

**CRU'D: LESBIAN IDENTITY TENSION IN CAMPUS CRUSADE FOR
CHRIST**

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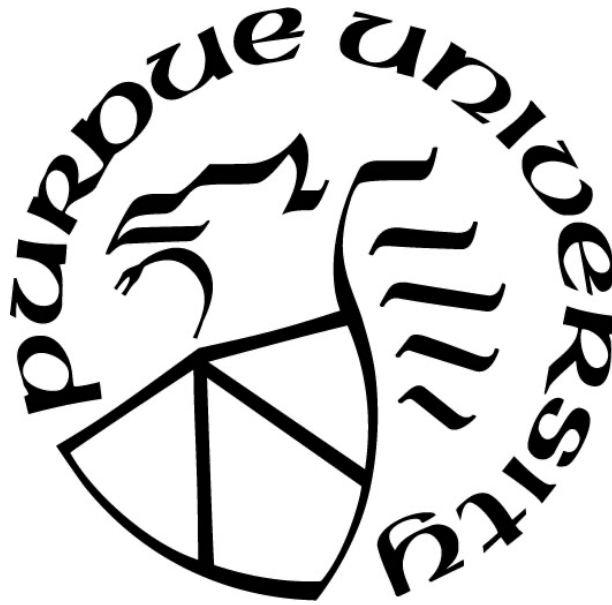
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Dedicated to LGBTQ former members of Cru

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ABSTRACT

Identity tensions in religious organizations has become a popular research area in organizational communication within recent decades. This study endeavors to investigate lesbian identity tension within the evangelical, college-based organization Campus Crusade for Christ (Cru) with the guiding research question: How do lesbian former members of Cru and former Cru staff discursively navigate identity tensions regarding homosexuality within the organization? Through surveys of six lesbian former members of Cru and eight former Cru staff, this essay demonstrates a nuanced perspective of identity tension between homosexuality and Christianity in the United States and highlights common themes from all participants: anxiety, frustration, fear, shame, and regret. Utilizing structuration theory and feminism as overarching theoretical frameworks to shape the discussion on sexuality, race, identity, and concertive control, the unique narratives of the participants' surveys and interviews provide new insights on the struggles of LGBTQ individuals within the de facto anti-gay organization, Campus Crusade for Christ (Cru). This study provides a brand-new application of popular organizational communication theories to an underrepresented population (lesbians) in an understudied organization (Cru) to contribute to the ongoing research on identity tension in religious organizations.

Keywords: identity, concertive control, race, structuration, lesbian, Cru

CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

“Since Christianity, the Western world has never ceased saying: To know who you are, know what your sexuality is. Sex has always been the forum where both the future of our species and our “truth” as human subjects are decided.”

- Michel Foucault (1988, pg. 110-111)

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Deeply inconvenienced, I sighed with exasperation when I saw the 15 boxes of crap from my childhood that my parents were offloading on me. “It’s all your stuff,” my mother explained. *What stuff?* I thought. I’m a 34-year-old minimalist who hasn’t lived with my parents for 16 or so years. I begrudgingly piled the boxes into my compact car and drove for two hours without a hope of being able to see out my back window: my literal rear view obscured by the items that would give me a detailed rear view of my past as a young, Evangelical Christian girl who didn’t know she was a lesbian.

Over the following week, I waded through baby dolls, notes from high school crushes, musical paraphernalia, shotty craft projects, and life-sized posters of 90’s teen heartthrobs Andrew Keegan, Devon Sawa, and Johnathan Taylor Thomas (*JTT* to his dedicated fans). The box that made me chuckle the most was the one labeled “Bibles, pogs, drumsticks”. No three words could better summarize the essence of my 90’s childhood as a disciplined Evangelical, spirited gamer, and ‘chick drummer’. Reliving the experiences of a devout Christian, closeted lesbian child made me physically and psychologically cringe. My younger self’s desperate desire to be who God (capital G is how I thought of him back then) and my parents wanted me to be left me feeling heartbroken for the naïve, confused girl I once was. Little did my younger self know, the Evangelical Christian environment in which I grew up and my unknowingly being a

lesbian would create irreconcilable tensions within myself and my personal relationships that would result in catastrophic heartache, years of familial estrangement, and a long-lasting anxiety attached to the notion of romantic love.

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Around age 20, I discovered I was a lesbian. During that time, I was a devout member of the university campus-based Christian organization, Campus Crusade for Christ (Cru). As I was exploring my sexual identity, I faced backlash and emotional manipulation from the staff of Cru. Staff members divulged private and intimate details about my actions with one another across multiple university campuses. News of a lesbian experience I had in Virginia was rapidly spread to Cru members and staff in Ohio and Indiana overnight. I was scolded and implored to disclose my sexual experiences to authority within Cru. My heart and mind were torn between my desire to live a life that was pleasing to God and the persistent voice in the back of my head that told me I was different from people around me. Throughout the last decade, I have encountered and befriended several other women who now self-identify as lesbians and were former members of Campus Crusade for Christ. Through hours-long conversations with these women debriefing about our past experiences in Cru, certain themes frequently emerged: shame, guilt, confusion, and anger.

After reflecting on my time in Cru and realizing that many other women have been through a similar, tumultuous experience as mine, I decided to conduct this study to investigate the phenomenon of lesbian identity tension within the organization Campus Crusade for Christ. Doing so is important for at least two reasons. First, this pervasive Christian organization is severely under-studied, particularly through organizational communication and related lenses. Situating this study in the discipline of organizational communication contextualizes and brings

to the fore the communicative constitution of identity tensions within the organization in question (Cru). Second, the discussion of LGBTQ experiences in religious organizations is paramount to a growing academic understanding of marginalized identities in hegemonically occupied spaces. This study emphasizes the voices of a commonly overlooked demographic in media, popular culture, religion, and academia: the “L’s” in “LGBTQ”. Since Adrienne Rich’s (1980) publication about lesbian erasure in scholarly feminist literature, there has been a growing awareness of lesbian erasure in other facets of society, including in areas of academic research – and the subdiscipline of organizational communication is no exception. Searches of the keyword “lesbian” in recent, major organizational communication journals yield very few results of articles written that explicitly include “lesbian” in the title which would demonstrate the centrality of the marginalized identity to the work (searched: *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Monographs*, *Communication Research*, *Human Communication Research*). While some articles and titles mentioned lesbians explicitly, it was often in conjunction with gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities. What is lacking in journals that publish organizational communication research is the presence of studies that specifically spotlight lesbian voices in the discussion of identity tension within organizations and in organizing contexts. However, there are a great deal of articles written about general identity tension within religious organizations ranging from discussions of the dissolved Mars Hill megachurch in Seattle, Washington (Garner & Peterson, 2018), to tension and organizational exit from the Church of Latter-Day Saints (Hinderaker, 2015), to the conflicting identities of Catholic sisters and their feminism (Pauly, 2018). The publications of the aforementioned articles help us draw the conclusion that there is an extant academic interest in the notion of identity tension in religious organizations, though it is difficult to find explicit narratives or research of lesbians in

religious organizations. This study contributes personalized narratives from underrepresented lesbian voices to the conversation about identity tension within the religious organization, Cru. By conducting this investigation, I hope to add these women's voices to the ongoing conversation about homosexuality in religious organizations, and specifically draw attention to the pervasive organization, Cru, and its hegemonic influence on young, evangelicals in the United States.

It is important that I note here the definitions of terms like *lesbian*, *queer*, *identity*, and *tension* that are used quite frequently in this work, as those words do not have fixed meanings in all cultural or social spaces. Firstly, I utilize the term lesbian as meaning women who are romantically and sexually attracted to women. In this study, all lesbians are cisgender, meaning they identify with the gender they were assigned at birth – in this case, cisgender women. I do not, however, believe that one must be a cisgender woman to be a lesbian. The term *queer* occasionally appears in this work and its meaning is hotly debated, which suggests the fluidity of its multiple applications. For the purposes of this study, *queer* refers to:

“...the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.”
(Sedgwick, 1993, p. 8)

I use the term *identity* to mean the labels, orientations, and states of being chosen by the participants. Lastly, I rely on Woo *et. al*'s (2017) definition of *tension* as “feelings of anxiety, discomfort, or tightness that occur when organizational members face oppositional or bi-polar choices, incongruent situations, or paradoxes (p. 4)”. While this study examines lesbian identity tension, it is important to note that identity formation, particularly gay and lesbian identity formation, is not always linear (Sophie, 1986) and identities are not always fixed. I encourage readers to keep these points in mind while understanding that the human experiences described

in this work may have gone through processes of shaping, reshaping, deconstructing, and rebuilding to arrive at how they are today and will likely continue to evolve from here.

Additionally, this research endeavors to interrogate the discursive and rhetorical role of Cru staff in current and past LGBTQ members' identity tension experiences. How are Cru staff members trained to "deal" with LGBTQ members? What are the common practices enacted when a Cru staff member discovers that a Cru member is engaging in homosexual activity (using the organization's language)? How has Cru's philosophy toward LGBTQ expression and freedom changed since its nascency? To what extent do/can Cru staff members exercise autonomy from the organization when "dealing" with LGBTQ members? With these questions in mind, I conducted interviews of former Cru staff which holistically demonstrate dialectical narratives and identity tensions of members in the organization.

The lenses through which this study's data are analyzed are feminist and queer. My central motivations as an academic researcher are to promote equality and equity in society, make space for flexible and plural identities and experiences, and provide a platform upon which marginalized voices can be spotlighted. This study utilizes structuration theory, feminism, religious coping theory, and queer reflexivity to frame the conversation on identity, as well as concertive control theory to guide the discussion on power within Cru. I write autoethnographic vignettes as a form of queer reflexivity (McDonald, 2013) to frame the discussion on narratives of lesbian former members of Cru. As McDonald and Rumens (2020) state, "... both queer theory and autoethnography have been underexplored and have much to contribute to our understanding of organizational life and organizing processes (p.2)". My personal accounts also encourage the reader to allow emotion (Jaggar, 2013) into the academic discussion of identity tension, particularly regarding sexuality and self-discovery. Furthermore, the results of the

interviews provide unique insight into the struggles the participants faced, in their own words, within the de facto anti-gay organization, Campus Crusade for Christ. Shame, fear, anxiety, frustration, and regret are among the common themes that emerge from the thematic analysis of the survey and interview responses. This study provides a brand-new application of popular organizational communication theories to an underrepresented population (lesbians) in an understudied organization (Cru).

CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

Extant literature on LGBTQ identity tension in religious organizations is cross-disciplinary in nature stemming from sociology, psychology, interpersonal communication, organizational communication, and religious studies. The most relevant theoretical frameworks guiding this study are based in organizational communication and feminism. These meta-theoretical underpinnings lend clarity and support to the postmodern critical feminist lens through which I conduct this study and through which I filter my own personal experiences to synthesize the autoethnographic vignettes for this work. The theories presented below drive and frame this study's research questions which focus on communicatively navigated lesbian identity tension, identification, organizational control, and religious coping strategies. Firstly, I will provide a brief description of Cru as a Christian organization. Then, I will detail the theoretical foundations of this study. Lastly, I will list and explain epistemologies that encompass and motivate this work.

A Brief History of Cru

In 1951, Bill and Vonette Bright founded the evangelical, college-based, Christian organization Campus Crusade for Christ (a.k.a Cru, Crusade, Campus Crusade) at UCLA. Recognizing that the organization had an overtly colonizing moniker, the name was officially shortened and changed to Cru within the last decade. The campus ministry started with a few hundred students and six staff members. The first international location that welcomed Cru to its college campuses was South Korea in 1958, which eventually became Cru's second largest national representation after the United States. Over time, the Campus Crusade for Christ ministry exploded across the globe, establishing itself in 190 countries spanning 5,300 campuses

worldwide. The organization's mission, vision, and values are: to "win, build and send Christ-centered multiplying disciples", to have "movements everywhere so that everyone knows someone who truly follows Jesus", and to exhort a value base of "faith, growth and fruitfulness" (Cru, 2019). The organization, now housed in hundreds of college campuses across the United States, holds weekly, evening gatherings on campus that are conducted in a Sunday morning church service style, complete with worship music, prayer, Bible readings, and a brief sermon. College students comprise the majority of the organization's membership, while Cru staff consists of post-college-aged adults who have dedicated their lives to the continuation and success of the organization for no pay. Each Cru staff member must fundraise a livable salary by soliciting donors to sustain their finances from year to year. The staff is responsible for mentoring members, organizing weekly meetings and mission trips, and furthering their own understanding and practice of the Christian faith. Cru members gather outside of the weekly meeting times in small groups called Bible studies, during which a junior or senior student leads younger students in studying and discussing the Bible's teachings. Each spring and summer break in the academic calendar, Cru sends groups of students on a voluntary basis around the country and the world to evangelize the Christian message to non-believers (a common term heard in Cru referring to anyone who is not a Christian). While a few members will remain in the organization after college as first-year Cru staff, most members naturally phase out of membership after graduating from college and moving onto the next stage in their lives. Before further discussing Cru as an exemplary religious organization in which identity tension occurs, I will first explain the theories applied in the framing of this research.

Theoretical Frameworks

Two primary theoretical frameworks guide this study: feminism and Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory. I rely on famed feminist scholar, social activist, and woman of color, bell hooks' definition of feminism as: "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (1992, p. 1). hooks states that sexist and oppressive thought and action can stem from anyone, no matter their gender or social location. She also boldly proclaims that feminism is for everybody and must be accompanied by efforts to end all types of oppression such as racism, classism, and imperialism. The feminist framework in this study is one of inclusion: gender inclusion, trans inclusion, racial inclusion, disability inclusion, class inclusion, cultural inclusion. The feminism I employ strives to provide a platform for marginalized voices to be heard, which is precisely the central goal of this study on lesbian former members of Cru. Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality pairs with hooks' notions of feminism in accentuating the multiplicity of human identity and experiences. Crenshaw theorizes that there are multiple points at which marginalized identities converge in an individual and tensions arise due to the societal oppression of those identities. It is hooks' and Crenshaw's feminism that I engage with in this work. The application of Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, for the purposes of this study, is its focus on the interplay of systems of power (structure) with the micro-processes of human communication, action, and emotion (agent). Structuration theory centers relation and connectivity between structure and agent, suggesting that one does not exist without the other. This serves as a particularly useful theoretical perspective in organizational communication for its inherent questioning of how an organization (structure) and individuals (agents) co-constitute and perpetuate organizational practices and norms. I employ a unique application of feminism and structuration theory in this work for the theories' interesting overlap regarding agents acting within dominant structures.

Sub-categorically to feminism and structuration theory, I utilize the following theoretical underpinnings to guide the work: religious coping theory, identity/identification, concertive control, and queer reflexivity (detailed in the epistemologies section below). These subcategories frame a detailed look at the surveys, interviews, and stories generated in this study. The discussion presented in this study on authority structure in Campus Crusade for Christ highlights a distinct connection to methods of concertive control (Barker, 1993), in which low-ranking members of an organization enforce its rules and norms, solidifying organizational control on a peer level. Scott *et. al's* (1998) work on structurational identification (and identity) accompany the frame of structuration theory in this study to examine tensions that arise during the formation of organizational identification and individual identity. Authors of structurational identification acknowledge that “identity is elusive” and “cannot be established once and for all” (p. 303). Similarly, queer reflexivity (McDonald, 2013) allows for shifting and evolving identities throughout an individual’s life and does not advise rigid boundaries or identity labels. The notion of queer reflexivity provides a platform on which I tell autoethnographic vignettes throughout this work to serve as real and, at times, emotionally evocative examples of coming out as a lesbian in a conservative Christian environment. Lastly, religious coping theory (Trevino *et. al*, 2012) provides one possible explanation as to why many individuals in conservative religious communities struggle to accept racial, cultural, sexual, and gender minorities due to their values and beliefs.

The central research questions that emanate from these theoretical frameworks are: How do lesbian former members of Cru discursively navigate their past identity tension within the organization? What information, feelings, and opinions do former Cru staff and leadership communicative about the organization’s stance on homosexuality? How do former Cru staff and

leadership view Cru's structure of leadership and authority? What stories of struggle and oppression are being told by former members or staff of Cru?

Queerness and Christianity

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In 2014, for the first time in my adult life, my parents unexpectedly decided to host a family Christmas gathering at their house. We had already celebrated our traditional extended family Christmas at my maternal grandparents' home, and this time, my parents wanted an additional, intimate gathering of "just us": the two of them, my brother (and presumably his girlfriend), my sister (and presumably her husband and kids), and me (and presumably my girlfriend). Though my conservative Christian parents and I had experienced tumultuous conflicts in our relationship over the years, mostly due to my coming out as lesbian at age 22, I was actually looking forward to the unprecedented get-together of our nuclear family at my childhood home. A week before the greatly anticipated weekend, I emailed my parents to confirm the details, ending the message with "Andrea and I are excited to see everyone in Warsaw on the 17th!" Their response still haunts me to this day. Authored by my father on behalf of them both, the email read, "If you have misunderstood that we have accepted your choice of participating in homosexuality, I want to straighten that out now. We do not accept it and do not want the sin brought into our home." Even today, seven years later, revisiting the contents of the email brings painful tears to my eyes.

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Unfortunately, stories like mine are not uncommon. Feminist scholar, woman of color, and lesbian, Sara Ahmed (2010), frames the process of coming out to parents as a negotiation of

unhappiness. Some LGBTQ individuals choose to share their coming out stories on digital forums like Reddit in hopes of creating a community and safe space for others to use as a resource in their own coming out journeys. One Reddit user indicated that their (gender undisclosed) parents kicked them out of the house for a month after coming out. Another user laments his parents' ignoring his sexuality after coming out and fears he will never feel complete until they accept him for who he is (Swain-Wilson, 2019). On the larger public stage, world renowned lesbian Ellen DeGeneres's coming out journey was one of the first public displays of the difficulties and consequences surrounding the decision to disclose one's homosexual identity. Ellen's mother, Betty, later wrote a book detailing her learning to accept Ellen's lesbianism: a process that started with heartbreak, denial, and emotional struggle (DeGeneres, 2000).

Anecdotes like mine above provide a glimpse into the widely shared struggle of being gay in a heterosexual, Christian community. A common question I have been asked as a gay person is: "Gay marriage is legal now! So, coming out gay isn't really a struggle anymore, right?" While rates of acceptance of gay marriage among American adults have increased from around 30% in 2002 to 61% in 2018, statistics of LGBTQ youth experiences do not demonstrate similar optimistic trends (Pew Research Center, 2019). A 2018 report stated that 67% of LGBTQ youth have heard their family members openly make negative comments about LGBTQ people. Additionally, 77% of LGBTQ teens reported feeling depressed and 95% claimed to have trouble sleeping at night (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). Fear of rejection and fear of abandonment are among the commonly felt emotions by LGBTQ individuals surrounding their coming out process, which cause myriad mental and emotional health struggles. Considering the rise in acceptance of same-sex marriage across America, why do gay and lesbian Americans still experience hardship when coming out? One possible reason emerges in the same data that

demonstrated the increase in acceptance of gay marriage. Approximately 70% of American adults self-identify as Christian. Among that 70%, the largest denomination represented in the United States is Evangelical Christianity, at around 25% (Pew Research Center, 2014). White Evangelical Christians reported a 29% acceptance rate of same-sex marriage in 2019, which was significantly lower than the acceptance rate among white mainline Protestants (66%), black Protestants (44%), Catholics (61%), and unaffiliated Christians (79%) (Pew Research Center, 2019). Furthermore, Burdette *et. al* (2005) state, “Research has also demonstrated the importance of biblical literalism in connection with tolerance toward controversial groups, particularly gays and lesbians. Conservative Protestants are more likely to believe that the Bible is the literal word of God... and biblical literalists are on average less tolerant than those who hold other views of the Bible” (p. 181). According to this data, the Evangelical Christian narrative greatly influences a person’s level of acceptance of lesbians and gays. Lesbian and gay individuals who are members of an Evangelical Christian community or who have Evangelical Christian parents are likely to experience familial conflict and lack of community acceptance during their coming out journeys. Conservative Protestants and Evangelicals commonly refer to a variety of biblical verses to support their lack of support for homosexuality: Genesis 1:27-28, Genesis 19, Ephesians 5:22-23, 1 Peter 3:1, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and Romans 1:26-27. These verses discuss the perverse and harmful nature of homosexuality, as well as appropriate relations between a man and woman. In an extreme case, conservative religious leader Jerry Falwell claimed that homosexual Americans were partially responsible for the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, because their sinful actions drew anger from God (Burdette *et. al*, 2005). On the other hand, a 1994 study of gay Catholic men showed that the men’s involvement in Dignity, a Catholic organization for gays and lesbians, promoted acceptance of one’s gay orientation

(Wagner *et. al*, 1994). In this example, the participants were able to work through their internalized homophobia by relying on Christian faith to help them accept their gay identities.

To explain the phenomenon of conservative Christians' lack of acceptance towards gays and lesbians, Trevino *et. al* (2012) examined the link between perceptions of lesbians and gays (LG) as desecrators of Christianity and the perceivers' likelihood of having anti-LG sentiments. Unsurprisingly, the study finds that the more a Christian views LGs as desecrators to Christianity, the more anti-LG attitudes the person has. Interestingly, the authors cite similar previous work "that the appraisal of Muslims as desecrators of Christianity predicted higher levels of anti-Muslim attitudes" (Trevino *et al*, 2012, p. 541). The authors offer an explanation called religious coping theory (Pargament, 1997), which posits that when an individual perceives a threat to their fundamental values, they will cope in whatever way necessary to protect and preserve their value system. In the previous examples given, religious coping did not only foster negative attitudes toward LG individuals but also toward other non-hegemonic and culturally *other* identities in the U.S. "Religion is far more likely to be used in the coping of those for whom religion is a highly salient aspect of their understanding of self and world than in the coping of those who are less devout" (Pargament, 1997, as cited in Park, 2005, p. 711). Religiously devout individuals may use their religion for meaning-making or problem-solving when they face difficult events (Park, 2005). In fact, since religious beliefs tend to be relatively stable, individuals facing difficulty will reframe events to conform to their preexisting beliefs (Pargament, 1997). Religious coping can be applied retrospectively, as described in a study on a small group of Danish Pentecostals about their coping strategies in difficult situations (Viftrup *et. al*, 2017). One participant in the study retrospectively coped with her past desire to not attend a camp, because little did she know, she would meet her future husband there. Today, she

considers the event an act of God's divine intervention in her life. In this case, the participant utilized religious coping for meaning-making purposes. The outcome for the participant is suggested to be positive (i.e. God had a perfect plan for her life all along). In Christianity, positivity is a common result of religious coping (Abu-Raiya and Pargament, 2014). On the other hand, negative religious coping is described as reframing an event to view it as a punishment from God, which tends to cause higher rates of emotional distress (Pargament *et. al*, 1998). Unfortunately, negative religious coping was found to be linked to suicidal behaviors in U.S. military veterans (Bourn *et. al*, 2018). Some studies have found that "guilt, shame, depression, self-loathing, and suicidal ideation were among the experiences reported by LGB individuals who experienced conflict between their sexual orientation and their religion" (Schuck and Liddle, 2001, as cited in Bourn *et. al*, 2018). While one's own internal process of religious coping may produce positive emotional and mental health outcomes, this study considers how a person's internal religious coping affects others around them. This is an understudied aspect of religious coping, particularly when applied to an organizational communication framework.

Feminism and Christianity

Mary Daly (1975) addresses complications that exists for women in Christianity. Early in her work, Daly suggested that men and women should have equal status in Christianity (Catholicism, specifically) and emphasized the inconsistent biblical messages of women's roles in society. Simone de Beauvoir's work and coinage of the phrase "*The Second Sex*" (1949) preceded Daly's and laid a foundation of skepticism that religion is not a welcoming milieu to women. De Beauvoir claimed that men control religious practices, much like they have historically controlled other large institutions in society to keep women oppressed (Thompson,

2018). Following de Beauvoir's assertions, Daly's later work adopted the narrative that religion was not made for women and in fact degrades and relegates them to a lower social status. In her interview that appeared in *U.S. Catholic* (1968), Daly enumerated signs to identify the secondary position of women in Catholicism:

Consider the experience of a young girl going to Mass in the ordinary parish church. She sees that, first of all, the Mass is being said by a priest and the servers are all boys. When she goes to confession, she confesses her sins to a man. When she receives Confirmation, a man does this. The Pope is a man. And the angels are called he. Christ is male. God is called He. I think you have to consider the very subtle conditioning that comes through. She is conditioned to think in terms of specific inferiority because of this (p. 21).

Both de Beauvoir's and Daly's analyses demonstrate the salient tensions between identity, feminism, and Christianity. Originally, Daly argued for equality between men and women in the Catholic church, stating that equality and religion need not be mutually exclusive. Over time, however, Daly's perceived and lived conflict between feminism and Christianity dominated her work as she shifted to promote the notion that religion was not made for women. Conversely, the work of Jessica Pauly (2018) on how Catholic women navigate feminism and the church demonstrates examples of women living through, between, and among diverse narratives despite and including the conflicts that arise. The women interviewed in Pauly's study all identified as Catholic and feminist. All of the women readily acknowledged the innate tensions present between Catholicism and feminism but persisted in their participation of both through framing techniques such as highlighting endurance and minimizing difference. At times, the interview participants had to employ strategies to cope with the conflict that emerged from clashing aspects of their lived narratives. Out of 20 participants, most of the women considered abandoning Catholicism at one point in their identity journeys, while two of the women considered abandoning feminism.

Identity

Since the linguistic turn in the early 20th century which shifted research foci from an objective perspective to a subjective reality, several organizational communication scholars have delved into the journey of explicating identity, its formation, and tensions that arise because of it (Putnam & Mumby, 2014). As noted by Jessica Pauly (2018), “Identity is important because it informs who we are and how we describe ourselves to others” (p. 36). Scott *et. al* (1998) write, “Thus, any identity includes core beliefs or assumptions, values, attitudes, preferences, decisional premises, gestures, habits, rules, and so on. Identities, ideally speaking, provide us with relatively stable characteristics that make up self” (p. 303). While I support and promote the fluidity of individual identities, a major tenet of queer theory (de Lauretis, 1991), for the sake of this project, I chose to define identity as an enduring aspect of agents to encourage accentuation of tensions that arise because of identity. Identity tensions are more central to this specific work than identity fluidity, though both can coexist and create fascinating interplay for future research. Structuration theory has become a key framework often cited in organizational communication works that discuss identity. First proposed by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984), structuration theory highlights structures and agents as the two entities that reciprocally co-construct identity of and within an organization. The dual nature of the identity formation process within an organization is a central tenet of structuration theory. Agents are the individuals within an organization whose actions create constraints that become the rules of the organization itself. These rules and resources become the structure in which future agents identify themselves. Giddens (1991) not only argues that actors (or agents) are the creators of social systems and are created by those same systems, but also takes into account the process of self-identity through reflexive activities. Identity therefore becomes not only a product of the structure-agent duality,

but also a self-made concept based on continually creating one's own identity through actions. Organizational identity takes on a similar process to self-identity in that it is constituted through shared and sustained beliefs among agents of the organization (Sarason, 1995).

Subsequently, Scott *et. al* (1998) utilize structuration theory to explicate how identification, is the primary form of organizational attachment that leads to a sense of belongingness. For clarity, identification here is defined as “the process whereby an individual’s beliefs about an organization become self-referential and self-defining” (Pratt, 1998, p. 175). Three aspects of structuration theory are applied to the Scott *et. al*’s (1998) notion of structural identification: 1) the duality of identity formation in organizations, 2) regionalization of multiple identities producing multiple “targets” of attachment, and 3) situated activities to explain how multiple attachment targets exist concurrently. This theory promotes the structural dual formation of individual identity and organizational identification and adds that it is not only a binary process by which identities are formed but rather involves a multiplicity of simultaneous, intersecting and/or disparate identities and attachments. The 1998 theory’s allowance for variance and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) ages well as complexities of identity have risen to the fore of the American zeitgeist in the last two decades. The notion of “targets” of attachment (or resources of identity) mentioned in structural identification serve as particularly useful analogies for the purpose of this current study, which will be explained further in the results section. Finally, structural formation of identification suggests that situated activities, like interactions with other social actors in an organization, are partly responsible for forming an agent’s organizational identification. Based on this assertion, organizational identification and an individual’s identity are fluid and amenable to change situationally. However, each situational formation of identification leads to an agent’s sense of

belongingness within the organization. The belongingness hypothesis refers to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory that humans seek to form and maintain positive and lasting relationships based on a core motivation to belong. Cheney *et al.* (2014) discuss the notion of belongingness as a result of the individual-organization bond. However, Pratt (1998) argues that person-organization is too broad of a theory compared to organizational identification as a source of belongingness. The author explains, "Individuals seek to identify with social groups, such as organizations, in order to feel safety, belonging, or self-esteem, or to satisfy a search for transcendent meaning" (p. 185). Belongingness, according to Pratt, becomes a principal consequence of an agent's identification with an organization.

As suggested by Scott *et. al* (1998), individual identity is not homogenized by identification within an organization. *Intersectionality*, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), refers to the layered, complex, multivariate identities held by an individual. While Crenshaw wrote about women of color and their disproportionate experiences as survivors of violence, the term intersectionality may refer to any person and their experiences of oppression regarding a combination of race, religion, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, etc. Particular to this study is the intersection of gender, sexuality, religion and the oppressions faced by lesbian former members of Cru.

Race

The connection between whiteness and Christianity has grown exponentially as a subject of research in recent years. Australian author, Jon Stratton (2016), argues that Christianity in Australia and whiteness are implicitly linked, especially when compared to non-Christian faith traditions, particularly Islam. In the U.S., Davis (2019) states that Christian nationalists more

strongly oppose public policies that are perceived to support non-white groups (i.e. welfare, immigration). The entanglement of whiteness and modern Christianity can also be seen in the artistic renderings and depictions of the Christ figure as white-skinned with light brown or blonde hair and blue eyes, rather than illustrating that his true skin, eye, and hair colors were likely dark brown or black.

It is crucial that I, a white author, acknowledge ways in which whiteness plays a role in this study. This acknowledgement came after I received invaluable feedback from my thesis committee stating that whiteness is a relevant system of hegemonic oppression much like conservative Christian heteronormativity. All participants in this study are white. The relevance of whiteness and white privilege was reiterated in my interviews with former Cru staff, as many of the participants mentioned cultural tensions that the organization is facing today after an internal document written by hundreds of current Cru staff criticizing critical race theory surfaced (Yee, 2021). I am appalled and, frankly, not surprised that many leaders in Cru came together to write a document condemning integrating critical race theory (Crenshaw *et. al*, 1995) into teachings on compassion and inclusivity in the organization. I firmly support and value racial equality and equity in all cultural spaces as part of the feminism I employ in my personal and academic life.

Concertive Control

The theory of *concertive control* serves as a useful framework for analyzing evangelical organizations, specifically Cru, given its decentralized and often peer-oriented leadership structure. Concertive control can manifest as a top-down system, a work-level structure arising from interactions, or can be an integral part of the organization's constitution, particularly, Zorn

et al. argue, in values-based religious groups (2000). Research in organizational communication regarding concertive control gained much momentum since its inception in 1985 including studies on the U.S. forest service (Bullis and Tompkins, 1989), a bank in Bangladesh (Papa *et al.*, 1997), the temporary help industry (Gossett, 2002), an aerospace facility (Larson and Tompkins, 2005), and many others. Barker (1993) demonstrated the concertive control model through a longitudinal case study of a company, ISE Communications, as it underwent the transition from a conventional bureaucratic structure to a self-managing team structure. The research question of the article (though not explicitly stated this way) was to see if the “iron cage” created by bureaucratic structures would be loosened if another system was put into place. The self-managed teams system underwent three stages as it was realized: 1) Consolidation and value consensus, during which employees were separated into teams and they unanimously decided upon which values they would base their work strategies, 2) Emergence of normative rules, during which new team members were socialized into the establishing team structure and expected to “fall in line” (there was also a growing sense of tension among team members during this phase), and 3) Stabilization and formalization of rules, during which the teams’ values consensus morphed into somewhat rigid rules, much like those of the previous bureaucratic structure from before (Barker, 1993). It became apparent over time that the concertive control model seemed to encourage a heightened exertion of control over the employees, one that made them uncomfortable. One employee spoke about how she felt bad for not fulfilling a shipment order in time, which hints at a personal, individualistic effect that concertive control may have in self-managing team structures. She herself expressed shock at her own bad feelings in response to not completing her work as expected of her. Barker aptly points out a “heightened intensity” (p. 424) of norms in the concertive control model, an effect caused by the heightened level of

visibility of one's actions given that one's colleagues had become, in a sense, bosses to one another. Some workers complained that they felt more watched under the new system than under the old one. Some compelling evidence emerges that suggests Cru practices concertive control, which will be further explicated in the discussion section. This study is not the first to observe concertive control in religious environments. Communication scholar, Tammy McGuire (2010), critically examined the effects of concertive control in parochial boarding schools. McGuire notes:

... [the] examination of spiritual approaches to organizing noted that concertive control of spiritual norms and values was more prevalent in the absence of bureaucratic attempts at control. Furthermore, the more organizational members identified with an organization, the more likely they were to attempt to preserve that organization's spiritual norms via measures of concertive control (p. 90).

Other current research on religion and control ranges from calculating individual self-control based on input of religious trigger words (Rounding *et. al*, 2012) to China's post-Mao governmental regulations on religious practice and behavior (Potter, 2003). However, after searching Google Scholar and major communication journals (*Journal of Communication*, *Communication Monographs*, *Organizational Science*, *Human Communication Research*, *Management Communication Quarterly*), I found no existing research regarding critical analysis of methods of control in Cru.

I also wish to acknowledge the complexity of researching control in religious organizations – for the sake of this study, I will only speak on Evangelical Christianity. The sole wielder of power and control, according to Christianity, is God himself. Some Christians even believe in predestination, which suggests that humans have no free will to accept Jesus Christ as their savior, but rather that some are chosen for eternal life in heaven, and some are not (Thuesen, 2009). The radical belief that all power and control over humanity and the universe

resides within a single intangible deity complicates the discussion of control in Christian organizations. Technically speaking, leaders in Christian organizations are meant to be acting out their positions of power as representatives of God with no expectation of selfish gain. In Christianity, it is widely accepted that cisgender men are more fit to hold those positions of power than women or non-binary individuals, based on several passages found in the Bible. This assertion is supported by the notion that there was a “feminization” of Christianity in the 20th century representing an increase in women’s active roles in churches, suggesting that the history and foundation of the religion was originally intended to be masculine (Pasture and Art, 2012). If decrees about fitness of leadership, positions of power, and maintaining control come from the Creator of Universe, how is a lowly ranked member of a Christian organization to question or challenge it? Leaders in Christian organizations will defer to God’s sovereign authority when justifying decisions regarding appointments to leadership. God holds all control and leaders (usually cisgender, heterosexual men) enforce that control. The undeniable, objective, capital-T Truth, according to Christians, is that one God is in control. Christianity firmly relies on a singular objective reality, and this study does not. Further explanation is provided in the methods section.

Epistemologies

This study acknowledges the epistemological underpinnings of (lesbian) identity work. What counts as knowledge? Who is responsible for knowledge production? How do personal experiences and storytelling contribute to academically rigorous research? I consider these questions while expanding three epistemological categories relevant to this study: emotion and postqualitative work, feminist autoethnography and queer reflexivity, and onto-epistemology. While I separate these categories in this section for the ease of the reader, I acknowledge that

each category overlaps and co-constructs the next. I encourage readers to view the categories as intimately connected by blurred boundaries and codependent upon one another.

Emotion and Postqualitative Work

“I feel therefore I can be free.” – Audre Lorde, 1984

Emotion plays a central role in this study. Through storytelling, lesbian former members of Cru recount their emotionally tumultuous experiences as they wrestled with self-identity and belonging within an Evangelical Christian organization. Feminist scholar, Alison Jaggar (2014), posits that emotion as epistemology in qualitative research has long been underestimated. She writes, “...by construing emotion as epistemologically subversive, the Western tradition has tended to obscure the vital role of emotion in the construction of knowledge” (p. 378). While specific emotions or emotional experiences may not be widely applicable or scientifically repeatable, the value of emotion as a subversive method of inquiry stands. Leavy & Harris (2019) state, “Today, feminist scholarship still systematically argues the possibilities and problematics of women’s feelings (and emotions and feelings more generally) as “valid” research and posits their place in rigorous scholarship” (p. 17). Furthermore, Jaggar notes that emotions and values presuppose one another in that emotions arise as a response to an evaluation of an experience. Korean American education researcher, Jeong-eun Rhee (2021), asks: When do feelings count? Rhee frequently references counting feelings in her auto/ethnographic, post-qualitative, decolonial research on immigrant experiences in America and hauntings by her deceased mother. In *Decolonial Feminist Research: Haunting, Rememory, and Mothers*, Rhee challenges not only the notion of objectivity in research but also the nature of qualitative research itself. Rhee is uniquely positioned as an English as a Second Language Learner (ELL) to manipulate language to create new and innovative ways to describe human experiences. Some

examples of quirky terms that she utilizes are ‘rememory’, ‘bumping into’, ‘response-ability’, bat feminism, ‘m/others’, and onto-epistemology. For the sake of this study, I wish to draw readers’ attention to the notion and emotional experience of ‘rememory’. In her emotionally evocative work, Rhee recounts tales of her mother’s life while arguing that dredging up her mother’s rememories are not an action of the past, but instead unbound by time or space. Rememories, according to Rhee, are not unlike Schrödinger’s Cat: neither dead nor alive, or maybe both. Rememory is all inclusive of past and present, of self and other, of memory and action. Rememory is emotional, spiritual, physical, intellectual, intangible, and tangible. The evocative power of rememories is palpable in this study’s participants’ retellings of emotional experiences in Cru regarding their sexuality. The rememories, and emotions tied to them, are so integrated into the participants’ current lives that they expressed to me their willingness to be surveyed about their experiences with sexuality and Cru before this study even existed.

Jaggar (2014) reminds readers that emotions and feelings differ: one can claim to be outraged about an injustice without turning red in the face in that exact moment. Equally true is that emotions and feelings can act in co-occurrence, validating and reinforcing one another in physical and mental manifestations. While I will not speak for the participants of this study regarding their feelings, I perceive that emotions and feelings interact in some participants’ retellings of traumatic or disturbing experiences in Cru. Some participants use salient language cues to imply feelings that are accompanying emotions.

I, the primary researcher of this study and also a lesbian former member of Campus Crusade for Christ, am no exception to the emotional impact of this research. Emotional labor, as defined in Kelly & Gurr (2019, p. 105), “refers to self-disclosures, demonstrations of empathy and support, and other ways in which the researcher’s emotions are called upon in order to

facilitate the project.” I knew since the nascent stages of this thesis project that I would be required to perform great deals of emotional labor with the content matter bumping up against my personal history and essence of being. Reopening the part of myself that holds the joys and pains of my coming out while in an Evangelical Christian organization has been exhausting. I feel pain for my former self and wish I could make the whole thing easier on her. However, the joys and pains of myself and others is what inspired me to write this thesis to address the question: how do lesbian former members of Cru and former Cru staff discursively navigate identity tensions regarding homosexuality within the organization?

CHAPTER THREE - METHODS

Undeniably, this study exhibits elements of postqualitative research methodologies (see: Rhee's mother's ghost haunting her rememories). Postqualitative, as defined by Rhee (2021), can be posthumous, emotional, and defying of the constraints of time as we know it. Postqualitative, as defined by Bodén & Gunnarsson (2021), is nothing, anything, and everything. Needless to say, scholars have yet to home in on a singular definition of what postqualitative methodologies mean or how they work. Perhaps therein lies a key point: definitively explicating postqualitative would be antithetical to the method itself. Postqualitative methods allow for an author's ghost mother to haunt her, or for the memory of a first lesbian experience to feel like it is happening today, or for an act of betrayal to produce knowledge in a graduate thesis. I also believe that postqualitative methods serve as an appropriate method to examine experiences within Christianity given the often intangible and inexplicable nature of religious beliefs, figures and events like faith, angels, demons, a deity, rising from the dead, and a virgin birth. The following autoethnographic vignette about an interaction with people I met in Cru is exemplary of action-meets-self, self-meets-haunting, haunting-meets-betrayal, betrayal-meets-emotion. All names in the story have been anonymized for the privacy of those involved.

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On a Friday evening during my senior year in college, I was sitting alone in my room, bored out of my mind, and none of my apartment-mates were home. The phone rang. It was the person with whom I had my first lesbian sexual experiences just a couple years earlier. She went to a college in the next state over, and we spoke frequently as we were able to maintain a platonic friendship after our months-long lesbian encounters ended. "What are you doing?", she asked. I could hear other voices in the background. "Nothing at all," I replied. "Great!", she exclaimed, "You should let us kidnap you!"

My friend, Nora, and I met when we both participated in a stateside mission trip, “Summer Project”, hosted by Campus Crusade for Christ a few summers back. Our connection was electrifying from the moment we shook hands. There was something about her... something I couldn’t put my finger on. I just knew I wanted to spend *a lot* of time with her. I was 19 years old at the time, and she was four years older. We were inseparable that summer. The intensifying of our interactions together took place over a three-month time period. It started with playing music together, then having intimate conversations about our lives, then cuddling, then kissing, then more. We were in love in a way that I didn’t know was possible. I discovered that the unique *thing* about Nora was that she had been sexually involved with another woman a few years prior to our meeting. Her previous experience explained why she moved gracefully through our physical interactions, and my body was as awkward and rigid as a rusted tinwoman. With Cru staff and members surrounding us at all times, pulling off a secret lesbian love affair on an Evangelical Christian mission trip was tricky. We did get caught, and we did get in trouble. I was escorted back to my bunk in the middle of the night, scorned by a Cru staff woman (who many suspect is, herself, a lesbian). Nora and I were counseled separately that summer on *codependency* and forbidden from spending time alone together. We, of course, disregarded that rule entirely. Our love flourished.

Summer Projects were designed as a chance for Cru members to act as leaders halfway through the mission. The Cru staff packed their bags and left us 90-some college students to manage the Summer Project on our own. Nora and I were both denied leadership positions, post-staff departure, based on our ongoing *sin struggles*. When the summer came to an end, Nora and I, heartbroken at the thought of departing one another’s side, had to figure out a way to see each other as often as possible while attending our full-time college classes and jobs and living an hour and a half apart. We visited each other every weekend, which had a directly negative effect on my local college friendships. My best friend at the time, Emeline, felt replaced by this “new best friend”, not realizing that what Nora and I shared was vastly different than a friendship. But participating in homosexuality is a sin, and there was no way I could explain to Emeline the truth of my connection to Nora. I was losing my grip on my friendships whether I talked openly about my being gay or not. I felt alone, and there was literally no way to fix it except to let go of Nora, the person with whom I felt the most profound love and connection I had experienced in my life.

Our breakup had a horrifying impact on my mental and physical health. My internal battle of questioning my identity and my external conflict with Emeline and my friend group left me in an emotionally troubled state at all times, and my grades suffered dramatically. I didn't eat. I didn't sleep. I felt scared all day, every day, for reasons I couldn't explain. I experienced unshakable symptoms of severe depression and mental health issues that I didn't have the vocabulary to describe at the time. All I could think to say was, "Demons are haunting me". During the few classes I forced myself to attend, my eyes would close without my realizing it. I wasn't falling asleep – my eyes would simply close as I sat upright, facing the front of the room. It was terrifying. With the knowledge I have now, I would diagnosis the eye-closing as my body's response to severe emotional trauma and lack of sleep. I believed it was my fault the demons were there, because I had willingly participated in homosexual acts. I was being punished. I had dug my own spiritual grave. To this day, I have never felt as lost or in as much emotional pain as I experienced in that time in my life. Truly, it's a miracle I survived that experience at all, and it's important to note: many people don't. According to the renowned LGBTQ organization, The Trevor Project (2021), sadly, LGB youth are five times more likely to attempt suicide as compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Though I faced immense suffering, I was fortunate to never have thoughts of suicide (an act which I was taught was a sin).

Three years passed between the time that Nora and I ended our romantic interactions and her requesting to kidnap me on an uneventful Friday night. We both had had romantic relationships with other women in that span of time. The only difference between our experiences was that I was beginning to accept my sexuality and she was not. At that time, I was openly dating Sydney, and I felt true happiness and satisfaction with my romantic life again. I was in love, and I was learning how to not be ashamed of it.

I consented to letting Nora and my other friends "kidnap" me for a day. It was just the thing I needed that week: to be loved by and have fun with my dear friends. They drove the hour and a half to my apartment just to pick me up and drive back to their college town. I don't have clear memories of what activities we did while I was there, because the vivid and scarring memory of the car ride home eclipses any joy that I felt that weekend.

It was an intervention.

The entire hour and a half car ride home was an anti-gay intervention, led by none other than Nora herself. The hypocrisy was astounding, not to mention infuriating. I remember arguing

for my happiness, my right to choose who I love, and my belief that God loved me anyway. Bible verses were rhetorically thrown at me about how my lifestyle choices were sinful and leading me down a path of destruction to myself and those around me. The intervention was flawlessly planned, as they knew I couldn't escape a moving vehicle. When we arrived at my home, I remember stepping out of the car without saying goodbye – angry tears of betrayal clouding my eyes. It wasn't a spontaneously planned friend-napping. It was a calculated plot for a person who had lesbian relationships herself (unbeknownst to our friends) to convince me that the way I was living was sinful. Surprisingly, Nora and I were able to maintain a life-long friendship even after this hurtful event. When asked today, Nora says she has no recollection of the intervention.

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Feminist Autoethnography and Queer Reflexivity

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 733). The autoethnographic samples given throughout this work constitute autoethnographic *vignettes*, which Humphreys (2005) describes as a contextually rich portrayal of an event in an author's life. The practice of autoethnography has faced pushback in the field of communication as it has been viewed historically as unfavorable for its lack of generalizability (Fernando, Reveley, & Learmonth, 2019). What's more, autoethnography takes a toll on the writer and requires unprecedented vulnerability. Sprenkle & Piercy (2005) write:

By telling a story *on* ourselves, we risk exposure to our peers, subject ourselves to scrutiny and ridicule, and relinquish some of our sense of control over our own narratives. ... By giving up the power that comes from being disembodied and disinterested observers, we can claim a new sense of empowerment and add another dimension to our understanding of the human condition. Vulnerability is returned for strength (p. 156).

As an autoethnographer, I wrestled with the potential consequences of doing this type of work which violently throws open the curtains of privacy on my life, allowing all onlookers an

intimate view into the most personal corners of my psyche and experiences. What happens if my parents read this? What happens if those involved in the vignettes read this? How will people perceive me? But the counter questions to these concerns galvanize and inspire me: What happens if I *don't* write this? What happens if people *don't* learn about the struggles of lesbians in marginalizing spaces? Who will write this if I don't?

My personal concerns for marginalized people and identities are inherently feminist. Jaggar writes, “Emotions become feminist when they incorporate feminist perceptions and values, just as emotions are sexist or racist when they incorporate sexist or racist perceptions and values. For example, anger becomes feminist anger when it involves the perception that the persistent importuning endured by one woman is a single instance of a widespread pattern...” (2014, p. 387) I cannot deny that I feel feminist anger when I reflect on my experiences as a suppressed and marginalized lesbian in Campus Crusade for Christ, and my anger is vicariously lent to the lesbian participants surveyed in this study for what they endured. “Feminist autoethnography is a method of being, knowing, and doing that combines two concerns: telling the stories of those who are marginalized, and making good use of our own experience” (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005, p. 156). Furthermore, renowned feminist scholar, Sara Ahmed (2017), states that addressing issues of institutional power dynamics and institutional failure *is* feminist work. Feminist work allows women to tell their own stories. “Feminist work is often memory work” (p. 22). Ahmed warns against doing this type of feminist work if one does not feel stable enough in the moment to address the necessary hardships the work carries with it. Ahmed’s assertions proactively reify Rhee’s (2021) claims that feminist memory work is intrinsically tied with the present and with emotion.

The use of feminist autoethnography in this work is accompanied by a particular category of self-reflection: *queer reflexivity*. Queer reflexivity consequently grew from its larger foundational ancestor, queer theory, first termed by Teresa de Lauretis (1991). Queer theory has been written about at great length by famed scholars such as Judith Butler (1990), Eve Sedgwick (1990), Jack Halberstam (2011), and several others. James McDonald (2013), a leading scholar on the topic of queer reflexivity, asserts that reflexivity becomes queer when the question of difference and social location is central to the interrogation. As previously mentioned, queer theory itself does not take center stage in this work to maintain focus on identity tension rather than identity fluidity, though my personal philosophy is that both can coexist. I support and promote future research on the interplay between Cru and queer theory. Through my own queer reflexivity communicated by interspersed autoethnographic vignettes, readers can catch a glimpse of the fluid identity formation championed by queer theory, albeit not centralized theoretically in this work. McDonald (2016) argues that reflexive researchers understand that identity does impact fieldwork and should be observed and included as a formidable contributor to knowledge production. Queer reflexivity sheds a light on the multiplicity of gendered experiences within the LGBTQ community to subvert the notion of a monolithic and unified existence. McDonald encourages readers to avoid making sweeping assumptions of self and others in the research process to allow for evolving identities to transform and take shape. This study utilizes queer reflexivity as a lens through which the unique stories of each individual lesbian participant as well as my own autoethnographic reflections are told.

Onto-epistemology

“Who I am is never separable from what I know and how I know...” – Rhee, 2021, p. 3

Geerts and van der Tuin (2013) explain onto-epistemology as the method “in which being and knowing are always already entangled” (p. 171). Onto-epistemology is the *being in knowing, knowing in being*. Rhee (2021) claims that onto-epistemological research “demand[s] researchers to contest and cross the boundary of questions, topics, methodologies, and academic disciplinary knowledge that are counted as relevant, appropriate, and legitimate within a dominant western science regime” (p. iii). In this way, *being* lesbian qualifies a person to produce *knowledge* on lesbian experiences. While there is not one monolithic Lesbian Experience, a lesbian participant in a study like this contributes situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) to a larger conversation on marginalized lesbians in hegemonic spaces. The situated knowledge produced brings examination and scrutiny to one corner of lived experiences by lesbians in Campus Crusade for Christ, a severely understudied organization.

Onto-epistemology was a natural continuation of Marxist standpoint theory, later adopted by Western feminists in the 1980s as feminist standpoint theory (Jaggar, 2014). The theory posited that (cis) women could produce knowledge on women’s experiences because of their *being* women. Critics of the theory state that it assumes one unified women’s experience which does not leave space for uniqueness and difference. This is where I believe onto-epistemology steps in. Onto-epistemology, as a method rather than a de facto theory, does not require allegiance or identification with a group. It allows agents to produce knowledge based on *being*, no matter what affiliations an individual has or does not have. *Being is knowing, knowing is being*. This method affords lesbian participants in this study to be active producers of knowledge on the topic of experiences of marginalized lesbians in an Evangelical Christian organization. This method also allows me, the researcher and writer, to count my own stories as knowledge production. As previously noted, Sprenkle & Piercy (2005) state, “feminist autoethnography is a

method of being, knowing...” (p. 156). It is through onto-epistemology that the categories in this paper overlap and blur together. It is through onto-epistemology that we see how emotion meets reflexivity, reflexivity meets autoethnography, autoethnography meets feminism, feminism meets being, being meets knowing.

Utilizing the epistemologies listed above, along with structural and feminist theoretical commitments, this study asks the research questions: How do lesbian former members of Cru discursively navigate their past identity tension within the organization? How do former Cru staff and leadership perceive the organization’s stance on homosexuality? How do former Cru staff and leadership view Cru’s structure of leadership and authority? What stories of struggle and oppression are being told by former members of Cru?

Participants and Recruitment

The women former Cru members who participated in this study currently identify as lesbians but first experienced attraction to or romantic interactions with women while they were active members of Cru during their undergraduate degrees at various universities across the American Midwest. I, the primary researcher of this study, also identify as a lesbian former member of Cru, and I collate my identity and experiences into intimate autoethnographic vignettes to reflexively frame my work. An academic thesis is the outlet I have chosen to make my histories known and to expose the unjust actions carried out against me, marginalizing me as a sexual pariah within an organization and community I once trusted. I cannot and will not claim that the entirety of my lived experiences in Cru were negative or harmful. However, it is the negative and harmful experiences that made a deeper, longer lasting impact on myself, my identity, and others who experienced similar treatment. While I did not originally intend to write about Cru, through my acceptance into the Organizational Communication master’s program in

the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue University, I questioned what organizations have had the greatest impact on me throughout my life. Campus Crusade for Christ was the organization that protected and destroyed me during vulnerable, formative years of my young adulthood – and I am not the only one who feels this way regarding Cru.

The lesbian participants were recruited by their own expression of interest. Six women eagerly volunteered to participate. All participants are white, cisgender, lesbian women in their 30's from the United States. The majority of participants are women I knew from my time in Cru. The racial demographics represented in this study are reflective of the representation of racial diversity within the participants' branches of Cru. That is to say: there was very little racial diversity in Cru at the campuses represented in this study. Anecdotally, I remember meeting approximately five people of color out of nearly 500 members of Campus Crusade for Christ at my university. There may be several reasons for this, and I believe the question of racial diversity in Campus Crusade for Christ should be investigated as research on the organization expands.

Other participants who I sought to recruit for this study are former staff of Cru or individuals who had leadership responsibilities within Cru. I recruited 8 participants who are former Cru staff to contribute their narratives to this study. Men, women, and a non-binary individual participated in the interviews, and their ages range from 30s to 40s. They staffed branches of Cru at various universities in various states across the United States. Some former staff held Cru leadership positions outside the United States for a stint of time. These participants were recruited by their own expression of interest or through my reaching out to them on messaging apps to gauge their interest and availability in contributing their stories and

perspectives to this study. Interviews with these participants took place on a video chatting platform at a time and date of their choosing.

Originally, I had planned to interview current Cru staff, and I was notified by my university's IRB that a letter of permission was required from a high-ranking executive in Cru to interview their staff. When I reached out to the high-ranking individual in Cru, he denied my request for permission to interview current Cru staff about topics on identity and LGBTQ. My secondary option, which became my only option, was to interview former Cru staff.

Data Collection

Based on my own experiences in Cru regarding my sexuality, I knew that the content of this study may be sensitive for some participants. Therefore, I decided that the best method to acquire the lesbians' stories from their time in Campus Crusade for Christ would be through informal surveys. Utilizing a digital survey method, the participants could take as much time as they needed to think carefully about the open-ended questions posed and sit with the feelings the survey may have produced in them. I notified participants that they could spend up to two weeks considering their responses to the surveys before returning them to me. Most returned their surveys within three to five days. Given that the women former members who took part in this study live in various states across the country, the most efficient method of surveying was through a word document transfer via a secured cloud service online. Furthermore, I wanted to allow the Cru former members to have as much mental and emotional space and time as possible to go over the questions in the comfort of their own homes to reflect on vulnerable and tumultuous moments in their young adulthoods. I wanted to avoid any of the participants feeling social pressure when discussing such a fragile subject.

The video chat interviews with former Cru staff were recorded, transcribed, then stored in the secure, cloud-based storage, Purdue Box. Privacy and protection of participants' identities was of utmost importance in this study; therefore, no identifying details of any participants are included in this study. All data stored in Purdue Box will be permanently deleted after the conclusion of this study.

Procedures

The surveys given to lesbian former members of Cru were stored on a secure cloud platform, Purdue Box, and a link to the survey document was sent to each of the six participants. Survey questions for lesbian former members of Cru (Appendix A) included: Were you aware of your sexual orientation when you were a member of Cru? What conversations did you have with Cru members (or staff) regarding your sexual orientation? What feelings did those conversations produce in you? What pushback did you receive from authority figures within Cru with regard to your sexual experiences? Were you subjected to reprisal or harmful repercussions at the hands of other Cru members or staff? Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews with former Cru staff took place remotely through video chatting platforms like FaceTime and Zoom. Interviews lasted between 30-90 minutes, depending on how much information and how many stories the participants wanted to share. Interviews were recorded for audio based on consent and preference of the participants. Interviews were transcribed verbatim using otter.ai. Interview questions for former Cru staff (Appendix B) included: What is Cru's stance on homosexuality? From where does Cru draw its stance on homosexuality and how might it differ from other Christian organizations? Have you ever personally interacted with a member of Cru who identified as gay/lesbian or who was labeled as "struggling with homosexuality"? How did those conversations make you feel? Is there anything you would change about those interactions as you

look back on them today? These survey and interview questions were designed to reflect the postmodern feminist research questions that focus on identity, queerness, and power/control which are central to this study.

Data Analysis

The survey questions focus on communicative exchanges between the lesbian former members of Cru and others within the organization with regard to their sexual identities and/or experiences. Like in much of communication scholar Charles Redding's works, I employ qualitative content analysis for analyzing the responses I have collected to ensure the project is framed as "developmental rather than definitive" (Buzzanell & Stohl, 1999). Content analysis serves as a useful method for deciphering meanings and connections between survey responses to produce a well-rounded and evolving picture of lesbian identity tension in Campus Crusade for Christ. In some cases, I let the participants' words speak for themselves – so to speak. In doing so, I employ Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis to identify common themes in the data that produce compelling extracts from participant contributions that connect this study's overarching narrative - from research questions to future directions. While this study contributes new voices to existing research on structuration, feminism, religious coping, identity, control, and autoethnography, it also shines a light on a severely understudied yet pervasive organization, Cru. Highlighting marginalized individuals' stories in an understudied Christian organization is a crucial step toward achieving true equality and equity in historically hegemonic spaces.

Cru-speak 101

I choose not to place this vocabulary list in a glossary because reflecting on the words sparks a visceral response within me, indicating that this list is more about me and my journey of communicative self-discovery than I thought. I laugh at myself recalling how I used to believe the words. I chose to define the terms myself as an act of subversion without looking up their official meaning, countering how the words used to define me. While many of these terms are popular across several sects of English-speaking Christianity, some of the terms I never heard outside of a Cru context.

spiritual warfare – the belief that actual demons, along with Satan, are battling for the ownership of human souls. Demons and Satan can use invisible or tangible media through which they manipulate the human soul. Spiritual warfare can be experienced on a personal or global level. “I felt a strong sense of *spiritual warfare* when I was trying to read my Bible, but the Devil kept making me think about sex.”

season – a period of time in one’s life, typically marked by a series of events or particular recurring emotions, oftentimes with a negative connotation. “I’m in a *season* in which God is teaching me about my weaknesses.”

the fall – a short phrase that describes humanity’s fall from God’s grace when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. “Thanks to *the fall*, we are all slaves to our sinful nature.”

fruit – popularized by Bible verses that describe “bearing fruit”, fruit refers to the positive consequences of events or actions in one’s life supported by their active Christian faith. “There is *fruit* in his friendship with the new pastor.”

codependent – While this term can be used as secular jargon to describe a relationship in which two people are too attached to one another, this term is used in Cru to describe people (specifically women) who have a same-sex romantic attraction to one another. “Your *codependent* relationship with her has to stop because it is not pleasing to the Lord.”

spiritual gifts – a list of talents that are said to come from God and are assigned to all people uniquely. “I have the *spiritual gift* of teaching, but my father has the *spiritual gift* of leading.”

DTR – an abbreviation for “define the relationship”. This term is used for romantic, heterosexual relationships and describes a conversation in which both parties explain what they want out of the relationship and what direction it is going in the future. “My boyfriend and I *DTR*’d last night!”

quiet time – a section of time, usually 30 minutes or a few hours long, in which a Christian spends time praying and reading the Bible as a quasi-meditative spiritual practice. “My *quiet time* with the Lord this morning was amazing.”

my walk – a phrase used to describe a Christian’s belief in God and relationship with Jesus. “I know how badly pornography affects *my walk*, so I avoid it the best I can.”

discipler – a person in Cru, usually Cru staff or student leadership, who privately mentors subordinates in the organization. “My *discipler* told me today that I need to focus more on what the Bible says about purity rather than focusing on what I hear in our society today.”

share the gospel – this phrase describes the act of evangelism. “I had the amazing opportunity to *share the gospel* with my boss today at work.”

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CHAPTER FOUR - FINDINGS

When I initially outlined the goals for this study and imagined the participants I wanted to interview, my first inclination was to investigate the stories of lesbian former Cru members because of my own experiences and knowing that I have easy access to lesbians with similar stories to mine. A total of six lesbian former members of Cru participated in this study. I linked a secured survey document on Purdue Box to each participant and gave them two weeks to fill out the survey at their leisure. All participants returned the survey to me well before the end of the two weeks. All six women are white, in their 30s, cisgender, able-bodied, and middle-class. One of the lesbians was a more active member in a similar but different organization from Cru; therefore, many of her responses were not able to be included in this study directly.

Secondarily, I wanted to recreate the identity tension I am investigating by dialogically positioning interviews with current Cru staff about their beliefs and practices regarding homosexuality against the narratives of the lesbian former members. I was informed by my university's IRB that I would need special permission from an executive of Cru to interview their current employees. I was pointed toward a man in charge of some form of human resources within the organization. I sent him an email politely requesting to have access to employees of Cru to interview them for my thesis project. The man declined without explanation. His rejection put an immediate halt to the smoothly flowing process of data collection and research that had been occurring up until that point in time. I was forced to reimagine and restructure the dialogic tension my work was meant to display. My advisor suggested that I interview former Cru staff, because they would have the same knowledge without an official, current affiliation with the organization. After amending the IRB scope for the study and receiving an approval, I told one friend about the new direction of my research, and she got the snowball [sampling] rolling. Each

person I interviewed gave me additional phone numbers of other former Cru staff that they knew would be interested in participating in this study. I was able to speak to eight former Cru staff members and engage in informative and vulnerable conversations with each participant. All former Cru staff participants are white, ranging in age from mid 20s to late 30s, able-bodied, middle-class, and represent a range of genders (woman, man, and non-binary). All the interviews were 45-90 minutes long.

To review, the research questions that are addressed through participant surveys and interviews are: How do lesbian former members of Cru discursively navigate their past identity tension within the organization? What information, feelings, and opinions do former Cru staff and leadership communicate about the organization's stance on homosexuality? How do former Cru staff and leadership view Cru's structure of leadership and authority? What stories of struggle and oppression are being told by former members or staff of Cru? I begin by sharing themes and comments from the lesbian former members' surveys. After that, I present excerpts and summaries of my conversations with former Cru staff. All names have been changed for the privacy of the participants. In the lesbian former members' survey responses to questions on sexual identity tension during their membership in Cru, the following themes emerge: anxiety and shame, and fitness for student leadership.

Lesbian Former Members: Anxiety and Shame

Kacey was a devout member of Cru during her undergraduate life. She expressed that the most overwhelming emotion she experienced during her affiliation with Cru regarding her sexuality was anxiety. She felt anxious, wondering what her attraction to women would "mean about [her], [her] future, [her] salvation." Kacey's lesbian thoughts and experiences while being a member of Cru caused her to question if she would still be accepted into the Christian heaven

and even made her question the existence of the Christian God altogether. She also experienced depression and a fear of being “found out” and “shunned”. Kacey shared an anecdote of a pivotal conversation that caused her to feel fear and shame regarding her sexual orientation and feelings. She heard a group of Cru members “sharing a prayer request” with one another about two girls who had been romantically involved and were ultimately forced to separate and end their friendship. Kacey felt scared and angry because firstly, she realized that people in Cru might talk about her behind her back if her sexuality was discovered by others, and secondly, she was angered by how that group of Cru members was gossiping about someone’s sexuality under the façade of “sharing a prayer request” about a friend.

Following three years of intense participation in Cru, one respondent, Brenda, voluntarily stepped away from membership in Cru to take time to discover her sexual orientation during her senior year in college. She expressed that once she realized she was a lesbian and reconciled that realization within herself, she was selective about with whom she shared the information of her sexuality because “It felt very shameful, it felt very disheartening, and some individuals ‘damned me’ for my ‘lifestyle choice’.” Brenda’s use of quotation marks around the words “damned me” and “lifestyle choice” are indicative of her disapproval of such terms. To me, those terms are coded phrases adjacent to *Cru-speak* that demonstrate the speaker’s notion that heterosexuality and homosexuality function inherently differently in that one is natural (heterosexuality), and one is a choice (homosexuality). However, in recent years, I have had conversations with conservative Christians during which they told me they believe people can be born with homosexual tendencies just like humans can be born with a propensity for any other sin. While the individuals who spoke that to me likely perceive themselves as the Christian version of *woke*, to the LGBTQ community, it’s a continuation of the tired accusation that homosexuality is a sin

whether it's a "lifestyle choice" or not. Later in the survey, Brenda claimed that the motivations for her decision to step away from Cru were "fear and shame" even before knowing her sexuality for certain.

Much like Brenda, another respondent, Amber, also "felt shame after being open" when she confessed her "same-sex attraction" to Cru staff members. The most painful aspect of being open for Amber was that she seldom shared vulnerable details of her personal life with anyone, and when her confession was met with "sadness [and] disappointment", she "immediately regretted it". Amber recounts a time when she applied to go on a Summer Project (a mission-type trip for Cru members and staff to places around the world for the purpose of evangelizing to people in the target regions), and in the application form, she was asked if she "struggled with same-sex attraction". She responded honestly and consequently received a phone call from Cru staff telling her she needed to seek an accountability partner who could help her address her struggles with same-sex attraction. Amber goes on to say, tongue-in-cheek, that she had to let somebody know her "dirty little secret" before being allowed to go on a Summer Project. It is doubtful that Amber would have considered her same-sex attraction a "dirty little secret" if the Cru questionnaire had not first framed homosexual attraction as a "struggle".

Another respondent, Naya, admitted that throughout her years of participation in Cru, she was secretly engaging in same-sex sexual activity with other women, and the resulting feelings "that surfaced" were "anxiety... fear... shame... hopelessness." Naya cites the cause of her negative emotions to be Cru's framing of homosexuality as "sinful". She claims to have "consistently felt watched, judged" by Cru staff after rumors spread about her alleged "sinful" behavior.

The anxiety and shame that the lesbian former members felt were a result of the lack of acceptance of homosexuality in their conservative Christian social circle, Cru. Many participants indicated that they knew their peers and Cru leadership would judge them, and even punish them, if they let their sexuality be known. There is an undeniable stigma in Cru associated with homosexual behavior and actions, and the stigma results in the mistreatment of Cru members who identify as LGBTQ. They are often judged or shunned by their peers, and they are not allowed to hold student leadership positions as they are seen as unfit to lead others according to the moral laws of the Bible.

Lesbian Former Members: Fitness for Student Leadership

In Cru, it is seen as a privilege to be selected for student leadership positions. Typically, a member is selected for a student leadership position based on the recommendation of an older student leader or based on nomination by Cru staff. In order to be recommended or nominated for a student leadership position, a member must show that they are trustworthy, mature, biblically well-read, and have a strong “walk with the Lord” (see *Cru-speak* vocabulary list for a detailed definition). Almost all the respondents mentioned something about leadership roles within Campus Crusade for Christ. Leadership roles are determined by 1) age and seniority (a freshman usually does not hold a student leadership position), 2) willingness to lead (a personal expression of desire to lead), and 3) recommendation from an authority figure in Cru (a current leader determines leadership fitness after observations and conversations with a possible candidate for leadership). Most of the comments on leadership centered on how the women were not considered fit to occupy such a position based on their sexual orientation, experiences, or questioning. One respondent, Sammy, states that she did not explicitly face repercussions in Cru for her same-sex activities, but that she was not asked to repeat the leadership roles that she had

occupied for years once she had made her lesbian sexual orientation known. On the other hand, Amber, who had never held a leadership position in Cru, projected that if she “had tried to participate more, or taken on a leadership role, that [she] might have experienced harmful repercussions.” While Amber did not provide details on the harmful repercussions, it is easy to assume – based on other participants’ comments - that one of them would have been her removal from a student leadership role.

Naya, who held various student leadership positions, shared two interesting stories about conversations she had regarding her ability to lead within Cru. Firstly, when she auditioned to be on the worship team her senior year, her impressive performance on guitar and vocals was met with skepticism because she, a woman, was not seen as capable to lead a worship team. While she acknowledges that the Cru staff judges of the audition were issuing an attack more on her gender than on her sexual orientation, she claims that the two were intertwined. Naya attempts to understand the event through implied questions the judges seemed to be asking: “Your sexuality makes you masculine, why can’t you be more feminine? Why can’t you be like the rest of the women?” The other anecdote Naya shared took place on a Summer Project. During Naya’s Summer Project, there came a time when Cru staff left halfway through the summer and selected students who would take their place as leaders. The woman staff leader of Naya’s Summer Project pulled her aside before leaving and expressed disappointment in Naya, claiming that she wanted to choose her to be the female student leader, but that it was obvious that Naya was distracted by same-sex attraction, therefore rendering her unfit to lead. While the woman staff leader did not explicitly use that verbiage, Naya understood that she did not embody the correct identity of a leader in the organization. Despite her being selected to lead a Bible study on her

campus, which proves that she has the skills necessary to lead in Cru, her same-sex attraction on Summer Project led to the disintegration of her leadership reputation in the organization.

As within many formal organizations, there exists a shared vernacular among participants that forms invisible but perceptible boundaries between members and non-members. Given that Cru is no exception to this phenomenon, the women's interview responses were replete with quotation marks denoting, what I call, *Cru-speak*. The following are some examples of *Cru-speak* mentioned in the lesbian former members' survey responses: "sin" (an action against the will of God), "save me" (religious salvation through acceptance of Jesus as savior), "my sin-nature" (the innate tendency of humans to act contrary to God's will), "confession" (religious practice of exposing one's sin to peers or leadership), "struggle" (common definition used here, but Cru applies the term to behaviors like homosexuality which are typically not viewed as a struggle in secular societies), "same-sex attraction" (Christian code for homosexuality), "issue" (referring to lesbian/homosexual tendencies), "idolatry, lust, and codependency" (Respectively: putting a person or thing in the place of God, having sexual thoughts and feelings toward someone outside the context of marriage to them, a relationship in which both parties depend on one another to an unhealthy and obsessive extent), "sharing a prayer request" (speaking a concern to peers in hopes of soliciting their prayers about the concern), and "lifestyle choice" (the belief that homosexuality is a chosen behavioral pattern instead of an innate sexual orientation). Furthermore, many of the women's responses to the first question, "Were you aware of your sexual orientation when you were a member of Cru?", were not a simple yes or no, primarily because Cru as an organization would not use or allow others to use terminology like "gay", "lesbian", or even "homosexual". When certain language is not available for use, it becomes difficult to respond to otherwise simple questions. Additionally, the LGBTQ process of

coming out (revealing one's own sexual orientation or gender identity) is not necessarily linear, which provides further context for a seemingly simple question not soliciting simple answers. Naya notes, "it was almost as if Cru didn't have the language or confidence to speak about same-sex attraction." Despite her interpretation, she goes on to state, "[Their] stance was clear: it was a sin."

Former Cru Staff

Interestingly, six of eight of the former Cru staff I interviewed also currently identify as queer or lesbian. To reiterate, I did not specifically seek LGBTQ former Cru staff for this study. Fortuitously, the technique of snowball sampling led me to them (or them to me). All but one respondent referred me to friends and acquaintances who also used to be Cru staff. In this section, I will refer to the former Cru staff respondents as "respondents", "participants", and "interviewees", as those terms will not be used in the subsequent paragraphs to describe the lesbian former members. Respondents' motivations and willingness to be interviewed for this study ranged from curiosity to overt eagerness.

Common themes that emerged from interviews with these participants were: anger and frustration, regret, mental health, and race. The following text consists of former Cru staff participants' own words. I deliberately chose to format their interview responses in the following structure for two reasons: 1) Consistent with my theoretical assumptions, I want to privilege the voices of agents in an organization, and 2) As readers will see, each of the participants redundantly, repetitively, and forcefully (Owen, 1984) drives home a consistent theme of agreement across their responses to various questions regarding homosexuality and Cru. Furthermore, this format demonstrates how participants' anger, frustration, regret, and other themes surface at differing moments according to their experiences. Through organizing the

following data in this way, readers can first absorb the words of the participants before secondarily consuming my interpretation of the data.

1) What is Cru's stance on homosexuality?

Alexis: [speaking from the perspective of Cru as an organization] “We don’t really wanna know. We don’t really wanna have to talk about it. But if we have to say something, then no, you can’t be a leader [and gay] in our organization.”

Astrid: “Firmly against it. It’s unbiblical.” She later added, “I think they’re wrong, but they’re welcome to think that.”

Connie: “I don’t think they’ll ever be affirming because of their interpretation of the Bible... everyone has sin, but this one is seen as really bad.”

Jared: “[Cru] would affirm that all people are fallen into sin and brokenness, and that that sin and brokenness pervades all of who we are, every part of us, our intellect, our emotions, our sexuality, all of those things are fallen and able to be redeemed.”

Lance: Because he was about to get married, he had been thinking a lot about “how is marriage designed biblically, how has it been distorted... things like that”. He followed up by saying, “I feel very frustrated that this seems to be the topic that is like ‘absolutely not’, but how often is pornography talked about, or just sex outside of marriage?”

Maeve: “It was a no-no,” followed by exasperated laughter. They continued that Cru’s stance on homosexuality was “rarely blatantly stated because they were trying to maintain the myth of like we love everyone ... or that we are gonna love [gay] people so that they love Jesus and then change.”

Sibby: “It’s easy to be unclear,” she stated, referring to her opinion that Cru does not take an official stance on homosexuality publicly to avoid culture shaming. She later claimed that during her coming out process while still being active staff for Cru, she felt like her colleagues were thinking of her, “Why can’t you just shut up and pretend to be straight for longer?”.

Tara: “You can be gay, but you can’t act on it.”

2) From where does Cru draw its stance on homosexuality?

Alexis: “Umm... white, conservative evangelicalism,” followed by laughter.

Astrid: “They think that they draw it from certain passages and scriptures that are translated into English that they don’t really understand – and so they think that’s what God’s will is, I guess.”

Connie: She commented that Cru, now, has the official document about what its stance is on homosexuality as an organization, but “what every individual believes is actually different”.

Jared: “They [Cru] would hold to historic sexual ethics ... a definition of marriage between one man and one woman, and that sexuality ought to be expressed within that context.” Later, Jared described a hypocrisy he sees in Christians that condemn homosexuality faster than they condemn slaveholding. “If we are gonna look at the scriptures: 1 Timothy puts slaveholding and men who practice homosexuality next to each other.”

Sibby: This participant explained three categories relevant to this question: Side A, Side B, and Side X. She described that each ‘side’ is like a camp of thought within Christianity. Side A represents Christians who affirm the LGBTQ community and accept them wholly as children of God. Side B, where Cru is located according to Sibby, is the camp that says having homosexual thoughts or desires is not wrong, but you cannot act on those thoughts because the action is the sin. Side X represents the Christians who believe that every aspect of homosexuality is wrong, forbidden, and unbiblical. Sibby credits Side B thinking as a source from which Cru constitutes its stance on homosexuality and the LGBTQ community.

Tara: “People read 1 Corinthians 6:9 [which mentions that homosexuals will not inherit the kingdom of God] and say “yup, we take it as face value, unequivocally, absolutely, this is what the Bible says, no questions, moving on.” But they skip forward five chapters in the same book [which talks about women’s head coverings in church], and they say, “oh but there was cultural stuff, it was talking more about general modesty, it was the time, and that’s not relevant to us today” and it can be interpreted... without 100% taking it at face value.”

3) How are Cru staff trained regarding how to “deal” with homosexuality?

Alexis: “I honestly don’t remember receiving training on that other than the organizational stance of ‘yes this is a sin and we need to try to lead people away from this lifestyle’... I probably would have left a lot sooner than I did if someone would have sat me down in a training session and told me ‘this is how to tell someone not to be gay’.”

Connie: This participant recounted a notable moment at a Cru conference when someone stood up and said: “We are having a meeting for any staff that identifies as LGBTQ community’. That was the first time I’d ever seen someone up front communicate like ‘we have staff that deal with this’. So, I went to the meeting and was very surprised that there were so many people in that room... I felt so scared to step into that room at first, but then I felt so at home.”

Jared: “There was informal training on issues related to sexuality.”

Lance: “From what I recall, I do not recall receiving any training... It would have been nice to see that more readily available, because I did not see that readily available.”

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Complementary to the question stated above, many participants mentioned documents with statements regarding sexuality on them that they were required to sign as Cru staff.

Alexis: “Anytime I had been through any type of interview process, whether that was to join staff, or interview students for summer project or whatever, there was always like that question on [the interview document] like ‘is this your sin struggle’.”

Astrid: “I think they handle [homosexuality] poorly. I’m trying to go into my memory and see if it was even explicitly talked about that much or ever, or if it was just implicitly known in something you sign as a leader and then as a person on staff, maybe part of something you agree to and then you just consciously tuck that away and nobody ever talks about it again. I think they view it as something very shameful, so if you treat something that way and it’s dark and bad to talk about, then nobody talks about it and it’s just wrong and kinda silenced. Kinda like they do with sex.”

Maeve: “When you go on a mission or you’re applying for staff, on the application there’s a specific question about (air quotes) sexual sin, and you just have to bare your soul... I get very angry thinking about those forms because there’s this like idea that like both your boss or your discipler-mentor person has the right to know these really deep, weird things about you and then be able to determine if you’re good enough to be a missionary... I don’t feel like there was privacy like at all in those spaces ... You are continually expected to confess things.” The participant later added that they felt like they were being tracked by staff because of those applications forms and what they wrote on it.

Tara: During new staff orientation, Tara received an 8-page document called “Leading in a Complex Moral Environment” which talked about Cru’s stance on sexuality. “We had to sign something saying we agreed with it by the end of the summer.”

4) What conversations did you have with members/mentees about homosexuality?

Connie: The participant remembers mentoring one girl who came to her saying she struggled with homosexuality and Connie responded by saying “I don’t think you actually do”. Connie deeply regrets saying that because she feels like she co-opted the mentee’s journey of self-awareness. She also believes that she probably projected fear and insecurity about her *own* journey with same-sex attraction onto the mentee, so she didn’t want to believe the mentee actually struggled with it. “That wasn’t fair to her. Like why did I do that? That was out of my own fear.”

Sibby: “I have a lot of just like guilt and regret. Like we would do things for LGBTQ students and it was kind of a bait and switch like, ‘oh, but we also believe ... you shouldn’t be in a relationship’”. Sibby later went on to say, “I would want to change every single conversation... It will always be one of the greatest regrets of my life, I think, that I spent three years like really intentionally discouraging people from their true selves.”

Tara: A non-Christian, girl student joined Cru, became a Christian, and confided in Tara that she was a lesbian. Tara said it didn’t matter to her and that they should focus on other things before tackling the big topic of sexuality in their mentoring relationship. Tara’s fellow staff members

suggested they wanted Tara to tell the new member that she can't date women and can't act on her homosexual desires. Tara didn't want to do that, so she and the new member had their mentorship chats off campus to avoid the gaze of Tara's boss and so they could talk about whatever they wanted.

5) Mental health

Alexis: "The most urgent reason for leaving was I was really struggling with mental health issues and was kind of on the verge of a mental breakdown – suicidal, depressed, all that kind of stuff. And uh just really felt like I was getting the support I needed from my team, from my region, from whoever, and like what I needed was help, and I felt like I was actually being hurt more by staying on, so I decided to leave pretty abruptly... There was really a lack of knowledge or understanding on like dealing with mental health and mental health crises... anyone in the organization... kept doing things that weren't like helpful."

Connie: Connie saw a male friend of hers, who identified as gay and was in a relationship with a man, experience hardship in Cru at the hands of other staff because of his sexuality. "It was... angering." She explained that seeing her friend go through that pain made her fear for her own mental, spiritual, emotional, and social safety within Cru. "My body was physically being affected by the amount of shame I was living in."

Maeve: The participant says they struggled with mental health issues while transitioning between multiple mission trips for Cru. They felt tossed around by the organization without much regard for their need for stability. While making the transition from learning Chinese and living in China to learning French and living in France, Maeve noticed a "turning point in accepting a lot of [their] identities but also peacing out of the church world". A primary catalyst for this change in Maeve's life was based on how words and their meanings are fluid between languages, which, to Maeve, reflected aspects of human nature generally. From that moment, they began their process of religious deconstruction.

Sibby: Sibby bravely shared that she was hospitalized because of mental health issues while on staff with Cru. She says her main trigger was "the reality of like realizing I'll never have ... a partner, and I'll never be, like, normal... I was, like, considering killing myself". Leading up to her hospitalization, Sibby states, "Every time an attractive girl walked by, I like hated myself, this felt horrible... I hated myself so much".

6) Race

While I did not explicitly ask questions regarding race in Cru, many of the participants mentioned the topic of their own accord. This was mostly due to recent headlines in Christian media outlets that described an internal document of around 177 pages, written by a group of hundreds of Cru staff, proclaiming their disapproval of critical race theory. Their primary

complaint in the document was that Cru's recent shift to focus on social issues like racism distracts from Cru's central mission of bringing the gospel of Jesus to the world. Many participants of this study referred to the document in a tone of disapproval.

Alexis: "[Cru is] in a whole mess over racial reconciliation, ya know, the big bad wolf critical race theory", she laughs... They're really feeling that tension now in regards to race but I think that's also true when it comes to, ya know, stance on sexuality". When I asked Alexis where she thinks Cru draws its stance on homosexuality, she responded, "Umm white conservative evangelicalism... English translations of the Bible by educated white men", followed by laughter in seeming disbelief. "The organization as a whole is led by white baby boomers that sit in an office down in Orlando".

Maeve: "There are so many wild riffs and divides going on right now especially around race inside of Cru... There is a contingency that is convinced – like many conservative people these days – that critical race theory is just ruining the world. So, they're saying that these social issues are distracting from Cru's central mission of the gospel."

Sibby: "As far as like these last few years, they've done a lot of like racial reconciliation at all staff conferences. More conservative staff is like angry about that... because they're white nationalists".

Tara: "There are a bunch of old white men at the top of the organization and they're pulling the strings and they have the final say." She later added, "It's naïve to not recognize that [the Bible] has been translated by old white men".

7) Personal narratives and final comments

Some of the personal stories and final comments shared by the participants do not fit neatly into the question-answer format, but they hold much value on their own. One noteworthy anecdote came from Maeve when they were describing salient moments in their Christianity that gave them pause. During one of their art performances, Maeve recited the line that they knew was the most fundamental, most humble statement a Christian could make, "There's nothing good inside of me except Christ". After the performance, their art professor pulled them aside and told them, "That's not true". Reflecting on that moment gives Maeve pause today because it highlights the extreme beliefs and lack of self-worth into which Cru members and Christians are indoctrinated.

Another poignant narrative is that of Sibby. She says that she was *the* go-to person for LGBTQ related issues because she openly declared to Cru that she struggled with same-sex attraction but was choosing not to act on it because of her Christian convictions. Her sacrifice was seen as a shining example within the organization, and she was asked to mentor students with the same struggles and to give talks at weekly meetings about her celibacy. “Everyone was respectful of me as long as I was celibate”. After living that life of organizational fame, Sibby attended a conference of Christians who were accepting and affirming of homosexuality. When she got back to her campus after that conference, she decided it was time for her to come out in a more public way. She wrote a vulnerable blog post that gained 10,000+ views about her gay sexual orientation and her choice to not act on it. Some catastrophic consequences ensued. She lost financial donors (upon whom Cru staff solely rely for income), she lost friends, and she felt as if her Cru staff colleagues were thinking, “Why can’t you just shut up and pretend to be straight for longer?”. One colleague asked her, “Why do you have to be this public?”. After dwelling on it longer, reflecting on the negative responses to her blog post, and after being hospitalized for mental health issues regarding her suppressed sexuality, Sibby decided that maybe being celibate is not the only way to live righteously as a gay person. This sparked the final straw of controversy between Sibby and other Cru staff. Sibby states that, “I wasn’t fired ... it did come down to a very serious conversation with my team leader and the rest of my team, everybody was there, but where he just basically said ... if you don’t think that [celibacy being the only choice for gay people in Christianity] is true ... you shouldn’t be on staff”. So, she left. Interestingly, though the 177-page internal Cru document criticizing critical race theory is mostly about race, Sibby, who is white, was mentioned by her full name in the one page Sibby claims was dedicated to “hating gays”. Sibby’s full name is the only name of current or former Cru staff

to appear in the body of the document. The authors named her, specifically, to equate her progressive beliefs about homosexuality with what they perceive to be the harmful emphasis on other progressive ideologies like critical race theory. Sibby's appearance in the document along with the comments on homosexuality seemed shockingly out of place and tangential. The addition of Sibby and the topic of homosexuality made the document seem, to me, like a ranting conservative diatribe motivated by fear of difference and opposition to change.

Some final thoughts shared by participants that I wanted to be sure to include touch on their current stance on Christianity. I want to highlight these two participants' responses to show that, while many participants had similar experiences on Cru staff regarding oppression of their sexuality, the way their experiences reflect on their beliefs can differ.

Astrid: "You're indoctrinated for so long to believe that certain things are essential to your salvation and if you don't believe them, are you even a Christian? So, once I started questioning those things, it was just like: this is all about power and control."

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Me: Do you think Christianity and being an LGBTQ person are reconcilable?

Connie: "Yes".

Me: Do you identify as a Christian?

Connie: "Yes".

Me: And how do you practice Christianity these days after leaving Cru?

Connie: "With a struggle", she laughs. "I'm in a process of... deconstruction".

Complementing the participants' responses is a word cloud, pictured below, created by compiling the lists of most common words (prepositions and articles excluded) spoken during each interview with former Cru staff. The research questions for this study specifically address how participants communicate about their time, experiences, and struggles in Cru. This word cloud demonstrates the frequency with which the most common words were spoken during the interviews by representing their frequency in font size: the larger the font, the more frequently

the word was mentioned. The font colors and word locations are randomly generated and hold no innate meaning. Note that the words of my interview questions are also included in the word cloud, though I spoke much less frequently than the participants.

I uniquely interpret the content of this word cloud given my background in Cru and my participation in the vulnerable interviews with former Cru staff. One of the most interesting details that stands out to me when examining this word cloud is how small the word “sin” is (located between the letter *p* and *l* in “people”). In my time in Cru, and many other lesbian former members’ time in Cru, there was a heavy focus on the topic of sin and how any actions on same-sex attraction are sinful. It is surprising to me to see that the word “sin” was mentioned so infrequently in the interviews with former Cru staff (as denoted by its small font size) given its prominence in Cru and Christian vernacular. Another word I noted for its size and location is the word “god” embedded into and enveloped by the much larger word “cru”. Though word locations are randomly generated, the positioning of these two words in relation to one another intrigues me. The dominance of the word “cru” over the word “god” coincides with how membership in Cru felt for me: I strived for the social approval from the organization and its members more than I cared what any deity thought of me. I predict that I am not the only former member who feels this way. Lastly, and humorously, the word groupings “queerness session” and “gay interview” caught my eye as those phrases accurately describe how my interviews felt with most former Cru staff. Six of eight former Cru staff that I interviewed now identify as queer or gay/lesbian. After I asked my formal questions and gave them space to talk about their opinions and experiences first, many of the participants asked questions about my life. I openly shared vulnerable details from my experiences as a form of reciprocal respect for what they shared with me. I fondly reflect on our conversations of commissary and mutual vulnerability. I

have maintained contact with some of the former Cru staff participants because of their excitement about this project and our shared desire to create a supportive community for people like us.



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Personal Reflection on Interviewing

While conducting interviews and surveys with participants of this study, I have felt an array of emotions: intrigue, validation, hope, dread, excitement, and ire. Interestingly, that range of emotions splits on a gender gap: cisgender women and non-binary people with the positive, cisgender men with the negative. I have been in contact with three men during the interview portion of this study. Two men consented to be interviewed, and both men made it known that they view homosexuality as a sin. Both men left leadership in Cru for typical reasons that most people change jobs (i.e., money, the feeling of being “called” elsewhere, etc.). The third man consented to be interviewed, then stood me up and didn’t respond to any of my following correspondence. On the other hand, the lesbian former Cru members that I surveyed, as well as the women and non-binary former Cru staff that I interviewed, all told me that they stepped away from Cru indignantly because of the social injustice that they witnessed or personally experienced. Though I am referencing a sample size no larger than 10-15 people, this observed gender split speaks volumes to me.

Maybe it’s just easier for men to be in Cru, I think to myself. As long as they’re not gay. Or a person of color. Or trans. I try again: Maybe it’s just easier for white, cishet men to be in Cru.

Many of the women and non-binary people I interviewed have stated that they either no longer call themselves Christians or follow some aspects of Christian teachings but don’t often express them publicly.

Maybe it's just easier for white, cis het men to be Christians, I add.

The behavior I put on as the researcher varies depending on the participant. This is not to say that I let my biases impact the opinions of the participant. However, some participants, especially the women and non-binary participants, make jokes and give knowing nods when they communicate their feminist ideals as they reflect on their time in Cru. They seem to be saying to me, “I know you get it”. After I come to understand their feminist leanings and open-minded worldview, my body relaxes, and I respond with a shake of my head and an exasperated smirk. To one participant, I even went as far to say something like, “I’m supposed to be unbiased during these interviews, but I can’t help but agree with what you just said”. I believe my statement was in response to the participant calling Cru “kinda culty”.

While I initially felt guilty and like a “bad” researcher when I let my feelings be known during interviews, I have come to hold a different opinion over time. I believe my interacting with these individuals in as authentic a way as possible creates a safe conversational space that draws out rich and valuable qualitative data. To reiterate, I do not state any personal opinions or assert myself before a participant has a chance to share their own beliefs first. But I do cave in when a participant states that Cru’s beliefs are based on the biblical translations of dead white English men, then follows it with a laugh as if we are sharing an inside joke. I laugh with her.

Interviews with the men felt jokey in their own right. My extroverted, ENFP, Enneagram 4/8, Gemini self – if you believe in any of those labels – knows that to have a meaningful communicative interaction, all parties involved need to feel comfortable. I easily put myself in the conservative Christian mentality that I once held for many years. I remembered what American Christians joke about and how they talk. I cringe every time I see the Cru-originated

affectation of speaking out of the side of the mouth while smiling that supposedly demonstrates the person's relatability and humility. (Picture someone smiling with only half their mouth while shaking their head in disbelief and saying, "But I guess God just knows what he's doing!" Be sure to really emphasize the word "God", stretching out the short *o*, and adding a slight pause after the word "just" for dramatic effect.) I knew what verbiage to use, what questions to ask, and what topics men and women are (heavy quotes) "supposed to avoid". I did not suggest to them in any way that I am currently a Christian, but I do know how to talk to Christians. The men I interviewed were open and truthful about their opinions on homosexuality and Cru. On many occasions, I had to stifle my frustration when gayness was compared to "the sin of watching pornography" on multiple occasions.

I am certain there are men who are former Cru staff that left the organization because of their feminist convictions. Unfortunately, I have not had access to men like that yet. But to those men, and to the women and non-binary individuals that understand why membership in Cru and/or Christianity feels uncomfortable for minorities, I say the following millennial-favorite catchall...

Same.

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CHAPTER FIVE - DISCUSSION

This study seeks to provide a platform on which stories of LGBTQ former Cru members and former Cru staff can be shared. Specifically, this study strives to highlight marginalized narratives in hegemonic spaces, like the stories of lived experiences by lesbian former members of Cru. The research questions addressed by the participants' surveys and interviews were: How do lesbian former members of Cru discursively navigate their past identity tension within the organization? What information, feelings, and opinions do former Cru staff and leadership communicate about the organization's stance on homosexuality? How do former Cru staff and leadership view Cru's structure of leadership and authority? What stories of struggle and oppression are being told by former members or staff of Cru? Communicative, discursive navigation of emotions, experiences, and identity are the focal points of my analyses of participants' surveys and interviews. Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of structuration (Giddens, 1984) and a progressive, inclusive feminism (hooks, 1992), I will explicate below how this study's results demonstrate that coercive control (Barker, 1993) is inherent to Cru's organizational practices. I will also explain how the results show the push-and-pull phenomenon of structuration identity construction that occurs when Cru members and staff are asking fundamental questions about their own identities (Scott *et. al*, 1998). I will also highlight examples of religious coping theory (Trevino *et. al*, 2012) in practice within (and without) the organization that arise in the participants' responses. Lastly, the emotionally riddled responses from participants lend themselves to Jaggar's (2014) emotion-as-epistemology. I endeavor to categorize the most common emotions expressed in the responses – frustration and anger, anxiety and fear, shame, and regret – under each theoretical framework to promote emotion as knowledge.

Frustration and Anger at Concertive Control

Barker's (1993) theory of concertive control posits that organizations can exercise a deeper degree of control over its members if the organization entrusts its members to uphold organizational values and norms. In practice, peers assert control over each other for the sake of organizational unity, as they have been convinced that adhering to the organizations' values and norms benefits them. The result of concertive control is that peers control one another's behavior at all levels of the organization, which minimizes the need for executive intervention.

One salient example of concertive control is the document(s) that Cru members (and staff) are required to sign that inquires on their sin-struggles before going on any type of mission trip for Cru. Both lesbian former members and former Cru staff referenced the documents with exasperation. Former Cru staff, Maeve, stated they "get very angry about those forms" because the forms not only expose "deep, weird things" about a person but also determine a person's fitness for mission work based on the severity of their transgressions. These documents, while surely an initiative of high-level executives in Cru, is passed down through all levels of the organization to ensure value and identification alignment. The documents are enforced at the peer level, as concertive control theory suggests, and perpetuated as a sign of loyalty to the organization ideal of its members' identities. In the example of lesbian former member, Amber, who had to fill out a questionnaire that asked if she "struggled with same-sex attraction" before attending a Summer Project, her honest answers resulted in her being required to seek an "accountability partner": a peer to keep track of her actions in the organization. That requirement was frustrating for Amber, who didn't want a peer observing all her actions and behaviors. While Cru's leaders would likely say that their inspiration to require their members to have accountability partners is biblical (see Proverbs 27:17, for example), a secular viewpoint suggests that requiring accountability partners at all levels of the organization is an example of

concertive control: make the organization's members watch each other's actions to keep them in line with organizational values and beliefs. As I mentioned earlier, discussing values and beliefs in a Christian organization is difficult because they believe that their moral authority comes from the creator of the universe and that he dictates everything that happens on Earth. In this way, it is likely that Cru's leaders would not see accountability partners as a form of concertive control for the organization's sake, but for the sake of being loyal to what their deity demands of them.

Former staff member, Connie, commented that it was "angering" when she saw one of her friends and co-staff member come out as gay in Cru only to face extreme hardship at the hands of his colleagues. Connie was angry witnessing the pain her friend experienced as a consequence of his peers' lack of acceptance of his sexuality. Connie knew that her colleagues would exercise - what I argue to be - concertive control over her, as well, if she were to come out as gay.

Former Cru staff member, Astrid, recalls a rare occasion of seeing gayness directly addressed in Cru:

"The only time that I would remember that they had maybe talked about queerness or gayness in public was maybe when somebody had converted from (air quotes) queer to straight and was telling their testimony... because the church really loves that bullshit (rolls eyes)"

Astrid's use of the expletive "bullshit" demonstrates that she likely felt frustration when recalling the event. The word "bullshit" also implies her disbelief and lack of alignment with the organization's values regarding people claiming to convert from queerness to heterosexuality. Additionally, Astrid's eye roll emphasized her exasperated frustration with Cru's glorification of conversion therapy: a practice that is illegal in many regions of North America (Taglienti, 2021).

Lastly, and contrary to the other forms of frustration and anger about concertive control, Lance – former Cru staff – believes that accountability partners and denial for student leadership

positions should be applied to members who “struggle with pornography” the same way they are applied to members who act on their same-sex attraction. For this participant, I argue that concertive control worked in his benefit, so much so that he wishes peer control were exercised on all members of Cru equally. In this case, we see an example of someone who benefits from a system like concertive control because of his hegemonic identities (white, heterosexual, able-bodied man) and full adherence to organizational norms.

Anxiety and Fear about Concertive Control

The most common emotions expressed in interviews with former Cru staff and lesbian former members were anxiety and fear. One example of these emotions that, I contend, are a result of concertive control appears in lesbian former member Kacey’s story of overhearing her peers in Cru gossip about two other women members who had a romantic relationship with one another and subsequently had to end their relationship. Kacey feared for her own organizational social status knowing that her peers could spread news about her sexual orientation and/or experiences so easily. I argue that Kacey’s peers’ gossip was a form of concertive control and a method to perpetuate organizational norms by framing non-hegemonic sexual orientations as *other* (hooks, 1992). Kacey knew that she would be *othered*, too, if anyone found out about her sexuality. Her peers disguised the gossip as “sharing a prayer request”, but Kacey interpreted their gossip/prayer request as a coded communicative tool of control that could eventually affect Kacey and caused her a great deal of anxiety and fear.

Lesbian former member, Naya, felt anxiety around fellow Cru members and Cru staff because she “consistently felt watched, judged”. Her use of the word “watched” suggests an Orwellian sense of being observed by peers and authority as if they were waiting to catch her in an unacceptable act. Naya was also denied a student leadership position on her Summer Project

because she did not conform to the heteronormative values of the organization, therefore rendering her unfit to perpetuate the system of concertive control on her peers.

Shame in Structuration Identity-Identification

Scott *et. al* (1998) utilize Giddens' structuration theory (1984) to frame a conversation on the duality of identity-identification construction in an organization. Scott *et. al* explains that identification is a process in which identity is formed, especially when reflected off others in social settings. In this way, identification tends to demonstrate one's values and adherence to social norms within targeted groups, like membership in an organization. "Identification... represents the forging, maintenance, and alteration of linkages between persons and groups. Often made manifest in social interaction, identification in a structural sense represents the type of behavior produced by and producing identity" (p. 304). The authors emphasize the duality of identity creation and note that "not only are identity and identification products of one another, but they make sense of one another. I am a father because I act in fatherly ways, and my fatherly ways make sense because I am a father." (p. 307). In this example, "father" is the author's identity, and "fatherly ways" is the author's identification with parenthood. Interestingly, identification in this sense is based on social actions, and identity is simply fact. This duality, and the tension caused by it, emerge in various participants response, particularly when *shame* is mentioned.

When former Cru staff member, Connie, realized she had romantic and sexual attraction to other women, she felt shame because of the conflict in her heart and mind between the organization's desires (heterosexuality) and her internal identity (queer). "My body was physically being affected by the amount of shame I was living in." In Connie's case, her emotional turmoil physically manifested in her body, giving her clear warning signs that

something was not healthy for her. She left Cru shortly after that to honor her mental and physical well-being. I argue that the tension Connie experience was the tension that arises from the duality of identity-identification formation for lesbian (or LGBTQ) members of a conservative Christian organization, Cru. Connie eventually accepted her sexual identity for what it is, and she continues to wrestle with how her sexuality fits with her Christian beliefs.

Lesbian former member, Brenda, stepped away from Cru citing that “it felt very shameful” to embrace her lesbian sexuality. Even when Brenda wasn’t sure of her sexuality, she knew that she could not explore questions about her sexuality unless she stepped discontinued her identification with Cru. Similarly, lesbian former member, Amber, recounted the tensions she felt within the organization after she admitted to having attraction to same-sex individuals. Lastly, lesbian former member, Naya, commented the same struggle with feeling shame as she was discovering her sexual identity while in Cru. I argue that these tensions are due to the duality of identity-identification within Cru, an organization that does not support or affirm LGBTQ identities.

Regret as Religious Coping

Bourn *et. al* (2018) states that “guilt, shame, depression, self-loathing, and suicidal ideation were among the experiences reported by LGB individuals who experienced conflict between their sexual orientation and their religion” (p. 305). The authors contend that religious coping, the process by which an individual handles stress inputs by leaning on religious beliefs, can have positive or negative impacts depending on the practitioner. Positive religious coping would result in the individual feeling a closer connection to their deity and further affirmation of their religious beliefs. Negative religious coping, on the other hand, creates doubt of one’s beliefs and may generate a sense of existential instability. Both positive and negative religious

coping are found in participants' responses in this study, and they specifically manifest through comments on *regret*.

Former Cru staff member, Connie, employed positive religious coping when she insisted that her mentee did not “struggle with same-sex attraction” despite her mentee’s stating exactly that. Connie believed that what she was doing was right and in line with what God wanted from her: to turn people away from sin and point them toward him. In this sense, Connie practiced positive religious coping and she felt affirmed that she was doing right by her religious beliefs. During my interview with Connie, however, she expressed deep regret about that interaction with her mentee, because she now believes that it is wrong to not allow people to explore their own sexual identities. Today, Connie is facing negative religious coping as she believes that it is not wrong to be gay (contrary to the Christian Bible’s teachings), and she is struggling with reconciling her sexuality and her beliefs.

Another former staff member, Sibby, stated that she has “a lot of just, like, guilt and regret” regarding how she treated LGBTQ students while recruiting them into Cru. She claims that Cru uses a bait-and-switch technique with LGBTQ students to convince them that their sexuality doesn’t impact their fitness for membership in Cru, but when they join, they are told that their sexuality doesn’t impact their membership as long as they don’t act on it. At the time, Sibby engaged in positive religious coping, because she believed that God approved of suppressing the sin of homosexuality and she helped spread that message when recruiting new members. She went as far to say that practicing a bait-and-switch on LGBTQ members of Cru “is one of the greatest regrets of [her] life”. Today, Sibby expresses negative religious coping through her regret and her new beliefs that being gay and acting on it is acceptable, which contradicts the conservative religious beliefs promoted by Cru.

Contributions and Limitations

This study examines lesbian identity tension in Cru through surveys with lesbian former members and interviews with former Cru staff. The goal of this study's research questions was to form the following three major contributions to the field of organizational communication: 1) This work highlights marginalized voices and identities in a historically hegemonic space in the effort to add to the growing bodies of research that emphasize the value of underrepresented lived experiences, 2) This research is one of the first critical analyses of Cru, a severely understudied organization, whose name does not appear in any critical, published works in major organizational communication journals today, and 3) This work is one of very few in organizational communication literature that pairs participant narratives with the author's autoethnographic perspective. These contributions are meaningful and timely because of the current cultural uprising against social and systemic injustice based on race, sexual orientation, gender, ability, and all intersections of identities therewithin. Additionally, autoethnography is growing in popularity in many qualitative academic disciplines as a cultural shift to highlighting the value of marginalized lived experiences occurs. The participants of this study directly addressed my research questions regarding discursive navigation of lesbian identity tension in Cru, opinions on Cru's stance on homosexuality, and stories of struggle and oppression. The research question which focused on how former Cru staff view Cru's structure of leadership and authority was not ultimately integral or relevant to the findings, as the structure of leadership was not discussed as much as we discussed the types of people who are permitted to lead in Cru.

While this study does make major contributions to the field of organizational communication, it also has limitations. Firstly, the sample size of participants in this study is small. I utilized snowball sampling to recruit as many participants as possible, but given the sensitive nature of this research and the requirement of some degree of vulnerability (despite

anonymity), many would-be participants may find participation in this type of study emotionally challenging. Furthermore, former Cru members and former Cru staff do not have common gathering places, though this is starting to change with the existence of Instagram accounts like #DoBetterCru and other social media groups. When those online groups have more members and are more widely known, recruitment for a study like this one may be much easier.

Another limitation, which I have mentioned throughout this work, is race. I, as author, and all participants for this study are white. I personally knew very few (less than 5) people of color from my time in Cru between 2004 and 2008. Membership in my campus's branch of Cru was around 500+. Similarly, many participants reported to me that they knew few people of color from their own campus's branches of Cru. People of color are astonishingly underrepresented in Cru, and that is reflected in the race of the participants in this study.

One limitation came as a surprise to me throughout the interview portion of this work. My original intent for this study was to recreate the dialogic identity tension that occurs for lesbian members of Cru through pairing lesbian former member surveys with supposed hegemonic former Cru staff interviews. As previously mentioned, six out of eight of the former Cru staff now identify as queer or gay/lesbian; therefore, the dialogic identity tension could not be well represented because most individuals on both sides of the dialogue identify as LGBTQ. While this surprising turn creates valuable data and tells an interesting story, the limitation lies within this study's inability to robustly demonstrate the dialogic identity tension that exists between Cru members and staff regarding homosexuality.

Lastly, I did not receive approval from IRB to interview current Cru staff. This limitation was, at one point, stifling to my research process as I did not imagine other options for collecting data on opinions and experiences of Cru staff. My lack of access to current Cru staff means that

this study may include some claims made by the former Cru staff participants about Cru and its policies that may be outdated or may have changed within the organization. Additionally, not having permission to interview current Cru staff for this study means that I do not have official access to important internal documents, such as Cru's recently released official statements and organizational stance on homosexuality.

Future Directions

The online presence of the concept of *deconstruction* is on the rise. Deconstruction – building on Jacques Derrida's (1972) mention of the term - refers to the process of disentangling oneself from religious beliefs (often Christian) and critically analyzing the religious morals and values with which one was raised. Social media accounts based on deconstruction have surged in recent years, and digital communities are forming around shared experiences from conservative, religious upbringings. This increased attention on deconstructing and/or leaving religious spaces paves a path for academic critical analyses of major Christian organizations like Cru. Though this work is one of the first, particularly in the field of organizational communication, more research on Cru should follow. Based on my observations while conducting this study, I foresee a few valuable directions for future research on Cru. Firstly, the intersection of race and Cru must be further investigated. Some current events in Cru lend themselves to this type of future research, like the release of the 177-page document written by hundreds of Cru staff opposed to the teaching of critical race theory. Historic cultural shifts are occurring in the organization, and a critical analysis of such events could explicate Cru's impact on the world of young, evangelical, college students in the U.S. and across the globe. Secondly, research on Cru with a focus on organizational exit could prove valuable to understanding tensions that arise for Cru members and staff that were not discussed in this work. Thirdly, some participants in my study

mentioned the impact of fundraising on their well-being, as fundraising is the only source of income for Cru staff. This leads me to believe that analyzing the personal impact of finances on mental health for Cru staff could create valuable and interesting data regarding Cru's organizing practices.

Finally, this study places lesbian experiences in Cru at the center of the research due to my personal history as a lesbian in Cru and connections to other lesbians with similar experiences. I suggest that future research address gay, trans, queer and other LGBTQ+ lived experiences and tensions in the organization. As deconstructionist movements and communities continue to form online, LGBTQ former members or staff of Cru will become more visible and future participant samples of similar work to mine can be more diverse and inclusive. I encourage future researchers of Cru to consider Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality, as well as queer theory and the fluidity of identity, and how LGBTQ identities converge with race, ability, class, gender, religion, and other identities.

Conclusion

This study endeavored to investigate lesbian identity tension in the pervasive university campus organization, Campus Crusade for Christ (Cru). Additionally, I interrogated the lived experiences of former Cru staff to situate participants' responses in a dialogue with one another – one part from the member side, one part from the leader side. Interestingly, many of the former Cru staff participants that volunteered to be interviewed for this work also identify as LGBTQ and shared many similarities with the lesbian former members in their stories of struggle and oppression at the hands of Cru. Anxiety, fear, frustration, anger, and regret emerged as common themes among the participants' responses. Several participants also mentioned struggling with mental health issues while experiencing identity tension in Cru. Although all respondents in this

study are white, many of them noted that racial tensions are on the rise in the organization and staff are splitting along political divides. Based on the survey and interview responses for this study, I predict that future researchers of Cru may witness the organization's division or downfall. Conservative Christian organizations, particularly ones targeting young adults, are waning in popularity compared to the cultural uprisings we see today supporting progressive views of LGBTQ, race, and politics. In many ways, Cru's encouraging students into leadership positions can be seen as a counter measure against its own demise, training the conservative leaders of tomorrow, perpetuating white, heteronormative, conservative Christian ideologies that permeate and dominate even the most powerful milieus of our society today.

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A Letter to Many–

To the Cru staff man who denied me access to interviewing current Cru staff: What are you afraid of?

To the Cru staff woman on Summer Project who told me that I shouldn't spend time alone with that girl unless we had an accountability partner present: Let people be different.

To the girl I wanted to be alone with on Summer Project: I'm sorry that we couldn't allow our relationship to flourish. It's neither of our faults. I'm glad we're still friends.

To the Cru staff woman who mentored me on how not to be gay: Allow yourself to be whomever and whatever feels right for you. I'm here if you're ready to accept it.

To my first girlfriend ever: I'm glad we decided to come out as lesbians together that morning I brought you Starbucks as an apology after our fight.

To my exes: Thank you for comforting me when I cried from the trauma of losing friends and not being accepted as gay in Cru and by my parents.

To my exes' parents: You stepped in as surrogates when I needed you most. I'm forever grateful for you.

To my parents: *You are* the trauma of my homosexuality. My gayness made me make sense, and you interrupted my self-discovery with your judgment and sorrow. It was hard because *you made it hard*. When Cru people judged me or turned me away, I would have loved to fall back on supportive parents, but you made me feel awful. I carry the trauma you gave me, and I wish you were better about all this. An antiquated book, written by/for/about men, pieced together at different moments in history, based on folktales passed down by word of mouth tells you it's not ok for me to be a lesbian and you believe it. I wish you could think more critically than that.

To the closeted lesbian that is in Cru today: I see you. You're not alone. There is a supportive community waiting to embrace you whether you remain Christian or not.

- Chelsy

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APPENDIX A

Lesbian Survey Questions

1. Were you aware of your sexual orientation when you were a member of Cru?
2. What conversations did you have with other Cru members (or staff) regarding your sexual orientation? What feelings did those conversations produce in you?
3. What pushback did you receive from authority figures within Cru with regard to your sexual experiences?
4. Were you subjected to reprisal or harmful repercussions at the hands of other Cru members or Cru staff?
5. Was your exit from Cru voluntary (meaning was it a decision you made of your own volition)?
6. What conversations did you have before, during, and after exiting Cru?
7. Did leaving Cru (whether voluntary or involuntary) affect your Christian beliefs or affiliations?
8. What else would you like to add about important conversations or communications in Cru regarding your sexual orientation?

APPENDIX B

Former Cru Staff Interview Questions

1. What was your affiliation with Cru?
2. How long had you worked for the organization?
3. What is Cru's stance on homosexuality?
4. From where does Cru draw its stance on homosexuality and how might it differ from other Christian organizations?
5. How are Cru staff trained with regard to interacting with Cru members who identify as gay/lesbian or who are labeled as "struggling with homosexuality"?
6. What conversations have you had with Cru staff regarding homosexuality?
7. Have you ever personally interacted with a Cru member who identifies as gay/lesbian or who is labeled as "struggling with homosexuality"? What did conversations with that person look like? How did they make you feel?
8. If you could get in a time machine and revisit those conversations, is there anything you would change about how they went?
9. What is your perspective on how Cru handles the topic of homosexuality?
10. How have you seen Cru's approach to homosexuality change over the years (if applicable)?
11. If you skipped any of the questions above, would you like to share your reason for skipping them? What is it?
12. Is there anything about this topic that you would like to add that we haven't already discussed?

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