REJECTING, COMPARTMENTALIZING, OR INTEGRATING

MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE IDENTITIES:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF GAY MUSLIM MEN

LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES

Dissertation presented to the Faculty of the

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the nine men who readily welcomed a stranger into their inner experiences for the benefit of those facing similar issues. These participants enabled this study, and it is my hope that the conclusions based on information that they disclosed will help mental health professionals provide better services for gay Muslim clients. These individuals overcame hardships while navigating conflicts between culture and identity, often in silence. I hope that this is an opportunity for their voices to be heard.

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At the outset of this study my committee and I knew it would be a major undertaking. Undaunted by the endeavor at that time, I could never have imagined what this process entailed. As I reflect on the past 2.5 years and my growth as an individual and a professional, it is apparent that many people have significantly contributed/made significant contributions to this entire process. I especially want to acknowledge my friend, mentor, advisor, and dissertation chair, Michael Loewy, Ph.D., who provided me with guidance and direction when I felt adrift. In addition, I want to thank Sheila Henderson, Ph.D., and Saba Ozyurt, Ph.D, who comprised my dissertation committee. All three of these professors far exceeded their responsibilities as committee members and patiently helped this study come to fruition. I would like to acknowledge Amber Hager, a fellow graduate student who provided methodological and emotional support during the dissertation process. Sonia Castleberry and Pamela Wrona also deserve acknowledgement and appreciation for the countless hours they spent editing and reviewing this document.

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provided a monetary contribution to help fund the project.

Abstract

Given the intolerance of homosexuality in many religions and religious communities, particularly Muslim American communities, many LGBTQ-identified individuals who grow up in Muslim families and societies struggle with the two oft-perceived incompatible identities. Numerous researchers have examined this phenomenon among Christian and Jewish gay men in the United States, but minimal research has addressed men who identify as gay and Muslim. These individuals face an even greater risk of psychological and physical harm due to the cultural and religious proscriptions that gay Muslims face and the lack of social and psychological resources available to them. By further examining how gay Muslim men cope with their sexual and religious identities, and how personal traits, experiences, and situations mitigate or enhance the conflict that many experience, my intent with this this study was to contribute to the nascent psychological framework that mental health providers, especially therapists, could access when working with clients who identify as gay and Muslim. Using a social constructionist paradigm and thematic analysis, the lived experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of nine men all of whom are between the ages of 24 and 35, were raised in Muslim families, and are attracted to other men were examined in this qualitative study. The analysis of the interviews focused on religion, sexuality, identity negotiation, relationships, and mental health. Particular efforts were invested in looking at how the participants negotiate their religious and sexual identity development and, if present, how they resolve their identity conflict. The majority of the participants rejected their Muslim identities with a few participants maintaining their Muslim and gay identities. Implications for clinical practice are discussed.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Background of the Problem

Given the intolerance of homosexuality in many religions and religious communities, particularly Muslim American communities, many lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer (LGBTQ)- identified individuals who grow up in Muslim families and societies struggle with two incompatible identities that contradict each other (Siraj, 2006). This struggle and contradiction has been a popular topic in sociological literature but has received less attention from social and clinical psychologists, which is unfortunate given the psychological ramifications of identity conflict (Jaspal & Cinnarella, 2010).

Identity conflict arises when an individual has two or more identities that are deemed incompatible (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000). The topic of identity conflict is particularly salient among sexual minorities who identify as religious and has been the focus of numerous researchers (e.g., Gillman, 1998; Sweasey, 1997). This saliency appears to stem from the frequent association between religion and sexuality. Worthington (2004) acknowledged how religious leaders are commonly perceived as regulators of sexuality as they dictate sexual mores.

A number of studies conducted in the United States have examined the identity development process of gay Christian (Levy & Reeves, 2011), Jewish (Balka & Rose, 1989), and Muslim (Minwalla, Rosser, Feldman, & Varga, 2005) men who must live with or resolve the conflict that stems from their gay and religious identities. Considering the relative invisibility of the Muslim American community and the general discomfort and avoidance of discussing sexuality in this population, limited research exists. This is problematic given the level of

distress and turmoil that identity conflict and dissonance instills in those who struggle with trying to accept and integrate different parts of their identities.

The construction of gay and lesbian identity is influenced by social and cultural contexts (Eliason, 1996). Much of the research examining gay and lesbian identity has been conducted within the United States (Greene, 1997, 1998), a country with a limited Muslim population. As a result, the majority of U.S.-based research addressing the intersections between religious and gay identities has focused on Christian and Jewish men. An Internet or database search for queer Muslims may retrieve more results now than it did 10 years ago; however, there remains a dearth of queer-affirming resources for Muslims (Minwalla et al., 2005). Because of the controversial nature of sexual expression, there is a strong proclivity to reduce complex phenomena to simplistic answers that are often rooted in bias and misinformation. As sexuality and freedom of sexual expression occupy an increasing amount of space on international agendas, these misconceptions must be challenged, and more research is needed to better understand queer Muslims (Shannahan, 2010). The present study's goal was to expand this limited body of literature with a specific focus on helping inform clinicians working with gay Muslim men who present in therapy with identity conflict regarding their religious and sexual identities.

Statement of the Problem

The conflict between religious and sexual identities is extremely prevalent among members of the LGBTQ community who belong to religious communities. While a number of studies have examined this phenomenon among Christian (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000) and Jewish gay men (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000), minimal research has addressed men who identify as gay and Muslim (Siraj, 2006), who are at even greater risk of psychological and physical harm given the cultural and

religious proscriptions that gay Muslims face (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Further complicating matters, few mental health services are available for Muslim Americans and immigrants from predominantly Muslim nations (Haque, 2004). The lack of services is likely the result of a small number of therapists who are familiar with the Muslim approach to treatment and potentially a lack of interest among providers who do have this skillset (Haque, 2004). As more Muslims migrate to liberal democratic nations in the West, a shift must occur from a focus on Islam/Muslims *and* the West to Islam/Muslims *in* the West (Malik, 2009), and well-informed therapists have the potential to play a critical role in assisting this shift. The benefits of resolving identity conflicts are not limited to these individuals; they extend to the family, the community, and society as a whole.

Purpose of the Study

Researchers in sociology have explored identity navigation among gay Muslims and documented the process to some extent (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010), yet few psychological studies have explored the issue. Psychological research is greatly needed to help address the mental health problems associated with identity conflict among this population. Within their respective communities, gay Muslim men and queer Muslims in general struggle with the shame, guilt, stigma, and castigation that same-sex attraction incurs (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). While the intensity of these emotions varies by individual, no gay Muslim man escapes the disgrace and internal distress that develops with a gay identity. By further examining how gay Muslim men cope with their sexual and religious identities and how personal traits, experiences, and situations mitigate or enhance the conflict that many experience, my intent was to contribute to the nascent psychological framework that mental health providers, especially therapists, could access when working with clients who identify as gay and Muslim. Developing a comprehensive therapy for

gay Muslims was not the focus; rather, the intent was to identify important issues for mental health providers as they work from their respective theoretical orientation with clients from this population.

Theoretical Perspectives

   Social constructionism. The social constructionism (SC) paradigm underlaid this study. SC asserts that humans do not discover or find knowledge; instead, they create it (Schwandt, 2000). Within the specific context of this study, which focused on an examination of how people navigate personal identities and social categories, SC asserts that humans have created these categories through consensus, and the limitations and animosity that stem from these identities are not essential to the human experience but are instead a result of peoples' actions. Gender, racial, and sexual identities are manmade constructs that are defined and reinforced within societies (Seidman, 2003). Important influences that contribute to the creation of knowledge and meaning exist within a social context (Castells, 2010). Language, shared beliefs, practices, and customs contribute to the development of socially constructed roles such as sexuality, religion, and gender, all of which are pertinent to the present study.

   Through socialization, humans learn to embrace the behaviors and roles associated with their biological gender. Jeffrey Weeks (1986), a British sociologist who helped pioneer the sociological approach to sexuality, emphasized that "sexuality is not a given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency" (p. 25). Similarly, Foucault (1980) argued that sexuality is a socially constructed identity.

   Humankind experiences predictability as comforting, and the concept of a manmade, malleable, and unstable human identity is difficult for many people to accept. Individuals often reject any theories that question the inherency of the human identity, and those who espouse

these newer ideas may draw the hostility and ire of others uncomfortable with challenging their existing reality (Said, 1978). Social orders are built on the assumption that identities are stable, and information that contradicts this belief threatens nationalism, patriarchy, and other constructs that people utilize to maintain power (Said, 1978). Challenging these firmly held beliefs is immensely difficult, but SC as a theory can help facilitate an understanding of diversity and fluidity of identity. It can also promote tolerance by illustrating that humans have the power to alter these seemingly inherent or fixed social categories. SC also challenges many religious beliefs as it questions the power and omnipotence of God or a higher power and places control of one's life and perceptions of reality in the hands of people.

Cultural autonomy. The power of research does not solely lie in the identification and dissemination of knowledge but also in the platform it provides for the groups to have a voice. To Muslim Americans, mainstream U.S. culture determines the focus of the research and the information they choose to report and interpret. Aside from the invalidation of this process, the institutional misrecognition that results with the marginalizing representations of "otherness" renders a group invisible (Fraser, 2000) and robs them of their voice. Taylor (1992) identified voice as an essential element that people use when constructing their identities and its absence can have detrimental effects.

Following the national focus on Islam that emerged from the development of Al-Queda, the attacks on 9/11, and the United States' increased military involvement in the Middle East further studies have addressed this population (Leonard, 2003). Yip (2009) asserted that Western discourses of Islam and Muslims focus on macro issues such as governmental policies, political issues, and multiculturalism. The motives underlying this body of work seem rooted in a desire to manage Muslims (Turner, 2007) more than help them. This trend appears even more

pervasive following the recent revolutions in the Arab world and the involvement of Western and Eastern nations attempting to establish stability in the region. Considering the priorities of Western nations conducting research, issues pertaining to personal and social identity among Muslim American are deemed inconsequential and therefore relegated to professionals in specialized fields with limited audiences (i.e., theologists, sociologists; Yip, 2009).

Delimitations

Individuals who identify as men, Muslim, and gay were examined for this study. These specific demographics narrowed the focus to a unique group; doing so did not address the remaining population that falls on other parts of the gender, sexuality, and religious spectrum/matrix. More comprehensive studies can and should address the intersections of the communities excluded in the present project.

It is important to note that much of the research pertaining to gay Muslim men has been conducted in Great Britain, Turkey, and a handful of other countries throughout Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Each of these countries has its own unique culture, which limits the generalizability of the results to Muslims living in other countries. That said, due to the minimal empirical research on LGBTQ Muslims residing in the United States, this existing body of literature is presented within the current study. The inclusion of this material is not intended to portray all gay Muslims as a homogenous group with interchangeable experiences regardless of cultures; the intent is to provide a context for the participants' experiences that may complement and contrast with those of other gay Muslims throughout the world.

Terminology

Considering the problematic historical context of homosexuality and the label homosexual, it is important to outline affirming terminology for this paper. The categorization

of homosexuality as a mental disorder contributed to the stigmatization of the label homosexual as researchers and clinicians referred to their subjects/patients as homosexuals within the context of psychological incompetence and deviance for much of the 20th century (Rothblum, 1994). As a result, most men and women within this community prefer the term gay and lesbian (Sue & Sue (2008). With the onset of the gay rights movement, the LGBTQ community advocated for more affirming labels like gay and queer (following its recent appropriation) (Brontsema, 2004), and culturally competent researchers have striven to replace the label homosexual with more affirmative terms.

Complications inevitably arise when selecting a term to refer to a historically oppressed group. Within Muslim cultures and societies, the term gay is perceived as a Western construct used to describe an identity that carries connotations of a lifestyle that a person chooses to embrace (Whitaker, 2011). The voluntary or involuntary nature of sexual desires is irrelevant as a person can choose to act or abstain from sexual activity. Given the potential for Western bias, the term gay was only used in the present study when contained in quotations. It is important to note that homosexuality as a construct does not carry the same connotation as homosexual as it defines a behavior, not a person. In recognition of its scientific origins and widely recognizable meaning, homosexuality was used in the present study when referring to the identity or behavior.

The label men who have sex with men (MSM) was used in the present study when referring to participants and other homosexual men. Unlike other labels discussed, such as queer and gay, MSM specifies the gender and behaviors of a person; as such, it minimizes the inherent conflation of sexual identity and behavior commonly endorsed in the West (Young & Meyer, 2005). The concepts of gay as an identity versus a set of behaviors reappears throughout this

study and reiterate one of the primary distinctions between Western (American/European) and

Eastern (Asian/Middle Eastern/African) cultures.

Cultural Issues and Differences

Before embarking on research involving people who are culturally different from the

researcher, it is important to identify some of the commonly perceived cultural differences and

biases between Western and Eastern cultures, and especially those relevant to the present study.

These differences vary based on the social identities and categories that each culture has

constructed. While these differences often get conveyed through a Western-Eastern dichotomy,

which is reinforced by individuals operating within an "us versus them" mentality, the

dichotomy is actually a continuum and people generally endorse elements from both. Relevant

cultural differences in the following discussion include an introduction to the gay identity versus

sexual behavior debate, the challenges of cross-cultural research, Orientalism, and the risk of

committing Orientalism.

Gay identity versus sexual behaviors. At the outset of this study, a major challenge

involved understanding the concept of homosexuality from a Western and Eastern perspective.

Weeks (1992) succinctly describes this challenge in the following quotation:

Homosexuality, like all forms of sexuality, has different meanings in different

cultures—so much so that it becomes difficult to find any common essence which

links the different ways it is lived, apart that is, from the pure sexual activity

itself. (pp. ix–x)

While the concept of a gay identity permeates Western thought, many traditional cultures

do not conceptualize sexual behaviors within the context of an identity (Weeks, 1992; Whitaker,

2011). Instead, sexual behaviors simply represent sexual behaviors. Same-sex interactions may

deviate from the normative sexual behaviors of an Islamic or an Eastern culture, but an individual's sexual identity does not automatically default to bisexual or homosexual following his or her first same-sex interaction. Within many predominantly Muslim countries and Islam itself, the concept of sexual orientation does not exist. More specifically, it is believed that humans are "naturally" attracted to members of the other sex (Abu-Saud, 1990). In essence, sexual orientation is irrelevant as men and women are attracted to each other since they are able to reproduce, and any interest or desire to have sex with a member of the same sex should be resisted, its importance minimized, or redefined as something other than homosexuality.

The potential pitfalls of cross-cultural research. Cross-cultural research can be methodologically and ethically challenging as it carries a risk of perpetuating the biases and inequality that many of these studies intend to address. One common risk involves comparisons that can lead to the over- and undervaluation of one group versus the other. The possibility of praising one culture and devaluing another is high, especially when comparing the United States and the West with Islamic countries in the East, which is problematic given the former's imperial and colonial powers over the latter.

The West is often viewed as modern, progressive, scientific, and secular while the Eastern cultures embrace traditional, conservative, and religious values. Mindful of the Imperialist history that the colonial powers imposed on Eastern societies, it is important to remember that culture provides the backdrop to help provide an understanding of a different group, and it should not should not be used to simplify or reduce and entire group of people to a set of beliefs and attitudes (Schmitt, 1992b). Furthermore, cultural differences should not be used as means of justifying one culture's efforts to alter or altogether reject another culture (Schmitt, 1992b).

Prior to delving into the body of literature relevant to Muslim Americans, it is important

to examine the historical context and sociocultural influences through which scholars have

interpreted the information contained in these resources. The Middle East, much like Asia,

Africa, South America, and other former European colonies, has attracted the attention of

Western-trained social scientists interested in a better understanding of the people of these lands.

Despite the efforts of some well-intentioned researchers, these outside observers inevitably

misinterpreted, misrepresented, and misreported the culture, customs, and interactions that they

encountered and witnessed (Massad, 2007; Said, 1978). This phenomenon is particularly

apparent in Western literature addressing the Middle East and Islamic issues (Massad, 2007;

Said, 1978). These misrepresentations date back to beginning of Middle Eastern scholarship

during medieval times when European scholars actively attempted to slander Mohammed's

reputation in an effort to discredit Islam (Roded, 2006). Many perceived Islam as a threat to

Christianity considering the rapid growth and intellectual and mechanical prowess exhibited by

Muslims during the Middle Ages (Said, 1978).

Many of these fictitious statements, especially the description of the prophet Mohammed

as licentious and savage, persist today. The Western pedagogical canon has reified these beliefs

in the Western conscience/psyche (Said, 1978), and the media has promulgated negative images

of Muslims. For this reason, Massad (2007), Said (1978), and other academics have expressed

concerns about the accuracy of Western-originating literature addressing Islam, Muslims, and the

Middle East. Both authors have asserted that regardless of their ethnicity or nationality, Western

scholars writing about the Middle East rarely consider the people they write about as potential

audiences and consumers of their work (Said 1978). In other words, Western scholars write

about these people and present them in a way so that audiences back in the West can enjoy the

stories and narratives. As a result of this nonreciprocal approach, distorted and misrepresented information and contradictory facts, both damaging and beneficial, permeate all genres of written work in this body of literature. Aware of the potential biases that may even eclipse the most careful scholars on this topic of research, consumers of this material, including researchers, must remain vigilant when examining and citing the limited resources addressing Muslims who identify as MSM.

Orientalism. As a complex phenomenon, Orientalism is a difficult concept to define succinctly. Said (1978) wrote that "In short, Orientalism [i]s a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient" (p. 3). It also refers to a Euro- or Western-centric perspective that places the Orient as lesser than and is described and perceived through the perspective of Europeans and Americans who legitimate their interpretations above those who exist in these cultures. Said wrote extensively about Orientalism in his seminal text of the same title. While Orientalism as a construct has been challenged (see Warraq, 2007), many academics have praised Said's work, and it has helped shift the focus of scholarly work on the Middle East and Asia.

Western Christians have perceived Islam as a threat since its formation. Islam is a "culturally and militarily formidable competitor to Christianity" (Said, 2003, p. 343) with the epicenters of both religions in close geographical proximity. The intensity of this perception has fluctuated during the past 1,300 years with tension between Western Christians and Muslims reaching a tumultuous high in the 21st century. In the United States, a country fixated on identifying a common enemy, Muslims have replaced the fascist and communistic "other," an unenviable position previously held by the Soviets (Said, 1978/ 2003). Said (1978) argued that unlike any other religious or ethnic group, "Virtually anything can be written or said about [Arab

people and Muslims] without challenge or demurral" (p. 287). Written almost four decades ago, this statement still remains relevant today. It probably resonates with even greater strength in the 21st century as prominent political and cultural figures denigrate the "Muslim other" (Said, 1978, p. 342) in order to curry favor among their constituents and the larger U.S. populace.

A Muslim identity is still used as a means of undermining the credibility of controversial and powerful figures in the United States (i.e., President Obama), often underneath the guise of patriotism and national pride. Even though many citizens in the United States refrain from engaging in this prejudice, the phenomenon of "othering" in a general context occurs frequently and allows people to protect themselves by avoiding interaction with diversity.

Muslim Americans and foreign nationals who practice Islam comprise one of numerous cultural groups that are currently deemed as "the other" in the United States. Any group labeled thusly poses a threat to American values and way of life. Two notable groups that also serve as formidable others include immigrants and anyone who identifies within the LGBTQ umbrella. Even though gay men and women have experienced the greatest growth of tolerance in recent years when compared with other minority groups, negative attitudes toward Muslims and immigrants have increased (Schafer & Shaw, 2009). Therefore, in the United States men who are or are perceived to be MSM, Muslim, immigrant, or of Middle Eastern descent occupy a precarious position in society. These individuals are not only targeted by mainstream groups in the United States but also by Muslim American communities. While these Muslim communities may not share the same racist and anti-immigrant beliefs as the mainstream community, they overwhelmingly carry disdain for LGBTQ- and queer-identified individuals (Leonard, 2003). Similarly, even within the progressive gay communities in the United States that accept people of color and immigrants, religious identity can limit the acceptance available to these individuals;

in other words, one cannot be religious and gay. Men who identify as both Muslim and MSM,

irrespective of immigration status, find minimal support from many of the communities and

groups with which they identify or belong (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011).

According to Massad (2007), Orientalist undertones permeate Western movements to

promote human rights and liberate the oppressed MSM Muslims living in the Middle East. In

the following excerpt from his book, Desiring Arabs, Massad (2007) discussed this phenomenon:

The Gay International was to reserve a special place for Muslim countries in its

discourse as well as in its advocacy. This Orientalist impulse, borrowed from

predominant representations of Arab and Muslim cultures in the United Stated

and European countries, continues to guide all branches of the human rights

community . . . Supporters of the Gay International's missionary tasks produced

two kinds of literature on the Muslim world in order to propagate their cause: an

academic literature produced mostly by the white male European or American

gay scholars, "describing" and "explain" what they call "homosexuality" in Arab

and Muslim history to the present; and journalistic accounts of the lives of so-

called "gays" and (much less so) "lesbians" in the contemporary Arab and

Muslim worlds. The former is intended to unravel the mystery of Islam to a

Western audience, while the latter has the unenviable task of . . . "liberat[ing]"

Arab and Muslim "gays and lesbians" from the oppression under which they

allegedly live by transforming them from practitioners of same-sex contact into

subjects who identify as "homosexual" and "gay." (pp. 161–162)

The ease with which this pattern gets repeated necessitates a vigilant researcher to monitor the

work for Orientalist-tinged comments and analysis. Preventing this error is particularly

important for the present study, as the intent was to make a useful contribution to the literature and not perpetuate the imposition of a Western-based agenda that recycles Orientalist beliefs under the guise of civil rights and liberation.

Limiting bias. The techniques and approaches that qualitative researchers employ while designing and conducting their studies are meant to limit bias. Safeguards such as trustworthy practices (e.g., multiple reviewers—colleagues, the researcher, participants) and researcher-based tools such as self-reflexivity provide additional filters and screens to sift through pieces of information that may reproduce biases.

In particular, self-reflexivity is a pivotal tool that helps identify and address any of the researcher's personal biases. Involving participants in the review process and asking them to examine the interview transcripts also helps reduce bias. While the ultimate goal is to produce bias- and fault-free research, achieving this goal in its totality is impossible. Recognizing that some misinformation would seep into the present study, the goal was to prevent as much as possible from invading the data and the conclusions.

The conflict between religious and sexual identities is extremely prevalent among members of the LGBTQ community who belong to religious communities. While psychological research has addressed Christian and Jewish communities, the field of psychology has a limited understanding of LGBTQ-identified Muslims. This lack of knowledge and resources makes it challenging for the mental health field to address these issues within the Muslim community. Numerous cultural differences, especially those related to the notion of identity, and recent tension between the Muslim and mainstream communities have contributed to the dearth of information.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

This chapter is a discussion and analysis on the available literature related to gay Muslims. To maintain a relevant focus within this literature review, this chapter only contains information pertinent to this study. Information in this chapter was gathered from multiple types of sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, nonfiction research books, dissertations, articles from popular media publications, and memoirs.

This chapter contains four major sections: (a) Related Literature (b) Islam, (c) Identity, and (d) Mental Health. The first section provides an overview on research similar to this study. The second section addresses Islam and provides a brief overview of the religion, an examination of Muslims living in the West and the United States, and some of the challenges that this community faces. The section also includes an examination of the Muslim stance on sexuality and a review of the complex historical and present day interactions of Islam and homosexuality. Identity is addressed in the third section. An overview of identity is provided, followed by a discussion on ethnic identity, religious identity, and Muslim religious identity development. Sexual identity and sexual identity development is then explored with a brief review of sexual identity development models. Lastly, the topic of identity conflict is introduced and research on identity conflict resolution is presented. In the mental health section, a general definition of mental health is provided followed by an overview of how Islam conceptualizes mental health and the treatments that Muslims are both willing and more reluctant to pursue. A summary of the literature review concludes this chapter.

Related Literature

Even though the Middle East and Muslims continue to remain in the forefront of U.S. media, as an ethnic and religious community Muslim Americans have largely been neglected from the research conducted in the United States (Leonard, 2003). While this trend has started to shift (Rouhani, 2007; Yip 2004a, 2004b) as more social scientists have taken an interest in this population, the examination of Muslim therapy clients and sexuality, more specifically homosexuality, comprises an even smaller portion of the limited body of research (S. R. Ali, Liu, & Humedian, 2004; Leonard, 2003; Shannahan, 2010). The majority of the peer-reviewed research that has examined gay Muslims has taken place in Europe. For this reason, it is important to examine the lived experiences of gay Muslim men living in the United States.

According to numerous researchers, academic literature that does address sexual diversity among Muslims is restricted to autobiographical accounts of individuals or a small group of gay- or lesbian-identified Muslims who have shared their experiences through interviews (Minwalla et al., 2005; Rayside, 2011; Siraj 2006). The same pattern persists in the limited literature examining Muslim sexual minorities and in other Western countries (Rayside, 2011). In addition to the lack of research on sexual diversity among American Muslims, there is also a limited amount of research examining the identity formation processes of this population (Hermansen, 2003; Leonard, 2003; Peek, 2005), especially religious identities among Muslims living in the United States (Peek, 2005).

Research in Europe. In Europe, Muslim immigrants are the most studied contemporary group of immigrants residing on the continent while researchers in the United States focus more on African American Muslims than on immigrants who identify as Muslim (Leonard, 2003). Much of the research on Muslims and the Middle East available in English has been conducted

by British scholars, and studies examining sexual minorities are published in European and

International journals. The conclusions of these studies and the experiences of these participants

will share many similarities regardless of the geographical region, but the sociodemographic

factors and political/social tensions will definitely alter the results.

       Gay Muslim references. Four notable resources addressing gay Muslim men exist.

Schmitt and Sofer (1992), the editors of *Sexuality and Eroticism among Males in Moslem*

Societies, claim that this volume is one of the first larger publications in English to address

eroticism between males within Muslim societies. Massad (2007) deemed this volume

Orientalist for its Western biases and overreliance on outdated theoretical paradigms. The first

Western work to examine homosexuality in Islam was an entry in the French *Encyclopedie de*

l'Islam titled Liwat, which was published in 1977 (Schmitt & Sofer, 1992). This entry provided

information pertaining to the history of Islamic homosexuality.

       More recent works that attempt to provide a more balanced perspective include Roscoe

and Murray's (1997) *Islamic Homosexualities.* This compilation approached the topic by

acknowledging the Eurocentric bias that permeates discussions around identity and sexual

identity, in particular as a modern creation of the West. Both of these works were published in

New York City. In contrast to both *Sexuality and Eroticism* and *Islamic Homosexualities*, more

recent texts such as *Islam and Homosexuality*, published in 2009, and *Unspeakable Love, Gay*

and Lesbian Life in the Middle East (Whitaker, 2011) address male and female sexual minorities.

Islam and Homosexuality is a collection of essays written by various specialists in the field, and

Unspeakable Love is a sociological account. An increasing number of scholarly and

nonscholarly articles, memoirs, books, and collections of written works exist, with more and

more non-Western authors contributing to the body of literature (Rouhani, 2007; Yip 2004a,

2004b). It is important to note that literature, articles, memoirs, and fictional accounts of this information have been published, but few psychological studies have been published in peer-reviewed journals.

Peer-reviewed research. Since 2005, the year that Minwalla et al. (2005), published their groundbreaking study examining gay Muslim men living in the United States, numerous researchers have continued to explore how gay Muslim men negotiate both of these identities (Bereket & Adams, 2008; Jaspal, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, 2012; Jaspal & Siraj, 2011; Jivraj, de Jong, & Tauquir, 2002; Siraj, 2006; Yip, 2004a, 2005). The majority of these studies have taken place in Great Britain with one study occurring in Turkey.

Overview of Research by Region

Western/Non-Muslim. Minwalla, Rosser, Feldman, and Varga (2005) asserted that their study was the first academic study to "document gay Muslim identity experience" among progressive Muslims in the United States (p. 123). This groundbreaking study helped to challenge the widely endorsed belief that gay and Muslim identities are incompatible and mutually exclusive. Subsequent researchers confirmed these findings and investigated additional elements related to this topic of managing sexual and religious identities. The majority of this research has occurred in the United Kingdom. Rusi Jaspal, Andrew K. T. Yip, and Asifa Siraj are three notable researchers who have studied this topic, with the former two producing a prolific amount of work examining British gay Muslim men, many of whom are from Pakistan and other Southeast Asian countries.

The majority of these researchers operate in the social science fields, but few identify as psychologists (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010), with Jaspal as the exception. In contrast to the sociologists studying this population, Jaspal's research with British Pakistani gay Muslim men

examines more of the psychological elements of identity conflict. The work most relevant to this study includes his research addressing how British gay Muslim men cope with their incompatible sexual and religious identities (Jaspal & Cinnarella, 2010), navigate the coming out process (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011), relate to other gay men (Jaspal & Cinnarella, 2012), and the psychological ramifications they endure as a result of identity conflict (Jaspal, 2012a). As sociological researchers, Yip and Siraj focused on family dynamics (Yip, 2004b) and heterosexual perspectives of homosexuality and gay men and women (Siraj, 2009). Abraham's (2009) study, which took place in Australia, has more political undertones than the previously mentioned studies that used an ethnographic approach. Abraham addressed how the gay Muslim living in Australia finds meaning among the existing divisions of the "Clash of Civilizations" between the queer West that views Islam as the predatory other and the homophobic Muslim community.

Lastly, the studies conducted in Western countries address the complexity of immigration as many of the participants either migrated to the West or belong to the first generation of their family to be born and raised in the West.

Eastern/Muslim. Of the many studies in this review, one of them was conducted in countries with a Muslim majority. As one of the few secular countries with a Muslim majority (Kandiyoti, 1987), Turkey serves as a gateway between Western and Eastern cultures (Tapinc, 1992). For this reason, it is not surprising that a gay movement has developed in urban areas within the country. In their qualitative study, Bereket and Adams (2008) examined identity integration among Turkish men who identify as gay and Muslim. They had a particular interest in understanding "how Islam and same-sex relationships coexist" (Bereket & Adam, 2008, p. 205). This is an important study as the majority of published accounts of homoeroticism within

Muslim countries have been authored by foreign visitors and White sex tourists in the Middle

East (Minwalla et al., 2005).

Despite where these studies took place, the results significantly overlapped. These

similarities pertained to the methodology of the research as well as the ways in which the

participants coped with their identity conflict and managed their distress and navigated the

conflict. Some differences did emerge in the studies in the West, as the participants had access

to individualistic ideas and greater personal freedom.

Overview of Research by Topic

Methodology. All of these studies examining gay Muslim men and their identity

development are qualitative in nature and they relied on the data collected from interviews and

focus groups. Minwalla et al. (2005) and Siraj (2006) both recruited young gay Muslim men

affiliated with the At-Fatiha organization. As a progressive Muslim organization this referral

source likely impacts the way that the participants view religion and how they resolved their

conflict. Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) addressed how they did not rely on progressive Muslim

organizations as recruitment sources. As a result, the participants in their study had a greater

variation in religious attitudes. The other studies did not allude to using any other religious

referral sources and relied primarily on nonrandom sampling methods and word of mouth.

In addition to recruiting from similar sources, Minwalla et al. (2005) and Siraj (2006)

were also two of the earlier studies that had smaller samples ($N = 6$ and $N = 7$). A small sample

size is not inherently problematic within qualitative studies as there is no consensus on the ideal

sample size (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). The results of one study that focused on

theoretical saturation indicate that the majority of meta themes are attained by the sixth

participant and theoretical saturation can occur by the twelfth interview (Guest, Bunce, and

Johnson, 2006). Every study is unique, but their finding is significant as it suggests that larger

studies are not always essential, especially when so little is known and the population can be so

hard to find. The larger studies consisted of 42 and 47 participants. Yip (2004a, 2004b, 2005)

utilized the same interviews that he conducted with 42 participants (22 men and 20 women) for

the three studies that he conducted on this topic. The various studies that Jaspal and his

colleagues conducted ranged from 10 to 47, with the latter sample representing a comprehensive

study that combined the samples of prior studies and analyzed them together as a single sample

with different research questions.

 Coping. Compared to the participants in Minwalla et al. (2005) and Siraj (2006), who

were involved in a progressive religious organization, the majority of the other participants in

this collection of studies had more difficulty with their identity conflict and resolution. The

participants throughout the studies repeatedly reported feeling shame, fear, guilt, and anger. To

deal with these psychological challenges the participants in these studies have utilized a range of

coping strategies and techniques. These techniques included denial of their gay identity as a

form of coping with their sexual and religious identities (Jaspal, 2012a, 2012b).

 Externalization of the origin of their sexual identity was another technique that emerged

(Jaspal & Cinnerella, 2010). For instance, participants living in Britain attributed their same-sex

desires to the hedonistic influences of British culture. Among the participants who retained their

religious and sexual identities, the most commonly utilized efforts involved the reinterpretation

of the holy texts as a means of justifying the existence of gay Muslims. While this technique

emerged in several studies, Yip (2005) explored the various interpretive approaches that gay

Muslims use to justify their presence within religion in his article "Queering the Texts." Without

any research addressing identity conflict from a clinical psychological lens, the researchers

neglected to mention the coping styles and mechanisms that enabled the participants to manage in their daily lives.

With regard to coming out, those who had disclosed their sexual identity to their family members encountered an overwhelmingly negative response. Only one participant reported a compassionate response from his parents. Nonetheless, the participants collectively acknowledged that coming out, while painful and costly for some, liberated them from the oppression that they endured while closeted (Siraj, 2006). Collectively, results from the studies showed that the participants' capacity to embrace both identities conveys the feasibility of integrating gay Muslims into mainstream Muslim culture but also acknowledges how challenging this process may be, given the level of disdain that the Muslim community harbors towards same-sex relationships.

Lesbian Muslim women. The Safra Project is a British-based organization created to address the issues that Muslim lesbian-bisexual-transgender-identified (LBT) women face. Similar to Al-Fatiha, the Safra Project organizes events and provides opportunities for Muslim sexual minorities to discuss related issues. It differs from Al-Fatiha in that it has a research and policy division and provides assistance with legal and social services.

The Safra Project published a study in 2002 that identified challenges that Muslim LBT women encounter and made recommendations to help address and correct these challenges (Jivraj, de Jong, & Tauquir, 2002). Like gay men, lesbians and other women with alternative sexual identities endure persecution within Middle Eastern and Muslim cultures as homosexuality is considered a sin for everyone, regardless of gender (Bouhdiba, 2008). Their devalued status, however, deems sexual interactions between women as less threatening than men who have sex and relationships with other (Kugle, 2010).

Preferred labels. Within the LGBTQ community, labels (gay, queer, MSM) have a

harrowing history as they have often been used as a derogatory term and for insults. In order to

convey respect it is important to know whether individuals with same-sex desires label

themselves and, if so, what term they prefer. The majority of the studies in the review in the

present study used the term gay to refer to the participants' same sex attractions. Several authors

acknowledged that the term gay has numerous meanings depending on the cultural context, but

none of them addressed if and how Muslim men who are attracted to other men choose to label

themselves while living in the United States. Many terms have emerged in Arabic, some of

which are more affirming than others, but they are more culture specific and do not have much

traction in U.S. culture.

Related research in other religious traditions. Considering the overt heterosexism and

homophobia endorsed by other religious communities in the United States, Muslims by no means

hold a monopoly on antigay religious rhetoric and a staunch opposition to homosexual rights and

freedoms. A significant number of studies examining the intersection of religious and sexual

identities exists among Christian (Buchanan et al., 2001; Ganzenvoort, 2011; Nugent, 1986;

Levy & Reeves, 2011; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Rosser, 1992; Schuck & Liddle, 2000),

Jewish (Balka & Rose, 1989; Cooper, 1989; Coyle & Rafalin, 2001; Halbertal & Koren, 2006;

Kahn, 1989), and Native American or Two Spirit (Williams, 1986) communities. While some of

these studies employed quantitative analyses, many of the more recent studies are qualitative**.**

Islam

Often perceived as homogenous by those outside the faith, Islam has a rich and complex

history that makes it challenging to describe or define in only a few paragraphs. Reducing the

world's second largest religion into a few paragraphs would inevitably exclude groups of people

and overemphasize less salient components of the religion. This section provides a brief overview of the origins and main principles of the religion. For a more comprehensive overview of Islam, see Smith (1991) and Al-Faruqi (1994).

The word Islam is derived from the root *s-l-m*, which means both peace and surrender in Arabic (Smith, 1991). When translated into English, the full meaning of the word Islam is "the peace that comes when one's life is surrendered to God" (Smith, 1991, p. 222). Referred to as Muslims, the followers of Islam recognize Judaism and Christianity as religions as well as the Jewish and Christian prophets as they have contributed to the development of Islam (Smith, 1991). Founded in the sixth century A.D., Islam is the last of the three Abrahamic religions (Smith, 1991). All monotheistic in nature, the Abrahamic religions share the same basic theological foundations with a few notable differences (Lewis, 2003; Smith, 1991).

Despite their common origin, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam differentiate themselves from each other based on the prophets and holy texts that they follow (Lewis, 2003; Nydell, 2012; Smith, 1991). Islam diverged from Christianity with the emergence of Mohammed, who Muslims consider as the last or most recent prophet sent by Allah, also known as God, Jehovah, and Yahweh. Much like Christianity incorporated the Old Testament into the Bible, the holy book of Islam, the Quran, shares ideas and themes with both the New and Old Testament (Nydell, 2012; Smith, 1991). While the Bible, which was written by men and utilizes parables to convey messages, the Quran instead includes direct pronouncements from God (Smith, 1991). It is believed that Mohammed transcribed directly from the voice of Allah (Hasan, 2001). When translated into English, the Arabic word Quran means "the Recitation" (Nydell, 2012, p. 75).

As the word of Allah, Muslims perceive the Quran as an indisputable text, and arguments or disagreements over the Quran pertain to the interpretations of the text and not the text itself

(Husain, 1998; Yip, 2005). In addition to the Quran, two other Islamic scriptures, the *Hadiths*

and *fiqh decisions* also carry significant importance. The Hadiths are texts containing the ideas

and beliefs attributed to the Prophet based on what he said or did on his own initiative (Kugle,

2010; Smith, 2008). The Hadiths emerged after the Prophet's death and a finite process is used

to trace accuracy of this statement (Kugle, 2010; Wafer, 1997). Unfortunately, many of the

Hadith contradict each other, especially with regard to same sex interactions, and they are a

significant source of tensions among different sects within Islam. Critics of the Hadith accuse

those who favor them as trying to supplant the authority of the Quran with the word of

Mohammed (Kugle, 2010). Fiqh means understanding, and it was through the process of fiqh

that decisions were made about the development of Islamic laws. (Kugle, 2010; Smith, 2008).

Fiqh are simply Islamic laws (Smith, 2008). Hadith and fiqh decisions both influence Islamic

jurisprudence, also known as Sharia law. Sharia law deals with the social and moral legislation

of Muslims and the observance of rituals of Muslims (Glasse, 2001; Wafer, 1997).

Another aspect of Islam that distinguishes it from Judaism and Christianity is the way

that Islam gets incorporated into the daily lives of Muslims (Rayside, 2011). Unlike most sects

of Judaism and Christianity, Islam is often perceived as more than just an organized religion. To

the majority of Muslims, Islam is "a way of life" (Hamdan, 2008, p. 103) as it is comprehensive

and central to daily living (O. M. Ali, Milstein, & Marzuk, 2005; Nydell, 2012). This concept of

Islam as a lifestyle manifests in the rules for living and the common reference to the nation of

Islam (Lewis, 2003). Younger generations of Muslims living in the United States are beginning

to identify as Muslims first, and their ethnic or national identities have become secondary

(Leonard, 2003; Peek, 2005). In other words, regardless of what country a person might hold

citizenship in, every Muslim is a member of the nation of Islam, and religious identity supersedes nationality.

Explicit and highly structured, Islam has clear guidelines and rules that outline spiritual, familial, social, political, and economic spheres among other life domains (Hamdan, 2008). This explicitly outlined set of beliefs minimizes ambiguity and reduces the opportunity for personal interpretation found within the other Abrahamic religions. The *Five Pillars* form the core of Islam, and they influence numerous aspects of the religion (Nydell, 2012). Depending on the context and location, the ability to identify as a Muslim rests solely on one's adherence to the Five Pillars. Those who comply with every pillar are said to "walk the straight path" (Smith, 1991, p. 243), which practicing Muslims perceive as their primary objective. As outlined in the Quran, the Five Pillars include believing in only one God—Allah, the God, engaging in prayer five times a day, providing charity for the poor and less fortunate, observing the fast from sun up to sun down during the holy month of Ramadan, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca in one's lifetime if one has the means and ability (Leonard, 2003; Nydell, 2012; Smith, 1991).

Each pillar has a specific meaning and purpose that challenges the believer to comply with and pursue (Smith, 1991). The first pillar, believing in only one God, corresponds with the first commandment outlined by Moses. The second pillar, praying five times a day, reminds Muslims of their continuous human servitude toward Allah. According to the third tenet, Muslims are expected to donate 2.5% of their net worth to charity as a way of protecting the less fortunate and vulnerable members of society. Fasting during the month of Ramadan, an arduous task expected of all able adherents to the faith, helps Muslims maintain their compassion and empathy for others. Lastly, in the eyes of Allah, all humans are equal (Husain, 1998; Nydell, 2012). The pilgrimage to Mecca symbolizes this equality and reminds people of their earthly

status as every pilgrim wears the same clothing regardless of their ethnicity, class, and so on. The removal of status markers reminds Muslims of their sole loyalty to Allah, who views every Muslim without differentiation (Smith, 1991).

In contrast to Christianity and Judaism, two religions intended to provide individual salvation, Islam strives to facilitate the creation of a just society (Nydell, 2012). The Five Pillars contribute to this objective, and additional expectations and prohibitions help create a safer community. Some of the notable prohibitions include abstention from alcohol, stealing, lying, gambling, consuming pork, and engaging in pre- or extramarital sexual activity (S. R. Ali et al., 2004; Smith, 1991). Additional proscriptions exist in various Islamic sects.

A variety of distinct sects exist within Islam. The two most prevalent and populous sects include Sunnis and Shia (Hanif, 1994; Nydell, 2012; Smith, 1991). Other schools of thought within Islam include Sufism (Smith, 1991) and Wahhabi Islam (Lewis, 2003). The former sect, Sufism, has mystical elements (Smith, 1991) while the latter is a conservative approach that has gained unexpected popularity in recent times (Lewis, 2003). This popularity stems from the financial contributions made by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States as part of their effort to build mosques and provide Imams (religious clerics) to help promote Islam in the diaspora (Lewis, 2003; McCloud, 2003).

Islam and the West. The Western world, starting with Europe, has a history of misunderstanding the Muslim world and falsely portraying the religion that dates back centuries (Roded, 2013; Shaheen, 1997). As Smith (1991) wrote,

Of all the non-Western religions, Islam stands closest to the West—closest

geographically, and also closest ideologically; for religiously it stands in the

Abrahamic family of religions, while philosophically it builds on the Greeks. Yet

despite this mental and spatial proximity, Islam is the most difficult religion for

the West to understand. (p. 221)

Almost two and a half decades have passed since Huston Smith penned this statement, and it

remains just as relevant today, if not more relevant. Leonard (2003) emphasized that Islam is not

a monolithic religion as it varies throughout the world. Muslims living in America may practice

Islam in a different way than those living on the Arabian Peninsula or in South Asia. The

customs and attitudes of the host nation play an important role in influencing how religious

rituals get practiced (Leonard, 2003). Sunni and Shiite Muslims are a primary example where

differences emerge that can create hostile factions that disagree at a fundamental level (Leonard,

2003).

Leonard (2003) elaborated on this, adding that individual and collective Muslim identities

draw upon demographic factors such as "national origin, language, ethnicity, sectarian

affiliation, race, and/or class, and all of these can be crosscut by generation, gender, and

sexuality" (p. 52). For this reason, a Muslim identity, as a construct, is far more complex than

simply a reflection or expression of religious affiliation, which is how the West often perceives

religious identity (Adibi, 2006).

In the 21st century the secular West and Islam as separate institutions are often portrayed

and perceived as enemies (Lewis, 2003). Currently positioned as the leader of the Western

World, this hostility is directed toward the United States, which returns the hostility without

understanding why it developed (Lewis, 2003). In Europe, ideological differences between

Europeans and the larger Muslim community have resulted in greater tension that governments

have attempted to resolve (Awad, 2013; Gerges, 1999). Much of this tension stems from

differing lifestyles as Muslims from more conservative traditions perceive Western culture as

"degenerate and morally bankrupt" (Naber, 2006, p. 87), sexually lax (McCloud, 2003), and

indulgent (Rayside, 2011). Conflict between Muslim immigrants from the LGBTQ communities

has created tension in the United States and European countries with much of the research

focusing on the Netherlands (El-Tayeb, 2012; Hekma, 2002). This conflict has resulted from the

tolerance that the West provides homosexuality, which creates concern for many Muslims

(Leonard, 2003).

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the diminished threat that communism posed to

Western democratic nations, the enemy/other position became vacant (Said, 2003). The

increasing hostility and violence between Muslim extremist groups and Western democratic

nations that ensued during the last decade of the 20th century and the first few years of the 21st

century helped solidify Islam's role as the cultural other, and it became the focus of Western

military, political, and foreign policy (Said, 2003).

In the United States, misconceptions permeate the national narrative of Islam. The events

of September 11, 2001, brought the American Muslim community to the forefront of national

politics. Following the events related to 9/11 and the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a

perception of Islam as a religion of violence has increasingly gained prominence and been

perpetuated (Nydell, 2012; Panagopoulos, 2006). These misperceptions are rarely corrected and

contribute to the prejudicial attitudes and beliefs that are applied to an entire community (Nydell,

2012). Many U.S. citizens claim to know little about Islam, yet they make strong judgments and

evaluations based on their limited perceptions (Nydell, 2012; Panagopoulos, 2006; Rayside,

2011).

In addition to the incendiary remarks made about Islam and Muslims, efforts to describe

Islam as a peaceful religion have also been disseminated. President Bush notably claimed that

Islam is a religion of peace soon after the attacks on September 11, 2001. Safi (2011) asserted

that this statement lacks merit. He prefaced this assertion by explaining his belief that the

Islamic tradition can lead to peace; however, claiming that Islam is a religion of peace overlooks

the problems occurring within this community. Safi also stated that Muslims are humans, and,

like any group of humans, Muslim communities include extremists and moderates, militants and

pacifists, and a wide spectrum of individuals. Furthermore, Islam is not an inherently peaceful or

aggressive religion. The Quran and Hadith are written and the reader who interprets the texts

places them in their context of misogyny, patriarchy, equality, and justice (Kugle, 2010; Safi,

2011; Schacht, 1970; Yip, 2005). AbuKhalil (1997) spoke to the fact that the Quran discusses

the equality between men and women; however Arab culture, which preceded the Quran, asserts

male dominance. Just like any effort to better understand a controversial topic, developing an

accurate and greater understanding of Islam requires a nonbiased approach and an effort to

educate oneself about the beliefs of a diverse community (that currently accounts for one fifth of

the world's population (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Muslim Americans. In a study examining American attitudes toward Islam,

Panagopoulos (2006) found that many Americans strongly believe that Islam is very different

from their own religion. This perceived difference likely contributes to the heightened level of

Islamaphobia, or prejudice against Muslims, that currently pervades the media and popular

thought in the United States (Panagopoulos, 2006). In the United States, Muslims are one of the

only communities, aside from immigrants, that have faced an increase in intolerance over the

past decade (Schafer & Shaw, 2009). Panagopoulos (2006) argued that this hostility stems from

widespread doubt about the compatibility of Islamic thoughts and beliefs with the "Western

values of tolerance, acceptance, and civility" (p. 613) as well as the association between Muslims and terrorism.

Despite the limited understanding and interaction that U.S. citizens have of Islam and Muslims, Islam has an extensive presence within U.S. history that dates back to the slave trade (Curtis, 2009; Hasan, 2001; Leonard, 2003). According to statistics gathered in 2012, 14 generations of Americans have practiced Islam in the United States (Suratwala & Wajahat, 2012), and roughly 5 million Muslims live in the United States. Other estimates of the Muslim community living in the United States suggests this figure is between as low as 2.6 million (Suratwala & Wajahat, 2012) and as high as 8 million (Bagby, Perl, & Froehle, 2001). These figures continue to increase, and Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States (O. M. Ali et al., 2005; Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Leonard, 2003). In 2003, Leonard stated that if the growth rate continues as it has, the population of Muslims living in the United would soon surpass the Jewish population.

The percentage of Shi'a (30%) and Sunni (70%) Muslims living in the United States differs from worldwide figures, where Shia comprise 15% of the population and Sunni 85% (Takim, 2002). The division between Shi'a and Sunni appears to be increasing as more Muslims immigrate to the United States (Takim, 2002). Aside from Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, smaller immigrant communities that typically have their own form of Islam also live in the United States; these include Sufis, Ismailis, and and even smaller populations of Druze and Wahhabis (Leonard, 2003; Rayside, 2011). Many of these sects developed over their disagreement regarding the religious leadership following the death of Mohammed in the 7th century (Leonard, 2003). The conflict that emerges between the various sects worldwide is also present

in the United States; however, it is less pronounced and it primarily results in political and

religious fragmentation between the various sects (Rayside, 2011).

Among Muslim immigrants, who are collectively perceived as morally traditional

(Mazrui, 1996; McCloud, 2003), there is a strong concern about relaxed sexual attitudes and

beliefs in the West and the negative impact that these loosened sexual mores may have on future

generations of Muslim youth. Ironically, these concerns do not appear to be warranted as,

according to Rayside (2011), younger Muslim Americans from more recent generations are

endorsing more conservative values than their older family members. Younger Muslim

Americans, regardless of socioeconomic status, have a higher propensity to identify with an

idealized Islamic world that endorses greater levels of conservative ideology that is intolerant

and rigid (Hermansen, 2003; Peek, 2005). Muslims within the diaspora, especially in Western

countries, are at an increased risk for developing more extreme religious beliefs. Rayside

attributed this increased risk to the higher levels of Islamaphobia and hostility directed toward

Muslim communities. As younger generations of Muslims in the United States and Western

countries face increasing levels of persecution than prior generations, they are drawn to religion

(Peek, 2005) as well as anti-Western dialogue and a desire to "dis-identify" with the West

(Hermansen, 2003). This appeal is related to their desire to connect with a Muslim community

and empower themselves (Hermansen, 2003; Leonard, 2003; Peek, 2005). The common

criticism of the West that most Muslim youth and older generations endorse revolves around

sexuality and other forbidden practices in Islam that the West pursues (Hermansen, 2003;

Rayside, 2011).

Often portrayed as a homogenous group, Muslim Americans have the most diversity of

any religious group in the United States (Leonard, 2003). This diversity relates to ethnic

identity, religiosity, socioeconomic status, education level, and political affiliation (W. M. Ali, 2012; Rayside 2011). The majority of Muslims living in American identify within three ethnic groups: African American, South Asian American, or Arab American (Rayside, 2011). African American and South Asian American Muslims each comprise a third of the U.S. Muslim population, and the Arab American group consists of a quarter of the population (Rayside, 2011). The remainder of the Muslim American population includes Latinos, Whites, and American Indians who are converting to Islam (Smith, 1999).

In a study comparing religiosity levels between Muslims living in the United States and Europe, Muslim Americans are more likely to state that religion is very important in their lives than European-based Muslims (Pew Research Center, 2007). More than half of the U.S. Muslims interviewed (55%) endorsed the statement "religion is 'very important in their lives'" compared to 22% of German Muslims, 18% of British Muslims, 19% of Spanish Muslims, and 10% of French Muslims. While the United States as a whole endorses higher religiosity then European countries, higher American Muslim observance is likely a result of conservative Muslim clerics in the United States (Haddad et al., 2006). Muslim clerics in the United States are frequently recruited from more conservative Muslim countries with traditional values such as Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries that fund the development of Muslim communities abroad (Rayside, 2011).

Muslim Americans are frequently portrayed collectively as highly observant and religious individuals (Rayside, 2011). This perception neglects a significant portion of secular Muslims living in the United States who identify with Islam culturally but do not actively practice the religion (Leonard, 2003). Muslim cultural identity mirrors Jewish-identified individuals who do not practice Judaism but consider themselves Jewish and affiliate with the culture. Cultural

Muslims, also referred to as "unmosqued" or secular Muslims, benefit from the ability to maintain their affiliation with the Islamic environment and celebrate the achievements of their fellow community members while simultaneously defending themselves from the contempt that the mainstream community attributes to Islam (Leonard, 2003).

Relative to the U.S. population, Muslim Americans have higher levels of education then the general public, and their endorsement of a broad range of political topics mirrors those issues supported by the mainstream (Rayside, 2011). Attitudes toward homosexuality are one exception, as Muslim Americans and evangelical Protestant Americans have similar disapproval levels (Rayside, 2011).

Findings from a Pew Research Center study (2007) showed that all subsets of Muslim participants had lower levels of acceptance for homosexuals than the U.S. average. This included historically more accepting groups such as Muslims who self-identified as liberal, moderate in religious commitment, and with a high education level. These negative attitudes and low acceptance levels likely stem from the lack of exposure to queer Muslims in the United States (Nasirzadeh, 2010) and the dismissal of those visible queer Muslims as overly influenced by the Western lifestyle.

Muslim Americans are overwhelmingly disapproving of homosexuality (Rayside, 2011), with African American and Black Muslims having the highest disapproval rates (Pew Research Center, 2007). Muslim South Asian American communities expressed a greater willingness to discuss homosexuality (Leonard, 2006). Notably, Muslim Americans who had immigrated to the United States had lower acceptance levels than second-generation Muslim Americans with the exception of Black Muslims (Pew Research Center, 2007).

Muslim American ethnic communities. U. S. Muslim communities have organized themselves by ethnicity, sect, and length of time residing in the United States. These three categories contribute to a hierarchy that has developed among the various Muslim subcultures and communities throughout the country.

Despite their shared religious beliefs, African American, South Asian American, and Arab American ethnic groups ultimately segregate themselves within their mosques and religious communities (Jamal, 2005). This segregation leads to limited interaction between these three groups and fragments their political and religious organization (Rayside, 2011). This segregation appears to stem from the sect of Islam to which they belong, ethnicity, and period of immigration, which is closely related to class and wealth (Rayside, 2011).

African American/Black Muslims. African Americans have an extensive history with Islam, and they preceded the Arab American Muslims who are often identified as the first Muslim ethnic group in the United States (Curtis, 2009). Austin (1984) estimated that 10% of enslaved Africans brought to the United States practiced Islam, and Islam barely survived slavery in the United States. As African Americans migrated north and encountered religious alternatives during the 20th century, Islam was resurrected.

For many African Americans, Islam became a way to circumvent or even confront the societal oppression they faced as second-class citizens in the United States, and many prominent African American leaders converted to Islam and promoted conversion (Dannin, 2002). According to Dannin (2002), African American Muslim communities are distinct from other Muslim communities in the United States, and African American Muslims value the protection they receive from their collective identity, which often takes priority over the universal/collective

community of Muslims worldwide. This leads to conflict between this community and recent

Muslim immigrants who align themselves with Islam (McCloud, 1995).

     Arab/Middle Eastern American Muslims. Arab Americans were the first large ethnic

group of Muslims to immigrate to the United States. Many of the early immigrants fled the

Middle East during the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the 20th century, and another

surge of immigration occurred following World War II (Lawrence, 1999). Historians consider

these the first two waves of Muslim migration. The long migration history of the Arab American

community, along with the numerous countries that the migrants left, contributes to the diversity

and variation within the Muslim American community (M. Khan, 2003). Over the past 140

years, Muslim men and women have immigrated to the United States from Arab countries. They

have developed numerous organizations and federations to support themselves and their interests

as a community (Leonard, 2003).

     Southeast Asian American Muslims. Among the Southeast Asian Muslim population,

the majority of the individuals immigrated during the fifth wave of Muslim immigration that

started in the 1960s (Leonard, 2003). Like the Arab Americans, the Southeast Asian Muslim

community faced racial scrutiny within the United States. This group currently comprises the

largest majority of Muslim immigrants in the United States, and the majority of them have

immigrated from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh (Leonard, 2003).

     Unlike the Arab Americans, many of whom fled their countries due to political turmoil

and unrest, the Southeast Asian immigrants came to the United States as highly valued

professionals, and they hold high-level positions in a variety of prestigious fields. This

community has more experience with holding a minority role in democratic governments than

the Arab American Muslim community, and their socioeconomic status as a group is

considerably more homogenous. Both of these factors have enabled the Southeast Asian Muslim American community to unify and hold leadership positions within the larger Muslim American community (Leonard, 2003).

Islam and sexuality. For centuries, myths depicting Muslims as licentious and perverse individuals have circulated in the Western world (Roded, 2013). Currently, these myths have been replaced by the stereotype of the sexually repressed and frustrated Muslim (Schmitt, 1992a). In contrast to these images frequently found in popular Western culture, those familiar with the Quran and other religious texts identify Islam as a sex-positive religion (Bouhdiba, 2008; Bullough 1976; Dunne, 1990; Kugle, 2010).

Despite the shared Abrahamic origins, the sexual mores promoted within Islam are derived from the pre-Islamic Arabic culture, which was significantly more sex positive than those cultures from which the Judeo-Christian traditions emerged (Bullough, 1976; Pellat, 1983). While Christian and Judaic principles reinforce sex as a means of reproduction, Islamic values encourage sexual interaction between married partners as it is believed to strengthen relationships and increase overall well-being (Ismail, 2011). The primary stipulation with this prosexual stance is that sex is only permissible between a man and a woman who have had a consecrated marriage. There are explicit rules and regulations for what the religion considers sanctified sexual acts, and these parameters are outlined in numerous Islamic texts such as the Hadith and Akhbar (Dunne, 1990).

Dialmy (2010) divided the primary rules for sex between Muslims into three categories. These categories include gender (male/female), marital status, and gender of partner (opposite/heterosexual or same/homosexual). In terms of gender, men have more freedom than women when it comes to sexual expression and sexual activity (Dialmy, 2010). While it is

forbidden for men and women to engage in premarital, extramarital, and same-sex sexual

activity, men have more leeway in each realm (Dialmy, 2010). These parameters are rooted in

the Arab-Muslim definition of sexuality as centered around the reception/insertion of the penis in

a sex act (Oberhelman, 1997) as well as male dominance over a subordinate (woman, boy, or

slave; Dunne, 1998).

Individuals who engage in sexual activity outside of marriage or with members of the

same sex are denounced and punished according to Sharia (religious law) as they have not only

committed a sin against Allah but also a crime (Kligerman, 2007). Punishments for these

offenses include imprisonment, lashings, and, in some countries, execution (Kligerman, 2007;

Whitaker, 2011). While these crimes are strongly condemned, they are rarely prosecuted, as

Muslim jurisprudence requires a minimum of four eyewitnesses who observed the act to testify

(But & Muhametov, 2013). Nonetheless, these laws and punishments help reinforce the

perception of Islam as a sexually repressive religion.

Despite the acceptance of sexuality within marriage, modesty regarding sexual behaviors

and topics is of utmost importance. Disclosing details regarding sexual interactions with one's

partner is forbidden and when in public, and partial nudity and cross-gender contact is highly

discouraged (But & Muhametov, 2013). Murray (1997) argued that within Islamic culture there

is an ethos "of avoidance in acknowledging sex and sexualities" (p. 14). This ethos is especially

true within families, as discussing sexuality in the home with family members is taboo. Within

Moroccan culture, while at home, men and women are seen more personally than in public, and

topics such as sex create significant embarrassment for parents and children (Eppink, 1992).

Because of the sensitivity around sexual issues in the home, children in Morocco learn about sex

primarily through their peers. While sex is neither good nor bad, the neutrality fades depending

on the context and situation. For example, sex between a married couple is good and pure as it

reinforces the bonds of love and because "sexual pleasure purifies hearts" (Dialmy, 2010, p.

161). Conversely, sex outside of marriage is bad or impure. The presence of sexual freedom and

prevalence of sexual activity in Western societies, especially among adolescents, nonmarried,

and same-sex individuals, sharply conflicts with this ethos (Duran, 1993; Rayside, 2011).

Within the broader perspective, marriage acts as a frame to help regulate sexual desire

and social norms within Muslim society (Dunne, 1990; Siraj, 2006). Beyond its neutrality, sex is

also about power (Dunne, 1990; Hatem, 1986). Sex between partners who are considered equal

is reproachable as men are considered more powerful and superior to women (Dunne, 1990;

Eppink, 1992). As such, the active sexual partner or the inserter is considered superior to the

passive partner or the insertee (Eppink, 1992). This translates to the heterosexual/homosexual

binary in Western countries and the active/passive binary found in traditional societies (Eppink,

1992). The power bestowed upon men as the dominant sexual partner and inserter extends to the

greater flexibility and sexual freedom they possess (Dialmy, 2010). Sexuality is constrained by

masculine heterosexual domination, and men are seen as potent sexual beings who, left to their

own devices, would sexually disrespect and take advantage of women (Conway-Long, 2006).

For this reason, men insist that women cover themselves with the hajib or the burqa as a means

of protecting themselves from unwanted sexual interactions (But & Muhametov, 2013; Ismail,

2011).

Within Islamic cultures, sexuality and sex are incorporated into daily life and experiences

(Boudhiba, 2008). This is another contradiction when thinking about prohibitions, prescribed

rules and regulations, and the criminalization of specific sexual acts. Writing about Morocco, De

Martino (1992) described how many Muslims perceive sexual activity as an effective means of

releasing tension, and it is widely believed to promote mental well-being. Arabic culture

pragmatically approaches sex as a necessary and acceptable activity when performed in

accordance with the Muslim texts (De Martino, 1992). B. Khan (1992) framed this discussion by

comparing human males to other male animals who are in need of sexual release. B. Khan's

emphasis on male sexuality and the notable omission of female sexuality reflects the power

differential between the sexes.

The regulation of female sexuality and the policing of male sexual roles are common

phenomena in many patriarchal societies (Espin, 1999; Hatem, 1986), and many Muslim nations

adhere to these principles. For women, virginity plays an important role in their suitability and

desirability for marriage and therefore must be protected to ensure their matrimonial prospects

(Dialmy, 2010). Conversely, Muslim men receive encouragement to display their masculinity

and sexual virility (Bouhdiba, 2008; Murray, 1997). The sexual prowess of men and the demure

nature of women limit men's access to sexual partners (Eppink, 1992). The homo-social

organization of Muslim communities minimizes the interactions between men and women

(Bouhdiba, 2008). The lack of access increases the likelihood of initial sexual experiences

occurring between members of the same sex (Bouhdiba, 2008). Men often find sexual release

with other men and the same applies to women; however, this activity does not reflect

established sexual interests related to sexual orientation as it results from the lack of access to the

partner of interest except for those who are attracted to the same sex.

Sexual release and sexual pleasure are two different concepts, and they play different

roles in Muslim communities. Sexual release pertains to the physical need to orgasm while

sexual pleasure has more to do with love and mental/emotional intimacy. In the West, more

emphasis is placed on the pleasure and mental/emotional component, while in the Middle East

sex is an action and does not have the same emotional meaning (Schmidt, 1992a).

For adolescent boys living in Morocco and Turkey, a hierarchy of preferred sexual outlets

provides guidance for upholding cultural norms. Heterosexual sexual contact is preferred and

rests at the top of the hierarchy, but sexual contact between members of the opposite sex is

limited (Eppink, 1992; Necef, 1992). As a result, adolescents often engage in their first sexual

act, or series of acts, with members of the same sex. Aside from accessibility, same-sex sexual

partners have an added benefit of familiarity as the lack of cross-gender interaction among

adolescents can increase the pressure and fear that an adolescent male may experience when

engaging in sexual activity with a female peer.

At the bottom of the hierarchy is masturbation as it is considered a sin and is an explicitly

forbidden action (Ismail, 2011). Allowances are made if masturbating will prevent a serious

crime from occurring (i.e., adultery), and single individuals are permitted to masturbate if they

need to release "sexual tension" but not as a means of fulfilling "sexual desire" (Whitaker, 2011,

p. 174). Within North African societies, sexually active men dominate the passive sexual object.

When there is no sexual object, the act of masturbation itself is considered unmanly (Eppink,

1992).

Within cross-gender sex and masturbation, several other options exist for pursuing sexual

release. Sex with animals, such as sheep, is prohibited (Boudihba, 2008) but still practiced in

some countries (Duran, 1993; Eppink, 1992). Sex with another male or hand jobs are additional

options. Moroccans feel safety engaging in activities as a group and, unlike in the West, they

view isolation as a threat and more shame inducing (Eppink, 1992). Groups of boys might

explore their sexuality together by masturbating each other or having sex with same woman,

often a prostitute (Dialmy, 2010; Eppink, 1992). Bouhdiba (2008) described having sex with a prostitute as a common practice among single men approaching marital age. These group sexual activities are not perceived as homosexual in nature even when males engage in anal sex. Because of the gendered power dynamics associated with sex, friends and equals in terms of age and status cannot engage in anal sex. Akin to the sexual practices in ancient Greece and other pederasty-practicing societies and cultures where older men and younger men have sex, an individual who holds power, often defined by age, is the top/active/inserter and the bottom is usually a younger male or individual of lower status (Dialmy, 2010). Anal sex is a quick process where the top inserts orgasms and removes. In Muslim culture, the purpose is for sexual release, not sexual pleasure or to satisfy erotic thoughts (Eppink, 1992). Boys will participate together— not talk about it or look at each but will assist one another (hand jobs; Eppink, 1992).

Akin to Ancient Greek culture that also practiced pederasty, structured sexual acts between males followed a hierarchy, with younger boys often filling the passive role and the older males assuming the active role (Murray & Roscoe, 1997). With age and maturity, the younger, passive partner would assume the active role and find a younger partner. Within Morocco, minimal differences exist between a young male or female sexual partner if the nonmarried older male takes the active role (Kligerman, 2007). As adolescent males mature, they no longer fill the passive role. Maturity is often established with the onset of puberty and the loss of the feminine appeal (Murray, 1997), which often occurs around 15 and16 years of age (De Martino, 1992; Schmitt, 1992a) with the development of secondary sexual characteristics (Murray, 1997). Once matured, the single male will exclusively assume the active role until he marries and engages in sexual interaction with his wife (DeMartino, 1992). Using Western

sexual identity labels, this individual is considered heterosexual, regardless of whether he had sex with males or females prior to marriage (Necef, 1992).

Islam and homosexuality. Dunne (1998) explained that the concept of sexual orientation contradicts the framework in the Middle East and other parts of the Muslim world. Homosexuality in Europe and the United States has a distinct meaning from homosexuality in Muslim and Middle Eastern communities. In Muslim communities, men who fulfill the penetrative role in sexual intercourse are considered heterosexual regardless of the sex or gender of their receptive sexual partner. This contrasts with the Western concept of homosexuality, as a man can identify as gay without ever having had sexual intercourse or solely performing the penetrative role.

For many inculcated in the view of this behavior, the notion of a gay identity in the Western sense often gets conflated with gender identity and gender nonconformity (Dunne, 1998). Until recently, the concept of sexuality as separate from sexual identity and gender identity (i.e., how masculine or feminine one appears) has had limited traction in the Middle East (Dunne, 1998). Sakalli (2002) found that Turkish students had difficulty differentiating homosexuals, transvestites, and transsexuals. This argument is particularly relevant when discussing the origins of the homosexual identity, which many perceive as a Western-created construct.

There is a widespread perception that same-sex relationships face greater challenges within premodern or more traditional societies. Whether this perception is accurate is debatable. It may result from actual hostility directed to homosexuals, or these relationships may be limited by the organization of these societies (Roscoe & Murray, 1997). There is an assumption that in order to have same-sex relationships accepted in society, the society must be modern and

progressive with social freedoms. The majority of today's scholars would agree that egalitarian homosexuality (i.e., both partners identify as gay and partake in the relationship equally) is a modern development. This form of homosexuality appeared/emerged at the beginning of the 20th century in European and North American metropolises and then proliferated after the conclusion of World War II (Roscoe & Murray, 1997). Based on the prevalence of egalitarian homosexual relationships in the West and the association of Western democracies and civil and social freedoms, it makes sense to deduce that a gay identity is a Western development. Roscoe and Murray (1997) challenged this assumption. In their landmark text, *Islamic Homosexualities*, they traced patterns of same sex activity over centuries. Prior to the development of the "gay identity," as it is known in the West, Northern Africa and Southwest Asia had some of the most diverse homosexual sexual practices anywhere in the world. The contemporary Western gay identity provides a singular concept of lifestyle, behavior, and group formation; however, these elements have been observed among same-sex relationships in previous times and are not unique to the modern homosexual (Roscoe & Murray, 1997).

While many factors contribute to the differences between the Western and Islamic man who engage in sexual activities with another man, a prominent difference is that the Western frame examines the gender of the partner while the Islamic frame examines the position of each partner and his or her gender presentation (Murray & Roscoe, 1997). Labeling one form of engagement as "categorically distinct" from the other and therefore not consistent with modern homosexual identity reinforces orientalist and Eurocentric values.

The complexity of homosexuality within Islam. The Western concept of homosexuality/gay sexual identity has a complex and complicated relationship with Islam. This complexity stems from different conceptualizations of homosexuality: the patriarchal culture

entrenched in most Muslim countries that restricts sexuality and gender, the contradictory/conflicting statements within the Islamic text and lay teachings as well as popular and academic literature, and, lastly, the Western imperial influence that initially abhorred Islamic licentiousness and now denounces the sexual rigidity.

Identity versus behavior. The differing perceptions/conceptions/definitions of the phenomena identity and behavior significantly contribute to this complexity between cultures. From a Western perspective, sexual orientation "refers to the sex of those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted" (American Psychological Association, 2011, p. 11). Homosexuality is the sexual orientation in which an individual is attracted to a member of the same gender. A person who has never engaged in sexual activity with a member of the same gender or any other person can still identify as gay (Dubé, 2000).

Homosexuality is often perceived as a stable identity and recent research has shown that gay men who consider themselves exclusively gay maintain a stable sexual identity throughout their lives (Savin-Williams, Joyner, & Reiger, 2012). Similar research on adolescents and younger adults indicates that sexual identity is not as stable during these developmental stages Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007).

The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid, first introduced in 1978, is a tool used to measure sexual orientation. Klein (1978) identified seven domains of sexual orientation, with sexual activity comprising only one of these domains. As such, sexual orientation pertains to much more than sexual interaction. When the concept of sexuality as an identity gets transposed onto a model in which homosexuality exists solely within the context of an individual's behavior, identity and behavior often get conflated (Dunne, 1998) While same-sex behaviors and gay identity are conjoined within the Western/U.S. framework, in other parts of the world engaging

in same sex sexual activities does not automatically mean that a person identifies as gay.

Interdisciplinary research shows that homosexual behavior occurs in almost every society, but

the social position/role of homosexual does not occur universally (Escoffier, 1998). Because of

the disparity in presence of both constructs throughout cultures, it is important to acknowledge

the distinction between sexual activity and a sexual identity, as they have very different

connotations.

   The origins of sexual orientation is a popular topic in the United States as proponents and

opponents of the gay rights movement seek answers to support their claims to award or deny

rights to sexual minorities (Seidman, 2003). While the origins of sexual orientation are

irrelevant when deciding whether every human is entitled to the same rights, this debate has been

a defining element of legal cases (Pickhardt,1998). Generally, proponents of the gay rights

movement support the belief that sexual identity is not a choice but an inherent and immutable

facet of the self (Pickhardt,1998). Claims that homosexual orientations can be altered lack

sufficient evidence, and such efforts have been condemned by the American Psychological

Association and outlawed in numerous states considering the psychological damage they create

(American Psychological Association, 2011; Haldeman, 2002). Many opponents of

homosexuality view the debate from a behavioral perspective, which argues that a person who

consents to and engages in a sexual activity with a member of the same sex makes a conscious

choice to do so and it is the decision to act on the desires that is inherently sinful (Wafer, 1997).

   When these two paradigms collide, people who are passionate about this debate have

difficulty reconciling differing opinions. A notable example of colliding paradigms occurred in

2007 when former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad spoke at Columbia University and

declared in his speech that homosexuals do not exist in Iran (Jaspal, 2014). This statement

sounds ludicrous to an individual who endorses the concept of homosexual identity. From the perspective of homosexuality as a behavior or action, which dominates much of the Middle East and which President Ahmadinejad seems to believe, this is a logical assertion as people in the Middle East may engage in same sex acts, but this does not make them gay. Considering how prevalent homosexuality is as an identity in the West, it makes sense why many people, not only in the Middle East but also beyond, view homosexuality as a Western invention that has invaded and "infected" cultures outside the West (Whitaker, 2011).

Despite the different perspectives, same-sex activity still occurs in Muslim communities just as it does in Western communities. The language used to refer to these behaviors and identities does not eliminate the behavior; it simply shapes the way in which the behavior can manifest. Regardless of whether homosexuality is a behavior or an identity, human beings strive to connect with members of the same sex. Treating people from the West and East as qualitatively different reinforces the social constructs and undermines the strong attraction to members of the same sex that a smaller proportion of the population possesses. The cultural context and the way in which people conceptualize these "taboo" behaviors only affect the ways in which they get expressed.

Patriarchy. The second contributor to the complex relationship between Islam and Homosexuality is the patriarchal nature of mainstream Islam and the cultures of most Muslim countries and societies. Kugle (2010) described patriarchy as inherently misogynistic and homophobic and reported that patriarchal cultures often treat sexual minorities harshly as they are perceived as a threat to male dominance and the social order (i.e., the status quo). Religions themselves are not inherently patriarchal or conservative; it is the practitioners who interpret the texts that introduce patriarchal concepts and oppression (Kugle, 2010).

Islam is quite accepting of diversity; the Quran contains numerous versus addressing its beauty (Kugle, 2010). The prevalence of patriarchal culture and systems within Muslim communities and the subsequent restrictions and limitations that patriarchy can impose on identities outside the mainstream influences daily life and religious beliefs. The conflation of Islam and patriarchy makes it difficult to distinguish these two constructs (Kugle, 2010).

As part of a patriarchal system, men have much to gain by embracing their masculinity. Within many cultures in the Middle East and throughout the world, rape is used to terrorize an enemy as the sexually penetrated are feminine and sodomy is "a supreme affront" to Muslim masculinity (Chebel, 1988, p. 18)

Contradictions. The third element that contributes to the complex relationship between the Western concept of homosexuality and Islam involves the contradicting statements that scholars who study homosexuality in Islam frequently make (Roscoe & Murray, 1997). This confusion with sexual issues emerges in both Eastern and Western writings. As such, Muslim scholars and scholars on Islam from the Middle East and secular scholars from the West make contradictory statements about the Muslim stance on same-sex activities (AbuKhalil, 1997.

The lack of consensus among religious and cultural leaders about the status of same-sex behaviors likely stems from multiple sources. One potential source is the inconsistent messages that pervade historical accounts as well as ancient poems and text (AbuKhalil, 1997). Another possibility is Shannahan's (2009) claim that too many voices within Islam compete for authority, and each voice has a specific interpretation of Islam and the Quran. Also a possible source is the cultural understanding that engaging in prohibited behaviors is only problematic if publicly acknowledged (Dunne, 1990, 1998). Among visitors and emigrants, this cultural phenomenon may lead to confusion as they share anecdotes of their observations and experiences/beliefs

regarding the presence of same-sex sexual activity in Islamic societies (Murray & Roscoe, 1997). This speaks to single men's limited access to sexual partners in the Middle East and the notion of sex as a form of release and a behavior, not an identity.

The historical context of how Islam expanded and interacted with other cultures over the past 15 centuries helps clarify some of the contradictions pertaining to Islam and homosexuality. As Islam began to spread outward from the Arabic Peninsula, other diverse cultural practices and religions were accommodated within the new religion (Roscoe, 1997). This diversity helped shape Islam as it evolved. As Islam spread throughout the Mediterranean, it subsumed cultures with an extensive history of same-sex activity (pederasty) and prostitution (Roscoe, 1997). As members/descendants of these societies converted to Islam, they continued engaging in these practices. Islamic and Middle Eastern poetry contains both explicit and implicit references to pederasty, the status-differentiated practice of a man engaging in sexual activity with a boy (El-Rouayeb, 2005; Murray, 1997). Murray (1997) asserted that pederasty is considered to be the "great tradition," as it was frequently practiced by the elite and appears to be the most frequently encountered form of same-sex activity in Muslim societies. The various types of same-sex sexual activities that had been practiced for millennia in the Oikoumene region continued under Islamic rule (Roscoe, 1997). This behavior was not necessarily accepted, tolerated, or rejected; it simply occurred. The indifference or permissiveness that Islamic societies maintained for same-sex acts began to wane with the introduction of Europeans (Kligerman, 2007).

As imperialism spread during the 19th century, prominent British/European explorers and academics, such as Sir Richard Francis Burton, M. Le Duc D'Harcourt, Gustave Flaubert, and Edward W. Lane, described the sexual behavior they witnessed in the Middle East (Massad, 2007). Interpreted and presented from a Victorian framework, an era infamous for its sexually

repressive attitudes and beliefs, these reports and travel narratives, portrayed the Middle East and

the Muslim occupants as sexually indulgent (Burton, 1973; Dunne, 1990). These conclusions

reinforced the medieval stereotypes and myths of the barbaric Muslim/Arabic nations and

embossed the moral superiority narrative that Christian Europeans employed to justify

colonialism and the righteous efforts to offer salvation to non-Christians (Murray, 1997).

To Christian Europeans, individuals who had denounced homosexuality and persecuted

gay men and women for centuries, the Arabic/Muslim tolerance of same-sex sexual activity and

prostitution was deplorable (Murray, 1997). As the West underwent a sexual revolution that

liberated individuals from this sexually repressive mindset, the Middle East and other countries

with a Muslim majority have increased their sexual conservatism (Massad, 2007). Considerable

irony resulted from this shift. Massad (2007) noted, "While the pre-modern West attacked the

world of Islam's alleged sexual licentiousness, the modern West attacks its alleged repression of

sexual freedoms" (p. 37).

This shift in sexual mores and decreased tolerance of alternative sexual expression

resulted in part from the European involvement and influence that colonialism imposed on the

Middle East. Kligerman (2007) identified the dissolution of the kin-based community structure

in the Middle East as a major contributor to this shift. The kin-based structure was prevalent

prior to the proliferation of capitalism and male wage-work that reinforced the patriarchal notion

of the family unit. In conjunction with the structural changes, Muslim teachings regarding

homosexuality became increasingly punitive (B. Khan, 1997). The shift in sexual mores and

values that has occurred during the past 100 years is significant, especially considering how the

majority of contemporary Muslims now view homosexuality as a consequence of Westernization

or a Western import (AbuKhalil, 1993; Kligerman, 2007).

The strongly entrenched disapproval of homosexuality and receptive intercourse still remain prevalent in the Middle East and many Muslim cultures; however, small groups of young men and women have recently started to challenge these beliefs (Gutierrez, 2012). Since the 1990s and the advent of Islamization and globalization, the Western concept of the gay identity is appearing in metropolitan locales in the Middle East such as Istanbul, Turkey. Akin to gay areas of major European and American cities, openly gay communities in Istanbul have bathhouses, bars, and theaters that cater to gay-identified men (Gutierrez, 2012). Furthermore, in Iran and Turkey some youth are rejecting the strict limitations around sexuality and marriage (Gutierrez, 2012). As the only Muslim-dominant member state in the European Union, Turkey's secular approach may not represent the Muslim countries of the world; however, it does provide insight into what Islam and Muslims might pursue in the future.

The relationship between homosexuality and Islam is highly contested and inevitably leads to disagreement. Many scholars and religious figures make statements akin to "Islam forbids homosexual practices" (Duran, 1993). This clearly communicated and widely circulated statement reinforces the belief that homosexuality and Islam are mutually exclusive. In an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Muzammil Siddiqi, the former director of the Islamic Society of North America, stated that "being gay and Muslim is a contradiction in terms," and that Islam is totally against homosexuality (Heredia, 2001). Many individuals within Muslim societies and individuals in the mainstream and gay communities in the West endorse this belief (Rahman, 2010; Rahman & Hussain, 2011; Rayside, 2011). Muslims and Muslim scholars who support this claim justify its validity by citing the Quran, which they assert forbids homosexuality (Kligerman, 2007; Leonard, 2003).

Antigay proponents use verses from the Quran to justify their denouncement of homosexuals. This often leads to the perception that the Quran explicitly denounces homosexuality and provides limited exceptions for the acceptance of gay Muslims (Duran, 1993; Kligerman, 2007). A frequently cited Quran verse used to support this claim includes the story of Lot, otherwise known Sodom and Gomorrah, within the Old Testament. This story allegedly provides sufficient evidence to condemn homosexuality (Kugle, 2010).

The evidence this camp presents to substantiate that Islam and homosexuality are inherently incompatible appears compelling and explicit. However, many Muslims and non-Muslims alike disagree with the exclusive argument. Similar to the work conducted by Christian scholars and theologians to dispel antigay rhetoric within the Bible, Quranic scholars, historians, and social activists have identified and developed a substantive amount of alternative theories and evidence that supports the contrary (Kugle, 2010). Jamal (2001) shared these sentiments and argued that within the Quran, same-sex practices are viewed no different than specific nonsexual or opposite-sex sexual interactions.

Kugle (2010), an Islamic scholar who favors interpreting Quranic verses within the context of the time period they were recorded, has argued that sexual acts between members of the same sex rarely occur in the Quran. He stated that when they do appear and they are addressed, the condemnation pertains to the violent or exploitive nature of the acts, not the act itself. For instance, individuals who read the Quran literally may interpret the story of Lot as a punishment against sodomy while others who read the same story using a context-dependent approach would assert that the punishment is in response to the violation of hospitality customs in the Middle East and the abuse of guests (Jamal, 2001). This shift in perspective changes the nature of the story and raises doubts about the indisputable accuracy of the literal interpretation

that serves as the cornerstone piece of evidence used to justify the illegality and immorality of same sex relations. Daniel Helminiak (2000), a Christian theologian, has conducted similar analysis on the Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah as Kugle (2010), and both scholars have reached comparable conclusions. If a resolution to this conflict existed solely within the Quranic text, there might be a straightforward argument. The Quran is the holiest text in Islam; however, it is only one of many texts upon which Islam basis its decisions.

The Quran does not contain any punishments for same sex activity and is less explicit than the Hadiths (Kugle, 2010). The Hadith and the fiqh state outright that same sex acts are illegal. Critics of the Hadith question the accuracy of the prophet's words 400 years after his death (Yip, 2005). They attest that Hadith are man's effort to influence society via religious absolutism, and they support this argument by identifying Hadith that contradict the Prophet's actions. For example, one Hadith states that women are inferior; however, the Prophet fought with women in battle (Yip, 2005).

Widely interpreted as condemning of same-sex sexual activity, opponents of homosexuality cite Shari'a (Wafer, 1997) in their arguments against the acceptability of homosexuality. Some scholars of Shari'a law interpret homosexuality as both a sin and a crime (Duran, 1993). Depending on the sanctions within specific countries, an individual convicted of homosexuality can face a variety of consequences ranging from lashings to execution by hanging (Whitaker, 2011). Few individuals are ever convicted of the crime of homosexuality as evidence, aside from confessions, is difficult to attain, and Shari'a law encourages repentance over confession (Duran, 1993). Both the Hadith and Shari'a law have limited power as the Quran remains the ultimate Islamic (Kugle, 2010).

Despite their ideological differences, members on both sides of this debate agree that a significant amount of tension exists between Islam and homosexuality (Rayside, 2011). To help resolve this conflict, research addressing Islam and issues of sexual diversity is greatly needed (Siraj, 2006). Beyond the distress and confusion that individuals who face conflicts between their Muslim and sexual identities experience, the relationship between Islam and homosexuality and men who identify as Muslim and as MSM is an important one to explore. This intersection of identities has an oppressive history intertwined with sociopolitical and imperialistic undertones that span centuries.

The occurrence of same-sex attractions and sexual interactions dates back millennia; however, homosexual and bisexual identities are a relatively modern concept (Baumeister, 1986; D'Emilio, 1983) that emerged in the latter half of the 19th century (Patterson, 1995). Prior to the creation of the term homosexuality in 1869, same-sex acts were simply acts (Weeks, 1992). The linguistic labels and definitions of homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality, among others, enable the construct of sexual orientation to exist (Boswell, 1989). Homosexuality and the subsequent terms used to assign label to behaviors and, ultimately, a set of norms enabled the existence of these constructs. Prior to their linguistic definition, they were only behaviors and ceased to exist without a label (Boswell, 2005; Schmitt, 1992a). Outside of the Western world, no terms referring to same sex behavior, or even opposite sex behavior, had been established prior to 1868 (Schmitt, 1992a). With the introduction of the concept into areas outside of the West, cultures have developed terms to simulate the meaning. In Islam and Arabic societies, the words and constructs associated with same-sex stereotypes have been derived from the Quran (Schmitt, 1992a).

Based on this information, there is a prevalent perception that homosexuality and Islam are incompatible identities. Yet sex between people of the same gender happens throughout the world. How do those who identify with both constructs negotiate their identities?

Identity

Identity defined. Depending on the interpretive lens, the concept of identity has many definitions. In its most basic form, identity refers to a person's psychological relationship to particular social groups and categories or systems (Sherif, 1982). Identity serves as a unified purposeful aspect of self (Frable, 1997; McAdams, 1995) that enables an individual to "define and describe . . . [a] sense of self, group affiliations, structural positions, and ascribed and achieved statuses" (Peek, 2005, pp. 216–217).

Theories about identity have shifted over the years. Questions about the degree to which the role an individual or group plays in developing an identity have resulted with theorists contesting claims that the individual has greater influence over identity than the group and vice versa (Baumeister, 1986; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). Many researchers studying the construct of identity perceive identity as an individual achievement with limited group influence or involvement (Baumeister, 1986). Turner and Tajfel (1979), prominent researchers in the field of identity theory, argue the opposite. Theorists on both sides of the debate make logical and compelling arguments and assert that their constructs of identity are the most accurate. Recent research (e.g., Stets & Burke, 2000) suggests that an identity has an individual component as well as a social component and that these components are simultaneously activated. Considering how these two sides cannot be separated, it is inaccurate to assume that a personal identity exists solely within the realm of the individual or solely within the realm of the group.

Goffman's (1959, 1963) work on identity indicated that an identity is constructed between the interplay of self-reflection and the management of visual and verbal impressions. In other words, identity requires the ability to examine oneself and utilize insight. This identity is also based on a combination of a person's "internal subjective perceptions, self-reflection, and external characterizations" (Peek, 2005, p. 217). The identity development process continues throughout life, and both personal and societal factors impact it (Haddad 1994; McMullen 2000; Nagel, 1995). Tajfel (1978) asserted that people define themselves by the groups with whom they belong, and identity emerges from the interaction between a person and social changes. Both of these statements allude to the notion of identity as a social construct that evolves with time and the context/situation (McAdams et al., 2006).

Identity plays an important role in maintaining psychological health. According to Erikson (1968), identity enables people to arrange/organize the self, and it provides individuals with a sense of purpose (McAdams et al., 2006). Hence, an unstable or poorly formed identity poses a threat to an individual's well-being and overall psychological health. Individuals who lack an established identity or doubt their identities are at risk for a myriad of psychological problems, including failure to develop a sense of self. Despite the importance of a well-developed identity, identity development can go awry.

As complex beings, humans have many identities with varying degrees of importance attached to each unique identity. Stryker (1980) claimed that identities will organize themselves into a hierarchy in which the most salient identities get prioritized. Prioritized identities are familiar, and the ability to invoke specific identities provides information about the intensity of the commitment to that identity. Furthermore, identities are unstable and constructed within a context (Hall, 1989); people are constantly negotiating their gender, racial, ethnic, sexual, and

religious identities (Frable, 1997). Thus, identities change when the internal and external

contexts change.

Intersection of identities. Most identity theories and models are predicated on a single

social identity. This focus on one identity enables specificity and attention to detail; however, as

complex beings, people hold countless identities, which these theories negate (Fukuyama &

Ferguson, 2000). Efforts to incorporate multiple identities within theoretical models have

recently started to emerge within the field of psychology (Riggs & das Nair, 2012), and

researchers are stressing the importance of exploring the development and integrations of

multiple identities (Gallor & Fassinger, 2010).

 Cole (2009) described the term intersectionality as an analytical approach "that

consider[s] the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of social group membership"

(p. 170). Intersectionality helps researchers maintain their focus on the numerous identities an

individual may possess and acknowledges that the presence of specific identities may alter the

individual in a way that would not occur if he or she had a different constellation of identities.

For instance, a woman who identifies as a Black lesbian will have a qualitatively different life

experience than a heterosexual Black man and a gay White man despite the identity that she

shares with each of them. Adding an identity does not have an additive effect that can be

predicted by a formula as the addition of an identity creates a cumulative interaction. Changing

just one identity within an individual who has many identities will create many differences as all

of these identities interact and intersect each other. Much like an ecosystem, the addition of a

new identity results in a systemic shift and reorganization within the human psyche.

By incorporating the concept of intersectionality within psychological research,

researchers diminish the risk of making false conclusions about people and their identities (Cole,

2009). The intersectionality approach is also an effective means of examining privilege and privileged identities among advantaged and disadvantaged groups as it focuses on each identity (Cole, 2009). Because of the complexity of identities and the infinite permutations of identity and social positions, any efforts to examine the intersection of multiple identities will fall short (das Nair & Butler, 2012). As such, the ultimate value of utilizing the intersectional approach stems from the ability to continuously question the predetermined, static categories, and assumptions about identity. Researchers das Nair and Butler (2012) refer to this process as "intersectionality in action" (p. 3).

The focus on the intersection of gay and religious identities is an emerging topic within social science research (Minwalla et al., 2006). The simultaneous examination of multiple identities provides researchers with a clearer understanding of how gay Muslims socially construct their identities. Examining these identities as coexisting "undermines the equation of universal identities with monolithic and exclusive cultures" (Rahman, 2010, p. 951), and challenges those who doubt, or even deny, their existence. Research within an intersectional framework also sheds light on how same sex activity relates to a gay/homosexual identity within the context of local, national, and international politics (Rahman, 2010).

Self-categorization/labeling. Self-categorization is the act of identifying oneself with a particular social category or group (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Within the context of this current study, self-categorization pertains primarily to the ways in which the participants categorize/label their sexual behavior and/or sexual identities. Common labels used for those individuals who do not have heteronormative identities in the West include gay, queer, and MSM.

Prior research indicates that geographical location is one factor that influences the labels MSM use when self-identifying or labeling their sexual desires. Meyer, Costenbaderb, Zulec,

Otiashvili, and Kirtadze (2010) examined the labels of men in Eastern Europe who have sex with men and learned that categories based on biological sex, often used in Western contexts, do not apply. Considering how the Western concept of gay is perceived as alien to many cultures (Cantú, 2002), the participants in Meyer et al. (2010), used their own taxonomy/nomenclature for same sex desires and behavior, which emphasized the elements of sexual practice, relation to other men, and nonsexual demographic and personal factors (Meyer et al., 2010). These conclusions underscore how Western terms for sexuality, despite their apparent pervasiveness in many cultures, lack universality, and that a range of other terms exist. In situations where cultures have adopted Western terms, the meanings of these labels/terms get transformed following their introduction in to the cultures (Harris, Cook, & Kashubeck-West, 2008).

As globalization increases and cross-cultural research expands to include less familiar cultures, there is always a risk of inaccurately applying the label/concept, resulting in miscommunication and potential conflict. Examples of this miscommunication often involve the conflation of gender identity and sexual identity. While the term gay is used increasingly used outside the West, Savin-Williams (2005) asserted that within the United States its use has started to decline, especially among adolescents who reject sexual identity labels that they perceive as restrictive. Other findings contradict this claim and assert that the majority of youth with same sex attractions still identify as gay; however, new labels like pansexual and reappropriated/reclaimed words like queer have become more prevalent among sexual minority youth in recent years (Russell, Clarke, & Clary, 2009). The terms pansexual and queer are more ambiguous in nature, and this helps to create a more collective community that does not have as many divisions between the various groups that identify as sexual minorities (Russell et al., 2009).

Research on ethnic and sexual minorities suggests that members of ethnic minority communities living in the United States embrace sexual identity labels differently than sexual minorities who belong to the mainstream community (Savin-Williams, 1996). Akin to reactions that other cultures have to the word gay, ethnic minorities within the United States do not share the same relationship with the term gay as White middle-class individuals, who utilize the label most (Savin-Williams, 1996). Researchers trying to access ethnic minority communities have had limited success when using the word gay to recruit and identify participants (Meyer et al., 2010). African American and Latino communities often use the term MSM to label their sexual behaviors. As previously noted, the labels MSM and queer can create problems for both researchers and individual community members as their vagueness can lead to miscommunication. Previous researchers examining Muslim Americans who are attracted to members of the same sex often referred to the participants as gay. They rarely mentioned how or why this label was selected, and those who do offer their explanations describe selecting a term that is best understood by them, the audience, and/or the dominant culture of the country where the study took place. Further research to identify what labels Muslim men use to refer to their same-sex desires is important to provide to mental health professionals working with this population.

Ethnic identity. Considering the often-visible physical markers of ethnic identity (e.g., skin color, cultural accessories) and the historic and ongoing discrimination and oppression that many ethnic minorities continue to face, a significant amount of research has addressed ethnic identity. Phinney and Ong (2007) stated that ethnic identity "derives from a sense of peoplehood within a group, a culture, and a particular setting" (p. 271). Ethnic identities develop over time and experience. While ethnic identity remains a unique entity, it does share components with

other group individual identities (Phinney & Ong, 2007). For the purposes of the present study, ethnic identity pertains primarily to the construct of race, a nonscientific taxonomy that is preferably called ethnicity. Ethnic identity is a form of social identity and has many dimensions, including self-categorization, ethnic values and beliefs, and commitment and attachment (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Religious identity. Religious identity is another form of social identity, and, depending on the context, it may also represent an ethnic identity (e.g., Jewish). Religious beliefs fundamentally reflect how a person perceives the world (Stander, Piercy, MacKinnon, and Helmeke, 2004) and differences within the same religion vary widely. These differences within religions, among many others, relate to interpretations of religious practices and scriptures as well as different values and perspectives on lifestyle behaviors and identities.

Most relevant to the present study are the interpretation styles of the holy texts and scriptures (i.e., contextualists versus literalists/fundamentalists), and openness to change and growth (i.e., extrinsic vs. intrinsic). Fundamentalist and extrinsic-oriented religious individuals are often referred to as conservative while contextualist and intrinsic individuals are referred to as progressive (Allport & Ross, 1967; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Barret & Barzan, 1996).

Religious interpretation leads to tense debates within religious circles, as the manner in which a person interprets religious scriptures drastically changes their meaning. Fundamentalism, also known as literalism, and contextualism are commonly utilized interpretation styles. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992) defined fundamentalism as "the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity" (p. 118). Fundamentalists believe that they must adhere to the one set of inerrant teachings as they were written, regardless of the

developments that occurred after their creation. Despite their differences, fundamentalism and

literalism are two different styles of religious interpretation (Appleby & Marty, 2002) that can

overlap. Fundamentalists selectively choose to read religious passages literally when they

support their interpretation of the scripture.

       In contrast to fundamentalists who interpret the Quran literally, progressive Muslims

recognize how Islam extends beyond the holy scripture and the Prophet and includes the impact

people have in their relationships (Safi, 2011). When interpreting religious texts, progressive

Muslims are willing to take into account the temporal and cultural context of the scriptures as

well as the impact of their actions on others, which may alter the meaning. A prominent figure

in this, Muhsin Hendrix, an Imam living in South Africa, has created an interpretative approach

to the Quran that strives to promote justice for the oppressed (Kugle, 2011). This radical new

interpretative approach empowers LGBTQ-identified Muslims to reform their own relationship

with Islam.

       Considering how fundamentalist believers negate any alternative beliefs or explanations,

they often think in a rigid manner that does not accommodate difference or differing beliefs

(Friedman & Downey, 1994). This rigidity and lack of tolerance for diversity makes it difficult

for sexual minorities to establish their sexual identities within fundamentalist communities

(Buchanan et al., 2001). Religious sexual minorities from progressive communities, or religions

that respect sexual minorities, may not have the same level of difficulty negotiating their sexual

and religious identities. Interpretation style often coincides with other factors related to religion

such as religious orientation.

       Allport and Ross (1967) conceptualized two distinct types of religious orientations,

intrinsic and extrinsic. Within their framework, an intrinsic orientation is seen as an internal

force that leads a person to "truly live" his or her religion (Allport & Ross, 1967, p. 434). In other words, people who are organized around an intrinsic orientation focus more on their relationship with religion and pay less attention to human elements within religion (Allport & Ross, 1967). In contrast to the intrinsic type, individuals with an extrinsic orientation look to religious leaders, scriptures, and other authority figures outside of themselves for religious guidance and insight (Allport & Ross, 1967). Allport and Ross described how individuals with an extrinsic orientation benefit from religion by their accrual of social and material resources that provide status, acceptance, and security.

People's interpretation style and type of religious orientation impacts how they negotiate their sexual and religious identities and the degree of difficulty that that may endure (Allport & Ross, 1967; Barret & Barzan, 1996). Barret and Barzan (1996) argued that sexual minorities with an extrinsic orientation often experience more difficulty managing their sexual and religious identities as they follow a more rigid approach that does not embrace differences, and the views and opinions of others will have a stronger impact on them, more so than those with intrinsic orientations. This argument is supported by the research of Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, and Williams (1994), who found that gay individuals who have a traditional religious extrinsic orientation are likely to have higher rates of internalized homophobia. This internalized homophobia then delays the formulation of a stable homosexual identity (Harry & DeVall, 1978).

Muslim Religious Identity Development

Limited empirical psychological research addressing the religious identity development of Muslims living in the United States exists (Peek, 2005). This dearth of research reflects the

general lack of studies focusing on Muslims in the United States as well as the tendency to omit religion from research examining identity theory and development.

In her article examining the salience of religious identity for second-generation Muslims living in the United States, Peek (2005) identified three stages of religious identity development: religion as ascribed identity, religion as chosen identity, and religion as declared identity (Peek, 2005). Like other stage models, individuals progress through the stages based on how they are functioning at any one moment in time.

As children develop in a familial context, their early religious identities, beliefs, and practices will likely mirror those of their parents. Peek (2005) found that many participants in her study who were the children of immigrants initially identified with their parent's nationality and ethnic identities. This is not surprising given the emphasis that U.S. cultures put on defining oneself by ethnicity instead of religion. While following their parents' cultural and ethnic practices, many of the children displayed Muslim religious identity by way of their dress and their attendance at mosque. They did not have to understand that they were engaging in Muslim practices as this was their experience throughout childhood (Peek, 2005). Because of Islam's stigmatization, a number of participants concealed their Muslim identities and many participants attempted to pass as mainstream Americans. Peek found that passing behavior still evoked a sense of shame among those who identified as Muslim. This transition from concealing one's identity as a child to prevent rejection and ostracism to openly identifying as a Muslim as an adult conveys that as people mature they begin to take more ownership of their religious identity. As people consciously chose to identify as Muslim, they were embracing their religious identity by choice and were no longer following their parents' behaviors (Peek, 2005). The period at which this transition occurs varied among the study's participants.

Exposure to peers in educational settings and institutions played a valuable role in the religious identity development of many Muslim Americans. Hermansen (2003), Leonard (2003), and Peek (2005) noted that high school was an influential time for Muslim Americans and that college was the most critical period of reflection for the participants who began to embrace their Muslim identities. A prominent factor in this was the exposure to other Muslim students in college, which was far greater than in high school. As Peek (2005) wrote,

> Peers and close friends played a significant role in constructing, reinforcing, and affirming the strong emerging religious identity of almost all participants. The interviewees often told me that they began to learn about Islam with their friends since they were going through a similar process of religious exploration. (p. 228)

The Muslim Student Association was a pivotal college group that fostered connections for many participants in Peek's 2005 study. It helped provide a unified and organized location for Muslim students, who remain a small minority group at most U.S. institutions (Peek, 2005).

A strong religious identity can serve as a protective factor and provide numerous benefits to recent immigrants and religious minorities. Yang and Ebaugh (2001) found that for some immigrant groups, religious identities are prioritized over ethnic identity, and for others this pattern is reversed. Given the sense of disorientation and confusion that many recent immigrants experience after migrating to a new country, religion may serve as a unique constant as it can transcend cultural differences (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). Depending on the size of the ethnic community, the religious community might provide more abundant connections to resources (e.g., material, educational, occupational, social, support) that can assist with resolving overwhelming challenges (Chen, 2002; Hurh & Kim, 1990). For this reason, a religious identity can assume more salience for an immigrant or an immigrant group than it might if they never left

their home country. This is especially relevant for Muslims immigrants who identified with the religious majority prior to moving to the United States, where they now comprise a religious minority that the host culture views with distrust (Chen, 2002). Maintaining a religious identity can also assist with the migration process and the inevitable concerns regarding national and ethnic identities that can lead to stress and tension (Feher, 1998; Yang, 1999). Furthermore, religious identification helps with diffusing ethnic and cultural differences that might otherwise threaten connection (Sullivan, 2000). Lastly, pursuing a religious identity can help immigrants maintain their cultural beliefs, values, and traditions (Warner, 1998).

Within the United States, significant differences exist between different generations of Muslim Americans (Leonard, 2003). For instance, the single Muslim identity is being replaced by many Muslim identities that are embracing pluralism. As more identities are incorporated into the identity equation the complexity increases, especially in the case of those with marginalized identities pertaining to gender and sexual orientation (Naber, 2000).

Second-generation Muslim Americans, whose parents immigrated to the United States during specific decades and eras, reported similar patterns. The children of Muslims who immigrated during the 1960s–1980s shared a strong perception that they are a visible yet poorly understood religious minority (Leonard, 2003; Peek, 2005 Rayside, 2011Rayside, 2011). Unlike their parents, who immigrated to the United States with well-developed Muslim identities, this generation has had to seek out and establish their Muslim identity as religious and ethnic minorities in a country with minimal Muslim visibility (Leonard, 2003; Peek, 2005 Rayside, 2011). The challenges inherent in this task have resulted in increased levels of frustration and perceptions of oppression, which is one reason why this generation has collectively developed a stronger motivation to seek out religion.

The majority of the participants in Peek's (2005) study expressed a desire for their children to learn their native language and unify as Muslims more than just as a nationality or ethnic group. This latter focus, which is the primary focus in the United States, does not resonate as strongly with Muslim immigrants who want to elevate their Muslim identities and their children's Muslim identities as the most salient form of identity. This seemingly collective desire makes sense when examined through a theoretical perspective regarding group solidarity. Durkheim (1984) and Tajfel (1981), both have noted that when groups face persecution or feel threatened, they instinctively find solidarity around the shared persecuted identity. The animosity and suspicion that resulted from the events of September 11 tightened the Islamic community and reinforced their faith (Peek, 2005, pp. 223–234). Hermansen (2003) referred to this second generation of Muslims that has begun to endorse more increasingly conservative and condemnatory views as "Display Identity Islam," which is a form of identity assertion.

Sexual identity. Despite the occurrence of same-sex attractions and sexual interactions throughout history, homosexual and bisexual identities are a relatively modern concept (Baumeister, 1986; D'Emilio, 1983). They emerged with the creation of the concepts of sexuality and sexual orientation, which are social constructs that European scientists developed in the late 19th century (Patterson, 1995; Seidman, 2003).

Prior to the creation of the terms homosexuality and heterosexuality, sexual acts were simply behaviors. For example, a man who engaged in sodomy with another man was simply a man who had sex with a man (Gutierrez, 2012). Consequently, the linguistic label and definitions of homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality enabled the construct of sexual orientation and identity to exist (Boswell, 2005; Schmitt, 1992a). With the advent of the gay rights movement in the West, the gay identity emerged as a primary social identity (Seidman,

2002). It currently represents large communities, and the identity itself is more intrinsic than the sexual actions and behaviors that the term gay typically invokes. In its present iteration, individuals can recognize their same-sex attractions and identify as gay or lesbian without ever engaging in a sexual interaction (Dubé, 2000).

While the West acknowledges that a gay identity is a prominent social identity, many societies throughout the world dismiss the concept. Globalization and the ubiquitous presence of U.S. media have exposed other cultures to the Western concept of sexual identity (Seidman, 2003). Feminist and queer theorists are often at the forefront of the effort to teach others that sexual identities or categories are not universal (Kligerman, 2007). These theorists argue that homosexual, as a term, only applies to those who label themselves as such and that people who engage in same sex behavior do not inherently qualify as homosexuals (Dunne, 1990). Massad (2007) wrote about the internalization of the gay rights movement, which refers to efforts by the West to liberate sexual minorities in the Middle East. He critiqued this argument as these Western agencies assume that the sexual minorities identify with a Westernesque sexual identity.

Sexual identity development. Sexual identity development refers to the process by which individuals recognize their sexual attractions and develop a stable sexual identity. A significant component of this process involves the integration of their sexual identity within their overall identities (Cass, 1979, 1984; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). In the earlier stages of sexual identity development, individuals have an increased risk of experiencing shame, mental anguish, anxiety, loneliness, suicidal ideation, maladaptive interactions with others, and engaging in compulsive or addictive behaviors (Lewin, 1993; Ponse, 1978).

As the later stages of sexual identity development approach, people experience greater psychological well-being and physical health (Ponse, 1978). The coming out process helps

people develop their sexual identities (Buchanan et al., 2001), and gay identity formation

involves establishing a positive gay self-image (Troiden, 1988; Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder,

1996). The concept of people moving through stages as they develop their sexual identity stems

from the popularity of sexual identity models that researchers have created to help understand

how people progress through this process.

    Sexual identity development models. Within the last 40 years, countless Western

researchers have developed models to explain sexual identity development and the coming out

process. The most notable of these models include Cass (1979, 1984), who is credited with

developing the first comprehensive model. Coleman (1982), Faderman (1984), and Troiden

(1989), among others, have created subsequent stage models adding on to Cass's work, and the

majority of these models were based on White men and women in a Western context.

Revolutionary in their time, these models had several flaws that limit their use today.

    Current research rejects the notion that people progress through the stages in a linear

fashion (Diamond, 2005), and the focus on traditional sexual identities (i.e., gay, lesbian,

bisexual, straight) limits the applicability of these models to individuals who hold alternative

sexual identities such as pansexual and queer (Russell et al., 2009). Researchers also discovered

that developmental milestones offer greater utility than stages (D'Augelli, 1996; Floyd & Stein,

2002), as they accommodate a more diverse range of sexual fluidity and identities (Horner,

2007).

    Within the West's mainstream communities and the mainstream gay community, the

coming out process is often conceived as the apex of mental health and well-being (Haldeman,

2007). Created by Western researchers who used samples of middle-class White men, these

sexual identity development models measure adjustment of LGB-identified individuals by the

disclosure of their sexual identities and by their participation within the gay community (Cass,

1979; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Yip, 2008). Given how ethnic minorities often have

different sexual identity development trajectories than members of the mainstream, this

conceptualization is problematic. Critiques of these traditional stage models have raised

questions about their applicability to all men and women, and researchers have developed newer

models to account for these flaws.

   Advances in sexual identity development. With the emergence of intersectionality in

psychological research in the early 1990s and the increasing awareness of how culture impacts

sexual identity development, new models have emerged that incorporate these findings (Eliason,

1996). In response to traditional sexual identity development models that ignore cultural

differences and measure progress by public disclosure of sexual orientation, McCarn and

Fassinger (1996) developed the inclusive model of sexual minority identity formation. This

unique model distinguishes between the reference group and the internal/personal components of

identity, which provides greater flexibility (Gallor & Fassinger, 2010).

   Unlike its predecessors, this model accounts for an individual with a strong gay or lesbian

identity who may not publicly identify with the LGBTQ community or a LGBTQ subculture.

McCarn and Fassinger based their initial study on lesbian-identified participants, and Fassinger

and Miller (1997) replicated the model with gay male-identified participants. Like other models,

the inclusive model consists of four phases: awareness, exploration, deepening commitment, and

internalization/synthesis. It differs from the other models, however, by measuring identity

formation through the resolution of the phases instead of the outcome of coming out (McCarn &

Fassinger, 1996). While no current sexual identity development model addresses all criticisms,

the inclusive model of sexual minority identity formation takes into account cultures beyond European Americans.

   Ethnic minorities and sexual identity development. Gay men of color are noticeably absent from LGBTQ community spaces throughout the United States (Teunis, 2007). Their absence does not reflect lower prevalence rates of homosexuality among ethnic minority communities; rather, it speaks to the challenges that gay men of color face when it comes to publically disclosing their sexual identity and sharing public spaces with other gay men. Several social issues contribute to the challenges experienced by gay men of color. Racism within the gay community is a prominent factor that limits ethnic involvement (Teunis, 2007). as well as the incongruent body image and physical traits that are revered by gay male culture men in the United States (Teunis, 2007).

   Traditional family values, religious beliefs that reject homosexuality, and gender roles and gender presentation are common deterrents of accepting an LGB identity (Buchanan et al. 2001; Wagner et al., 1994). Many collectivistic societies embrace traditional family values. Individuals who have recently immigrated to the United States often espouse traditional family values and religious beliefs. When entire families move together, or individuals reunite with other family members following immigration, internal conflict related to an emerging gay identity can lead to familial estrangement, and feelings of shame, and disappointment (Savin-Williams, 1996, 1998). Dubé and Savin-Williams (1999) found that ethnic minority youth who adhered less to traditional family beliefs may have an easier time accepting a sexual minority identity. This makes sense given that less dissonance exists between their cultural beliefs and a newly developing identity, which makes it easier to integrate or adopt a new identity. Within their study of U.S.-born participants who identified as ethnic minorities, Rosario, Schrimshaw,

and Hunter (2004) found that cultural factors do not delay identity development but they may delay the integration of multiple identities.

Identity conflict. Identity conflict emerged as a coherent construct in the 1970s. During the past four decades, researchers have studied how this construct develops and the impact that it has on those who have experienced this phenomenon. According to Baumeister, Shapiro, and Tice (1985), identity conflict results from the simultaneous existence of multiple self-definitions (i.e., identities) that are incompatible with each other. Self-definitions consist of commitments, which refer to the broad range of socialized or individual behaviors, values, motivations, and aspirations that comprise an identity (Baumeister, Shapiro, & Tice, 1985). When commitments in two or more identities conflict with each other, the parent identities may be incompatible (Baumeister et al., 1985).

Identity conflict model. Baumeister et al. (1985) developed the first model for examining identity conflict. This model consists of two components: identity deficits and identity conflicts. Identity deficits occur when a person has a lack of commitments to one or more identities, and identity conflict occurs when the multitude of commitments to one or more identities begin to contradict each other (Baumeister et al., 1985).

When a person fulfills a new commitment or series of commitments, identity conflicts can be triggered as contradictions get noticed. They can also materialize following situational changes and extraordinary life developments. As Baumeister et al. (1985) stated, "Identity conflicts are jointly determined by situations and personal commitments" (p. 412). Commitments and values are rarely in a perpetual state of incompatibility. The incompatibility arises when two commitments place restrictions on behaviors that contradict each other

(Baumeister et al., 1985). This creates a dynamic where a person will inevitably violate one of his or her commitments by adhering to the other (Baumeister et al., 1985).

Baumeister et al. (1985) encapsulated the subjective experience of a person struggling with identity conflict as "the feeling of being in an impossible situation" (p. 414). This sense of impossibility reflects the individual's perception that his or her commitments are irreconcilable. This irreconcilability often leads to a decision to forfeit one identity in order to preserve the individual's well-being, which is a selection process that creates stress (Baumeister et al., 1985). Regardless of the commitment/s chosen to follow, individuals struggling to resolve their identity conflict will betray the foundation underlying the commitment they choose to dismiss. This betrayal often creates feelings of guilt (Baumeister et al., 1985).

Identity conflicts can develop in two ways. In the first trajectory, a commitment (or a component of a commitment) changes following a period of ongoing compatibility with other commitments (Baumeister et al., 1985). In the second, a newly emerged or imposed commitment is incompatible with other long-standing commitments (Baumeister et al., 1985). The latter approach typifies how identity conflict likely develops for many sexual minorities. When individuals starts to notice their same-sex desires and wants to engage in same-sex behaviors, the long-standing commitments (e.g., gender, religion, ethnic, cultural) that preceded the sexual desires strive to restrict these behaviors. Based on this rationale, the rare individual with preexisting commitments that are compatible with the same-sex desires would not experience any conflict.

Baumeister et al. (1985) noted that immigrants often experience identity conflict after moving to a new country. This conflict results from their decision to maintain allegiance to their cultures of origin or to engage in the behaviors and traits of a new culture. In addition to

immigrants, identity conflict is particularly salient issue for many sexual minorities who are also

religious. Numerous researchers have examined identity conflict among gay men within

Christianity (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2001; Ganzevoort, van der Laan, & Olsman, 2011; Levy,

2008; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000), Judaism (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000), and Islam (Jaspal &

Cinnirella, 2010; Minwalla et al., 2005; Yip, 2005) in an effort to better understand how they

resolved this conflict.

Identity conflict is important and essential to the experience of a complex identity as

well-integrated identities that are never challenged (Raggatt, 2006). The severity of an identity

conflict can vary as commitments can contradict each other in many ways. Some of the

incompatible commitments will be easier to accommodate or resolve than others. In situations

where conflict develops between two strongly endorsed identities, crises can manifest and the

individual must actively resolve the conflict (Baumeister et al., 1985).

Resolving identity conflict. Researchers (Bereket & Adam, 2008; Ganzevoort et al.,

2011; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000) have found that individuals who have resolved the conflict

between their religious and sexual identities found that individuals utilize four strategies to do so:

rejecting the religious identity, rejecting the sexual identity, compartmentalizing both identities,

and integrating their identities. Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, and Hecker (2001) further divided

these options into two categories and referred to choosing between the two worlds and

integrating the two worlds.

Individuals may reject their religious identity overtly or in a more subtle approach in

which they decrease their religious engagement until they no longer practice (Rodriguez &

Ouellette, 2000). Results from research on Christian-identified gay men and women showed that

rejection of the religious identity often resulted in identifying with atheism or affiliating with and

practicing a more lesbian- and/or gay-affirming religion (Ellison, 1993). While Christian-identified individuals living in the United States have more options for selecting other denominations in the Christian faith, members of other religions have fewer alternatives. In 2004 the founder of Al-Fatiha, an Internet-based organization that advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning Muslims, claimed that over 90% of gay-identified Muslim Americans rejected religion in favor of their sexuality as they did not believe that they could reconcile their homosexual desires with Islam (Amal, 2004). Considering the methodological challenges involved with tracking gay Muslims in the United States, this statistic is difficult to confirm; however, the figure reflects a high percentage of gay Muslim Americans who struggle with negotiating their religious and sexual identities.

Rejecting one's sexual orientation is a difficult task that requires a significant amount of psychic energy. Gay men and women can reject their sexual orientation through celibacy and repression of their same sex desires. Commonly known as conversion therapy, LGBTQ-identified individuals receive treatment with the intent of changing their sexual orientation (Haldeman, 2002). Conversion therapy has raised controversy in recent years as the treatment has been banned in several states and is harshly condemned by the American Psychological Association. This form of therapy is still popular in other parts of the world, such as Egypt, and it is often something that Egyptian parents of LGBTQ-identified children will pursue if they have the resources (Whitaker, 2011).

Marriage is another remedy for "curing" homosexuality, and parents who learn of their child's same sex desires will often marry them to address their "problematic" impulses (Siraj, 2006). When it comes to LGBTQ-identified individuals, religious communities sometimes tolerate sexual minorities if they conceal aspects of their sexuality (Pitt, 2009). This conditional

form of acceptance allows individuals to remain involved in the community as long as they

refrain from engaging in the behavior that the religion identifies as problematic (Pitt, 2009).

      Baumeister et al. (1985) described compartmentalization as a compromise between

conflicting identities. Conflict does not arise when people can keep their sexual identity separate

from their religious identity. The absence of dissonance reduces the conflict and stress. This

strategy seems like a desirable alternative to the abandonment of an identity in favor of the other,

but maintaining this separation requires a significant amount of energy that is ongoing as these

identities both remain intact. Debates about the threshold between compartmentalization and

integration could flourish with minimal results as one person's preference to withhold one

identity in one setting may be interpreted by another as a lack of integration. A host of

contextual factors could account for this.

      Of the four resolution strategies, identity integration is recognized as the optimal strategy

(Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006). High identity-integration levels are important given the

impact that they have on mental health and overall behavioral and psychological well-being

(Benet-Martinez, Lee, & Leu, 2006; Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; Wagner et al.,

1994). Considering the malleable nature of identities (Deaux, 1991), and how they change

depending on their context (Hall, 1989), identities are capable of shifting and can become more

compatible, leading to reduced conflict and stress. Rodriguez and Oullette (2000) concluded that

identity conflict can be resolved when a person can develop a single sense of self that integrates

his or her religious and sexual identities. This integrated identity embraces a positive religious

identity and a positive sexual identity without any dissonance between the two (Rodriguez &

Oullette, 2000). Individuals who achieve integration view relevant societal and cultural barriers

as surmountable, and instead of being queer *or* religious, one identifies as a religious queer.

Integration frequently occurs when individuals feel strongly attached to both their identities and refuse to reject one identity in exchange for the other (Rodriguez & Oullette, 2000). The intensity of this connection provides the motivation and resolve necessary to confront the conflicting identities. Integration also can occur over time as societal attitudes and opinions shift. When the conflicting identities no longer seem incompatible due to the evolution of cultural attitudes, a person could identify as both simultaneously (Rodriguez & Oullette, 2000).

Identity conflict resolution is typically a one-stage process. Individuals either have little volition in accepting an identity that is imposed upon them or they have the ability to choose between the various commitments (Baumeister et al. 1985). In the situation where people have no choice but to accept their new identity (i.e., an athlete who suffers a spinal cord injury), they often have the choice of whether they want to integrate components of their former commitments. The second approach, which involves more personal volition, can prove challenging as individuals must choose which commitment he or she chooses to reject (Baumeister et al., 1985).

For some people, compartmentalization is a third option for resolving an identity conflict. While not everyone has the ability/capacity to maintain separate spheres, those who can manage to do so invest a lot of energy to support this resolution strategy. That said, for some individuals, compartmentalization may serve as the best option if they cannot integrate their identities and are unwilling to reject one. In the case of a gay man whose family will sever their relationship with him if he discloses his sexual orientation, compartmentalization of his sexual identity enables him to express his sexuality in some contexts while also maintaining his familial relationships.

Mental Health

Defining mental health. Defining mental health inevitably poses a challenge, considering the breadth of terms and values that various cultures attribute to healthy individuals. The following definitions are two of many examples that reflect elements of the definition of mental health used for the present study. Satcher (2000) provided the following definition:

> Mental health refers to the successful performance of mental functions, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity. Mental health is indispensable to personal well-being, family, and interpersonal relationships, and making contributions to the community or the society. It is easy to overlook the value of mental health until problems surface. Yet from early childhood until death, mental health is the springboard for thinking and communication skills, learning, emotional growth, resilience, and self-esteem. These are the ingredients of each individual's successful contribution to community and society . . . Successful performance rests on a foundation of mental health. (p. 6)

This definition highlights the pivotal role that mental health fulfills in helping an individual have a rewarding and meaningful life. Unfortunately, life-long good mental health eludes nearly every individual as many elements and factors interfere with the attainment and maintenance of emotional health and well-being. As a supplement to Satcher's (2000) definition, Abdel-Khalek (2012) identified factors that comprise mental health including "signs of happiness, mental balance, self-esteem, self-control,

sociability, and social involvement" (p. 743). He continued on to state that "Mental

health is not just the absence of negative symptoms, signs, and psychopathological

reactions such as depression and anxiety" (Abdel-Khalek , 2012, p. 743).

Research on the subject of mental health in sexual minorities mental health suggests that

this population utilizes therapy more often than heterosexuals (Liddle, 1997) due to the higher

levels of stress from internalized homophobia and less access to non-professional support

(Cochran, 2001). Meyer (1995) created the minority stress model, which indicates that gay men's

greater endorsement of mental health problems are associated with discrimination and

persecution by society. The biopsychosocial model of perceived racism, developed by Clark,

Anderson, Clark, & Williams (1999) takes into account the emotional challenges that minorities,

particularly African American and Black individuals, experience as a result of persecution.

Many researchers have asserted that religiosity and spirituality play an integral role in the

development and maintenance of strong mental health (Abdel-Khalek, 2012; Barnes & Meyer,

2012). Regardless of one's denomination, sect, or affiliation, religious/spiritual beliefs have the

capacity to enhance mental health and emotional well-being among men and women living in the

United States (Barnes & Meyer, 2012). This capacity, however, is often diminished for sexual

minorities as many religious communities hold hostile attitudes toward them (Barnes & Meyer,

2012) The widespread condemnation of alternative sexuality in the Abrahamic religions, and

most relevantly, Islam, has a negative impact on the psychological well-being of gay men and

other sexual minorities within those religious communities (Siraj, 2006). This example of

exclusionary beliefs and the many religious followers who enforce them creates an inhospitable

religious environment for sexual minorities. This is unfortunate considering that researchers

have found that religiosity or spirituality often mediates mental distress and buffers the

challenges of mental illness. Furthermore, individuals raised in a religious background who later

discover that they identify as gay often experience more difficulty with coming out than other

gay individuals who do not identify as religious (Wagner et al., 1994).

Any efforts made by religious LGBTQ-identified individuals to deny one of their

identities can result in personal sacrifices that will likely have a negative effect on their mental

health and emotional well-being (Helminiak, 1989; Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996;

Wagner et al., 1994). Hiding or withholding one's sexuality can lead to increased stress, chronic

anxiety, guilt, self-doubt, isolation, and paranoia (Oetjen & Rothblum, 2000), and separation

from religion or inability to express in religious beliefs and practices can create family discord

and marginalization (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Hunsberger & Brown, 1984). To complicate

matters, mental health professionals, who have a responsibility to respect diversity within many

domains including sexuality and religion (American Counseling Association, 1995; American

Psychological Association, 2002), can find it challenging to work with clients who hold religious

and LGBTQ identities (Haldeman, 2002; Wagner et al., 1994). The expectation for therapists to

remain neutral when discussing religious beliefs and values related to sexuality can prove

challenging for therapists and counselors, especially considering how many of these

professionals have received minimal training regarding religious issues (Kelly, 1994; Shafranske,

1996).

Coping with mental distress. Coping with mental distress is an important task for

everyone in searching for optimal mental health, especially for those dealing with identity

conflicts. There are many different ways to look at the concept of coping. Lazarus and Folkman

(1984) define coping as:

> Constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts [intended] to manage
>
> specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or
>
> exceeding the resources of the person. (p. 141)

There is some research that examines how gay Muslims cope with identity conflict. Jaspal and Cinnirella (2012) examined gay-identified Muslim men in London from Southeast Asian backgrounds to study coping with identity conflict stress. Jaspal and Cinnirella (2012) found that participants coped by externalizing responsibility for their identity ("they were born gay," p. 864), defined their identity in behavioral terms, and that some participants usurped personal authority over their religious beliefs by discrediting the institution of Islam, not the religion itself. This information is helpful in reflecting on the ways in which identity conflict was tolerated and eventually resolved; however, it does not provide enough insight into the participants' daily lives. Clinicians working with clients who identify as gay and Muslim can use these results to look at the larger picture. Examining the quality of day-to-day living with these thoughts and frustrations and the way they cope with them is very important, especially since mental health issues are rarely addressed or discussed in Muslim cultures.

Islam and mental health. Within Islam, the Quran provides a clear explanation of mental illness. It also provides directives for specific conditions and actions such as suicide and other self-injurious behaviors. According to Islamic doctrine, mental illness results from an "imbalance of humors of the body" (Husain, 1998, p. 288). Unlike other cultures that initially believed in the demonic and supernatural etiology of mental illness, Muslim cultures recognize the concept of cause and effect and developed several therapies and treatments to help treat the condition (Husain, 1998).

Findings from other research contradict these claims and reflect that Arab Muslims often attribute mental illness to the possession of demons (jinns), the evil eye, and magic (Al-Krenawi, Graham, & Kandah, 2000; Al-Adawi et al., 2002). The imbalance of humors (spiritual, psychological, physical, and moral) can often be realigned through spiritual practices (Husain, 1998). Given the central role that Allah plays in the lives of Muslims, He is central to the treatment of mental and physical disorders and ailments (Husain, 1998).

Traditional treatment. Islam utilizes a holistic approach to illness that is preventative (Husain, 1998). The Islamic strategy for promoting and maintaining good mental health stems from the acknowledgement that humans inherently contain deficits and defects and there are constructive ways to overcome them (Husain, 1998).

One element of overcoming these defects involves daily prayer. Prayer involves the recitation of the opening verse of the Quran in which an appeal is made for Allah to help guide a person and prevent the person from going "astray" (Husain, 1998). Guilt that stems from sin is another important element addressed within Islam. Husain (1998) outlined a multistep process that provides guidance to attain absolution for one's problematic behavior. The first two steps involve recognizing and then apprehending the sin. Once these steps are achieved, an individual promises to never repeat the sin, and the individual invokes God's forgiveness (Husain, 1998). This process is complete when the individual engages in a useful action, with certain actions being considered spiritual therapies. Some of these actions include seeking and providing forgiveness, charity, and prayer. Prayer has an especially central role in healing a variety of physical and mental ailments connected to the heart, stomach, and intestine (Husain, 1998). By engaging in

these activities, people attune their hearts with Allah. This attunement strengthens their spirits, bodies, and souls, and collectively they assist in repelling illness and sickness or increasing the speed of recovery (Husain, 1998).

Western treatment. Within the West, mental health services and psychological treatment play a valuable role in helping manage and maintain people's stress. The majority of these services occur within a secular framework; however, people also seek religious/spiritual counseling and support. In other countries and cultures, religious figures and family members fulfill this role, and, if present in the country/society, secular- or scientific-based therapists often remain the last option (Husain, 1998) as these services are stigmatized (Fabreka, 1991).

Muslim and ethnic Arabs rarely seek counseling on their own volition, and clients are often connected to therapists via concerned family members (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000; Husain, 1998). Cultural edicts dictate that personal information remains within families. Often it is elder male relatives and group leaders that give permission to seek assistance and care, and traditional and Quranic healers are frequently used in conjunction with therapy (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). For LGBTQ-identified individuals, these resources will not likely seem to be a good option. Within the West, LGBTQ-identified clients are reluctant to attend therapy with religious counselors, even gay-affirming religious counselors, considering the association between religion and oppression that many of these individuals have endured (Bivens, Nehneyer, Khchberg, & Moore, 1995; Schaefer & Coleman, 1992). For religious LGBTQ individuals, simply seeking therapy from a secular therapist who is gay affirming also raises problems as, since psychology has a history of atheism, secular therapists have an extensive reputation for either being unwilling or lacking the competence to address religious identity. This leaves few, if any,

professionals available to assist individuals seeking therapy to address the conflict

between their sexual and religious identities (Davidson, 2000).

For young gay Muslim men who are in a foreign country away from the supervision of

their family, struggling with issues that they cannot disclose to their families out of a fear of

rejection and ostracization and with no access to traditional healers, therapy can provide an outlet

and an avenue for connection and relief. For students, university counseling centers are often

ideal locations as services are confidential and complementary, and most therapists working at

these centers are culturally competent and familiar with identity development issues.

Chapter III

Methodology

A number of researchers have examined how gay Muslim men navigate their identities. Much of this research, conducted by sociologists and psychologists, has taken place outside the United States, primarily in Britain. Research is needed to address the unique cultural and sociopolitical contexts of the United States. As such, this study was conceived as a contribution to this minimal body of research by providing an examination of the identity negotiation process, factors that ameliorate or exacerbate identity conflict, coping efforts utilized to resolve the conflict, and issues pertinent for therapists and mental health practitioners providing therapy for gay Muslim men in the United States.

Four research questions shaped this study and provided a focus for the information collected. They are as follows:

- How do participants define (not define) or label (not label) themselves and their sexual behaviors and desires? In what ways is this based on the nation or culture they live in?

- How does an Islamic religious identity impact the development of a Muslim man's sexual identity? How does religious observation, level or degree of engagement/identification (e.g., devout, strongly, culturally), sect (e.g., Sunni versus Shia) impact this process?

- In what ways and to what degree do cultural factors pertaining to culture, family, social systems, and personal traits influence participant's identity development process?

- How do gay Muslim men cope with the stressors resulting from their conflicting identities and the consequences of the identity/ies they embrace?

The following chapter provides an overview of the processes and organization of the present study and its development. This chapter consists of six sections that provide detail on

participants and their demographics, recruitment, measures/interview protocol, procedures, data

analysis, and lastly, researcher bias and trustworthiness, and auditing procedures.

Participant Demographics

Nine men between the ages of 24 and 35 years participated in this study. All of the

participants identified as male, lived in the United States at the time of the study, communicated

in English, and endorsed stronger sexual attraction toward men than toward women. In terms of

ethnicity, seven participants identified as being of Middle Eastern descent, one as being of

Southeast Asian descent, and one as being African American. At the time of interviews,

participants lived in three geographical regions of the United States. The majority of the

participants lived in the West, and the remaining two lived in the Midatlantic and the South.

Less than half of the sample ($n = 3$) was born in the United States. Two of these three

participants identified as first-generation Americans. The third individual's family had lived in

the United States for many generations. One of this same individual's great-grandparents had

converted to Islam, and the following generations continued to practice Islam.

Six participants identified as immigrants and emigrated from five countries (one each

from Iraq, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon, and two from Israel). These six participants

had resided in the United between –-21 years, and their age at immigration spanned from 3–33

years. Two participants immigrated as young children with their families and acquired

citizenship. The remaining four immigrated at the age of 18 years or older. Two of these four

participants held student visas as they were pursuing advanced degrees, and the other two had

been granted asylum due to persecution of their sexual identities in their home countries.

Participants were asked if they have any intention or desire to move outside of the United States.

One participant, who was born in the United States, expressed an interest to do so at some point in the future.

The family size of the participants varied. Every participant had at least one sibling, with one sibling ($n = 2$) and two siblings ($n = 3$) as the most prevalent numbers. The remaining four had three, four, five, and 30 siblings. Almost half of the sample ($n = 4$) reported that they were the eldest child in their family. Seven of the nine participants came from middle class families in their respective countries, and two identified as poor.

With regard to education, eight participants held a bachelor's degree, and five were still enrolled as students. One of the students was pursuing an associate's degree, and four were pursuing doctoral degrees. The majority of the degrees, both received and pursued, pertained to the fields of medicine, technology, physical sciences, and the social sciences. The jobs that participants identified followed a similar pattern. Seven of the nine participants were employed. One of the participants who did not have a job was prevented from seeking employment due to restrictions related to his asylum process; however, he did participate in volunteer work. The other individual was a full-time student who did not work while attending school.

When asked about dating history, eight participants reported that they had dated at some point in their lives, and one participant had been married to a woman and had divorced her a few years ago. Of these eight individuals, three had dated members of both genders and five had only dated men. At the time of the interview, six participants identified as single while the remaining three participants had a significant other.

Regarding affiliation with an Islamic sect, two participants did not provide specific information when completing the demographic form. The seven participants who did identify an

affiliation overwhelmingly identified as Sunni. One individual stated a joint identity as Sunni

and Shia as his mother and father affiliated with different sects.

The last demographic question presented to participants asked whether they agreed or

disagreed with the following statement: A man cannot identify as both Muslim and

gay/homosexual. The overwhelming majority of participants ($n = 7$) disagreed with this

statement, believing that it is possible for men to simultaneously hold both identities. The

remaining two participants agreed. With regard to those who disagreed with this statement, the

majority of the participants' identities did not coincide with their belief about the possibility of

simultaneously identifying as both Muslim and gay. In other words, it appears that some

participants believed that it is possible to identify as both Muslim and gay in theory but they did

not personally hold both of these identities simultaneously.

To introduce the reader to each participant, a brief narrative of every participant, referred

to by a pseudonym, is provided. In addition to the narratives, a demographic table (see Table 1)

is also provided for the reader's ease of reference. Table 1 presents the participants' pseudonyms

names, their ages arranged by decade, their country of birth, their developmental age at time of

immigration, and their response to Question 10, which asked if whether someone could

simultaneously identify as both gay and Muslim. All demographic information is presented as it

was at the time the study was conducted.

Hakim. Hakim is of Middle Eastern descent and is in his 20s. He emigrated from Iraq to

the United States with his parents and younger brother. Hakim spent his childhood in the

Midwest and then moved to the West Coast.

Omar. Omar is of Middle Eastern descent and is in his 20s. His family emigrated from Afghanistan prior to his birth. He is the eldest male in his family and spent his childhood living on the West Coast.

Fuad. Fuad is of Middle Eastern descent and is in his 20s. Fuad's family emigrated from Palestine and he was born in the United States. He spent his early childhood in the Midwest and then moved with his family to the West Coast.

Zakari. Zakari is of Southeast Asian descent and is in his 20s. As a young child he immigrated to the United States from Sri Lanka with his parents and a younger sibling. The family settled on the West Coast.

Rafiq. Rafiq is of Middle Eastern descent and is in his 20s. He emigrated from Lebanon to the United States to pursue a college education as a teenager. He moved to the West Coast and lived with relatives as he attended school. He is the eldest child, and his parents and siblings still reside in Lebanon.

Adam. Adam is of North African descent and is in his 30s. He was born in North Africa and immigrated to Saudi Arabia with his parents and siblings as a young child. Adam was granted asylum by the U.S. government in 2013.

Ahmed. Ahmed is of Middle Eastern descent and is in his 20s. He was born into a Palestinian family living in Israel. Ahmed was granted asylum by the U.S. government in 2013, and he moved to the West Coast 1 year ago.

Yousef. Yousef is of Middle Eastern descent and in his 20s. He was born into a Palestinian family living in Israel. As a teenager, Yousef immigrated to the United States to pursue a college education. He moved to the Southern region of the United States to live near relatives as he attends school. His immediate family still resides in Israel.

Mehdi. Mehdi identifies as an African American man in his 30s. He is the eldest of his

siblings and lives on the East Coast where he was born. Mehdi is fourth generation follower of

Islam in his family, following his great-grandparent's conversion to the religion.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Birth Country	Age at Immigration	Question 10 Response
Hakim	20s	Iraq	Early childhood	Yes
Omar	20s	United States	N/A	No
Fuad	20s	United States	N/A	No
Zakari	20s	Sri Lanka	Early childhood	No
Rafiq	20s	Lebanon	Late adolescence	No
Adam	30s	Sudan	Adulthood	Yes
Ahmed	20s	Israel	Adulthood	No
Yousef	20s	Israel	Late adolescence	No
Mehdi	30s	United States	N/A	No

Recruitment

In order to participate in this study, individuals had to meet the following six criteria: age

18 years or older, able to speak or communicate in English, identify as male, raised as and/or

identify as Muslim, have a stronger sexual attraction toward men than women, and grew up in

the United States or a predominantly Muslim/Middle Eastern nation. An initial preference for

participants from an Arab or Middle Eastern nation was waived due to difficulty recruiting

individuals who met this criterion.

Given the challenges associated with accessing men who identify or have identified as

gay and Muslim, I utilized nonrepresentative sampling methods and procedures commonly used

to recruit members of hard to reach communities, like MSM (Heaphy, Weeks, & Donovan,

1998). The first two individuals who participated in this study heard about the project by word

of mouth via personal contacts of mine who agreed to distribute flyers via email and listservs

(see Appendix A). The same flyer was used for all advertisements and recruitment purposes.

The remaining individuals were recruited though chain referral and snowball sampling methods.

After completing their interviews, participants were asked to help disseminate information about

the study, and those who agreed to assist with recruitment made postings on gay Muslim-specific

listservs. In addition to postings made on my behalf by personal contacts and participants, I also

posted frequent advertisements on Craigslist, primarily in the San Francisco Bay Area, and

created a Facebook page intended to recruit interested individuals.

The posting that was disseminated through email, listserv, Craigslist, and Facebook,

listed the eligibility criteria and advertised a $25 prepaid VISA gift card as a token of

appreciation for participating. Individuals interested in participating contacted me via email and

either requested additional information about the study or asked to participate. I asked

prospective participants if they met each inclusion criterion and offered an interview to everyone

who met the criteria to participate. The individuals who did not meet all of the criteria were

informed that they did not qualify to participate based on the specific criteria/on that they did not

meet and thanked for their interest in the study.

Depending on the participant's personal preference and logistics, the interviews took

place in person or over the phone. Four of the participants requested to meet in person while the

remaining five were comfortable with phone interviews. I was able to accommodate each

participant's location and format preferences. I informed all of the participants who partook in

telephone interviews that it was not possible to ensure the confidentiality of the phone call. The

five participants who were interviewed by phone acknowledged this fact and still agreed to the

interview.

Prior to conducting an interview, I needed to have a hand-signed copy of the consent form (see Appendix B) from each participant. The form consisted of two pages outlining the participant's rights in detail. For phone interviews, the participant and I arranged for a copy of the consent form to be sent via email or mail, and the interviews were scheduled once I had the completed form in his possession. I informed each participant that I might need to contact him in the future to ask subsequent questions. All participants expressed comfort with future contact, and they indicated their preferred method of future contact on the consent form.

Measure Used and Interview Protocol

Demographics form. The demographics form (see Appendix C) consisted of 18 questions. The questions inquired about the individual's age, country of birth, region of residence in their home country, country of residence prior to age 18, length of time residing in the United States, location of residence in the United States, their reason for moving to the United States (if applicable), their desired length of residence in the United States, number of siblings, childhood socioeconomic status, selected gender of partner in an ideal world, if they have dated before and the gender of their prior and current partners, highest level of education completed, current grade and major (if applicable), current occupation or most recent occupation if unemployed (if applicable), the Islamic sect with which they affiliate, and lastly, they were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "A man cannot identify as both Muslim and gay/homosexual." Four of the participants completed the form prior to the interview; the remainder completed the form with me at the beginning of the interview.

Semistructured questionnaire. The interviews were conducted using the semistructured life-world approach (Kvale, 2007). Kvale (2007) identified the primary purpose of this type of research interview as obtaining participants' descriptions of their life and world. This

information is then interpreted to provide insight into how they make meaning of their

experiences. The semistructured questionnaire (see Appendix D) contained 18 questions, two of

which contained multiple follow-up items. These questions fell under six domains, four of

which correlated with the research questions. Following the order in which they were presented

during the interview, these domains include (a) childhood and family life, (b) religious identity,

(c) sexual identity, (d) coping mechanisms, (e) current identity, and (f) review. The review

section provided an opportunity for participants to expand on their earlier responses or share any

information that the questions did not address. I used the experiences garnered from a

practice/pilot interview with a volunteer participant who met the six criteria previously listed to

organize the order of the questions. The final interview protocol and other facets of the current

study utilized insight gained from this practice/pilot interview, which was not included in the

data.

Procedures

The interview protocol. I conducted one in-depth interview with each participant. The

interviews lasted between 60–90 min with the majority concluding after 75 min. Prior to asking

the first interview question, I reviewed the consent form with the participant, who had an

opportunity to ask questions and express any relevant concerns. I emphasized the participant's

right to refrain from answering any questions and reminded the participant that he could

terminate the interview at any time. Following the participant's consent, I introduced the study

by stating the following:

> In the past few years there has been an interest among psychologists in identity
>
> development and conflicting identities. I am particularly interested in gay identity
>
> development and how gay people recognize their sexual orientation and the process that

they undergo to accept their sexual orientation. From interacting with my peers and

through my personal experiences, I am also aware that many gay men may initially have

difficulty accepting their gay identity, especially individuals from communities that

discourage homosexuality. Little research has been conducted that examines the

experiences of Arabic and Middle Eastern identified gay men who are Muslim and living

in the United States. I am excited to learn more from you about your experiences in order

to fill this gap.

Before asking the first question, I received verbal consent from all of the participants to

audio record the interview, and once provided, I began recording. After finishing the interview, I

read a debriefing statement (see Appendix E) and the participants had additional opportunities to

ask questions and provide feedback. The length of this postinterview conversation varied

depending on the participant's reaction to the study, interest in discussing topics related to the

research, and questions pertaining to the presentation and publication of the material.

Information exchanged after the audio recorder was turned off, was not included in the transcript,

and therefore was not coded.

Transcripts and data security. I retained sole access of the materials collected during

the interview process. After uploading the digital recordings for each interview to my password-

protected computer, the interviews were deleted from the recording device. I transcribed all nine

interviews verbatim. All consent and demographic forms received in person or electronically

were printed and stored in a folder within a locked filing cabinet.

Participants also had an opportunity to choose a pseudonym that would replace their

actual names in the manuscript. If a participant did not want to select a pseudonym, I selected a

name on his behalf. I initially labeled the electronic folders based on the order of the interview

(1–9) and, as the study progressed, the files were labeled with the pseudonyms. Five years after completion of the study, I will delete all electronic personal data and shred all paper documents containing any of the participant's personal information.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (TA). TA is a fundamental tool for analyzing qualitative research. The theoretically flexible nature of the approach and the widely applicable skillset needed to analyze data from this approach make it an ideal tool for beginning qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While some theorists (e.g., Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2000) classify TA as a qualitative tool and not a specific method, not all researchers agree. Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined a standardized process for utilizing TA as the primary data analysis method for a qualitative study. Like grounded theory, TA is not based on a specific theory or epistemology. Researchers can use it in conjunction with other methods, and it is compatible with both essentialist and constructionist paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The model for TA, which consists of six phases, helps establish TA as a separate methodological entity that researchers can use as a primary form of analysis and not simply a tool that complements other methods.

Braun and Clarke (2006) explicitly outline the six phases of TA. The first phase in the process involves familiarization with the data. The second phase begins after the researcher reviews the data and consists of generating the initial codes. The third phase involves looking at the data from a broader perspective and allowing major themes to emerge. In Phase 4, the researcher evaluates the themes identified and organized in Phases 2 and 3 to determine their relevance and connection with the study. This occurs within the context of the full transcript. Themes also are reviewed to determine if they can be collapsed or combined with other themes

or divided into several subthemes. The fifth phase focuses on defining and refining the themes.

The essence of the group typically serves as the label or the description of the theme. In order to

define and label a theme, it is often necessary to conduct further editing or refinement. The sixth

and final phase involves weaving all of the data into a coherent story that accurately and

succinctly answers the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To support the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the data, the researcher includes

vivid examples from the transcript. Aside from supporting the conclusions, these examples

increase the trustworthiness of the data and enhance the understanding of the material (Braun &

Clarke 2006). For a more thorough explanation of the six phases of the standardized model, see

Braun and Clarke (2006). Other useful resources addressing thematic analysis include Aronson

(1994), Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), and Boyatzis, (1998).

Braun and Clarke (2006) advised researchers to make several decisions prior to starting

the coding process. The first decision involves determining whether they will approach the

content from a manifest or latent level. This refers to the depth in which the content is processed

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). I chose to focus primarily on manifest content in order to minimize any

risk of misinterpreting the participants' responses. The second decision regards whether the

researcher takes an inductive or deductive approach to the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Having read similar studies and attaining some awareness and insight into the phenomena under

study, I utilized a deductive approach.

Domains. Based on the research questions and the construction of the study, four

domains of interest were identified prior to data analysis. The codes and themes developed were

based upon the four domains: religion, sexuality, identity, and mental health/coping. After

coding the data and reviewing the codes, a fifth domain, interpersonal relationships, emerged.

These five domains provided an initial outline for the study. Within each domain, the themes were organized within categories, and particular attention was paid to which categories were relevant to the participants and which categories only pertained to some of the participants.

  Coding. Prior to coding and analyzing the data, I identified nine coding styles compatible with TA, the four research questions, and the sample used in this study. These methods were attribute, magnitude, structural, descriptive, in vivo, emotional, values, narrative, and theming the data (for a description and review of the coding styles see Saldana, 2009). After conducting and transcribing the interviews, I reevaluated the coding methods selected during the design phase. Based on their relevance to the research questions and compatibility with the content of the interviews, I used five of the initial nine styles (structural, descriptive, in vivo, emotional, and values coding) that I identified from the data that emerged and discarded the remaining four coding styles (attribute, magnitude, narrative, and theming the data).

  Upon completion of each transcript, the document was uploaded into MAXQDA 11, a qualitative data analysis software program. Akin to other computer-assisted data acquisition systems (e.g., CADAS), MAXQDA 11 provides a central location to organize and maintain the coding process. I reviewed the transcripts line by line and added new codes as necessary. A total of 247 initial codes emerged from the nine transcripts, and after several review processes, the 247 codes were reduced to 71 codes that were then categorized within 23 themes, which fit within the five domains.

  TA Phase 1. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize the importance of having familiarity with the data. I gained familiarity with the data primarily by conducting the interviews and transcribing them verbatim. I invested over 120 hours in the transcription process. Lapadat and

Lindsay (1999) stated that transcription is an interpretative act that assists with creating meaning of the data being transcribed.

TA Phase 2. I reviewed the nine transcripts line by line, and, in an effort to maximize coverage of the interviews, coded anything that seemed slightly relevant to the study. In doing so, I generated a list of 247 initial codes, most of which were primarily semantic in content and pertained to a variety of phenomenon. These codes were then further distilled and similar concepts were combined (e.g., coming out to friends and family became coming out to others), resulting in a final list of 71 codes.

TA Phase 3. I then focused on the final list of codes and began to organize them by theme. I identified 23 themes from the 71 codes.

TA Phase 4. After identifying the 23 themes, I then reread the transcripts again to ensure that no important details were missed that might support or contradict the 71 codes and 23 themes identified in the prior phases. While rereading the transcripts, I also recorded them in MAXQDA 11, using the codes and themes from Phases 2 and 3.

TA Phase 5. I then continued to explore the content of each theme and assigned them to one of the five domains (religion, sexuality, identity negotiation, mental health, and interpersonal relationships) previously established.

TA Phase 6. In the final phase, I determined how the themes best fit together and weaved them into a coherent narrative reflecting the participants as a collective group as well as individuals. For a complete list of the codes and themes identified throughout the analysis period, see Appendix F.

Saturation

The sample size for this study was determined using theoretical saturation. Experts in the field of qualitative research have not reached a consensus on the ideal size for study samples and the samples vary by type of qualitative methodology (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). The experts do share consensus on utilizing theoretical saturation as a means of determining the ideal sample size. In their analysis of 60 in-depth interviews, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) established the meta-themes by the sixth interview, and they reached theoretical saturation by the 12th interview.

In order to identify the percentage of codes attributed to each participant, I obtained a code matrix that identified which participants received which codes. I arranged the nine participants in their order of interview along the x-axis and the list of codes. If a code was assigned to a single participant, that participant received credit for that code. For codes that applied to multiple participants, the participant who was interviewed earliest in the order received credit for that code. I then tallied the number of codes assigned to each participant and divided the number by the total code count (225). The initial code count was 247, but I removed 22 in vivo codes, or quotations, from the initial total, as these codes primarily related to quotations that often reflected concepts captured by other codes. Approximately 90% of the codes developed within the first six interviews; by the eighth interview, 98% of the codes had emerged. For further details about theoretical saturation, see Table 2.

Table 2

Theoretical Saturation

Participant	# of codes	# of quotes	Percentage of codes
1	53	2	26
2	32	0	24
3	43	4	19
4	23	6	10
5	20	6	9
6	27	2	12
7	10	3	4.5
8	8	0	3.5
9	4	2	2

Note. There were 247 total codes; codes related to 22 in vivo questions were deleted for a final code count of 225.

Researcher Bias and Trustworthiness

Self reflection. Considering how the qualitative researcher uses the self as a research tool, ongoing self reflection is essential throughout the processes of the study. After transcribing each interview, I completed a modified version of the Guide for Written Self-Reflection of Interviews (Roulston, de Marrais, & Lewis, 2003), which consists of 23 questions (see Appendix G). On average, my interviewing skills improved with each participant. After completing the self-reflection journal, it became apparent that I felt much more connected to the participants with whom I met in person. The telephone interviews provided a substantial amount of information, but several of the participants did not seem as engaged as others, which their brief responses to the questions reflected.

Trustworthiness. I contacted each participant and asked him to review the transcript from his interview. The voluntary transcript review process involved reading through the

transcribed interview and making any corrections or clarifications in the transcript. Those

willing to participate received an email containing a brief explanation of the review process and

an encrypted, password-protected attachment. A follow-up text or Facebook message or a

separate email containing the document's password soon followed. Upon receiving the reviewed

transcripts, I incorporated the edits within the final transcripts and began the coding process.

This review helped ensure the trustworthiness of the data and gave participants an opportunity to

reflect on the narrative they shared.

I managed to reach eight of the nine participants, and seven participants agreed to review

the transcripts. Four of the seven participants who agreed to review the transcript returned the

documents with edits. The other three informed me, via email, that they did not need to make

any changes. The four participants who returned the transcripts made few corrections. Several of

them commented on their speaking habits and their tendency to say um as they collected their

thoughts. I informed these individuals that the interviews were transcribed verbatim and that any

idiosyncratic tendencies or expressions would be removed from the excerpts used in the final

study.

The remaining participant who was contacted and chose not to review the transcript

insisted that he trusted me and did not consider it necessary to review his transcript. Several

efforts were made to contact the ninth participant; however, the individual who responded at the

phone number that was provided on the consent form denied any knowledge of me or of

participating in an interview.

Auditing procedures. In addition to fact checking with the participants, a graduate

student affiliated with the university I attended, assisted with code review. The graduate student

read a transcript and identified 24 initial codes. The codes were then presented to me and the

graduate student provided her rationale for the codes. The graduate student's list overlapped with my list of codes. The next step of the code review process involved the graduate student reviewing the list of final codes (71 in total). The graduate student did not find any problematic codes in the list. After spending so much time steeped in the data, listening to what the graduate student found as the most poignant details of the interviews gave me an opportunity to revisit some of my initial reactions during the interview. Her notes also provided clarity on what themes to emphasize in the discussion.

Chapter IV

Results

The purpose of this study was to identify how gay-identified men raised in Islamic settings and living in the United States cope with the conflict between their religious and sexual identities and to better understand which situations mitigate or enhance the conflict that many experience. The study had four primary research questions:

- How do participants define (not define) or label (not label) themselves and their sexual behaviors and desires, and in what ways is this based on the nation or culture they live in?

- How does an Islamic religious identity impact the development of a Muslim man's sexual identity; that is, how does religious observation, level or degree of engagement/identification (e.g., devout, strongly, culturally), or sect (e.g., Sunni versus Shiite) impact this process?

- In what ways and to what degree do factors pertaining to culture, family, social systems, and personal traits influence participant's identity development process?

- How do gay Muslim men cope with the stressors resulting from their conflicting identities and the consequences of the identity/ies they embrace?

Four domains of interest—religion, sexuality, identity negotiation, and mental health issues— were identified at the outset of the study. An additional domain (interpersonal relationships) emerged while reviewing the interviews. Each of the five domains contains multiple categories or dominant themes that emerged directly from the transcripts. They are discussed below.

Domain 1: Religion

The primary unifying theme of this study and the common connection shared by all participants is their religious identification as Muslim at some point in their lives. Regardless of

whether participants embraced an Islamic religious identity at the time of the study, all nine

individuals spent their childhoods raised in Muslim families and the majority lived in Muslim-

dominant communities and countries.

I identified any religious topics in the interviews and categorized them under the domain

of religion. During the interview participants were asked to state their current religious identity

and to share the religious developmental process they underwent starting from birth to the time

of the interview.

Current religious observance/identity. All participants reported that they were raised

in Muslim households and seven participants identified their affiliation with the Sunni sect. One

participant disclosed that one of his parents identified as Sunni and the other as Shiite and one

did not specify his sect. Except for one, the participants endorsed religion as young children and

then, as they matured, the religious beliefs and identities underwent transformations. This

section presents an exploration of the participants' current religious identity/observance.

When asked about their current religious observance, the participants had a variety of

responses. A minority of the participants, three in total, identified as Muslim, and the remaining

six participants reported that they do not practice the Five Pillars of Islam and therefore no

longer consider themselves Muslim.

Currently identify as Muslim. Of the three participants who continue to identify as

Muslim, all had a different label for themselves (Sunni Muslim, modern Muslim or Aisyiyah,

and part-time Muslim). Mehdi strongly identifies as a Sunni Muslim. He stated, "I follow

everything . . . I pray five times a day, I read my Quran, I teach other people, I get people

married."

Yousef described himself as a practitioner of Aisyiyah, or modern Islam. He had learned this term from another person who had proffered it after hearing about Yousef describing his religious beliefs and values.

I used to say that I am a nonpracticing Muslim, which didn't really mean that I am very firm in my beliefs; it was just more of that's where most of my values come from—my religion. . . . Based on my overall beliefs and values, I would say just Modern Muslim or something like that.

Omar described himself as a "part-time Muslim," a label he had developed. When asked to define the term, Omar said that as a part-time Muslim:

I believe in God, I believe that you should be good to people, like the Five Pillars of Islam is praying, knowing in God, going on Hajj, fasting. I don't fast; I mean I don't get anything from it. I don't see the point of starving yourself from sun up to sun down; I would rather . . . give money to charity that helps people, you know, that is more valuable.

Omar's description implies that while he does not follow each of the Five Pillars, the standard definition of a practicing Muslim, he still believes in God and follows some elements of Islam. Omar's description of a part-time Muslim corresponds with the pattern that other participants shared regarding compromise around their beliefs. Omar claimed that he did not follow the five tenets, specifically, praying five times a day, because U.S. culture does not accommodate this lifestyle. He explained,

I don't think I could pray five times a day . . . during the workday; it's just not happening. We don't live in Afghanistan, you don't live in a Muslim country, so if

you are talking you can . . . [say] "I'll be back in 5 minutes or 10 minutes; I have to

go pray."

In response to my inquiry about whether he would engage in prayer five times a day if he lived

in a Muslim majority country or a place in which daily prayer was accommodated, Omar replied,

"I probably would just because everyone else was doing it, probably."

Currently identify as non-Muslim. Of the six participants who do not identify as

Muslim, two described themselves as atheist, one as agnostic, one as spiritual (nonspecified), and

the remaining two simply stated that they no longer identify as Muslim without specifying any

other labels.

Adam and Ahmed both identified themselves as atheists during the interview. They

described how they came to their realizations that God did not exist. Both Adam and Ahmed

explored a variety of religions to determine if they could find another religion besides Islam.

After arriving in the United States and gaining more exposure to Christians, Adam stated that

I was shocked about how similar the mentality about the people of religion. It did

not matter if you were Christian or Muslim or whatever; it is just some kind of the

same mentality that they justify the things that are not otherwise justifiable

through the ancient texts through which they believe.

Adam's observations of the similarities between Christians and Muslims, among other religious

groups, appear to have contributed to his dismissal of religion entirely. Ahmed made a similar

statement after exploring Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. He commented on his wariness of

any group endorsing shared beliefs that he cannot prove. Ahmed stated,

I was also trying to read some Buddhism things and then I came to that karma

thing and okay, and then I figured out that Karma is another way of identifying

> God, which is the same God, and so I came to the conclusion that, why should I
>
> belong to a certain group, because at some maybe another 1,000 years from now
>
> that group will fight for that belief and impose it on others.

The notion of imposing beliefs on others was a common sentiment among the participants who no longer identify as Muslim or religious.

Zakari and Fuad both stated that they are no longer practicing Muslim, but they did not identify their current religious identity. Zakari described his religious/spiritual beliefs.

> I actually try to stay away from . . . mosques and religious practices because I feel
>
> like for me it is more of a spiritual thing with kind of like there is a higher power
>
> but I am not convinced or certain that I need to pray to it. Looking at other
>
> religions, I relate to them, say for example Buddhism or Christianity. They all
>
> preach great things and for me I feel like it would not be appropriate to only
>
> identify with one religion as there are so many good things out there; and so I
>
> think that as far as being a Muslim, I think an identity, I cannot shed it, I don't
>
> feel like I cannot say I'm not Muslim but I don't want to say that I am a Muslim
>
> or a practicing Muslim, so maybe with a qualifier.

Zakari touches on numerous issues in this interview excerpt. In contrast to Adam and Ahmed, who reject religion as they perceive it as endorsing faulty concepts, Zakari does not want to identify with only one religion. He also alluded to the fact that there is some uncertainty about religion and spirituality. Zakari discussed how he has "more of a desire to be spiritual rather than religious. I think that people as human beings need, I guess not a higher power, but something to believe in, something to give us hope."

Fuad did not identify as atheist, but he emphasized how "I have been more scientifically oriented . . . since I stopped being Muslim around 17." He also discussed how he has studied religion and knows a lot about the historical context of Abrahamic religions.

Unique to the rest of the participants, Rafiq grew up in a "not very religious household." Originally from Lebanon and Muslim heritage, he shared how his parents made the decision "not to push religion too much on me or me with my sisters." Rafiq stated that

My parents made that decision because I was born at the end of a 10-year war in

Lebanon between different religious groups . . . my parents definitely living

through the whole thing suffered a lot because of religious conflicts of the

country.

With minimal religious influence in his home environment and awareness of the religious animosity among his peers and community, Rafiq spent a lot of time reflecting on religion. Aside from his birth certificate, which identifies him as a Muslim based on his father's lineage, he never established a strong religious identity and he currently has no religious affiliation. As a result of the destruction that he witnessed in the name of religion, Rafiq stated, "I am ambivalent towards religion."

Rafiq describes himself as agnostic. He said,

Now I am comfortable saying that I am agnostic, not atheist, that is a little too

harsh. But as a scientist that is another aspect of it. I am already very questioning

about, umm, especially having not really liked the things that have come out of

religion I was extra critical (laughter) about my views on it.

Feelings about current religious identity/observance—Muslims. When asked to share how he felt about his current religious observance, Mehdi instantly stated, "Oh, I am fine with

it." As he discussed his Muslim identity, Mehdi communicated his self-assuredness and confidence as a Muslim by not wavering when responding or not questioning his responses. Yousef and Omar responded to the same question with slightly more ambivalence than Mehdi, and other content from their interviews indicated that they may have more questions and doubts about their observance. While Yousef and Omar did not have the same degree of confidence as Mehdi, they still identified as Muslim. In reference to his religious identity, Yousef expressed that he is still evolving. He stated,

> I would say that [religious identity] is something that I have not fully figured out
> yet. It is something that I am still working on . . . but . . . if somebody asks me I
> will definitely include it as part of my overall identity, but not sure to what extent.

Omar asserted that since he began identifying as a part-time Muslim,

> I think I'm happier right now. Before, I was not happy . . . If you are Muslim,
> obviously a guy is not supposed to like a guy because that is wrong. But if you
> believe that God made you a certain way and you know that God has planned
> your life for you, then this is God's doing.

Feelings about current religious identity/observance—non-Muslims. When the non-Muslim-identified participants shared how they felt about their current religious observance, the six participants fell into various categories. The group that endorsed an improvement in their quality of life following their change in religious observance consisted of four participants. These individuals acknowledged that their departure from Islam created significant levels of interpersonal and intrapsychic stress; however, at the time of the interview they felt comfortable with their sexuality and sexual preferences.

In terms of the more specific groups, Hakim, Fuad, Adam, and Ahmed endorsed strongly negative reactions to religion. Among the sample ($n = 9$), these four individuals described the most pain and duress resulting from religion and they reacted to religion in different ways. Adam did not disguise his contempt for religion during the interview. He reflected on the sacrifices he made in the name of religion and the sense of loss he endured after he no longer believed in God:

> Yeah and then you think of gay and God is giving you a test to see to test your patience and is going to make it up for you and then like I said, by the age of 30 when I said I am not going to be compensated for all the pain and I think sometimes I still feel, ah, anger that I have been lied to and I put up with so much waiting to be compensated in heaven and now I know it was a big lie so I am still trying to find ways to deal with it.

Ahmed reflected on the losses resulting from his identification as atheist. While discussing holidays and celebrations, Ahmed shared, "I feel like there is a gap, there is a gap, because like every one almost everyone celebrates some types of feasts a year."

Hakim expressed a similar sentiment as he no longer celebrates any of the cultural and religious holidays or feasts related to his Muslim heritage. During Ramadan or other holidays, he informed me how

> There are Muslim holidays that still roll around every once and a while, but I don't, yeah I don't care about them so much. I hear about them, when Ramadan rolls by I will, if I see . . . a Muslim person on campus . . . there are other gay Muslims on campus as well, I will say happy holiday, happy new year.

Rafiq commented on how his lack of religious identity or religious observance has resulted in a sense of separation from others. While he did not explicitly state that he felt isolated, Rafiq describes his difficulty with defining himself in the following excerpt:

> I still had friends from different religious groups, it was just kind of, uh, I never knew how to answer the religion question and I don't know if I still do, just because it was never easy to define myself in one category or another.

Asked if he thinks he will ever identify with a religion, Rafiq responding by saying, "I don't think I will, it's going to be very hard." For Rafiq religion "is still an aspect missing from my life and I don't know if it is ever going to be something that I will completely embrace or incorporate."

Cultural identity versus religious identity. Regardless of whether they currently identify as Muslim or not all of the participants spoke about the cultural connection that they will forever relate to Islam. Hakim described this experience in by comparing Muslims to atheist and agnostic Jewish and Christian individuals in the following excerpt:

> I do see myself in the same way that there are atheist or agnostic Jews who culturally identify as Jewish. I see myself in a very abstract way identifying culturally as Muslim because that is the way I was brought up and there are quite a few things about me still . . . that is a very culturally entwined. It is integrated into my psyche. Maybe it is more accurate to say I identify as Muslim as a lot of atheists identify as Roman Catholic still. Like they still, there are still a lot of atheists or agnostic people who were raised Roman Catholic, but don't buy it they think it is a load of garbage, but are still very much, they can't let go. They went to mass they were alter boys things like that.

Ahmed, Zakari, and Rafiq shared similar sentiments to Hakim's. They identified how they still greet others in a manner consistent with their culture and they think about many of the teachings and stories they heard in religious settings during their childhood. Rafiq and Zakari shared how they struggle to differentiate their culture from Islam. Rafiq stated,

> Yeah, for me it is hard to differentiate whether it was religion itself or culture in terms of living in the Middle East and having certain teachings, but a lot of that culture draws a lot of things out of religion and religious teachings, so maybe they are correlated in a way.

Zakari talked about the influence of his parents.

> I would tell people I was raised Muslim, but I don't practice, and today that is how I feel. I was raised Muslim but I don't practice it but I feel like it is a part of me . . . I still find myself wondering if that was the religion itself or that was just my parents' upbringing of me and it was associated with religion.

Ahmed described how he negotiates this interesting dynamic by continuing to celebrate some religious festivals and holidays in a secular manner.

> For me like I call my family if there is a feast, ah, culturally I cele . . . like I eat with some friends here like we went out for dinner and had the same type of food like we have on feast, but it was like a cultural thing not a religious belief thing . . . I enjoy it . . . I am celebrating it culturally, not religiously, because though I stopped believing, but I cannot eliminate all these 28 years that I was living a cultural thing and not only a religious thing.

As the participants spoke about their cultural identification as Muslim, it became apparent that

they experienced a degree of conflict. Hakim described the psychological pull between "cultural

identification" and "religious antagonism." In terms of logistics, Rafiq stated,

> The logistical piece says I am Muslim and part of me you know someone asks if I
>
> am Muslim, I still say yes, or um, yeah, it is hard for me to completely turn it
>
> down, deny it, or cut it out, umm, but at the same time I know I am not a
>
> practicing Muslim.

Considering the power of nationalism and pride, especially among immigrant communities or

foreign nationals living abroad, no longer identifying with a culture and the physical and

psychological comforts a familiar cultural identity provides, created a struggle for many of the

participants.

The participants who did not identify as practicing Muslims followed a similar series of

events that ultimately resulted in their decision to stop practicing Islam. These four participants

each began their religious transition with a period of questioning the religious beliefs they

learned as children. The questioning gave way to exploration of other Abrahamic religions and,

for Ahmed, Eastern religions as well. The individuals noticed similarities among the religions

that caused them to become increasingly disillusioned with the concept of organized religion.

Ahmed made a poignant statement about his view of religion. He said,

> All the fights in the Middle East are about religion and nobody can really prove
>
> that 2,000 years ago like that really happened . . . I cannot prove it didn't really
>
> happen, but why would I kill for that? I was also trying to read some Buddhism
>
> things and then I came to that karma thing and okay, and then I figured out that
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> karma is another way of identifying God, which is the same God, and so I came to

the conclusion that, why should I belong to a certain group, because at some

maybe another 1,000 years from now that group will fight for that belief and

impose it on others.

For Ahmed and the other participants who did not identify as religious or practice religion,

personal interactions, experiences, and contradicting statements and beliefs complicated their

relationship with organized religion. Another source of complication involved the

transformations in religious attitudes that accompanied emigration.

Increasingly conservative. Three participants discussed how their families became

increasingly more observant and conservative in their religious practices and beliefs. All three of

these families immigrated to a different country with young children. Hakim stated that while

living in Iraq, he remembers his "mom not being veiled" and he recalled, "She wore short

sleeves . . . and makeup." Within 2 years of moving to the United States Hakim shared that his

mother "went from being relaxed to covering herself from head to toe." Zakari had a similar

experience to Hakim's. His family moved to the United States from Sri Lanka when he was a

young child. In terms of religious influence, he recalls, "Growing up I remember . . . it was kind

of whatever my parents wanted to do." Once Zakari and his sister started attending "Sunday

school," Zakari's family became more invested in their Muslim identity. He stated,

It was not until Sunday school when I felt more of a duty to be religious, but I

thought my parents were more proactive about it as well, I noticed that my dad

prayed more and we started to eat Halal food. In the past, we were not as strict

about that. Once we started Sunday school my sister and I and became more strict

about that. That was probably around junior high when we went into high school.

I think I was a lot more aware and I identified a lot more with my religion.

In Sudan, where Adam spent his early childhood, he recalls Islam meant that "people should love each other and be nice to each other and be generous and love your neighbor and all that good stuff." Upon moving to Saudi Arabia at the age of 9 years with his family, the strict enforcement of Sharia policies by the Saudi Arabian government influenced his views of Islam. He stated that

> Over there they give you a version of religion that really interferes with every
>
> little detail of your life so and you are not allowed to listen to music, you are not
>
> allowed to sit with women, near women, or look at women.

The version of religion that Adam and his family practiced was different from the Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. While Adam and his siblings attended school and received Islamic education, his older family members "read these texts like the narratives, hadiths, the Quran, and stuff." He shared that his family members believed that they "didn't know much about our religion so they took it like they are learning more about what God is saying and with time they started to buy it."

Identity development process. All participants were asked to reflect on their religious beliefs and involvement throughout their life. Participants often responded to this question by stating their degree of religiosity as young children. All participants, except for Rafiq, stated that they were interested in religion with Hakim and Mehdi emphasizing how important religion was to them as children. Many participants either directly stated or alluded to the role that their families played in their early religious development. Omar, Rafiq, and Yousef had the least religious immediate families compared with other participants, and both Omar and Rafiq had religious grandparents who taught them about Islam. The remaining participants had more observant parents who practiced the Five Pillars, or some variation of them.

While discussing his home environment and whether he ever questioned or doubted religion, Mehdi stated that religion was "installed." "Well, growing up in my house it wasn't a question. It was install . . . it wasn't a question about I don't want to do this or I don't want to do that. It was installed in us." Other participants echoed Mehdi's sentiments about following what is expected of one as a child. Ahmed stated,

> For the first years like kids don't know what religion is, they are just told to do
>
> what their parents tell them to do. So, like if I am fasting, I am fasting because
>
> my mom is not cooking so I have to wait for the food until its sunset because I am
>
> not supposed to eat from sunrise to sunset because I am just told to do that
>
> because I don't know anything.

For Ahmed and other participants, as they matured and learned about the Quran and Islam this pattern of following one's parents was replaced with an internal desire and motivation. Ahmed continued on to say,

> At a certain age, like when you are a teenager, you are told to do that to make God
>
> happy, and then yes, you start believing you want to make God happy so you start
>
> doing that from the inside, like you believe that.

For some participants this process occurred earlier than adolescence, and there was a common theme of wanting to be a good Muslim. Omar said, "Of course I wanted to be a good Muslim because that is the thing to do." According to Ahmed a "good Muslim" involves following "all of these teachings," and Zakari stated, "I am going to be a good person and follow the Quran." As children, the participants overwhelmingly accepted what they were taught and complied with the beliefs of their families. Yousef stated, "I was pretty firm in my beliefs I

guess or what I thought I believed what my family said." Except for Mehdi, as the participants aged they soon began to question what it is they were taught as children.

Ahmed's narrative presented just previously is highly characteristic of the other participants as their religious development began with following their parents and developing a sense of personal religious ownership and a strong desire to be a "good Muslim." For many participants, this phase ended when they were confronted with a challenge (same-sex attraction) or exposed to a new idea (education) that made them question their beliefs and instill a sense of doubt about their Muslim identity.

Questioning/doubt. During adolescence, many participants began to question their religious beliefs. The emergence of these doubts often coincided with the awareness and/or identification of their same-sex attractions, education (attending college), exposure to media, and for some, immigration. These resources provided access to information that in turn reinforced the participants' doubts about their religious beliefs.

Adam spoke about the religious teachings he learned in high school and how he began to doubt and question many of them while he attended college outside of his home country. He said,

> Yeah, I was taught these things, and yeah, Jihad stuff like that, that went all the
> way through high school, and then when I went to college in Jordan I started to
> see other ideas and started to grow up a little bit and see like there are other
> beliefs. I was very close-minded at the time and then after college, I came back to
> work and I wasn't very, uh, into religion.

Zakari, Fuad, and Yousef reported a similar experience in college. Zakari's doubts about religion manifested soon after arriving in college and he gained exposure to a social network that felt indifferent about his identity as a Muslim or a nonpracticing Muslim.

Television and the Internet were two important forms of media where participants encountered information that contributed to their doubts about their religious identity. When asked if he felt that there was a moment when he decided to give up religion, Adam said,

Of course there are always some doubts, it is not really 100%, then like after 32 like I started to see some YouTube's, lecture[s] and I knew that I was right, I could feel that I was right, but I could not make up the arguments in my head to face the religion. So when I hear what they say it just feels so good to hear this from other people. Yeah, like one thing you have been trying so say for so long, you hear it from another person, and it just feels so good and so much easier.

He continued on to share that he was able to solidify his perspective on religion while watching *Religulous*, a movie starring comedian Bill Maher. Adam described it as "a very nice movie and it put so many things in perspective."

Adam described how he never really thought about the Islamic teachings he learned as a child. During an Internet discussion, a gentleman from Europe asked Adam to explain the rationale behind the some of the Islamic beliefs. Adam struggled to make sense of the explanation. He stated,

I tried to teach him the point of view from Islam and then when I looked at my answer . . . I start to think about it because in the past I was always thought these things as a child, and these are things that I don't ask anymore because you accept it and you move on you don't really think about it. So when I tried to give him

these answers I reexamined the logic of these things so I started to think. I did not

just jump over night with these but I began to reevaluate them.

The reevaluation process that Adam mentioned initiated a chain of thoughts that resulted

in Adam questioning his beliefs. It is notable that Adam mentioned how this process transpired

slowly. It took a period of reflection. After experiencing doubts about Islam, the participants

began to explore different religions.

Exploration. As Adam questioned the Sunni Muslim practices he had been taught as a

child, he began to explore the Shiite sect of Islam. Noticing some similarities and even more

shocking beliefs and values, Adam began exploring other religions. The majority of the

participants who investigated other religions examined Judaism and Christianity.

While exploring Judaism and Christianity, Ahmed struggled to believe the stories he

encountered in the holy scriptures of both religions. During his interview, Ahmed exclaimed,

I cannot believe that Moses talked to God, so I cannot believe in Judaism, I

cannot believe that virgin, like Mary was a virgin so I cannot be a Christian, I

cannot believe that Mohammed flew to the sky so I cannot be Muslim.

Detecting similar patterns between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Ahmed explained

his predicament during the interview in the following excerpt. "All of them are going around the

same thing. All of the Abrahamic religions are going around these same stories, and I don't

believe in any of the stories."

After learning about Judaism and Christianity, Adam reached a similar conclusion as

Ahmed. Adam stated, "I started to see the big picture very clear that it is the same thing in

Judaism and the Bible and I thought you people should go back to history where you came

from."

Recognizing the similarities and overlap between these three religions, some participants researched Eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism). Despite the apparent differences between the Abrahamic and Eastern religions, Ahmed and Zakari both made comments connecting Buddhism with Christianity. Ahmed compared Buddhism to Islam in the following excerpt from his interview:

> I was also trying to read some Buddhism things and then I came to that karma thing and okay, and then I figured out that karma is another way of identifying God, which is the same God.

Zakari did not emphasize the similarities between the religions in the same way as Ahmed; however, he did discuss how he could relate to numerous religions. He stated,

> Looking at other religions, I relate to them, say for example Buddhism or Christianity, they all preach great things, and for me I feel like it would not be appropriate to only identify with one religion.

For many participants, the exploration of other religions led to the conclusion that Islam was no different from other religions, which were based on myths and stories.

Rafiq and Fuad both expressed their interest in religion despite the fact that neither of them identify with a religion. Rafiq likened his approach to investigating religion as a "scientist going around with a magnifying glass, this is interesting, why are these people doing this. I want to learn more." Coming from an engineering perspective, Fuad stated,

> Religion is fascinating to me as regards to the historical relevance of it as an entity, but as an engineer it is a great . . . story and I think that everyone should read it, especially since it was written 2,000 years ago . . . the Bible, Torah, the Quran whatever, Tao Te Sing, all of that is very interesting to me in theory.

Turning/tipping points.   The participants who underwent a change in their religious

beliefs followed one of two paths. The first path was a definitive moment in which an epiphany

struck, often as the result of an event. In contrast to an immediate moment, the second pathway

involved a series of events that accumulated and over time led to a change in beliefs.

The turning points often occurred as individuals gained insights about their religious

beliefs and practices that conflicted with their principles. After moving to the United States to

attend college, Yousef shared,

> I just started thinking about things in a different way than I have, um, it was after
>
> a lot of exposure to . . . friends, and a lot of psychology stuff. I figured that I
>
> haven't really created like my own theology of anything. I have just basically
>
> gone with whatever I was told that I, you know, that I needed to figure what I
>
> really you know care about and didn't care about.

Hakim and Zakari both recalled the specific situation when they stopped believing in

Islam. Hakim recounted the experience of waking up one morning during college and

completing his morning prayers behind his mother. After he finished praying his mother

informed him that his prayers were invalid, having prayed behind a woman, and that he needed

to repeat them. Hakim referred to this moment as "the tipping point." He stated,

> That experience with my mother was a tipping point when I realized that this . . .
>
> type of oppression of women in Islam has even seeped into my mo . . . my very
>
> own mother thinks that she herself has somehow invalidated my prayer, my
>
> relationship with God, my communication with Him . . . That was like I said the
>
> tipping point where I never prayed again after that, and I never fasted Ramadan

after that, I would pretend that I was, but I would eat still because I did not buy it.

Everything pretty much dissolved after that.

Still living at home during this period, Hakim had to maintain the appearance that he practiced Islam as prescribed. Zakari's turning point occurred during his first year in college when he had more room to explore his beliefs as he attended college away from home. He stated,

I think there was a definitive moment . . . My freshmen year of college during

Ramadan . . . I was just so hungry and something came over me and I just thought

I don't need to be doing this, I don't need to be starving myself for the principle.

I don't see the point of this so I just stopped, and I didn't continue to fast, and I

stopped praying, and . . . I didn't feel obligated to practice religion for the next

few years. I just did not have a problem not going to the mosque or praying and I

did not feel guilty about this.

In contrast to Hakim and Zakari who recalled a "definitive moment" when they stopped practicing Islam, Ahmed and the other participants described a series of events and a steady reduction of religious behaviors that eventually resulted in their dismissal of Islam. Ahmed described his process that occurred over a 3-year period. He stated,

I joined a group for gay Palestinians, um, like you know we sit and talk in groups

and at that time I started to figure out that I am not sick, I am normal. So at the

age of 25, yeah, I figured out that I am a normal person and I stopped having guilt

trips. Yeah. Between 25 and 28 I was just like I stopped having any guilt trips

and then I was like I am not doing any prayers I'm not doing any . . . so I started

having this suspicion that these stories true or not true? Then at 28, I came to that

decision that, no these stories are not true . . . these are all myths and I am not believing in any of these stories.

Religious insecurity. Among the participants who no longer identified as Muslim, a few made comments that appeared to reflect a level of insecurity in their decision to reject Islam. While they are following their decisions, they appear to have a thought in the back of their minds that maybe they made a mistake.

Fuad reported that as a teenager he got a tattoo and as a result can no longer enter a mosque as he has desecrated the Quran. As he reflected on this "immature decision," he shared, "If I am going to be eternally damned then that is pretty set in stone at this point, do I believe in that? No, but it could just be a self-serving explanation." Adam and Ahmed also made statements about the possibility that they may have made a mistake by rejecting Islam. Adam acknowledged that he has had doubts about whether he should have stopped practicing Islam, as there is never 100% certainty with religion. These doubts did not undermine Adam's decision to reject Islam. In a similar period, Ahmed described how he had the following belief: "Maybe I will go to hell but let me at least enjoy life." All three participants appeared to question whether the religious beliefs that they have chosen to forfeit might affect them in the next life. All three participants firmly rejected religion, but they shared a degree of insecurity about the potential consequences of their actions.

Negative messages about homosexuality. Participants reported a variety of negative messages that they heard about homosexuality from their religious community as well as read about in the Quran. Numerous participants shared how they learned about the story of Lot, otherwise known as Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible, during their religious education. Hakim referred to it as the "story of gay people getting destroyed by God," and in his education "that

was the take-home message." Zakari recalled his religious teacher stating that men who are together "should go to hell." Adam shared that he received the message that "gay people are filthy animals" and "what they are doing is filthy and against nature." Adam stated that

> In the Islamic state when a man is having sex with another man this is so against nature that the throne of God, like God in the seventh heaven has a throne and it would shake from the ugliness of this action.

Lastly, Mehdi shared that growing up he learned that if you are "Muslim you not supposed to be gay, if you're gay you're supposed to be thrown over a cliff, you're supposed to get stoned." None of the participants talked about any affirming attitudes or affirmative statements directed toward MSM within a religious setting or context.

Many participants shared antigay statements that cited the Quran and other religious scriptures. In reference to the Quran, Zakari stated, "I've never really seen any explicit messages about homosexuality."

The Story of Lot and historical context. Both Fuad and Adam discussed the misinterpretations of the story of Lot in the following excerpts from their interviews. Fuad said,

> One thing I have not shared with you is my interpretation of the Quran, it is not just my interpretation, many Muslim scholars also share this interpretation—when sodomy is mentioned in the Quran you have to be aware of the context, the historical context, not just the pathos and the ethos but the logos that sodomy is wrong and the logic there. When it was written is that there was a group of people who came into a Judeo-Christian area and raped and pillaged them and sodomy was one of the practices in that historical context in that specific book was written.

Adam addressed a separate aspect of the story in the following statement:

> The main focus in the Quran that they were having sex with men, not about the
>
> inhospitality or anything, this was very clearly that these people were punished
>
> and this and it has never happened before the people of Lot or that sort of thing,
>
> that there was never any homosexual action ever before these people they were
>
> the first to invent it.

Both Fuad and Adam arrived at these conclusions after identifying their same-sex
attractions.

>*Aversion to Islam.* Adam made a poignant statement regarding his feelings about
conservative Muslim communities in the United States. This particular statement pertains to
Sharia. He stated,

> Some people in this country actually blame others for thinking like that it is just
>
> they see a lot of demonstrations in U.K. who want to apply Sharia is some parts of
>
> the U.K., and I sometimes overreact to Muslims here and I say no Sharia and my
>
> reaction is very strong. Sharia is pure BS and it is an insult to me just to mention
>
> it.

Both Hakim and Adam referenced how seeing men and women dressed according to
conservative Muslim doctrine caused them distress. Hakim proclaimed, "When I moved to San
Francisco and see someone wearing a veil I would get frightened." Adam shared, "When I see a
guy with a beard with woman who is covered I feel very negative feelings toward that." For
both individuals, men and women dressed in accordance with Sharia law triggered many of the
painful memories and feelings of their prior oppression. Adam clarified why the beard and veil
are especially frightening. In reference to the Islamic scriptures (Quran and hadith) that antigay

protestors cite he stated, "So anyone who comes with the beard means that he is following the exact verses that are making me and . . . others miserable"

 In addition to the increasing promotion of Sharia in places, like the United Kingdom and the United States, and visible markers of religious affiliation (i.e., beards, burqas), Adam also expressed his frustration with the efforts of Islamic proponents to portray Islam as a religion of peace. Having migrated to Saudi Arabia from Sudan as a young boy he spent the majority of his life in an Islamic state that closely adhered to Sharia principles. In the following excerpt, Adam addressed those who believe that Islam is a peaceful religion. He stated,

> I have seen your religion of peace and I lived in it for three decades and it is not
>
> peace and it is just it does not make sense and I don't want to hear anything. I
>
> don't visit Muslim centers and sometimes I don't want to see them.

Having struggled to endure the impact of Islamic principles in their homes and communities, both Hakim and Adam expressed strong disdain for aspects of Muslim culture that caused them so much pain. The intense feelings and distress that emerged during the interview when these topics were addressed convey the ongoing concerns and continued threat that all participants carry with them in their daily lives.

 Summary of religion. Except for one participant whose family did not identify with or practice their religion, the participants spent their childhoods as members of Sunni Muslim families. The degree of religious observance varied within these families as well as the approaches employed to educate the participants about Islam. While the majority of the participants are currently confident and comfortable with their established religious identities, a few participants acknowledged that their religious beliefs and identities are still evolving.

The majority of participants no longer identify as Muslim, with most identifying as atheist or agnostic. Among those participants who no longer identify as Islam, the majority reported that their quality of life has improved as they have developed a better understanding of themselves and closer relationships with their peers and younger relatives. A few participants who no longer practice described how they miss celebrating the Muslim holidays as well as the safety they felt in their relationships with Allah. Of the participants who still identify as Muslim, most have modified their conceptualization of Islam and the way they practice. These three individuals also reported many of the same benefits experienced by those who no longer identify with the religion. Regardless of their religious observance, all of the participants spoke about the cultural connection that they will always maintain with Islam as it is a central aspect of how they identify.

Degree of familial religious observance varied among the participants. The participants who had migrated with their families from one country to another reported stronger observance levels than those who were born in the United States or immigrated to the United States alone. As children, the participants learned about Islam by following their parents' directions and engaging in the practices they observed. With age, maturity, and greater knowledge of Islam, the participants developed more autonomous religious identities and applied themselves religiously in order to become "good Muslims." The emergence of sexual desires and the awareness of the permanency of their same-sex desires created conflict and a sense of rejection that caused some of these participants to question the meaning and purpose of the religious practices.

Not every participant's period of doubt and questioning started with his sexuality. As participants attended college courses, had exposure to the media, and began interacting with other people outside Islam, they gained new insights that contradicted or confounded what they

had learned as children and adolescents. As Islam became less believable (tenable), participants began investigating and exploring other religions. None of the participants found another organized religion that resonated with them, leading four of the nine to identify as atheist/agnostic.

In contrast to the negative messages that all of the participants had heard Muslim religious figures make about the LGBTQ community, none of them reported any LGBTQ-affirming religious environments. Without progay messages to counter the myriad sources of homonegativity the participants encountered, antigay narratives, like the Story of Lot, had a substantial impact on the participants who internalized the negative messages they heard. Two participants expressed that the rejection and disdain that they experienced from practicing Muslims resulted in an aversion from Islam.

Domain 2: Sexuality

I identified any sexually related topics or themes in the interviews and categorized them under the domain of sexuality. During the interviews, participants answered numerous questions about their sexuality and the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that they have in reaction to their sexuality. Participants discussed how they describe their sexuality as well as the process that occurred from first recognizing their same-sex attractions and how they have reacted to them.

Sexual identity. When asked how they refer to themselves in terms of their sexual behaviors, seven participants described themselves as gay. Zakari and Ahmed preferred using different terms when referring to their identities. Zakari stated,

I don't really like labels . . . [T]o be easy I will say that I am gay; in college I used

to think that I am queer, that was more of an umbrella term. I have an issue with

labels because of the effect the label has, or the connotation or stereotype, and I

think I really like the term . . . "Men who have sex with men" as a good label in

my eyes just because it is more definitive and more practical. As I said in my

statement . . . you can call yourself whatever you want, but I think your actions

speak louder than your words and that term MSM is more appropriate.

Zakari then clarified that while he prefers MSM, one must be sexually active in order for that

label to describe an individual accurately. He continued by stating,

I am not sexually active so I think just to make it easy on myself and the people

around me it is just easier to say that I am gay but that can mean anything so I

identify as gay for several purposes, but I think being more definitive, MSM is a

more appropriate term.

Ahmed also objected to the term gay. He stated, "I identify as queer, but in the Middle East I

used to say I was gay." Fuad also used the term queer; however, he used queer and gay

interchangeably. He stated,

[When] I'm in a building where the only other people coming in are queer, I

identify as a gay man. Outside of the building, back on the streets of Jerusalem or

the 10-min bus ride back to Shefat I would not tell someone that I was gay . . . I

would not identify queerly by any means.

Ahmed disclosed a number of prominent labels used in the Middle East, such as sodomist, luti,

and mithly. The terms sodomist and luti are considered derogatory labels taken directly from

religious texts and have widespread use in the Middle East. According to Ahmed, mithly is a

term "in Arabic that is only used between homosexuals that is translating the literal word of the

word homosexual." Ahmed stated that homosexual

is a biological term . . . Homosexual it is not a bad word . . . neither a good word.

It is just if a man is practicing sex with another man, then he is a homosexual that

is just or a woman who is practicing sex with a woman, then she is a homosexual.

So it is just a very basic, literal translation, besides whatever those other words

which are like really bad, like they are still currently used like sodomist and not

normal.

Ahmed disclosed that he initially identified himself as a sodomist and as his acceptance of his

sexual orientation increased, he began to label himself with more affirming terms.

Ahmed's process mirrored that of many participants, especially Rafiq, who talked about

how his awareness of the word gay increased with time. Rafiq shared,

My label kind of progressed over time and so from, in Lebanon definitely not gay.

I do, it was hard for me to embrace the word gay because my definition of gay

was very, well, yeah clouded. Very, again I had to teach or learn on my own what

gay meant, kind of define it on my own. It was the same approach I had for

religion in a way (laughter) it was just not, I don't know, nobody taught me about

it, nobody would talk about it. It was and I feel like it really changed through

time and most of it happened in the last 10 years ever since I came to the U.S. I

was not allowed to act upon it whatsoever even think about exploring it in

Lebanon.

Reactions to being gay. Participants disclosed that they had a variety of reactions to

their emerging same-sex desires and eventual identification as gay, queer, or MSM. The initial

reactions to the same-sex desires were overwhelmingly negative for the majority of participants.

Omar reported that same-sex desires were "really scary because I felt like I was going to

disappoint my parents you know not getting married, not having kids—it was really

disappointing." Hakim described the sexual feelings as frightening and Ahmed also labeled

them as scary. Other participants reported that their self-identification process was uneventful

and they did not have any strong reactions. Three primary reactions emerged in the data:

emotional, cognitive, and behavioral.

      Emotional. In terms of the emotional responses, common feelings that participants

endorsed included fear, disappointment, and shame. Omar made the following statement:

> It was really scary because I felt like I was going to disappoint my parents you
>
> know not getting married, not having kids—it was really disappointing at first but
>
> then I kept telling myself, oh, I'm glad I'm not gay you know I like girls I like
>
> girls, but I didn't. It was really disappointing at first.

      Cognitive. The cognitive reactions primarily included thoughts or efforts to avoid

thinking about their situation. Rafiq reported that he would "avoid," "ignore," and "den[y]" his

sexual desires toward men. In reference to his same-sex attraction, he stated, "I denied it.

People would try to tease me about it and I was always like no (laughter)." Pleasurable sexual

experiences with men did not even have an impact on Rafiq's acknowledgment and acceptance

of his sexual desires, as he stated, "Even after I had my first experiences with guys and enjoyed

them, I kind of stopped myself and thought maybe I have clouded judgment, maybe I'm going in

the wrong direction and I should date women."

      Omar also engaged in forms of denial and minimization. He shared, "I could not even

come out to myself, and I kept telling myself that 'you like girls.'" Omar stated, "At first, I did

not want to admit to myself and it was difficult admitting it to myself that I am gay, and now I

am comfortable with who I am."

Behavioral. Behavioral responses ranged from ongoing efforts to avoid their sexual feelings, including suicidal ideation and attempts and dating women. Three participants (Hakim, Fuad, and Adam) reported suicidal ideation and attempts. Fuad and Hakim referenced their suicidality but did not discuss much about the events leading up to the thoughts and feelings regarding their desire to die. Adam reflected on the thoughts and feelings that preceded his suicidal ideation. He shared,

> At the age of 27 I started to think about suicide because I was feeling so much
>
> pain, and God is not liking this, and my family won't like it, and there is no way
>
> to deal with it, and it's not going to go away, because the psychiatrist said there is
>
> no help there is no therapy so what do you people want me to do? What does the
>
> world want from me? . . . I cannot move on like this; it is too much.

While Adam was "desperate for this madness to end," he denied attempting suicide but acknowledged that he engaged in some passive suicidal behaviors that involve a high degree of risk of death without actually causing death. When asked about his attempt Adam stated,

> There was not an exact attempt. But I would feel so bad at night [I] would take
>
> my car on the highway and put my foot on the gas and hit the end of the . . .
>
> meter, like full speed, and would play loud music and somehow internally wish
>
> for an accident or the car to flip and all this misery to end.

In addition to suicidality, participants also reported dating women. Rafiq discussed how he dated girls in an effort to convince himself that he was not attracted to men. Rafiq eventually realized that he enjoyed the privilege that came with a heterosexual relationship but he had stronger sexual feelings for men. Ahmed also noted how his romantic involvement with women

helped him deny his attraction to men: "I was living in denial and then when I was in college, I

dated a girl and I stayed with her for one year and then I told her that I cannot make it."

With time, the participants who reacted negatively to their same-sex desires eventually

embraced them or at least accepted their presence (accepted the fact that no matter what they do

they will remain). This acceptance resulted from their negotiation of their gay identity. This

development process began for each participant soon after his realization that he felt sexually

attracted to men.

Societal factors. Navigating a gay identity is a challenging process for many individuals

regardless of ethnic, cultural, and religious identities. For Muslim Americans this process can

prove even more challenging. Important themes that emerged during the interviews include

cultural and familial avoidance of sex, negative image of LGBTQ, gender role socialization, and

gender nonconforming behavior.

Familial and cultural avoidance of sexuality. The majority of participants described

how sexuality, both homosexuality and heterosexuality, were never discussed within their

families, as sexuality is a taboo topic in many Muslim cultures. Zakari and Hakim shared how

their parents never broached the subject. Hakim stated, "My parents never mentioned it—sex or

sexuality." Zakari reported similar sentiments: "My parents were never really open about stuff

like that sexuality, I mean growing up we never never really talked about stuff like that, that is

just something we don't talk about."

Ahmed shared that if his father knew that he was watching any television shows that

addressed sexuality he "would take the remote control and change the channel and say 'you

should not watch such stuff.'" Regardless of country of origin, sexuality was not discussed

between parents and children. Hakim stated that "Growing up in Missouri there was no notion

or concept of sexuality. I did not learn about the birds and the bees until 9th-grade high school."

Yousef also mentioned high school as a time when peers engaged in more discussion

about sex. Yousef shared:

> There was not really much talk about the act of sex, period. There is obviously
>
> some when you get to older age, high school, maybe middle school, and that is
>
> mostly from peers and its mostly just like things that they like to joke about or
>
> things that they like to say that they know about. Masturbation came up at some
>
> point and some people viewed it as [wasteful].

Participants reported that friends and peers would occasionally discuss sexuality and

sexual matters but they often had limited knowledge or faulty information about the logistics of

sexual intercourse. Rafiq recalled that at the age of 14, "I overheard my friends saying 'so do

girls get pregnant form the vagina or the anus? 'Cause I saw this video' like oh no, so even at

this age people were clueless." Rafiq attributed the dearth of information to the religious

prohibition of sex education. He shared, "Sex education was banned out of the religious figures

from both the Muslim and Christian side, and there was no talk about sex."

When asked if he had any sexual education in Saudi Arabia, Adam laughed and retorted,

"No, there is no such thing." The absence of sexual discussions of any kind in both school and

home reflects the larger cultural scripts about sexuality. In Saudi Arabia Adam learned that

"normal heterosexual . . . sex is a disgusting and forbidden thing" and sex between two men "is

the worst thing that could happen ever."

Adam explained that the cultural prohibition around discussing sexuality reflected the

belief that simply talking about the subject would activate "the temptation that would lead to

sex." Ahmed mentioned that there is a lot of sexual pressure in the Middle East as men and

women are culturally prohibited from engaging in premarital sex. The lack of accurate

knowledge about sex and sexuality in general and the taboo and stigma associated with

discussing the topic prevented many participants from learning about homosexuality.

Furthermore, the invisibility of the people who identify as members of the LGBTQ community

and the lack of positive images drastically affected many participants who had no way of

learning about their same-sex attractions.

Negative images of LGBTQ people. Participants disclosed how individuals from many

Muslim countries and communities espouse outdated stereotypes and false beliefs about

members of the LGBTQ community. Participants born in the United States and those who

immigrated all believed in fallacious myths about gay men, which in many cases contributed to

negative reactions when same-sex desires emerged. Omar disclosed, "When I was growing up . .

. I thought that if you were gay you automatically got HIV. That was, I don't know maybe from

the media, and that was my thinking." Rafiq also recalled overhearing a conversation between

his mother and one of her sisters. She had expressed astonishment having "heard that now gays

just kind of like you know like they hide in the society and they are not wearing pink." Rafiq

was surprised by her "misconception" and stated, "I feel like what I learned about sexuality was

as much as my mom learned at her age."

Rafiq asserted that LGBTQ awareness and attitudes in his home country, Lebanon, are

commensurate with the beliefs endorsed in the United States 25 years ago. In reference to the

Lebanese population, Rafiq stated, "gay for them means whatever the definition of gay was here

about 25 years ago." He continued to list some of the traits that are associated with gay men in

Lebanon, including a man who "wears dresses, has a pink purse, has makeup, has a mental

illness, is really disturbed, and needs to be put into psychiatric help." Hakim listed similar

attributes when describing what the Iraqi culture considers representative of gay men: "Someone

who is not masculine, dresses up in women's clothing, wears makeup, and styles their hair." He

stated that the derogative terms directed toward gay men in Iraq are "comparable to the very

offensive word tranny" used in the United States. The association between gender

nonconformity and alternative sexualities is strong. This connection, which is also prevalent in

the United States, reflects the strict adherence to gender roles that many Muslim countries and

communities endorse.

Gender role socialization. The participants often addressed the topic of gender roles

when speaking about sexuality. In reference to his community and family Ahmed stated that

"they believe a lot in gender roles and they are very strict, the gender roles." Most of the

discussion around gender roles and the expectation that men and women strictly adhere to their

respective roles revolved around the notion of masculinity and the reactions the participants

incurred when they violated male gender norms.

Participants did not specify what masculinity and femininity was per se; however, they

did name a few behaviors that were not considered appropriate for men to conduct. Ahmed

stated that men "are not supposed to do [their] eyebrows" or chew gum. He shared, "My father

or uncle would say you are not supposed to chew gum because that's . . . a feminine gender role

thing. When describing some of the changing gender patterns in Iraq, Hakim mentioned that the

popularity of Turkish soap operas among young Iraqi women has triggered a shift in how young

Iraqi men act. He stated,

> More recently there has been a kind of, because of the popularity of Turkish soap
>
> operas in Iraq, there has been a shift to the metrosexual thing in Iraq, but still it

does not go beyond that. It is still very heterosexual and it is what the women

like, they are watching these soap operas and are fawning over these actors or

they are fawning over these guys like Justin Bieber and that is being emulated by

straight men so that they can flirt with girls on campus.

According to Hakim, this shift is simply a change in behavior and not loosening of gender role

identity or acceptance for gender flexibility as he shared, "Other than that, the whole metrosexual

thing, gays are . . . comparable to being a she, like a tranny woman."

Rafiq also described his experience reviewing social media apps while visiting Lebanon.

He acknowledged the concern that men have with sexual positions and maintaining their

masculine position and identity.

I remember also just for kicks turning on Grindr[1] in Lebanon and no one showed

their face, and they were all top masculine so you know even their acceptance of

their identities is partial, and they would not let themselves do anything that they

might want to do because they still have those worries "am I crossing the line that

I am not supposed to cross and what if somebody found out."

Aside from Hakim's description of the soap operas, most participants discovered what was and

was not gender-appropriate behavior based on the chastisement they received from family

members. Adam stated:

I remember I was playing with my brothers and we were making fake phone calls

so I decided to imitate my aunt, my aunt's voice and he was there and went nuts

over it. "Why would you imitate your aunt's voice and not your uncle?" So I

was, you know. My aunts, I see them most of the time and they are close to me.

_____

[1] Grindr is a "location-aware real-time dating application" used by men who have sex with men
(Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2014, p. 1).

My uncles, I don't see them much. Also, that is the first thing that came to mind

and it was an innocent decision.

While the male gender role restricts men from chewing gum and grooming themselves in

specific ways, many behaviors and traits that are widely accepted in the Middle East violate the

male gender role in the United States.. Hakim stated, "Common to the Middle East . . . there is

affectionateness; it would not be odd to see two men holding hands in the Middle East. It would

not be odd to be close to one another."

Affection and platonic physical contact between men are not perceived as violations of

the male gender role in Iraq and the Middle East; however, homosexuality is associated with, as

Hakim put it, "someone who is not masculine, dresses up in women's clothing, wears makeup,

and styles their hair."

In addition to chastisement from male family members, the participants also described

how they endured similar treatment from their peers. Hakim mentioned that he did not have

many friends growing up as a result of his "effeminate" tendencies. Numerous participants

identified themselves as effeminate or feminine and described how this negatively affected their

relationships. In terms of their sexual identity and messages about sexuality, the gender

nonconforming participants encountered a range of reactions that communicated that they were

different and influenced how they navigated their gender presentation and sexual identity.

Gender nonconformity. The participants who presented in a gender nonconforming

manner seemed quite comfortable talking about their experiences related to their stigmatized

presentations. Hakim, Omar, and Rafiq all identified that they were effeminate growing up and

almost all of the participants indirectly referred to gender nonconforming traits and behaviors

that they engage/d in. Hakim stated, "I was a little more effeminate than my peers," and he was

bullied by both the "typical Midwest American peer group and the Muslim boys" who also

bullied Hakim, "because I was on the more effeminate side." According to Hakim "Sexuality in

that regard was seen as the best way [to] bully or harass someone." Omar also stated that "I was

more effeminate than the other guys" and "I have always been quiet and they could tell that I was

gay, so sometimes they would pick on me."

Zakari did not identify himself as effeminate, but he did describe how a sense of

difference during childhood as a result of his interests: "There was a certain point where I knew I

was different because I liked to play with dolls." He also stated that "Sports was not my favorite

thing" and talked about how he used to "put make up on." At another point in the interview

Zakari also stated, "I guess that maybe going with the stereotypes I was not that good with

passing."

In contrast to Hakim and Omar, who struggled with peers who acknowledged their

gender nonconformity, Fuad discussed the importance of presenting as masculine and

maintaining his masculinity with his friends. He described how "It is common in the gay

community to refer to each other as she . . . and make each other female and call each other

queen or like 'bitch, please.'" Fuad's refusal to participate in this dynamic (phenomenon)

created some tension between himself and other gay men. Fuad was impacted by this

phenomenon, which he half-heartedly and in a self-denigrating manner attributes to his

upbringing and culture. In reference to the use of queen and bitch he stated, "That used to really

offend me and some of that might be my Muslim brainwashing to be misogynistic, but my

masculinity is something that I really strive to hold onto."

Navigation of the gay identity development process. Numerous gay identity

development models currently exist. While they vary in their organization they generally follow

a series of stages that incrementally lead to the acceptance of a gay identity. Recent research emphasizes the progression as circular instead of linear, as was suggested in earlier research. For the participants in the present study, similar themes emerged that corresponded with the stage models.

Many participants addressed a sense of difference prior to naming their sexual identity. These thoughts occurred at different times for participants, with some of the earlier occurrences beginning around middle childhood (9 years of age) and the later beginning in young adulthood (26 years of age). The participants who recognized their same-sex attraction had similar patterns.

Rafiq described how he was aware that he was different from others back home in Lebanon but did not have enough information about sexuality to know why or how he was different. He shared,

> Yeah, but at the same time I did not have any crushes on boys, I wasn't very, I
> don't know what to say. It just wasn't very clear. It was very weird. I just didn't
> know what was happening. I knew I was different but I couldn't define how and I
> wasn't necessarily so attracted to guys that it was, it was not that obvious to me.

Participants spoke about feeling different from their peers often throughout their lives. Religion, nationality, and gender presentation emerged during the interviews; however, sexuality seemed to be the most prevalent source of difference.

Limited exposure to homosexuality. Some participants had no exposure to the concept of homosexuality (e.g., gay, MSM, queer identities) and did not know that the concept of homosexuality existed. Fuad repeatedly stated during the interview that as a child "I did not know what the word gay meant." Participants from both the United States and other countries

reported limited knowledge of homosexuality. For many participants, relatives and peers introduced the concept of homosexuality, at which point the participants had to engage in exploration. When talking about his first encounter with the term gay, Rafiq shared that during adolescence he heard the word gay from his cousins who were visiting from the United States. Lacking awareness of what the word meant he used the Internet to find the definition.

Exploration. After he learned the basic concept of the term gay, Rafiq had to independently explore the term to understanding the meaning. He discussed his process of exploration and how he had to develop his understanding of the term, as he could not talk to anyone about it. He stated,

> It was hard for me to embrace the word gay because my definition of gay was
>
> very, well yeah clouded. Very, again, I had to teach or learn on my own what gay
>
> meant, kind of define it on my own. It was the same approach I had for religion
>
> in a way (laughter) it was just not, I don't know, nobody taught me about it,
>
> nobody would talk about it.

Media. Most participants, especially those living outside the United States, avoided researching homosexuality or exploring the gay community in person. In reference to exploring the gay community, Rafiq shared that "I was not allowed to act upon it whatsoever even think about exploring it in Lebanon." The risk of getting caught deterred Rafiq from exploring the gay community and, like many participants, media outlets served as his primary source of information. All of the participants, except for one, described how they initially accessed and made first contact with the gay community via the Internet. Rafiq stated, "Most of what I learned about what gay was was through the Internet." The Internet's influence in helping participants navigate their sexual

identities is significant.

Participants' use of the Internet as a resource to explore gay culture and further develop their identity often resulted in viewing pornography, which served as the most illuminating element of some participants' development processes. Zakari described the series of events following his initial interactions with the Internet. He stated,

> I discovered Google and you could type anything in and get an image, and I
> thought, oh okay, being around puberty I thought oh, I am going to look up
> pornography, and my search was mainly with women, and this is what people
> watch, um, this is what guys my age talk about and I am going to look this up and
> look up and see what happens. I enjoyed it, it was fun, but then I thought, well
> this is Google, I can look up anything, so I looked up male pornography and I
> realized I really liked it and then I eventually looked up gay pornography, and I
> think growing up I have been attracted but I do not think it was until puberty
> when I made the connection with sexual desires toward men, especially with
> pornography became more visual making it more realistic and . . . it was
> something I strongly craved, I strongly desired.

For Zakari, the connection between identifying his sexual identity and viewing pornography was close. He stated, "I think it was high school when I started watching gay porn and I had a really strong attraction to men."

Rafiq also discussed his discovery of pornography on the Internet. After his cousins introduced him to the label (gay), he shared how he "started looking at gay porn." Rafiq described his reaction to gay porn by stating how he did "not necessarily not lik[e] it." Like Zakari, Rafiq started watching pornography with opposite sex actors and then began increasingly

viewing gay porn. He disclosed, "I was looking a little bit at both and then I started migrating

towards gay porn and thought huh maybe I am into this stuff, who knows?"

In addition to pornography, participants also described using the Internet to connect with

other gay men. Hakim, Adam, and Yousef discussed how they met people in online chat room at

websites designed for gay men to communicate. Hakim struggled with his identity until he

developed feelings of attraction for a man in the chat room. He shared,

> I went onto a website online, and it happened to be a fitness website that was
>
> catered to gay men . . . but there was also this way that you could go on dates on
>
> that website. I did not go on any but I could chat with people, and it was one way
>
> for me to chat with people, and it was the first time I started to like someone who
>
> I chatted with quite often, and the time that they told me that they like me it was
>
> the point of no return, and I was like oh, so this is what it feels like for all those
>
> 13-year-olds who were dating in middle school when I was not allowed to. This
>
> is what it feels like when someone actually likes you and this is what it feels like
>
> to be okay with your sexual to realize that you are a sexual being and you just so
>
> happen attracted to men or members of the same sex. So that was a good week of
>
> just weeping all day long and just not knowing what to do with all of those
>
> feelings. But yeah, it was very exciting but at the same time also very frightening.

In comparison to the other participants, Omar, Ahmed, and Mehdi did not mention the

Internet or media as frequently or in the context of meeting others.

Isolation and loneliness. Many challenges arise as an individual navigates the gay

identity development process. Social support is a valuable resource when coping with these

challenges. Omar was the only participant who had a close friend who came out to him before

Omar disclosed his sexual identity. Omar shared how his friend's disclosure enabled him to

come out to his friend, an action that had quite a powerful impact on him. When asked what

experiences in his life helped him come terms with his sexual and religious identity, he replied,

"My friend coming out to me that was a really big thing that I had someone who knew what I

was going through that I could talk to . . . yeah, it was really nice."

The remaining eight participants struggled in varying levels of silence for much of their

navigation process as they did not feel comfortable discussing their identity with those close to

them. Because talking about sexuality in Saudi Arabia is taboo and, as Adam stated, "you

wouldn't dare bring it up in discussion," LGBTQ-affirmative resources and sources of support

are difficult to find. Men who find themselves questioning their sexuality often resign

themselves to navigating this process alone, increasing their vulnerability to the isolation and

suicidal ideation so common to the questioning community.

This was not an easy process for some who constantly evaded their same-sex attractions

and the distress that the awareness of a gay identity instilled. For some participants, their

isolation in dealing with their same-sex attraction made it more challenging for them and more

uncomfortable. Adam described how he thought that he was sick, and by not discussing it with

anyone he lacked access to affirming sources.

As an early adolescent, Omar had a gay contact; however, the remaining participants kept

their sexual identities hidden from those around them until late adolescence and college.

Maintaining this secrecy came at the expense of many relationships and contributed to intense

feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Sexual interactions. Sexual interactions both assisted and complicated the gay identity

development process for the participants. Of the nine participants, eight either stated or alluded

to the fact that they have engaged in sexual activity with another man and seven were sexually active at the time of the interview. When it came to discussing sexual matters some participants appeared more comfortable than others. Those who did disclose information about their personal sexual interactions shared how the decision changed their lives and the range of emotions they felt (excitement, anxiety, angst). Some discussed their decision to permanently or temporarily abstain from sexual contact with men.

Passing a threshold. When asked how he felt following his first sexual experience with a man, Yousef stated,

I guess I had a feeling that there was no going back now, umm, you know, before that, you know, I was just talking about it and thinking about it and seeing something that was there, but it was never like, I don't know if this is the best way to say it, but it got real.

Yousef's description of how he reacted to his first sexual experience with a man is highly reminiscent of a threshold that once surpassed can never be reversed. This concept of the threshold emerged in other participants' narratives in that they engaged in sex with a man as a way to step into another stage that helped to clarify their identities. Rafiq stated,

That is why I like came to the U.S. I went to UCLA and was like okay, I still don't know where I stand, and it got to a stage where I'm 21, I need to (whispers) I'm still a virgin and (laughs) the only way I am going to find out what I like is just like, by giving it a try. Like that was the point where I was coming to terms with, okay, I've got to experiment in order to know what the hell I want so I stop asking myself that question that is driving me nuts in my head, so yeah, so I had sex.

For many participants who embraced Islam while also coming to terms with their sexual identity, the act of sex was a looming event. Biologically, the sexual desires were strong for many participants but the fear of committing this "sin" was equally troubling. The impulse for sexual interaction for many participants was strong. Zakari stated that he "craved sex." Adam shared how he reflected on the biological and moral debate he had related to abstinence:

> I am supposed to be a nice person and do what religion says about that says, so I never tried or attempted to have sex with any men, and then it was starting to wear me out and how long is this going to go on? I'm 25, like other people, heterosexuals, are supposed to get married or something . . . At one point I said okay God is merciful and so on, there is nothing I can do and I cannot take this anymore.

Adam's statement, "I cannot take this anymore" speaks to the turmoil he endured. In an attempt to resolve this dialectic, Adam reached the following conclusion, "The punishment is for penetrative sex only, so I said, okay I will avoid penetrative sex and start with [nonpenetrative sex]." Adam's insights enabled him to take small steps to eventually having sex. The anxiety that resulted from the initial interaction was especially severe for him.

Anxiety and angst. Adam, Fuad, and Rafiq addressed the challenges they faced as they engaged in sexual interactions with men. As Adam described the series of events that resulted in his first sexual interaction with a man, he named the intense emotions he felt. Adam shared that he met his first sexual partner through an Internet website. He cleared his throat as he recalled how he felt when he met with his sexual partner:

> Of course for first time I was like shaking in fear for being caught doing a huge crime . . . So the fear was like overwhelming I couldn't even get myself together .

. . And then I just felt so guilty afterwards I stayed for another 6 months to a year

I did not attempt . . . And then after a while the guilt eased up and I tried again.

The fear and the guilt were tangible as Adam described this experience. He did not

succumb to the guilt and fear, and with time he was able to overcome these feelings.

Adam informed me that at the age of 27

I found all these people who are feeling the same way and it's not just . . .

somehow stupidly I thought like it's only me and there are so few people and

these people are sick should be killed and are like animals.

The awareness that he was not the only man having sex with men helped reduce his guilt

and frustration. He reported how he was told that

The punishment in the Islamic state when a man is having sex with another man

this is so against nature that the throne of God, like God in the 7th heaven has a

throne and it would shake from the ugliness of this action . . . Okay, I said, so I

started looking at the map, like I said there are all these other people having sex

and the amount of porn on the Internet, God must be on vibration the whole time,

his throne would never stop because it is happening all the time, 24 hours.

When asked if he was aware of what was going on in terms of pornography outside of the

Muslim world, Adam responded:

Yeah, of course when you see the amount of porn on the Internet and it was my

only exit from this world . . . and I noticed that these people are turned on by the

same things that turn me on and it is not only me, all these people cannot be sick.

There is something that must be wrong with my [culture/religion].

The realization that his culture had misled him, with regard to sexuality and sexual interactions was a poignant yet bitter moment for Adam. He stated, "It made me pissed off with the culture that taught me these things, those bastards wasted, those bastards wasted my life and put me through so much misery for no reason."

Even though he has identified as a gay man for many years, Fuad disclosed that he still struggles with the psychological components of having sex with men. He shared,

Sometimes in the middle of sex I will like think of my parents' shame and guilt and shit and that will be a total turn off. It is very rare that will happen—it usually happens if I am drunk or something, but you know that lowered self-awareness of being inebriated, but typically I am sober and I was just talking to my parents or something I just get that negative feedback.

Fuad compared this phenomenon to classical conditioning, suggesting the pervasive and engrained negative beliefs and emotions he holds and feels during sexual interactions.

Rafiq also had some hesitance about his sexual interactions with men. He acknowledged that he enjoyed the physical act of sex but that was not fulfilling enough for him after his initial sexual interactions with men. He shared,

Even after I had my first experiences with guys and enjoyed them, I kind of stopped myself and thought maybe I have clouded judgment, maybe I'm going in the wrong direction and I should date women . . . So I started having relationships with women, and then you know I was like naaaaah, it would last for 3 or 4 months and I was like nooo, okay, well let's try guys and then I was like ahhhh, no, and then I would go back to girls (laughs), so I flip-flopped about four times and after that, after those experiences I was like well, it looked like I enjoyed the

sex with guys a lot more, ahhh, girls I really enjoyed for the most part because of

the comfort and the fact that you could have a partner and be open about it, and,

you know, having it and having other guys getting jealous, and like dude, how did

you get her, like give me advice on how to score with the girls (laughs).

Abstinence. Zakari and Mehdi were the only participants who reported that they

refrained from engaging in sexual contact. During the interview Zakari stated, "I am not

sexually active." He described his rationale for his current abstinence in the following excerpt.

I went through relationships in college, and in college, I mean, I was pretty

sexually active, there was no reservations because I am in college, I am young,

and I can do whatever I want, and right now I think one of the concerns I have

STDs and I, that is one thing that is on my mind, I want to be sexually active and I

am concerned about my health about, um, knowing that with MSM there are

bigger risks. I think that is the fear that I have.

He explained that he would like to be sexually active but only in a committed relationship, which

he does not feel prepared to enter. Unlike Zakari, Mehdi did not engage sexually with men.

I label myself a Gay Muslim man. I mean I was married before, I had a wife and

all that, I got kids, like, but I am attracted to men and I don't sleep with men, I get

in relationships, that is how I base myself in relationships. Because I have been

gay or whatever you want to call it . . . I have been in two relationships with two

guys and both of my relationships have lasted over 7 years.

Summary of sexuality. Five main topics related to sexuality were addressed in this

section. Sexual identity and the way in which participants identify and label their sexual

orientation was the first major topic explored in this section. The labels and terms that the

participants used to identify their sexual orientation evolved with time, their increased comfort with their sexual orientation, and greater understanding of the gay community. The majority of the participants identified their sexual orientation by using the term gay with the remaining participants preferring to label themselves as MSM and queer. Several participants had difficulty understanding the word, gay, as they did not have access to an accurate and affirming definition and limited access to gay resources.

Reflecting on the period following the recognition of their same-sex desires, the participants described their emotional, intellectual, and behavioral reactions. While the emotional reactions varied, none of the participants expressed excitement or pleasure upon acknowledging their sexual interest in other men. Common emotions included anger, angst, anxiety, shame, guilt, and despair. Many participants emphasized their concerns about disappointing family members and mourning the loss of their ability to pursue the cultural scripts of adult men in Muslim cultures such as getting married and having children. Unable to manage these strong reactions, some participants disengaged from their emotions and relied on denial and avoidance to protect them from the pain induced by their sexual identities. Others approached the issue with intellectual perspectives and logic that helped them maintain distance from their emotionality. Some participants who felt extreme distress also reported suicidal ideation, and some participants dated women in an effort to conceal and ultimately eradicate their desire for men. As the intensity of these emotions faded and they had more time to think about their futures, many participants began embracing their same-sex desires and accepted their identity as gay/queer/MSM.

As a social construct, sexuality and sexual identity extend beyond the individual to the community and larger culture. The societal factors that participants discussed included the

familial and culture avoidance of sexuality, negative images of LGBTQ people, and gender

roles/norms. These three aspects of culture increased the challenges that the participants faced as

they began to explore their identities.

All of the participants reported how the lack of discussion, education, and information

pertaining to sexuality, both opposite and same-sex interactions and attractions, complicated the

matter, especially for participants who spent their adolescence in countries without sex education

programs. A potent atmosphere of hostility toward sexual minorities developed in many of the

participants' communities due to the dearth of affirming gay role models, and misperceptions

and stereotypes flourished due to the lack of access to accurate information about human

sexuality. This situation became even more hostile for participants who violated the male gender

roles as their parents, friends, and peers policed their nonconforming behaviors and interests.

Participants provided substantial insight into how they navigated the gay identity

development process. With the majority of the participants having minimal exposure to the

concept of homosexuality and communities of gay people, many participants reported learning

about the possibility that two men could feel sexual desires toward each other. This epiphany

was followed by a period of exploration with most participants sharing how the Internet and

Western-influenced media sources facilitated this process.

As their sexual identities emerged, the participants reported developing a desire to

connect socially and physically with other gay men. Closeted and concerned about the

ramifications that their sexual identities could have on their futures and their families if

publicized, most of the participants reported an acute sense of loneliness and isolation. Only one

participant had a gay friend as a young adolescent, and many participants relied on meeting

people over the Internet.

The participants who felt comfortable discussing their initial same-sex sexual experiences stated that these interactions had a powerful impact on their development. Eight participants disclosed that they had engaged in a sexual act with another man and two of these participants shared that they currently abstained from sex with one of the men, qualifying their celibacy as a temporary phase that will end when they enter a monogamous relationship. The intense emotions and feelings that they described regarding these first encounters emphasized the fear and guilt connected to the religious proscriptions that they were violating as well as the acknowledgment and recognition that sex with men felt right. The men who had engaged in sexual interactions with other men discussed how these experiences solidified their identities and helped them accept the permanency of their sexual orientations.

Domain 3: Identity Negotiation

This section contains categories and themes relevant to the process of negotiating identities. Information about specific identities (e.g., religion and sexuality) is presented in Domains 1 and 2. During the interview participants were asked about how their sexual and religious identities impacted each other as well as additional identities they valued. The participants also reflected on their salient identities and described how these identities interact and intersect. Because identity negotiation is an especially idiosyncratic experience, the secondary themes include the various identities that participants held and the ways in which participants negotiated their identity conflict. Lastly, their sexual and religious identities impacted the participants in a multitude of ways that significantly varied depending on their life circumstances.

Most salient identity. To examine what identity the participants considered to be most representative of themselves, I asked them which identity they perceived as most salient. Omar,

Rafiq, and Adam identified their most salient identity as gay. Omar also included his gender/sex identity as "gay male," and Adam included both his sex/gender identity as well as his ethnicity. "I am gay, a man, Middle Eastern." The remainder of the participants mentioned other identities. Fuad and Yousef both named academic and occupational identities. Fuad reported that his salient identity is either an engineer or a scientist, and Yousef felt strongly that his most salient identity is an international student. Fuad emphasized that education is an important aspect of his identity.

> Education has always been a privilege for me. I don't know how [being] gay
>
> really incorporates that priority for me, or being Muslim. Maybe Palestinian, as it
>
> incorporates politics and how integral that is to self-awareness, but you have to
>
> educate yourself to know who you are.

Zakari was the only participant to select his country of origin as his most salient identity. He stated,

> I want to say my strongest identity is Sri Lankan. I like to tell people that is my
>
> nationality, and this is still the first thing that people see . . . Some people wonder
>
> because I do not look like a typical Sri Lankan so I feel like I need to identify with
>
> that and . . . feel like I am Sri Lankan and that is my identity; or brown, I feel like
>
> my identity is connected to my skin color . . . [S]o like how I look on the outside
>
> is how I identify as Sri Lankan, more than gay.

Mehdi was the only participant to acknowledge his religious identity as his most salient identity. Without hesitation he responded to this question by stating "Muslim."

Ahmed and Hakim had interesting answers that had a similar degree of simplicity. When asked about his most salient identity Ahmed replied, "I'm a human." Hakim responded with a very personal answer that he initially seemed hesitant to disclose. He stated,

> This is cheesy but for the longest time I did not feel like a real person, so now I
> feel like I identify in the Pinocchio-style way—a real boy, regardless of what my
> sex and gender and religious affiliation is.

Hakim's reference to his transformation to a real person reflects his current ability to present his authentic self.

Participants struggled with this question in numerous ways. Some participants had never heard the term "salient" before and needed further information to answer the question. Other participants felt restricted with only providing one identity. Both of these difficulties are understandable given the language barrier for some of the participants, the inherently academic nature of the term "identity saliency," and the complex meaning and value associated with an identity, especially marginalized identities. Upon further clarification of the term and the question, some participants struggled with selecting just one identity. On these occasions, I invited participants to name any other identities after they answered to the initial question. In response to the questions—what is your most salient identity, and what are additional identities that you value—the participants introduced many additional identities beyond gender, religious/spiritual identity, and sexual identity. These are important identities to address as they often superseded the identities targeted by this study (sexual and religious/gay/Muslim).

Important identities. The identities that participants shared ranged in frequency and degree of importance. With the intent to clearly present this information, the identities have been organized under primary and secondary. The primary identities are those that hold more value for the participants, and the secondary identities are those that the participants mentioned but did not have as much relevance to their daily lives. The identities were categorized mostly through the degree of conflict or distress that participants communicated during the interviews.

More than half the participants immigrated to the United States, and those who were born in the United States all qualify as second-generation Americans except for Mehdi, whose family history extends for generations. It is not surprising that national identity and immigrant identity were the most common primary identities participants discussed. Racial/ethnic identity and sex and gender presentation were two other prominent identities, and political affiliation was particularly relevant for one participant who frequently mentioned the conflict he experiences due to his political affiliation.

Immigrant. Discussion of an immigrant identity emerged primarily when talking about the benefits and consequences of immigrating to the United States. Rafiq discussed how his identity as a recent immigrant is very important to him. While his gay identity is currently his most salient, Rafiq reported that if he had been asked to name his most salient identity 4 years ago, he would have selected "recent immigrant." The motivation for naming this identity pertained to the significant period of adjustment that Rafiq experienced immediately after arriving in the United States.

Immigration also played an important role in facilitating Rafiq's ability to identify openly as a gay man. When asked about his identity as an immigrant, Rafiq described how immigration assisted with changing his life. He stated,

Coming out here in the U.S. has been a major turning point in my life. In Lebanon I was [a] quiet, super shy little kid who never spoke up. I would get picked on whatever I was in and people would say things about me being gay or something like that. . . . [T]hen I came to the U.S. and completely transformed myself (laughs). I became this loud, extraverted, confident, much happier, much more independent, matured quite a bit, did things my own way, made a ton of friends, and kind of shined in a lot of ways that I would not have in Lebanon. So it was that confidence, and that new happiness, and that new circle of friends that were supportive that I was able to make here by immigrating, that I was able to come to a place where I was ready to make it official like in terms of my sexual identity.

When asked about the impact that immigration had on his identification as gay, Rafiq stated,

I think that [immigrating] has been the biggest change in my life in all kinds of ways so, like I said earlier, if I were still in Lebanon I would not be coming out any time soon and I don't think I would have been able to have met the people who have had such a positive influence and been around people that I felt were accepting enough to share something like this with them.

It was not always easy for Rafiq, who disclosed one challenge of immigration was that the first time he visited the United States "9/11 happened 2 weeks later."

Hakim, Zakari and Rafiq discussed how their status as immigrants contributed to a sense of difference and being an outsider. Having immigrated to the United States as young children, Hakim and Zakari both discussed what it was like to attend school where they were the only

individual who was an immigrant and Muslim. This created conflict in terms of their social lives

and feeling like an "outsider." Hakim recalled,

> Yeah, so I remember when I started school here in the United States I was the
>
> only person of color, I guess, I was in the Midwest, I was the only person who
>
> identified as a Muslim or what not so there was a feeling of being an outsider,
>
> when there were holidays or like parents' day, mother's day or father days when
>
> the parents were encouraged to come to school and have lunch with the student,
>
> my parents did not show up and cited religious reasons as to why they could not
>
> show up to events like that, and I was taken out of social activities that might be
>
> considered antithetical to our religion.

As a young child and immigrant from a non-Western country, Zakari had a similar experience as

Hakim. He was separated from the other students because he could not attend events or

participate in activities related to Christian and U.S. holidays. Zakari spoke to this experience in

the following excerpt:

> Growing up I knew that I was different . . . in terms of my religious beliefs . . . my
>
> family is different, you know, we don't celebrate Christmas or Easter . . . [being]
>
> an immigrant it was a different experience 'cause I guess that American traditions
>
> we did not follow them like Thanksgiving or Fourth of July.

In contrast to Hakim, who felt like an outsider with his peers, Zakari stated, "I did not

feel left out" or "deprived." He further explained,

> As an immigrant your culture is Sri Lankan and you're Muslim and there are
>
> things you have to do, we had to, whatever your parents did you would follow
>
> your traditions.

Adam immigrated to Saudi Arabia from Sudan as a child before receiving asylum in the

United States as an adult. As a result, his experience was different from Hakim and Zakari as he

emigrated from a Muslim country to a more conservative Muslim country. He encountered

conflict related to his status as an immigrant and his race/ethnicity in an ethnically homogenous

country, but not related to his religion. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia had a stricter level of

adherence to Islam than either Sudan or the United States. The following interview except

incorporates elements of immigration, nationality, and ethnicity.

> Yeah, that's tough because I was born in Sudan, I lived in Saudi Arabia, but I am
>
> not Sudanese so yeah I am unable to . . . so then I feel like someone from a
>
> different planet and also because of the color of my skin. Most people in Sudan
>
> are Black and I am not so when I go there I feel like an outsider, and then I go
>
> back to Saudi I feel like an outsider, and then here of course it is very clear that I
>
> am going to be an outsider, but there are so many outsiders in this society so
>
> somehow it is okay, it is not as bad.

Moving to the United States and living on the West Coast has provided Adam with an

opportunity to interact with a more diverse population. He shared, "Yeah because of the culture,

uh, the diversity here, it is okay so it is not such a bad thing." Having recently immigrated to the

United States he is still in the process of fitting in, and he stated, "Yeah, because I just moved

here 1 year ago so with time I am sure I will fit [in]."

Nationality/national heritage. As Fuad talked about how he values his connection with

his family, despite their disapproval of his sexual identity, he explained how it is so important to

preserve his relationship with them as a means of staying connected to his culture. He stated,

> We are amicable under certain constraints. Like I said, those constraints are a
>
> compromise that I am willing to accept because without my family, my direct
>
> connection, I have lost my Palestinian heritage. My Spanish is better than my
>
> Arabic; I have lost half my Arabic.

Fuad also discussed how his Palestinian identity gets overshadowed by his gay identity and

Israeli culture's relative acceptance of the gay community in comparison to Palestinian society

facilitates this phenomenon. Fuad explained how "[the] Israelis had this campaign thing where if

I wanted to be gay I had to support Israel and that like really confused me about my Palestinian

identity." Furthermore, during his trips to the Middle East and Palestine Fuad openly identifies

as gay only while visiting Israel, and the queer Palestinian organization that he attends in

Jerusalem. Fuad described how the center is located:

> Far outside my family's refugee camp, people won't recognize me on the street,
>
> you know, and for the most part I'm in a building where the only other people
>
> coming in are queer, I identify as a gay man. Outside of the building, back on the
>
> streets of Jerusalem or the 10-minute bus ride back to Shefat I would not tell
>
> someone that I was gay. That is not, I would not identify queerly by any means.

Fuad described numerous interactions with Israelis regarding the "progay" Israelis and

the "antigay" Palestinians. This allegiance to his cultural heritage and the solidarity he

feels with the Palestinian people is notable. However, Palestine and his family do not

accept his gay identity, which is an important aspect of his personhood. On the other

hand, Israel, the country that oppresses his people is more than willing to welcome him if

he forfeits his Palestinian allegiance. This is sort of an internal "Sophie's Choice."

With a student's visa, Yousef's postgraduation plan to reside in the United States (beyond graduation) is tentative. This element of uncertainty contributes to his ambivalence about getting "too acculturated" to U.S. culture. He described some of the conflict he has about maintaining his Palestinian-Israeli cultural identity while balancing his connection with U.S. culture.

> I guess I am an immigrant to an extent. . . . I try to make sure that I represent my
> culture and background well in other places, especially in the United States, but at
> the same time I . . . would like to be more enculturated than I am acculturated, but
> I feel like I am more acculturated to the American lifestyle kind of thing so it, it is
> helpful because like you know because it's something a lot of people don't have .
> . . I also like bring this [degree] of diversity that they are not really . . . able to find
> easily. At the same time . . . it kind of has this issue, you know, have I gone too
> far? Am I now too much of an American to be an Arab, um, or a Palestinian? . . .
> Yeah, everything is just complicated for me, I don't know? I guess I think about
> this a lot because these things are very implicit as well as explicit in my life
> because of my field of study as well as my personal experience, so it is kind of
> hard to not think about them for a while.

Ethnic/racial identity. Ethnicity/racial identity was an important topic for Fuad and Zakari. Fuad described how his ethnicity impacts his involvement with the gay community in the United States.

> One thing I struggle with more than being gay and Muslim or being Muslim and
> White . . . [is] the brownness. Where am I on the spectrum of brown to [White]?
> Because in the queer community that is how I measure acceptance.

Fuad discussed how the gay community is focused on a certain appearance that includes

ethnicity, body type, and clothing.

> Even to this day—even when I moved to San Francisco a lot of people are like oh,
>
> you are Palestinian—that must be so confusing, right? 'Cause the only gay clubs
>
> are in Israel—but it's not like I could go to them. Great, and you see that in the
>
> Castro too, it is this White twink image that is preferred, that is the same in Tel
>
> Aviv too, it is not applicable to the majority of the population which happens to
>
> be brown and not White.

Fuad also addressed the limitations of his ethnicity, and religious identity, within the broader

mainstream U.S. community. While talking about the challenges of his profession and his career

path he stated, "I really do enjoy research, it's just that environment is hostile if you are not that

stereotypical White Christian man."

> For Zakari, his ethnic identity often overshadowed his sexual identity in terms of conflict

in his life. As a Sri Lankan, people often focused on this visible trait far before they encountered

or acknowledged his sexual or religious identity. As he explained why his Sri Lankan identity is

more salient to him than his gay identity, Zakari stated,

> My nationality . . . is still the first thing that people see . . . I feel like my identity
>
> is connected to my skin color, and so like how I look on the outside is how I
>
> identify as Sri Lankan, more than gay.

> ***Sex/gender presentation***. Masculinity was important to many of the participants. The

benefits afforded to men in many Muslim communities and mosques provided them with a

degree of power when they often felt powerless due to their sexual identity. Some of the

participants who had gender nonconforming presentations were often emasculated by more

masculine men, which made them feel different. In reference to his gendered interests and

presentations, Zakari shared,

> Sports was not my favorite thing, that was the other thing about my childhood. I
>
> think there was a certain point where I knew I was different because I liked to
>
> play with dolls and I think my parents tried to make me feel guilty about that.
>
> They tried to discourage me from that and eventually I grew out of it. Looking
>
> back on it that was something that made me different from the other children at
>
> school.

Gender is an important issue when thinking about the freedom and the flexibility to

explore one's sexuality autonomously. The freedom bestowed upon men in many Muslim

cultures and societies enabled the participants to venture outside their homes, their local

communities, and the Internet. Without any female participants, data from the interviews cannot

be used to attest to these statements; nonetheless, prior research supports the restraints imposed

upon many of the young Muslim women. The gendered power that men hold was also

underscored by Fuad's desire to maintain his masculinity, as it is both a valuable and important

identity for him.

Religious identity. Zakari explained how his Sri Lankan identity had a significant impact

on his Muslim identity. He shared that Muslims comprise a small percentage of the population

in Sri Lanka and when he began his involvement with the religious community in the United

States, he was surrounded primarily by peers from Muslim majority countries like Pakistan.

Zakari stated,

> In terms of religious identity I think it was a little more difficult growing up
>
> around Muslims who came from a Muslim majority country. [In] Sunday school .

. . I was . . . with a lot of Pakistani people and . . . I think that there culture and

religion were blended together, or their country's culture was integrated into their

religion or vice versa. So growing up and going to Sunday school it was difficult

trying to identify with people who could like read Arabic and speak that language,

and sometimes I felt like I am not really that Muslim. I felt like I needed to

solidify it more and I needed to make it more apparent, and I was like well, I pray

five times a day and I fast during Ramadan, therefore I'm Muslim. I felt like I

had to prove something to other Muslims, whereas with my gay identity, that was

a lot easier.

Living in Lebanon without a religious affiliation, Rafiq frequently found himself isolated in

terms of religion, an identity that he still struggles to attain and understand. While not highly

distressed by the lack of religious affiliation as he has witnessed the wrath and fury that religious

conflict can incur, Rafiq did assert, "[religion] is still an aspect missing from my life and I don't

know if it is ever going to be something that I will completely embrace or incorporate." He

continued on to talk about his interactions with his religious friends with whom he is comfortable

having a relationship as long as religion "doesn't cloud their judgment in terms of accepting

people in their lives." He shared,

I am almost a little bit jealous . . . of their connection to faith . . . I know it brings

them peace and like it almost kind of reassures you. Especially people who are

going through rough times, they have something to turn to and I don't have that. I

wish I did, or I could, but it can't.

Rafiq shared that he has tried to explore religions but embracing a religious identity is challenging. When he asked if he will ever have one he stated, "I don't think I will. It's going to be very hard."

Political affiliation. Fuad's political affiliation carried an immense amount of importance as a Palestinian living outside of Palestine. His identity as a "queer Palestinian" was important to him and he discussed this frequently during his interview. Some of the Israel progay policies complicated his identity. As a result, Fuad shared,

> I was never able to separate my politics from my sexual orientation, from my
>
> religious beliefs—it was like one chaotic mess for a long time. Even to this day—
>
> even when I moved to San Francisco a lot of people are like oh, you are
>
> Palestinian, that must be so confusing right? 'Cause the only gay clubs are in
>
> Israel—but it's not like I could go to them.

Fuad distinguished himself from the other participants in this study through his frequent discussions about politics. As one of three participants of Palestinian heritage, Fuad lived in Palestine, while the other two participants spent their childhoods in Israel. As citizens within Israel, it is likely that they did not face the same degree of limitation as Fuad when it came to movement, exploration, and basic needs.

Intersectionality. All of these identities added layers to who the participants are as individuals and how they navigated their lives and the conflicting identities they held. All of the participants appeared comfortable enough with their identities to embrace them simultaneously on a personal level. When displaying these identities in a social or public context, the level of comfortable diminished and challenged many participants. Fuad poignantly articulated how he

felt restricted in certain environments, which provides additional insight into his identity

negotiation process. He shared,

> Environment factors greatly inhibit my self-expression like a three-dimension
>
> spectrum, like a prism. Depending on where you hit, um, the light can enter at
>
> any point and still display the same range of colors from red to indigo. You know
>
> if you hit it at any of my three identities of the triangle. Being Palestinian if you
>
> shot light through it it would still come out a rainbow, being gay, and not using
>
> rainbow as a queer reference, I just was using it because it was the only allusion
>
> that came to me—if you shot a light through my gay identity it would still be the
>
> same as my Palestinian or Muslim identity or maybe my bioengineering identity,
>
> the same personality comes out. There are limitations of social settings that I
>
> have experienced, so I cannot think of a specific social situation where I have
>
> been able to express more than two of those identities at the same time even at Alt
>
> House, the organization I am affiliated with for queer Palestinians. So it is being
>
> queer, Muslim, and Palestinian, no one has room for science—they are like, oh
>
> no, we need to fight for our rights, we cannot waste time on engineering classes
>
> and biology, you need to take more history classes and Arabic classes, you need
>
> to remember your language.

Identity conflict. As they shared their experiences and interactions with their families,

peers, and communities all of the participants described interactions and recalled messages and

comments denouncing Muslim men who are attracted to men. These messages appear to have

constructed the belief that a Muslim man cannot be gay and a gay man cannot be Muslim.

Regardless of whether the participants agreed with or rejected this belief that gay and Muslim

identities are mutually exclusive, the processes of negotiating their sexual and religious identities suggest that this is a pervasive reality that has a significant impact on MSM in the Muslim community. This is not to say that none of the men found a way to integrate their identities, they just had to struggle, and for many the result was worth it to them.

Before further exploring how identity conflict emerged and impacted the participants in this study it is important to acknowledge that Rafiq, Zakari, and Mehdi had unique situations that distinguished their conflicts from the remaining participants who reported conflict between their Muslim and gay identities. Rafiq's limited identification with religion altered the nature of his conflict. According to Rafiq, "Most of my inner struggles with my identity came from myself . . . rather than from religion." Despite his strong identification as Muslim in the past, Zakari echoed Rafiq's sentiments: "[Islam] has not gotten in the way of my sexual identity or sexual impression." Zakari shared that his ethnicity and religion posed more of a challenge than his sexual identity in his development. Lastly, Mehdi, provided little if any information about any conflict between his Muslim and gay identities. He did not believe that his sexual and religious identities had any impact on each other.

Is identity integration possible? When asked about whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that a man cannot identify as both Muslim and gay/homosexual, Hakim and Adam agreed and the remaining participants disagreed. Hakim provided the following explanation for his response.

> One can be culturally Muslim, the way there are nonpracticing culturally Jewish
> or culturally Roman Catholics. But ultimately the gay male would not be living a
> practicing Muslim lifestyle unless he stayed in the closet.

During the interview, Hakim addressed this answer and expanded on his written explanation. He stated, "If one . . . is gay, umm, and wants to continue to be a practice[ing] Muslim then they can so very well do it but . . . they would have to keep it in the closet, they cannot act upon that lifestyle." Adam's explanation for his affirmative response had a more visceral and corporal reaction in comparison to Hakim's more cognitive answer. He stated,

> Some people have been able to [do] that, numb some parts of their brain and the
>
> logic or make excuses with the text—take things literally or figuratively—[it's]
>
> not worth it to find excuses so I dropped the whole thing.

Based on their responses and the bulk of their interviews, both Hakim and Adam appear to fall under the rejecting religion category. They explicitly stated their position on simultaneously holding a gay and Muslim identity and described their dissatisfaction with religion.

The remaining seven participants disagreed with the statement that a man cannot identify as both gay and Muslim. Participants had the opportunity to explain their responses and among those who did share their rationale behind their beliefs two themes emerged: distinguishing the self from others and confidence versus uncertainty.

Zakari and Mehdi both provided responses that conveyed confidence and certainty in their beliefs. Zakari wrote, "I disagree. A man can identify with whatever and whoever he wants." And Mehdi wrote, "I tell people that the only one I have to answer to is Allah. I live for me and not worried about what a man or female has to say." Fuad approached the question with more uncertainty. Fuad wrote, "Disagree, but overall I'm ambivalent since I would understand why someone would think this." Fuad's response also has an element of answering for himself while separating his beliefs from the opinions and experiences of others. Rafiq and Yousef incorporated similar distinctions between themselves and others in their responses. Rafiq stated

that he disagreed. "You can be, go talk to a religious figure in a mosque—good luck, but you

can be both." As was the case with Fuad and Rafiq, Yousef distinguished himself from others

but acknowledged how his personal identity process contrasts with his response. He said,

"Although I have not gotten to the full identification of Muslim despite the identity of gay I do

think it is possible to identify as both and therefore I disagree with the statement." Yousef's

identification of his process helped categorize him within the three options for resolving identity

conflict (rejection, compartmentalization, and integration).

    Sources/origins of identity conflict. Starting with the premise that negative attitudes and

messages toward same-sex relationships and sexual acts are not inherent in the human psyche but

learned through the influence of others, the participants developed messages and feelings about

their same-sex attractions from those around them. All of the participants reported that they had

heard messages deriding same-sex relationships and sexual acts. The majority of these messages

came from scriptures and individuals associated with religion, with family members and peers

communicating a substantial number of antigay messages as well.

    All nine of the participants internalized these negative messages. The degree to which

these internalized messages impacted the participants varied. Rafiq and Zakari reported that they

had minimal exposure to religious denunciation of homosexual practices. Both participants,

however, encountered negative messages at home and expressed hesitance with expressing their

gay identity around other Muslims.

    Identity conflict resolution styles—Rejecting the Muslim identity. Based on the

inclusion criteria, all of the participants identified as gay. As a result, rejecting a gay identity in

favor of a Muslim identity was not a viable option. Five participants appeared to fall into this

category. Hakim, Adam, and Ahmed, Fuad and Zakari explicitly stated that they maintain their

gay identity while longer no identifying as Muslim. Hakim, Adam, and Ahmed explicitly stated

that they reject Islam and religion in its entirety. Fuad expressed similar sentiments as these

three participants; however, as the interview progressed his ambivalence about Islam became

more apparent. In one of his last responses during the interview he stated,

> I am not rejecting it [Islam], I am trying to give back to the community and I am
>
> trying to reincorporate myself into my Palestinian Muslim identity but not as, you
>
> know, like I said I got that horrible tattoo when I was pretty young, I say pretty
>
> young, it was like 6 years ago, but I cannot go into a mosque anymore—now that
>
> I think about it that way am I unifying being [gay] and Muslim or am I at peace
>
> with it? I will let you make that assessment; I will leave it up to you.

Zakari made a similar statement to Fuad's. Zakari described how he no longer identifies as a

practicing Muslim, and even though he endorses some Muslim beliefs he currently identifies as

spiritual. He explained, "I don't feel like it is a rejection of [Islam] . . . There are so any religions

out there that I don't want to identify with just one of them."

Hakim and Adam were the only participants who disagreed with the statement that a man

cannot identify as both gay and Muslim. As such, they were categorized as rejecting Islam.

Ahmed's acknowledgment that a man can identify as gay and Muslim does not reflect his

personal identification, and he too was categorized as rejecting his Muslim identity. When

Hakim and Adam stopped believing in the Islamic teachings they had resolved their identity

conflict and ultimately benefited from this decision. Ahmed reported that he continued

balancing his sexual and religious identities for a 6-year period after he began to question the

religious doctrine he learned as a child. His final loss of belief in Islam led to the rejection of his

Muslim identity when he was 28 years old. He stated,

> I started having . . . suspicio[ns] . . . are these stories true or not true . . . I was
>
> having these suspicions and then at 28 I came to that decision that, no, these
>
> stories are not true, these are all myths and I am not believing in any of these
>
> stories.

Fuad's rejection of religion followed soon after he recognized his gay identity. He asserted,

"When I came out as gay and had no way of consolidating that I was gay and Palestinian-gay and

Muslim." In various setting he was only able to display a few of his identities.

Identity conflict resolution styles—Compartmentalization. At some point in their

identity negotiation process, all participants compartmentalized their sexual identity. An

individual must recognize his or her sexual identity prior to sharing this information with others,

and all of the participants reported withholding this information from others for an indeterminate

amount of time. As the only participant whose sexual identity became known to others prior to

his own personal awareness, Fuad still managed to compartmentalize his gay identity. That said,

at the time of the interview some of the participants no longer operated in this category.

Some participants maintained a simultaneous identification as gay and Muslim for a

period of years. Ahmed described how he spent 6 years identifying "as gay and Muslim at the

same time." Ahmed shared,

> I used to keep the prayers and be gay at the same time, ah, so I wasn't having sex
>
> during Ramadan. I would still fast and still go to the mosque, do the Friday
>
> prayers, and be gay at the same time.

Ahmed disclosed that he still experienced internal conflict and worried about the potential

consequences of his actions until the age of 25 years. He stated, "I was still feeling like I was

doing the wrong thing . . . am I right, am I wrong, and I started doing extra prayers." After

joining a support group for gay Palestinians, Ahmed had a series of realizations that changed

how he practiced his religion. He stated,

> I started to figure out that I am not sick, I am normal. So at the age of 25, yeah, I
>
> figured out that I am a normal person and I stopped having guilt trips, and then I
>
> started being more spiritual. I stopped doing any prayers, but I was still believing
>
> like there are these books that I am supposed to believe, okay, I am not going to, I
>
> am not doing any prayer, but like I wasn't eating pork.

Rafiq's limited identification with religion in general makes it more challenging to place

him in a category as the other participants who either identified or continue to identify as

Muslim. Rafiq's description of how he modifies how much he discloses about his religious

beliefs based upon his audience suggests that he also fits in a compartmentalization category. He

stated,

> I end up redefining my views on religion depending on who I am talking to so a
>
> little bit so if I am talk to . . . I would be okay with telling a scientist that I'm kind
>
> of agnostic, but if I'm talking with someone from the Middle East . . . you don't
>
> want to tell them I don't believe in God so that is just going to [upset them], so
>
> you would just say I am a Muslim, but not a practicing Muslim, you want to
>
> soften the blow.

Identity conflict resolution styles—Compartmentalization/integration. As the only

participants who still identified as Muslim, Omar, Yousef, and Mehdi were the only individuals

in this study who can fall within the compartmentalization/integration category. Both Omar and

Yousef have disclosed their sexual identity to the community and friends but not their family.

The inverse is true for Mehdi who has informed his family of his sexual identity but not his

community. Yousef stated that he still has room to grow and improve in fully integrating his

identities.

Identity conflict resolution. As part of the interview, participants described how they

resolved their identity conflict. The techniques discussed refer to navigating the identity process,

not coping with the distress that resulted from the conflict. Some of the methods were used by

several participants while others were used only by one participant. The four techniques

mentioned were categorized into internal and external sources. The internal sources refer to

efforts and processes that came from within, and external sources of resolution were based on the

involvement of others.

Internal techniques. The most widely used internal technique involved following the

principles and values consistent with being a "good Muslim." In conjunction with trusting that

God has a plan for him as a gay man, Omar also adhered to the concept of behaving as a "good

person" and good Muslim. He stated,

> For a while I was like, oh, I'm going to go to hell because I like guys and that is
>
> not how it should be . . . but then like I was like okay, if you are a good person
>
> and you do good things than that is not the right way to think. And like I said, if
>
> you are Muslim . . .

Mehdi also used this method. After he disclosed his sexual identity to his family, Mehdi spoke

with his father. He recalled, "I told him I do everything in the Quran that I am supposed to do."

Mehdi's recognition of the Quran as the most important source within Islam is evident. He also

identified additional activities that he believes keep him in compliance with Islam. He asserted,

> I am doing what I got to do, I pray, I do what I got to do, I'm not saying that I am
>
> one of the best Muslims out there, everybody makes mistakes, but everybody got

flaws also, but me being Muslim I follow everything (speaks Arabic). I pray five

times a day, I read my Quran, I teach other people, I get people married.

Yousef broadened his concept of the good Muslim to a good person, or good religious follower. He stated,

I just try to mostly follow what I can do of the religion to that extent . . . I mostly

tell myself that I think that I am a good person and [that I follow] like most of

what any religion would teach.

Yousef stated in times of doubt or concern "The only way I could . . . be okay with the fact that I am gay" involved reflecting on how important it is to

be [good] to each other and be kind to each other and more, you know,

focus more on love than hate and more on peace than war kind of, that has

always been, ah, the only way I could . . . be okay with the fact that I am

gay.

Consistent with the concept of being a good Muslim, Mehdi described how he minimizes his identity conflict by presenting himself to others in a specific manner. He shared, "I carry myself like a Muslim." Mehdi's approach involves how he describes his sexual preference and how he interacts with people. In regard to his label, Mehdi shared, "I don't say I like men, I say 'I am in love with the same sex,' that is how I say it and how I consider myself." For Mehdi, this semantic reframing, in conjunction with how he carries himself, reduces the frequency with which he gets treated differently. Mehdi explained,

I don't get judged, don't nobody ever say, oh there he is, (removed Name) he's

gay, I never heard nobody call me [something disrespectful] or disrespect myself,

because I don't carry myself like that, I carry myself like a Muslim . . . one couple

> wants me to marry them tomorrow, they don't look at me like a gay Muslim man
>
> because I don't carry myself like that, don't nobody don't know about my sex life,
>
> nobody don't know about my love life 'cause I know how far to take it when I am
>
> having a conversation with somebody, who I can trust, who I can open up to, and
>
> who I can't. At the end of the day I don't get judged.

The numerous references to sexual elements (labeling his sexual identity and not disclosing his sexual actions or details of his "love life") indicates that carrying oneself like a Muslim involves refraining from mentioning sexually and homosexually related information.

Another internal source that two participants utilized to counter their identity conflict included removing or minimizing the opinions of others and asserting one's autonomy. Without prompting, Mehdi and Zakari both disclosed their belief that a person's (religious) actions are solely between God and the individual and that other people's opinions are insignificant. Mehdi asserted, "Whatever I do behind closed doors is my business. The only person I got to answer to is Allah." This approach worked for Mehdi, who asserted that "everybody else's opinion doesn't matter to me."

While sharing his beliefs regarding adherence to religious customs and doctrine, Zakari touched upon similar sentiments related to his relationship with God. He stated, "[Muslims] are raised to know that the relationship with God is between you and God and no matter what he says, what you believe in, and how you behave, is what God sees." He continued to talk more specifically about how he makes sense of scripture-based prohibitions against homosexuality within Islam. In reference to the Quran, Zakari shared,

> I've never really seen any explicit messages about homosexuality. There is this
>
> kind of this give and take because with a lot of religious texts they outlaw a lot of

> things . . . but I guess people who identify as Muslim participate in them, like
>
> drinking alcohol. No matter what you can identify with religion . . . because you
>
> are not showing off to someone else, it is a personal identity.

For Zakari, whose family members exercise more individual selection in which religious policies they follow, he recognizes that flexibility and autonomy are important components to religion as well. Using a similar line of thought, Yousef described how "It is okay to, you know, to be different in some way as long as you are maintaining the focus." Yousef is referring to Islam when he speaks about maintaining the focus. In other words, even if you are different and love men, as long as a man adheres to the Muslim teachings, difference is acceptable.

> Yousef was the only participant who explicitly mentioned the concept of control as a

means of resolving his identity conflict. He shared,

> Whatever lies ahead after I die is it and, you know, whatever happens happens, I
>
> guess. I know that I can't really, I can't really, you know, control any of these
>
> things. I didn't decide you know to be born in a Muslim community, I didn't
>
> decide to be gay either, it's nothing that I can help, um, and I just try to be a good
>
> person overall, and, you know, if that is not enough then that is not enough.

External technique. Omar was the only participant who discussed using an external technique. As part of Omar's identity conflict resolution, he utilized both internal and external sources that enabled resolution. Omar described how reflecting on God's plan helped him resolve his identity conflict, which lead to his compartmentalized/integrated identity. He explained, "If you are Muslim and you believe that God has written your path for what you are going to do in life then this is what God chose for you and this is how it's going to be." Omar's trust in God provided him relief as he was able to recognize that his sexual orientation must be a

part of a larger system that God had created. Omar also utilized several internal techniques that

assisted with his resolution. When asked about when he came to that realization, Omar shared,

> I guess it took a while thinking about it, just thinking about life and . . . just
>
> thinking about things in general and weighing out both sides. Is this really the
>
> right way to think? Or you know . . . being the devil's advocate for both sides and
>
> putting things into perspective.

After coming to the realization that if he lives a good life he will not endure punishment

for following God's plan, Omar reported feeling, "really, really relieved."

   Impermanence. While some participants strongly reject or embrace Islam, Fuad and

Zakari both made reference to some changes that have occurred with time. Fuad, who rejected

his Muslim identity as an adolescent, questioned this stance as the interview concluded. He

asked himself "Am I unifying being Gay and Muslim or am I at peace with it?" Unable to

answer the question he deferred to me, stating, "I will let you make that assessment." Zakari,

who has also rejected his Muslim identity in exchange for a broader spiritual perspective,

disclosed that

> I am still not religious, but feel like, since college I have grown a little more
>
> aware of my cultural basis of it and so I am spiritual, but I feel like the cultural
>
> aspects of it are starting to resonate with me a little bit, to a greater extent than it
>
> did in college.

Both of these interview excerpts suggest that as time passes, the participants' relationships with

their culture and religion change and they may categorize themselves differently in the future.

The categories they are in are not permanent and will likely change as their personal awareness

and religious/spiritual beliefs evolve.

Impact of sexual and religious identities. The participants were asked about the impact that their sexual and religious identities had upon each other. In an effort to understand the direction of the impact the participants answered two questions: (a) how does sexual identity impact religious identity, and (b) how does religious identity impact sexual identity? The participants' responses varied and the following section is organized based on the positive and negative impact of sexuality on religion and the impact of religion on sexuality.

Impact of sexual identity on religious identity. When answering these questions the participants' responses contained negative, positive, and neutral impact. The majority of the participants addressed the positive impact that their sexuality had on religion with fewer participants acknowledging a negative impact. Two participants provided responses that were more difficult to categorize and seemed more neutral in their impact. Two themes that emerged from the responses addressed how sexuality either hindered or enhanced religious expression and increased critical thinking.

Fuad disclosed that he believes that his sexual identity limited his religious identity. He stated,

I mean, I would definitely say that they have inhibited it. I would say that being gay has inhibited being Muslim because the majority of the Muslim world would not have a Muslim be gay, so like I said before I separate those identities quite clearly with the exception of Al Touse [a queer Palestinian organization] being a safe space.

Hakim expressed how Islam limited his sense of safety and security. He shared,

I want to say that [my sexual identity] did not have anything to with do about how I feel about Islam. I want to believe that Islam, regardless of what your gender is,

regardless of what your sexuality is, Islam is a difficult pill to swallow . . . [and]

something to be afraid of . . . I want to say that objectively . . . but I am gay and I

am sure that has a lot to do with why I am afraid of Islam.

In contrast to Fuad, Zakari described how he his sexual identity enabled him to feel empowered

and removed restrictions and limitations. He stated,

I think that it has strengthened me more than hindered me as I have had to

challenge my beliefs and I have had [to] challenge my religion to accept my

identity and that in itself has strengthened my sexual identity. The fact that I have

to look at my religious beliefs or what my religion preaches, I think that in itself is

kind of strengthening to identify with something that I am technically not

supposed to.

Ahmed's analogy of religion and sexuality as layers covering each other contained elements of

liberation. When asked about how his sexual and religious identities impacted each other he

replied,

I think of it like two layers trying to overlap each other . . . my religious belief

tried to cover that sexual orientation thing to hide it but then I became more

closeted, and now I became like coming out covered that layer of religion and

then that pushed it away . . . so it's gone . . . if religion was the cover, I was

covered and now I am . . . completely uncovered.

Ahmed continued to provide further clarification of his layers analogy and stated, "Let's say the

closet the doors are the religion God is hiding you away, but once you open the doors the

religion is gone."

Adam described his sexual identity as being the light that helped him clearly see his religious beliefs. He stated,

My sexuality was the light when I began to see the other ugly things so it is not

always for myself. I see what the . . . women's rights in the Quran are awful, the

verses for slavery, and many things that do not make any sense. So my trigger to

look into this was my sexual orientation, but now as I examine the whole thing it

just turned out to be . . . yeah.

Adam's experience with violating sexual proscriptions helped him identify some of the negative

elements of his religion, and it allowed him to question Islam and determine if he wanted to

continue living as a practicing Muslim. Other participants recognized how their sexual identity

provided an avenue to think critically about Islam. Zakari spoke about critically examining

Islam instead of accepting all elements as the true and real.

I think that it makes me feel a lot more empowered toward looking at other

religions and other beliefs more critically as opposed to just oh well, I was born

Muslim, I am only going to believe in Islam, and I am not going to accept . . . or .

. . believe in other things. I feel like accepting my sexual identity has helped me

to look at my religion, look at Islam more critically and not necessarily rejecting

it.

Ahmed discussed how his sexual identity enabled him to examine issues from a different

perspective. He reported,

I don't know. The only thing that I know is that because I was gay, am gay, I was

exposed to other people and opinions and seeing things from a different

perspective, and that helps me see the whole belief thing from a different angle

and not just believe the way I was taught. I am not just listening.

Yousef discussed how his sexuality prevented him from fully complying with the religious

teachings and provided some flexibility to examine and assess what elements he did want to

follow instead of "blindly" adhering to everything. He shared,

I guess to the extent like I have lowered my standards of the religion because I

didn't feel like I could meet every single one, so I decided to choose only the ones

I truly [believed] in as opposed to follow everything blindly.

Mehdi and Rafiq were the only participants who did not have anything to say about how their

sexual identity impacted their religious identity. When asked if either identity impacted each

other, Mehdi responded by stating "No." Rafiq asserted, "I have not embraced religion in my

life from an early age" and this distance from religion has limited the "impact" he feels.

Impact of religious identity on sexual identity. The impact of religion on sexuality was

overwhelmingly negative for the participants. While Zakari and Mehdi expressed how religion

had a beneficial impact on their sexual identities, the other participants described the challenges

and burdens they faced as a result of Islam as a religion and cultural group. Hakim blatantly

stated that "[Religion] made things a lot worse." The concept of limitations, restrictions, and

barriers emerged again. The most prevalent barrier for religion involved disclosure of one's

sexual identity to oneself and others.

Rafiq's response echoed similar sentiments as Hakim's, and he targeted religion in

general as a barrier to self-disclosure and expression. He stated:

I only can think of the negative impact of religion so far on my family, my

country, and being a barrier to coming out in terms of, or a barrier to the [lack of]

acceptance of homosexuality, at least in Lebanon and [the United States].

Rafiq did qualify how he felt differently about some of the churches in [city name deleted] as

"They are all very accepting, and that is something new to me and I have never seen that before."

Omar talked about how his religious beliefs thwarted his self-acceptance of his gay

identity. He shared, "At first I did not want to admit to myself, and it was difficult admitting it to

myself that I am gay, and now I am comfortable with who I am."

Unlike the other participants, Zakari did not identify religion as having a negative impact

on his sexual identity. He stated,

I feel like it has not had a big impact or that is has not gotten in the way. I

mentioned it before, homosexuality in Islam, I haven't really been exposed to it . .

. I feel like the topic I want to say is that it is so taboo that it's not even discussed .

. . That is my gut feeling, it has not gotten in the way of my sexual identity or

sexual impression.

Zakari also described how his Muslim heritage helps him stand out in the gay community and

this leads to attention from other men.

In some cases I come across as more exotic as Muslim and that sexual attraction

may come across as being different, and being an identity that being gay and

Muslim is different like a gay Republican or something like that, oh, that is

different.

Zakari never stated whether he perceives this exoticism within the gay community as a positive

or negative trait, but as he presented this information he sounded optimistic and confident or at

least presented himself that way.

Much like their answers for how sexuality impacted their religious identity, Rafiq and Mehdi had similar responses for how their religious identities impacted development of their sexual identities. Rafiq shared,

> I think it was I am lucky the way that I was brought up and that my parents were
> not very conservative or practicing. [That] put me in a place where most of my
> inner struggles with my identity have been, hmmm, I want to say that most of the
> messages that I have in my mind for being gay or for not being gay when I was
> struggling came from myself rather than from religion.

Mehdi declined that his religious identity had any impact on his gay identity and stated, "That is just the way I am."

Identity negotiation summary. The intersection of the participant's multiple identities was the focus of this section. While this study's focus was on sexual and religious identities and the conflict that frequently emerges between them, three participants considered their gay identities and one participant considered his Muslim identity as the most salient. The remaining participants articulated that their occupations (i.e., student), nationality, and gender/humanity best represented how they view themselves. Selecting a single identity as the most representative of oneself is not an easy task as it reduces the complexity of an individual to only one aspect of self. People have countless identities that intersect to produce who they are. When given the opportunity to expand upon their most salient identity, participants also named their immigration status, ethnicity, nationality, and political affiliation, among others, as important.

For some individuals, the identities they claimed as salient and representative conflicted with each other. Participants recognized the source of conflict as both internal and external. The

majority of participants recognized that their conflict stemmed from both sources. However, a

few participants emphasized one source over the other. The external sources of conflict between

their sexual and religious identity most frequently developed from the messages and interactions

that they encountered with their family, peers, religious figures, and the larger community. The

degree to which the participants internalized these messages varied, but no individual was spared

from the impact of these negative messages. As they attempted to negotiate and eventually

resolve this conflict, the participants utilized one of the following three approaches: rejecting

their Muslim identity in favor of their sexual identity, compartmentalizing both identities, or

integrating their identities.

Seven participants expressed belief that the integration of their sexual and religious

identities was possible, and, of these seven, none had managed to attain a level of identity

integration. Except for Rafiq, who did not identify as religious/Muslim, all of the participants

began their identity negotiation process in the compartmentalization realm. Many participants

underwent a religious evolution as their sexual identities began to develop. At the time of the

interview, the identity conflict negotiation process for four of the participants resulted in the

rejection of their Muslim religious identities in favor of their sexual identities. One additional

participant also fits with this group as he no longer identified as Muslim, but unlike the other

four participants he still identified as spiritual. Viewing all religions as similar, he endorsed a

spiritual perspective that enabled him to integrate many practices instead of wedding himself to

one specific practice. Rafiq also fit somewhere between the rejection and compartmentalization

realms as he never really identified as religiously Muslim despite his upbringing in a Muslim

community. The remaining three participants fell within the compartmentalization-integration

continuum. While these participants identified as practicing Muslims and gay men, their closeted lifestyles necessitated the creation of a hybrid category.

In their efforts to navigate the identity negotiation process, the participants utilized several tools and techniques. These techniques refer to resolving the identity conflict, not coping with the distress that resulted from the conflict. Five techniques emerged with certain techniques getting utilized more often than others. The five techniques included: adhering to the values and principles of being a good Muslim, using autonomy over one's action to minimize the opinions of others, relying on God's plan, having control over one's life, and acknowledging that with time people change and evolve.

The participants discussed how their sexual and religious identities influenced each other. The majority of the participants addressed the positive impact that their sexuality had on religion with fewer participants acknowledging a negative impact. Participants shared how their sexual identity provided an avenue to think critically about Islam and examine issues from different perspectives. For numerous participants, the act of facing their sexuality led to questioning the religious principles and beliefs that they had accepted as truth. For others, their sexual identity hindered their religious expression and created additional obstacles to practicing their faith.

When examining the impact of religious identity on sexual identity, two participants did not provide much information. The other seven participants, who did talk about their experiences, described their religious beliefs as having a detrimental affect on their sexual identity development. Many of the participants did not feel welcome or accepted by their Muslim peers and often faced harassment and judgment from other Muslim peers. As a result of these feelings, most of the participants had not disclosed their sexual identities to their parents and families, despite their desire to do so. Among the three participants who had come out to

their families, one individual reported a positive experience and a strong relationship with his family members following disclosure. The other two participants had very precarious familial relationships, and one of them no longer communicates with his siblings and parents.

Domain 4: Mental Health Issues

During the interviews the participants discussed a variety of stressors, or events, experiences, and situations in their lives that create problems and emotional upheaval. Raised in Muslim families and communities, most participants identified their sexual orientation as a stressor prior to their religious identity. At the time of the interview, sexuality and religion created a lot of stress, but sexual identity created the most problems. Participants utilized many of the coping mechanisms discussed next to manage the distress that resulted from the internal and interpersonal problems related to their same-sex desires.

An integral component of this study involved examining how participants coped with the stressors resulting from their conflicting identities and the consequences that resulted from the identities they embraced. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as

Constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person. (p. 141)

Using this definition, I identified any coping efforts that participants initiated to endure the duress and strain that accompanied their identity conflict. While the intensity of the conflict varied by participant, creating greater stress for some, all participants found ways to meaningfully make sense of their situation. During the interview participants were asked two questions regarding coping: (a) how they coped, and (b) what would have helped them cope. Both of these questions also served as themes for coping. The excerpts selected for this section

address a range of topics, including but not limited to details about the coping method, the

benefit of the coping method, and the context in which the participant utilized the method and

why.

What helped (how they coped). The participants provided over 30 unique methods

when asked how they coped with the distress that resulted from their conflicting identities. The

methods they provided were then categorized into three primary styles: cognitive, action, and

social. Each of these coping methods and techniques helped alleviate the participants' internal

distress. Not all of the coping styles identified provided the same degree of relief as some styles

were more effective/adaptive than others. The three styles are described next with the unique

methods presented in descending order of frequency.

Cognitive. Participants overwhelmingly endorsed the cognitive coping style. This style

refers to individuals using their thoughts to provide comfort when experiencing duress and

dissonance. Examples of cognitive coping styles include denial, intellectualization, positive

thinking, and distraction. All participants endorsed using some coping technique that falls into

the cognitive category. The majority of participants talked about their coping style in response to

their stress related to their gay identity.

Fuad identified himself as a cognitive individual, and he mentioned numerous times how

he relies on his ability to think as a means of coping. He stated that "there are a couple types of

catharsis and I think for me thinking is catharsis." At another point in the interview Fuad

reflected on his discomfort with emotions and said, "I like to deconstruct my emotions before I

act them out so I feel very grounded about coping with my identities." While Fuad grounded

himself via thinking directly about an issue, other participants preferred to not think about the

stressor.

Distraction. Omar described how when he first recognized that he was attracted to men: "It was stressful . . . I tried not to think about it when those thoughts come up . . . I would do something to get my mind off of it. I did not want to dwell on it, I guess." Hakim also mentioned that he utilized distraction as a way to tolerate the reality that he felt attracted to men. He stated that he was enrolled in "a very intense doctoral program right now" and he stated that he copes by work[ing] really hard" as he has a lot of homework and assignments related to his graduate program. Hakim also said that "distracting myself and surrounding myself with friends and making friends" also helps.

The concept of school as a source of distraction also emerged in Fuad's narrative. Fuad expressed how "being in classes helped me. I liked to learn first of all and being in classes helped me not focus on sexual identity, which was very confusing for me."

Denial/avoidance. In addition to distraction, participants also utilized denial and avoidance as methods of keeping their thoughts and emotions at a distance. Omar, Zakari, Rafiq, and Ahmed shared their experiences with denying their same-sex attraction toward men. Rafiq stated that

> There was quite a while where I struggled with [it]. I don't know if it is denial
> but even in high school I would suspect it a little bit and then I would push the
> idea away and say no, no, no it cannot be happening, it is wrong, I can't do this, it
> cannot be true, and even after I went to, even after I had my first experiences with
> guys and enjoyed them, I kind of stopped myself and thought maybe I have
> clouded judgment.

While Rafiq had difficulty labeling his behavior as denial, Ahmed felt comfortable acknowledging that "I was living in denial." Ahmed was only able to accept his sexual identity

after living with a woman for a year and recognizing that he did not find their relationship

fulfilling. Omar also experienced a degree of denial about his sexual orientation and asserted

that "At first I did not want to admit to myself . . . I could not even come out to myself."

Zakari's denial of his sexual orientation presented in a manner akin to wishful thinking. He said,

"I remember thinking that the way I coped with it was, this is just a phase, I hope this is just a

phase. I told myself this is just a phase." Over time all four of these participants recognized that

their sexual attraction to men was more than just a phase.

        Critical thinking. In addition to distraction and avoidance/denial, participants also

coped by finding some sort of peace through critical thinking. Critical thinking is a

unique coping style in that it also serves as a means of resolving conflict. Ahmed

engaged in a dialogue with himself about the choices he could make and the potential

consequences that these choices would have. In his late 20s, as Ahmed reflected on his

attraction to men and the religious proscriptions that he had violated, he said to himself,

> Okay, maybe I will go to hell but let me at least enjoy life, because I don't want to
>
> lose my life and my afterlife. Because if I am told that afterlife I am going to hell,
>
> ok, so why should I have hell now? So why I am losing both sides [lives]? So I
>
> am going to enjoy the first part and then let's go to hell later.

This rationale resonated with Ahmed and it empowered him to dismiss and disregard any

attempts to thwart his interests and desires. Other participants used a similar line of critical

thinking. When confronted with cultural and religious proscriptions they reflected on what they

felt they could handle and what they could not. For individuals who still embraced elements of

Islam and were presumably not comfortable with the concept of hell in the same manner as

Ahmed, some participants coped by thinking about how they could compromise. As a gay-identified man, Yousef stated that

> I have lowered my standards of the religion because I didn't feel like I
>
> could meet every single one. So I decided to choose only the ones I truly
>
> [believed] in as opposed to follow everything blindly. Um, I think had I
>
> not been gay I would never have tried pork, not to say that it made me
>
> make that decision, you know, but I can't fit the description 100 percent so
>
> it is ok to, you know, to be different in some way as long as you are
>
> maintaining the focus.

Yousef also stated that "I just try to mostly follow what I can do of the religion to that extent, I guess do damage control." Ahmed endorsed a similar perspective prior to concluding that if hell was inevitable, why not enjoy life on earth. Ahmed said, "Yeah, I was like, it was hidden deep inside in my mind it is like someone telling me like ok you are doing one thing wrong, but don't break all the rules." He then explained his perspective in terms of an analogy. "You can have a piece of chocolate during the day, but don't go for the cheeseburger . . . or don't have four cheeseburgers." Ahmed gave the following example of one compromise he made during a period in his life when he was still practicing Islam.

> I had a boyfriend for 3 years and during that time like I used to keep the prayers
>
> and be gay at the same time, ah, so I wasn't having sex during Ramadan, so 30
>
> days of not having sex.

 Omar reflected on the evaluation process he used to find relief.

> I guess it took a while thinking about it, just thinking about life and . . . about
>
> things in general, and weighing out both sides. Is this really the right way to think

or you know, I don't know life, being the devil's advocate for both sides and

putting things into perspective.

It is important to note that these ideas and approaches that resulted from thinking critically about

their situations did not immediately materialize. Ahmed, Yousef, and Omar struggled for quite a

while before reaching these conclusions.

Comforting/empowering thoughts. Three participants shared some of the messages that

they used to comfort and empower themselves in times of duress and doubt. When worried

about his sexual attraction toward men and what these feelings meant for his religious identity,

Yousef shared that he would reduce Islam to the Islamic religious beliefs and principles that he

valued. More specifically, he would reassure himself that Islam wants

people to be [good] to each other and be kind to each other and . . . focus

more on love than hate, and more on peace than war kind of, that has

always been ah the only way I could . . . be okay with the fact that I am

gay, um, that has always been the thing I always referred back to

whenever I thought about it.

In contrast to Yousef, who still identified as Muslim, Adam, who had rejected Islam in

favor of his gay identity, found strength and support by reflecting on the fact that "I know I am a

good person" and "I just had faith that I am a good person trying to make it through life." This

simple belief helped Adam combat the homophobic messages he heard.

Mehdi's comforting and empowering thoughts had a unique tone in comparison to

Yousef's and Adam's. Mehdi never described any specific experiences involving rejection or

discrimination related to his sexual identity or disclosed any concerns or doubts about his sexual

and religious identities. In response to my questions regarding what it was like to come out to

his family, Mehdi replied,

> I was like listen, this is what it is, it ain't gonna change. If I love myself and I let
>
> other people know and if they don't love me then they wasn't there from the
>
> beginning so. I love[d] myself before I knew what was going down and what it
>
> was headed for.

 Mehdi stated that he copes with distress by utilizing self-love, which has a powerful impact. All

of the participants have the capacity to utilize self-love and other elements of positive

psychology; however, not everyone may have awareness of this type of coping style or apply it

effectively. That said, all participants identified positive thoughts or a positive approach as a

means of overcoming their stress.

   Positive thinking. There was no shortage of positive thinking and reframing among the

participants. When asked about how he dealt with angst resulting from his religious conflict,

Yousef asserted, "I don't put enough time into, you know, focusing on the negative

consequences of being gay and those relationship kind of things." In their efforts to reframe

their negative experiences and think positively, participants did not ignore the challenges they

faced; they chose to not focus or dwell on them. Hakim acknowledged that he had to manage a

difficult situation and he was honest with himself. In reference to the challenges he faced with

his family's rejection after he came out to them, Hakim stated, "A lot of it sucks but I guess there

is no point in dwelling on what I wish could have been different." Remaining focused on the

present and the opportunities that awaited him, Hakim made a new life for himself. Despite the

difficult life experiences that Hakim endured as an adolescent, he asserted that "it could have

been so much worse. I do remember growing up, where as strict as my family was there were

people that were even more strict with their kids and I am lucky." Hakim followed this

statement with his acknowledgment that "I am lucky I made it to San Francisco." While he

would have preferred to have not endured the struggles in his life, he proclaimed, "I am who I

am because of my experiences."

Adam engaged in a similar process in which he acknowledged that life is not fair, which

did not prevent him from pursuing his life. Adam said, "I believe I am tough and I can handle it,

I have been through a lot. Yeah, I think now I am moving forward, I really put most of the

things behind me and trying to." After receiving asylum in the United States and having to

adjust to living as an immigrant in a new country, Adam found comfort in remaining employed

in his career field and "that is what keeps me hanging on."

Choosing to be happy. Yousef recalled how after his first sexual interaction with a man

the finality of his action descended upon him and, as he stated, "there was no going back now."

At this point he could have dwelled in regret and remorse; however, he refused to do so. Instead,

Yousef told himself in reference to his actions

> There is no danger there anymore. So I have to roll with it or live in, you know,
>
> disgrace of myself and feel like I did something so wrong for the rest of my life,
>
> which is not going to be a pleasant life.

His intentional decision to "roll with it" enables Yousef to pursue fulfilling relationships with

men instead of getting mired in the religious and cultural doubts about his actions.

Other participants had similar realizations. They recognized that they could live in

disgrace or they could choose to enjoy their life. Given the power of thoughts and the ability to

choose how to live the rest of one's life, positive thinking served as an effective coping tool.

Sense of humor. Even though none of the participants stated that they coped with their

stress via humor, several participants, Rafiq, Fuad, and Adam in particular, laughed during their

interviews as they shared some of the most challenging aspects of their narratives. The

humorous interludes often manifested in laughter or sarcasm and appeared to help ease their

disclosure rather than make light of the situation. While discussing his social difficulties in high

school, Rafiq shared the following excerpt about his denial of his sexual orientation:

> My definition of gay was something (whispers) really really bad and I don't want
>
> to be something bad or something that is really looked down upon so, um, so
>
> yeah, I wanted to fit in. I tried my best and it was, you know, yeah, and I denied
>
> it. People would try to tease me about it and I was always like no (laughter).

While most of the instances involving humor were indirect comments, the same three

participants also made statements that mocked some of the more extreme religious beliefs and

societal mechanisms used to oppress sexual minorities or quash dissent. Adam talked about the

message he heard about God's disapproval of men having sex with each other. He shared,

> The punishment in the Islamic state when a man is having sex with another man,
>
> this is so against nature that the throne of God, like God in the seventh heaven has
>
> a throne and it would shake from the ugliness of this action . . . Okay I said, so I
>
> started looking at the map, like I said there are all these other people having sex
>
> and the amount of porn on the Internet, God must be on vibration the whole time,
>
> his throne would never stop because it is happening all the time, 24 hours, right
>
> from the love.

Activities/action. In addition to cognitive methods of coping, participants also reported a

variety of activities and actions that enabled them to handle stressors in their lives. These

activities were divided into six categories: activism, self-care, mental health services, coping via the body, media, and religious pursuits.

Activism. Two participants discussed how their work as activists who assist members of the LGBTQ, Muslim, and Arabic-speaking communities. A third participant expressed interest in one day contributing to this issue via assisting two of his lesbian-identified friends make education films about individuals who identify as Muslim and LGBTQ. Aside from Fuad, Ahmed and Adam did not directly refer to their activism work as a means of coping. I included both Ahmed and Adam in this section as it was apparent that they both benefited from their education outreach in a manner consistent with coping.

While talking about his frustration with the lack of LGBTQ-affirming resources and exposure in Arabic, Ahmed disclosed that he made a Facebook page. He shared how he had

> started posting stuff [LGBTQ-affirmative documents] and translating many things
>
> into Arabic because there is no Arabic source for the people there to know that
>
> they [LGBTQ-identified individuals] are just normal people, it is not the wrong
>
> thing to be gay.

Ahmed disclosed his intent to educate his family about MSM and alternative sexualities via films after coming out to them. He had identified numerous films that would provide positive images and arguments that MSM and queer-identified people could live meaningful and rewarding lives. Unfortunately, he could not locate any of the films in Arabic. Throughout the interview, Ahmed referenced how his family and community lacked exposure to gay-affirming resources in Arabic and how the few depictions of LGBTQ individuals in the media were stereotypical and reinforced the homophobic beliefs of those in his home community.

Fuad's utilization of activism had a more direct and clearer connection as a method of coping. He has a history of leadership and civic engagement that began in childhood and continued during adolescence and adulthood. In describing his work, Fuad stated,

> I am pretty involved in the queer community, and like I said in terms of being a
>
> gay and Muslim I have a lot of different mentors and in terms of gearing it
>
> towards investing in the future of a Palestinian or any . . . it is pretty important to
>
> me.

Fuad referenced the organizations and programs with which he has been affiliated and has supported throughout the interview. He disclosed that personal experiences served as a primary catalyst to volunteer as a worker in a suicide crisis center and he encounters youth who are attempting to navigate similar stressors and challenges that he did as a youth. Fuad described his volunteer work and some of the issues he encounters in the following excerpt from his interview:

> When I am trying to talk to a queer Muslim youth who is really confused and is
>
> 13 or 14 years old online and they say I don't know what to do, like I find myself
>
> going back to what those psychologists used to say to me and it is like oh, you are
>
> so young-like, and I will talk to them about their future and I will be like you
>
> know what (unintelligible quotation) sometimes they are really into crisis when
>
> they are talking about like a bottle of pills in front of them, okay put the bottle of
>
> pills away and let me tell you my own story. A little self-disclosure too really as
>
> like my last option and I tell them that when I was in college doing all this shit
>
> that you just said you will never be able to do. Here is my story and I did it, I
>
> prioritized my queer identity, but if you are not there and you are not at that point
>
> where you cannot act out being gay without like very severe consequences like

homelessness, um, you really are not, I don't think you should. I don't think that

is gay shame to tell a kid not to come out if you are going to be homeless, like no.

Fuad's focus on helping youth, the homeless, and members of the queer and Palestinian

communities is notable as he has held or continues to hold each of these identities at some point

in his life.

Adam discussed how he has two close friends who share a similar family history in terms

of conflict with their father. They are both involved in helping to change attitudes about

LGBTQ- and Muslim-identified individuals. Adam stated that

They are very active and they are making videos and educating people and they

are starting to bigger, but now I am focusing on helping me first and I need to

focus on me for a while, maybe afterwards.

Adam's intent to feel more stable and settled prior to getting involved with his friends' work

appears to reflect an awareness of his personal boundaries and emotional limit. This is an

example of how Adam's willingness to use his self-awareness prevented him from overextending

himself and enabled him to utilize self-care, which is another coping style that emerged from the

interviews.

Self-care. Self-care refers to the practice of intentionally engaging in behaviors

that promote one's physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Intending to stay in the

United States for a defined period of time and then return home to Saudi Arabia, Adam's

spontaneous application for asylum and approval created a unique set of circumstances

that other participants did not encounter. Without any forethought or planning, Adam

had to find employment and housing. In the midst of managing this stressful situation,

Adam explained:

So I am trying to finish my certification and get a good job. This alone will put

me at much ease. Then I see my bank account go back to the normal level then I

can deal with the emotional stuff . . . but now . . . I put the emotional on hold and

focus on establishing myself.

Employment and financial priorities/necessities made it challenging for Adam to think about

other issues such as relationships and emotional health. When asked about his interest in dating

he acknowledged that he wants a relationship, but only when he feels "more stable." Adam went

on to say:

At the moment I feel like right now I am not in good shape because in relationship

I have to care for someone and have to put to invest time and effort, and I don't

have that right now as I am really trying to establish myself and my career.

Mental health services. Some participants reported using mental health services

as options for coping. Fuad and Zakari both met with therapists for individual therapy,

and Ahmed and Fuad also participated in support groups. Fuad's initial phase of therapy

began when his parents discovered his gay identity and insisted that he meet with a

professional. He stated,

I should also mention that my parents had me sent to a shrink, a series of shrinks

all throughout high school. All of whom pretty much you know were, a couple of

them were friends, a couple were Muslims, yeah, but all of them were pretty

intelligent people and they said like, "Listen, your parents are not going to accept

you, but you should prioritize your education right now. Just tell them what they

want to hear . . . you are so young, don't throw your future away, look at all these

internships you have, you are going to go to a great college, you don't need to be

gay right now." So that was kind of the message.

At the time he attended therapy, Fuad dismissed these messages. With age, however, he

recognized their pragmatism. When conducting crisis calls, Fuad reported that he offers the

same advice to youth intent on coming out regardless of the consequences. Without provocation,

Fuad said that this advice is not shaming or invalidating considering the risks associated with

coming out (homelessness, emotional distress, etc.) that he personally experienced.

Both Ahmed and Fuad attended a therapy group or a support group for individuals

coming to terms with their sexual identities. Both of these groups met in Israel and participants

had an opportunity to gain exposure to affirming representations of LGBTQ individuals and the

community. Ahmed reported that the group "[was] one of the most helpful things" that he

encountered for managing his sexuality. He described the benefit of the group in the following

excerpt:

> [Group therapy] is the most important thing the support group. Because all that
>
> time I'm listening to things to be done from a certain source, which is always
>
> either my family which are religious and from national TV, which are also very
>
> culturally very Middle East strict, very Eastern culture about very being binary
>
> genders and very strict about gender roles, uh, but then you on the other side, you
>
> start hearing the other opinion, and then you figure out, no this is more right, this
>
> is more, this sounds more logical to me. I should have listened to the other
>
> opinion before, but I am happy that at least I did it at the age of 25. Some people
>
> are at the age of 40 and still not accepting themselves so.

Hakim and Zakari both expressed interest in seeing an individual therapist as a way to deal with

their stress in the future. Zakari informed me that he "is considering seeing a psychologist or a

psychiatrist to talk about this [experience]." Adam reflected on how his ongoing conversations

with his friends who have undergone similar experiences provide similar benefits to therapy. His

interactions are presented in the Social Support section.

  Coping via the body. Some participants engaged their bodies in an effort to

manage their distress. As a college student Hakim utilized the gym to enhance his self-

esteem by increasing muscle mass and "improving" his appearance. When asked how he

dealt with intense emotional duress, Hakim stated, "I go to the gym a lot." Aside from

the gym, Hakim also discussed how his graduate program required a lot of physical

activity and movement as he had to travel around the urban area where he lives. He

traveled primarily by bicycle to maximize his opportunities for physical exercise. Hakim

was the only participant to directly state that working out helped him cope.

  When asked about how he coped with the stress of waiting to hear about the decision for

his asylum application, Adam shared that he used alcohol to assist with the angst and

uncertainty. He did not discuss drinking alcohol frequently and referred to it in the past. In

response to a question about how he managed the angst that resulted from waiting for the

decision of his asylum application, Adam responded "most of the time I'm there I would be

drunk in a club so I don't even know." Adam was the only participant who acknowledged his

alcohol use. Given the prevalence of exercise and substance use as a means of coping for many

men, it is surprising that more participants did not identify these methods.

  Media. During their interviews, almost every participant referenced how the

Internet and other media sources helped them in some way. While the Internet primarily

related to sexual and religious exploration and exposure to Western culture and concepts,

Hakim referenced the Internet in relation to coping. He did not specify what about the

Internet or how he used the Internet to cope, but he stated that "the Internet also helps."

As Ahmed mentioned, having limited access to LGBTQ-affirming resources and

materials in his community, it is possible that the Internet helped provide a connection to

more positive and empowering materials or, at a minimum, distraction through

entertainment.

>In addition to the Internet, writing also emerged as a method of coping. One of Fuad's

friends recommended that he read a book that had a meaningful impact on him, which he

describes in the following excerpt.

>One book that really helped me was reading Gloria Anadalua's *Borderlands*,
>
>which was, you know, all about intersectionality, and she has this quote, "I did not
>
>abandon my people, my people abandoned me." Uh, and when I first read that 4
>
>years ago it really like (laugh), ah, my friend was like, he's a sociologist, you
>
>need to read this, so I read it, and I remember that quote and I was in Spanish and
>
>it was a very powerful line.

>*Religious pursuits.* When asked about how they coped with stress pertaining to sexual

religious identities, none of the participants stated that they prayed for support. One participant,

acknowledged that he prayed, but not for strength or comfort. Omar stated, "I did [pray] a few

times because I just wanted life to be easier for me and I felt like it would be so much better if it

was not like that, so I did a few times, yeah." The topic of prayer also surfaced during Ahmed's

interview. He stated that

>I would still fast and still go to the Mosque, do the Friday prayers and be gay at
>
>the same time, but I was still feeling like I was doing the wrong thing until the age

of 25. Am I right, am I wrong, and I started doing extra prayers.

Social support. Social support as a coping method had the third highest rate of utilization among participants. For the purposes of this study any behaviors and or activities that met criteria for this category of coping required interaction with people as a way to help participants manage stress and discomfort. Differentiating activities that involved people (i.e., volunteering at a crisis hotline) from social support (i.e., talking with friends) proved challenging. Individual and group counseling met criteria for both activities and social support. They ultimately were placed in the former category as attending therapy is a more structured activity than talking with friends and relatives. Within the social support style, two categories emerged: engaging others socially and monitoring interpersonal interactions. Engaging others socially comprised the majority of the coping behaviors within this category.

Engaging others socially. Whether they stated it directly or not, all of the participants used social interaction as a means of coping. Hakim discussed how social support helped him endure challenging periods in current time and how he feels support by "surrounding [him]self with friends and making friends." In college Hakim also relied on friendship during a period when he had to withhold his recently acknowledged gay identity from others. Hakim stated, "One thing that did help . . . was that support system that I haphazardly stumbled upon, that lab manager I was talking about her family and neighbors." The neighbors that Hakim mentioned were both gay-identified men who provided a source of connection to the gay community before he could access it.

Adam described how he met a group of friends who share many of the same traits he possesses.

So now my friends which I have here are mostly Arab and they are the same they

came to the U.S. on asylum and they also became atheist or already were, and that

is now my group of friends because we can share the same ideas and understand

each other better.

Adam considers the support and conversations he has with his friends as a form of counseling as

they discuss difficult topics that most of his friends can relate with in some way as they have

shared similar experiences.

Not everyone experienced talking as a useful experience. In response my inquiry about

whether he used any larger institutions to help him come to terms with his sexual identity, Omar

stated, "No, I don't usually share things with people. I keep things inside and don't really talk

about it."

Monitoring interpersonal interactions. Zakari and Adam both mentioned ways that they

cope by minimizing opportunities for encountering stressful situations in their social interactions.

Rafiq explained that he found it easier to selectively share information depending on the

individual or group with whom he is talking. He explained,

I am a people pleaser, so I end up redefining my views on religion depending on

who I am talking to . . . I would be okay with telling a scientist that I'm kind of

agnostic, but if I'm talking with someone from the Middle East, somebody's

asking like (whispers: agnostic is not something nice). Yeah, you don't want to

tell them I don't believe in God, so you would just say I am a Muslim, but not a

practicing Muslim, you want to soften the blow.

Rafiq also benefits from softening the blow as he does not face as much disapproval from

Muslim peers or have to answer as many questions.

Adam and Hakim both shared how they have a strong reaction to conservative/fundamentalist Muslims. This aversion developed after their persecution and oppression within Muslim communities. Adam reported that he prefers to avoid practicing Muslim men and women as a way to diminish his distress. He stated,

> I have issues with people who still identify as Muslim; there is stuff I just don't want to hear anymore . . . So now my friends which I have here are mostly Arab and they are the same. They came to the U.S. on asylum and they also became atheist.

For Adam, surrounding himself with others who have a shared experience is comforting as they are able to "share the same ideas and understand each other better." Adam also stated that in addition to the coping methods he uses, he is still trying to find a way to deal with the conflict and disappointment he feels. Looking back on the challenges he faced and the sacrifice that he has made to pursue religion at the expense of his happiness during his childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, Adam stated,

> And then you think of gay and God is giving you a test to see to test your patience and is going to make it up for you, and then like I said, by the age of 30 when I said I am not going to be compensated for all the pain and I think sometimes I still feel, ah, anger that I have been lied to and I put up with so much waiting to be compensated in heaven, and now I know it was a big lie so I am still trying to find ways to deal with it.

Adam's remarks are striking as he acknowledges the lasting impact and psychological upheaval that has resulted from his conflicting identities.

What would have helped (how they would have liked to cope)? In an attempt to learn more about what resources and support Muslim-identified MSM would like to have had access to as they coped with their stressors, I asked the participants what would have helped. The participants' responses were divided into four categories: exposure, reassurance/validation, guidance, and mental health services. Furthermore, some participants identified elements of their lives that they wish had not been present. Had these factors been removed or never occurred they would have had an easier time coping with their situation.

Exposure. Numerous participants identified exposure to diversity as an element of their life that made their experiences easier to navigate. Several participants, who did not have access to diversity, stated that they would exposure to more members of the LGBTQ community and religious diversity would have significantly helped them cope with their identities. Zakari discussed how he would have appreciated a more diverse environment, especially in childhood. He explained,

> I think that growing up it would have been interesting being exposed to more
>
> people, more type of people, different lifestyles . . . Growing up, I guess, getting
>
> more exposure would have made it, would have given me a different picture of
>
> the world or different experiences and it may have changed my outlook.

Omar endorsed a similar opinion to Zakari's. During his childhood, he lived in a community with a minimal Muslim presence. Nonetheless, he shared that he grew up "sheltered" and would like to have not been "so sheltered" as a child. Omar also mentioned that his grandmother had a significant impact on his development during his formative years, and it would have been easier for him "if my grandmother did not play such a big role in my life." He explained this comment in terms of religious teaching. He stated how he would have liked "if

she had not told me what is right and what is wrong and making me think about religion."

    Reassurance and validation. The majority of participants grew up in households where they received negative messages about MSM. Numerous participants discussed how helpful it would have been if their parents or family members could have provided some reassurance. The type of reassurance changed based on the needs and situations of the participants.

    Zakari shared how he wanted to know that his parents would love him regardless of his sexual and religious identities. He said,

> I guess deep down I would have liked it if my parents were like, we love you no matter what, that would be a much more comforting or if my parents made a statement that would have made it more apparent that it would be okay to identify as something else, like it would be okay to be, to not follow the majority, it would be okay to choose to have sex with another man. Growing up if they made that more apparent or if they were more open-minded I would not feel as afraid to come out to them or have more reservations to come out to them.

    For Adam, the ability to share the burden of the stress he carried would have been reassuring and comforting. He described how "through this whole thing I have been just dealing it with myself" as he did not feel comfortable sharing this information "with my mother, my father, or anyone." Adam asserted that "If just one person was there to talk to me or make it easier for me that would have made it much easier."

    Unlike Zakari and Adam, Hakim would have been content with reassurance from people he did not know. Hakim stated, "I wish I had that it gets better campaign as I was growing up, because it does get better." Lastly, Zakari addressed homophobic messages at a societal level. He shared,

Maybe if those kinds of things were not spoken of as taboo, like if homosexuality

was not spoken of as something bad, I think that my life would be a little

different, I don't want to [say] easier, but I think my outlook would be.

Mehdi found relief and support from religion and his family as well as his self-love. The

only response he provided when answering the question about what could have helped him cope

involved "loving myself first." It is not clear what Mehdi was referring to when he said "first."

It likely involves his feeling strong with self-love before any of his same-sex feelings emerged.

Guidance. Participants discussed how some guidance would have helped them cope with

their stress. The term guidance refers to role models and includes having friends and family

members who have followed a similar path the participant is attempting to pursue. Zakari stated

that it would have been helpful. "I think if maybe I had more examples of people" who were gay.

Yousef explicitly shared,

Most of my role models were heterosexual . . . all of my role models were

heterosexual, um, so there was never really a way to relate on that level to

somebody [in particular].

Rafiq made a similar statement.

If I could have had one out gay person in my world, or one out gay family

member somewhere, somehow, my goodness that would have made everything

much easier. If there was a precedence and they had come out and may have had

some of those issues and put in some effort to explain to everyone that it is okay

to be gay or accepting of it, just that would be, would have been such a relief in

terms of knowing that people can come around and be accepting, so any kind of

role model, there was nothing, (brief laughter) I had no, there was nobody who

came out absolutely none, I had not met one out gay person in my life ever until I

moved to the U.S., and that is why I feel my immigration here was a very big

thing, umm, yeah, and it was a change that was essential to me coming out.

Anything like a role model or any kind of relative or close friend of the family

who was out would have been a huge change.

In addition to a role model, a path to follow also resonates under the guidance category. Rafiq

stated,

It sucks to be the first person to be the one to start this coming out movement that

again that has been the biggest barrier. If I had one person ahead of me and saw

that they were at least making some progress then I would have jumped right

behind them and felt comfortable doing it, but if I have to be the first one to do

something this big, I don't know if I could take on a battle this big alone.

Even if a role model who is MSM was not available, a partner, boyfriend, or friend would have

also provided a degree of support for some participants.

Yousef identified that he would have liked to have more dating experience prior to

arriving in the United States as this would have helped him find and maintain a partner after he

started school. Yousef said,

I think also not having been in a relationship before moving to the United States

would probably have given me a better idea of relationships in general because

with my first relationship things didn't go to well so I think that would have been

helpful, um, like had I been in a straight relationship really having been never

completely dated anyone, umm, before I came to the United States before 19 and

a half or so and that made it difficult to date when I got here.

Yousef's willingness to have dating experience with men or women is notable. He also disclosed,

> I think it would have definitely been helpful had I known anyone, ah, had I known
> more people that had moved to the States like people who were gay Arabs that
> moved to the States to study there just had you know an easy path there.

The importance of having MSM-identified friends at a younger age, perhaps in high school and college, was underscored by Omar, one of the few participants who had a close friend who had come out to him in high school. In reference to what would have helped him, Omar stated, "I guess if my friend would have come out to me earlier."

Mental health services. Participants used mental health services as a means of coping and also identified mental health services as a resource that could have assisted with their coping process. Ahmed, who had participated in a support group in Israel, discussed how he wished that he "had that support earlier." His rationale for the benefit of attending the support group earlier, related to the messages that he heard "in school, on TV, from the community . . . [were] totally wrong" and having more affirming and accurate information about alternative lifestyles related to sexuality could have assisted with accepting his gay identity earlier.

Rafiq stated that access to a therapist would have been helpful. He discussed the benefits of individual therapy and acknowledged his uncertainty about whether he would have utilized services had they been available.

> I don't know if I would have actually used services with a counselor, like if there
> was a counselor who was even gay and out or any teacher at school who was gay
> and out, you know, who I might have felt comfortable approaching them to, you
> know, discuss my initial fears and struggles but there was nobody to turn to,

absolutely nobody to turn to.

The latter half of Rafiq's statement echoes the same sentiments of having no support system to discuss his sexual identity and the lack of members in the community who could serve as role models for MSM-identified youth.

Summary of mental health. An important element of this study involved developing a better understanding of how gay men with a Muslim upbringing cope with the stress that can result from their conflicting identities. Much of the stress the participants reported stemmed from the initial realization of their sexual identity followed by the complications created by their Muslim identities.

I organized the participants' unique coping methods into three categories: cognitive, action, and social. All of the participants reported utilizing coping methods within all three styles with some methods getting more use than others. Within the cognitive style some of the more prevalent techniques included distraction, denial/avoidance of their gay identity, intellectualizing their problems to avoid experiencing emotional distress, focusing on empowering thoughts, critical thinking, positive thinking, and humor. In comparison to the cognitive style, the action- and social-based coping styles contained fewer methods; however, participants had greater overlap in the methods they utilized to manage their distress. Action-based coping methods that had greater use included utilizing mental health services, coping via the body (using substances, working out), and engaging in activism. A few participants described using self-care to minimize their stress as well as praying and reading.

Two techniques, engaging others and monitoring interpersonal interactions, comprised the social coping style. These techniques were valuable and well utilized by the participants. While only a few participants directly referred to their use of interpersonal engagement and

interaction as a means of diminishing stress, all of the participants spoke about the support they

received from their friends, family, and other people in their lives who care about them.

In addition to identifying the coping techniques they used to manage their distress, the

participants also reflected on what resources and support they wish they could have accessed as

during the negotiation process. I organized the responses into four categories: exposure to

diversity, reassurance/validation, guidance, and mental health services.

Domain 5: Interpersonal Relationships

Religion, sexuality, and identity were the primary foci of this study. Inevitably, other

issues and concepts emerged during the interviews. Interpersonal relationships presented as the

most prevalent topic, and during the data analysis phase I added it as the fifth domain of this

study. I identified any interpersonal relationship information that occurred during the interviews

and categorized them under relationships. Relationships were organized within three groups:

family, friends, and community (Muslim and gay). Beyond these three groupings, each also had

three primary themes. These three themes were relationship quality, disclosure of sexual

identity, and individuation.

Family. All of the participants talked about their families and the impact that their

family members had on their growth and development. Some participants had maintained strong

relationships with their parents, siblings, and cousins while others reported that they no longer

had contact with their family.

Relationships with family members. Adam spent a significant amount of time reflecting

on the poor relationship he had with his father. He shared that his father "was angry most of the

time, but for me specifically I get a higher dose of the anger than the rest of the family." Adam

did not know why his father would get so angry with him and he questioned, "If it was because

of his anger issues or if he was sensing my sexual orientation at an early age." Adam never directly mentioned his mother during the interview. Other participants primarily spoke of their mothers and neglected to mention their fathers. The majority of the participants simply referred to their parents.

Hakim and Fuad talked about their challenging relationships with their family. Both of their challenges with their family started after disclosing their sexual identity. Hakim informed me that he no longer had contact with his family, a statement that triggered an emotional reaction from him. Fuad's relationship with his family drastically deteriorated following his family's discovery of his sexual orientation. Fuad described his high school life as "traumatic" and that he had "a very unstable living situation." Fuad disclosed that during high school,

> Every few weeks my mom or dad would bring up me being gay and I would have
>
> to go sleep in my car or hide away where they could not find me. One time they
>
> called the police and the police found me in the car and arrested me because they
>
> told them that I had stolen the car.

Fuad's relationship with his family has improved since high school; however, it remains tenuous. He talked about a recent event when his family came to visit him.

> Yeah, my whole family visited San Francisco last night for the Giants game. And
>
> we were sitting and making jokes. Now that I am independent of the family they
>
> like struggle to find reasons for me to hang out with them. They don't want to
>
> lose. . . . They don't . . . as long as I don't talk about being gay they accept me as
>
> like a son they are proud of, but like if you talk to my parents about me running
>
> away they will hang up on you. If you talk to my parents about me being gay
>
> they will yell at you and then hang up on you.

Level/degree of religious observance. As discussed in the section on Initial Religious

Environment/Family in Domain 1, participants had a range of religious environment and familial

observance levels. Four types of religious observance emerged in the data analysis: minimal

religiosity, moderate religiosity, increasingly strong religiosity following immigration, and

strong religiosity. Rafiq was the only participant who described a minimally religious family.

Throughout his interview he repeatedly stated, "I was born into a not very religious household

mostly because my parents decided not to push religion too much on me or me with my sisters."

Without imposing religion on his son, Rafiq's shared how his father "does consider himself a

Muslim but he is not a practicing Muslim. He does fast during Ramadan, but aside from that he

doesn't go to mosque or pray during the daytime."

Interestingly, Rafiq also had a lot of exposure to religious diversity as his mother

and father did not share the same religion and he also has siblings who married

individuals outside of their respective religions.

> I got exposure to a lot of different at least in terms of I embrace all kinds of
>
> different religions because I had to in order to accept the diversity in my family in
>
> terms of religion, especially on my mom's side of the family, so, umm, yeah, and
>
> even on my dad's side of the family, one of his sisters married a Druze and one
>
> married a Christian.

The moderate religious group consisted of Yousef, Omar, and Fuad, who described the presence

of religion during their childhood but stated that it played a complementary role. Yousef said,

> My family was never religious as some Muslims but there were things that they
>
> would stick to because of their religion, like you know, not eating pork and things
>
> like that, like fasting or trying to at least, and fasting during Ramadan, things of

that sort that, you know, praying and dressing a certain way was never specific,

was ever really highlighted or made a big deal out of.

Omar described how his religious exposure came primarily from his maternal grandmother and added "My parents did not really enforce it as much."

Hakim, Zakari, and Adam described how their families became increasingly religious after immigrating to a new country. Hakim and Zakari noted sharp changes in their parents' approach to increasing their observance as Muslim. While Hakim's parents become more conservative within the first 2 years of immigrating, Zakari's mother and father adjusted their observance level as soon as Zakari and his sister reached an appropriate age to attend what Zakari referred to as "Sunday school." Similarly, soon after arriving in Saudi Arabia, Adam's parents soon began adhering to a more conservative Muslim identity than they had while living in Sudan. Adam said, "My family was also new to the culture of Saudi Arabia so their version of religion, which they brought from Sudan, was an easier way of practicing religion." Adam further explained how upon arriving in Saudi Arabia his parents began to acknowledge that "they did not know enough about Islam," and they responded by

read[ing] these texts like the narratives, hadiths, the Quran and stuff and say we

didn't know much about our religion, so they took it like they are learning more

about what God is saying and with time they started to buy it.

Ahmed and Mehdi described their families as strongly religious. At the age of 3 years Mehdi started attending Mosque with his father, and he shared that his family is strongly committed to Islam. When discussing his family and their level of religious observance, Ahmed stated,

My family is very religious, some are fundamentalist, and some of my brothers

are fundamentalist. My family is super religious. I told you we have to go to the

mosque like every Friday, do the prayers on a daily basis. My mother and sisters,

they wear the hijab. My brothers got married to women also wearing the hijab.

We are a very separate family, in my family men and women are not allowed to

mix.

Attitudes toward homosexuality. When speaking about their family's awareness, level of

understanding, and acceptance of LGBTQ individuals, none of the participants described their

families as accepting or tolerant. The negative beliefs and attitudes varied regarding intensity.

Fuad disclosed that his family is laid back and relaxed most of the time; however, they have a

strong reaction to homosexuality. He said, "I think my whole family is pacifists until you get

into the non-Muslim things such as being queer and then all of a sudden my whole family is very

very [activated]."

Fuad's description of his family as relatively laid back on many issues except for

homosexuality seems generalizable to many of the participants' families. Regardless of the

degree of their religious adherence and observance, the participants' families overwhelmingly

had negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Mehdi's family appears to be the one exception.

Disclosure of sexual identity to relatives. Three of the nine participants reported that

their families knew about their gay identities. Of these three, Mehdi was the only participant

who reported that he intentionally disclosed this information to his family. One of Fuad's

siblings shared his sexuality with their family, and Hakim never mentioned how his family

discovered his sexual identity.

Mehdi reported that he invited his family over for dinner and disclosed his sexual identity

after they finished eating. He recalled the event in the following excerpt from his interview.

I was like, listen I've got something to tell you all. They came to my house and

we had dinner and I just said, I was like look, I love this religion, I'm not going to

change my religion for nobody, I am going to keep on praying, I am going to keep

on studying, I am going to keep on making hajj but there is one thing that, I mean,

that I said, you know I have been married before but I am not attracted to females,

I love, like men . . . my family is cool with it. My family loves me more because

I don't have nothing to hide.

Mehdi's experience coming out to his family was very different than the reactions Hakim and

Fuad received from their families. When asked about whether he had come out to his family,

Hakim stated, "I am no longer in touch with them . . . they don't want me." Fuad had a similar

response to the same question: "Ah yeah, I got kicked out for being gay." At the time of the

interview Hakim had no contact with his family. This separation appeared very difficult for him

as he had a strong emotional response and began to cry when asked about his family. Fuad's

relationship with his parents and siblings has vacillated over the years and his parents struggle

with the concept of his gay identity. Fuad said, "I would say my two older sisters are a lot more

accepting now, but when I first came out there was not really anywhere to go for a while."

During the interview, Ahmed informed me that he intended to come out to his parents within the

near future and he had spent time preparing how to present this information to his parents using

technology as he could not return home to disclose the information in person.

The remainder of the participants expressed similar concerns about disclosing their

sexual identities to their families, especially parents and older generations. If participants had

disclosed their sexual identities to some family members, cousins often knew first. Omar, Rafiq,

and Ahmed disclosed their sexual identities to their cousins and reported that their cousins

handled the news well. In response to my questioning about coming out to his family entire, Rafiq replied, "I am just not ready to start that whole, that whole movement, but at least know I know that my cousins are my allies and if things get physical at least I know that they will support me." Omar had a similar experience with his cousins, who responded supportively to him coming out. He described an interaction with a male cousin with whom he felt especially nervous disclosing his sexual identity. Omar stated,

> I just told him and I was very scared because he is very manly, kind of like a man's man, and he actually took it really well and he was like that's fine and I just want to say that I don't care, you're my cousin and nothing is going to change.

Omar followed this statement by saying, "All of my cousins have been really supportive and ok with the [gay identity]."

Ahmed and Omar have also disclosed their sexual orientation to their aunts, who were both fairly accepting of their identities. Ahmed said,

> They were like . . . I only choose the cousins that are very close to me and the ones that I really care for and I want to share that with them, and they were really okay with it, they said it is your thing and we are fine with that and I told my aunt, the wife of my uncle, she is European, she is not Arab. So I grew up like I spent most of my time when I was a kid with my cousins at their house at her house, her husband's and she said I always knew and that was like . . . she said I could easily tell like I always knew, so I wondered how my mom would accept that.

Adam, Zakari, and Yousef made no mention of disclosing their sexual identity to any of their family members. Yousef and Zakari described how they had put much thought into the idea of coming out to their families. Yousef, in particular, invested a lot of time and energy reflecting

on how family members may potentially react to his disclosure. He described the following

thought after spending the night at his aunt and uncle's home:

> There is always this idea in my head, I think. I was thinking about it yesterday
>
> when I woke up, um, I was staying in one of the beds, one of the extra beds they
>
> have, like I was thinking well, when they find out are they going to be like, oh my
>
> gosh he slept in this bed—change it. You know, things that come up just like you
>
> know, like that.

Adam did not provide any information about whether he had disclosed his sexual identity

to his family.

Barriers to disclosure of sexual identity. When questioned about what prevents them

from disclosing their sexual identity to their family members, the participants had a small range

of responses. Common themes included fear of rejection, significant efforts to educate family

members about homosexuality, withholding information to protect others, and lastly, familial

relationships devoid of discussing sexuality.

Fear of rejection. Participants frequently identified fear of rejection as a potential

consequence of coming out. Many encountered or overheard their parents making disparaging

remarks against sexual minorities, which increased their reluctance to disclose their sexual

identity out of fear that they might lose their familial connection. Zakari described this barrier in

the following excerpt from his interview.

> My original plan in college was that my biggest fear of coming out to my parents was
>
> them rejecting me and kind of turn me out and cutting me off basically, and so my plan
>
> was to develop a good professional career to get myself independent and being on my
>
> own and not having the possibility of me getting cut off financially I am not particularly

reliant on my parents, but that is my goal, to establish myself career-wise professionally,

financially, and then work on that first before I, you know, explain to my parents.

Zakari graduated from college a few years ago and as of the interview he has not disclosed his

sexual identity to his family.

Effort required to educate. Rafiq reflected on numerous challenges that he

envisions himself encountering if and when he does come out to his parents. One of the

most formidable challenges Rafiq described involves having to confront the Lebanese

community's lack of knowledge of homosexuality. He stated,

> Another reason why I hesitate to come out to them now, even though . . . I hope that they
>
> will be accepting of it, there is going to be a lot of education . . . I think that my family is
>
> conservative. Having inherited that . . . conservatism through the culture, through the
>
> teachings, through, umm, the subject matter being such a taboo and having such limited
>
> exposure or understanding of what it is that they have that stance of being against it
>
> because that is all they know and they have not seen the other side. And I think that is
>
> the biggest thing holding me back from coming out is they need to see that. I mean I
>
> would like them to see what I have been able to see, which is, I mean having, meeting
>
> some people who are amazing, successful at life, happy, who just happen to be gay.

Participants repeated this theme throughout the interviews. Ahmed explained that he had

invested a lot of time and thought into how he would disclose his sexual identity to his parents as

they have minimal exposure to positive images of homosexuality and positive depictions of gay

men in their home communities.

Rafiq spoke to the challenge that immigrants encounter when coming out, or

contemplating, coming out to relatives who still reside in the home country. He stated,

I feel like a lot of immigrants are burdened with the same, even if they come out here and are free to think in their own ways and become more open and more liberal or whatever you want to call it, it does not change that their families still live in a very environment with very different understandings, and they have to go back and face and teach them at some point or come out, so there is that little burden.

Minimizing interpersonal stress. Rafiq shared many barriers that prevent him from disclosing his sexual identity to his family. Many of his reasons stem from his family's needs and desires. One of the reasons he cited that pertains to him involves the level of stress that he endures as a graduate student and the emotional toll that occurs when an individual lives separated from his family in a foreign country. He shared,

I feel like I am already in school and I'm busy and I'm separated from my parents by continents physically and I don't need this additional emotional separation at this time, so I feel like it would be more appropriate at a later time and, yeah, in terms of things.

Other participants did not specifically state their desire to minimize their emotional burdens by refraining from coming out, but this barrier does present itself in many situations that emerged throughout the interviews and is likely a major factor that prevents people from coming out to their parents and families.

Withholding information to protect relatives. Multiple participants articulated their desire to remain closeted with their family. For them, withholding their sexual identity served the purpose of protecting their family members. This theme presented in several ways. Rafiq said,

What I worry about most is that I have two sisters who are very much younger than I am. I have one sister who is 7 years younger and another sister that is 9 years younger. I

don't want me coming out to affect them in any way. I think if my parents are going to

react negatively in any way it would be they might be like, oh sending me to the United

States was a mistake and this was why all of this happened and, umm, I don't want them

to hold my sisters back, not at least until they become citizens of the U.S., and that is

going to take another couple years so I am holding off until then at least.

Fuad also endorsed a desire to protect his extended family that lives in Palestine from the

consequences that could result from the community discovering his sexual identity. As he spoke

about this topic he clearly distinguished how he cares more about what happens to his family

than about what happens to him. He stated,

I have been attacked outside of clubs, but the shame that develop if I died, and the shame

from rumors being spread, even rumors from getting in a fight, or rumors from being

seen at a queer event, that sort of thing affects my family, so I prioritize my family's

shame over my own guilt.

Both of these participants are willing to withhold information regarding their sexual identities in

an effort to protect their family members from the potential consequences that coming out could

have.

Some of these barriers are reality and not just perceptions that prevent people from

connecting with their families. Both Hakim and Fuad have endured the rejection of their

families. Coming out for others, however, has been a powerful experience that surprised them.

For instance, when asked how his relationships with his family members have changed since

coming out to them, Omar responded, "I feel like we have gotten much closer." Similarly,

Mehdi described how his relationships with his family members have not changed following his

disclosure: "It's stayed the same, the love never changes." He also stated, "I ain't pretending, I

still get the love, the love is still there, umm, we still hang out and do stuff together as a family."

Nature of relationships. Participants discussed how they felt more comfortable sharing their sexual identity with their peers and younger generations (i.e., cousins and friends). The thought of disclosing this sensitive information to their parents and older adults induced a higher level of anxiety. For Omar, his concern with coming out to his parents revolved around discussing the topic of sexuality, not his concern that they would reject him. He explained, "I feel like they would be okay with it, but it is hard to say it. It's hard to open up. I am close to my parents." Omar continued to elaborate on this idea. "I guess there are certain things we talk about and certain things we don't. So I don't know, I feel like it would be difficult to get out there." It is likely that the nature of a relationship as a barrier to disclosing one's sexuality is not unique to Omar. Other participants alluded to this factor as they discussed whom they have and have not told.

Mehdi spoke to the nature of the relationships he has with his family, who had an affirming reaction to him disclosing his sexual identity.

> I hear stories about what most people tell their families. They say you can't come out because they don't want them to be part of their family at all and they become depressed and want to commit suicide. It wasn't like that for me because my family, like they say a family that prays together stays together, and that is how my family is no matter what. We rather you be honest than be a liar. We rather you tell us the truth and come out rather than you hold it in, because I always figured that what was done in the dark always comes toward the light so I'd rather keep it honest than tell a lie. I would rather tell the truth than tell a lie.

> In contrast to the other participants who reflected on the barriers and intimidating

aspects of disclosing their identity, Mehdi had a different coming out experience. While

he initially experienced some hesitance about coming out to his family, Mehdi disclosed

his gay identity to his family and they accepted him. Whatever barriers Mehdi may have

considered, if any, did not appear to materialize when he disclosed his sexual identity.

   "The city had eyes." Individuation through interpersonal distance from family. During

the interviews, participants routinely spoke about the obligations, pressures, and duties that

surfaced when interacting with their families. Many of these discussions surfaced when they

spoke about hiding aspects of their sexual identities or expressing their desire to explore their

sexual identities. While in close proximity to their families and family members, the participants

did not have an opportunity to explore their identities.

   When describing his experience living at home after acknowledging his sexual

orientation, Hakim poignantly stated, "The city had eyes [and] a lot of Muslims." Hakim

elaborated that while living at home with his family he felt limited in the aspects of his identity

that he could safely explore without his family hearing about his activities. On numerous

occasions throughout the interview, Hakim mentioned that his parents learned of his behaviors

via other members of the community who reported on them. Like many participants, while

living at home and in close proximity to his parents Hakim monitored his behavior and limited

his interactions with the gay community to prevent his parents from learning of his sexual

identity. Hakim shared how while living at home he observed gay culture "at arms distance."

He stated,

   I did not even go to a gay club there are none in [state name deleted], but it was a college

   town, there had to be a gay community, I was just not, I was not brave enough to go

   comingle with them but one thing that I liked to do was go to cafés and downtown, that is

where gay men would go, and so it was like almost being so close yet so far. I would go down to the café studying, and from the corner of my eye my ears were always open to those interactions, and that is what I would do to quench my thirst for exposure to the gay community.

Omar spoke directly to this topic as he recollected how he was able to grow by gaining exposure to other people in his life, and he learned from their ideas and experiences that differed from those in his family. He said,

I think that was a big thing and I guess, growing up and not being so sheltered with my grandma being around, I guess just talking to different people getting to know them what they have gone through, I guess that helped.

For many of the participants, exposure to difference and space from family members was attainable. For some, it was only attainable by immigrating to the United States or moving to a more progressive region of the United States and attending college. Both options created the necessary space participants needed to further explore their identities and the gay community without worrying about surveillance within the Muslim community.

Some of the participants viewed college as an opportunity to gain independence and distance from their families. When speaking about having sex with men, Zakari stated,

It was something I strongly craved, I strongly desired. It's, I think, that just trying to break out of my shell I think wanting to go away from college and that was something I wanted to explore.

Rafiq had a similar experience. After immigrating to the United States, he moved in with relatives in Southern California, where he attended college. During his time as an undergraduate student, Rafiq said that

> I was close to family in Los Angeles for quite a while and not having pressure to come
>
> out because, I was always worried about family knowing because I was at the same
>
> university as a lot of my cousins.

He did not come out to his peers until he moved out of the area to attend graduate school. "So I came out on my first day of school at [name deleted] that was September of [year deleted], so I had 4 years of being out away from that, away from family." Rafiq explained his thought process as follows:

> When I applied to pharmacy school I came up to San Francisco and I was ready at that
>
> time, okay, I'm going to be far away from my family for the first time and I was in San
>
> Francisco and I just said if now is not the right time I don't know what is. So I came out
>
> to all of my classmates first, people that I did not even know, instead of coming out to
>
> family first, which that was a personal choice of mine. I wanted to explore being gay and
>
> feel comfortable with myself and have a strong circle of friends that are supportive before
>
> coming out to my family, just in case it didn't go very well.

Yousef, an international student, spoke about how he had acquired more freedom and access to programs and events on campus, away from his family. He wanted me to know that his subtle distancing from his relatives, who lived in the United States, stemmed from his interest in a relationship and his same-sex desires. Yousef said,

> I guess I wanted to make sure that it doesn't seem like I have been trying to distance
>
> myself from my family that much, it's just, you know, I don't try too hard I guess,
>
> because in the back of my head there was this idea of, you know, what is going to happen
>
> when they find out kind of thing and it is still there.

Hakim lived at home while attending college. Unlike the other participants, his moment of individuation and separation occurred when he left the Midwest and "ran away to San Francisco." San Francisco was a beacon for many participants who viewed the Bay Area as a place to have more freedom and acceptance.

Among those who migrated to the United States, either through visas or seeking asylum, one of the primary incentives of emigrating involved exploring their sexual identity. While talking about his sexual identity and attraction, Rafiq stated, "That is why I like came to the U.S." Adam, Ahmed, and Yousef agreed that their sexual identity and the freedom to explore their sexuality served as a primary reason they chose to leave their home countries and immigrate to the United States. Education served as an additional motivator that provided a purpose to leave.

Friends and peers. When describing their social networks during childhood and adolescence, the majority of the participants said they had a limited number of friends. Many factors contributed to these limited social networks, most of which were outside their control. Some participants described not fitting in with their peers due to their ethnicity, immigration, status strict adherence to religious beliefs and customs, and gender nonconforming presentations. Those who were able to make friends often had to restrict themselves from deepening relationships as a means of self-protection and preservation.

Limited number of friends. The majority of the participants had a limited number of friends in primary and secondary school. A number of participants had no friends or no meaningful friendships until their last years of high school. Hakim reported that he made his first friend during his senior year. He said,

My senior year of high school was the first year that someone wanted to be my friend,

and I had never had that experience before where someone wanted to be my friend, because, of course, nobody out of the Muslim boys wanted to be my friend.

Yousef disclosed that met his closest friend toward the end of high school. He reported,

> The closest one would be somebody that I sat next to in most of classes in my junior and senior year of high school but, um, she always seemed fairly conservative so I never took any sexual disclosure route, but she, I guess, I can count her as a friend, but you, she was more of an academic friend, more of a classmate than just a friend.

> Interestingly, Yousef and Hakim described developing their closest friendship towards the end of high school. Both of these friends were women. In traditional Muslim families, cross-gendered friendships are perceived as threatening considering the proscription against premarital sex.

> Yousef and Adam spoke about having several groups of friends that they cycled through. Yousef shared how he believes that "friendship is supposed to be a lot of disclosure of personal stuff to get to that level of close friendship with somebody." However, where he lived in Israel "It was just not a very close friend situation." He stated,

> In high school I had a group of friends that I hung out with and I switched from one group to another sometimes, you know, because that group was not around. I guess I don't have a group of people in Israel that tomorrow I could call up and if they are not busy or drowning in schoolwork or actual work and they will come and see me and will go hang out and do stuff.

Yousef discussed how this lack of closeness with his peers did not bother him. He stated,

> I never really viewed it as an awful thing. There was like this I was not a very social person, and as I said, if I did not still have people that I could see and hang out with and

talk to when I go back home.

External harassment and bullying. Some of the participants reported that their peers frequently bullied them. Hakim simultaneously attended public school and a religious school where he interacted with two separate peer groups. Hakim's gender nonconforming presentation drew the ire of his Muslim peers, and as the only Muslim, immigrant, and person of color in his class, he endured bullying at public school as well. He stated,

> I remember being made fun of even by other Muslim boys. So I was very much bullied
>
> by both at public school [by] your typical Midwest American peer group and the Muslim
>
> boys who were my only, the only kind of pool that I was allowed to select from as
>
> friends. They also bullied me because I was on the more effeminate side.

Rafiq disclosed that his peers in Lebanon bullied him about his sexuality.

> I did get teased quite a bit about it between ages 15 to 18 . . . People in high school would
>
> tell me I'm gay and I did not understand why they would say such a thing, where it came
>
> from. I was still not, ehhh, in terms with it. I was not very aware of myself or how I may
>
> appear to my peers and what not.

Self-preservation. Adam described how he had strong connections with his groups of friends. However, as he developed attractions to certain individuals he would limit his interactions with them as a means of self-protection. He explained,

> Some of my friends were very close and some of them I developed some attraction, and
>
> then it is sad. I never mention it or talk about it, and when I get so tired I start to drift
>
> away from them because I cannot really keep up.

After developing these feelings for his friends, Adam described how he had two ways of resolving the tension: disclosing his feelings for his friends or distancing himself. Adam discussed how he always followed the latter path as the former was never a viable option. He shared, "I cannot say anything of course because of the huge amount of fear in the culture, so . . . I lost quite a few, quite a few good friendships."

Rafiq discussed how he had a challenging senior year when he withdrew from his class as he attempted to deal with his emerging sexual identity. He stated,

I feel like I kind of retracted myself socially a little bit and was quiet and kept to myself, and because I think I was too preoccupied with my inner challenges and inner debates and my inner struggles with this identity thing to be able to feel confident and . . . integrate myself more with the rest of the grade.

Strong relationships. In contrast to the other participants, Mehdi and Fuad did not describe social difficulties in high school during their interviews. Mehdi did not talk much about his social interactions, and among the information he did provide he said that his peers respected and continue to respect him.

Fuad shared how he benefited from his older brother's popularity. "My older brother was popular at the high school before me and it was the same high school in Sacramento and then people would always want to hang out with me." Aside from his brother's influence, Fuad also established many relationships through countless extracurricular activities and leadership positions that he pursued in high school, college, and the summers he spent visiting his family in Palestine.

Coming out. At the time of their interviews, all of the participants except for one openly identified as attracted to members of the same sex within their personal social lives, separate

from their family. Yousef's description of how he handles disclosing his identity is reflective of

the approach that many of the participants embrace. When asked if he is out to anyone, Yousef

replied,

> Yeah, most of my friends, most of anyone that I am close to who is not family know, and
>
> I don't really go out of my way to hide it anymore. I haven't done that in . . . years, but I
>
> also don't go out of my way to say it to people. I guess most people have some suspicion
>
> of it but they also don't think I am flamboyant or stereotypical enough to make that
>
> assumption. . . . so yeah I would say a lot of people know.

Adam shared similar sentiments about his choice in disclosing his sexual identity. He explained,

> I don't really like make an announcement wherever I go, but if it comes up I don't really
>
> try to hide it and then people have the choice to accept it or not accept it, but I didn't
>
> mention it at work, I didn't put it on my resume of course.

Fuad took advantage of the social opportunities in high school; however, his difficulty with

reciprocating the interest he received from his female peers resulted in rumors regarding his

sexuality. Fuad shared,

> I did not talk to anyone about it but my friends at school knew I was gay because I had a
>
> lot of girls tried to go out with me . . . I went to every single dance in high school, but I
>
> don't know why, I didn't even have fun at them. Usually I would leave my date for like
>
> the whole dance and sit outside, but for some reason I would be asked and did not want to
>
> say no, and there would always be this awkward conversation at the end of the night and I
>
> would just say "I'm not that attracted to you." And I would say like sophomore year,
>
> some rumors would have started and people would ask me "like are you gay?"

Akin to Fuad, others often perceived Hakim's sexuality prior to him having to directly say the

words. He said,

> Leading up to coming out many people would always say you know you can always tell
>
> me if you have something to say, wink, wink, nudge, nudge. I just couldn't. I knew that
>
> was opportunity and I couldn't, I just couldn't.

When Hakim did come out, he described his first experience as getting "pulled out of the closet."

While at work, Hakim took a picture of two animals cuddling in their cage and sent it to his

manager, whom he described as "motherly." In the email beneath the picture, Hakim wrote, "I

have always wanted to tell you this, I hope you will still love me, but I think my rats are gay."

Hakim explained,

> I was hoping that would be a segue to telling her that I am gay, but she immediately
>
> responded by saying I am so glad that you are coming out and being yourself, come over
>
> and give me a hug. So I went to her office and she gave me a hug and she pulled me out
>
> of the closet and she did not even give me a chance to say it. She said that she had been
>
> waiting for months and months for me to come out, and so when she got the email she
>
> did not even hesitate to pull me out of the closet. So that was a very healthy experience.

In contrast to the other participants who dealt with their sexual identity in isolation for many

years, Omar had the ability to connect with a gay friend early in high school after they came out

to each other. Omar recalled the conversations.

> The first person I came out to was my best friend. . . . I was surprised that he was gay.
>
> When he told me we were at my house and we were at the dinner table when he told me,
>
> and I was in shock and he said, "Aren't you too?" and I totally said . . . "I am not." I
>
> could not even tell him even though he was my best friend for like years. So I wrote a

note and gave it to him because I could not tell him, I was so embarrassed.

Zakari shared a similar coming out experience as Omar's, but it occurred during college. He

recalled,

> I remember the day I came out to one of my friends. There was this miraculous moment
>
> where she came out to me, and it was a connection with her that made me feel a lot closer
>
> to that gay identity or that same-sex oriented identity is so diverse and there is not one
>
> way, or there is not a specific way to follow it ,and it made it that much easier to enjoy
>
> that identity and be a part of that community of people who wanted to be with people of
>
> the same sex.

By engaging in a reciprocal coming out exchange, Zakari and Omar each had a social support

available.

For Ahmed, coming out to two of his friends was a unique experience as they

both reacted contrary to his expectations. Ahmed described how

> I have two coworkers, two women, one of them she is with a hijab and she is very
>
> religious and the other she doesn't wear any hijab, she is not religious, she is cool, she is
>
> very western. But when I came out to both of them, the religious one she said that
>
> [deleted name] it's your issue, it's your thing I don't care what your sexual orientation is,
>
> I just know you like as a friend. But the other one, the one that I thought she would be
>
> like more modern or like, she said that, oh you don't look like one them, and I said "how
>
> do they look like, am I supposed to have a tail or?" . . . And then she stopped talking to
>
> me . . . So the one who I thought she's going to be mad about it, she is fine with it, but the
>
> other, she wasn't happy with it, so I was shocked by the reactions of people there.
>
> *Gay friends.* For many of the participants, developing friendships with other MSM had a

profound impact on their social relationships and overall identities. College was an opportune time to develop gay friendships, and many of the participants developed some of their first relationships with other MSM and queer-identified individuals as undergraduates. Participants who lived in the United States met their friends through their social networks. For those participants who immigrated to the United States, they primarily met their gay friends on the Internet via websites and chat rooms in their home country. After arriving in the United States they did not need to rely on the Internet as they had more opportunities to meet people in person and at events.

Witnessing and interacting with happy gay people who experience their lives as fulfilling had a profound impact on accepting one's same-sex attraction. Most of the participants lacked happy openly gay role models. Rafiq mentioned how his family and other people living in Lebanon would struggle to realize

> that it is possible for me to be happy with a happy life without necessarily conforming to the traditional I'm going to get married and have a family, so it's, they will have some struggles with that, but the terms of me coming out to my immediate family who live in Lebanon, a lot of it comes from their limited understanding of what it means to be gay, them never having met an out gay person, them not knowing that, I don't know, not having any positive messages with homosexuality

Adam discussed the importance of having gay friends. He shared that

> [I try] to have gay friends so I can be myself and I don't have to wear the mask with my other friends and family so when I am out with my gay friends I can be finally myself and I don't have to pretend, and if I see anything I like I can comment on guys or something, and this of course is not possible with my friends from work or family.

Discovering that your best friend is also gay rarely occurs within the United States, and

the likelihood of it occurring in countries with limited to no tolerance for sexual diversity is even

smaller. Omar's relationship with his best friend is unique in that they both came out to each

other as gay. Other participants living in the United States met other gay men through mutual

friends. Hakim described how his coworker facilitated his connection to his first gay friends and

stated that his coworker "had two gay neighbors and they were husbands, and I went over to their

house and it was very interesting because they worked with Muslims." Hakim described how he

had to be very careful interacting with this couple because they worked with other professionals

who knew his family. He stated,

> They were physicians, and they knew Muslim physicians, and knew physicians who were
>
> very intimate with my family and who knew my family very well . . . so it was very
>
> interesting. It was difficult to tip toe around that for the good part of a year and a half
>
> before I ran away to [name of city deleted].

Yousef met his first gay friend on a social media site. He recalled how "I came

out to him and then he came out to me. We knew that we were gay and that is why we

became friends." Their shared gay identity played a prominent role in this friendship.

Yousef stated,

> I wouldn't say that I have many close friends in Israel. I have actually one that I was
>
> friends with and I was friends with because I found out that he was gay too, umm, but
>
> that is basically it because he is only person who knows back home . . . most people back
>
> home don't know.

Yousef strived to make it apparent that this friendship was never an intimate or sexual

relationship. He described their relationship as follows: "It was never more than friends, it was

not even more remotely more than friends."

Adam met numerous gay friends online while living in Saudi Arabia. One particular

website he found helped him meet others through the Internet. He stated,

> Like I said, I started letting go of the guilt and started to accept and found out that there
>
> are other people like me in other countries. . . . so this thing is up for discussion, at least
>
> in my mind. I started to meet others through the websites.

One website in particular provided Adam an avenue for meeting men in person to engage in

sexual activities with, which is how he initiated his first sexual experience with a man. He

shared,

> So I found something called, Bath Talk, at that time, the beginning of the Internet so I
>
> started to found, to meet other people from that so (clears throat), so of course for first
>
> time I was like shaking in fear for being caught doing a huge crime.

Within the United States, the Internet also offered a safe place for participants to make gay

friends and interact with the gay community. Hakim met individuals on a website that catered to

gay men. He said,

> I went onto a website online and it happened to be a fitness website that was catered to
>
> gay men. . . . but there was also this way that you could go on dates on that website. I did
>
> not go on any but I could chat with people and it was one way for me to chat with people,
>
> and it was the first time I started to like someone who I chatted with quite often.

College. Zakari, Rafiq, Fuad, and Yousef discussed how they met many gay friends in

college through social events, peer groups, and the gay clubs and organizations they joined.

Rafiq had moved the West Coast a few years before he matriculated into a large university. He

said, "It wasn't until I got into [college] and really started having a few gay friends." Rafiq

described his college campus as a bubble that provided a misleading level of security. Zakari

had a similar experience. He decided to minimize his focus on Islam and focus more on his

sexuality in college. Zakari explained,

> Once I was on my own I was like my parents aren't here to watch me and I have no one
>
> to answer to, so I started hanging around with people in my dorm, and they were not
>
> religious people so they didn't really care either way if I was Muslim or not Muslim, not
>
> to say that other people didn't care, but it was college and the freedom of college and
>
> people exploring things, and once I explored my sexuality, once I was questioned about it
>
> I began to lose that identity of being Muslim.

Zakari continued on to say that his decision to come out was easier to make based on his

location as "people were a lot more accepting" in his college community.

> ***Social interactions during adulthood.*** As an adult, Rafiq found that he had some

difficulty connecting socially with straight men based on differing hobbies and interests.

> Everybody talked football 24/7 and I don't know anything about that. That is not an
>
> immigrant thing for you, I have no idea what is happening in terms of football or
>
> baseball, two things that straight men talk about, and I could never interact with them
>
> around that in that arena (mutual laughter). I know nothing about that.

> Hakim overcame numerous interpersonal barriers to develop relationships with peers as a

young man. Two of the biggest barriers were his mother and father. He shared how the act of

walking with a female student almost resulted in having to withdraw from college at the

insistence of his parents.

> So my first year of college, [I was] exposed to so many people and I came home one day
>
> and . . . I got in a lot of trouble because someone had seen me walking on campus with a

girl who was probably like a lab partner of some sort or a study partner or someone I was

working on a project with, and they threatened to take me out of school if they caught me

again doing that.

Hakim acknowledged the irony of this situation as his parent's fear that he was engaging in

premarital sex held no merit as he "had no interest in these women."

Romantic partners/intimate relationships. All of the participants reported that they

had been in a relationship at some point in their lives, and three of the nine disclosed that at the

time of the interview they had a long-term partner. The nature of the current and previous

relationships that the participants discussed varied. Many participants identified a strong sexual

desire that emerged when they first had the freedom to explore their sexuality. As sexual acts

with men became commonplace and the participants' comfort and familiarity with the gay

community increased, emotional and social connection replaced sex as the primary focus of

relationships. The theme of freedom regarding relationships and sexual activities emerged as

well as the development of sexual personalities and personal limits.

Sexual/relational freedom. Both Rafiq and Yousef disclosed that they came to the

United States with limited, if any, experience with dating and sexual activity. Upon entering

college, both individuals had the opportunity to begin exploring these aspects of their gay

identity.

Yousef described how he felt a sense of freedom upon arriving in the United States. He

had not dated or engaged in sexual activity with others prior to immigrating. He said,

In the States I have a lot of freedom here and I basically do what I want to do, ah, I guess

I am more open and, you know, the idea of what is okay and what is not okay while still

trying to be you safe and not do too much risky stuff.

Yousef also elaborated on how he had to alter his expectations about dating after immigrating to the United States. Using his family members as models of the "standard" relationship, Yousef was surprised by the concept of short-term dating. He stated,

> Coming here, I initially thought that basically that it would be a standard thing, what had happened with any member of my family, they meet someone, they marry them, they stay with them forever, that kind of thing. Um, and so when I figured out that wasn't the case I just basically decided to explore, um, you know, different people.

Rafiq shared how at the age of 21 years he reached a moment in his life where he needed to take action with his sexuality. In reference to exploring his sexual identity, he said,

> That is why I like came to the U.S. I went to [name deleted] and was like okay, I still don't know where I stand and it got to a stage where I'm 21, I need to (he whispered "I'm still a virgin" and laughed). The only way I am going to find out what I like is just like, by giving it a try. Like that was the point where I was coming to terms with, okay, I've got to experiment in order to know what the hell I want so I stop asking myself that question that is driving me nuts in my head, so yeah, so I had sex.

Rafiq struggled with determining his preference to date men or women. He described the sexual experiences with men as incredible and the emotional connections with women as enduring. He vacillated between dating men and women for a period of time before meeting his first boyfriend. Talking about the sexual and emotional worlds that seemed mutually exclusive when dating men and women, Rafiq stated,

> I was like I have to see if these two worlds can meet. You know, it wasn't until I had my first like relationship with a guy . . . he was out, he was out and all of his coworkers knew . . . [We] got to be friends and we got into a relationship for about a year and a half. That

was the first time . . . I was like oh, so I can enjoy a relationship with a guy and have

emotions and get that . . . good sex (laughter).

Like many young adults in the United States, college provided Zakari with an opportunity

to explore his sexuality. He said,

I went through relationships in college, and in college I mean I was pretty sexually active.

There was no reservations because I am in college, I am young, and I can do whatever I

want.

As the participants adjusted to living in the United States and figured out how to function

as autonomous individuals without parental supervision these behaviors started to

change. Zakari's perspective on sex and dating changed after college ended. He shared

that he prefers long-term relationships that provide a secure context for sexual activity.

When asked about his approach to dating he replied,

I look for something a little more long term, like I am not in college anymore. I am not

as young as I was and I want something more continuous and with that would come

something more serious like a relationship. With my previous relationship . . . I did not

have a really emotional connection, it was more of a physical connection . . . Over time

the reason I broke up is because I was not happy.

Not ready to date. Some of the participants spoke about how they are not ready to date at

the moment. Zakari and Adam addressed this issue directly during the interview. Adam stated

how his personal lack of stability at the time of the interview, resulting from having to adjust to a

new country, served as the biggest barrier to a relationship. In reference to a relationship he

explained,

I will want one at some point, but when I feel more stable. At the moment I feel like

right now I am not in good shape because in a relationship I have to care for someone and

have to . . . invest time and effort, and I don't have that right now as I am really trying to

establish myself and my career.

Zakari did not elaborate as to why he does not want to enter into a relationship, but he expressed

how his preference to only engage in sexual activity in the context of a relationship creates stress

and confusion for him, especially as he wants to have sexual interactions but not a relationship.

He stated,

I don't want to be with someone right now, but I do want to be sexually active, but I

know that if I am sexually active I want to be in a relationship and at the same time I

don't really want a relationship, that is kind of weird.

It is interesting to note that Mehdi has the opposite relational preference as Zakari. Mehdi, who

was married to a woman prior to coming out, has had numerous long-term relationships with

men. With his male partners he refrains from sexual activity, but he wants the emotional

connection that a partner offers.

 Relationship challenges. During his interview, Hakim disclosed that his relationship

with his boyfriend recently ended and this had been a challenging time for him emotionally. He

attributed the dissolution of their relationship to the impact that his tumultuous childhood has had

on him and those whom he loves and who love him. In a forthright manner he stated that the

identity conflict

has influenced my relationships in that I think it affects my partners. My issues come out

and I love sharing stories of growing up. When you are with a partner you have a

platform to talk about these things that you wouldn't talk to others about. I am talking to

you because it's confidential and I would love, I hope this helps with your research, but I

think at the same time it tires, it will make my partners very tired and I am quite sure it

was part of why he felt like he needed to be alone because it was a lot to take in. A lot of

the things I have been through I did not get into the detail, but a lot of the abuse and

tumultuousness can be quite tiring especially if it is to a partner who cares about you. So

yeah, I think part of the break up, part of the reason he needed to be alone was because I

am a lot to take in so I think that my experiences very much affect, impact me, but will

very much impact my relationships.

Fuad discussed the challenges he faced with a former boyfriend who did not understand

the culturally rooted struggles between Fuad and his family. Fuad recalled getting involved with

a man in college who "did not like the term boyfriend and he wanted an open relationship."

Fuad described some of the conflict he experienced with this individual. He stated that the man

with whom he was involved "wanted to meet my parents" and he persistently presented the idea

after Fuad informed him that "it is not a good idea." Fuad outlined the following three reasons

as his rationale for not introducing the man to his parents:

One, you do not speak Arabic so they will see you as the oppressor and two, 'cause I'm

gay and due to my financial situation I cannot really fuck with that, and three you are not

my boyfriend so I'm not serious with this, you know. I cannot make a value assessment

here.

Both Hakim and Fuad provided insight into some of the challenges of dating

individuals from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. While Rafiq shared that "I

am not attracted to my own kind," he commented on how he encounters very few gay

Muslim men:

Even having friends who might . . . have had that experience of embracing two very

different sides, or having both similarities with me in terms of having the same ethnic

background, coming from Lebanon, and the being raised in Lebanon and also having a

gay identity like that, that is very rare and I have not met many out gay Middle Eastern

men. Like I said, if I do meet the occasional one or two, very few of them are out and a

lot of them are struggling with, either struggling with their identities or comfortable with

their identities but have not necessarily come out to their families about it.

Muslim community. The majority of the participants lived in communities with a strong

Muslim presence. Omar was the only participant who described his childhood as having limited

contact with other Muslims outside of his family. When asked about messages he heard about

religion from his community and peers, Omar replied, "Nothing really about Islam. I did not

really grow up with around many Muslims except for my family, mostly my neighbors weren't

Muslim." Adam's experience living in Saudi Arabia sharply contrasted with Omar's, as Adam

was surrounded by other Muslim individuals and families.

Other participants had varying degrees of contact with Muslim individuals. Hakim,

Fuad, and Zakari disclosed that they attended U.S. public schools, where they interacted with

few Muslim students, but in the evenings and weekends they attended religious schools and

Muslim-led events with their families. Mehdi did not specifically discuss his attendance at both

public school and religious schools, but he did share how he learned Arabic at a religious school.

The remaining participants, Rafiq, Ahmed, and Yousef, shared how they grew up in Muslim

communities and were exposed to members of other religions.

Gay community. Within the gay community, Hakim and Fuad expressed their disdain

for the cultural relativists who attempt to accept everyone, with the unfortunate result of

minimizing or undermining the negative experiences that Hakim and Fuad experienced at the

mercy of more conservative Muslim people. Hakim said,

> We are in the [deleted geographic region], right, and by default we are cultural relativists,
>
> so that has always been difficult for [me] in the [deleted geographic region] during this
>
> transition to make peace with that. Not everyone will see someone wearing a veil the
>
> same way that I do. People might be more open minded to it or say that it is her choice or
>
> something like that. Part of the issue or a discussion that I had with my ex was just that.
>
> He worked at [deleted name of university], so of course he was a cultural relativist and
>
> we had conversations like that, and I was very stubborn in my antagonistic feelings
>
> toward Islam or Muslims, and he was kind of the temper, the more temperamental . . .
>
> and he was the happy medium more of the devil's advocate. He tried to give me a
>
> different perspective . . . I think that is a struggle that I will, that I still have is being
>
> phobic of homophobia, yeah, and being Islamophobia in a different way, not the
>
> Islamophobia [that] is usually associated with what one would experience in the
>
> Midwest, like a racist or prejudice feeling because [Muslims] are different, not Judeo
>
> Christian so to speak. But one issue that I have had is a different kind of Islamophobia
>
> where I completely emphasize with Muslims in a way, when I am at the airport, for
>
> example, and I see someone getting pulled aside or harassed for some reason . . . or when
>
> I hear the Pope saying that Turkey should not be part of the European Union because they
>
> are Muslim. That makes me feel that [there] is just prejudice in that. But I think that . . .
>
> my feelings of Islam are not your standard Islamophobia, it is different. It is much more
>
> personal.

Fuad who also expressed frustration with people telling him about how he should feel and act. He spoke about his experience in college and the messages he received from other gay men who did identify as Muslim.

I remember him and most of his friends in Santa Cruz making up the gay, the queer population there is very small, they all knew each other. I used to get shamed a lot, I touched on it earlier, but like you mentioned this Western notion of being gay it still hasn't cemented itself in my mind, but the idea that, ah, for one to be Muslim I was ignorant—so being Muslim growing up I did not think I could be gay because you couldn't be gay you know, we would be like no, damnation blah, blah, blah, but then being gay and no longer being Muslim when I was 20 to 21 years old, people were telling be that I could not be Muslim, that it was ignorant. So I was being shamed from both sides.

Like Fuad, many of the participants experienced shame related to their sexual and Muslim identities. The source of the shame depended on the social context. Very rarely did participants describe members of the gay community as accepting of their Muslim identities. Few participants reported having contact with other gay men with a Muslim upbringing. Considering the strong beliefs held by some members of this minute subculture of the gay community, gay Muslims may not feel welcome if they still identify with Islam.

Interpersonal relationship summary. As participants discussed their religious and sexual identities and beliefs, they often described them in the context of relationships and interpersonal interactions. This section focused on the interpersonal experiences that the participants described. Organized by the type of relationship (family, friends, and community),

relationship quality, coming out, the barriers related to disclosing their sexual identities, and individuation were addressed in this section.

Discussions of family often occurred within narratives regarding childhood. Overall, participants described their childhoods as good while two participants reported difficulty remembering much about their youth and alluded to the challenging experiences they endured as children. Eight of the nine participants lived in communities with a strong Muslim presence and none of the participants had much, if any, exposure to the visibly open LGBTQ-identified individuals.

Families and specific family members had a significant impact on the participants, who all spoke extensively about these relationships throughout the interview. The majority of participants described satisfactory relationships with their family members while a few reported highly conflicting relationships and, for one individual, estrangement. At the other extreme, one participant felt highly supported by his parents, siblings, and extended family.

For the participants who referred to specific individuals, males were mentioned more frequently than women and portrayed as distant and disapproving. Two participants described traumatic relationships with family members. One of these relationships involved a participant and his angry father and the other relationship pertained to an exploitive and abusive brother.

Except for Mehdi, none of the participants described their families as accepting or tolerant of LGBTQ individuals. In this sample, participants described the homonegative attitudes originating from their family members' adherence to Islamic scripture, cultural beliefs, and faulty information and stereotypes about the gay community. The degree of familial religious observance appeared to correlate with the quality of relationships. Participants with highly traditional and religiously observant traditional families overwhelmingly reported difficult

relationships, while the inverse occurred with less religious families. Mehdi's family was an exception to this pattern as they actively followed the five tenets of Islam and accepted him as a Muslim man who is gay. Both Rafiq and Omar described their families as minimally religious; however, they had no intent of informing their families about their sexual identities. The homophobia and homonegativity in the Middle East and the United States likely accounts for their hesitance, as religious opposition to sexual diversity did not appear to be an issue.

Three of the nine participants were out to their families, and of these three Mehdi was the only participant who described intentionally coming out to his family. The remaining participants, especially Ahmed, wanted to disclose their sexual identities but feared that their families would not accept them for their same-sex desires. The fear of rejection and withholding of emotional and financial support weighed heavily on all of the participants. The fear of rejection was a major barrier to coming out for the participants as was a desire to minimize interpersonal stress and protect their family members from the societal shame. Many participants acknowledged the amount of effort and work they would have to invest in in order to educate their families about homosexuality.

All of the participants had come out to some people, with six of the nine participants disclosing their sexual identities to a few family members. These family members primarily included siblings, cousins, and aunts, and they were accepting of their relative's sexual identity. Participants mentioned feeling more comfortable coming out to sibling, cousins, and peers as sex was not discussed with their parents or older adults.

When they lived in close proximity to their families, the participants had limited opportunities to explore their identities. Most of the participants reported having to leave home and move to another city, state, or country before they could comfortably begin to explore their

sexual identities and pursue different religious experiences. College facilitated this opportunity as most participants who attended university enrolled in programs in different cities, states, and countries. Moving away from home to attend college or to accept a new job exposed some participants to greater sociocultural diversity for the first time. This exposure to religious, sexual, and cultural diversity challenged beliefs that the individuals had learned from their families and communities and expanded their awareness of the myriad choices and lifestyles that they could happily embrace.

The majority of participants reported having few friends and limited social networks as children. These limited social networks often resulted from harassment and bullying or self-imposed relational restrictions, each of which stemmed from their gay identities. A few participants had gay-identified friends early in high school, and others developed gay friends later in life as they acknowledged and accepted their sexual orientation. As participants aged and sought out communities that accepted them they developed strong relationships and support networks. All of the participants reported that they had been in a relationship at some point in their lives and three of the nine disclosed that they currently had a long-term partner.

Participants reported that their first exposure to the LGBTQ community occurred during college and graduate school. While some participants refrained from getting involved with the LGBTQ community at first, others immediately attended events and made connections with others. Among the participants who had lived outside the United States, the Internet facilitated much of their social interaction with gay men. Within the United States, these interactions primarily occurred in person. Participants commented on the notable personal changes that occurred when they could be open and honest with other members of the LGBTQ. These relationships were overwhelmingly positive for most participants; a few individuals struggled to

fit in with gay culture in the United States due to the racism cultural differences that complicated

their intimate relationships.

Chapter V

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Homosexuality and Islam are often perceived as mutually exclusive constructs that pose challenges for Muslim men who are attracted to men. Few psychological studies have examined how Muslim men who identify as gay cope with these challenges. The purpose of this study was to better understand how men who identify as Muslim, or had a Muslim upbringing, who later realize that they are gay, negotiate and cope with the inherent challenges of identity conflict. The following research questions shaped this study's focus:

- How do participants define (not define) or label (not label) themselves and their sexual behaviors and desires? In what ways is this based on the nation or culture in which they live?

- How does an Islamic religious identity impact the development of a Muslim man's sexual identity? How does religious observation, level or degree of engagement/identification (e.g. devout, strongly, culturally), and/or sect (e.g. Sunni vs. Shia) impact this process?

- In what ways and to what degree do factors pertaining to culture, family, social systems and personal traits influence the identity development process related to sexuality?

- How do gay Muslim men cope with the stressors resulting from their conflicting identities and the consequences of the identity/ies they embrace?

I collected data from in-depth, semistructured interviews with nine participants, all of whom reported a Muslim upbringing and a stronger sexual attraction toward men than women. At the time of their interviews, three of the participants identified as Muslim, and the remaining six had rejected Islam in favor of a different religious/spiritual practice or atheism. Interviews

were conducted over a 10-month period, with five occurring over the telephone and four in

person. I transcribed all of the interviews verbatim and analyzed the content using thematic

analysis. Prior to conducting the interviews, I identified four domains of interests (religion,

sexuality, identity conflict resolution, and mental health). During the analysis and coding

process, relationships as a fifth domain emerged.

This chapter presents discussion and analysis of the themes and findings presented in

Chapter IV. It is organized by the four research questions. Discussion of relevant themes and

information within the five domains is presented as well as implications for clinical practice,

study limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Question 1

Question 1 was: How do participants define (not define) or label (not label) themselves

and their sexual behaviors and desires? In what ways is this influenced by the nation or culture

in which they live/d?

When talking about the development of their sexual identities, the participants spoke

about feeling different from their peers. Often this sense of difference started early in their lives,

and they lacked an explanation for this feeling. Participants from the United States and abroad

reported having limited exposure to the concept of homosexuality, and a few did not know that

the concept even existed. They did not know about the various labels used to identify someone

attracted to a member of the same sex (e.g., gay, MSM, queer identities), and if they had heard

the terms, they did not know the meaning. For many participants, relatives and peers introduced

the concept of homosexuality to them. At that point, the participants could choose to engage in

exploration of homosexuality, which primarily involved Internet searches. As they matured and

had access to media outlets, they developed a greater knowledge of homosexuality and began to recognize that their sense of difference had a connection to their sexual desires.

The word gay has a unique history that is connected to political activism, colonialism, and social control. Gay is an inherently Western term that has varying levels of controversy within the United States. It also represents an identity. To identify as gay conveys more information than simply communicating one's attraction to members of the same sex. By claiming a gay identity, an individual states that he or she also partakes in the numerous elements of a gay lifestyle. This claim speaks to the differences of sexual behavior versus an identity that distinguishes many people and how they relate to their sexuality. Rafiq explained that it was difficult for him "to embrace the word gay because [his] definition of gay was very well, yeah, clouded" and he had to define it for himself.

During the interviews, all of the participants used the word gay to describe themselves at least once. The prevalent usage of this word does not automatically confirm that each participant prefers to self-identify as gay, especially given that two of the participants expressed their dislike for the word and all expressed their preference for different terms (e.g., queer and MSM) that they consider a more accurate reflection of their sexual identities/orientation. Despite their preference for other terms, these two participants labeled themselves as gay during portions of their interviews. One man who prefers the term MSM told me that saying the word gay is easier than offering a different term. For him, gay is an accepted and widely known term that he does not have to define or explain to those unfamiliar with less commonly used labels.

With regard to how they label their sexual desires, the participants unanimously responded that they identify as gay. Some were uncomfortable with the term even though they sometimes used it. Those who disliked referring to themselves as gay expressed a preference for

using more inclusive or action-oriented labels such as queer or MSM. One of the explanations

provided for embracing the word queer emerged from greater exposure to diversity within the

LGBTQ community. This exposure resulted in an examination of the divisions within the

community, and the inclusive term queer helped combat this divisiveness. There was also a

connection among individuals who identified as queer and conducted a lot of activism within the

LGBTQ community.

The preference for MSM and similar action-based labels reflected some potential

discomfort with the term gay and some of the stereotypes that this term incurs. One participant

voiced his preference to say that he is attracted to members of the same sex instead of men. This

nuance can be interpreted as someone distancing himself from the broader gay male community

and identifying more with men who feel more comfortable in separating their sexual desires from

their collective identity. In *Androphilia: A Manifesto*, Jack Malebranche (2006) stated

"Homosexual attraction [is] a variation in desire, rather than indicating a different kind of man"

(p. 21). The distinction that Malebranche makes between men who love men and gay men

sounds similar to the notion of a behavioral-orientated label such as MSM. Some may argue that

this rejection of the gay identity reflects latent internalized homophobia. Others find this notion

refreshing as they may not identify with the gay community and the political identity that the

term gay denotes.

The word gay has many connotations that vary by culture, and decisions to embrace or

reject the label are likely motivated by their perceptions of what the word represents. Commonly

considered a Western term (Harris et al., 2008), endorsement of the gay label may reflect an

effort to identify with a sexually progressive culture that is perceived as supportive of sexual

diversity. Murray (1997) asserted that those who feel the most oppressed in the Middle East are

those who consider themselves gay in the Western sense. This suggests that gay-identified

individuals who choose to immigrate to the United States are likely predisposed to embracing

Western terms. Similarly, efforts to reject the gay label may reflect anti-Western sentiments or

an effort to resist or obstruct the increasing expansion of the Western-based gay rights movement

that Massad (2007) referred to as the Gay International.

Researchers on ethnic and sexual minorities, not just Muslim-identified individuals per

se, have suggested that members of ethnic minority communities living in the United States may

embrace sexual identity labels differently than sexual minorities who are members of the

mainstream community (Young & Meyer, 2005). As a result, ethnic minorities likely have a

different relationship with the word "gay," as it does not have the same degree of prevalence in

religious communities and communities of color. Regardless of their comfort level with their

ethnic community and their Muslim identities, the participants did not use terms commonly used

in these communities.

Question 2

Question 2 was: How does an Islamic religious identity impact the development of a

Muslim man's gay sexual identity? How does religious observation, level or degree of

engagement/identification (e.g., devout, strongly, culturally), and/or sect (e.g., Sunni versus

Shiite) affect this process?

When examining the numerous factors that affected the participants' sexual identity,

differentiating the impact of religion from cultural and interpersonal challenges is a difficult task.

Hakim's description of Islam as a "comprehensive lifestyle" that extends beyond religion and

into the daily life of a practicing Muslim highlights the pervasive and far-reaching influence this

religion has on its practitioners (Norcliffe, 1999). This makes it challenging to isolate the impact

of religion on a Muslim person's sexual identity and necessitates a broader examination of the

individual and the context in which his or her multiple identities intersect. The conclusions

presented in this section stem from the participants' direct responses to related questions as well

as comments that indirectly addressed this topic throughout the interview.

With one exception, all participants stated that they were religiously involved as children.

The level of observance and degree of importance varied, with half of the sample reporting that

religion had a high degree of importance and the other half acknowledging that they had

awareness of religion but that their involvement was minimal. Consistent with the literature

examining the transgenerational transmission of religion, the participants' beliefs in early

childhood mirrored those of their parents and other important figures in their lives. Several

participants who identified as having less religious involvement described the role that their

grandparents had in educating them about Islam and inculcating Islamic beliefs and values. As

children, the participants overwhelmingly accepted what they were taught and complied with

their families' beliefs. With time and maturity, they no longer relied on direct religious guidance

from their parents and grandparents. With age and exposure to new experiences and

opportunities outside the home and family, the majority of the participants began to question the

religious practices and beliefs they learned as children. For many of the participants, this period

of doubt began when confronted with their emerging sexual desires and attraction toward men,

which placed them at odds with Islam and their communities. Educational opportunities and

geographical distance from their families of origin were two additional factors that contributed to

their doubts about Islam.

Religious identity development. All of the participants who reported an affiliation with

a sect of Islam identified as Sunni. As such, the results of this study did not provide further data

on the differences between how membership in different Islamic sects contributes to an individual's sexual identity development.

Because children are typically exposed to religion in childhood, prior to the development of their sexual identity, religious identities most often precede sexual identities (Peek, 2005; Page & Yip, 2013). This is especially true for non-Western or traditional cultures that discourage sexual freedom (Altman, 2004). As such, all of the participants in this study had developed a religious identity, or lack thereof, before the establishment of their sexual identities. When asked about how their religious identities influenced their sexual identities, study participants overwhelmingly noted the negative impact that their religious identities exerted on their sexual orientation. Through their narratives, the men described the feelings of anger, fear, shame, and guilt that bombarded them as they began to recognize that they were becoming "those people" that their parents, imams, and teachers had them warned about.

However, two study participants portrayed a very different experience in denying that their Muslim identities inhibited their sexual identity. Neither of these individuals described the impact as positive, suggesting that their religious identity had a neutral impact on their sexual identity at best. Despite their claims, it is likely that these two participants had endured similar struggles as the other participants but they experienced them differently. These two individuals may have had endured less distress than the other men in the sample for several reasons. One possibility is that they had greater insulation from the social and emotional challenges that the other participants faced. This insulation may include more affirmative environments, stronger support networks, and greater emotional and psychological awareness that buffered them or assisted their ability to fend off the intrapsychic and social pressures that resulted from their emerging sexual identities. It is important to note that both men spent their childhoods in the

United States, with one born here and the other immigrating at a young age. It is also possible that both men have resisted any attempts to examine the impact of their religious identities on their sexual identities because of the consequences that could develop from what they find. Lastly, these two men may have had the fortune of not developing the conflict that has afflicted the other individuals in this study.

Negative influences. Among the participants who did struggle with their religion and sexuality, the negative impact varied by degree and level of intensity. Participants at one extreme of the continuum reported severe hardship that resulted from embracing their sexual identities. Several individuals reported intense consequences that included, but were not limited to, the severing of familial relationships, suicidal ideation, and ongoing psychological and emotional trauma. The participants who struggled with conflicting identities to a slightly lesser degree described feeling restricted in their relationships as a result of their sexual identities, and reported strong feelings of loneliness and isolation, which resulted from their decision to withhold their sexual identities from family members and friends.

External challenges. The internal struggle associated with the impact of religion on sexual identity development was tough for many participants, but it is just one component of religion. Coming to terms with one's sexual and religious identities is a formidable task that gets exponentially more difficult when external sources, such as family, peers, and the larger community, promulgate negative messages that exacerbate the fear, anger, shame, and guilt that strengthens the men's resistance to accepting their sexual identity. The ways in which external sources reinforce the desire to deny or reject same-sex desires have no limit and likely vary based on contextual factors. Several participants disclosed some powerful experiences that they survived as adolescents and young adults.

Family challenges. Based on the narratives in this study, families who openly expressed their vehemence and disdain toward gay-identified family members expressed their disdain by withholding and withdrawing their emotional and financial support. This including prohibiting their son from living in the family home, sending him to mental health specialists with the intent of changing his sexual orientation, and arranging conversations with imams and other religious figures. For the participants in this study, all of these efforts failed to change their sexual identity, but they did succeed in alienation from parents and siblings.

Once it became clear that they had no control over their son/brother's sexual identity, families had two options to manage their interactions with this individual. They could choose to either set their differences aside and compromise or sever their familial connection. One participant reported that he and his family have arrived at a conditional level of acceptance that hinges on his concealment of his sexual identity or "gay lifestyle" when in their presence. Given his commitment to maintaining a connection with his family, the participant has agreed to compartmentalize his sexuality and any visible indicators of his attraction toward men in exchange for salvaging the relationship. Another participant was cut off from his family as his parents and siblings could not see beyond his gay identity. By conditioning their love on sexual identity, both families have sent a strong message to both men that further exacerbate the already heightened conflict between their religious and sexual identities.

The sacrifices that each of these men have made with their families has a series of consequences that creates unique problems. Having all connections with his family severed has given one participant the freedom he needs to embrace his identity without any conditions or impositions. This freedom has a substantial cost as he no longer has a family and must navigate the world without this valuable support system. He also sits with the awareness that his parents

rejected him. For the other participant, maintaining contact with his family at the expense of his

sexual expression and freedom has resulted in him still clinging to the hope that he can regain his

parent's blessing if he acts in accordance with their values. It seems likely that if he had the

option of "selecting" a heterosexual identity, he would eagerly turn straight in order to get

reinstated into the family. This dynamic has a significant impact on the participant, as his

parent's disapproval of his sexual identity limits his own acceptance of his sexual identity and

ultimately retards his progression through the identity development process. The lack of

acceptance affects other domains of his life and impedes the quality of his relationships and

capacity for sexual intimacy. Consequently, this individual continues to struggle with embracing

his sexual identity and remains isolated as he longer feels welcome in the Muslim community or

with his family, and he has limited interest in exploring the gay community. These factors

collectively reinforce the notion that Muslims should not be gay and that changing one's sexual

identity is the ideal means of resolving this conflict.

For participants who remain closeted, they endure their own mental battles when

interacting with family members who are perceived to be or are explicitly opposed to

homosexuality. When spending the night at his aunt and uncle's home, one participant disclosed

how he sometimes thinks about how his relatives would react if they knew that their nephew, a

gay man, has slept in a bed under their roof. This thought conveys the pervasive fear of rejection

that permeates their world. Homophobic messages that relatives make in the presence of

closeted gay men reinforce this fear and further perpetuate the concern about how they might

react if they became aware of their relative's gay identity.

All of the participants reported that they heard messages from their communities that

Muslims cannot be gay. Regardless of whether they believed these messages, the participants

did internalize them and invested a significant amount of time and energy combating the notion

that they are lesser than or inferior to men who are sexually attracted to women.

Religious or culture-induced conflict. Interestingly, the stress and conflict that

participants reported regarding their negative perceptions of their sexual identity were not limited

to only those participants who were raised in religious families and identified as Islam. Despite

his lack of religious identity and potential absence of negative religious messages denouncing

homosexuality, one participant noted that the negative attitude toward his homosexuality did not

come from religion but from himself. This participant had internalized the homonegativity that

surrounded him in his family environment and his culture. The cultural components of his home

country of Lebanon likely transmitted the antigay messages as the lack of openness regarding

sexuality, and the well-entrenched connection between religion and culture exposed him to the

same messages, albeit indirectly. The religion that Rafiq did not endorse still impacted him as

the religion permeated the culture and seeped into his worldview via socialization and the

messages he heard from his mother and others in his life. This is important to highlight as

agnostic or atheist individuals from the Middle East and other Muslim countries may still hold

the same beliefs and degree of conflict as their religious peers.

This notion of atheist- or agnostic-identified gay men from the Middle East struggling

with their sexual identity calls into question the impact of religion on sexual identity. Perhaps

Islam, as a comprehensive religion, and Middle Eastern culture are so closely intertwined that it

is nearly impossible to differentiate the aspects that contribute to the struggle with one's sexual

identity. Islam and Middle Eastern culture, and many other predominately Muslim cultures,

share a strong degree of patriarchy (AbuKhalil, 1997). By definition, patriarchal societies

throughout the world maintain their power and authority by subjugating women and suppressing

men who violate the prescribed gender roles. According to Pharr (1997) homophobia is a "weapon of sexism" (p. 1), and patriarchal societies wield notions of homophobia in order to maintain power. The fact that gay atheists who no longer endorse Islam still experience internalized homonegativity while living in the Middle East raises questions about the accuracy of assumptions about Islam as the primary driving force of homonegativity in Muslim cultures. It appears that Islam and culture conjointly support antigay attitudes; however, religion receives credit as the driving force behind the homonegativity. This is perhaps because Islam is credited with driving all social forces within Muslim culture.

The participants' degree of religious engagement and identification, prior to identifying their same-sex desires, did not appear to have a significant impact on their sexual identity development. Regardless of their level of religious observance, all of the participants struggled with their sexuality, and while some religiously observant individuals rejected Islam in favor of their sexual identity, others maintained both identities. While individual observance levels did not appear to affect the impact of religious identity on sexual identity development, familial religious observation levels did. Participants from actively practicing religious families and from conservative religious families overwhelmingly struggled with their same-sex thoughts and feelings, both internally in their own world and in their interactions with their family. Only one participant was an exception to this finding. The next section includes a more detailed discussion of the relationship between familial religiosity and participants' religious and sexual identity development.

Even though degree of religiosity did not prevent the participants from developing a sexual identity or prevent them from ultimately rejecting their religious identity, their degree of religiosity did affect the intensity of their emotional reaction to losing their religion. For those

who relied heavily on Islam and Allah to provide support and guidance, this absence was notable. Participants acknowledged how angry and frustrated they felt after they realized that the investment and sacrifices they made for religion were meaningless as Islam offered false promises and ultimately created more problems for them. These individuals no longer struggled with identity conflict, but their resolution of this conflict spurred new problems and emotional discomfort that also required an adjustment period. They needed time to acclimate to a new way of life, one without a central figure and a comprehensive lifestyle that helped them with navigating the world.

Because of the pervasive influence of Islam throughout Muslim cultures and the belief that same-sex activities are a choice, religion in general served as a barrier to self-disclosure and expression. Participants could not openly express their sexual identity out of fear of what would happen to them within a religious context. Even if they felt comfortable accepting their sexual identities, the community and their families, which were entrenched in religious doctrine and beliefs, could not be or were not willing to accept it. Some participants who were more receptive to the community and the messages of the people had a significantly harder time accepting their sexual identity. Ultimately, this led to their decision of rejecting religion in favor of their sexuality.

The two participants who minimized the contribution that religion made on their sexual identity both discussed how religion was between them and God. This distinction appeared to insulate them from the negative messages and rejecting statements they heard from others. The men in this situation insisted that they had minimal exposure to negative messages about homosexuality within Islam or that they benefited in some way from their cultural, ethnic, and religious identity. The notion of being different within the gay community emerged as an asset

for one individual, who described how other men perceived him as "exotic," which enhanced his desirability. The phenomenon of mainstream society fetishizing religious and ethnic minorities has an extensive history within the Middle East and Asia (Cervulle & Rees-Roberts 2009; Mahawatte, 2004). In spite of their own oppression, the gay community does not have immunity from perpetuating prejudice and discrimination, and the community's corporeal focus increases the susceptibility of fetishizing certain minority groups. It is unclear whether the classification of this exoticism as a benefit has actually enriched the well-being of those who are subjected to the phenomenon within the gay community or created more challenges under the guise of attention. Regardless, it suggests that sexual objectification provides a degree of power, however fleeting or transient it may be, or it reflects an internalized level of imperialism/orientalism that may or may not be apparent to the individual.

With regard to reflecting of the impact of his religious identity on his sexual identity, one participant's simple and straightforward response stands out. Consistent with his responses throughout the interview, he asserted that his religious identity had no impact on his sexual identity. Out of respect for the participants, I am hesitant to question the accuracy of their statements, but there is also an obligation to further explore the phenomenon at hand in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the research questions. Countless other reasons exist that lend more credibility to the rationale for not providing any information to this question than denying any impact. One could proffer numerous hypotheses as to why this individual provided his response. My belief is that any man, regardless of his sexual orientation or religious affiliation, who claims that sexual identity does not have any impact on religious identity, negates the power of socialization and cultural norms in the world around him. Furthermore, this participant conveyed an avoidance or reluctance to consciously examine internal processes or an

effort to indirectly abstain from answering the question. Assuming that my analysis of this response is accurate, reluctance to examine the impact of prominent identities suggests that this individual did not want to acknowledge the impact, due perhaps to discomfort with me, or that the answer was too painful to divulge and re-experience.

Of all the participants, Mehdi has maintained his faith and incorporated his gay identity in a paradigm that works well for him. His success in remaining close with his family and observing Islam to a degree that fulfills his religious/spiritual needs is admirable, and, as evident within this sample and samples of similar studies, is a rare feat. Gaining greater insight into his ability to accomplish this task has the potential to help other men in a similar situation and is a worthy pursuit for future research and academic examination. It is possible that Mehdi's method for managing his identities would not generalize well to other individuals; however, it may contain useful elements that can help other gay-identified Muslim men actively buffer themselves from the internal and external messages that contribute to their conflict.

During the data analysis process, it became apparent that focusing on the impact of religious identity on the development of sexual identity neglected an equally important element of the process by which the participants negotiated their identities. As such, it seemed relevant to include a section examining the impact that a sexual minority identity had on religious identity. For the majority of the sample, the participants' sexual identities had a positive impact on their religious identities. The most common outcomes included greater clarity to engage in critical thinking about religion. Among those who embraced religion, their sexual identity enhanced their beliefs, and for other participants their sexual identity ultimately contributed to their rejection of Islam, which they believe served as a blessing in disguise.

The impact of sexual identity on religious identity appeared to be most notable among participants who had rejected Islam or rejected religion altogether. Collectively, the same-sex desires represented a bittersweet gift that illuminated the darkest parts of Islam that are only visible to those who are willing to examine these inconsistencies. While knowledge provides power, the consequences of seeing Islam behind the scenes diminished the majestic nature and power of the religion. Several participants referred to their sexual identities as liberating them from the organized religion that they perceived as overbearing and oppressive.

Islam, as it is practiced in many places throughout the world, has discouraged the practice of ijtihad, which essentially translates to critical thinking. Said (1978) lamented the disappearance of this rich tradition within Islam which has given rise to orthodoxy and dogma

During earlier periods in their lives, when the men remained intent on preserving their religious identities, their emerging sexual desires inhibited the attention and commitment that they could make to Islam. The early messages that Muslims cannot be gay resulted in some men compartmentalizing their identities in specific contexts. These fragmented experiences made it challenging to wholly identify with a religion when the members have clearly articulated that they have no tolerance for people with certain desires, and, if discovered within the religion, these individuals would be removed and likely persecuted. As a result, their sexual orientations impeded their development of strong and secure Muslim identity. Encountering these attitudes enabled some participants to feel empowered as they had the resilience and the capacity to rise above the prejudice and gain greater insight into organized religion. Some of the men described their sexuality as a source of liberation or light that enabled them to have more flexibility in how they practice Islam. Their sexuality also provided different perspectives that extend beyond the reach of those men and women who accept Islam as it is because they were born into the religion

and never had to explain why justify why they were Muslim.

Perceived by many as mutually exclusive, a gay identity and a Muslim identity have an intricate and complex relationship. Gay Muslim men can attest to the intense societal pressures that work incessantly on ripping these identities apart. The identities themselves exert control over the individual and assert dominance over certain stages in life. During the period of sexual latency and the early sexual identity development stages, religious identity holds reign over the individual. For many, the disorienting transition from childhood to adulthood appears to serve as a breeding ground for social insecurity and a desire to fit in that leads to the overevaluation of the opinions of others. As adolescents and young adults gain exposure to new ideas, concepts, and interpersonal freedom, their sexual identities strengthen and, for most men, displace their sexual identities. The human sex drive is a powerful force that requires a substantial amount of energy to control. Many gay Muslims who remain conflicted about their identities for extended periods of time report caving into their sexual desires and engaging in sexual interactions with men. It appears to be easier to compromise or reject personal religious beliefs than to sublimate sexual desires and remain celibate. Considering the cultural and social consequences that gay Muslims endure, it becomes increasingly bizarre that anyone could maintain the assumption that sexual orientation is a choice and that gay people should abstain from sexual interactions.

Question 3

Question 3 asked: In what ways and to what degree do factors pertaining to culture, family, social systems and personal traits influence participant's identity development processes? The third question addressed the unique factors that affected each participant and his identity development processes. Three domains emerged as particularly impactful for their developmental processes: culture, family, and individual/personal traits. Culture refers to the

community and geographical location where the participants lived. Family involves the religious

observance level and degree of acceptance for the participants. Lastly, personal traits include

any personal characteristics or qualities that may have aided or hindered the participants in their

development.

      Culture. As a religion, Islam has universal beliefs, practices, and characteristics that

transcend culture. To assume that all Muslim cultures are homogenous, however, is a faulty

generalization (Leonard, 2003) as Muslim cultures vary considerably with regard to social

interactions, adherence to Islamic principles, and sexuality. With regard to the cultural elements

that hindered and assisted the participants in their identity development process, the participants

shared culture specific elements and experiences.

      Avoidance of sexuality/invisibility of homosexuality. One of the most notable shared

cultural elements involved the avoidance of sexuality. Despite the emphasis on sexuality within

Muslim culture, the topics of sex and sexual interactions rarely get voiced or discussed within

families or in public. This avoidance of sexuality inevitably limits the knowledge that

adolescents and pubescent teenagers have as they physically and mentally develop as sexual

beings.

      In addition to having minimal awareness about their bodies, many sexual minority youth

experience a sense of isolation as they fear that they are the only individual who has recognized

the permanence of their same-sex attractions. The majority of the participants had never heard

about homosexuality and learned about the concept from peers or cousins considering that many

Muslim countries prohibit sex education. This dearth of knowledge, in conjunction with parental

efforts to avoid or silence sexually related conversations, comments, and televisions shows,

likely reinforces the shame and guilt that sexual minorities often experience as they begin the process of developing their sexual identity.

Isolation. Gay Muslim youth, who hear messages early and often about the danger of same-sex desires, frequently lack confidantes with whom they can disclose their "deviant" sexual feelings. Some individuals have the fortune of finding other gay youth, but the likelihood of this happening in Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries is low given the cultural proscriptions against publically identifying as gay.

Without friends and sources of support to share their attraction to men and with a lack of publically visible and openly gay role models, gay youth learn to conceal their sexual identities at all costs. All of the participants reported that they heard negative messages about sexual minorities and the collective effect of these messages and the lack of gay men visibly living rewarding lives often resulted in continued efforts to avoid and deny their same-sex desires. Some participants, who refrained from pursuing relationships due to the consequences of being caught by their parents or government authorities, experienced despair. This despair resulted in suicidal ideation among a third of the men in this study.

The invisibility of homosexuality within Muslim communities did not afflict only those participants who spent their childhoods in Middle Eastern countries. Several participants who immigrated to the United States as young children, as well as those born in the United States, commented on the invisibility of homosexuality in their hometowns. This lack of visibility beleaguered their resolve when recognizing their same-sex attractions and served as a barrier to coming out as they developed. Participants also mentioned how coming out to their parents seemed even more uncomfortable given that they had never engaged in any conversation regarding sex or sexuality, which added an additional barrier to the coming out process and

likely increased their reluctance to disclose their sexual identities. Other researchers studying

gay Muslims have commented on how these cultural barriers make it challenging for gay Muslim

men to disclose their sexual desires to friends and family (Murray, 1997; Siraj, 2006).

Exposure to diversity. While all of the participants reported limited exposure to

affirming messages about sexual diversity, increased exposure to other forms of diversity (i.e.,

ethnic, religious, nationality) dramatically impacted how comfortable they felt with their sexual

identities. In contrast, individuals with less exposure to diversity appeared to have more

difficulty embracing their gay identities. Researchers examining prejudice and bias have found

that a negative relationship exists between prejudice and exposure to and contact with different

groups of people (Allport, 1954). The contact hypothesis, also known as the intergroup contact

theory, accounts for this social phenomenon, and specific interventions utilizing this theory

remain some of the most effective means of improving relationships between two groups in

conflict (Wright, 2009). For the majority of the participants, the greatest opportunities for

gaining exposure to diverse groups, ideas, and experience presented when they left home to

attend college or moved to another city for employment.

College and geographical distance from family. As a distinct culture in itself, college

afforded participants the opportunity to meet a diverse range of people, learn about other

cultures, and encounter alternative secular lifestyles. Most importantly, though, college offered

participants a chance to move outside the purview of their parents, and many of the participants

attended university in another city, state, or country. No longer monitored or restricted in their

activities, the participants who attended college outside their hometown described their

experiences as transformative.

The academic coursework also introduced concepts such as patriarchy, misogyny, and other social structures that help to maintain the status quo in male-dominated religions and societal institutions that also oppress sexual minorities. Dormitory living also provided opportunities for more autonomy and independence with regard to making decisions about observing religious holidays, customs, and diets and provided opportunities for sexual exploration.

In their studies examining gay Muslim men in Britain, Siraj (2006) and Yip (2004b) had similar findings. By moving away to attend college or simply moving to another city for work, the participants in Siraj (2006) and Yip (2004b) had an opportunity to date. Given the importance of the kinship network among many Muslims, the need to move away from their family members in order to embrace their identities places gay Muslims in a difficult position (Yip, 2004b). For individuals from collectivist cultures and/or kinship-based societies, which includes many Muslim countries, any decision that forces individuals to choose between supporting their family and fulfilling their personal needs can create dilemmas. Either choice a person makes will result in having to forfeit something of value: pursuing a relationship at the expense of familial connection or maintaining familial connection and sacrificing a relationship.

While college gave many of the participants in the present study greater freedom and flexibility, several studies examining heterosexually identified Muslim college students has shown the opposite trend. Peek (2005), Hermansen (2003), and Leonard (2003) noted that religious identity often intensified among second-generation Arab American Muslim students. Peek (2005) posited that connection to other Muslim students at college has a conservatizing affect in which Muslims, who frequently lack access to a larger Muslim peer group, become more observant in their adherence to the Five Pillars and become strict/conservative with regard

to Islamic values as they connect with a larger group. While college provides Muslim students

with a peer group of other Muslim students, the gay-identified students in the present study

sought out social groups who encouraged them to act in accordance with their desires and beliefs

instead of adhering to the rules and practices that Islam outlines.

Immigration. Immigrating to another country as an adult creates situations that do not

affect children who immigrate with their families. Some of these situations are beneficial for the

adult immigrant while others create additional stressors and responsibilities that child immigrants

may not notice or recognize. The sample for the present study contained participants who were

born in the United States, most of whom have parents who immigrated prior to their birth,

participants who immigrated to the United States as children or as late adolescents, and, lastly

participants who immigrated as adults when they were threatened by their home country.

Within the United States, immigrants and Muslims are often regarded with disfavor by

the dominant society (Schafer & Shaw, 2009). As such, people openly and frequently ridicule

these groups without fear of censure. Muslim Americans, especially those who have immigrated

to the United States, will inevitably face some degree of backlash as they possess at least one of

these cultural identities. Among the study participants who had immigrated to the United States,

few disclosed discriminatory experiences. Those who did described discriminatory encounters in

the workplace associated with efforts to find employment and expectations that they would serve

as spokespeople for the Muslim world. School was another setting, and several participants

reported that they endured bullying and harassment from other students. These experiences

inevitably reinforce the notion that a gay Muslim man rarely finds a space where all of his

identities are simultaneously valued and embraced, and it likely increases the pressure to

minimize or compartmentalize aspects of oneself based on the social context.

Family and relationships. The participants' families had a substantial influence on their identity development processes and overall degree of emotional well-being. The most notable factors related to familial relationship are discussed next.

Religious observance levels. Researchers examining the relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward sexual minorities overwhelmingly have concluded that religious conservatism/fundamentalism is a strong predictor of homophobia and negative attitudes about members of the LGBTQ community (Whitley, 2009; Wilkinson, 2004). These results transcend individual specific religious beliefs and apply to many of the prominent world religions (Fone, 2000).

Given the relationship between religiosity and homophobia, it is not surprising that the participants who described their families as highly observant experienced greater problems as a result of their same-sex desires and identity conflict than the participants from families with more moderate religious views and practices. Interestingly, the only participant who was out to his family and reported a strong relationship with them, likely the strongest of the entire sample, also had a highly observant family. This finding contradicts the hypothesis that religiosity is primarily responsible for the difficulties that gay Muslim men had in managing their identity conflict.

A closer examination of the history and dynamics of each family suggests that immigration may also to contribute to families increased religiosity and homophobia. In general, immigration is an inherently difficult process that strips people of their identities, assigns them new labels, and forces them to redefine themselves (Akhtar, 1999). This is especially true for families moving to Western countries from the Middle East, which have radically different cultures. As they adjust to their newly acquired statuses as immigrants and members of minority

groups (ethnic, religious, etc.), people may turn to religion in order to gain stability. Several

participants described how their families became increasingly religious after immigrating to a

new country. This phenomenon occurs frequently as immigrants attempt to cope with their

discomfort by turning toward religion as a means of securing their identity and establishing

themselves within a community (Cadge & Ecklund; 2007; Haddad & Lummis, 1987; Peek,

2005; Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). As their religiosity increased, the families likely began to endorse

more antigay beliefs, and they experienced more fear about their children falling victim to the

West's culture degeneracy (Yip, 2004b). This in turn provides a strong impetus to react in a

harsh and condemnatory way to protect their children. Muslim Americans who have spent

generations in the United States may or may not endorse the same degree of homophobic beliefs.

As the only African American and the participant with the longest history in the United

States, it is possible that these identities contributed to Mehdi's close family dynamic in spite of

their high degree of religiosity. Because of the racial and social oppression that they have

endured, African American families have survived by relying on each other for support. This

need for unity as a means of survival often results in the need to overlook differences and

transcends religious identity. Within the Black church, sexual minorities retain their membership

by not engaging in same-sex relationships and refraining from displaying or "flaunting" their

sexuality (Pitt, 2009). This same practice also applies within Islam, and it may explain why

Mehdi has a platonic relationship with a male partner. Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian

immigrants face different circumstances when migrating to the United States from their countries

of origin as they no longer hold membership with the majority group and they need to adjust to

living as ethnic and religious minorities in a new country (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). Their efforts

to establish negotiate the cultural differences, especially with their American-born children, can

result in parent-child conflicts (Lang, 1996).

Family relationships.   Notable differences emerged in the narratives of participants who

had solid, tumultuous, or nonexistent relationships with their families. While the latter groups

expressed higher degrees of suicidal ideation, psychological trauma, and an overall aversion to

Islam, the participants who had positive relationships with their families generally fared better

with negotiating and managing their sexual and religious identities.

Given the need for social support, many men were willing to protect their familial

relationships by withholding their sexual identities. This is consistent with avoidance of

discussing sexuality and not acknowledging problematic actions, two cultural practices common

in Middle Eastern societies.

The collectivist social organization underlying many Muslim cultures prioritizes the

family unit over the individual member (Almeida, 2005; Whitaker, 2011). Because an individual

is a reflection of the family and his or her actions can have significant consequences for all

members, the individual is expected to sacrifice any potentially damning needs and desires to

protect the family. As a result, sexual minorities, who have the potential to annihilate the marital

prospects of siblings and cast shame and disgrace on their relatives by disclosing and embracing

their sexual identity, are expected to sacrifice their sexual desires.

Armed with the power to disrupt the lives of their family members by disclosing their

sexual identities, gay Muslim men seem to benefit from emotionally and geographically distant

relationships with their family members. This distance provides a degree of anonymity that

enables them to pursue relationships with other men while simultaneously maintaining their

family connections.

Coming out. The participants had both positive and negative reactions to coming out. None of them mentioned a neutral experience or seemed ambivalent about the impact that disclosing their sexuality had on their relationships with friends and family. One participant, who was outed by a family member, described the difficulties that he faced as a result of the premature disclosure of his identity. A decade after being outed he still appeared conflicted with his sexual identity and mentioned that he does not celebrate his sexual identity.

The other participants, most of whom disclosed their identities to friends and family members of their same generation, had positive reactions and felt supported. This finding is consistent with Gallor and Fassinger (2010), who found that gay men and women of color in the United States most frequently disclosed their sexual identities to cousins and siblings prior to informing parents and grandparents. Another participant's situation was a bit more ambiguous as he never shared whether his family learned of his gay identity by accident or through his intentional disclosure. The hostile reactions of their families definitely influenced the identity development process for both individuals. While the explicit rejection of a gay relative can prove devastating, it can sometimes make the identity development process easier as the family no longer attempts to control and regulate an individual's efforts to pursue same-sex relationships. When family members who disapprove of their openly gay relative's same sex relationships remain connected with this individual, the individual can often feel inhibited and more restricted in his actions.

The only participants who has maintained strong familial relationships following his coming out experience, reported that his orchestrated disclosure of his sexual identity to family members did not result in any negative ramifications for his familial relationships; however, during his coming out conversation he clearly outlined to his family how his identity as a man

who is attracted to other men would not impede his religious commitments. This additional

guarantee may have softened the reactions and the concerns of his relatives who may or may not

have reacted differently if his sexual identity had interfered with his Muslim observance. The

participants who had positive coming out experiences with family members appeared to have

benefitted from the support that these relatives have offered. Extending this conversation beyond

relatives, peers, friends, and coworkers within and outside the Muslim community, coming out

had a dramatically positive impact on all of the participants as doing so increased their access to

social support and they had greater access to resources that normalized their same-sex desires

and validated their self-worth and value as a human being. For some, this love had a

transformational impact as they realized that they can live as openly gay men and still belong to

communities of people who appreciate them. The absence of well-adjusted and successful gay

men living in their hometown communities had impressed upon them that gay men were destined

to a life of solitude and misery in this life. Coming out exposed that scary fear for what it was, a

myth.

> *Peer relationships.* Peer support had a significant impact on the participants' identity

development processes. If participants perceived their friends, classmates, coworkers, and

cousins as homophobic or antigay they concealed their sexual identities and spent more time

struggling with their same-sex desires in isolation. During times when they could not disclose

their sexuality to anyone in their lives, the Internet served as a portal that connected them with

other gay men who had the ability to help normalize their same-sex desires. With age, the

participants had greater autonomy and more freedom to seek out affirming peer groups. When

interacting with supportive peer groups, the participants had the ability to more fully embrace

and examine their sexual identities. This ability to live openly enabled greater exploration with their religious identities as well.

While younger generations of high school students have shown a trend of identifying as members of the LGBTQ community earlier than previous generations, the participants in this study rarely discussed having gay friends prior to college. One participant had the privilege of having a gay best friend who disclosed his sexual orientation to him during their freshman year. This friendship did not absolve the individual of any conflict as he struggled to accept his gay identity, but it did prevent him from having to struggle with his identity in isolation.

Personal traits. The participants all had specific factors that unique contributed to their identity development processes. The most notable factors related to personal traits are discussed next.

Gender presentation. Much like religion, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, the way a person presents his or her gender (gender conforming versus gender nonconforming) is socially constructed and therefore depends on the culture in which a person lives (Seidman, 2003). Participants in this study reported varying degrees of gender presentations, with much of the sample acknowledging that they present themselves or act in a way that violated the gender roles that their home culture endorsed. Only one participant addressed his gender conformity and the importance of his masculinity to his identity.

The gender nonconforming individuals shared that they engaged in gender role violations such as chewing gum or lacking interest in sports, which were perceived by those around them as behaviors that women exhibit. For others, they had higher voices or spoke with great inflection and emphasis in their tone, and it was the manner in which they carried themselves physically that denoted their gender nonconformity. Despite contradictory evidence about the actual

correlation of gender nonconformity and alternative sexual identities (Bailey & Zucker, 1995),

gender nonconforming men are often perceived as gay. These stereotypes are well-engrained

within cultural narratives, and study results have shown that people are well-attuned to

identifying these mannerisms. Ambady, Hallahan, and Conner (1999) found that research

participants asked to examine video clips of a person talking (10 sec in length) could predict that

individual's sexual orientation with 70% accuracy.

Participants in the present study who described themselves as effeminate during

childhood were targeted by their peers and bullied. Parents were even aware of some of these

behaviors and would chastise the individual directly or indirectly by remaining distant and

withholding. One participant interpreted his father's anger and hostility toward him as a

response to this individual's gender nonconformity. Feeling rejected from peers and distant from

parents and other family members will have a strong impact on individuals and their

development. As the participants gained more awareness of the relationship between their

gender nonconformity and the interpersonal conflict they experienced, they made efforts to

conceal these interests, behaviors, and mannerisms in order to pass as heterosexual.

Unfortunately, some of the men had more difficulty with passing than others. If the outside

world consistently assumes that a person is gay and homosexuality is perceived as a sin in Islam

and repeatedly targeted as a result, it is likely that individuals may feel less comfortable in

religious settings. Consequently, they may express less hesitation with rejecting Islam and

embracing their gay identity.

The one participant who reflected on his gender-conforming presentation style

emphasized the importance that his masculinity meant to him. This individual recognized that

his reluctance to refer to other gay men using female pronouns impeded his ability to connect

with other gay men at times but it enabled him to remain connected to his family and ultimately to his culture. It also appears to have helped him remain confident in himself despite his sexual attraction and interest in men. His masculine identity was one source of power and privilege that he maintained. He stated, "It is something I strive to hold onto."

It is relevant to note that the overvaluation that gay men place on masculinity and the devaluation of femininity often relates to higher levels of internalized homophobia (Taywaditep, 2002). Another study participant shared how "they don't look at me like a gay Muslim man because I don't carry myself like that." This statement conveys an underlying belief that any other way of carrying himself is inferior. This argument is suggestive of internalized homophobia as the individual is monitoring his gender presentation (Taywaditep, 2002). For this sample it appears that gender nonconformity increases stress and interpersonal conflict, but ultimately the participants who described themselves as effeminate had more comfort with their sexual identities.

No religious identity. Based on a substantial body of research supporting the connection between organized religion and antigay attitudes, it seems logical to deduce that growing up without a religious identity would simplify the gay identity development process for most people. Individuals without a religious identity may fear familial rejection and mourn the loss of heterosexual privileges that make life easier. Their internal conflict and distress, however, would likely pale in comparison to those who firmly believe that their inherent sin will result in eternal damnation in the afterlife.

The only participant in this study who did not have a strong religious identity during his childhood reported a significant struggle with his gay identity. While he did not describe his emotional turmoil and distress in the same degree of intensity as those from extremely religious

families, living in the Middle East as a young man with same-sex desire was not easy for this

individual. One contributing factor to Rafiq's early discomfort with his sexuality may have been

his family's antigay attitudes, which they expressed in his presence. His parents' minimal

religious identity alludes to the homophobic attitudes and beliefs that culture can inculcate

independent of religion. The absence of religion may have minimized some of the negative

feelings that Rafiq had about homosexuality, but it still impacted him in other facets of his life.

Rafiq addressed how his absence of faith causes periodic concerns about his perception that he

does not have the capacity to embrace a religion, which he has attempted to develop. Other gay

men from Muslim cultures who did not grow up with a salient religious identity may share

similar experiences and perspectives as Rafiq or they may not have had as much difficulty with

the coming out process.

Question 4

Question 4 was: How do gay Muslim men cope with the stressors resulting from their

conflicting identities and the consequences of the identity/ies they embrace? How do they

resolve the conflict that results from their sexual and religious identities?

As one the primary foci of this study, the participants spent a significant portion of their

interviews discussing identity conflict and the impact it had on their lives. This section consists

of two parts, Part I and Part II. The first part includes an examination of the ways in which the

participants coped with everyday stressors and the intense emotions and disturbing thoughts that

they experienced while handling their sexual identity and the conflict that developed related to

their religious identity. The second part is an analysis of the various ways in which the

participants resolved their identity conflict, or have attempted to resolve this conflict for the time

being, and the techniques and concepts that influenced these resolutions

Part I. Participants identified a range of struggles and difficulties related to their conflicting identities. Identity conflict exacerbated interpersonal problems, inflamed peer and familial relationships, and limited their individual potential. The participants discussed a wide range of coping techniques and activities they used to manage their internal struggles and distress. These struggles included the conflict between their religious and sexual identities, familial relationships, especially those involving rejection and castigation, and their task of navigating the world as outsiders. The coping techniques they described fell into three categories: cognitive, action-based, and social support.

Cognitive. Of the three categories, participants mostly used cognitive techniques. Some of the common cognitive techniques included denial, distraction, positive thinking, avoidance, critical thinking, and reflection. The techniques named and utilized by the participants appeared to correlate with their level of gay identity development. On some occasions they did not reflect what would be expected.

Denial. When participants initially gained awareness of their attraction to men, the majority felt threatened and recognized the potential danger of these feelings. Many of these individuals entered a state of denial, as did their families when they disclosed their sexual identities or were outed by others.

Within the psychodynamic hermeneutics, defense mechanisms exist within a hierarchy. Denial is a primary or first-level defense. Participants who described using denial as a means of coping with their emerging sexual identity conveyed the threat their sexual orientation imposed and how their fear enveloped them. The emotional and mental energy required to utilize higher-level defenses escaped the participants. Denial requires a significant amount of psychic energy.

Relentless sexual desires, which often increase when denied an outlet or release, are very

difficult to suppress for extended periods of time (Ryan & Jethá, 2012).

Some participants reported consciously denying their sexual identity while others had no

awareness that they were attracted to other men and rationalized their interest in men as a desire

to be like them. Several participants encountered their sexual desires as late adolescents or

young adults. For many of these individuals, this later awareness of their sexuality appears to

have enabled their survival considering the homophobic attitudes of their family, communities,

and countries. As these attractions strengthened and other events occurred that no longer

enabled denial to function as a means of reducing stress, participants would shift toward

avoidance and distraction as ways to cope with their stress.

Distraction/avoidance. After denial ceased to provide psychological protection for

participants, distraction and avoidance functioned as efficient means of keeping their sexual

identity or a variety of uncomfortable topics at bay. Some participants used college courses as a

form of distraction. Simultaneously pursuing three majors allowed one participant to cope with

the conflict between his sexual and religious identities as well as the separation from his family

who disapproved of his sexual orientation.

Distraction provides temporary relief and is by no means a long-term solution. Its power

rests in the ability to habituate people to uncomfortable realities or stimuli. Instead of

submerging themselves in the midst of the conflict, distraction enables people to expose

themselves to the conflict for a brief period of time. As people increase their exposure, they

develop a comfort level that continues to grow by greater length of exposure. As such, people

can only avoid or distract themselves from their sexual desires for so long. As their sexual

orientation became less frightening, a period of time that varies by individual, avoidance and

distraction techniques eventually yielded to cognitive techniques that embraced one's position and involved critical thinking, positive thinking, and other means of intentionally reframing worldviews to accommodate contrasting identities within a single individual.

Critical thinking and positive thinking. Critical thinking and positive thinking cognitive techniques refer to intentional efforts to try and reexamine a situation, belief, or condition. This reexamination requires finding a strength or a positive element in what was once a frightening and, for some, debilitating thought. This is an empowering process that helps to illuminate how far people have progressed from their initial denial and avoidance of noxious beliefs. This technique requires individuals to accept their sexual identity in order to assert why they should no longer live in fear and misery.

Few participants utilized these techniques in a linear fashion as they began to cope with their developing sexual identity. Several factors account for the variations that the participants described as they talked about how they coped. One important factor involves the age at which someone names their same-sex desires, and related to age is the length of period that they struggle with rejecting their sexual identity and hoping that they can change. Someone who recognizes his sexual identity at the age of 12 years in the midst of middle school may struggle for a longer period of time than a 35-year-old man who realizes that he is attracted to men after a series of mediocre relationships with women. Other factors include degree of support and sense of isolation. As a general rule, people utilize these techniques in a linear fashion as they cycle through the various sexual identity development model stages. In conjunction with cognitive techniques, participants also engaged in actions and activities to help allay their distress.

Activities/action. Much like the cognitive coping techniques, participants' activities and action-based coping methods reflected their degree of acceptance of their sexuality. Participants

reported that they found comfort through pursuing mental health services, activism, accessing media, coping via the body, self-care, and increasing their religiosity.

Religiosity. Within the three Abrahamic religious traditions, youth struggling with same-sex attractions frequently turn toward religion in an effort to cope with their emerging sexual identities (Burton, 2012). This makes sense given that these religions clearly outline problems and encourage individuals to turn toward religion to resolve their problems and find relief. Unfortunately, sexual minorities turn to a community that more likely than not judges them and tells them that they need to change before they can fully participate and reap the benefits of religion. Several participants in the present study followed a similar trajectory. In an effort to absolve them of their same-sex desires and all of the problems and intense emotions that they created, some participants reported actively increasing their religious devotion and observance. This technique initially provides relief; however, the relief is temporary. Despite the effort they invest, as time passes their sexual desire remains, leading to increased distress and higher levels of desperation and despair that can result in anger and produce a host of psychological problems.

This phenomenon parallels conversion therapy and other programs like the now defunct Exodus International and similar programs that encourage members with same-sex desires to "pray the gay away." While proponents of religious-based conversion therapy assert that sexual orientation is mutable and those interested in altering their sexual desires benefit from such programs (Throckmorton, 2002), other researchers and the larger field of psychology have concluded that efforts to change one's sexual orientation typically result in emotional despair and hardship (American Psychological Association, 2011; Haldeman, 2002). Two states and the District of Columbia have outlawed therapeutic efforts to alter one's sexual orientation and

gender identity and gay rights advocates are proposing a Federal ban on conversion therapy because these therapies do not work (Hartmann, 2015).

Turning to religion as a means of coping with distress is not inherently problematic as religion can also reaffirm identity and provide a source of strength that enables individuals to accept their sexuality (Longo, Walls, & Wisneski, 2013). Different religions may provide more support than others. LGBTQ-identified followers in Christian and Jewish faiths have created branches that embrace sexual diversity and provide gay Christians and Jews with several alternatives to the more homonegative denominations and sects that denounce homosexuality and persecute sexual minorities. At the present time, it does not appear that any of these types of services exist in Islam, and, if there were any, they would be far less accessible and likely carry a greater threat to participants just as secular organizations that support gay Muslims often receive threats from religious figures and communities (Yip, 2005). One participant reported that he utilizes Islam and his identity as a Muslim as a means of strength and support and remains actively engaged in the mosque.

For some men, enhanced religiosity can result in anger and frustration with God, or greater peace and acceptance. Which outcome materializes depends on the individual's interpretation of why their same-sex desires remain, despite their increased religiosity. The individual gets frustrated and angry with God for not absolving him of his same-sex desires, despite an increase in his religious commitment is more likely to reject religion and endorse a belief that God has abandoned him, or that there is no God. Conversely, the individual who interprets the continuation of his same-sex desires as God's wishes, will likely perceive God as more loving and embrace religion. Some may even expand upon this approach by celebrating and taking pride in his or her sexual diversity.

Mental health services. While mental health services are not equally accessible to everyone and several barriers prevent Muslims living in the United States from seeking services, participants who attended individual or group counseling had an overwhelmingly positive experience. The gay Muslim support groups appear to have the most impact as they help to normalize homosexuality as a part of life. Considering the collectivist framework of Muslim societies and culture, group therapy provides an opportunity for Muslim individuals questioning their sexual orientation to explore a sensitive topic with others in similar situations. Ahmed's description of how the support group he attended played a central role in his ability to embrace his queer identity was striking.

Underutilization of mental health services among specific ethnic groups and other marginalized communities within the United States has helped reify the myth that members of communities outside the mainstream do not have any interest in counseling and therapy. Researchers examining this issue have recognized countless barriers that people outside the mainstream commonly encounter and often prevent them from seeking and/or receiving services that could dramatically impact their day-to-day functioning. (For more information see Gary, 2005). Islamic texts encourage practicing Muslims to seek help from God through prayer and the reading of specific passages (Husain, 1998). For individuals raised in Muslim communities and families but who no longer identify with the religion, the strong influence and cultural components can serve as barriers to treatment. Numerous participants, who had never seen a therapist, reported that they have considered seeking treatment as a way to cope with their stress. Interestingly, the rate of LGBTQ-identified individuals in the United States who seek mental health services far exceeds the rate within the mainstream community (Grella, Greenwell, Mays, & Cochran, 2009). Based on the sample in the present study, it appears that those who have

sought counseling and consider it a positive experience are better integrated within the gay

community. It is unclear whether therapy or individuals' willingness to seek therapy accounts

for their affiliation with the gay community and, if it is a combination of both factors, which

factor has the greater influence. One participant disclosed that he volunteers as a suicide crisis

hotline as a means of giving back.

Activism. Activism is another action-based method that appears to help some gay

Muslims cope with their identities. The notion of giving back and helping others work through a

challenge that some men have endured and survived had a lot of meaning for numerous

participants. Depending on where they live, gay Muslim men may not have access to volunteer

programs that support LGBTQ youth, but providing assistance for others in need was the most

important element of activism. The notion of serving others has strong roots in Islam and despite

their ambivalence or flat-out rejection of Islam and religion, the participants still conveyed their

cultural backgrounds in their efforts to give back.

Media. Media is a term that incorporates access to the Internet, television, Western-based

information, books, magazines, and radio programs. Participants all accessed and utilized media

to help understand the same-sex desires that prevented them from connecting with many of their

peers and family members. The media also enabled participants to conduct research and

experience homosexuality through written and visual erotic/pornographic material. Aside from

Mehdi, all of the participants accessed media to cope. Some of the notable examples include

Gloria Andalusia's book *Borderlands,* which resonated with one participant as it helped expand

his understanding of his identities and how they intersect. In the middle of his interview, Fuad

shared this from the book: "I did not abandon my people, my people abandoned me." This line

spoke to him and likely reflects the distance and separation from his community that results from his gay identity.

The erotic material that participants accessed through the Internet also served several purposes. Viewing nude images helped several participants recognize their gay identities. They discussed the striking physical and emotional differences that they experienced when watching pornography intended for heterosexual and homosexual audiences. Zakari shared how he initially watched cross-gender pornography and then discovered gay porn, which had a noticeably stronger impact. This noticeable difference helped him identify the same-sex desires that resulted in his identity as a MSM. While Sharia and Islam jurists denounce pornography and masturbation, several sources have acknowledged that masturbation is permitted when it helps prevent someone from committing a sin of higher magnitude (But & Muhametov, 2013; Ismail, 2011).

Self-care. Self-care refers to the intentional effort individuals make to maintain their well-being. For study participants, self-care often surfaced when personal needs were prioritized above wants and desires in order to make life more manageable. Instead of pursuing a relationship, one participant acknowledged that focusing on healing himself and establishing a career would provide a greater benefit. Self-care is an essential skill for attaining mental health. Within collectivist societies self-care can prove challenging as it requires individuals to prioritize themselves over the group and requires the ability to establish and maintain boundaries.

Several participants reflected on how they recognized the need to resolve personal issues prior to getting involved in relationships and other activities that could increase their stress levels. One of the most notable examples of self-care came from Adam, who disclosed that he was focusing on himself and his career instead of pursuing a relationship.

Coping via the body. When confronted with internal struggles and insecurities, people attempt to resolve the conflict in several ways, all of which share the goal of ending the suffering. Participants address two important topics that are particularly problematic within the gay community: body image and exercise and substance abuse. Unfortunately, body image issues and substance use and abuse have permeated the gay community, and members of this marginalized community often get fixated on their appearance and rely on alcohol and recreational drugs to cope with challenges.

Social scientists attribute the pervasiveness of substance use and abuse among gay men to myriad historical and sociocultural factors (Hughes & Eliason, 2002). While medical and mental health professionals discourage alcohol consumption as a recommended coping mechanism, alcohol use has far more meaning than a maladaptive effort to minimize stress for individuals raised in Muslim cultures. Renouncing his Islamic identity prior to arriving in the United States, Adam no longer had a religious responsibility to adhere to the Islamic proscription against alcohol. He managed to cope with the angst and strife that emerged while navigating his religious and sexual identities prior to living in the United States. His decision to partake in his host culture's coping technique reflects his willingness to explore new cultural elements. His imbibing could also serve a reflection of his desire to distance himself from the oppressive culture he left behind. Aside from this one participant, reports of alcohol and substance use rarely surfaced in the interviews.

Hakim coped with his psychological discomfort by transforming his negative self-image as a thin male by working out and increasing muscle mass. As his appearance became more congruent with his peers, his confidence increased. Despite these efforts preceding his self-identification as gay, Hakim's body image is intrinsically connected to his sexual identity. Body

image plays a significant role in the psyche of gay men and the hierarchical structure of the gay community (Duncan, 2010). Hakim's ability to transform his self-perception by changing his physical image reflects much of the pressure that gay men face to meet the "gay ideal" that gets projected throughout the community regardless of the corporeal attainability of this ideal.

Substance use and body image were not asked about nor rarely discussed throughout the interviews, but the impact of these issues on the gay community is substantial (Hughes & Eliason, 2002; Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005). Numerous participants commented on their skin color and body types as barriers to connecting with the larger gay community in the United States, which mirrors mainstream society with regard to racism (Teunis, 2007) and a slew of other prejudices and discriminatory attitudes toward marginalized groups.

The gay participants in this study primarily utilized the cognitive- and action-based techniques first when coping with their sexual identities. As they developed more comfort with their sexual identities, they started reaching out for support from other people, which required disclosing these identities.

Social support. In comparison with the prior categories, social support contained the fewest techniques; however, all participants mentioned the importance of social support as a means to help them cope. The two dominant techniques in this category include engaging others socially and monitoring interpersonal interactions. Much of the existing research on the impact of social support among LGBTQ individuals living in the United States has been conducted with samples of White middle-class participants (Gallor & Fassinger, 2010). It is believed that the present study's findings contribute to the limited yet growing body of literature focusing on ethnic minorities.

Engaging others socially. Participants identified family members, friends—both

heterosexual and gay-identified—and coworkers as their primary sources of support. Friends

were the most frequently source of support, followed by coworkers. These findings parallel

those of other researchers (Gallor & Fassinger, 2010; Kurdek, 1988). They contrast, however,

with regard to family members. Gallor and Fassinger (2010) and Kurdek (1998) found that

mothers were the family members most frequently reported as sources of support within gay

individuals' families. The most widely identified family member for support for participants in

the present study was their cousins. Participants who disclosed their sexual identity to family

members primarily told cousins and siblings, and a few had shared their identities with an aunt.

Middle Eastern and Arab men, who comprised the bulk of the sample for the current study, had

minimal representation in the aforementioned studies, suggesting that for this ethnic group

mothers were not sources of support, as participants had not disclosed their sexual identity to

them, and those who did know did not offer support.

Participants reported that the support they receive was strongest from those who knew of

their sexual identity. This finding is consistent with Gallor and Fassinger (2010), who found that

ethnic minorities endorsed higher levels of overall satisfaction with their social support when

they were out to their families and communities. Significant differences existed between the

present study's sample and the sample Gallor and Fassinger used. The Gallor and Fassinger

sample reported positive ethnic attitudes and a strong connection with their community as well as

advanced levels of ethnic and sexual identity development, exploration, and resolution, which do

not accurately characterize the current study's sample. People who do not feel safe within their

ethnic and religious community, and may not have advanced as far on their sexual identity

development, would likely have a different reaction to their support. Individuals with limited

support may feel greater fulfillment with one or two close relationships.

Adam disclosed that his closest and most supportive friends were a few LGBTQ-

identified individuals from the Middle East who had renounced their Islamic identities. Adam

emphasized that he had no interest in interacting or spending time with practicing Muslims who

identify as LGBTQ. Fingerhut, Peplau, and Gable (2010) described how members of the

LGBTQ community are uniquely positioned to provide support to other LGBTQ-identified

members struggling to cope with sexual minority-related stressors as they can best relate to the

experiences. Applying this principle to subcultures and minority groups within the LGBTQ

community, it is highly likely that participants find comfort from other Muslim members of the

LGBTQ community.

Support from people who knew about the participants' sexual identity and accepted it as

well from as other members of the LGBTQ community had the strongest impact for participants.

Omar and Zakari are two striking examples of participants who benefited from the social support

they received from others. Omar's best friend, who came out to him in the beginning of high

school, helped Omar have positive interactions with another gay-identified individual at a young

age. Other participants who did not have access to gay peers/friends in their areas repeatedly

stated that a gay friend would have provided substantial relief as they felt they were the only

individuals attracted to men in their communities. Having the opportunity to share their

experiences and insights with others would have mitigated the stress they experienced. The

participants who lacked access to other gay people in their communities used the Internet to

establish friendships and connections with other members of the LGBTQ community. As an

anonymous platform, the Internet is a unique medium for communication, and, without it,

contacting individuals from other states and countries would not have been feasible. During

their interviews, Hakim and Adam addressed how interacting with other gay men via the Internet

played an integral role in facilitating their sexual identity development and, more specifically,

accepting their gay identity. Adam's conversation with a Dutch friend had significant

implications. Much of their correspondence consisted of the Dutch man asking questions about

Islam and the theological and cultural underpinnings of the Muslim disdain for homosexuality.

As Adam answered these questions over time, he started to recognize the incredulity of his

responses. The nonconfrontational nature of their interactions coaxed Adam into realizing that

he did not support his culture's rationale for denouncing homosexuality and persecuting MSM.

Results from research examining cultural differences and interaction patterns suggest that

culture may influence how people interact with others and, ultimately, whether they use social

support to manage their stress (Taylor et al., 2004). Asians and Asian Americans are less likely

than European Americans to express their need for help by asking for assistance or even

reporting that they ask for assistance (Oliver, Reed, Katz, & Haugh, 1999). Taylor et al. (2004)

attributed this difference in minimizing conflict to efforts to promote group harmony and other

principles of collectivism. Comparisons are often drawn between Middle Eastern cultural

practices and other collectivist cultures like Latino and Asian communities. This is one reason

that many participants, especially those with families still residing in their home countries, had

not disclosed their sexual identities. Many participants described how they made personal

sacrifices to prevent family members from having to enduring the adverse effects of their sexual

identities.

As the only participant who came out intentionally out to his family, and is currently

accepted by his family, Mehdi receives the majority of his social support from family members.

This finding contrasts with the other participants who identify as Asian and Middle Eastern.

Ostrow et al. (1991) posited that African American men may utilize family support and resources

more readily than White men. This finding may also apply to the Asian and Middle Eastern

participants who did not rely on their family for social support. Other factors that confound this

assumption include the multiple generations of Mehdi's family that have resided in the United

States as well as the sociocultural context of racial oppression and discrimination that they

experienced. This history could have mitigated the antigay attitudes in Mehdi's family that

Mehdi described having exposure to as a young child. Mehdi also appears to withhold his sexual

identity from the religious community, which is a common practice among Christian African

Americans as well as Muslim-identified MSM (Duran, 1993).

>   ***Monitoring interpersonal interactions***. In contrast to the other coping styles that the

participants described, monitoring interpersonal interactions reflects a more passive means of

coping with their identities. This passive technique mitigates stressful interactions and conflicts

by limiting, if not preventing, harmful exchanges and conversations that might activate the

participants' vulnerabilities and fears. The simplest example involves concealing one's gay

identity or acting in a way that does not draw negative or unwanted attention.

>   Taywaditep (2002) described the process of masculinity consciousness in his seminal

work on antieffeminacy attitudes toward other gay men within the gay community. Masculinity

consciousness refers to the awareness and actions that gay men employ to ensure that they are

conveying a masculine or gender-conforming presentation style to deflect critical judgments and

homophobic comments by those who may make assumptions about how people express

themselves. By monitoring their actions and not engaging in actions or consequences that have

foreseeable consequences, which they likely learned from previous interactions, the participants

in this study shielded themselves from negative responses before they could incur them from others.

When it came to coping with their sexuality, many of the participants described repressing their desires as one of the few effective means of coping with their sexual identity. They were able to identify far more techniques that they utilized to cope with stressors related to religion. The discrepancy in number of techniques between these two stressors indicates that the participants perceived religion as an easier identity to manage. This may stem from the notion that religious affiliation revolves around beliefs and that people have greater agency with changing or altering their beliefs than they do with changing their sexual impulses and desires.

Part II. Revisiting the title of this study, Rejecting, Compartmentalizing, and Integrating Mutually Exclusive Identities, the focus of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the process of how gay-identified men with a Muslim upbringing negotiated their sexual and religious identities. Regardless of whether they perceived these identities as compatible or mutually exclusive, all of the participants have been affected by their gay and Muslim identities. The extent of the impact varied, with some participants incurring far more distress and angst from this conflict than others.

The four research questions were developed to investigate the identity development process and the ways in which participants coped with the resulting stress. The answers to these questions will hopefully enhance the competency of clinicians working with these individuals as well as other clients who have multiple identities that conflict with each other. Islam is not the only religion that castigates homosexuality. Some contemporary sects within Christianity and Judaism may express greater tolerance toward sexual minorities (i.e., love the sinner, hate the sin) or utilize a "don't ask, don't tell policy" much as some contemporary Islamic groups do, but

Judaism and Christianity have an extensive history of persecuting men and women with same-sex desires (AbuKhalil, 1993; Pitt, 2009). It is easy to portray all religious groups as homogenous in their attitudes towards sexual minorities, but Christians, Jews, and Muslims consist of many heterogeneous sects and attitudes toward sexual diversity vary within these groups.

Identity conflict sources. From a young age, all of the participants learned that same-sex desires did not have place in their lives and communities. This awareness resulted from both the absence of sexual minorities in their communities, regardless of country of origin, as well as explicit messages from religious figures denouncing homosexuality. The avoidance of sexuality within their families and prejudicial comments that parents and relatives made appear to have reinforced these negative evaluations.

Much as they did with religion, the participants adopted and internalized these beliefs without any opportunities to question or analyze the rationale behind the vitriolic statements that their caretakers directed toward LGBTQ-identified individuals. Well-versed in the antigay rhetoric promulgated by their religious and cultural communities, the participants understood the danger and threat that sexual desires and fantasies of men posed to them. As the participants entered puberty and began experiencing these desires more frequently, the negative comments and attitudes took on new meaning as they were suddenly the targets. Despite the different sexual development stages that the participants occupied, some did not recognize their same-sex attractions until early adulthood, but they all knew the danger of same-sex desires prior to their emergence.

These messages unarguably provided a foundation for the dominant belief that a Muslim man cannot be gay and a gay man cannot be Muslim. Regardless of whether the participants

agreed with or rejected this statement, the widespread endorsement of this belief in the Muslim community inevitably affected them. All nine participants were exposed to these negative messages. Starting from the premise that negative attitudes and messages toward same-sex relationships and sexual acts are not inherent in the human psyche but learned through the influence of others, the participants developed messages and feelings about their same-sex attractions from those around them. Had these participants lived in an era with less religious fundamentalism within Islam, perhaps 200 years ago when Arab-Muslim culture had fewer concerns with a sodomist or luti (someone who has sex with a member of their same sex/gender, Schild, 1992) and viewed homosexuality with greater indifference (Boswell, 2005), they would likely have heard fewer messages deriding homosexuals. With even more limited exposure to the West, the participants would have likely married women and started families while continuing to engage in sexual interactions with other men, likely younger men.

Identity conflict resolution options. Prior researchers on identity conflict and the resolution of religious and sexual identity conflict have outlined three possible options for identity conflict resolution (Baumeister et al., 1985; Bereket & Adam, 2008; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). The first option involves rejecting one of the conflicted identities in favor of the other. None of the participants rejected their sexual identity as they all identified as having stronger attractions toward men than women. While several participants may not actively engage in sexual relations with other men, they still acknowledge their attraction to men and their desire to form a meaningful emotional connection with a male partner.

Participants in the present study rejected their religious identities in order to more fully embrace their sexual identity. The second option, compartmentalization, involves a decision to maintain both identities but to refrain from expressing both identities simultaneously in specific

contexts and environments. For instance, a gay Muslim man who has compartmentalized his

sexual and religious identities will likely conceal his gay identity while attending mosque or

interacting with his relatives who have no knowledge of his sexual orientation. The third option,

identity integration, refers to the presence of religious and sexual identities sharing the same

identity space without any containers or boundaries that require disclosure of one identity verses

the other.

  Problems with the three categories. My primary goal of trying to understand how the

participants resolved their identity conflict proved much more challenging than initially

anticipated. Several factors contributed to this complex issue. The first factor involves the

dynamic nature of the participants cycling through the three previously identified options.

Identity development is an ongoing process.

  Personal identities can change as an individual interacts with his or her environment and

a person often alters their existing identity/ies or develops a new identity following significant

life changes and even the expansion of personal insight and growth (Baumeister, et al., 1985;

Breakwell, 1986; Hall, 1989). The second obstacle involves the potential/inherent problems that

arise when people attempt to categorize or label others based on observations and information

they have collected. The potential for inaccurately categorizing another person is high,

especially when a person perceives him or herself differently than what his or her actions convey

to others. The third factor pertains to the difficulty with defining identity integration. Many gay

identity development models, which are predominantly based upon Eurocentric beliefs and

values, consider gay identity integration to have been achieved when a person has fully disclosed

his or her sexual identity. As such, any efforts to conceal one's sexual identity, or pass, could

negate one's status as fully integrated. Applying this same approach to gay Muslim identities, a

fully integrated individual would need to engage in full disclosure of both his gay and Muslim

identities. If this establishes a precedent for identity integration, then how would someone who

embraces both his gay and Muslim identities in every domain of his life, except he has not

disclosed his sexual identity to his family, be categorized? Does this individual lack sufficient

integration of his gay identity and therefore belong in the compartmentalization category? This

scenario indicates a level of integration and compartmentalization that may reflect a degree of

shame or a fear of rejection that a person who is out to everyone may or may not experience.

To complicate matters, gay members of many cultural and ethnic communities outside

the mainstream U.S. population may face a range of problems if they disclose their homosexual

identity. This type of disclosure does not always result in an improvement in quality of life and

more meaningful familial relationships. The narratives of several gay men living in the Middle

East and Western countries include devastating experiences in which their families rejected them

or even attempted to have them murdered (Siraj, 2006; Whitaker, 2011). Whitaker (2011)

reported that some families living in Middle Eastern countries succeeded in killing their gay

relatives after they disclosed their gay identity. In less extreme circumstances, coming out may

not destroy relationships but it may place a wedge between them and their family members who

do not fully understand the gay issue. Whitaker (2011) noted that familial ignorance of

homosexuality creates significant problems for individuals after they come out. Within strong

collectivist societies, withholding one's sexual identity from his or her family is not necessarily

the most satisfying option but it can be the most practical as it prevents that person's needs and

identity from harming the lives of other relatives who may lose opportunities for marriage or

career advancement based on a sibling or cousin's identity. Countless studies and narratives

dedicated to the benefits of coming out have documented that regardless of culture, ethnicity, and

many other dynamics, coming out remains the most healthy option for mental health and integration of gay identity. Sexual identity may not be the priority for everyone, and the impact that disclosing one's sexual identity could have on an individual or the family and friends, especially within a collectivist culture, may outweigh the benefits of coming out.

The methodological problems that emerged within this study suggest that the three options for resolving identity conflict do not account for the unique experiences of the study participants. The three established options offer a helpful structure, but, like the traditional sexual identity development models that have received criticism for their linear approach, these options do not provide the flexibility to account for the nuanced identity factors that ultimately have important implications for the resolution of identity conflict. To account for these variances, I have modified these options by creating additional subcomponents for them as well as establishing a new option. These alterations mirror the internal and external scales within the inclusive model of sexual minority identity formation (Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger). This more-inclusive model mitigates the Eurocentric bias that coming out is the primary means of achieving a health gay identity by recognizing that this may not be the best option for every sexual minority and by including a community subscale and a personal subscale. The creation of two subscales enables individuals to acknowledge their private comfort with their sexual orientation and their disclosure/comfort with being out in their community, which may contrast each other. This model does not discourage sexual minorities from disclosing their sexual orientations and identities; instead, it provides options for individuals who feel comfortable with their identities to have recognition regardless of the environment and culture in which they reside.

The modification expands on the three options by including a personal and community subcomponent for the rejection and integration option. Within this modification, someone who feels comfortable with both of his religious and sexual identities on an internal level but has not disclosed his gay identity to his parents and family would be personally integrated and his gay identity would be compartmentalized with regard to the community, specifically his family. The new subcomponent recognizes the nuances of integration and rejection in a way that the three-option model does not. When it comes to identity-related psychological well-being, personal and community integration remains the gold standard; however, for marginalized groups within the gay community complete integration may not be feasible as the loss of their family may outweigh the benefits of complete integration. Furthermore, I added a new option, diffuse, which reflects the individual who does not neatly fit within one of the three options but overlaps two or more. Starting with the initial three options, I expanded two of them, Rejection and Integration, to include community and personal subcomponents. Within this expanded framework, it is now possible for an individual to personally reject his or her religious identity or sexual identity but still outwardly identify or express these identities to the community. Similarly, an individual may personally feel comfortable identifying as Muslim and gay, but due to his or her decision to conceal the gay identity, or Muslim identity, full integration has not been achieved.

Where do participants fit within the revised model? It is important to note that I did not ask participants to categorize themselves and none of them explicitly stated how they would categorize themselves. I categorized the participants based on their religious identity/affiliation, degree of acceptance of their identity, their disclosure of their identity to others, and other relevant information that varied by individual.

Prefacing the outliers. In order to resolve identity conflict, a clear and present conflict must exist. While all nine participants had some degree of identity conflict between their religious and sexual identities, three participants described their situations in a unique manner that varied significantly from the other six. These three outliers complicate the categorization process; however, two of the three outliers were still categorized

No religious identity. By familial and cultural lineage, Rafiq identified as a Muslim. With regard to religious beliefs, he never identified as a practicing Muslim. According to Rafiq, "Most of my inner struggles with my identity came from myself . . . rather than from religion." As such, Rafiq is precluded from being categorized as there is no religious identity to reject or integrate. Bereket and Adam (2008) had three participants report that same dynamic. While they identified as Muslim, they were raised in environments in which religion had minimal emphasis and impact in their lives. Religion, (Islam, Christianity, Judaism, etc.) is an integral component of societal life and culture in the Middle East and Arab countries and individuals who identify as atheist or agnostic warrant little respect in Arab cultures (Nydell, 2012). For this reason, people may identify with a religion or consider themselves Muslim, even if they do not actively practice.

No identity conflict reported. Zakari and Mehdi both described a lack of identity conflict in their interviews. Zakari stated, "[Islam] has not gotten in the way of my sexual identity or sexual impression." While these perceptions resonate for both individuals, their actions and concerns contradict their assertions that they did not have any identity conflict. They both have strengths that enable them to live comfortably and have much to offer, but it is impossible to avoid social pressures and messages. They may not cognitively recognize the conflict that they experience for several reasons. One potential reason may involve the heightened oppression they

endure in other identities or domains of their life. Ethnicity is a significant identity that may overshadow their sexual identity and, depending on the geographical region where a person lives, sexual minorities may have a strong presence but people of color face more oppression. This is often the criticism of gay culture as the gay community exults White culture and appearance over people of color, with the exception of specific racial groups getting fetishized, which is a different form of White power and privilege. Another possibility is that these individuals experienced higher levels of identity conflict at a younger age and they have already resolved the conflict. Lastly, they may have never experienced identity conflict.

Category 1: Rejection. Considering how seven of the participants believe that it is possible for a man to identify as both gay and Muslim, I expected that the number of participants who rejected their religion would fall within the minority of the sample. To my surprise, the majority of the participants, six of nine, rejected their Islamic identity.   Even though a response to a general statement does not necessarily reflect a person's action, the ratio of participants who consider something possible versus them actually achieving this status is quite notable.

The participants who rejected their religious identity comprised three categories: those who vehemently rejected their religious identity, those who simply chose their sexual identity over their religious identity, perhaps due to their inability to resolve the conflict or as a result of barriers to faith, (loss of faith, tattoo that prevents someone from entering a mosque), and the participant who subsumed Islam into his wider religious beliefs.

Vehement rejecters. Not surprisingly, the two vehement rejecters were also the two participants who strongly denied the plausibility of a man who identifies as gay and Muslim simultaneously. The vehement rejecters also shared a strong aversion toward traditional/conservative practicing Muslims, especially proponents of Sharia law. It appeared

that the pain and suffering that they endured firsthand in the presence of these religious Muslims

created a lingering, almost traumatic response. These extent of their rejection even pertained to a

discomfort about attending gay Muslim support groups as they did not want to spend time

around any Muslim religious teachings regardless of whether they were gay affirming or not.

Once the religious elements were separated from the cultural/ethnic heritage, their attitudes and

perspectives changed. One of the two participants in this category acknowledged the

compassion that he feels for Middle Eastern people who endure racial profiling and

discrimination, based on the stereotypes of Middle Eastern or "brown" people in the United

States following 9/11. The emotional distinction between religion and culture reflects the

connection that participants still possess even if they have denounced religion.

  Softer rejecters. The two participants who comprise the second category of rejecters

shared a level of discomfort and disdain for religion in general that did not register as extreme

vehemence toward Islam. They had their own feelings and attitudes about Islam, but they had a

noticeably softer quality. These participants still felt comfortable interacting with gay Muslim

men even though they personally no longer identified as religious. Like the other two

participants who rejected their religion, these individuals came to the realization that organized

religion was problematic and they could no longer believe in the stories that sustain religious

faith and belief. The notion that religion was a means of violence arose with all four individuals

that comprised these two subgroups. Religious had a destructive capacity and was viewed as a

source of more harm than good. Two of these four participants had nonexistent or highly

strained relationships with their families following their awareness of their gay identities. It is

interesting to note that Fuad rejected religion as an adolescent. In an action he described as

impulsive, Fuad had a Quranic verse tattooed on him, which immediately prevented him from

entering a mosque. As he talked about religion, Fuad seemed conflicted about rejecting his religion but acknowledged that his tattoo sealed his religious fate.

Rejection through inclusion. The fifth participant included within this category is different from the other four, who explicitly stated that they have rejected Islam and religion as a whole. Instead of rejecting Islam, he thinks about all of the available religions that humans practice and he rejects the notion of having to identify with just one of them. This participant described how his religious beliefs consist of an aggregate of beliefs from many of the world religions, including Islam. Even though he embraces Islam, I categorized this participant as rejecting Islam because of his shift in religious beliefs that reflects religious universalism, pluralism, or relativism. This participant is not identifying as Muslim and accepting other religions as equals to Islam; he is drawing elements from the various religions to create his own personal faith.

Category 2: Compartmentalization. At the time of their interviews, none of the participants utilized compartmentalization as a primary conflict resolution option. This finding is consistent with research examining gay Muslim men in Britain who are less likely to utilize compartmentalization because of the central role that Islam plays in the life of Muslims (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010). As a result of the psychological difficulties involved with immersing and separating themselves from Islam, which serves as a "meaning system" for many Muslims (Silberman, 2005), few perceive compartmentalization as a desirable or sustainable option for resolving their identity conflict (Baumeister, 1986; Harter & Monsour, 1992).

All of the participants concealed their identities and compartmentalized their religious and sexual identities at some point in their lives. Compartmentalization of their sexual and

religious identities occurred more frequently when the participants were beginning to accept their

sexual identity.

Some participants maintained a simultaneous identification as gay and Muslim for a period of

years when they dated men and attended mosque, fasted, and prayed. During this time they

remained concerned about the potential consequences of their sexual actions.

  Category 3: Integration. Omar, Yousef, and Mehdi were the only individuals who still

identify as Muslim. Two of these participants have disclosed their sexual identity to their

community and friends but not their family. The inverse is true for third participant who has

informed his family of his sexual identity but not his community. Working with the three

options for identity conflict resolution, I would have categorized these individuals as integrated

as they embrace both their sexual and religious identities. All of them still remain closeted to

significant individuals in their live, however, and do not seem fully integrated in their lives as

they still struggle with fear and angst around their sexual identities and there are apparent

differences in degree of commitment to their sexual identity and Muslim identity. For instance,

Omar pursues his life as a gay man and maintains his religious identity while Mehdi embraces

his role as a leader in his Muslim community while acknowledging his attraction to other men.

Yousef exists somewhere in between. As one of the younger participants, he appears to still be

engaging the process and is interested in a relationship.

  Omar and Yousef have similar views about their Muslim identities and what religious

observance entailed for them. They both refereed to their tendency to find a desirable medium

between their religious and sexual identities. Omar referred to himself as a part-time Muslim

and Yousef identified as a progressive Muslim who has had to make "compromises" about

various values and beliefs. Mehdi, who at the time of the study had a male partner with whom

he was in a platonic relationship, has not changed any of his religious practices subsequent to

coming out as gay to his family. All three of these individuals have personally/internally

accepted their sexual and religious identities, and they externally acknowledge their Muslim

identities. With regard to their gay identities, they selectively disclose and withhold this

information based on the context and their surroundings. This selective external concealment of

their sexual identity prevents them from achieving full identity integration, but their partial

disclosure recognizes that they have reached a level of integration that is noteworthy.

Approaches to resolving identify conflict. Yip (2005) referred to two approaches that

gay Muslims take to resolve their identity conflict, the defensive and offensive. The defensive

approach involves participants defending their gay identity in two ways: engagement within the

framework by constructing sexually affirming interpretations of the Quran and highlighting the

same-sex affirmative elements of the past to minimize the prejudice of present times. The

offensive approach is akin to queer theory and the deconstruction of hegemonic religious

structures and repositioning the interpretive authority from the religious institution to within the

self. The participants in the present study essentially utilized these approaches in various ways.

Borrowing Yip's (2005) approaches as a structural framework, the participants engaged in both

defensive and offensive techniques.

Defensive techniques. The moral technique is a defensive approach rooted in the

concept of the "good Muslim." In the early stages of their sexual identity development,

numerous participants mentioned how they wanted to act in accordance with being a good

Muslim. The notion of following the path outlined by the Quran and pleasing their parents and

authority figures was the best option to maintain their mental health. For some participants, this

meant enacting the role of the perfect child, which was generalized to all domains of his life. In

addition to being a good Muslim, the participants also reported behaving as a good person and trusting that their actions would buffer them from the penalties that they inherently accrued via their same-sex desires and actions.

During their interviews, several participants who strived to maintain both their gay and Muslim identities commented on their efforts to remain good Muslims. When Mehdi came out to his father, he assured him that he will "do everything in the Quran that I am supposed to do." Omar's desire to remain a part-time Muslim and the notion of compromising all engender the same desire to try and integrate the gay and Muslim identities. Several participants also presented their reinterpreted views of the Quran and the stories that opponents of gay rights commonly reference as justification and support of their antigay views.

Offensive techniques. Intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation, which refers the source of power that one receives from religion, seems to also play a role in the ways in which participants managed their identity conflict. Zakari and Mehdi reported the least amount of identity conflict, and it is likely that their beliefs about religion first and foremost as a relationship between God and the individual, with as minimal emphasis on others as possible, contributed to their ability to more easily manage their identity conflict. Furthermore, when connected to God, the opinions of others are insignificant and irrelevant. This perspective redirects the power currently held by the institution of Islam to the individual who makes his own decisions and reclaims his own religious identity.

Clinical Implications for Practice

Incorporating the insights and from results gathered in this study, this section contains an overview of how mental health workers can enhance their therapeutic efficacy when working with gay Muslim men or gay men who were raised within a Muslim family. While this section

contains relevant information from other research in addition to the findings from the present

study, it is not intended to be a comprehensive review of how to conduct culturally competent

therapy with gay men who identify as Muslim. This section includes discussion on the following

topics: cultural competency; developing a therapeutic relationship and building rapport;

important components of assessment; effective theoretical orientations; and interventions,

techniques, and approaches.

Historically, the field of psychology has had a contentious relationship with religion. In

recent years this dynamic has started to shift, and many researchers have examined the role of

religion and psychology and investigated how the inclusion of clients' religious beliefs and

practices within therapy can enhance treatment (Levin & Chatters, 1998). The current study was

conceived as a contribution to this collection of literature by addressing how gay Muslim men

can benefit from therapy. Even though therapy was not a primary focus, participants disclosed

how they cope with their everyday stressors and larger issues such as the angst that develops

from their conflicting identities and how they have worked to resolve the conflicts. The lack of

training related to religious issues (Shafranske, 1996) has made religion a challenging topic for

mental health professionals who face even greater difficulty with clients who identify as both

religious and gay (Haldeman, 2002; Wagner et al., 1994).

Cultural competency. Cultural competency and working from a culturally competent

perspective as a therapist reflects the "belief that people should not only appreciate and recognize

other cultural groups but also be able to effectively work with them" (Sue, 1998, p. 440). In

order to uphold these principles, a mental health worker must have some level of familiarity with

the client's culture. Sue and Sue (2012) have conducted extensive research in this area, and

recommend researching the potential client's culture and values prior to meeting. This

preparation can help orient the therapist, but it remains a starting point as one cannot know if the client holds the values affiliated with his or her culture until one asks.

It also recommended that therapists identify and examine the personal biases that they hold toward the client's group membership identities (Wynn & West-Olatunji, 2009). This practice minimizes the possibility for cultural, religious, and sexual identity microaggressions and can deepen one's understanding of their client's experiences.

As a comprehensive sociocultural identity, the religious and cultural elements of Islam can be explored. With regard to Islam as a religion, countless texts are available to read and local mosques and Muslim organizations, if contacted in advance, are often open to provide personal interaction. Face-to-face interaction and cultural immersion are expeditious ways to get familiarized with communities and their belief systems. Cultural or structural elements relevant to conducting therapy with Muslim individuals include understanding the family hierarchy, the collectivistic social structure of the community, and the homosocial nature of socialization. While these elements will vary by culture and country, many of these beliefs and practices overlap and can impact an individual. For example, homosexuality as a concept and a practice is denounced and regarded with disdain throughout most Muslim cultures and communities; however, it is an open secret that within these homosocial environments men frequently engage in homosexual behavior (Murray, 1997). This varies across cultures, but in cultures that are homosocial and severely restrict access to heterosocial relations, there is generally much situational homosexuality, especially among younger single men. In this case, it is most often intergenerational, sometimes coercive, sometimes not. As a result, gay-identified individuals living in Muslim-dominant countries and throughout the diaspora will have exceedingly different experiences.

Aside from understanding the various customs/traditions, values, and practices of Muslim Americans, recognizing their perceptions of therapy and the mental health system is of utmost importance. Comprised primarily of ethnic minorities, members of the Muslim American community, like many non-Muslim ethnic clients, may have concerns about the mental health system in the United States as well as the therapy process. These concerns are further exacerbated by the overwhelming degree of distrust that Muslim Arabs have of mental health professionals, including social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists (S. R. Ali et al., 2004). As a scientific field of study, psychology's history of dismissing religious and spiritual healing practices violates the beliefs of many Muslims, who have become wary of the field (Al-Kenrawi & Graham, 2000; Haque, 2004). Despite these ideological and philosophical differences, some Muslim individuals seek psychological services throughout the world, and Muslim Americans in need of emotional and psychological assistance often have few alternatives. Al-Issa (2000) encouraged therapists to accept and welcome any wariness or mistrust that Muslim clients might bring with them to the session. By creating space to explore and address this mistrust with a willing client, a therapist has the opportunity to help a client reevaluate the accuracy of this mistrust within the context of this specific experience.

Building rapport and a solid therapeutic relationship. Once the clinician feels knowledgeable enough about the culture and familiar with the various ways a Muslim may view therapy, it is important to focus on developing a solid therapeutic relationship to facilitate the therapeutic process. Building rapport is imperative in this process. S. R. Ali et al. (2004) recommended that therapists familiarize themselves with the stereotypes of Islam and Muslims in the culture in which they are practicing as a means of establishing rapport (for information on Muslim stereotypes in the United States see Shaheen, 1997).

Much like the therapy concerns, creating space to explore the discrimination that Muslim clients encounter can help develop trust. As members of a collectivist culture, Muslim clients may feel uncomfortable with the degree of self-disclosure and self-focus that is widely considered central to individual therapy. For this reason, initial discussions about pertinent cultural issues, such as mistrust of psychologists, may help develop the trust that then enables later self-disclosure (S. R. Ali et al., 2004). A conversation in which the client asks the therapist questions can also facilitate this trusting relationship (S. R. Ali et al., 2004).

The therapeutic relationship, often referred to as one of the most essential components of psychotherapy and the best predictor of therapeutic outcomes (Horvath, 1995; Krupnick et al., 1996) is equally, if not more important, when working with Muslim clients who also identify as gay. By establishing rapport with a client and building a strong foundation of safety, trust, and respect, the client relationship can withstand the ruptures that sometimes occur throughout the course of therapy. Inquiring versus assuming is a central component of practicing cultural competent therapy. Asking questions such as how clients identify with regard to their religious identity and sexual orientation is especially important (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000).

Like every individual who identifies with a religion, not every Muslim client will strongly identify with Islam. Religious identities shift with age, and despite being raised Muslim an adolescent or adult may convert to another religion or no longer identify himself or herself as Muslim. Those who identify as religiously observant may have a strong religious attachment. Some will identify more with Muslim culture than the religious components of the identity, while others may express disdain for Islam. All three perspectives emerged from participants in this study, and all of them had some connection to Islam, but they no longer shared the same identity or described their relationship with Islam in the same way.

A sexual identity label is a personal choice, and preferences with terminology or a lack of

categorization will vary. While gay is an easily identifiable and clear label used by many

individuals who are attracted to members of the same sex, terms like queer and MSM are also

increasing in prevalence, and some individuals may prefer one of these terms for its inclusivity.

To help facilitate a safe space that will enable clients to disclose this aspect of their identity when

they feel comfortable, monitoring the use of heteronormative language and mindfully using

gender neutral pronouns when referring to partners is advised. Depending on level of

acculturation and familiarity with Western constructs of sexual orientation, Muslim clients may

not even acknowledge their sexual identity as this is a foreign construct that has no meaning.

Another element of the goodness of fit with a therapist involves the therapist's own

religious affiliation. S. R. Ali, Liu, and Humedian (2004) discussed how Muslim clients who

seek treatment for alcohol abuse prefer to meet with a non-Muslim therapist in order to avoid any

potential stigma and judgment that a member of the same religion may develop. Considering

how alcohol use, like same-sex sexual activity, is prohibited in Islam, it is not difficult to

imagine a gay Muslim client engaging in a similar pattern and seeking a non-Muslim therapist.

Research suggests that gay clients often prefer meeting with an openly gay therapist even though

therapy outcomes do not differ based on the sexual orientation or perceived orientation of the

therapist (Liddle 1996, 1997).

Assessment. During the initial assessment and ongoing phases of assessment, the

therapist can benefit from examining a client's gender identity and degree of gender conformity

and nonconformity, which may not have the same components as U.S. gender roles and gender

roles in Muslim cultures vary widely. Other important factors for assessment include a client's

religious perspectives, if relevant. For example, does the client have a literal approach to reading

the Quran and looks to imams and influential figures to practice Islam or is he a contextualist

who values his personal beliefs and relationship with God over the messages he hears from

others? While these perspectives may pair in different ways, they will likely affect the ways in

which a client views the world and ultimately how he resolves and manages his identity conflict.

In addition, it is important to identify the external and internal sources that helped

establish and maintain the conflict between his religious and sexual identities. Lastly,

determining the current or dominant identity conflict state (e.g., rejected, compartmentalized, and

integrated) is crucial for identifying a plan for treatment. If a client adamantly rejects religion

and has no intent of integrating his religious and sexual identities at this stage in his life, than it

would prove more fruitful to examine how he can learn to accept his sexual identity and reorient

himself to this identity.

Clinicians working with gay Muslims or gay men with a Muslim upbringing can enhance

treatment by assessing for the client's attitudes toward practicing Muslims as well as gay-

identified practicing Muslims. While the latter group will comprise a smaller number of

individuals, they will likely have contact with the client during social events or potentially in the

future (e.g., if the client lives in culturally homogenous region with limited Muslim residents).

Considering how a strong identification with one's ethnic community appears to facilitate

positive social support (Gallor & Fassinger, 2010), addressing ethnic identity in therapy is

important. Recognizing the difference between cultural and religious identity is also important,

as some individuals will have different reactions and attitudes towards practicing gay Muslims

versus gay people with Muslim upbringings. Attending a support group for practicing Muslims

may agitate a nonpracticing Muslim and impose more harm than assistance. One important

implication of this concept is that when referring a client to a support group, it is important to

identify the presence of religion with the group as well as the meeting location. Mosques often serve as community centers and groups for gay Muslims in more progressive cities and areas, and the client may feel that meeting in a mosque is too highly reminiscent of the culture that he works hard to avoid.

Assessing the degree of comfort with other Muslims and religion is also useful in recognizing what beliefs may or may not be helpful to challenge. Several participants in this study expressed their frustration with non-Muslim individuals countering their critical opinions of traditional or fundamental Muslims. Hakim referred to these individuals as cultural relativists, and their well-intended efforts to balance the participants' negative perceptions were frequently experienced as invalidating and naïve. These individuals, who happened to be primarily White, knew little about the experiences that the participants endured within their religious communities in the name of Islam. It is hoped that culturally competent clinicians would avoid committing this offense; however, this issue may arise with clients describing their frustration with social supports and having to negotiate their relationships with their ethnic and religious communities as well as ethnic and religious minorities within the mainstream gay community.

Theoretical orientation. Success in therapy often relies on the strength of the therapeutic relationship more so than the theoretical orientation (Frank, 1961; Frank & Frank, 1991). This is an important fact to emphasize prior to discussing the therapeutic approaches that researchers have found as effective therapeutic tools with Muslim clients. Four theoretical orientations that appear to resonate with Muslim clients and clients struggling with identity conflict between their religious and sexual identities include narrative therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), culture-centered therapy, and group therapy.

Narrative therapy. Researchers on religious and sexual identity conflict have found that narrative therapy works well for reevaluating a client's sense of self as well as with clients struggling with conflicting sexual and religious identities (Buchanan et al., 2001). These findings emphasize the goodness of fit with the presenting problem more so than the population and the other factors that a Muslim identity entails. Muslim clients who are comfortable with this style can greatly benefit from the newly created narrative that encompasses them and their identity rather than rejecting and ostracizing them as abnormal deviants from the remainder of the community that pursues cross-sex relationships.

CBT. Based on the Arabic/Middle Eastern belief in the somatic origins of mental illness, Middle Eastern clients often expect a medical approach to mental health treatment (Al-Kenrawi & Graham, 2000). The medical model, which positions the therapist as the expert and the client as the passive recipient of treatment, contrasts with many theoretical orientations, especially those used by person-centered therapists who utilize a feminist and/or multicultural approach, which nicely complements gay Muslim clients. This is an important topic of discussion when socializing a Muslim client to a clinician's personal therapeutic style.

Several studies have concluded that Arab Muslim clients suffering from depression, anxiety, and bereavement respond well to CBT (Azhar, Varma, & Dharap, 1994; Azhar & Varma, 1995a, 1995b; Razali, Hasanah, Aminah, & Subramaniam, 1998). The directive approach taken by therapists utilizing this theory complements Arab Muslim culture. These findings are supported by the conclusion from the current study, as the majority of the coping mechanisms that the participants reported using involved a cognitive element. Considering the prevalence rates of anxiety and depression accompanying identity conflict and the coming out process, gay Muslim clients would likely also benefit from CBT.

Culture-centered therapy. Culture-centered therapy is an approach that utilizes culture as a framework to conceptualize the presenting issues of an ethnically diverse group of clients. In order to work within this approach, therapists strive to envision clients' experiences from their perspective. Culture-centered therapy also incorporates ecosystemic factors when conceptualizing presenting issues and identifying methods of treatment (Pedersen & Ivy, 1993). The inclusion of the systemic factors enables a more comprehensive examination of how religion, heterosexism, racism and other forms of oppression impact the client's mental health (Wynn & West-Olatunji, 2009).

Group therapy. In addition to individual therapy, gay Muslim Arab clients may also thrive in group therapy. Two participants in this study spoke to the powerful transformation that attending LGBTQ support groups had on their lives. Support groups are particularly appealing as they simulate collectivist values of the group and can recognize that they are not alone or isolated in their struggle. Addressing threatened identities, Breakwell (1986) noted that self-help groups, or support groups in this case, provide individuals with a positive influence. More recent research with gay Muslim men has found that support groups men had a positive impact on gay Muslim men as their affiliation with others helped to affirm their identities (Yip, 2007).

It is important for the therapist to have a clear understanding of the nature of the support groups before referring their clients. Degree of religiosity and comfort with homosexuality are two important factors for clients to know about prior to attending a group. Depending on how a client manages his identity conflict, a religious-based support group may deter an individual who has rejected his religious identity. Likewise, a progressive Muslim support group for gay men may not appeal to a client who resists any reinterpretation of the Quran to accommodate his or her same-sex desires (Jaspal & Cinnarella, 2010).

Interventions/techniques/tools. The following suggestions for inventions, techniques, and tools are based on information that came from the participants in this study along with findings from other researchers examining the mental health practices of Muslims living in America, the Middle East, and around the world. It is important to note that many of the techniques that the participants in this study identified developed organically for them. Depending on the stage of reflection and introspection, clients may not find them tenable or helpful in the same way. The awareness that other individuals struggling with similar issues developed their own methods of coping is powerful in and of itself and may provide hope to some clients in the midst of their own stress and confusion.

Support and validation consistently emerge as two of the most powerful interventions a therapist can provide for clients. This appears to be especially true for Muslim Arab clients who are gay. Depending on the client's familial and social history, he may have never disclosed his sexual desires to anyone due to a fear of rejection. The fear of rejection may stem from his family members, his friends, and/or himself. Traditional Muslims who follow conservative and literal interpretations of the Quran believe that men who have sex with men in this lifetime will face a severe punishment in the afterlife for repeatedly committing detestable sins. This fear of rejection is further compounded by the customary silence regarding sex and sexuality within the Muslim culture and the home.

In addition to the lack of support that gay Muslims receive, homosexuality is often invisible in their communities and countries. For those living in countries with access to Western media or those living in the diaspora, the Western depictions of homosexuality may not reflect the Muslim individual, and, if they do, their exclusive affiliation with the West serves as a reminder that the individual would likely have to sacrifice his current situation and relocate to

the "other culture." This would involve separation from one's family and, ultimately, the severing of familial and national ties. Considering the important role that parents and the family play in the lives of Muslim Arabs, and the role that parents play in the lives of any LGBTQ individual, the absence of parental support for the client can have a detrimental impact on his or her sexual identity development (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001).

Psychologists and mental health counselors can also utilize interventions that Muslims value. Lowenthal, Ginnirella, Evdoka, and Murphy (2001) examined religious factors and coping with depression. They found that in comparison to other religious groups, Muslims have more faith in the healing powers of Islam and social support. Harnessing this information, psychologists can utilize religious practices and the involvement of friends and family as interventions to help devout Muslims overcome depression (S. R. Ali et al., 2004). The religious components of this intervention may not have an effect on a gay client who has rejected his religious identity, but the element of support applies to all clients who can benefit from some degree of support from their family, friends, counselor, or other partner.

When participants in this study were in the midst of their identity conflict, they coped by adhering to the Islamic values and principals associated with being a good Muslim. In other words, participants followed the aspects of the religion that they had the ability to uphold instead of forgoing all of the practices because they violated the proscription against same-sex sexual interaction. One participant referred to this management as being a part-time Muslim, and another participant simply referenced the need to compromise. As a supplement to this approach, the participants also found support in their belief that God had a plan for them.

For individuals who have a desire to maintain both their sexual and religious identities and who find comfort in their religion, therapists can incorporate religious practices and beliefs

in treatment. In an effort to navigate the identity negotiation process, participants in the present study used several tools and techniques that helped them find some resolution to the identity conflict. Clients who feel comfortable and capable of silencing the external authorities and focusing on their own beliefs and thoughts can benefit from emphasizing their personal relationship with God. Harris et al. (2008) conducted a study with Christian clients and found that participants who were able to explore the varying worldviews and perspectives within other religions, using their own experience as the primary reference point instead of the external authorities within those religions, displayed marked improvement. Harris et al. (2008) quickly qualified the nongeneralizability of their findings as the sample only consisted of Christians. Nonetheless, the same concepts may apply to other religious individuals who are open and willing to engage in the exploration.

There were two participants in the current study who used a similar approach, focusing on themselves and God as the most important elements of their lives and not the negative messages they heard from others. These two participants, who had both lived in the United States since birth or a young age, came to the same conclusion that God intentionally created their same-sex desires. Since God makes not mistakes, the same-sex desires and the struggles that have resulted from the presence of these desires serve a purpose or provide a test for the individuals. Both participants managed to maintain comfort with a religious practice and their alternative sexual identity.

For secular therapists, this technique has multiple benefits. The first benefit pertains to the lack of religious knowledge that the therapist is required to know. The therapist helps clients maintain their perspective and keeps them focused on themselves as the primary reference point. This technique also helps clients develop a personal relationship with their deity and identify the

extraneous messages that humankind introduced into the religion that reinforces the homophobic, misogynistic, and patriarchal values that bolster the authority figures and maintain the status quo.

The techniques or perspectives just presented reflect the views and beliefs of participants who still embraced their religious and sexual identities. The inclusion of God and religion within them precludes their usefulness to participants who have rejected religion. The participants who no longer relied on God because this figure was no longer accessible to them or ceased to exist for them relied on their own ability to control their destiny. One participant who had rejected religion at a young age and appeared somewhat ambivalent about this decision alluded to the fact that people change over time. Beliefs and values that seem central to one's identity can change over time, and with those changes new possibilities appear.

Mental health professionals working with clients attempting to resolve the identity conflict stemming from incompatible religious and sexual identities may benefit from conceptualizing the presenting issues from a social constructionist perspective. Describing the concept of social constructionism clients may or may not help them resolve their conflict as it may further exacerbate their doubts and uncertainties by undermining the Quranic interpretation of human experience. Armed with an understanding of how religion and sexuality exists as social constructs within a larger societal system, therapists can more successfully meet clients at the level where they are present.

In their study examining how gay Muslim men living in Turkey manage their incompatible identities, Bereket and Adam (2008) asked their participants "What joys and difficulties have you experienced regarding your sexual orientation in relation to Islam" (p. 204)? This question helped elicit how the religious and sexual identities of the participants coexist in their daily lives. Buchanan et al.'s (2001) study included a list of similar questions on the impact

of narrative therapy helping clients resolve the conflict between their sexual and religious

identities. Buchanan et al. (2001) divided their list of questions into the following eight sections:

1) Exploring extrinsic/religious beliefs and attitudes

   - In what ways do your religious practices impact your life in regard to your sexual identity? In what way do they guide your life?

   - In what ways does your families religious background impact your life regarding sexual identity?

   - What support have you found within your church, doctrine, canon, etc. for your sexual identity? What have been the limitations you have found within these?

   - In what ways have you been able to explore your religion to find this support?

   - What can you do to inform yourself of the influences of these religious beliefs or practices?

   - In what ways do your practices facilitate the experiencing of your sexual identity?

   - In what ways does your religion influence your spiritual life?

2) Exploring intrinsic/spiritual beliefs and attitudes

   - Where did you gain your spiritual beliefs? What has influenced your spiritual beliefs?

   - How have these beliefs directed your life? In what ways are you gaining guidance from these beliefs?

   - What are the effects of these spiritual beliefs and behaviors on your life and on your relationships?

- How do these spiritual beliefs encourage you in developing relationships with others of your same gender? How have these beliefs discouraged you from forming new relationships?

- In what ways do these spiritual beliefs contribute to your quality of life as a person? In what ways have these beliefs subtracted from your quality of life?

3) Deconstruction

- What does your inner voice whisper into your ear? What conclusions have your drawn about your relationship with God (supreme being, nature, Buddha, etc.) because of this voice?

4) Opening space,

- Has there ever been a time when the outside forces could have taken control of your sexual identity but didn't?

- Has there ever been a time when your spirituality supported your sexuality?

- Can you think of a time when you were able to consider different ideas and you were not forced by your other ideas to get angry (or depressed, or upset, etc.)?

5) Preference

- Was this way of thinking about your sexual identity better or worse?

- Was this way of thinking about your religion better or worse?

- Was this way of thinking about your spirituality better or worse?

- Are you comfortable with these religious (or spiritual) beliefs? Do you want them to guide your life?

o If yes, then what might your religious (or spiritual) beliefs tell you about your sexual identity? How might they encourage you to live?

o If no, then how would you like to modify or change your religious (or spiritual) beliefs? In what ways would you prefer that they support your sexual identity?

6) Story development

- How is this way of looking at your sexual identity different from how you would have viewed yourself before?

- Who would be the first to notice if you viewed yourself in this way?

7) Meaning

- What does it say about you that you were able to look at your sexual identity in this way?

- What do you think your struggling with these issues tells me about you as a person?

- When you stand up against the oppression you feel, what type of person does that say you are?

8) Extending the story into the future.

- How do you see your relationship with your sexual identity and your religion developing in the next year?

- How do you think your sexual identity will impact your spirituality in the next year? (pp. 444–445)

The last issue that is important to address in this section involves the topic of coming out. In contrast to LGBTQ-identified members of mainstream U.S. society, who often portray their

coming out experience as a challenging yet positive and transformative action, ethnic minorities

often perceive the process of coming out as difficult as it typically makes it more challenging for

them to embrace their ethnic identity (Gallor & Fassinger, 2010). The same argument can be

made for gay Muslim Americans who face challenges related to their religious identity as well as

an ethnic identity for gay Muslim Americans of color. This perception is not always an accurate

belief. Clinicians must remain aware that the coming out experiences of their clients will vary,

but Gallor and Fassinger (2010) concluded that the participants in their study expressed their

satisfaction with being out and they were satisfied with the overall level of support they received.

However, every family is different. The familial responses for the participants in the present

study varied from family to family, which illustrates that need for cautious and conscientious

thought in clients who have started to prepare to disclose this information to their families.

Whitaker (2011) mentioned that coming out is not always recommended for everyone. In his

primer on the complexity of same sex identities in the Middle East, Whitaker wrote about the

dangers of coming out in certain countries in the Middle East, where honor killings routinely

occur.

Limitations of the Research

    Recruitment/sample. Recruiting individuals to participate in this study proved

challenging in numerous ways as it was difficult to find participants who met the inclusion

criteria and were willing to participate. To accommodate this challenge, I relied on nonrandom

sampling methods (word of mouth and snowball) to recruit participants.

    Samples collected using nonrandom sampling methods consist of self-selected

participants, which often have limited demographic heterogeneity as participants notify their

friends and other like-minded individuals about the study. In this study, especially, there may be

vast differences between the gay Muslim men who would volunteer to be interviewed and those who would not. On the other hand, there may be fewer differences between the men who willingly volunteered for this study and those who would present for therapy. Qualitative research minimizes the importance of generalizability; however, a demographically homogeneous sample limits the variation in perspective and diminishes the wealth of information collected.

With regard to data collection, one limitation resulted from the sole reliance on collecting information using semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews contain open-ended questions and offer flexibility in the order in which the participant receives the questions. As a result of this flexibility, every interview has a unique trajectory that increases the risk of certain perspectives and pieces of information getting overlooked or altered by the order of the questions or the topics of interest that the participants may invest more time in answering.

A second limitation related to data collection pertains to the sole use of participant self-report. When feasible, additional sources of information help supplement the participants' narratives and provide varying perspectives. Because of confidentiality and privacy purposes, I did not contact family member and friends or observe participants in an effort to gain any information to supplement the narratives and information that the participants shared.

Lastly, my European American identity and nonaffiliation with Islam may have influenced what information participants chose to disclose or omit in their responses. Cultural and ethnic differences are particularly relevant for Muslim-identified individuals as well as immigrants, two groups who have faced elevated levels of scrutiny in recent years given the sociopolitical issues that remain at the forefront of U.S. domestic and international concerns.

Analysis. Despite the ardent efforts I made to remain aware of my potential biases and prejudices and to correct them when they arose, there are inherent limitations with the analysis of this data. Without any cultural, religious, or ethnic membership with any of the participants, I coded the interviews and analyzed the data according to my view of the world. Auditing procedures were employed to identify any biases and minimize the potential for my worldviews to interfere with the accurate presentation of this material. Furthermore, having an unfamiliar graduate student asking intimate questions about their personal experiences may have caused participants to modify their responses. Their perception of my personal identities and uncertainty regarding my motives likely influenced their responses as well.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the inclusion criteria, all of the participants identified as gay. As a result, rejecting a gay identity in favor of a Muslim identity was not a viable option. Research focusing on individuals who have chosen to reject their sexual identity or refrain from acting on their desires for same-sex sexual interactions in favor of their Muslim identity would provide a major contribution to the literature. Contacting and recruiting these individuals would be a major undertaking that would likely require immersion within a Muslim community or novel recruitment methods that would enable the researcher to access this population. The likelihood of accomplishing this type of study is minimal. In lieu of participants who actively reject their sexuality, it may be more feasible to interview gay Muslim men who attempted to reject their sexuality but recognized that they could not. Asking them to retroactively reflect on what it was like for them to undergo the process and what information would have been helpful for them at that time may not provide as accurate data as individuals currently struggling with the conflict, but it would provide a access to information that is otherwise inaccessible. Either study would

help provide data on how many Muslims with same-sex attractions successfully manage to refrain from acting on their sexual desires. The existing studies examining gay Muslims and their identity conflict resolution process rely on self-selected participants, and the absence of celibate or non-gay-identified men skews the body of literature.

Participants in the present study predominantly endorsed conflict existing between their religious and sexual identities. Two participants denied experiencing any such conflict, and in doing so, they raised questions about the universality of conflict between these two identities. Given their sexual practices and demographics, it was challenging to determine if these perceptions reflected any internalized homophobia or other types of biases that obfuscated any conflict that might exist if these individuals examined their lives and actions through different theoretical lenses. Future research addressing gay Muslim men who report having minimal to no identity conflict would provide further insight into the pervasiveness of the conflict between gay and Muslim identities. Furthermore, this type of study could provide more information about the life factors that increase the risk of developing conflict that may ultimately help others enduring this conflict.

Research examining gender presentation and gender nonconformity among gay men is another topic with relatively few studies. I came across several narrative accounts of gender nonconforming or effeminate gay Muslim men living in the Middle East who had markedly different experiences. One managed to flaunt his gender nonconformity while effeminate men are usually harassed and persecuted by security forces; however, no empirical studies examining this topic emerged. Future studies with a strong focus on the intersection of sexuality, religion, and gender performance can offer insight into the gender dynamics in the Middle East and the

implications for the region as certain countries become increasingly more conservative and others continue to increase the size of their gay communities.

Lastly, many Muslims travel to the United States and other Western countries to attend school, receive specialized training and certification, and for a host of other reasons. During their stay in these countries they have access to gay communities and urban environments where they have the freedom to experiment with their sexual identities. Some arrive with intent to participate in the gay nightlife and activities while others discover an aspect of their sexual desires that they have never acknowledged. If, and when, these individuals return to their home countries, they have few options but to revert to their prior ways of life and often face pressure to marry a woman and settle down to start a family. The participants in this study who immigrated to the United States or had family that they visited in a non-Muslim country had difficulty imagining themselves adjusting happily to this remarkably different lifestyle. Psychological examination of how gay individuals adjusted in their home countries after returning from an extended period of time living in a more sexually expressive culture would help mental health professionals assist individuals on both sides of this transition.

Concluding Remarks

Within Muslim culture, particularly countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, sexual identity and religious identity have a very complex relationship. This complexity stems from the widespread cultural disdain and vehemence toward homosexuality that many Muslims justify in the Quran, the inarguable written word of God, and the enmeshment of a patriarchal culture and religion that creates a perception of homogeneity and shared beliefs. Many other cultures possess similar elements, but applied in isolation they lack the collective power found within Islamic society.

As a predominantly collectivist culture that values personal sacrifices for the benefit of the group and a strict gender division that inevitably results in same-sex interactions, there are substantial inconsistencies that are managed by strict rules and a culture of avoidance and denial when it comes to same-sex interactions. This culture has also been described as deeply rooted in tradition, and its entrenchment in tradition seems more likely to grow as global trends involving unwanted Western interventions and increasing sectarian violence and Islamist extremism generate greater instability in the region.

During this tumultuous time in the Middle East region, gay men and other sexual minorities living in the midst of this conflict face numerous challenges related to how they can live their lives. Immigration is an option for some, primarily those able and willing to gain entrance into another country and leave behind their families and the lives that they know. Others have minimal choice in the matter and seek asylum status in other countries as they face imminent peril due to their acknowledgement of or reputation as a sexual minority.

Regardless of how and why a gay-identified Muslim individual leaves his or her country of origin, arriving in a new country and acclimating to the culture is difficult. Expectations and hopes about a new country that offers the potential for sexual and religious freedom do not always materialize as homophobia is not endemic to Muslim cultures and societies. In Western countries like England and the United States, where greater tolerance exists for alternative sexual identities, gay Muslim citizens and immigrants likely face greater persecution for their ethnicity and/or religious practices. As a result, these immigrants entering the country often trade one marginalized identity for another and become the target of the host or mainstream culture that views them as exotic and with suspicion. Furthermore, until citizenship is conferred or asylum

granted, immigrants face the constant threat of having to leave and reconceal the identities that they have started to explore when they return home and have limited access to a gay community.

The Internet and other forms of media have helped gay Muslim men throughout the world connect with each other. This service has enabled many young men who have access to such resources to explore their same-sex desires and learn about possibilities that do not have a visible presence in public. Social support via the Internet and emerging groups for gay men in Muslim-dominant countries and societies provide outlets that help validate and affirm the men and their multiple identities.

For centuries, the Judeo-Christian world has demonized Islam and Muslim culture as the other. Currently waxing, this hostility/tension continues to permeate the psyche of both sides of this polar divide. This is evident in the Orientalist perception of the Muslim world as homophobic, misogynistic, and violent. While these pandemic traits exist in secular and religious cultures, Islam carries the burden of these traits. Developing out of Judaism and Christianity, Islam is essentially an extension of these earlier religions, and to claim that Islam is inherently more homophobic than the other two Abrahamic religions is a fallacious claim. This claim seems to be rooted in the conflation of religion and culture. Culture shapes religion and people shape culture. The recent increase in homophobia within Muslim cultures stems more from the worldwide increase in conservatism and fundamentalism. Much like the followers of Judaism and Christianity, two religions with a far more profound history of persecuting sexual minorities, extreme conservatives have hijacked Islam as a vehicle to pursue their own agendas. The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are not the dominant culprits of the homophobic elements that cause so much distress for sexual minorities. They play a role in the persecution of sexual minorities by cultural factors. The inherent patriarchal, misogynistic, and

homophobic culture that belies these religious institutions, in conjunction with the homosocial structure of Arab culture and the modern suppression of dissent and discouragement of ijtihad, all lend to secretive homosexual practice and the extreme loss of privilege when giving up a heterosexual identity.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Flyer

Seeking MUSLIM MEN to

Participate in Research Study

Participants will partake in an hour-long interview

Complete Confidentiality Assured

Eligibility Criterion for Participation

1) Speak or communicate in English
2) Identify as male
3) Are at least 18 year or older
4) Were raised and/or Identify as Muslim
5) Have a stronger sexual attraction towards men than women
6) Individuals who grew up in a predominantly Muslim/Middle Eastern Nation

Researcher will pay for local travel expenses

Participants will receive a $25.00 pre-paid VISA card as a token of appreciation for participating

If interested in participating or have further questions regarding the study, please contact the

researcher at

DID@alliant.edu

Or via phone at (415) 508-7596

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Consent Form

As a Ph.D. Student studying Clinical Psychology at the California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant International University, San Francisco, I am conducting a dissertation on how men who identify as Muslim and Gay (or have primarily same sex attraction) integrate these identities. If you are 18 or older, male, identify as Muslim and Gay (or have primarily same sex attraction) and can read and understand English, you are eligible to participate. I am the researcher and will be conducting the interview.

By agreeing to participate, you will be asked to partake in a minimum of one interview that should range between 60-90 minutes to complete. Participation in this study is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study for any reason at any time without penalty. Prior to publication, participants will have an opportunity to review the transcripts of the interview(s) and portions of the manuscript. The time period for reviewing this information can range from the end of the interview up to two years. Additionally, upon request the researcher can provide a summary of the results of the study.

The information that you provide is confidential, however there are three exceptions to confidentiality. As a mandated reported, if any information regarding a danger to others, abuse of child, dependent adult, or elder is provided, the interviewer will need to report this information to proper authorities. Also if the participant is threatening to harm himself the interviewer is obligated to inform those individuals and take preventative measure to ensure the participant's safety.

The interview/s will consist of you and the researcher, who will conduct the interview, and will be audio recorded. The interviews will then be transcribed. Both the transcripts and the recordings will be saved in a digital format and encrypted and password protected. Aside from the researcher, three professors on his dissertation committee, and a fellow graduate student who will assist in analysis, will have access to the transcripts. The researcher will be the only individual who can link participants with their interview recordings and transcripts by assigning a pseudonym. Due to the methodology of this study, the interviewer would like to have the option of contacting any participants to ask any follow up questions. If you are not comfortable with the interviewer contacting you, please inform the interviewer and mark the box below. If you are comfortable with the interviewer contacting you in the future please provide your contact information below.

After the study is completed the audio recording will be saved on my computer which is password protected. The files will be encrypted on the computer and password protected as well. The same procedures will take place with the transcripts in the word documents.

As a voluntary participant, you have the right to end the interview and/or withdraw your data from the study at any time. The data that you submit will be stored in a secure location for five years after completion or publication (whichever is later) of the study. After meeting these criteria your electronic data will be permanently deleted and any paper files will be shredded.

The mutually agreed upon travel expenses will be paid in cash and as compensation for your participation in this study you will receive a $25.00 Visa gift card after your interview.

All participants in this study face some risk of distress by reflecting and discussing difficult life events. If for some reason you experience a significant amount of stress from participating in this study, the interview can be paused or terminated and the researcher will be willing to discuss any feelings or thoughts that have arisen. At the participants request a referral to a licensed therapist will be provided. In the unlikely case that this service is necessary or you need to contact the researcher to ask any questions and/or report any problems I am available by e-mail at the following address DID@alliant.edu. Your email address or any other information acquired by means of contact will only be used to respond to your questions, comments, or requests. This information will in no way be connected to your interview responses. Upon completion of the study, this information will be erased.

If you would prefer to contact the University instead of the researcher, to report any problems or ask further questions, please contact the Institutional Review Board at Alliant International University, San Francisco Campus, 1 Beach Street, Suite #100, San Francisco, CA 94133; irb-sf@alliant.edu; (415) 955-2151) or my advisor, Dr. Michael Loewy, via the same address or his personal address mloewy@alliant.edu.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this form and if you are comfortable with the study, I hope that you decide to participate. If you would like to receive a copy of this document for your records please request one from the interviewer.

Please check one of the 2 boxes below

☐ I do not want to be contacted by the interviewer in the future

☐ I give permission for the interviewer to contact me in the future
Preferred Method of Contact: _____

By signing the line below I am confirming that I read the
description of the research project outline above and I am aware of
my rights as a participant.

_____   _____
Informant Signature   Date

_____   _____
Researcher Signature   Date

APPENDIX C

Demographics Form

Demographics Form

How old are you?_____

Country of birth: _____

Region/s of Country where you lived:_____

Where did you live until you turned 18?_____

How long have you lived in the United States? _____

Where have you lived in the United States? _____

Why did you move to the United States?_____

At this moment do you plan on living in the U.S. permanently? _____

How many siblings do you have?_____

Describe your lifestyle growing up (e.g. wealthy, poor)**:**_____

If the world were a Utopian society and gender/sexuality did not matter in partner selection, would you choose a male or female as your primary partner? (Circle/Write-in)

     Yes   No   With a: Male Female or _____

Have you ever been in a relationship?   (Circle/Write-in)

     Yes   No   With a: Male Female or _____

Are you currently in a relationship? (Circle/Write-in)

     Yes   No   With a: Male Female or ———————————

Highest Level of education completed:_____

If currently in school, degree you are pursuing: _____

Are your currently working?: (Circle one)   Yes   No

     If yes, what is your current job? _____

     If no, what was your last job if you had one?_____

What form of Islam were you raised with (e.g. Sunni, Shi'a)_____

In the space provided below indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statement and

feel free to describe any reactions or opinions that it brings up for you:

- A man cannot identify as both Muslim and Gay/Homosexual.

APPENDIX D

Semistructured Interview Question Protocol

Appendix D

Semistructured Interview Question Protocol

I. Childhood (5 minutes) (2 Questions)

1. <u>What was your childhood like?</u>
   If they do not address family, follow up with:

   Who did you grow up with?

2. <u>What messages did you receive about religion?</u>

   - *<u>from your family peers, and community</u>*

3. <u>What messages did you receive about sexuality?</u>

   - *<u>from your family, peers, and community?</u>*

4. <u>What messages did you receive about people who have sex with members of the same sex?</u>

   - *<u>from your family, peers, and community?</u>*
   - *<u>How did this impact you?</u>*

II. Religious Identity (15 minutes) (1 Question)

5. <u>Describe your religious development from childhood to present day</u>
   If they do not address, follow up with:

   - *How would you describe your religious observance now?*
   - *How do you feel about your current level of religious observance?*

III. Sexual Identity (15 minutes) (3 Questions, 3 sub-questions)

6. <u>How do you perceive yourself in relation to your sexual behavior (gay, heterosexual, no concept of sexual orientation)?</u>
   - *How does that definition compare to your country of origin and the United States?*
7. <u>When did you first notice sexual desires towards men?</u>

   - *What emotions/thoughts did this bring up for you?*

8. <u>Have you disclosed your sexual preferences to anyone?</u>

   - *If no:*
     - *Why not?*

   - *If yes:*
     - *Tell me about the experience*

If they do not touch on specific issues, follow up with:

   - *who, why, how you made this decision*
   - *How have your relationships changed after disclosure?*

If time is available ask

A. Have your sexual behaviors or beliefs about those behaviors changed since living in the United States? (If I have time)
   a. *If yes: In what ways?*
   b. *In no, why not?*
B. If you had no sexual desires toward men, how would your life be different? Similar?
C. Were you aware of sexual activity between male friends and acquaintances around you?
   a. *Males you respected?*
   b. *How did that impact your feelings about your sexual behaviors/lack of sexual behavior?*

IV. Coping and Mental Well-being (15 minutes) (6 Questions)

9. **Skip if already sufficiently answered**:
How have you been impacted by dealing with conflicted identities/behaviors?

10. **Skip if already sufficiently answered:**
How have you dealt with these feeling/thoughts/actions/events

11. **Skip if already sufficiently answered**:
Are there any personal identities, traits, life experiences that have made it harder/easier for you

to deal with your sexual orientation/religious identity and the identity development process?

If not addressed, follow up with:

- *How has your more recent identity as an immigrant impacted the ways in which you deal with the stressors associated with your other identities (i.e. seeking help)*

12. What would be or would have been helpful for you as you during this process?

13. If you had never left your home country, what would your life look like now?

14. If you had to/when you have to/ return to your home country what would/will you feel?

V. Current Identity (10 minutes) (2 Questions)

15. At this moment what is your most salient identity (or the identity you would select if you had to choose just one)?

16. How have your religious beliefs/beliefs about religion impacted your sexual identity and vice versa?

VI. Wrap up (2 Questions)

17. Are there responses to any of the questions I asked that you would like to expand upon?

18. Do you have any questions or concepts that you think are important to add to the interview or discuss before it is over?

APPENDIX E

Debriefing Script

Appendix E

Debriefing Script

First of all I want to thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. As I mentioned earlier there is very little information on this topic and the stories and experiences you shared today will help those who read this study understand how Muslim men who are attracted to men living in the United States integrate their religious and sexual identities and cope with any distress that results from this conflict.

As I conduct more interviews and begin to review the transcripts would you be comfortable reviewing yours for accuracy and potentially talking again to clarify your responses or answering additional questions?

Also, would you be willing to distribute this flyer to any friends or individuals you know who meet the criteria for participation in this study.

(If yes): Excellent, how many flyers would you like?
(If no): Ok.

APPENDIX F

Codebook

Appendix F

Codebook

I. Initial Codes
II. Final Codes
III. Themes
IV. Themes with Subthemes

I. Initial Codes (236)

911 Terrorism	Contact with US
Abandonment	Coping
Achieving equal rights	Cultural Barriers
Activism	Cultural Avoidance of Sex
Agnostic	Cultural Differences
Anger/Resentment	Cultural Factors Sexual Identity
Anti-Gay Messages	Cultural Identity
Anti-Muslim Attitudes in US	Current Observance
Arab Muslim versus Other Muslim	Current Stressors
Asylum	Dating
Atheist	Debasement of Self
Attraction to Friends	Debating
Avoiding Muslims	Defining self through Struggles
Barriers to Disclosure	Denial
Battling Dogma with Logic	Denouncing Religion
Beliefs about homosexuality	Differentiation From Mainstream
Beliefs about religion	Disappointment
Benefit	Discrimination
Broadened Awareness	Discussion of religion
Brother	Discussion of sex
Bullied	Distance from Family Fosters Identity
Childhood	Exploration
Childhood Environment	Distraction
Childhood religious beliefs	Distress
Choosing to be happy	Earlier Access to
Cognitive Dissonance	Early Religious Teachings
Combating Dogma With Logic	Educating Fellow Muslims About
Community	Homosexuality
Comparing Muslimness	Emerged
Comparison of religions	Emotion (Stated)
Compromises	Employment

Ethnic/Cultural Identity
Ethnic/Racially
Exercise
Experiences, Traits, Beliefs,
Exploration
Exposure
Exposure to Gay People
Familial Avoidance of Sex
Family
Family conflict
Family History
Fear
Fear of Islam
Feelings about
First Born
First Exposure
First Same Sex Sexual Interaction
Focusing on the positive
Friends who had succeeded moving to U.S.
Friendship
Gay Friends
Gay Friends
Gay Identity Process
Gay Invisibility
Gender non-conforming
Gender Policing
Gender Roles and Socialization
Grandparents
Guilt
Happy
Harmful
Having to move back home
Hearing about sex
Helpful
Helping to Combat Negative Messages in the Middle East About LG
History of Oppression
Home Country
Home Country Norms
Homosexuality Less Taboo
How do you cope
Humiliation
Identity
Identity conflict
Immigrant
Immigration

Impact of sexual identity
Important Figures that taught religious beliefs
In-Vivo Quotes

1. Because if I went at night past curfew and I got caught the Isr
2. Because the city had eyes a lot of Muslims
3. During that time I was having this belief like ok maybe I will
4. But in terms of within the within the gay culture very few Middle Eastern….
5. Feel like my identity is connected to my skin color and so like
6. If I wanted to be gay I had to support Israel and that like rea
7. I did not even go to a gay club there are none in Missouri, but
8. I felt like I had to prove something to other Muslims whereas w
9. I had not met one out gay person in my life ever until I moved
10. I met some friends and some were coworkers and we like interact
11. I think growing up there was something lost in translation
12. I tried to have gay friends so I can be myself and I don't have
13. I would go down to the café studying and from the corner of my
14. My dad, it was crazy because I was learning this stuff that my
15. Ahhhh, no I am happy now as a gay man. Now at this point I d
16. My sexuality was the light when I began to see the other ugl
17. Oh, I would say from 14-18 I pretty much hit like a stopping
18. The only thing would be Live your life for yourself, don't w

19. Yeah, like oh this is interesting. So yeah it was almost lik
20. So I did not have the fear I do not want to come out because my
21. So it was really cemented in my mind at 18 before I took a quee
22. Yeah its its an idea that keeps coming to you internally and yo
23. Yes, Yeah, that is the most important thing the support group.

Increased Religiosity As Reparative
Info about friends
Initial reaction to being gay
Intellectualization
Interactions
Internalized Homophobia
Internet
Islam as comprehensive lifestyle
Islamic Teachings
Lack of Exposure to Gays
Limited Memory of Childhood
Lonely
Marriage Pressure
Masculinity
Media
Members
Mental Health
Messages about homosexuality
Messages about religion
Messages about sex
Mocking Islam
Modern Islam
More Role Models
More Self Love
Navigating Alone
Never Immigrated
Not A Strong Religious Identity
Other
Out to Friends
Out to Parents?
Outcast
Parental Control
Parental Reassurance
participant/interviewer interactions
Path to follow

Peer Relations
Peer/Friend Disclosure
Perceived
Perceived Emotion
Perceived Reactions
Perceptions of home
Perceptions of home sexuality
Perceptions of the US pre Immigration
Perfect Child Role
Perseverance
Personal Beliefs about Islam
Personal Changes
Personal Shame
Personal Style
Personal Threats to Islam
Pornography
Prayer
Pre-Identification Of Gay
Prior Dating Experience
Process/giving up Islam
Quality of
Questioning Religious Beliefs
Questions about life as hetero
Reactions to Participant
Reframing Religion
Regional History
Relationships
Religion and Childhood
Religiosity Protective Factor Against Suicide
Religious - Sexual Identities- Negotiated
Religious Disillusionment
Religious Identity
Religious insecurity
Religious Label
Religious media
Religious Observance
Religious support
Religiously
Residential Location
Resolving Conflict
Resources (Books, music)
Restricted interpersonal interactions
Sacrifice
Safe Environment
Salient Identity

Same Sex
School
Self- Identification
Self-Care
Self-Disdain
Self-Love
Self-Supported
Self-Acceptance
Sensitivity to Proselytization
Separate
Sexism
Sexual Assault
Sexual Disclosure
Sexual Identity
Sexual Interaction
Shame
Shaming
Simultaneous
Since Coming Out
Since moving to US
Social Support
Spiritual

Stated
Stereotypes of People
Still Struggling
Substances
Suicidality
Support Group
Surprised by US Conservatism
Terminology
Therapy
Thinking
Transformations
Trauma
Trauma Perceived
Turning Point
US
US Diversity
Views About Homosexuality
W/ Father
What Helped
What would be helpful in the future
What would have helped
Wrestling with Homosexual Identity

II. Final Codes (71)

External
Social
Action
Emotional
First Same Sex
Assault
Friends
Dating
Sexual
Cultural/Familial Avoidance of Sex
Emotional
Behavioral
Cognitive
Acceptance
Messages about sex
Messages about homosexuality
Navigating Gay Identity Process
Exposure to Gay People
Initial Reactions to being gay
Current Reactions to being gay

Relationships
Feelings regarding
Turning Point
Current Religious Observance
Messages about religion
Discrimination
Stated
Perceived
Stressors
Emotions
Impact of Religious Identity
Impact of Sexual Identity
Impact of Identity Conflict
Peers/Non-Family
Family
Asylum
Identity
Feelings About
Feelings About
Resolution Techniques

Conflict

Most Salient

Religious

Sexual

External

Social

Action

Emotional

Cognitive

What they did

Quality of

Familial Sacrifice

Intersection of religion and sexuality

Quotations

Interpersonal

Immigration

Childhood

Religion

Sexuality-Homosexuality

Identity

Coping

What Would Have Helped

Mental Health

III. Themes (23)

1. **Separate**
2. **Religious Identity**
3. **Personal Changes**
4. **Peer Relations**
5. **Mocking Islam**
6. **Messages about sex**
7. **Mental Health**
8. **Islamic Teachings**
9. **Immigration**
10. **Identity**
11. **Home Country**
12. **Having to move back home**
13. **Gender Roles and Socialization**
14. **Gay Identity Process**
15. **Family**
16. **Experiences, Traits, Beliefs,**
17. **Emotion (Stated)**
18. **Coping**
19. **Community**
20. **Childhood**
21. **Childhood\Perfect Child Role**
22. **Benefit**
23. **Anti-Gay Messages**

IV. Themes/Subthemes

1. **Separate**
2. **Religious Identity**
   a. Religious Identity**Religious Label**
   b. Religious Identity**Questioning Religious Beliefs**
   c. Religious Identity**Important Figures that taught religious beliefs**
   d. Religious Identity**Current Observance**
   e. Religious Identity**Beliefs about religion**
3. **Personal Changes**
4. **Peer Relations**
5. **Mocking Islam**
6. **Messages about sex**
7. **Mental Health**
8. **Islamic Teachings**
9. **Immigration**
10. **Identity**
11. **Home Country**
    a. Home Country **Norms**
       i. Home Country Norms**Perceptions of home**
    b. Home Country**Views About Homosexuality**
12. **Having to move back home**
13. **Gender Roles and Socialization**
14. **Gay Identity Process**
    a. Gay Identity Process**Dating**
    b. Gay Identity Process**Sexual Disclosure**
    c. Gay Identity Process**Pre-Identification Of Gay**
       i. Gay Identity Process\\Pre-Identification Of Gay**Sexual Interaction**
    d. Gay Identity Process**Media**
       i. Gay Identity Process\\Media**Internet**
    e. Gay Identity Process**impact of sexual identity**
15. **Family**
    a. Family**Relationships**
    b. Family**Reactions to Participant**
    c. Family**Members**
    d. Family**Family History**
16. **Experiences, Traits, Beliefs,**
17. **Emotion (Stated)**
    a. Emotion (Stated)**Trauma Percieved**
       1. Emotion (Stated)\\Trauma Percieved**Perceived Emotion**
18. **Coping**
    a. Coping**How do you cope**
       i. Coping\\How do you cope**Activism**
    b. Coping**What Helped**
    c. Coping**What would have helped**

         i. Coping\What would have helped**Support Group**

19. Community
20. Childhood
21. Childhood\Perfect Child Role
22. Benefit
23. Anti-Gay Messages

APPENDIX G

Self-Reflection Questions

Appendix G

Self-Reflection Questions

Guide for Written Self-Reflection of Interviews

After conducting and transcribing an interview, please write your answers to the following questions. Think about these questions as you listen to the interview and read your transcripts. Please feel free to include additional questions that assist your process of reflection on your effectiveness as an interviewer. Approach the assignment with an open mind. Your improvement and skill level as an interviewer will increase if you adopt the habit of self-reflection. Critical compassionate self-reflection is a skill that is developed. It requires the desire and intent to learn, and an acceptance that practice is key to growth. Holding the intention to be less judgmental of others and yourself will serve you well as a learner, both in this course and throughout life.

Be sure to provide examples from the recording that support your points. Please include the question number and question followed by your response.

Ask yourself:

1. How do I feel about the success of this interview overall? Was it generally good, bad, or mixed?
2. What do I feel good about as I relive this interview?
3. How did I do with the explanation of the research purpose and/or the intent of this particular interview?
4. How did the interview context enable or constrain the interview process?
5. How did I do in building rapport with the informant? What worked? What didn't?
6. What kind of questions did I ask in the interview?
7. What kind of responses did I get?
8. How did my questions influence the informant's responses?
9. Were my questions leading? Did I put ideas in the informant's head?
10. Did I ask closed ended questions? Open-ended questions?
11. Did I ask multiple questions simultaneously?
12. Did I follow-up on things the informant brought up that might have been important, even if the question wasn't in my protocol?
13. How did I handle time within the interview?
14. Was there overlapping talk during the interview? Interruptions? How did I handle these things?
15. Did I use continuers and encouraging words during the interview (e.g., okay, mm-hmmm. Um)?
16. Did I treat the interview as a conversation? If so, what did I contribute to the conversation? If not, what was the effect?
17. Did I evaluate the informant's responses to my questions within the interview? If so, how did the informant respond to my evaluation?

18. Were my interview questions focused on the purpose of the research?
19. What would I do differently if I were able to do this interview again?
20. What suggestions for improvement do I have for my own interview techniques?
21. If I will be interviewing this informant again, what might I experiment with next time regarding my interviewing style, approach, or method?
22. One thing that really surprised me about myself in this interview situation was_____.
23. If I experimented with something in this interview, what was it and how did it go? (e.g., did I get the results expected? Will I try it again? If so, will I do it differently?)

This modified list of questions was based on a list found in:

Roulston, K., deMarrais, K., & Lewis, J. B. (2003). Learning to interview in the social sciences.

Qualitative Inquiry, 9(4), 643–668.