Abstract

Queer communities in Appalachia contain a unique set of strengths and vulnerabilities that impact their formation and outcomes. Higher amounts of poverty and religiosity in Appalachia follow the model of minority stress theory and create additional challenges for queer Appalachians. This project examined how these individuals experience their communities, and how this impacts their mental and sometimes physical health. Through interviewing 8 queer Appalachians and employing reflexive thematic analysis, I constructed five key themes that exemplify participant's experiences. These themes are 1). Many of the other negative experiences within these communities can be traced to a high prevalence of intergenerational trauma and widespread poverty, and queer people in south-central Appalachia understand this. 2). Reactions to those that cause harm are different: queer Appalachians have complicated, often bitter feelings towards religion, contrasted with a deep empathy for fellow queer community members. This is likely because of theme 3)., which is the presence of deep and emotional ties that encourage queer people to rely on each other for support, especially given that this support is denied to them from other traditional places of support in Appalachia, like the church and family. 4). Queer Appalachians very intentionally distinguished themselves from other queer communities around the United States, and had a sense of pride in this difference. Finally, 5). Despite growing political hostility, there was still a sense of hope, and many interviewees gave suggestions on what would help facilitate a better future for this community. This thesis examines these themes and explains their nuances to provide a clear and empathetic insight into this unique and resilient population. By doing this, we can work towards culturally-conscious solutions that address the systemic injustices faced by queer Appalachians.

Country Connections and Coterie Conflicts: Examining How Queer Appalachians Experience Community

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Content Warnings

This paper contains profanity and references to Queerphobia, Religious Trauma, Suicide, Substance Abuse, Childhood Trauma, Abuse in Romantic Relationships, Racism, Murder, and Grief. While these content warnings are present throughout this thesis, the page numbers of the most explicit references are listed below.

- 30-31 (suicide, substance abuse)
- 33 (suicide, grief, substance abuse)
- 39 (religious trauma)
- 45 (religious trauma)
- 49 (transphobia from the state, fearing for safety)
- 54-55 (murder, suicidal ideation, internalized homophobia)
- 56 (abuse in a romantic relationship involving minors)
- 60-61 (homophobia from parents, religious trauma)
- 62-63 (predatory behavior from an older person)
- 82 (racism, ICE, law enforcement)

Introduction

Queer communities exist in most places that queer people exist. These communities often provide much-needed support and resources, and form the basis of interpersonal relationships. While there has been research on these groups, it often focuses on more urban contexts, and doesn't provide an accurate picture of rural communities. This creates harm by ignoring negative intra-community dynamics, which weakens the effectiveness of potential solutions and contributes to a feeling of invisibility faced by the victims of intra-community violence. In this paper, I report on a study that examined south-central Appalachian queer communities by interviewing queer Appalachians. I wanted to understand how queer Appalachians experience their communities, and what unique strengths and vulnerabilities arise within these groups. Through the inclusion of queer Appalachians, this thesis seeks to portray a compassionate yet more holistic view that does not shy away from the negatives of a community steeped in poverty, religiosity, and trauma. It also seeks to show the resilience of the community, and find ways to mitigate these negatives. By creating a greater understanding of queer Appalachian communities, it will be possible to find solutions that address the specific needs of this group while acknowledging the systemic injustices that drive individual behavior.

In this paper, “queer” denotes a gender identity or sexual orientation that falls within the LGBTQ+ community, and is meant to be broad and inclusive of any identity that is not heterosexual and/or cisgender. This paper will use queer and LGBTQ+ interchangeably. Additionally, in this paper “South-central Appalachia” refers to the central Appalachian, southern Appalachian, and south-central Appalachian subregions defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission, which span from mid-Alabama to southern West Virginia. This is

generally the region of Appalachia that is most economically disadvantaged, though north-central Appalachia in parts of West Virginia have similar economic and cultural statuses. This paper will say use “south-central Appalachia” and “Appalachia” interchangeably for the sake of brevity, unless specifically stated.

The geographic label of “Appalachian” was chosen over other overlapping terms, such as “Bible belt”, or “southern”, because of its definable location and unique cultural history. Literature disagrees on what exactly constitutes the “Bible belt”, making it impractical as a geographic identifier. Additionally, unlike the identifier of “Appalachian,” there is not a label associated with those who live within the bible belt (Brunn, 2011). While “Southern” is a cultural identifier, it is much less geographically precise than Appalachia. Because of this, it encompasses many regions and cultures beyond those that reside in the Appalachian mountains. This thesis focuses on Appalachia because of the unique socio-economic conditions that are prevalent throughout the region, and it uses the term “Appalachia” because of its specificity.

Why Write This Thesis?

Reporting the nature of queer Appalachian communities requires care to avoid demonization. I intentionally place blame on the systems of power that perpetuate this community's struggles rather than on the individuals within this community. Still, understanding the unique challenges faced by queer Appalachians allows for greater efficacy in creating solutions that alleviate the frequency and negative effects of oppression and interpersonal violence. For example, an affirming community space that understands the social dynamics of queer Appalachians can recruit participants using the uniquely tight-knit nature of queer and Appalachian social circles. This space could then educate members on internalized homophobia

and how it impacts romantic relationships. Doing so would give community members the tools to understand where certain conflicts in their personal lives may be stemming from, which would foster better communication and conflict-resolution. On a larger scale, closer social relationships can also lead to more effective advocacy and resistance to oppressive systems.

Many of the current strategies for educating, sustaining, and advocating for queer people emerged in an urban context, and may not be as useful for rural queer people in less affirming environments. Paradoxically, places with more support are often the places that need less support because they tend to be located in environments that are more pro-LGBTQ+. This paper seeks to create knowledge about what kinds of support are available to more isolated queer communities, which allows stakeholders and activists to better understand what gaps need to be filled. This is especially useful as it allows for an efficient distribution of the limited resources south-central Appalachian groups have.

Additionally, it may be personally affirming for a person who has experienced intra-community violence to understand that they are not alone in that struggle, and that they can acknowledge the violence caused by those with similar identities to them without demonizing that group to outsiders. Communities cannot address violence from within if they refuse to acknowledge it out of fear that this acknowledgment will be weaponized. Taking the first step of documenting experiences of violence and community vulnerabilities may embolden others to share their experiences.

Beyond vulnerabilities, documenting the unique strengths in queer Appalachian communities has not been done as explicitly before. Having a greater understanding of these will allow queer Appalachians to be prideful of their communities. Emphasizing these traits creates a

sense of belonging centered on the positive aspects of this community, which helps buffer any internalized shame that could arise from being queer and Appalachian.

Literature Review

A review of the literature will first examine the regional Appalachian context, specifically religiosity and poverty, and its effects on first the general population and then the queer population. Then, an overview of the “queer” and "Appalachian" social identities will be provided. Next, the specific strengths and vulnerabilities of queer Appalachian communities will be discussed, before finally examining the impacts these communities and contexts have on individuals.

Appalachian Context

All stressors feed into each other, both for a community and an individual. It is impossible to understand why queer people in south-central Appalachian regions may have worse outcomes and harsher communities without understanding the context of the region. Knowing this is important for two reasons:

1. Understanding the exploitation of the region removes some blame from individual Appalachians and places it correctly on the systems that perpetuate oppression.
2. Previous research has highlighted the increased effectiveness of resources that are tailored for a specific population (Keller et al., 2025). Understanding a community allows for solutions that do not erase the cultural values of that community.

This section will discuss the roles that religion, family structure, and poverty play in shaping both the general population and the queer population of Appalachia. It aims to understand the negative effects each can have on Appalachians while also highlighting the

positive aspects of Appalachian culture, which should allow for a more empathetic and in-group understanding of the region.

Poverty

Labor exploitation and lower wages have long plagued central and southern Appalachia. These regions experience high rates of poverty, with the median household income in central Appalachia being 38% less than the national median (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2021, p. 285). Industries with strong ties to exploitative practices are cultural touchstones in Appalachia. For example, coal mining, a major source of economic activity from the 19th century to the present, is correlated with high mortality rates and poor socioeconomic conditions (Hendrix & Ahern, 2009). Poverty and dangerous labor practices create worse physical health outcomes, mental health outcomes, and worse quality of life (Lee & Inglis, 2020). Poverty is also cyclical, and an impoverished parent usually means an impoverished child. Childhood poverty is associated with lower adult income, higher risk of adverse childhood experiences, and lower likelihood of marriage, cohabitation, and children (Lesner, 2016; see also Ajay & Wimer, 2016, p. 26). While marriage and children is not a requirement for life satisfaction, a population-level disparity may reflect poverty's negative impact on relationship formation and maintenance.

Though these impacts potentially affect all impoverished Appalachians, they may have a doubly negative impact on the queer population. For example, households led by gay and lesbian couples are more likely to be impoverished compared to similar households led by different-gender couples (Shneebaum & Badgett, 2019). Additionally, factors that are protective for straight couples aren't always protective for gay and lesbian couples. Most related to this paper, living in a rural area reduces poverty for straight married couples. Though straight married

couples may still experience poverty at higher rates in Appalachia, rurality can act as a way to reduce the impacts and intensity of this poverty. In comparison, rurality does not reduce, and may even increase, poverty within lesbian couples (Shneebaum & Badgett, 2019, p. 25). Clearly, poverty is prevalent in south-central Appalachia, and its effects may be compounded for queer people.

Religion

South-central Appalachia falls under the “Bible belt”, which is a term adopted for the region because of its high population of Christians, many of whom are evangelical (Mann et al., 2023, p. 4). This religious nature has a crucial place in Appalachian communities, as churches and religious organizations often buffer the negative effects of poverty by providing material and social support. In the United States, 60% of emergency shelter beds are provided by faith-based organizations, and the social support provided by churches helps maintain community mental health (Johnson et al., 2009, p. 7; see also Shi et al., 2025). Beyond buffering against poverty, the church is an important place of socialization, and faith itself can cultivate a positive sense of purpose. For example, a study of diabetics in rural Appalachia found that religiosity significantly predicted greater engagement with self-care behaviors. Social support gained through the church moderated the effects of depressive symptoms and stress on self-care, meaning among those with depression, higher social support was associated with more self care behavior (Smalls et al., 2021). Thus, it makes sense that Appalachians have formed such strong connections to faith and church communities. It is undeniable that these institutions have helped foster social relationships and buffered the negative effects of poverty and isolation in Appalachian communities. This, combined with individual faith, binds Appalachians to Christianity.

But this bond is not equally beneficial for all Appalachians. Queer people who are often rejected by Christian institutions may not be able to access the social support these institutions provide without denouncing their queerness or being exposed to queerphobia. Because faith-based organizations are major providers of social services, this limits queer people's access to support, and can also decrease the quality of support if they do receive it. For example, of homeless trans people across the US who sought access to shelter, almost 30% reported being denied due to their gender identity or expression. Of those that did receive shelter, 44% experienced mistreatment (O'Neill et al., 2020). Additionally, a study of religious healthcare, social care, and social work organizations found a close connection between religious affiliation and negative attitudes towards LGBT people (Westwood, 2021). This decreased access to necessary social supports harms a population that already faces higher rates of poverty and homelessness. In this case, religious organizations are providing additional support to the general Appalachian population that queer people may have less access to. There are also instances where the region's religiosity is more actively responsible for the harm done to queer people.

Less access to social support is not the only area where omnipresent Christian influence can be problematic for queer Appalachians. Anti-LGBTQ attitudes are commonly expressed by churches and Christian organizations through sermons, literature, and hiring practices. These influence the broader faith community and are partially responsible for creating widespread queerphobia in south-central Appalachia (Mann et al., 2023). Conservative Christianity can create a hostile environment and isolate queer Appalachians from their general community. Isolation can lead to a feeling of invisibility, or a desire to hide queerness to gain access to community (Mann et al., 2023, p. 10). This leads to a complicated relationship many queer people have with religion - one that often is adversarial. While faith and churches have been

sources of necessary support for many Appalachians, this support is not equal for all Appalachians. It is crucial to understand why so many Appalachians respect and take part in church communities, because this paves a way for both addressing inequality for queer people and uplifting Appalachian cultural traditions.

Appalachian and Queer Social Identities

The contexts of Appalachia create insular social groups of different identities. This section will discuss social identity theory and what informs both Appalachian social identity and queer social identity. It will also analyze how these identities interact.

Communities often uplift some traits and stigmatize others. This process informs social identity theory, which examines how communities create a shared sense of identity (in-group) and an outgroup that they distance themselves from. This is done to bolster the self-esteem of those within the social identity group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 7-24). Queer social identity is a protective mechanism against stigma for some, and further stigmatizing for others. While a strong sense of pride and identity can encourage those that match the in-group understanding of queerness to find a positive and supportive community, those that do not have the traits and interests common in the broader LGBTQ+ identity may be further stigmatized. This is particularly harmful, as rejection from within the queer community is more negatively impactful than rejection from outside the community (Parmenter & Winter, 2025; see also Ong et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the “queer” social identity is often in direct conflict with the social identity of those residing in Appalachia, but not necessarily the “Appalachian” social identity. To

understand this, it is important to create a deeper understanding the Appalachian identity, which is complex for these three primary reasons:

- Geographical location is very important to the Appalachian identity, and different areas of Appalachia have vastly different social identities.
- Many people who could be considered to belong to the Appalachian social identity group do not self-identify with this group.
- Outside perceptions of Appalachian identity often do not match the self-labeled traits of this identity.

For example, people living within the south-central Appalachian region are more likely to identify as Appalachian if they are older, more well-educated, and have spent a larger percentage of their lives in the region. Yet, Appalachians are 7.7% less likely to have a bachelor's degree than the national average (Srygley et al., 2025, p. 60.). Even those living in South-central Appalachia were more likely to identify as "southern" than they were "Appalachian" (Cooper et al., 2010). There is also a distinction between community, rural, and Appalachian identity. One examination of communities in Ohio (which would be considered northern Appalachia) found that rural identity was associated with conservatism and Christianity, while Appalachian identity was only associated with poverty and gender; men were more likely to identify as Appalachian (Paskett et al., 2019). Another examination of anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes amongst those who identify with the "rural" social identity found an explicit positive link between the two, but notably, rural identifiers did have net-positive opinions of LGBT individuals (Thompson, 2023). Still, this shows a split between an Appalachian cultural identity and a rural cultural identity, though the two are intrinsically linked.

Stating these findings more plainly: contrary to general assumptions, Appalachian identity is not inherently conservative or anti-queer, and those that identify with the Appalachian social identity are not the same as those that would be considered Appalachians. As discussed in the previous section, religion and queerphobia is abundant in the Appalachian region, yet this is more in line with a rural social identity than an Appalachian one. This is important to understand as it demonstrates why some choose to self-identify as "queer Appalachian." Social identity is an important aspect of community formation, and the complex nature of queer Appalachian identity can inform how these communities interact with each other and those outside of the "queer Appalachian" group.

Queer Appalachian Communities

Communities formed through a shared experience of queerness in Appalachia face unique challenges due to the intersection of these two realities. This section will first discuss the vulnerabilities of queer Appalachian communities. These vulnerabilities include: tensions with the general Appalachian population, tensions with the non-Appalachian queer community, and community level trauma. This section will also discuss the strengths of queer Appalachian communities, which include diversity of identities and leveraging Appalachian resilience in a queer context.

Vulnerabilities

The presence of in-group out-group dynamics and high rates of queerphobia have widespread negative implications for queer Appalachian communities. The social identity of "queer Appalachian" brings strength in community, but also an inherent tension with other,

non-Appalachain queer people. There is a sense of being "caught in the middle" between rural-identifying unsupportive communities and non-Appalachian queer people who disparage Appalachia due to it's anti-LGBT attitudes. This is often expressed as a feeling of invisibility (Parks, 2021; see also Tabler et al., 2023). Resentment builds within Appalachian queer people towards both groups, and creates insular communities of individuals already shaped by rejection and trauma. Notably, internalized homophobia is common in these communities and leads to greater stigmatization (Mann et al., 2023; see also, Jordan, 2015, p. 7). Because rejection from an in-group is more impactful than rejection from an out-group, this can lead to compounding negative effects on Appalachian queer communities. It is the intersection of existing within these two groups that creates this unique vulnerability, which only bolsters the amount of community-level trauma faced by these communities.

Queerphobia, higher rates of poverty, inaccessibility of religiously-based social supports, and rejection from in-group social identities combine to create the conditions for community-level trauma. Violence done to an individual is still done within the context of that individual's community, and in recent years, trauma-informed care researchers have begun to address the impacts of communal trauma by seeking to create trauma-resistant communities. The trauma resistant community (TOC) model aims to improve the structural systems within a community through shared knowledge, values, and culture (Vides et al., 2022). While this model may be effective, queer communities in Appalachia are not trauma-resistant, and the violence that impacts one member of the community often has ripple effects.

The effects spread out in two major ways. The first is the interpersonal cycles of violence that happen directly between individuals in the community. Examples of this include someone with internalized homophobia imparting that shame onto their romantic partners, or someone

who experienced past trauma enacting violence onto their peers (Grady et al., 2022; see also Hillesund, 2019). The second is less direct events that lead to a sense of rejection and grief for other community members. This is referred to as vicarious trauma, or secondary trauma. Examples of this include someone seeing another member of their community be bullied for an identity they hold, or hearing multiple stories of romantic relationship violence between community members. Both add to collective trauma, which in turn impacts the mental health of individual members of the community (Silver et al., 2021).

A history of collective trauma can further contribute to unhealthy intragroup dynamics, but it can also lead to resilience and greater community support. The difference arises from how the collective trauma is perceived (Mengyao et al., 2023).

- If the historical collective trauma is appraised as a threat, characteristics of responses to current conflicts include hypervigilance, defensiveness, avoidance/disengagement, or radicalization.
- If the historical collective trauma is appraised as a challenge, characteristics of responses to current conflict include: mobilization, non-defensiveness, and approach and engagement.

This shows that experiencing common stressors and community-level trauma can be adversarial for communities, but it is possible to reframe negative shared experiences to bolster community engagement, activism, and resilience.

Strengths

The possibility of reframing collective trauma as a challenge shows a path to utilizing the unique strengths of queer Appalachians. These include resilience, tight-knit communities, and

diversity within the LGBTQ community. Some of these are common in other queer communities, others emerge from the unique interaction between Appalachian and queer.

While tight-knit communities can make the impacts of collective trauma more potent, they can also create systems of support that community members can rely on. Queer Appalachians have reported similarities between the community-based values of Appalachia and LGBTQ+ populations, and have stated that this communal nature is instrumental in promoting self-acceptance and bridging the gap between the two social identities (Garringer, 2017, p. 79-91). Additionally, a sense of community belonging is related to general and mental health, with higher rates of belonging being associated with better health outcomes (Michalski et al., 2020). Thus, queer Appalachian communities may be able to improve the health outcomes of members to a greater degree than the general population, which could also act as a protective factor against community-level trauma. This intersects with another advantage queer Appalachians have, which is resilience.

Queer Appalachians have utilized their community support to create avenues of advocacy against discrimination and systemic injustice. This demonstrates high levels of resilience, and showcases a major strength of these communities. A narrative inquiry of drag performances in southwest Virginia found the shows provided education, promoted resilience, and created kinship (Whitten & Azano, 2025). These shows were done in spite of drag bans, and showcase the willingness of queer Appalachian communities to resist systems of oppression with events that promote joy and community. Another source of strength in these communities is their diversity of LGBTQ identities. Because there are fewer queer people in rural Appalachian areas, there is less segmentation of different identity groups and socioeconomic status. This allows for communities to understand the intersections and unique challenges of each identity. These

vibrant communities often lead to greater and more well-rounded political involvement (Jordan, 2015, p. 42). Though this diversity of identity and class is a strength, it is limited by a lack of racial diversity, with some non-white queer Appalachians feeling as though the community connected "queer" with "white" (Garringer, 2017, p. 79-91). Still, there remains unique strengths within queer Appalachian communities that can be utilized to protect against the vulnerabilities this population faces.

Impacts on Individuals

Individual Appalachian queer people face different levels of stress, which have different impacts on mental health. Still, there are commonalities. The Appalachian contexts of poverty and religiosity and presence of community-level trauma lead to a higher likelihood of stressors that impact mental and physical health outcomes, as well as quality of life. Thus far, this paper has examined the broader situation queer Appalachians exist in; this section seeks to understand the impacts these contexts have on the individual.

Mental health is linked with the interpersonal relationships, romantic or platonic, that an individual experiences. These relationships are formed between people within the same community. For queer Appalachians, this often means forming relationships with others who are traumatized or experiencing hardship, which can create additional barriers to fostering and maintaining healthy relationships. As an example, internalized homophobia is common in queer Appalachian spaces. This means that the likelihood of entering a romantic relationship with someone who has internalized homophobia is higher than it would be otherwise, and internalized homophobia has been shown to significantly decrease relationship quality and satisfaction for both parties (Trombetta et al., 2025). Additionally, worse individual mental health is

accompanied by lower satisfaction with partners, and lower relationship satisfaction is associated with worse mental health, creating a cycle (Whitton & Kuryluk, 2014; see also Downward et al., 2022). Because queer people are more likely to struggle with poor mental health, this can create an additional barrier to high-quality romantic relationships. Queer Appalachians may have more difficulty finding and maintaining healthy romantic relationships, and when they do enter into low-satisfaction relationships, this can further harm their mental health.

Relationships, poverty, discrimination, and community-level trauma all contribute to a list of stressors that impact minority individuals. Minority stress theory examines psychological and health consequences of being a minoritized individual. It focuses on two primary modes of stressor: distal (external and societal) and proximal (internal). The increased direct discrimination that occurs from religious conservative communities in the form of exclusion and bullying is an example of a distal stressor faced by queer Appalachians. Inter-community discrimination is particularly impactful, which shows the importance of healthy and accepting communities (Parmenter & Winter, 2025). An example of a proximal stresser is internalized homophobia. The key thing to understand is that these stressors build on top of general stressors to create worse health outcomes, such as higher rates of chronic diseases, higher rates of mental health disorders like anxiety and depression, and substance use issues (Flentje et al., 2020; see also Baams et al., 2015). Though minority populations face unique stressors that impact individuals, there exists protective factors that can moderate the effects of minority stress. Individual internal traits associated with resilience in the LGBTQ+ community include optimism, emotional literacy, personal hardiness, and lower levels of internalized queerphobia (Peel et al., 2022). Additionally, romantic relationships have been shown to buffer minority stress in trans and nonbinary adults (Pepping et al., 2024). These factors allow for a more nuanced

understanding of what impacts individual mental health in the general LGBTQ+ community, and provides a pathway for creating solutions and interventions for queer Appalachians.

To sum, the Appalachian and community contexts mean nothing without how they apply to individual outcomes. These contexts also matter because health inequalities are not caused by individual actions, but instead unjust systems and structural inequalities. Why does it matter to one queer Appalachian that those in community with them experience greater stressors if they themselves do not? It matters because they interact and form relationships with each other, and those relationships have psychological impacts. It also is important to understand that every relationship formed and stressor endured builds upon each other - they are not experienced devoid of each other. The context of Appalachia shapes the queer communities formed in the region, and the communities themselves shape the individuals within them.

This leads back to the central question of this thesis, which seeks to understand how queer Appalachians experience their communities - the good, the bad, and the complicated. This was done by examining the relationships queer Appalachians had with each other, and connecting these to the cultural context of Appalachia as a region. I hoped to approach this topic with respect for the knowledge of fellow queer Appalachians, so I opted to ask them about their own perspectives of their community alongside asking about their experiences. Through understanding the strengths and vulnerabilities of this community, we can arrive at culturally-conscious solutions that directly address the unique needs of this population.

Methods

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the perspectives of queer Appalachians. This paper utilizes reflexive thematic analysis (reflexive TA) to analyse data and

report results. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their usefulness in reflexive TA, and have been used with this analysis type in previous literature (Pearson et al., 2025).

Sample

Sampling was done with two primary methods: in-person recruitment and snowball sampling. Given my connection to the queer Appalachian community, I was able to reach out via email to community stakeholders, asking them to spread a link to a demographics and consent survey amongst their queer friends, family, and activist groups. This survey allowed them to input their contact information so we could schedule an interview. After initial recruitment, snowball sampling was employed via giving the survey link to participants and asking them to refer their social circles to the study. Snowball sampling allowed access to participants who may otherwise be difficult to reach. It also allowed for interviewing different people from the same community, which provided a clearer view of how that same community can impact individuals differently. Participants were required to be 18+ and to have lived in south-central Appalachia for at least 2 years after turning 16.

The total sample size for the interviews was 8 participants, matching the goal I set at the beginning of the recruitment process. This size was calculated given the breadth of the study aim (broad), the density of the population (dense), whether or not the study uses established theories (it does, i.e. minority stress theory, social identity theory, and reflexive thematic analysis), whether analysis is cross-case or case specific (cross-case), and author experience (low). These criteria are outlined by previous literature (Malterud et al., 2016). In terms of demographic data, of the eight participants, four were cis women, two were cis men, and two were trans men. Their ages ranged from 20-44, and their individual incomes ranged from none (student) to $65,000.

Two identified as lesbians, one identified as a gay man, three identified as pansexual, and two identified as queer. All but one, who identified as Latino, were White.

Materials and Procedure

The interviews followed a semi-structured framework, which included a set of planned questions and follow-ups, and allowed for unplanned follow-ups to expand upon interviewee answers (Jamshed, 2014). The questions followed the guidelines for balancing relationships and rigor by starting with a general question and working up to more specific and personal questions (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I chose questions surrounding identity and interpersonal relationships within the queer Appalachian community. Specifically, I wanted to know what participants thought of their communities broadly, and I also wanted to hear their own personal experiences in conjunction with those thoughts. A sample question is as follows: “Have you had negative experiences with other queer people in your community? If so, what are they?” For a full list of questions, see appendix A.

Interviews were conducted online over zoom. Informed consent was given by participants prior to the interview, and affirmed during the first minutes of the call. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted 45-70 minutes, with 9 planned questions and room for follow-up questions.

Analytic Strategy

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (reflexive TA) describes a framework for analysis that considers the author’s positionality while constructing, analysing, and supporting themes within

data (Braum and Clarke, 2022). Reflexive TA emphasises meaning-making within the data by finding shared patterns and considering what their underlying or overt causes may be. In line with reflexive TA as it applies to semi-structured interviews, my analytical process involved keeping a reflexive journal that recorded my process and sense-making while following these steps:

- Step 1: Read and re-read interview transcripts while taking written notes.
- Step 2: Using qualCoder (a free, open source coding software), begin coding data that is interesting or related to the research question, with a particular interest in specific examples. Codes are fully inductive, with no codes chosen before analysing the data. Change the order of the transcripts and repeat the coding process twice, refining and combining codes as necessary.
- Step 3: Group codes with similar meanings and denote what those meanings may be. After grouping codes, start to denote potential themes.
- Step 4: Create a list of potential themes by grouping codes, and review data from each code again to determine if they match with the theme. Re-code and re-group codes to iterate on theme-generation and continue to refine themes, codes, and data within codes. Repeat this process until strong themes have been constructed with good data, and discuss these themes and data with my research advisor.
- Step 6: Finalize theme names for analysis. Start to find patterns and create meaning within themes while paying attention to my own perspective as a researcher. Begin the process of writing.
- Step 7: Create one-letter pseudonyms for participants when reporting. Randomize which letter goes with each participant to protect confidentiality.

- Step 8: Further refine analysis and make clear themes in a narrative account.

These steps are consistent with previous applications of reflexive TA using semi-structured interviews (Pearson et al., 2025).

Reflexivity Statement

Reflexive thematic analysis asks authors to reckon with their place and experiences when researching and creating narratives surrounding their research. This is what I will do in this section. I am an insider to this community, as I identify as queer and am a ninth-generation Appalachian. I have a large stake in the improvement of this community, and a good understanding of many of the experiences my participants had. In fact, many of the narratives, experiences, and cultural values expressed by participants are similar to my own. I experienced a lot of religiously motivated homophobia in my teen years, I had many friends who contemplated suicide in adolescence, and I was in a relationship that abruptly ended due to my then-partner's unsupportive family. I have also experienced frustration at the way issues I find somewhat frivolous are treated by my peers at the progressive and LGBTQ-affirming college I attend, given the intensity of issues I and my loved ones faced in Appalachia. For example, an incident where someone said they felt very unsafe because they heard a stranger say a homophobic slur in public was difficult for me to relate to. For me, feeling unsafe requires a more direct threat to bodily harm.

This connection to my participants and the data I have collected shapes my process in various ways. For one, I have access to different groups of people than those that are readily available to researchers who are not community insiders. I also know how to relate to participants during interviews, and given how community-oriented Appalachians can be, they are

more willing to share things with me they would not otherwise trust to be portrayed well by an outsider. Additionally, my analysis will favor what I most deeply understand, such as feelings and experiences I share with my participants. I have intentionally tried to include other perspectives that I may not agree with in an effort to most accurately portray queer Appalachians as they are. I have also put significant effort into not demonizing this group, as it already faces a lot of outside hatred and marginalization. I love my queer Appalachian community, and I am protective of it.

Still, there are common experiences in this community that I do not share, and that make me an outsider in some ways. My parents are supportive and I grew up in an upper-middle class household. I attend a liberal arts college in the northeast United States. I discuss poverty and trauma from an outsider's, researched perspective, and not a personally lived one. I am also cisgender, and thus do not face the bulk of current anti-LGBT laws being passed in my home state of Tennessee. These factors limit my ability to personally relate to some of the experiences of interviewees. In these moments I provide some context in my results sections, but generally let participants' own experiences speak the loudest.

Ultimately, my experiences of queer Appalachians and their communities has been complex. I have been harmed by members of my own community, often those experiencing systemic violence themselves. I conceptualized this thesis with a queer Appalachian friend of mine when we asked each other "why have so many other queer Appalachians harmed us?" Throughout the research process this has turned from a somewhat one-note question into a deeper understanding and empathy towards my own community, and a reconceptualization of harm in this community. Yes, harm occurs in this community. But it's as devastating as it is because we rely so heavily on each other to meet all of our social and material needs, and

because we feel a deep empathy for those who have harmed us. We understand where it's coming from, and some of us have made the same mistakes in the past.

Results

The queer Appalachian community is complex, with varied experiences that complement and contradict each other. Still, I constructed themes throughout data analysis that interact with each other to create a greater understanding of these communities and the interpersonal dynamics that arise from them. Behind many participant experiences lies a history of trauma, poverty, and substance abuse that was explicitly named and recognized by the participants themselves. Its prevalence in the data was overwhelming, and had a far-reaching effect on other experiences within queer Appalachian communities. Thus, the first theme to be discussed is how poverty, trauma, and substance abuse scaffold many of the other themes in this section. The second theme examines reactions towards those that cause harm, finding a sense of bitterness towards religion and conservatism tempered by great empathy afforded to other queer Appalachians. The next theme I constructed was the intense closeness of these communities and the reliance queer Appalachians have on one another. The second to last theme is the idea that Appalachian queer communities are different from other queer communities around the United States. Finally, a desire to hope, what activism has looked like in this area, and what solutions would be best for different stakeholders will be discussed.

Figure 1: Summary of Themes

Theme:	**Summary:**	**Example Quotes:**
1. The Scaffolding of Other Issues - Poverty and Trauma	Poverty and trauma were common in queer Appalachian communities. Recurring examples included deaths of despair, substance abuse, grief, familial rejection, and feeling helplessness as other community members struggled. This prevalence led to cycles of violence, but also a greater understanding of systemic oppression. Both of these impact how community members interact with each other.	"And just watching him spiral with drug abuse, with demons in his family, with things that, some of us have the strength to deal with and some of us just don't…And having that close relationship and losing it, I think just kind of showed me how vulnerable queer people can be in this area." "A great amount of the people in this area have the same damage. And hurt people hurt people."
2. Reactions Towards Those Who Cause Harm - Empathy for Each Other, Complicated Feelings for the Church	Queer Appalachians had complicated, often contradictory views of Christianity and faith. Many experienced religious trauma, and were bitter towards these institutions. This is contrasted with the empathy they showed for each other, where harm was often forgiven due to an understanding of where it originated from.	"I went [to church] and saw a pamphlet that was like, this is a queer preacher, and he says God loves him, and here's God throwing him in the lake of fire…even as a little kid, I was like, well, if there's a God, he hates me." "I think my empathy for that made me keep her in my life for so long because I was, I really did feel for her. That was really awful."
3. Reliance on Community That Creates Close Ties	Tight-knit communities and isolation meant that participants stayed in harmful relationships and struggled with dating due to limited options. They also facilitated uniquely altruistic mutual support networks and communities of care.	"Sometimes there's a loneliness down here that kind of gets in the way, where it's like this friendship, I have to keep this friend because if not, I'm all alone. And so you rely on these people, even if they're not the greatest of friends." "I mean, they're willing to do anything and they care so much. And it's so nice to, I feel like I have so many people that I could turn to if I ever needed something. Like it's, it just feels so accepting."
4. Distinction Between Appalachian Queer Communities and Other Queer Communities	Appalachian queer communities distinguished themselves from other queer communities in the United States. They felt connected to Appalachian cultural values generally, and found it difficult to relate to queer people who were not Appalachian.	"It's like, oh, they got to have this positive experience and they got to have a positive upbringing that I just didn't get to have. And I think that can cause some bitterness. But, I feel like it's very easy for Appalachian queer people to be friends and hang out and feel the solidarity." "My friend, who's also Appalachian, talks about this thing called the pull with this area…once you're here, it's hard to leave for a long time. Like something just kind of pulls you back."
5. Getting Better, and What Can Be Done.	Older queer Appalachians felt that, despite current political turmoil, things were generally trending better in the region. There are also things that different groups can do to improve the social and political situation of Appalachia, and these are often sources of community building unto themselves.	"I don't think when I first came out in 2005, I could have imagined there being a pride here in this city…Does it still have problems from being where it is? Yes, I mean, it does…But the fact that we can do that now, and I couldn't even imagine that 20 years ago, I'm going to put that as a win." "The people that care about social issues the most and helping underserved populations, it's queers."

Theme 1: The Scaffolding of Other Issues - Poverty and Trauma

Participants deeply understood the history of exploitation in south-central Appalachia, and often discussed the presence and effect of poverty and trauma on their experiences. Though they are not always interrelated, much of the trauma experienced by Appalachians follows from poverty, which acts as a major determinant of health in the region. Many participants noted that members of our community are likely to be involved in activist or volunteer spaces to combat poverty, trauma, and queerphobia in Appalachia. Among the data, there exists a sense that being queer allows participants to more deeply understand injustice and creates a desire to better the lives of not just other queer people, but Appalachians generally. This theme will discuss common sources of distress in the queer Appalachian community before showing that these experiences influence intra-community relationships.

Aligning with data surrounding higher rates of trauma in Appalachia, descriptions of traumatic experiences - both related and unrelated to queer identity - were common in interviews. These ranged from the deaths of loved ones caused by substance use (usually chronic alcoholism) to familial rejection and beyond. One participant spoke of the prevalence of suicides through drinking that is spurned on by the trauma of being queer in Appalachia:

> I feel like there's been a lot of, and I'm not even going to call them suicides. I'm going to call them drinking themselves to death, drugging themselves to death. And people don't know how many people have died in this area because they were queer. You know,

> indirectly, based on that trauma, based on the habits that were formed to deal with that trauma, [the] unhealthy ones - O, Cis Man, 35

This quote highlights the connectedness between trauma and substance use, and ties both to suicide. Queerness in Appalachia was explicitly stated by a few participants, on its own, to be traumatic. O's words affirm this, as he says it is the experience of being queer that encourages the use of substances. In the few examples given by participants relating to deaths of queer loved ones, substance abuse always played a key role. In these cases, queer Appalachians used substances to cope with the trauma they had experienced, which ultimately led to a death of despair. When these deaths occur, they have ripple effects across the broader community. There was a common sense of grief among participants, especially older ones, who both mourned the loss of loved ones and felt angry at the central injustices that facilitated their deaths. This quote also demonstrates how invisible queer Appalachians who struggle with addiction are. The idea that "people don't know" how many have died implies these are individuals who have been separated from their communities. It gives the sense that the broader Appalachian region does not know about or care for the trauma of queer people. This invisibility and lack of support can lead to queer Appalachians feeling isolated, and the trauma described in this account demonstrates how common despair is in the queer Appalachian community. Additionally, when a community member dies in a way that is related to their queerness, others in the community may internalize this, and it contributes to a sense of hopelessness.

Substance abuse and grief, while causes of trauma unto themselves, are often preceded by more common experiences of rejection and queerphobia. One participant spoke of familial rejection and described how prevalent that experience was, saying, "In high school, I had a lot of

friends that got kicked out of their homes. Like, definitely at least two. But the real number of people who had to stay away from their homes was probably closer to like 10-ish." (T, Trans Man, 20). This shows different levels of unacceptance in family structures. Queer adolescents were often kicked out of their homes outright, cutting them off from essential familial support. This causes them to rely exclusively on social services and their community, which creates some of the deep dependence discussed in theme three. But there is another form of unacceptance shown here that can create internalized shame and be traumatizing in its own way. The experience of individuals feeling the need to stay away from their homes, despite not explicitly being kicked out, is more common, and shows the causal queerphobia and widespread familial rejection faced by queer Appalachian adolescents. This alleviates some of the financial reliance on community compared to those with no parental support, but still shows a reliance on community for social support. Additionally, the experience of being alienated from the family unit is an isolating one. Especially in adolescence, when queer Appalachians may not have peers who are out given the social consequences of being open about queer identity in a queerphobic area. Familial and social rejection, alongside the financial hardship it can bring, act as significant sources of distress among this population.

Additionally, the elevated prevalence of trauma within these communities can itself be a source of distress. There were many instances of participants feeling hopeless or upset by the amount of trauma not only they themselves experienced, but also the amount other community members experienced. One participant who had a very public-facing job explained, "I do hear [trauma] stories probably more than most. And a lot of times it leaves me feeling incredibly helpless because I don't know what all the right answers are and I feel like I'm supposed to." -

(H, Cis Woman, 44). Another participant gave an example of watching a loved one experience trauma and eventually ending their own life, and explained how deeply that impacted him:

> And sadly, we lost him. He took his life about three years ago. And just watching him spiral with drug abuse, with demons in his family, with things that, some of us have the strength to deal with and some of us just don't have the skill set to deal with those problems. You know, it really affected me because I thought about, you know, how close we were together growing up and how we started in the same place, but the same region can kind of make or break you. And having that close relationship and losing it, I think just kind of showed me how vulnerable queer people can be in this area. And it really has stuck with me. - V, Cis Man, 36

These quotes demonstrate that direct violence between community members is not required for psychological distress to be spread within communities. Simply being constantly exposed to the traumatic experiences of loved ones and fellow community members can act as a source of distress itself. The above quote also connects to the idea of substance abuse as a common reaction to being queer in Appalachia, and furthers the idea that these deaths are slow, invisible, and a direct result of queerness. Though participants may have been harmed or negatively affected by the actions of the addicts in their lives, the pain they ultimately felt and remembered most deeply was the loss of the person. Feelings of hopelessness were common among participants, as they felt unable to do anything when watching community members struggle with identity, substances, and despair. The loss experienced by V served to show him the vulnerability of his community, which is another source of hopelessness and distress. The idea

that some queer Appalachians simply don’t have the strength to deal with trauma shows that, for many, resilience is required for survival. This can be a demoralizing mindset for those watching others in their community struggle to overcome the challenges they face.

The above experiences highlight the overwhelming prevalence of trauma in this area, the forms it most often takes, and the tragic consequences it can have. The initial presence of trauma often leads to more, which exemplifies how it scaffolds instances of intra-community harm. One participant stated it plainly, saying “a great amount of the people in this area have the same damage. And hurt people hurt people, man, and they'll keep doing it. So I think it tends to be kind of a cyclical thing.” (S, Cis Woman, 21). Shared traumatic experiences can allow individuals to relate to each other, but they can also perpetuate cycles of violence among community members. This creates environments where individuals rely on each other, as discussed in theme three, but are all experiencing different levels of trauma and poverty. These circumstances can cause them to hurt, or in more extreme cases, retraumatize members of their own communities. Here, S is reflecting on how initial trauma creates the conditions for the harm that is often perpetuated in the queer Appalachian community.

While the prevalence of trauma scaffolds intra-community relationships in negative ways, it also provides queer Appalachians with a greater understanding of the systems of oppression present in society. The quotes above illustrate knowledge of cycles of trauma and unhealthy coping mechanisms, and how they impacted participants. Others spoke clearly about poverty and its cross-sections with the queer community, such as E:

> Historically the war on poverty started in Appalachia. And so I think that is definitely something that you have to acknowledge as well…And that's pretty prolific throughout

> and it cross sections gender and sexuality in so many different ways, right? I mean, beyond the things that we love to discuss…like HRT or surgeries. That's one very specific sliver of gender identity. You can't have access to that without socioeconomic status being of a certain threshold - E, Cis Woman, 38

She continues later in the interview to explain why queer Appalachian's exposure to poverty and trauma may support their willingness to help and ability to do so:

> The more privilege you have, the less you are able to see, the less you're able to help. And statistically, queer Appalachians are still pretty far down on the rung here. So they're able to see this really broad spectrum of people that have things that they don't or privileges that they do not have and will never have. And we're still pretty far down as far as socioeconomic status goes, statistically speaking. And I think that the farther down you are in this pyramid, the more likely you are to help your community. And research also demonstrates that. The poorer you are, the more likely you are to help. - E, Cis Woman, 38

This is borne out in the data as well, with many participants discussing community involvement, activism, and volunteer work. Poverty is the originator of much of the trauma present throughout Appalachia; many queer Appalachians carry additional trauma unrelated to queerness that intersect with the unacceptance they also face. Because of the invisibility of queer trauma, such as the deaths from substance abuse discussed earlier in this theme, participants may feel the need to join activist and volunteer organizations to help alleviate the lack of support

given to them by the general Appalachian community. Ultimately, though the overwhelming prevalence of trauma does contribute to cycles of distress within this community, it also creates the complex understanding of systemic violence that many participants demonstrate.

Poverty and trauma impacts most other themes discussed in this paper, showing its presence as scaffolding. For example, familial rejection and need for support creates strong community ties. Overcoming trauma can also necessitate resilience and a distinct cultural identity. Ultimately, it is imperative to keep in mind all of the answers to the question of "What is the experience of queer Appalachian communities?" are the results of the "Why?". And in this community, that "why" is often a history of violence, poverty, systemic injustice, and shame. Understanding this allows for us to view those that harm others with the empathy necessary to break cycles of abuse.

Theme 2: Reactions Towards Those Who Cause Harm - Empathy for Each Other, Complicated Feelings for the Church

The poverty and trauma typical to Appalachia is caused by exploitation alongside consistent divestment from the region and its people. This leads to community-based solutions often spear-headed by Christian organizations. This has two effects: increasing prevalence of evangelical Christianity, which often perpetuates anti-queer attitudes, and excluding queer people from the primary way to distribute social services in the area. While the second has larger impacts for the next theme, the propagation of negative attitudes towards queer people that the churches of Appalachia have contributed to has significant impacts on Appalachian queer people's attitudes towards both the church and themselves. Each participant shared experiences with Christianity and religion, despite it not being specifically asked about in the interview

questions. Though most of these experiences were negative, participants had varying views of religion and Christianity, with some remaining religious themselves. Other participants expressed strongly negative opinions of Christianity and the role of organized religion in Appalachia. Generally, feelings towards religion were often strong, complicated, and wrapped up in a lot of deeply personal, contradicting experiences.

This mirrors some of the relationships that queer Appalachians had with others in their own community who had harmed them, which often involved close personal relationships that had a lasting negative impact on interviewees. Participants expressed much more willingness to forgive in the case of other queer Appalachians who were causing harm as compared to non-queer religious people and organizations, even if the harm itself took a similar tone. For example, some participants reported being in romantic relationships where their partners told them they were "going to hell," which perpetuated or instilled internalized queerphobia and shame within the participants. Situations such as this were met with more nuance and understanding than similar situations where the person perpetuating this shame was not a member of the queer community, even if the in-community example seemed to have a greater effect on interviewees. This may be due to a number of reasons, including the institutional power of Christian organizations, compassion for those going through similar internal experiences as the participants, or the undeniable role evangelicalism has played in the overall queerphobia of the region. The following theme will examine examples of forgiveness, empathy, and experiences with religion, and connect all to the queer Appalachian experience of community.

Though the interview did not explicitly ask about religion, many participants brought it up in various ways. Most commonly were one-line or off-hand mentions of religious trauma. This was treated as an obvious fact of life for queer people in Appalachia, and usually discussed

with a more casual air than some other serious topics. It was seen as obvious that this was the Bible Belt, which meant that Christianity, traditional upbringings, and queerphobia were a constant presence in people's lives. H says, "I mean, a lot of this is in the heart of the Bible Belt. And so you've got a lot of people who grew up with a lot of religious trauma and religious trauma in various ways." (H, Cis Woman, 44). Participants didn't often go into details on their own religious trauma, but the seemingly ubiquitous nature of it could explain why participants were more critical of shame caused by churches and queerphobic religious people than they were of those who perpetuated that shame in their own communities. Interviewees implied that they had also experienced religious trauma, so they likely had compassion for those struggling with internalized shame. In my own experience, when I was told I was going to hell, it was most often by a non-queer person. In those cases, it was easier to shrug off than when it came from another queer person. The negative feelings I had after were not only tied to the sentiment and internal feelings of shame brought about by the comment, but also that I knew the queer person who told me I was going to hell thought that about themselves too. It is emotionally difficult to see that kind of pain in your own community, and it feels natural to become bitter towards the ideology and religion that instilled self-hatred into those you identify with, and in some cases, love.

Though vague references were most common, religious trauma was not always vaguely discussed; some participants shared in-depth experiences with the Christian church. For those that went into more depth, their experiences often led to a deep-seated bitterness towards religion. O describes an experience he had going to church, followed by his opinion on religion generally:

> I went [to church] and saw a pamphlet that was like, this is a queer preacher, and he says God loves him, and here's God throwing him in the lake of fire. And this was a fucking cartoon pamphlet that I read. And even as a little kid, I was like, well, if there's a God, he hates me, you know? And so I think being queer in Appalachia, having that kind of constant messaging is inherently traumatic. - O, Cis Man, 35.

He continues later, saying:

> This is just my personal opinion. I believe that all religion is a cult…It's a lot more difficult to find a community within our community because of the fear, because of the strength of the people that oppose us due to false religious claims or just pure hatred that they hide behind a Bible. - O, Cis Man, 35.

There are a few things to note in these quotes. Most participants who attended evangelical or conservative churches did so with their families as children. O exemplifies how formative these experiences are, and how some churches or Christian organizations in the area curate hateful anti-queer messaging targeted towards younger people. This can explain why internalized shame is so intrinsic and long-standing within participants, even after they no longer attend queerphobic churches. This also shows an initial break with family. When a parent or guardian brings their child to church there is a tacit endorsement of the attitudes expressed there, and they may internalize the thought that their guardians hate them or people like them. This creates fear, and alienates them from their family - one of the strongest social formations in Appalachian culture. Thus, the church is a major force that drives adolescent queer Appalachians

away from their families and towards relying on their communities. The second part of the quote shows how these attitudes complicate relationships within this newfound community. Finding queer community requires being out to some degree, and fear often prevents people in Appalachia, especially adolescents, from disclosing their identity to anyone. This makes community formation much harder.

Additionally, individuals still have the internalized shame imparted to them from early anti-queer religious experiences and trauma. Bitterness towards religion may arise from two separate places: direct experience with hateful attitudes expressed by religious people/organizations, or seeing people in your own community weather inner turmoil because their identity intersects with their belief that people like them will be eternally punished. Even participants who did not grow up religious experienced shame due to the ripple-effects of prevalent queerphobia in the broader Appalachian region, as well as in their own communities. S explains:

> I was raised agnostic, so I actually have no religious background or reason to feel shameful of things. But I still feel it. Like I still, the shame is so instilled in everybody here that it's like, it has had no choice but to reflect in me. And there was not a point where I was like, theologically, this is wrong. I don't even, that's never even like been instilled in me. But it's still something that is shameful and odd and off-putting. Like that's just something you feel. - S, Cis Woman, 21.

Among participants, shame over queer identity at some point in life was near-universal, particularly in adolescence. As explored in theme one, queer people in Appalachia are more able

to see, understand, and attempt to combat the systemic injustices that occur around them. Thus it makes sense that they will have empathy for queer people who do them harm by perpetuating their own internal shame because they understand where the shame comes from. They can recognize the external causes and place blame on the family of the queer person, their Christian upbringing, and/or the general attitude of the region instead of the individual themselves. Additionally, those that did not grow up religious, or have worked through much of the shame and religious trauma they used to experience, understand that the more outwardly queerphobic queer people are likely some of the most vulnerable members of the community. They can see past the hurtful comment itself to the tragic circumstances that underlie it. The effect of these comments from within queer Appalachian communities still persist, though, and impact how this community relates to each other.

Christianity remains an important cultural touchstone of Appalachia, and was not universally disliked among participants. Many participants harbored less bitter, more complicated opinions of the church. Some took particular lessons from scripture without the belief, some found value in the community that churches provided, some still identified with the Christian faith but disparaged organized religion, and some remained Christians who attended church regularly. Though queer community in Appalachia was not explicitly divided among faith lines, one participant did note some tension between those who had different beliefs:

> I think with religion, it's also hard because sometimes you do have queer Christian friends. And I think sometimes that can also kind of set another binary between the queer community. Because of course, for some queer people, they even, like, I had this one guy from Appalachia say that he knew he was gay, always knew he was gay, but would marry

> a woman just so that he could appease God. So it's a lot of that. There's a lot of that. -F, Cis Woman, 20.

This demonstrates the continued effect that the religiosity of the region has on queer community formation and perpetuation. It was difficult for participants who were not strongly Christian to be close with those who were, because this often meant being exposed to ideas they found antagonistic at best or retraumatizing at worst. This is a natural and protective reaction to those that still have exclusionary religious beliefs, but it does alienate those who are Christians and may be struggling with contradictions between their faith and their identities.

Christian queer participants also expressed some tension with non-religious queer people. This divide is shown by a participant who is himself religious and who has an atheist partner who grew up in the northern United States. He describes the difference in faith between him and his partner as a small thing, and states it has never caused any real issues. Still, this quote exemplifies the feeling of there existing a group of Christian queer people as distinct from a non-Christian queer group:

> And I was raised in church until I started going to college. And then I started discovering myself and I just stopped going because it just didn't feel like a place I wanted to be. But I still have all that like knowledge and some of those beliefs and stuff. And so sometimes that causes, just things that I'm like, hey, Just because I believe this doesn't mean you're [his partner is] better than me. - U, Transmasc, 23.

Notably, this participant did stop attending a church that felt inauthentic to himself, demonstrating the tendency of some queer Appalachians to remain religious in a different way from how they grew up. This also shows that the tension with non-religious queer people is present not just with conservative religious queer people, but to a lesser extent also those that remain faithful in any capacity. The underlying bitterness towards the church that some Appalachian queer people have can cause them to internalize a disdain for all who still subscribe to some aspects of Christianity, which may externalize as a condescension towards religious queer people. Though organized Christianity is responsible for much of the strife experienced by queer Appalachians, this quote shows a more positive experience of religion is possible for some in this community. The rejection of this idea by others in the community can feel hurtful and exclusionary for those that harbor a deep-seated faith. There is an additional angle of this interaction that involves the insider, religious perspective of a queer Appalachian and the outsider, secular perspective of a queer person who is not Appalachian. This is worth noting here for context, but the separation of these two groups will be discussed more in-depth in theme four.

Following the thread of positive experiences with Christianity, some participants who had deconstructed and largely overcome their religiously motivated shame found some value in their past beliefs. V, who had previously spoken about internalized homophobia caused by Christianity, said:

> I think really it just goes back to the culture here, influencing queer culture in this area. Even with all the religious trauma, the golden rule of doing unto others as you want them to do unto you [facilitates] community, coming together for a meal, sharing community with one another. I think it's, if you can find it and you can get past your own personal

demons, I think it really is a great thing to lean into and makes it easier sometimes. - V, Cis Man, 36.

This quote also has multiple layers worthy of discussion, and shows a further possibility for queer Appalachians. For one, it demonstrates that religious trauma is overcomable. This participant did so by accepting the parts of Christianity he found to be positive influences while rejecting the parts that were harmful. This was a common thought process for most non-religious participants who didn't express a level of bitterness towards Christianity. The cultural resonance of religion in Appalachia is also exemplified here. V acknowledges that Christianity can be harmful, but its impacts on Appalachian culture are not always negative. And those positive aspects of Appalachian culture - the golden rule, sharing meals, coming together - also seep into queer Appalachian culture. But in order to access these positives, queer Appalachians must overcome the demons brought about by the same ideology.

Queer Appalachians have a deeply complicated relationship with religion, and this permeates their relationships with each other. For U, the difference was small, but for those who still struggle with intense internalized queerphobia caused by Christian faith, it can lead to the permeation of these ideas into their communities. This was discussed briefly above, but the quotes below show specific examples of what this looks like, and how individuals reconcile these harmful attitudes with their feelings about the person expressing them. S, the participant who mentioned feeling shame despite not being religious, discusses a harmful relationship she had as a teenager:

> Her [S's partner] really southern white family were not chill about her being mixed, and they were not chill about her not being particularly religious. They thought her being queer was like a sin, and she was just undeniably queer, and she knew that. So she, but she was also still religious. She still held these ideas that had been instilled in her. Yeah. So she really, truly thought, like, queerness is something that gets punished, like eternally punished, but she was just queer. So it's like, she couldn't really reconcile that. And that's just like, that was sad. I, think I, my empathy for that made me keep her in my life for so long because I was, I really did feel for her. That was really awful. - S, Cis Woman, 21.

While some participants had a more antagonistic view of Christianity, almost all exhibited a sense of radical empathy for other queer Appalachians in the community - even those that have harmed the participant. The bitterness sometimes expressed towards the church and conservative ideology in the region was not directed at other community members, even if they had a negative impact on the speaker's life. This empathy was radical for two reasons. One: It was so pervasive, bordering on universal among participants, and Two: It required the participant to not only feel for other queer Appalachians, but to actively forgive them. There were plenty of schisms and break ups among participants, but most were affected very deeply by the hurt they saw in the people they left. A lot of interviewees tied this empathy to the idea that harm coming from queer Appalachians was unintentional and stemmed from past trauma, or related it to times in their own lives where they acted similarly. The following quotes exemplify this:

> I am extremely protective of this community as well. I think that when those people were falling, when those people were falling and experiencing BPD [Borderline Personality

Disorder] episodes or whatever it is, but fear that they needed to protect themselves, but even from us, who cares about them. It was never a feeling of haha [self-satisfied], get out. It was always a feeling of, fuck we lost another one. Fuck you know, I'm watching this person fall, fall because they're feeling hated in their own community. But the truth is, they're pushing people away and becoming toxic to those around them because the pressure of being queer in Appalachia is so great. It's difficult not to crack." - O, Cis Man, 35.

Because I feel like there's a lot of people who don't know how to like, they don't know how to be truly and fully themselves because there's been such a long time without it. So it's like they have a hard time understanding others. I met a bi man not too long ago who at the time wasn't quite sure if he was bi or not. And because of religious trauma, because of other things, he later told me that he'd actually felt very uncomfortable with me and very hostile kind of towards me because I am so openly queer. And I feel like it's that give and take. Like, now he's great. He dresses in drag and he loves that kind of thing. And it's like, it's all about, I think, about being able to be yourself. I feel like a lot of Appalachian queer people don't know how to do that sometimes. And I think it can take a very long time, of course, because of, just because of the way we've been raised. - F, Cis Woman, 20.

[Speaking about an ex-husband] And the more we couldn't communicate with one another, I think the more resentful we got toward each other. And a lot of that really comes from, I think, our own family backgrounds. You know, my parents were divorced.

> I grew up in a divorced household and it was really dysfunctional. And I think I had trust issues that I really should have worked out in therapy before I ever got married. And, my ex-husband grew up in a traditional married household, but with an abusive father. And so I think without even realizing it, he carried a lot of that controlling relation, controlling personality with him into his relationship without even realizing he was doing it."- V, Cis Man, 36.

When participants would discuss religious trauma, queerphobic organizations, or churches that had done them harm, they took a much less nuanced tone. These quotes show a willingness to understand why other queer Appalachians perpetuate harm. This speaks to a strong loyalty within the community, and deep connections queer Appalachians feel towards each other despite their differences; connections many cannot feel with the churches and Christian people in their communities. Harm was seen as unintentional coming from other queer Appalachians, but purposeful coming from Christian organizations. We can empathize with others in our community who are also struggling because we understand where the harm comes from. In the case of religiously-motivated queerphobia, the reasons for harm are more societal and obscure. There are no deeper traumas or unintentional motivations behind the harm that we can use as a crux to empathize with these groups, at least not any that we have also personally experienced. Additionally, the balance of power is unequal. It feels impossible to subvert highly prevalent conservative Christian ideology. Whereas with other queer Appalachians, there is hope; so many of us have overcome those internalized queerphobic attitudes within ourselves. To alienate a queer person doing harm is to cut them off from the very thing necessary for them to heal.

Mirroring the feelings of loyalty, participants spoke about feeling protective of their communities. The empathy expressed by participants may also stem from a desire to not see their communities vilified. In his quote above, O mentioned being protective of this community. T also comments on this tendency, saying, “I do see a lot of that in Appalachia. Of people trying to specifically share their positive experiences with being queer, because there is a lot of negativity to go around” (T, Transmasc, 20). Most participants exemplified it by focusing very heavily on the positives of the community, even if they later discussed significant harm done to them by other community members. E, when debating whether to disclose a negative experience she had, explicitly stated her thought process in a way that illuminates this protectiveness:

> I think about these things as a researcher, right? Like when you put out literature, when you put out a thesis and you support certain things, what do those end results look like? And. You know, not that you're trying to sway studying results, but if you only discuss negative things and you cannot talk about, you know, the things that are worthwhile in your community, that's where it gets difficult. - E, Cis Woman, 38.

Thus, the tendency of participants to highlight the underlying trauma of queer Appalachians who did them harm may be motivated by the desire to portray the community in a better light. Participants knew they were being interviewed for a thesis, and wanted the community they care about to be portrayed in the way they see it. Some participants may feel bitter towards queer Appalachians who have harmed them, but hesitate to say this because they want readers to understand how the prevalence of trauma impacts this community. They

understand there may be biases against Appalachians prevalent in academic literature, in addition to the biases against queer people they know are prevalent in Appalachia.

Another reason for radical empathy may be the omnipresent sense of loss in the community. This could be someone in their lives having to hide themselves, becoming too toxic to continue being around, or dying by suicide. The greater sense of empathy expressed by participants may be due to this, as individuals extend grace to avoid losing more people. This can be seen in these quotes:

> When the most recent law was passed about anti-drag measures, it was actually cleverly worded so that any trans woman could not be themselves in public. And she was like, I'm going to have to start wearing boy clothes again. And the tears in her eyes, I will never forget when we spoke about it. (long pause)...And I think the most heartbreaking thing is when I'm watching some of my close friends pretend to be straight so that they don't feel like they'll be harmed - O, Cis Man, 35.

> I mean, sometimes I think people, start to get a really hard outer shell and either they start completely denying who they are or just like become really negative and outwardly just kind of like close off. And that really sucks to meet people like that and be like, you could be so happy. And I understand why you're not. I totally get that. And like, I've struggled the same way, but it's just like people being so shut off from everybody because it's like you had to heal whatever part of yourself you could, but it really sucks. - U, Transmasc, 23.

> That was the reason we broke up and everything. I definitely feel like that put a strain. And I think about it a lot because it's like, now that she's in a Christian college, I wonder like, is she ever going to be able to be who she is? Or is she always going to feel that pressure to be what her parents always wanted her to be? - F, Cis Woman, 20.

Ultimately, queer Appalachians experience harm perpetuated by many different people or systems. Their reaction to this harm tends to be very different depending on where it comes from. For the church, an institution which has undeniably originated much of the internalized shame queer Appalachians experience, some participants expressed bitter or complicated feelings. For other queer Appalachians, they expressed a more compassionate understanding. This is likely because of the personal connections, losses of queer loved ones, and desire to portray the community well to outsiders. This sense of empathy and loyalty leads to stronger communities, which can be protective. But these strong, often insolar communities can have harmful effects as well. These will be explored more in the next theme.

Theme 3: Reliance on Community That Creates Close Ties

"I think it is easier to be violent sometimes than to be loving when you feel ashamed of the people that you care about." - S, Cis Woman, 21

Because of widespread religious attitudes that exclude queer Appalachians from social services, as well as common queerphobia present in the region, queer communities become very important to survival. This creates close bonds and mutual aid networks that can be uniquely altruistic. Queer Appalachians will, sometimes without being asked, show up to help each other

in difficult times. Occasionally at their own detriment. While this is a powerful example of what a strong community looks like, it can also lead to individuals being taken advantage of. Complicated, antagonistic, and/or just plain messy relationships dynamics arise in these tight-knit communities. These can look like participants feeling obligated to provide assistance to others to an unreasonable degree, or staying in relationships that are not ideal because they believe they will not find another person who accepts them. Geographic isolation of Appalachia plays a key role in the creation and maintenance of these relationships, as does cyclical trauma and poverty. But tight-knit, loyal communities also provide many positives for queer Appalachians. They ensure that queer people are cared for, replace some of what is lost from unsupportive families, and can provide a supportive space for participants to heal from past trauma. This theme will explore the many sides of queer Appalachian's experience of community that arise from how close these communities can be.

The positives of the caring, close-knit communities found amongst queer Appalachians can not be overstated. Participants gave many examples of resource sharing, community care, and networks of support that can and should be emulated, even in communities that have fewer disadvantages. The question of "Do you think queer Appalachians are more likely to help or harm each other as compared to other queer communities in the US?" was overwhelmingly answered with "help" or "it depends," with no participants saying "hurt." Examples of this care will be examined more closely in theme five, but its ubiquitous nature is an important context to understanding why participants come to rely on and appreciate their communities so intensely. This theme focuses more on the impact this reliance has, and less on what these communities provide for each other.

Many interviewees discussed how intense relationships can be in Appalachian queer communities. A quote from S exemplifies the double-edged nature of tight-knit and loyal communities:

> They're stuck here. I know people who've bought houses already. They're not leaving. And they still have the same need for community. So they get into really intense friendships and relationships and they can be pretty unsafe, but they tend to stick because you stick to what you have. You accept the love you think you deserve. And in this area with so few options, you just kind of take what you can get. And it's tough. It's really hard to see that happen to people you care about - or cared about. But I've also had friendships that stick. I mean, because I mean, people are loyal and they care about one another and shared experience really strengthens like a dynamic. - S, Cis Woman, 21.

Shared experience and acceptance creates strong ties, which can mean staying in unsafe situations, or leaving and still caring about those who were left. This echoes aspects of the previous theme, where participants felt empathy for other queer Appalachians who harmed them because they understood the underlying causes of that harm. But these strong ties also created friendships built on mutual understanding. Ones that participants could feel seen and safe in. Whether participants were able to find healthy connections or harmful ones often depended on the options available to them. They found little acceptance in the broader non-queer community, so they would often form bonds with any who would support their queer identity, even if those connections were harmful.

The idea of limited options was discussed often in interviews, and related to the isolation of Appalachia. Isolation and intense relationships were often discussed together, as exemplified by this quote:

> I was a complete loner in high school, middle school, all that because of the community I grew up in. But that meant the two friends I had were like ride or die. And we were all queer and it was like we were all in it together, even if sometimes we didn't quite see eye to eye. It was again, back to that mindset of like, we can talk it out. We can figure out a compromise. - F, Cis Woman, 20.

O further supports this idea, saying, “When someone does like you, they fall head over heels in love with you because, I mean, you're the best that they've found in this area and it makes it much more difficult.” (O, Cis Man, 35). The intensity of relationships was directly correlated to the limited accessibility of them. Participants would struggle to find acceptance outside of their romantic relationships or fellow queer people. Combine that with strong internalized shame and an intense need to be validated, and it’s no wonder why participants clung to any connection they could form. This had both positive and negative effects. Participants discussed loyalty and a willingness to forgive, but some participants stayed in relationships that they otherwise might not have if they believed there were better alternatives. This is explained by U, who states:

> Sometimes there's a loneliness down here that kind of gets in the way, where it's like this friendship, I have to keep this friend because if not, I'm all alone. And so you rely on these people, even if they're not the greatest of friends. And so I think there's a little bit

> more of an ease to be in a friendship or relationship that you shouldn't be in because it's like, well, if I don't stay friends with these people, I never have friends and I'll never meet anybody. - U, Transmasc, 23.

It is possible that the assumed loyalty of connection caused some queer Appalachians to take advantage of their friends and partners. At least, it provided the social determinants that facilitate taking advantage of others. The complications in these relationships may also not even be through an active harm, or taking advantage, and more through personality differences. Because the pool of accepting people in Appalachia was so limited, participants may form friendships where the only thing that they have in common is their identities. Creating intense bonds with those the participant would otherwise not relate to in an effort to not be alone lowers the quality of connections some queer Appalachians can form. Most of these strained friendships arose in adolescence, and many found more supportive communities in college or later adulthood. But those past experiences still weigh heavily on some participants.

Limited options complicated some of the affirming experiences of participants. A couple participants described moments where they felt seen and understood, yet conflicted because they came from someone who had harmed others. O gives an example of this:

> We were young, stupid, drunk kids. And he passed me 40 ounce. He's like, I don't even care if you sucked dick bro. That's fine. I don't give a fuck. He's like, he's like, who cares?...And this is a person, I want you to know, this is actually like a really kind of a traumatic thing for me because this person went along, went on in his life to do horrific things. He's in prison right now for the things he's done…He killed two of our friends,

> and I miss those girls…Without that context, at the time, that was the most acceptance I ever had. And it was the most I ever felt like, that was the first time I ever felt like it was okay to be who I am. (tearing up) That was the first time, because the trauma of having my friends find out that [I liked men], I was cold, dead feeling inside, if anyone ever found out, like I would kill myself if anyone ever found out. And I really felt like that. I felt like I wanted to die. And I went to Rick's house and he was like, whatever, fool, no big deal. Let's have a 40, let's hang out." - O, Cis Man, 35.

While this participant was in Arizona at that time, he had been living back and forth between Arizona and Appalachia. Despite this not occurring in Appalachia, the underlying causes of the desperate need for acceptance this participant felt are similar to what many queer Appalachians face. This participant came from an abusive, outwardly homophobic household, something that is disproportionately common in Appalachia due to cycles of exploitation and violence. The fact that this participant was so starved of any kind of acceptance that they had to see this small moment from someone who later caused intense trauma and pain in an unconscionable act of misogynistic violence as life-saving and critical speaks to the true lack of any kind of support many queer people face, especially those in unaccepting households. Much of the impacts of queer Appalachian communities comes not from purely antagonistic relationships where they were harmed by their peers. It comes from the fact that those that did harm were people who were also critical in that person's life, and may have been instrumental in helping that participant accept a part of themselves. Even if they would later see those individuals as toxic, abusers, and/or worthy of being cut-off.

Beyond complicated affirming experiences, isolation and close romantic relationships interacted in many different ways to contribute to unhealthy or abusive intra-community dynamics. One participant described how shame, isolation, and queerphobia contributed to an environment more inclined to abusive situations:

> When something bad happened to me, when that person did something bad to me, there's nobody for me to tell. Because I know in my head as a 12, 13 year old, I did something that's, something happened to me that is not acceptable. And not only is it not acceptable because it was bad, but because it was between what would appear to be two cis women, two cis girls. So there was nobody to talk about it with. And nobody found out. This was an isolated thing that I just had nobody to tell. And then when I started dating, when I got a little older, That was my only context for what a romantic interaction could be like - S, Cis Woman, 21.

She relates a later relationship, also made worse by isolation, to the commonality of trauma in Appalachia:

> And then my final relationship with an Appalachian was a long relationship that was in, it was closeted for the entire time, for two years. And (long pause) That relationship was a slow, quiet kind of abuse that comes from mental illness that just is so integral to this area. - S, Cis Woman, 21.

There is a noticeable pattern happening in these communities. Traumatized people, often adolescents with little access to mental health or social support, form strong bonds with the few people that do accept their identities. Isolated from the rest of their general Appalachian communities and family, these create not only the conditions for toxic and abusive relationship dynamics, but also the conditions for silence about these relationships when they do happen. If your romantic partner is closeted, reporting abuse can mean outing them, which participants understand may lead to an unsafe situation. It also requires outing yourself. Many adolescents in Appalachia may be out to their friends or peers but not out to parents, school administrators, or anyone with knowledge and power to intervene in these situations. Additionally, they understand that these individuals and institutions, instead of helping, may in fact further shame them for being in queer relationships rather than supporting them through the emotional turmoil that traumatizing relationships can have.

When the above participant mentions slow, quiet abuse, she touches on the isolation many queer adolescents face in their relationships, especially when they are the only support system for their partners. Teenagers take up the mantle of caring for their partners who are simultaneously harming them by enacting and intensifying internalized shame, withdrawing them from their other social connections and supports, and, in extreme cases, relying on their partners to provide support that prevents them from ending their own lives. There is intense care and empathy shown by the queer Appalachians that stay in these relationships to protect their partners and fellow community members. But they are far from healthy fulfilling dynamics, and these relationships also traumatize the partner that is providing the care, worsening the general mental health of the community. These relationships can feel like impossible situations. In many cases, queer Appalachians in the carer role are right to feel that if they break away from that

relationship, no one will step up in their place to care for that person. They understand that this person will be another loss that the community faces, and this is often a person that they still love or care for in some way. Often, queer Appalachians in the carer roles do leave these relationships - and they are better for it - but these relationships still have a lasting effect on how they engage their community in the future. For one, as the participant above states, this can be the only context that they have for future romantic relationships. This can cause them to enter into cyclical patterns where they tolerate abusive and toxic behavior because it has been normalized; in some cases they may not even see the behavior as wrong. These relationships also have a lasting effect on the mental health of the participant. Beyond the trauma of the relationship itself staying with the participant, it can lead to feelings of loss or guilt. This is especially true if the person they were dating does end up losing the ability to be themselves, falls into patterns of substance abuse, or, at worst, experiences a death of despair. If queer Appalachians knew there would be support for the people they leave behind to save their own mental health this break would be much easier, and the conditions that create these kinds of relationships would be lessened greatly.

While not all followed the same archetype or severity as this relationship, most participants experienced one or more negative romantic relationships. Not all of these were considered traumatizing; limited options does not automatically mean an abusive relationship, and not all participants would describe the same relationships with the same words. More often, limited options just meant incompatible relationships. Participants described the difficulties of entering into relationships when the dating pool was much smaller, and lower quality relationships when they did:

> My wife and I met online, but the other two people I dated here, we met in person. And so it was, I feel like it's harder to meet people here [than Charlotte]. And it's harder to, because everybody seems to know everybody, and everybody's somebody's ex, and everybody, like, and so there's this drama that you don't know you're walking to. And granted, there exists on some bigger level, but because the pool is so much smaller, it is so much more incestuous. - H, Cis Woman, 44.

> I think that it probably more generally, [being in a relationship in Appalachia] would be harder just because of everything that goes on around us. It's hard to commit. It's hard to like have boundaries in a casual relationship. It's hard to get into a relationship in the first place. It's hard to, it's hard to know what you want out of a relationship. - T, Transmasc, 20.

These speak to general issues that arise from a smaller dating pool. Areas that have larger amounts of queer people can often have a greater separation between platonic, supportive community and dating options. In Appalachia, coming out can be less safe, and participants tended to be more selective in who they disclosed their identities to. This meant that those who participants knew were also queer, and thus those they knew they could potentially be in relationships with, were people they often already knew in a different context - be it friends, a community space, or exes of someone else they knew. This could complicate the relationships between community members, as H commented on, and provided an additional angle for messy social situations to arise. Though these were often not traumatizing events, they could make interactions within the community harder or more uncomfortable. Additionally, as T touches on,

the context of the area - including how tight-knit the community is - can make casual relationships more difficult. These types of relationships can be important to understanding what someone ultimately wants from a more serious relationship. But every bridge burned through a relationship that ends poorly is a more significant portion of the dating pool for queer Appalachians who already have limited options for romantic engagement. Additionally, burning that bridge may have ripple effects for other connections that person has because of how close these communities tend to be. The ending of relationships often have effects on a friend group or small organization that both parties were a part of, even if the relationship was casual. While the difficulties of finding relationships can lead to creating the conditions for harm, the difficulty itself is also frustrating for many queer Appalachians who are seeking companionship.

Additionally, even if participants were able to enter into relationships, outside influences impacted their ability to maintain them. A very common shared experience was individuals ending relationships in adolescence due to familial pressure to do so. This can be seen in these quotes:

> I was a sophomore in high school and my mom found out [I had a girlfriend] and it was, she, did not like it and agree. And she told me to break up with her and then I didn't. And then I lied about it. And my mom got upset. It was like a whole really big thing. And it made me deny my identity for a long time. And I think it just kind of put off me discovering a lot about myself because it was like, oh, okay, I'm not safe to, like, have to feel this. - U, Transmasc, 23.

> When I was 18, I was asked out by a girl and we were dating and it was going great. And then she broke up with me and said the reason was because she was scared her parents would find out. And they were even more religious than my parents. Like she was in college and she was still being forced to go to a Christian organization once a week. And if she wasn't there, they would freak out…And I think about it a lot because it's like, now that she's in a Christian college, I wonder like, is she ever going to be able to be who she is? Or is she always going to feel that pressure to be what her parents always wanted her to be? - F, Cis Woman, 20.

This experience was shared exclusively by participants who were assigned female at birth (AFAB). My own experience mirrors this, where it was most common among my friends in lesbian relationships and even occurred in one of my own high school relationships. This is likely because, in my experience, AFAB individuals were more likely to be out in high school than those assigned male at birth (AMAB). This often came down to a safety issue, where queer Appalachians AMAB faced more scrutiny from their fathers, who would sometimes threaten violence if their sons came out as queer. This is not to lighten the effects that being forced to end a relationship due to queerphobic families can have on an adolescent, only to examine what demographic within the queer community this most often happened to and why. The quotes above exemplify the two different sides of this equation: the one whose family forced them to break up, and the one who was broken up with. For the first, the shame imparted by his mother forcing him to break up with his high school girlfriend caused him to deny his identity for a long time afterward. It created a major schism between him and his mother, and impacted his later relationships until he was able to find more acceptance in college. For the second, the break

caused her to dwell on the mental health and situation of her partner who was forced to break up with her. This echoes, though to a lesser extent, the feelings of queer Appalachians who left relationships characterized by caring for their traumatized partners, such as S. For both, this is an additional example of losing someone, and these situations can make queer Appalachians feel helpless. It also demonstrates another reason for the lack of options in this community, as many go back into the closet or deny their queerness because of these events.

The lack of options also led to age-gaps being common amongst interviewees, with three of eight describing current or past relationships with an age gap of at least 8 years. Though these relationships tend to be at greater risk of unhealthy power dynamics, two were described as healthy, and those participants were currently with their older or younger partners. These were often a product of online dating, and most participants treated them as normal and expected. There was a clear age divide between younger queer people and older queer people as to the acceptability of this relationship dynamic, with older queer people having more positive views of these relationships. This could be because though everyone experiences limited options, older queer people described the dating pool as being much less limited now than when they were younger. Even now, it is generally understood among interviewees that there are many more out younger queer people in Appalachia than older queer people. While limited options are one reason for age gaps, financial insecurity can contribute as well. Predatory situations can arise or be made worse when the younger individual is financially reliant on the older individual, as described by F:

> There was a woman there who was…in her 30s, and I was 17, and she would often say or do things that kind of made me uncomfortable a lot of the times, she would tell me about

> how if I were a little older, she would steal me away…or joke about waiting for me to be older. And that was a little scary. And it got worse because she actually offered me a job. And at the time, I wasn't financially secure. So I said yes to the job. And, comments like that got worse, a bit more touching, a lot of gift giving, a lot of asking me to go places. And it definitely took me a while to figure out that was like a very negative thing for me. Because, as a kid, it's like, you don't really think about those kinds of things. People make jokes about that kind of thing a lot or talk to people like that. But in hindsight, I'm very glad that I'm not in that position anymore. - F, Cis Woman, 20.

This can stem from the greater poverty and unacceptance of Appalachia. Particularly when younger people are cut off from family (or their family doesn't have the resources to support them) and cannot turn to the social services offered to others through religious organizations. Age gap relationships in Appalachian queer populations are complicated. They are worth mentioning here because of their prevalence and ability to become situations of unequal power. Being in the younger queer person camp, I tend to have a more negative view of these relationships. But in interviews and even some of my own platonic connections with older queer people, these relationships can emerge as positive, healthy, and mutually supportive unconventional couplings. They often arise from individuals being unable to find a partner their own age, even if they wanted to, rather than a desire to have control over a younger person. Given trends of more younger queer people being out, it is likely that the frequency of these relationships will decrease naturally, but they are still worth noting as a current reality for many queer Appalachians.

Despite the prevalence of negative experiences, a majority of romantic and platonic relationships of all age groups described by participants were neutral or positive. Interviewees often found their romantic relationships to be affirming and supportive, with many of them being key to seeking gender-affirming experiences in particular. This is seen in these quotes:

> [My partner is] the first person I told that I thought I was trans. Like they're the person that I was talking about top surgery and testosterone. Like they've been with me through all of it. And it's just been like, without them, I would not have, I like wouldn't have done any of the things that I have done because they were supportive and pushed me to do those things. - U, Transmasc, 23.

> Now, once they started accepting the fact that first that they were non-binary and then that they were not super bisexual, they were more on the lesbian side of things. And then that they got HRT came and then top surgery came. And every time we took one of these steps and they came into a place of self-actualization, that made our relationship more healthy and it grew. - E, Cis Woman, 38.

> I'm extremely lucky that the person I fell in love with is not only open, but encouraging. Literally enjoys that part of me and allows me to be that. Takes me out to buy skirts … And she'll go through and she'll pick out a skirt and she'll go, do you like this one? And I'll be like, yeah. And she'll keep it in her hand…She'll do that for me, like part of date night sometimes. She'll go out and we'll get a couple. I have a fricking drawer full of

> them now. But that is something that I've never been able to experience before. That's something I've never been able to express. - O, Cis Man, 35.

The same close relationships that can create the conditions for isolation and staying in relationships despite them being unhealthy can also lead to richer, more fulfilling, and unconditionally accepting relationships. Many individuals described growing with their partners. For some, supporting them led to feelings of pride within themselves, and helped deconstruct some of their own internalized shame. The opening quote of this theme examines how feeling ashamed of the people you love can make it easier to be violent towards them than to be loving. But feeling love towards someone who shares with you the things you are ashamed about can also act as a powerful motivator towards recognizing that you yourself are still loveable. This occurred most often in relationships where only one party felt internalized shame over their identity, while the other party was confident in their identity. Typically, successful relationships were ones where partners were mutually supportive in some way. Though one party may feel shame the other doesn't, they may support the other partner in a different way, or at least be emotionally open about what they are experiencing and where the shame originates from.

In the examples above, there is also a level of open-mindedness shown by queer Appalachians towards their trans or gender non-confomring partners. E mentioned that had she at any point affirmed the fact that she was a lesbian, and not interested in dating anyone other than a woman, her partner would have stopped taking the steps that ultimately led to a more fulfilling relationship for both of them. Situations like this are more likely in Appalachia because of the tendency of individuals to stay in relationships. Though this is not possible in every situation, supportive partners provide emotionally open and safe relationships that help with the

self-actualization of both/all parties. In this case, they helped participants explore their gender identities, but these principles were also replicated in supportive relationships for cisgender participants. Positive romantic relationships were often instrumental in helping interviewees deconstruct their own internalized shame and understand themselves and their past experiences.

Participants described additional positives of this closeness. Particularly, loyalty was seen as a key trait of the queer Appalachian community, and one that helped participants see the humanity in their partners and forgive flaws that they could - and eventually did - grow from:

> The difference in our relationship was that we were always able to take ownership of our mistakes and want to change. And I think if you have that, regardless of sexuality, gender identity, sexual orientation, as long as those are your two prolific things in a long-term relationship, you're likely to make it. - E, Cis Woman, 38.

> I think that as Appalachians, because we want to keep these people, we're willing to talk it out. We're willing to figure it out…Like even me and my queer friends, we always talk things out because it's like, if I don't have these friends, who am I going to have? And am I going to be able to find more queer friends that understand these aspects of me? So it kind of forces you to talk it out, which I think can be a positive. - F, Cis Woman, 20.

Close connections are a double-edged sword, and it can be difficult to navigate when to hold on to a relationship and forgive someone of the harm they have caused, and when to cut these connections off. The queer Appalachian willingness to air on the side of keeping connections and supporting each other is not necessarily a flaw, even if it can make them more

vulnerable. This follows the principles of restorative justice; participants saw the humanity in the harmers and believed they could improve. If this attitude was adopted by the broader Appalachian community towards queer people, much of the harm perpetrated by members of this community would cease.

Additionally, the tight-knit nature of queer Appalachian communities had mostly positive impacts outside of romantic contexts. Participants expressed the unconditional support they received during surgeries, moves, or other life events. There was a sense of always knowing someone would step up to help. This can be seen in these quotes:

> [My queer community] helped me move into my new apartment…And so like, there's just, I mean, they're willing to do anything and they care so much. And it's so nice to, I feel like I have so many people that I could turn to if I ever needed something. Like it's, it just feels so accepting. - U, Transmasc, 23.

> I think one of my most positive experiences was at the gay bar, actually. The second or third time I went, I was 18 or 19. No, I was 21. My 4th time I went back, I went to get a drink at the bar. And one of the bar managers back then, I believe it's the partner of the other owner, saw my ID and then remembered and then knew my name because he grew up in the same hometown with my parents where I'm from... And so he kind of…looked after me in my younger 20s, made sure that I wasn't being, you know, put in unsafe situations or have people like annoying me or hitting on me that I didn't want there or whatever. But I think just the I got you, I think is what maybe my most positive experience in this community has been. - V, Cis Man, 36.

These experiences of queer community were often related to being Appalachia as well. There was a sense of the Appalachian queer community being uniquely poised to offer social support because of the greater cultural tradition of care among close communities. Participants discussed this intersecting with the closeness of queer communities, and having an additive effect, echoing some of the positives participants saw in the religious traditions of the area discussed in the previous theme. These experiences were uncomplicatedly kind, and show the healing effects of a community there to provide support without being asked. Though a couple participants touched on how this expectation of support could feel unreasonable at times - stemming from the messaging of churches to put others above oneself - most participants were pleased to participate in a community that was altruistic, even if they also acknowledged it was unreasonably so at times. There was a sense of pride over participant's ability to put others over themselves, and to make sacrifices for the betterment of their communities.

This does undeniably create stronger connections. It facilitates communities where healing is possible. But, as with many things in this community, it can be complicated. What many negative experiences among participants point to is a difficulty drawing interpersonal boundaries to protect oneself. Imposing boundaries may feel like a rejection of fellow community members, and, as seen above, sometimes unconditional acceptance can be a healing tradition. But in a vulnerable community, understanding how to implement these boundaries would help protect these communities from some of the more harmful relationships they endure. Mutual aid is important, especially for a community that feels rejected by the broader region. And participants did have some positive mental health benefits from being able to help others in their communities. But it is a great burden to carry the mental health of your loved ones and

fellow community members on your shoulders - especially so when it feels as though no one else will pick up the slack if you stop.

Queer Appalachians face harm from all sides: their own communities and the broader region. They respond to this by supporting each other to a degree that is both admirable and, at times, unreasonable. Queer Appalachians often feel obligated to stay in unhealthy situations because if they do not, they may lose the person they are supporting. Additionally, these are situations that can feel isolating and hopeless; participants may suffer in silence to avoid outing themselves or their partners. There are also barriers that exist to entering in more healthy romantic relationships, too, including limited options and tight-knit communities that facilitate complicated friendship and relationship dynamics. While the reliance on community is more complicated in romantic relationship dynamics, friendships are more often improved by the closeness of community. Usually, friendships are not seen as the sole supportive influence in someone's life, and instead the tendency for community support can benefit both the supported and the supportive. Additionally, when healthy romantic relationships are found, the willingness of queer Appalachians to talk things out and stay with their partners can lead to self actualization and improvement in both parties. It can just be difficult to tell which relationships are worth salvaging. Ultimately, the willingness of queer Appalachians to support each other through difficult traumas and forgive past harms was a point of pride among the community, and served as a delineation between these communities and other queer communities. The next theme examines more of these differences, and how they impact queer Appalachians.

Theme 4: Distinction Between Appalachian Queer Communities and Other Queer Communities

The idea that queer communities within Appalachia lead deeply different lives from other queer people around the United States was explicitly discussed by many participants. There was a deep sense of pride in the cultural traditions of Appalachian queer communities, which were often tied to general Appalachian cultural traditions. Many of these were born from struggle, and lead to greater resilience. Participants expressed feeling more resilient and realistic than other queer communities online and throughout the United States, which sometimes lead to alienation from these groups. Interviewees described the traits that characterized their communities, and tied them explicitly to being Appalachian. These shared cultural values included resilience, opposition to oppressive government, connection to family and heritage, a strong sense of community, opposition to labor exploitation, and reverence for the mountains themselves. All of these and their impacts will be discussed in this section, as well as the explicit separation from other queer communities.

Two of the shared cultural values were rooted in a sense of place. The reverence for the mountains and the connection to heritage were both recurring themes in the data. Specifically, many participants had at some point moved away, found other places to be more accepting of queer people, and yet came back. One participant describes this experience as an almost spiritual or instinctual pull, and another describes the importance of the mountains themselves:

> I was happy to get out and see the world, but I don't know. My friend, who's also Appalachian, talks about this thing called the pull with this area…once you're here, it's hard to leave for a long time. Like something just kind of pulls you back. And so it happened to me. I came back. - V, Cis Man, 36.

> I used to say when I was coming back home down the interstate, you start to see the mountains that I'm familiar with, like the, you know, And it just felt like, home felt like the mountains were just kind of giving this big hug. - H, Cis Woman, 44.

These examples speak to a level of respect participants have for the area, and help explain why some people who could - and did - move away still want to live in a place they understand can be hostile to them. Strong community ties create the kinds of connections participants want to return to. Also, Appalachia is a very naturally beautiful place, as touched on by H above. The pull of Appalachia is something my own mother discusses often, and these quotes resonated deeply with me. It is hard to explain why the mountains themselves can feel like home, but for many participants, they just do. This pull was not experienced by all participants, however, who described the reason many people stayed as being familial or economic. But there was a sense that once you're in Appalachia, you stay in Appalachia. In S' case, this was less due to a reverence of the area, and more due to poverty and isolation.

> The people you grew up around have this limited life experience where their immediate surroundings are just their world. Because a lot of people just stay here. That is just kind of how it goes. People stay where they grow up and then that's just their lives. Where, even friends who I know who lived in rural areas and other places…people leave, like people cycle, there's cities nearby. There's just a different culture about like, social, like, politics, that just doesn't exist there, or even poverty that just doesn't exist there. Poverty is so integral to this area and why people stay here in ways that it isn't to every area. - S, Cis Woman, 21.

The importance of heritage echoes this idea of staying and being tied to the land of Appalachia. Most participants discussed their intergenerational ties to the area when asked if they identified as Appalachian. Other participants who have lived in the area for many years but were not born here expressed the exclusionary nature of the Appalachian label as one that requires a multigenerational connection. This can be seen in these quotes:

> When I tried for a leadership position, I tried to pull on some of that. And I say that, I mean, you've got people here that have been here like 5 plus generations. And then like, they're the, we, we're from here, what point are you, from here? And so I would try to have this narrative of I've been here since I was 2 trying to play into that, of that I'm one of you, we are in that to try and be seen as a we, even if outside of that, trying to earn a status like to get elected that interactively, I don't feel that need to have to validate credentials. - H, Cis Woman, 44.

One participant who has lived in Appalachia for more than 10 years stated:

> I'm very sensitive to cultural specifics. So I don't feel as though I can call myself an Appalachian. My children can because they're basically born and raised here…I'm getting, I'm getting there. I'm not there yet. I don't think I can claim to be Appalachian yet. - E, Cis Woman, 38.

The Appalachian cultural identity was strong and seen as very important, alongside being difficult to break into. While the pull of Appalachia provided some comfort for those who felt connected to it, it alienated others who felt like they had less of a claim to the label of "Appalachain". The need to prove this connection may also be borne from subconsciously seeing "queer" and "Appalachian" as opposing. Fundamentally, despite the harm that this region can impose on queer people, many felt that moving away was impossible. This may help explain why queer Appalachians are motivated to work within their communities to improve them, because it feels like the only home they have.

The queer Appalachian cultural identity was often compared to other, non-Appalachain queer communities. Many participants found other queer people to be unable to relate to their identities and experiences. This manifested in two key ways: One was other communities looking down on Appalachians, including queer Appalachians. The other related to the struggle of queer Appalachians being more serious and less safe, with many participants finding the problems of other queer communities to be frivolous compared to the struggles of their communities. The first can be seen in these quotes:

> The power dynamic is usually the other direction of like, you know, because this belittling people because of their accent or where they're from or, generational poverty or whatever, to just throw, layers upon layers that the power dynamic is not generally in the Appalachian's favor. - H, Cis Woman, 44.

> [My partner's] family [who are not Appalachian], I mean, their uncle and their mom both look down so bad on everyone around here. And it's like, Okay, that's weird. So, but I

> don't think it really ever affected our relationship. I think it was just a couple of times I have to be like, hey, now, calm down. I know what I'm talking about too, you know? And I think, and I think it comes with like a religious thing too. - U, Transmasc, 23.

Though these quotes aren't directed explicitly at queer people, the hesitancy towards Appalachians to trust non-Appalachians is still reflected here. Forming a queer Appalachian identity that is based in resilience and that affirms the ability of queer Appalachians to understand their own circumstances can act as a barrier to being made to feel unintelligent by non-Appalachian outsiders. Non-Appalachian queer people are not exempt from these prejudices because of a shared identity.

The second reason queer Appalachians found it difficult to relate to non-Appalachian queer people was much more common in the data. An issue that resonated deeply with me was the idea of safety being different for Appalachian queer people versus other queer people. E expresses this idea, and while it's said in a humorous tone, it exemplifies this well:

> I struggle when I hear a lot of people talking about feeling safe. And they're not talking about physical safety. And they're just talking about…a mentally taxing circumstance and I'm like that - I can't - like that means your resiliency - like you are no you're not allowed on the compound when the end of the world comes because you're going to be you know expendable waste because you're over here crying about a circumstance that, that doesn't mean anything, ultimately. It's inconsequential to the greater scheme of things. - E, Cis Woman, 38.

This idea was expressed by other participants, particularly when discussing close relationships with people who were not Appalachian, and thus could not understand many of the traumatic experiences of the interviewees. These quotes show this:

> Dating people outside of here almost feel weird too, because it's like they have no context for what this is like. They don't know me. I will say once again, the only person I've dated that's not from here was wealthy and from a larger city. So they had no context for what I'm talking about at all. And that's almost not even on their fault. But I don't know, I think it's probably like a little harder. But I'm sure there is comparable experiences to other places. I think being queer in America is hard. But also it's just like sample size here is not in your favor. - S, Cis Woman, 21.

> I feel like there's such a solidarity when it comes to queer Appalachians. It's like, it's like we all know how hard it can be. You talk to people from other places and some of them have accepting parents, which is amazing and great. I don't typically see that in Appalachia, but it's, it always kind of feels sometimes like a divide. It's like, oh, they got to have this positive experience and they got to have a positive upbringing that I just didn't get to have. And I think that can cause like some bitterness. But, So I feel like it's very easy for Appalachian queer people to be friends and hang out and feel the solidarity. But I also, on the other side, think that it can make it very hard for Appalachian queer people to be friends with people from other places or from different backgrounds. F, Cis Woman, 20.

These quotes can further explain why queer Appalachians may feel a pull towards the area. They may feel excluded from other queer communities because of this inability to relate to foundational traumas. Identity is very important for Appalachians, and ultimately acted as a separator between other queer communities. Suffering was not idealized, per say, but the resilience that is born from it very much is; particularly because resilience is both a traditionally Appalachian cultural value and a traditionally queer cultural value. Drawing these lines does act to separate queer Appalachians from broader queer communities, but it also shows the solidarity queer Appalachians have with each other. As F said, we all know how hard it can be to exist as a queer person in Appalachia. Understanding this allows for queer Appalachians to have more compassion for themselves and their community members, as seen in theme three. The other side of this coin is having less compassion for the struggles of queer people who do not have to endure the same level of disadvantage and trauma that queer Appalachians face.

Another major cross-cultural trait between general Appalachian culture and queer culture was the reliance on, and formation of, strong communities. Loyalty and community were highly valued by participants, who often related this to the cross-section of the identities that they held. T expresses this sentiment:

> I think the Southern hospitality makes people more likely to help. I really do. And I've never been really anywhere else. So I'm really just going off of what I feel like from here. But I feel like I feel like the kindness and the community just kind of continues with being gay. So like, you're already got this, like, treat people respectfully and kindly and treat people the way you want to be treated. Like, I feel like there's a really good core there that then just gets even closer whenever it's like, hey, I know you're really

> struggling and I'm struggling too. And so let's help each other the best we can. - T, Transmasc, 20.

This demonstrates an additional reason to the ones discussed in the previous theme as to why queer Appalachians are so likely to forgive and support each other, one rooted in the cultural traditions of Appalachia. Participants themselves noted this difference in the likelihood of queer Appalachians to forgive each other when compared to other communities, especially those online. Some expressed that they themselves had been homophobic, transphobic, or bigoted at some point in their life due to their upbringing, and demonstrated understanding towards other queer people who were struggling internally with their queerness or trying to learn how to be more accepting. Particularly, forgiveness towards those who had harmed them in the past was notable. F explains the difference in forgiveness between Appalachian communities and more urban communities:

> We know what it means to grow up Appalachian and queer. So I feel like there's more understanding there and more like openness to like kind of being…like not being open-minded. I think there's a lot more like learning and education with Appalachian. Whereas I think, if someone from, if a queer Appalachian were to like go to a different city and they hadn't learned or hadn't been taught a lot of things, they would be a little like, a little outdated…Because I feel like other places aren't as open to educating queer people, especially if it's like they're, like a queer person that isn't a teenager or is a little older. Like they should already know this. …I've had people come out to me in their 20s and be like, I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. I don't even know if I'm

> saying the right thing. Like I keep misgendering people because I just didn't learn how to do that. And I'm like, listen, I get it. takes a lot of effort and time to figure it out because you grew up in a very specific way. - F, Cis Woman, 20.

The idea that queer Appalachians understand each other came up often, and speaks to the solidarity common in this community. This can provide deeper context to some pieces of previously discussed themes, such as protectiveness Appalachians expressed towards their own communities, willingness to have intense empathy for their communities while expressing bitterness towards Christianity, and understanding of shared experiences of trauma. They had difficulty relating to other queer communities because the solidarity so important to Appalachians was absent. For participants, other queer communities don't understand what it means to be Appalachian. They don't follow the traditions of overcoming past trauma, focusing on highest-priority safety needs, organizing forgiving and incredibly tight-knit communities, and/or appreciating the beauty and uniqueness of the Appalachian region and its residents.

Some participants did find flaws within queer Appalachian community values. Most notably, U touches on how these values contribute to the lack a boundaries discussed in the previous theme:

> Sometimes. I mean, you know, because there's such a, I feel like there's a closer community aspect in all of Appalachia. Just caring for each other and everything. But I think sometimes caring for someone can go past your own personal boundaries and it can become caring for others above yourself. And it's really easy to lose that and to be like, oh, I've been neglecting myself this whole time, trying to make sure that all these friends

> were okay and were happy with me. And it starts to it starts to wear on you. And then trying to heal from that, you start to become bitter and be like, nobody really cares about me. - U, Transmasc, 23.

They related this desire to put others above yourself to the same sentiment being expressed in church, showing an additional connection between general Appalachian identity, Christian influence, and queer Appalachian identity. Caring for each other can be an important part of this identity, and pride that Appalachians have in their willingness to do so can help bolster self esteem. But the presence of an identity predicated on your ability to care for others, especially when you are also dealing with your own trauma and trying to heal from it, can cause feelings of failure or bitterness when you're unable to live up to such an ideal. It is worth noting that this participant does not tie this tendency to queer Appalachians explicitly, and shows that most Appalachians experience this in their communities - especially as it stems from the Christian influences of the area. Yet, it shows that adopting Appalachian cultural traditions directly into queer Appalachian identity can impose some harmful effects on the community, even if the underlying tradition of support and empathy is a valuable one.

Generally, queer Appalachians found their communities to be more resilient, tight-knit, and giving than non-appalachian queer communities. Many participants found it difficult to relate to non-Appalachian communities because of the sense that they did not truly understand the struggles and identities of those from Appalachia. This could be related to the strong cultural identity of hardship and resilience that is present in all Appalachian communities. This impacted the already isolated members of the queer community as it prevented them from having strong relationships outside of Appalachia, which has an already limited population of queer people and

allies. Additionally, the merging of Appalachian traditions with queer traditions could cause some strife regarding the unreasonable expectation of care within these groups. Still, these values helped connect interviewees to each other, find common ground with non-queer people in Appalachia, and form strong communities that are critical in the changing political climate of the area.

Theme 5: Getting Better, and What Can Be Done.

This theme is separated into three distinct sections. The first is demonstrating the ways in which participants have seen the reality for queer people improve the past 20 years, and how this is complicated by recent backsliding from local conservative policies and the rise of Trumpism. The last two sections combine my own analysis with that of queer Appalachians to provide action steps designed to help these communities while being cognizant of the cultural values they hold. The first is written for queer Appalachians; the second is written for outside stakeholders and/or policy-makers.

Political Realities

I identified a fairly clear split between older queer Appalachians and younger queer Appalachians regarding the political realities of living in a conservative area. Because of the longer-term perspective, older queer people were cautiously optimistic about the overall direction of tolerance in the region, though there was still significant fear surrounding the recent conservative legislation being passed. The legislative actions that inspired the most fear were those targeting the trans community, such as drag bans, removing gender-affirming healthcare from insurance, and bathroom bans. V explains the complicated progress of the area by

discussing the presence of a pride parade, and H demonstrates the fear instilled by the recent anti-trans laws passed in the state she lives in:

> I don't think when I first came out in 2005, I could have imagined there being a pride here in this city and have like a rotating pride parade and festival in the these cities. Does it still have problems from being where it is? Yes, I mean, it does. We had protesters down there this year. They were like white nationalists yelling all kinds of terrible things. But the fact that we can do that now, and I couldn't even imagine that 20 years ago, I'm going to put that as a win. I try to keep in mind, just with ongoing horrors of living in today's times, that you have to remember parts where we're succeeding and doing better and making strides and advances. And I think that because we can lean in our community, it can show a strength that people can even if they don't agree with it in this area, can at least respect. - V, Cis Man, 36.

> The Pride Center works with a lot of trans youth. And they've come into issues where if a trans youth is under 18 and wants to get support and they have an unsupportive family, anybody who drives them to the Pride Center to go to a meeting or to talk with somebody or to get clothes or whatever can be charged with kidnapping. - H, Cis Woman, 44.

When positivity was expressed by participants such as V, it often was genuine. However, occasionally it felt as though participants were just trying to cling to some hope given the worsening political situation of Appalachia. One participant said, “You still have to treat other people well, even if you're going through a really hard time. And it's a really hard time.

Especially now, just with trying to stay positive when everything feels like every single day something more negative happens," (U, Transmasc, 23). The political realities feel hopeless to many, especially considering that for trans youth the ability to transition as soon as possible often makes the transition easier physically and emotionally. Yet, the ability to stay positive helped participants avoid hopelessness, which made it easier for them to engage in activism within their communities. Still, the perceived falseness of it can feel like a dismissal of how bad things really are, and contribute to the sense that their feelings of fear are invalid.

Connecting to a positive, or perhaps more accurately, neutral spin on the conservatism of the region, there was also a sense among some participants that the conservative nature of the area acted as a protective factor in a limited way. This was expressed by E, who said:

> We've been having a lot of really interesting conversations, my spouse and I. And we discussed, like, the trans community and people of color quite often, our children are folks of color, and my husband is a trans man. We are in a weird way right now that's very specific to this point in time, almost more protected than more liberal states is because our politics have said, Yeah, we're gonna support and endorse ICE. So that doesn't always put us in the crosshairs of things like ICE, even though we have seen them here, we're not having ICE raids here like we're observing elsewhere, right? Like, our highway patrol has readily said, Oh, we'll work with you, no worries. So, you know, they're kind of just doing their job in a racist way, which is not different than, to me, other normal policing. - E, Cis Woman, 38.

Though this was not a common sentiment among interviewees, it does hold some merit. For one, Appalachia has not experienced large-scale ICE raids and an uptick in violence against citizens and protestors like those seen in more liberal, northern cities. That does not mean that this violence does not occur, only that Appalachians are already fairly used to dealing with it. But I am also unsure if conservatism truly acts as a protective factor. For one, there are fewer networks of community support for undocumented immigrants in the area, though they do exist. Additionally, police readily working with ICE and immediately complying with anti-trans laws can put these communities in a more vulnerable state than if law enforcement officers in the area were more resistant to working with federal agents. But there is truth to the fact that greater resilience and practice with protesting unjust laws puts Appalachians in a unique position to resist quietly without facing as much visible harm. They have developed the skills to do so already, and because Appalachian states have capitulated to Trumpism, there is less scrutiny against these communities. Ultimately, I am unsure of what to think about this point, but it is something to consider when looking at the political realities of immigrant communities, trans communities, and communities of color in Appalachia.

Despite the possible protectiveness of conservatism, racism, and queerphobia being "business as usual" in Appalachia, E also points out that anti-trans bills, particularly those targeting adolescents and access to gender affirming care, have had a majorly negative impact. Fundamentally, the political realities of queer Appalachians are complicated. On a 40-year scale, they have improved drastically. Looking at the short-term, things feel dire and increasingly hostile. Participants have found solace in their communities, which serve as both places of individual support and political activism, to be discussed in the next sections.

For Queer Appalachians - What Can Be Done

The most commonly mentioned reason for both community and individual mental health improvement was interaction with and commitment to creating and sustaining strong communities. There is a lot laying on these communities: they are places to form friendships and find potential partners, all while serving as bases of political and social activism. The combination of these things can lead to complications, and it is important to be aware that while your community may generally support you and improve your life, it can contain individuals who may cause you harm interpersonally. Still, the general consensus among participants was that finding a queer community is worth it, even if you may have to go through several iterations of it to find one suited to you.

Finding queer communities in Appalachia can be difficult, and, particularly for older individuals or those who did not attend college, takes a very active effort. Participants found most success in two different types of groups: leisure and activist. On the leisure side, this involved joining an adult queer sports team or getting involved in local arts scenes such as theater or music. These groups became very central to participant's lives, and provided much-needed support which many found to be near-unconditional.The activist side was a bit more complicated for participants, who found these spaces to be more volatile. Many were a part of one organization before finding something about it distasteful and moving to a different group. Participants sometimes found these groups to be at odds with each other, and lamented that already limited resources were not being pooled because of ideological differences and hostility within these communities. Yet, participating in these groups, once a good fit was found, was incredibly rewarding for participants, who enjoyed helping the more vulnerable members of their communities.

Another source of finding community for participants related to queer-focused events and spaces like pride parades and gay bars. Though the presence of gay bars has dwindled in Appalachian areas, alternative music venues that weren't explicitly queer still often provided safe and affirming spaces. Generally, participants found more fulfillment in organized groups and clubs, with many being cautious of the alcohol-centric culture of dedicated queer spaces outside of pride centers. But before knowing what was available, bar and event spaces served as important places that provided many with their first queer-affirming experiences.

Participants here give examples of how meaningful being a part of a queer community has been, and where they have been most successful in finding it:

> You're talking about like where I found community, right? Okay, the [queer sports team I'm in]. That's an entire group of people in the queer community or supporters of the queer community who have just completely taken me and my wife in like family. Like they, we've gone out with them, we've hung out with them, I've played for them for a few years…so even in sports, I've found community in this area. - O, Cis Man, 35.

> But I have, in recent years, kind of cast my net wider as far as being able to find queer community. And especially with recent events in the last few years in this country, it's kind of made it really important to have a queer community that you can lean on. - V, Cis Man, 36.

> That community, that support, that being there for each other, like that kind of thing. And even modeling resilience like that when things happen or whatever, at least, I mean, I, it

> won't be much a shock because I'm going to keep talking about politics and organizing and stuff like that. So I'll meet a lot of people in those circles and so tend to like fight back or stand up or protest or, do things. And so finding seeing that resilience, seeing that strength, seeing all the ways that they make their voices heard, inspire me to make my voice heard. - H, Cis Woman, 44.

> And something that has been very, very hard fought was the Pride festivals…The Pride festivals that we have have been extremely liberating for me. - T, Transmasc, 20.

For those who may live in places so rural that they have no dedicated queer groups or infrastructure, the arts can be a key place to find allies or other queer people. Participants here explain their experience in the arts and how that helped them find community:

> The music scene [here] is really queer. Like I would actually say it's kind of inextricable from the music scene is how queer it is. And it has provided like such a nice community center. I think it really works to make sure queer people have allies. There's a lot of people who I would say I'm acquaintanced with. Maybe we're not even friends, but I know if something were happening, they will be protesting. They will be doing good things for others. - S, Cis Woman, 21.

> I was pretty much a loner…because I couldn't really find a place that felt right to me. And then it was like, I tried theater. And of course, like every stereotype theater was like,

> where I started to find some people and where I started to build bonds and friendships. - F, Cis Woman, 20.

If all else fails, online spaces can be a safe and anonymous fall-back for those seeking affirming spaces, but I encourage queer Appalachians to find an in-person community that they can organize with and gain support from. Finding a community is essential to the well-being of queer Appalachians individually, but it is what these communities can accomplish together that makes them key to creating a better environment for other queer Appalachians. Many participants were organizers, activists, and people who had been working to improve Appalachia for years. H shares a piece of political strategy, while E explains the prevalence of queer people who work to help their communities, which is a mobilizable force:

> As an organizer, there are strategic ways to organize. People can react, people can activate, and people can organize. And reacting doesn't tend to have a lot of positive outcomes…Organizing is a long game…And so I see more people reacting than organizing, which hinders the movement, which doesn't foster relationships that are needed in organizing and building power and building community…I think that there's a lot more of that happening because there is a lot of trauma that happens here too. And which, I mean, all the trauma, not justifying the trauma, but all of that's valid of what somebody went through and what they're feeling about. But we don't have the infrastructure to help people understand those differences and to channel it. - H, Cis Woman, 44.

> I work in housing, mostly with people that are unhoused. And the people that care about social issues the most and helping underserved populations, it's queers….There are a lot of queers in housing and homelessness services. And that I am very proud of…So, and I don't know if that's translatable to other areas, but I think because we recognize our own circumstances and challenges within ourselves and our state policies and our own communities, we are more apt to want to give back to our own communities to try and fix our own communities. - E, Cis Woman, 38.

Organizations and activist spaces need as many volunteers and resources as they can get. In conservative areas, they are not likely to be given institutional support. Queer Appalachians can improve their individual situations and well-being by finding fellow queer people and engaging in this community. They can improve the political or social situation by volunteering in pre-existing pride organizations, starting queer-focused clubs, or, if they are safe to do so, being visible and open in their queerness. Embracing the culture of mutual aid, support, and forgiveness can help rehabilitate other queer people who struggle with addiction, internalized queerphobia, poverty, and/or trauma. But, this must be done realistically. Queer people, especially in populations of heightened trauma and addiction, can cause significant harm to each other. Understanding this and voicing it in community spaces can end some of the isolation others in the community experience when they do not want to further demonize a group they care deeply about. Additionally, understanding that there are other options for activist groups, clubs, and places of connection for queer people can avoid the mentality of "If I leave, I'll never find something like this again," which can cause people to feel stuck in debilitating situations.

It is difficult to find a balance between forgiveness, leniency, and tolerance of abuse. People must feel safe in order to grow. A supportive community can act as a protective factor against trauma, but it must truly be supportive and not just queer-affirming. If attitudes in Appalachia improve, so will community spaces. Lessening the prevalence of trauma and strengthening the presence of mental health resources will decrease intra-community harm. This can be done without putting oneself in harm's way by working towards the growth of the region in activist spaces. But, if a queer Appalachian is in the mental place to do so, and has an extensive community to help them if something goes wrong, extending kindness, support, and humanity to those suffering and lashing out can help them grow; this may help prevent some of the losses this community suffers frequently. It should not fall on queer Appalachians, who already struggle immensely under economic exploitation and widespread queerphobia, to do this work, but in reality it often does. Sometimes, queer Appalachians will do all that they can, and it may not be enough to help someone. Sometimes, queer people will take advantage of the heightened vulnerability of other queer people in their community. As F states:

> It took me a long time to realize that queer people weren't evil. And then it took me an even longer time to realize not all queer people are good. Because it was kind of like a switch. It was like immediately from, oh, they're bad, to being like, not every queer person is going to be a good person to me, unfortunately, which is, that's fine. We're all people. I think that's what took me so long is that we're all people. - F, Cis Woman, 20.

Ultimately, finding queer communities, joining activist efforts, and extending grace and kindness to those in the community will eventually lead to a better, more supportive environment for queer people in Appalachia, as long as it is done with proper safeguards and boundaries.

For Those Who Are Not Queer Appalachians - What Can Be Done

Paradoxically, places that are generally queer-affirming (and thus arguably need less) tend to have more resources dedicated to helping queer people. While everyone should support local queer organizations, there is a case to be made for diverting some of this support to queer Appalachian communities. These communities suffer from a lack of access to education, economic support, and mental health support. Participants noted things that would better their situations. T discussed access to education about polyamorous relationships, S discussed the need for access to mental health services not inhibited by cost, and E discussed the need for greater economic support and access to healthcare:

> I do think that I could have benefited from knowing more about [polyamorous] relationships and how they went and just knowing what to do at all or how to communicate or what kind of like what kind of standards that you need to have. There's just nothing, there's no access to information like that because that's one of the things I think that you still can't talk about. - T, Transmasc, 20.

> It is not their queerness that makes them [harm others]. It is mental illness and poverty. Being raised in an area where everybody has trauma, and it's never going to be addressed

> for generations because of poverty, because of poverty. They cannot be treated because they are poor. - S, Cis Woman, 21.

> Socioeconomic status. I mean, above all else, right? I think it truly is socioeconomic status and the fact that…we are a fairly rural area. And that's one of the reasons why we love it here. But it's also a very big shortcoming - rurality. There are some cross sections that are very strong with rurality specifically tied to health care. And if you don't have good health care outcomes in an area which most of Appalachia does not. We're simply going to have more medical vulnerabilities, which means that our lifelines aren't going to be as long as the rest of the United States. - E, Cis Woman, 38.

Those who are not queer Appalachians can provide the things that most Appalachians cannot: economic support, education, and healthcare resources. Donating to small Appalachian pride centers and organizations, as well as local artists and school arts programs, can provide essential support. Particularly as gender-affirming care becomes prohibitively expensive. Large-scale national organizations can be effective targets for donations, but many of them are based in urban areas and tend to be less active in more rural, conservative regions. Thus, targeting charitable donations to local community organizations will have the largest impact on Appalachian queer people. Beyond pride centers, donating to local libraries in Appalachia can provide much-needed support for access to information. Many libraries in Appalachia are facing targeted attacks on their collections, and most librarians are on the front lines of fighting for queer people, particularly queer youth, to have access to media that affirms their identities (Wang, 2025).

Additionally, funding queer-affirming research efforts and college groups in Appalachia is essential right now. With a recent law passed in Tennessee, it is illegal to have any sort of identity-based club or DEI office at a public university. This has caused many pride centers to be dismantled and queer-focused research to be stopped. Given that queer Appalachians are already an under-researched population, this is devastating for researching solutions and better understanding this unique population. Especially as there had been a push for academics and researchers in the area to collaborate with and directly uplift the queer communities they studied - which has now been significantly disadvantaged. Academics and researchers in other areas in the country can help fill the gap this will create by focusing their research on queer Appalachians. Others can get in contact with researchers and department offices of Queer and Gender Studies programs in Appalachia to inquire about ways to help fund and sustain these programs.

Truthfully, while economic and academic support are helpful and important, they cannot compete with the impact that having more queer-affirming therapists, gender-affirming healthcare professionals, and supportive teachers would have. While it is understandable not to move to isolated, hostile, and economically disadvantaged regions, doing so would provide much-needed support. There are also ways to support the proliferation of these three professions in the region without moving to them. For one, every state in south-central Appalachia is a PSYPACT state, so therapists who do not live there can still be licensed in the state and provide remote therapy. Queer-affirming therapists can do this and advertise in Appalachia to increase access to therapy in this region. This is particularly impactful if they take medicaid and specialize in addiction, substance abuse, PTSD, and/or childhood trauma. As for the other two jobs, supporting scholarships for queer Appalachians and their allies seeking to become teachers

or gender-affirming healthcare professionals can help provide greater access to these professions, as well as improving access to education in the area generally.

The last thing non-Appalachians can do is recognize the humanity and struggle of queer Appalachians. Be more understanding of their upbringing and interrogate any anti-Appalachain biases you may hold. Have grace for queer people who come from more conservative backgrounds, and listen to them and their experiences. If you educate them on queer issues, do it in a non-condescending way, and understand that what safety and discomfort means to you may not be the same for them. A southern accent does not translate to stupid, and differences in education, when they do arise, are usually a direct result of exploitation, trauma, and poverty. There is a lot to be learned from how queer Appalachians form and perpetuate their communities.

Discussion

Summary of Results

Queer Appalachians experience their communities in complex ways often distinct from other queer communities. Trauma and poverty are commonplace, and this leads to negative effects that ripple throughout individual members. Most commonly, substance abuse, shame, difficulty forming healthy relationships, and losing loved ones. But those that overcome, or at least continue to survive under, the unjust systems of oppression have found solace in a deeply-rooted, tight-knit, politically active, resilient community that looks after each other.

Generally, the overwhelming presence of poverty and experiences of past trauma were explicitly named and recognized by participants. They understood the systemic causes of injustice in their communities, and many were in activist groups to address these issues. This

understanding led to an empathetic and protective view of their Appalachian queer communities, where they expressed forgiveness and desires to help those that have caused them harm but who were suffering. This empathy was not always extended to those outside the community. The prevalence of Christianity played a major and sometimes complex role in these communities, with many identifying the church as the root of internalized shame and common queerphobia. Others were themselves Christian, and emphasized this as a dividing, but ultimately not exclusionary, feature of Appalachian queer communities. Additionally, participants often expressed difficulty relating to, or in some cases bitterness towards, queer people who were not themselves Appalachian. Some participants found that other queer communities did not grasp the gravity of difficulties faced by Appalachian queer people, and thought these groups could be dismissive, condescending, or too focused on mundane issues that felt small to participants who often felt afraid or unsafe in Appalachia.

Despite these challenges, participants reported strong, often kind communities that, while sometimes limited and isolated, found ways to support those who needed help. Many participants were not just engaged in local queer causes, but general activism for their communities as well. Though some felt afraid due to the hostility of non-queer Appalachia, they were often still involved in efforts to improve the lives of all who lived there. Participants who had lived in the area more than 20 years also generally felt hope at the improvement they had seen in that time, despite deep anxieties about the current conservative and volatile political climate.

Generally, intra-community relationships were complex. Participants often experienced traumatic losses of other queer community members, entered unhealthy relationships with people who abused them or experienced intense shame in their own identities, or endured other negative experiences with members of their own communities. These negative intragroup dynamics, when

combined with the inability to seek support from the broader queerphobic Appalachian community, led to heightened feelings of isolation where participants felt unable to discuss the traumatic experiences they were undergoing. Though these negative experiences were somewhat common, most participants ultimately praised their communities. They expressed gratitude for the kind, resilient people who helped them endure the hardships of being queer in Appalachia.

Minority Stress Theory and Social Identity Theory - Connections to Previous Literature

The prevalence of poverty and trauma and its impacts on this community align with previous literature on minority stress theory (Flentje et al., 2020; see also Baams et al., 2015). Internalized shame was common among participants, and acted as a significant proximal stressor. For interviewees, this shame led to silence after abuse, difficulty emotionally connecting with other queer people, and intense feelings of self-hatred. Each of these effects builds on the distal stressors of poverty, trauma, and common queerphobia to impact the individual health of participants. Participants described experiences where their shame, or others', caused major difficulties in finding satisfying and healthy connections, which in turn created a cycle of more isolation. Additionally, the commonality of loss, combined with little familial support, added more to the stress of these communities. Participants reported past and present mental health issues, such as intense feelings of grief or sadness, substance abuse issues, suicidality, and others. The additive effects of stressors combining to create and reinforce negative health outcomes is clear within the data. These findings closely align with other literature on minority stress in queer Appalachians, which found similar rates of isolation and discrimination, as well as a lack of access to identity-affirming health services. This literature also notes the high rates of resilience in this population ((Mann et al., 2023). This thesis expands upon the experience of minority

stress in queer Appalachians by examining the impacts these stressors have on how this population engages in community, as well as providing specific examples of what inter-community stressors in queer Appalachia can look like.

The protective factors discussed in previous literature, however, were also common in these communities. In fact, the greater likelihood of queer Appalachians to near-unconditionally support each other seemed to be directly caused by the understanding of systemic disadvantages exhibited by community members. Many of the participants whose mental health had improved were in supportive romantic relationships, and this was especially true for trans and/or gender non-confroming individuals, directly affirming previous studies on romantic relationships as a protective factor (Pepping et al., 2024). Additionally, personal hardiness was common among this population, which has been shown to increase resilience on a population level (Peel et al., 2022). Most notably, the strength of community and support buffers some of the internalized queerphobia exhibited by participants, and helps mitigate the effects of this stressor.

The results of this study also align with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Some participants expressed a strong connection to an Appalachian identity, while others expressed feeling excluded by it, or having to "prove" they were Appalachian. Specifically, this identity was tied very strongly with heritage and sense of place. When asked if participants identified as Appalachians, many listed how many generations of family they have that were from the region. Others who had lived in the area for many years felt unable to claim the Appalachian label because they were not born there. There was a sense that this was not only self-imposed, but that it was common for others to not see someone as Appalachian if they did not have generational ties. This reflects the out-group formation essential to the creation of social identities, and shows that queer Appalachians sometimes felt alienated from their own

communities due to strict standards on how long a person has to live in Appalachia to be considered a "real" Appalachian. This strain could also be caused by the perception that Appalachians are conservative and religious, and some participants felt that this was in conflict with their queerness. They may have felt the need to "prove" their Appalachian-ness because they feared other non-queer Appalachians would exclude them from the label because of their identities. In other words, queerness may have been seen as a trait of outsiders, rather than Appalachians themselves.

Another strong connection to social identity theory demonstrated by participants was the strong distinction made between Appalachian queer people and other queer people around the United States. Generally the differences favored queer Appalachians, and were meant to establish our community as more resilient, focused on high-impact important issues, and connected as opposed to other queer communities. Under social identity theory, the social group can provide and maintain a positive sense of self (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). While queer Appalachians do this by finding good traits in themselves and those in their community, it also aligns with social identity theory to find an out-group and compare it negatively with the in-group. The separation of queer Appalachians from other queer people in the United States combined with the idea that those groups were more sensitive, less realistic, or less community-oriented provides a way for queer Appalachians to more strongly identify with the positives in their own communities. Notably, though this formation of out-groups relates to social identity theory, it may still be a true observation made by queer Appalachians regarding the necessity of practicality and strength within our community. Yet, it can also serve to alienate queer Appalachians who do care deeply about issues deemed less immediately important by other community members. Specifically the issues of veganism, fair-trade products, being very

abrasive about one's queerness in typically non-queer spaces, being sensitive or getting offended easily, and a large focus on smaller interpersonal issues rather than big-picture changes or traumatizing events were sometimes referenced as undesirable traits of the broader queer community. This is reflective of a community in survival-mode; one that, compared to other queer communities, feels it cannot split hairs regarding issues that are not of immediate safety and legal ability to exist.

Limitations

This research has significant limitations that should not go unaddressed. The sample was majority white, with only one participant identifying as Latine. Given the prevalence of racism in south-central Appalachia, the experience of a queer person of color both in the area and in the queer community itself is likely to be different from a White queer person's experience. This is especially true as 88% of people in central Appalachia are White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Some intra-community harm may stem from racism, and this paper does not reflect that. Additionally, prior research on Black communities demonstrates similar experiences to queer Appalachians, and shows that there are commonalities among minoritized populations - especially those that are economically disadvantaged and exploited. Specifically, greater subjective stressors within a community - the perception of neighborhood disadvantage - had a significant negative effect on Black individuals mental health, whereas objective stressors did not (Jenkins, et al., 2024). This relates to the feelings of loss and hopelessness that queer Appalachians faced when they perceived their communities to be struggling that went beyond the distress they felt at understanding objectively the level of economic disadvantage of the region. Both groups showed a vested interest in reducing objective stressors, and often organized

communities around this goal. This paper lacked the means to examine the similarities and differences between White and POC queer Appalachian communities, but prior research suggests that intersections exist. Understanding how different minority communities have and continue to form and maintain community can provide pathways for uniting against oppressive systems and create spaces for those that experience intersecting forms of marginalization.

Additionally, no trans women were interviewed during this study. Many participants discussed impacts that recent legislation has had on trans women in particular, and this paper does not include that perspective directly. Prior research has examined drag as resistance in Appalachia, and highlights how trans women and other queer performers engage in their communities in similar ways to how participants in this study did (Whitten & Azano, 2025). Though it was clear that trans women were a part of the social groups of many participants, their experience of these communities may have been different due to the direct targeting they are facing. This can lead to more difficulty being out, which could limit access to queer community.

Geographically, all participants lived in the specific subregion of south-central Appalachia, with none residing in central or southern Appalachia. Thus, though they align with previous literature on queer Appalachians, results may be less generalizable to these subregions. Still, the shared presence of poverty, geographic isolation, high rates of christianity, and rurality among south, central, and south-central Appalachia indicate some generalizability. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed. While this allowed me to reach those that may have been harder to find otherwise, it also recruited those engaged in similar community activities and who may have similar interests and experiences. The protectiveness of queer Appalachian communities also serves as a limitation, as participants may be more hesitant to share experiences that shed a negative light on themselves or their community, even if these

experiences are important to a more holistic understanding of this group. Additionally, many queer Appalachians are not able to be out, which makes them difficult to find and interview. The experience of community for these individuals may be vastly different, and they may feel even more disconnected from the queer Appalachian community. Though some interviews touched on participants'experiences with closeted queer Appalachians, the inability to reach this population directly limits my ability to examine their experiences in this region and within these communities.

Implications

The queer Appalachian community is one with a strong cultural identity, wariness of outsiders, and deep prevalence of poverty and trauma that feels insurmountable given the lack of resources in the region. Solutions providing increased mental health and economic resources can and should take advantage of already existing tight-knit community networks of support. Additionally, queer Appalachians will likely be more susceptible to help if it comes from a community insider, someone who has also experienced economic and personal hardship, and/or someone who already has the support of a trusted community member. Queer Appalachians understand the systemic exploitation they have experienced, and are understandably wary when the very institutions that have exploited them, such as prestigious academic institutions, larger businesses, political organizations, and even some non-profits (especially if they are religious) offer support.

This research also implies the importance of community to queer Appalachians. It is a necessary lifeline, and often the only source of support for many. The community is always necessary for queer Appalachians, but it is not always a positive force. An insular, isolated group

experiencing widespread trauma and poverty creates conditions for horizontal, intra-community violence. Additionally, as queer Appalachians already feel disparaged and targeted by the majority of their neighbors, they often hesitate to speak against those within their communities to not give any support to hateful claims. Queer people have been accused of many detrimental qualities, ranging from shoving their identity in others faces, to being abusers or pedophiles. This is even more common in Appalachia, where evangelical communities and churches often use these talking points. It makes sense that a queer Appalachian would be hesitant to report or discuss abusive situations, especially those involving someone older, with not only researchers but also their fellow community members. This paper does not seek to perpetuate harmful stereotypes about queer people. Overwhelmingly, participants described their communities as kind and helpful, and many have fulfilling positive romantic relationships with other queer people in Appalachia. But harm does happen in these communities, and there was a trend among participants of down-playing this. They understood that those who do harm in the community are likely experiencing hardships, and enacting something that they themselves have faced. But not addressing the prevalence of horizontal violence in queer Appalachian communities does a disservice to those who have experienced this harm. It also makes finding solutions more difficult. Researchers and activists, especially those outside of this community, should understand that harm between queer Appalachians is likely to be underreported, and understand that this is a genuine protective mechanism that stems from empathy towards others in our Appalachain queer Community.

A final implication relates to my presence as simultaneously an insider and an outsider. Queer Appalachians are more likely to be open about their experiences with me, and I have easier and deeper access to the members of this population. During recruitment, more than one

participant stated they were happy to help out a fellow queer Appalachian, and told me I could reach out to them anytime if I needed further information or support in general. Additionally, given my connection to the region, I knew what resources were available to participants who were struggling. I had on-hand a list of LGBT-affirming therapists and mental health professionals, many of whom I knew and could personally recommend, as well as knowledge of pride and community resource centers. Still, given that I was acting as a researcher for an academic institution - a liberal arts college in the northeast United States no less - participants explained things differently and withheld more experiences and opinions than they likely would if we had spoken in a less formal setting. Researchers may always be imperfect insiders to this population given the exploitation they have endured stemming from powerful institutions like academia. This makes the insider status of a researcher more important, as I was able to recognize when participants were likely editing themselves. I have had many informal conversations with queer Appalachians (including two of the participants of this study) about their experiences that take a more derogatory tone towards community members who have done them harm. Even as a community insider, participants hesitated to portray their communities in any negative light. An outsider is likely to get an even more protected narrative. Not that any are untrue or inauthentic, but a difference between insider, outsider and formal, informal interviews exists and does impact data.

Future Research

Future research should more explicitly center the effects of race and class on the experiences of community, poverty, trauma, and substance abuse in queer Appalachians. Given that participants cited socioeconomic status as an integral piece of the Appalachian experience,

and cited such high rates of poverty as a driver of many other negative effects, future research should examine not just the effects of this on queerness, but also the most effective and efficient use of economic resources and support. As for the effects, a study that examines participant's sense of place and ability to leave unsafe conditions tied to their economic status could provide a more clear understanding of what the most pressing economic hardships within this community are, and examine the implications of social services that are primarily provided by religious organizations. This is especially true as prior research highlights the effects that financial hardship has on individual health (Lee & Inglis, 2020). Additionally, examining how to most effectively use the resources available to queer Appalachians and testing which interventions have the largest impact will allow for the limited support available to go further. Beyond the effects of poverty, future research should include more queer Appalachians of color to gain a broader perspective of how race impacts the experience of queer Appalachian communities, which, though having a marginalized perspective, can still be racist themselves. Given the amount of racially-based discrimination in the area, this research should be conscious that, unless done by a community insider, participants are likely to feel isolated and to be protective of their community to a higher degree than white queer Appalachians.

Another avenue of future research should focus specifically on community mental health solutions. Especially those involving treatment and support for substance abuse and grief. Ideally these are pilot studies that implement possible solutions and test their effectiveness. This research can take inspiration from mental health interventions done previously in Appalachia or other geographically isolated areas, interventions done in very spiritual communities or those with large amounts of religious trauma, and/or interventions done in economically disadvantaged marginalized communities. These solutions must be empathetic to and understand the deep

community ties and loyalty present within this population. They must also support the cultural values of queer Appalachians, else they risk not being taken seriously - or even being disparaged - by the population they are meant to serve.

Calls to Action/What Can Be Done

Many of the things in this section were already discussed in the final theme of the results section. However, given that these are the action steps that may reasonably be taken by the likely majority of readers of this thesis, they are worth reiterating. Without emphasizing doable courses of action, this paper threatens to become what many queer Appalachians perceive academia to be: An empathetic portrayal of our lives that ultimately doesn't do anything for a community that doesn't have the resources to "increase access to affordable mental health" or ability to vote for more progressive policies. Below is a list of things I think are most high-impact.

For Non-Queer Appalachians

Some of the most important things that queer Appalachians lack are access to: mental healthcare, economic resources, social support, and education. For each, I've provided a brief overview of action steps.

- Mental and Gender-Affirming Health Care: If you are a queer-affirming mental health provider, especially if you provide low-cost care or take insurance, you can become licensed and practice remotely in every state in south-central Appalachia, as they all are PSYPACT states. This is especially impactful if you specialize in grief, PTSD, substance abuse, or suicidal ideation. As for gender-affirming care, advocate for policies such as medicare for all, and continue to fight for trans healthcare on a federal scale. If you're a

gender-affirming healthcare provider the best thing you can do for this population is to move to south-central Appalachia. Given that's often not realistic, you can also support go-fund-me campaigns for Hormone Replacement Therapies and gender-affirming surgeries. These have been vital to many of my Appalachian trans friends, especially those without parental support.

- An additional, but not legal, thing that you can do is get access to gender-affirming hormones such as testosterone or estrogen by asking your doctor for them. Often, the exact same hormones are much easier for cis people to get than trans people, and you can then anonymously provide them with these hormones through mutual aid organizations or personal connections. In queer Appalachian communities, I have seen this manifest as frequent gym-goers getting illegal yet common access to testosterone and giving it to their transmasc friends.

- Economic Resources: Donating to local pride community centers or mutual aid groups is likely to be more directly impactful and an efficient use of money for queer Appalachians than donating to nation-wide charity organizations which often struggle to reach isolated rural communities. Queer Appalachian communities already have networks of support, many of which are interpersonal, and just need money or supplies.
- Social Support: Without living in south-central Appalachia, targeted social support is difficult. Generally, when encountering queer people from conservative and/or religious areas, be openly queer-affirming and non-condescending. Be patient when they don't know things you may find obvious, such as how to use correct pronouns or what certain labels mean. Canvasing or phone banking for more progressive politicians and policies

can work, but be realistic about the outcome given the conservative supermajority in most of south-central Appalachia. Generally, many queer Appalachians are starved for acceptance of their identities, so providing that if you get the opportunity can go a long way.

- Education: Access to education is limited in Appalachia generally. There are two ways to address this - providing greater access for queer Appalachians to leave and go elsewhere to get an education, or support educational institutions and scholarships within Appalachia. For the first, colleges and universities can do two things:
    - Be less selective/employ affirmative action to applicants from Appalachia, given that most don't have access to rigorous high schools with AP (advanced placement) and dual enrollment options.
    - Provide more financial aid to Appalachian students/be more rigorous in discussing their family situations. While a queer Appalachian's family may seem able to pay for expensive tuition, there is a higher likelihood that they won't financially support their children's higher education. This is especially true if the student is queer and looking to go to a more liberal-leaning institution, and the parents are conservative and/or religious. This was the case for a few friends I had in high school, who didn't get financial aid because their parents had some money, but had been financially cut off from their family due to their queer identity.
    - Ideally solutions would bolster the education system within Appalachia itself, but this is a long-term legislative goal that requires much more social progress than is feasible within the next five years. A more immediate solution would be to

support research emerging from Appalachia, specifically about queer issues. This can be done through citing this work, engaging and networking with its authors, and writing to college presidents currently gutting women, queer, and gender studies departments due to new executive orders. Additionally, you can fund scholarships or donate to go-fund-me campaigns of current queer Appalachian students, especially those that want to enter healthcare.

For Queer Appalachians

The work should not fall on you to improve and support this community that has been targeted by local and federal governments and conservative social movements. Yet, most of us understand the common Appalachian feeling of: no one is coming to save you. I also want to emphasize that this work can be fun, engaging, community-building and fulfilling, and many of you have been doing it for years already. This section discusses some things you can do to help others in your communities. More information can be found in the last theme of the results section, but below is an itemized list of actions you can take.

- Get involved in community: Finding other queer Appalachians leads you to forming the social connections that can help you and others survive. This community will also likely lead to opportunities for volunteering and activism. Ways to find this community are listed briefly in the last theme of the results section.
- Be out when you can, affirming when you can't: Many of us queer Appalachians experience intense queerphobia and internalized shame. Being out and affirming can demystify queerness and provide much-needed support and counter-programming to your fellow community members.

- Donate and volunteer: If you can, donating money or volunteering at local queer-affirming organizations can hugely help your community, and you may be able to meet and organize with activist social and political groups doing so.
- Get into healthcare: If you can and want to stay in the area, getting into a healthcare field in Appalachia is one of the highest-impact things you can do for your community. Specifically, becoming a therapist, counselor, someone who can prescribe HRT, or someone who can perform gender-affirming surgeries would help to fill the gap left by the absence of many of these services.
- See a mental health professional/look inward: If you can, seeing a mental health professional could improve your life and the lives of those in your community. Be open to change, and interrogate how you interact with other queer Appalachians. Be open and empathetic, but set boundaries when you need to. If you're in a healthy place mentally, you can provide so much more support than you can otherwise.
- You can't save them all, but you can save some: You probably will lose someone to substance abuse, suicide, reverting back into the closet, or forced seperation due to unsupportive family if you haven't already. If you're in a position to: offer financial help, living arrangements, support, food assistance, and/or other resources to queer Appalachians who are struggling. For some, this will be life-changing and may prevent them from worse outcomes. But understand that you cannot save everyone, and have a community that understands what you're going through if you do lose someone. Also don't forget to celebrate the successes when they do happen.
- Have fun: Participate in an art form, fall in love, spend time with your friends and supportive family. It is important for queer Appalachians, especially adolescents, who

> feel hopeless, ostracized, and politically targeted to see queer joy. To understand that a better life is possible. It will also give you something to fight for, as opposed to just standing against the barrage of bigotry.

Ultimately, queer Appalachians have so much they can learn from each other. The tight-knit community can lead to exploitative situations, but it can also be a major asset once you find people you feel safe with and relate to.

Conclusion

To conclude, queer Appalachians face many social and economic disadvantages that color their experiences within their own communities. The higher rates of poverty, trauma, and substance abuse lead to cyclical violence and feelings of loss and hopelessness that permeate throughout this community. I interviewed eight queer Appalachians to better understand how this community relates to one another, and presented five themes that exemplify their experiences. The first demonstrated that queer Appalachians understand the economic and social disadvantages they faced, and often organized their communities around addressing these issues. Poverty and trauma led to losses within the community, and prevented many from healing and forming healthy relationships with other queer Appalachians. The second theme addressed the differences between how queer Appalachians reacted to the institutions and people that harmed them. They had complicated, often contradictory or bitter feelings towards the church - an institution that has deep ties to the queerphobia so prevalent in Appalachia. For other queer Appalachians, they approached harm with a more empathetic and nuanced angle. Many hoped to reform or help those that had harmed them, because they understood the underlying reasons behind the harm.

The third theme examined how the tight-knit nature of these communities colored their impact. While closeness and loyalty allowed for the strong empathy and willingness to help exhibited by queer Appalachians, it also created some of the conditions for unhealthy and/or abusive relationship dynamics. The fourth theme displayed a disconnect between queer Appalachian communities and other queer communities in the United States. It found that queer Appalachians felt they were more resilient and practical, and that this community still felt very strongly connected to Appalachian cultural values. The final theme explored the ways that queer Appalachian communities come together to support each other, and provided examples of how to better the circumstances of those within these communities for queer Appalachians themselves, as well as those residing in other areas. Ultimately, queer Appalachians experience intra-community harm and weather stressors both from within their communities and, most egregiously, from those outside of their communities. But all participants found that their communities were more likely to help than harm them, and many saw their kind, resilient neighbors and lifelines necessary for their survival and happiness.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What is your identity in relation to queerness? What labels do you use, and how do you define those labels? Do you label yourself Appalachian or something else? What does the label of Appalachia mean to you?
2. What do you think are the strengths of queer Appalachian Communities?
3. What do you think are the vulnerabilities of queer Appalachian communities?
4. How does being Appalachian affect you and your social circle, if it does at all?
5. Have you had positive experiences with other queer people in your community? If so, what are they?
6. Have you had negative experiences with other queer people in your community? If so, what are they?
7. Describe an experience you heard about or saw another queer Appalachian have? How did that affect you, if it did? Does seeing/hearing about the experiences of other queer Appalachians generally affect you?
8. I want to understand how communities can come together or can experience collective distress. With that in mind, can you describe a time you thought someone else being both queer and Appalachian may have contributed to the harm they did to you or others? What about a time where it contributed in a helpful way?
    a. Follow up: Do you think queer Appalachians are more likely to harm or help each other when compared to non-Appalachian queer people?
9. I want to understand how being queer and Appalachian impacts romantic relationships. Have you been in one or more romantic relationships with other queer Appalachians?
    a. If yes: Describe those relationships. Were they high-quality? Give examples of how they impacted you.

i. Follow up: Do you think the Appalachian context mattered? If so, how?
ii. Follow up: Do you think it is easier or more difficult to have high-quality romantic relationships with queer people in Appalachia as compared to other areas of the US? Why?

10. I also want to understand how being queer and Appalachian impacts friendships. Have you had other queer Appalachian friends?
    a. If yes: Describe those relationships and give examples of how they impacted you.
        i. Follow up: Do you think the Appalachian context mattered, and if so, how?
        ii. Follow up: Do you think it is easier or more difficult to have high-quality friendships with queer people in Appalachia as compared to other areas of the US? Why?

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