolation and invisibility.

Finally, I observed the theme of Visibility Management in the participants' experiences. Many discussed the challenges of navigating multiple identities and the tension between wanting to be visible and authentic while also fearing the consequences of being too visible or too open about their sexuality.

As a researcher, I am struck by the complexity of these themes and the ways in which they intersect with one another. I recognize the importance of exploring these themes further and gaining a deeper understanding of how they shape the experiences of gay Latino men from the Spanish Caribbean living in the US. I feel privileged to be able to contribute to this important area of research and hope that my findings will contribute to a greater understanding of the unique challenges faced by this population.

**Journal entry #6:**

**04/05/2023**

As I continued to analyze the qualitative data from my study on the experiences of gay Latino men from the Spanish Caribbean living in the US, I began to notice several sub-themes that were particularly salient in participants' narratives.

One sub-theme that emerged from the data was the early awareness of their sexual identity, often accompanied by feelings of confusion and isolation. Many participants spoke about feeling different from a young age and struggling to understand and accept their sexuality. This was often compounded by cultural and religious beliefs that stigmatized homosexuality and made it difficult for participants to find acceptance within their communities.

Another sub-theme that emerged was the early exposure to gay culture, often through media or social networks. Many participants described seeking out information and representation of gay Latino men as a means of understanding their own identities and finding a sense of community.

The data also highlighted the challenges of navigating different environments as a gay man, including the workplace, social settings, and family gatherings. Participants discussed the

tension between wanting to be open and authentic about their sexuality while also fearing the consequences of being too visible or too open.

Family, religious, and cultural influences were also salient sub-themes that emerged from the data. Many participants spoke about the difficulties of reconciling their sexuality with their family's cultural and religious beliefs and the impact this had on their relationships and sense of self.

Finally, the theme of self-acceptance emerged as a critical sub-theme in participants' narratives. Many spoke about the process of coming to accept their sexuality and the importance of self-love and self-acceptance in finding a sense of peace and happiness in their lives.

As a researcher, I am struck by the complexity and nuance of these sub-themes and their impact on the experiences of gay Latino men from the Spanish Caribbean living in the US.

#### **Journal entry #7:**

**04/15/2023**

Today, I engaged in the process of bracketing as I analyzed the data for my research study. As a researcher, it is important to acknowledge and recognize my own biases and experiences that may influence my interpretation of the data. By bracketing, I was able to set aside my own experiences and perspectives to focus solely on the data and themes that emerged from the participants' narratives.

At the same time, as a Latino Caribbean gay man, I found myself empathizing and sharing similar experiences with my participants. While I had to be mindful of my personal biases, my shared experiences with the participants allowed me to connect with them on a deeper level and to better understand their perspectives. I felt grateful for the opportunity to explore these

shared experiences through a research lens, and to contribute to a better understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by individuals like myself and the participants in the study.

**Journal entry #8:**

**04/19/2023**

Today, I reached out to my dissertation committee members to ask for their feedback on my data analysis and emerging themes. As a novice researcher, I value their expertise and perspective in qualitative data analysis. I explained to them the methods I used, including the IPA approach, and shared my preliminary findings. I asked for their feedback on the themes that emerged from the data and their overall impression of the analysis. They were supportive and provided helpful feedback, suggesting no additional areas to explore, and accepting the themes and sub-themes I presented to them. I feel grateful for their willingness to help and appreciate their guidance as I continue to refine my research.



## **APPENDIX I: PEER REVIEWING MEETINGS WITH COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

### **Recruitment process meeting with Kevin 01/18/23**

Questions:

Do I need a RA?

How to address skepticism around # of participants interested in the study?

Where and when do I update changes (extra focus group)?

Need help simplifying the focus groups questions.

### **Data analysis meeting with Kevin 02/08/2023**

I ran a focus group with 6 participants, I do not want to run another focus group.

Discussed MAXDQ data analysis software use and change to Microsoft Word.

How do I start Chapter 4?

Notes from meeting:

- It is ok to stay with the current data from 6 people in the focus group. No need to run another group.
- Start the memoing process to reflect pre-during-post reaction to the focus group.
- Address the question: what came up for you pre/during/post focus group.

### **Coding process meeting with Alex 03/31/2023**

Discussed the process of coding. Alex explained that instead of using the term codes use sub-themes. Alex agreed with the data analysis process and how I was using Word to sort out themes and subthemes.

### **Thematic analysis meeting with Markie 04/10/2023**

Explore the transcript with Markie during a Zoom call. Discussed potential themes and subthemes. Markie provided an example of data analysis and share her own dissertation format.

### **Data analysis meeting with Dr. Markie 04/20/2023**

Discuss chapter 4 structure and ways to present themes and subthemes in this chapter.