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Everyday Positive Identity Experiences of Spiritual and Religious LGBTQ+ BIPOC

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the everyday positive identity of spiritual/religious lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+), Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC). By enriching our knowledge about the positive developmental processes (e.g., strengths, resilience, protective factors) that multiply marginalized and underrepresented populations employ to navigate their identity, we can better understand the impact and dynamics of systemic oppression on an individual's expression and development of self. Ten individuals from Canada and the US provided diarized voice entries to a daily prompt in an experience sampling method (ESM). We analyzed voice clip entries collected over a period of two to four weeks and conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis for local and global expressions of identity that weave real-time processes to generate a broader frame of positive identity mechanisms, contexts, and content. Real-time concrete events prompted participants to reflect on their broader identity conceptualizations across time (past, present, and future) through the experiences of presence and gratitude.

**Keywords:** Real-time processes; positive psychology; identity development; LGBTQ+ psychology; multicultural psychology; religious/ spiritual psychology

### **Everyday Positive Identity Experiences of Spiritual/Religious LGBTQ+**

Individuals who embrace complicated intersecting identities may experience conflicting and some- times competing cultural messages from the multiple communities to which they belong. Analytical frames such as Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) address how such tensions, shaped by simultaneous memberships to overlapping systems of privilege and marginality, impact mental, emotional, physical, psychic, and spiritual well-being (Bonelli & Koenig, 2013). In this study, we explored the intersecting identities of individuals who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+), Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), and spiritual/religious. We emphasize the enactment of intersecting identities in every day experiences, as those “real time” experiences link to broad and global understanding of the self.

#### **Links between identity enacted in real time and global identity structures**

Galliher et al.’s (2017) integrated developmental model for studying identity in context melds Erikson’s (1968) concepts of identity configurations (e.g., the ways that individuals organize and manage different aspects or components of their identity), Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory of ecological systems, and Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) intersectional analysis to situate identity within four levels of culture, social roles, personal domains, and everyday actions. At the broadest level, identity is situated within *historical, cultural, and political contexts*; as such, it is crucial to attend to power dynamics that inform and shape one’s sense of self among competing master/dominant narratives, and one’s simultaneous memberships to groups of varying privilege and marginality. At the second level, identity is also informed by the ways in which we exist in relation to one another, so one’s *social roles* (e.g., spouse, parent, sibling) are also explored. The third level is comprised of interpersonal (e.g., romance, friendship) or ideological *content domains* based on group memberships (e.g., occupational, politics, religion, hobby) that are

idiosyncratic and significant to the individual. At the fourth level, identity is constructed and maintained in the “*everyday*,” where the individual’s constellation of “relations, and domains can be revealed through the microcontent” (Galliher et al., 2017, p. 2016) of “day-to-day thoughts, feelings, and actions associated with individuals’ identities” (p. 2013).

Everyday experiences provide contextualized information on the local scale – what happened, who they were with, how did they react – and what domains are important to individuals that reveal the broader cultural expectations, beliefs, structures, and culture as experienced and embedded within the individual. Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al. (2008) posited a micro-macro dimension to capture the dialectic between identity *expression* in “real-time” (micro level) and identity *reflection*, which requires one to organize aggregated experiences over extended periods of time to generate coherent “big picture” accounts of identity experiences (macro level). Conceptualizing a micro-macro dimension highlights the fuzzy distinction between micro-level everyday expressions of identity and longer term reflections about identity. In this study, we forefront micro-level experiences as we asked participants to describe their expressions of identity in everyday moments, but we recognize that those experiences are inextricably tied to their reflections about their identity over time. Thus, discussing the concept of time in identity research is inherently murky because relaying an experience of identity expression in every day, “real time” automatically affords the individual an opportunity to engage in reflection and connect the real time experience to global ideas about identity. We use the terms “everyday expression” and “real time identity” to capture our intention to explore identity expression in specific interactions and concrete events, recognizing that our effort to articulate a finite distinction between day-to-day lived identity experiences and broader, global thoughts about identity is somewhat arbitrary.

***Research at the intersections of religion, ethnicity, and sexual or gender identity***

Crenshaw (2013, 1991) asserted that intersectionality is not just an analysis of our complex, multiple, and overlapping subjectivity, but also an “analytic sensibility” that reveals how the dynamics of power and oppression impact the ways in which we navigate and inhabit the world through systemic, cultural, and interpersonal forces. As intersectionality is not additive but constitutive (Cho et al., 2013), experience of sexuality is directly tied to experiences of religious identity, racial identity, and gender identity. A number of studies do address the experiences of those at the intersections of LGBTQ+, religious/spiritual, racial/ethnic, and cultural identities (Adams & Phillips, 2009; Alessi et al., 2021; Boellstorff, 2005; Garcia et al., 2008; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Culture, family, and religion greatly overlap in how their existence, messaging, and expressions are intertwined. That is, family may comprise religious and cultural traditions and customs; religion is enacted through family scripts and the cultural/state constructs of the heteronormative family; and culture is experienced within these micro and macro domains of family interpersonal relationships and the public/private participation of religion.

***Unique identity development experiences for spiritual/religious LGBTQ+ BIPOC***

There is evidence that racialized LGBTQ+ individuals may have an alternative course of identity development, negotiation, and navigation, suggesting that Cass (1984) classic model of homosexual identity development is inadequate in its explanatory power for this population. Even more complexly, practicing an idiosyncratic version of faith, often involving theological (re)work, can be a source of coping in order to hold different identities together. Those who stay in touch with God after forced migration or traumatic experiences precipitated by their families or communities (Alessi et al., 2021), or conflict between religion and sexuality experienced in

adolescence (Garcia et al., 2008), often must challenge interpretations of the religion of their youth (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). This “remedial ideological work” (Berger, 1981) allows individuals to configure their own relationships to customs, traditions, doctrine and practice (Alessi et al., 2021; Boellstorff, 2005), in order to take pride in being both spiritual/religious and LGBTQ+ (Rosenkrantz et al., 2016).

### ***Support and stigma in family, culture, and religion***

Scholars have explored the role of family as a nexus of interpersonal connections, cultural identity, community resilience, political influence, and love and support (McGuire et al., 2017), but find that they can also concurrently contribute to individuals’ sense of contention, internal conflict, and homophobic experiences (Choi & Israel, 2016). Holding multiple marginalized identities may leave LGBTQ+ BIPOC more vulnerable to stress. However, a number of studies reveal that they have unique sources of support and better coping skills to promote personal, interpersonal, and community-wide resiliency to overcome adversity (Gray et al., 2015; Morales et al., 2013). Models of identity development that see sexual minority status as superseding other categories of being may be experienced as inconsistent, unhelpful and/or distressing (Moradi et al., 2010), and it is paramount to also centralize connection to cultural heritage, history, family and community, and self and relationships (Choi & Israel, 2016). Attending to values of connectedness to communities and cultures of origin, maintenance of prized social relationships, and navigating traditional expectations of family and gender, reveal the entanglements of sexual and ethnic identity development, disclosure, and experiences of minority stress and healthy relationships (Choi & Israel, 2016). Similar to a number of postmodern and contemporary scholars of identity integration (Schachter, 2004), Choi and Israel (2016) agreed that no one identity configuration is “good,” “bad,” or “better” than another

(Hahm & Adkins, 2009); rather, identity configurations dynamically reveal the contexts and situational demands that differentially impact comfort, empowerment, and connection to the other.

### ***Emphasis on positive identity configurations***

Studies of sexual and gender minority people of color are often framed from a deficit perspective, exploring stigma, risk, stress or health disparities (Moradi et al., 2010). As a counterpoint to the existing deficit approach, we contribute to the growing body of literature around resilience, strengths, and positive identity experiences. “At the most basic level, to have a positive identity is to feel good (i.e., have positive emotions and thoughts) about oneself” (Riggle et al., 2014, p. 398). Consistent with themes of positivity explored by Riggle and colleagues, other scholars have highlighted the importance of feeling seen (Parmenter et al., 2020), love (Rosenkrantz et al., 2016), authenticity (Boellstorff, 2005; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010), wholeness (Fisher, 2007), connectedness (Yip, 2008), pride (Adams & Phillips, 2009; Cass, 1984), creativity (Shah, 2016), joy (Van Den Brandt, 2018), pleasure (Brown, 2018), power (McQueeney, 2009), and freedom (Alessi, 2016). Our objective was to explore the “everyday” expressions of positive identity at the intersection of culture/ethnicity, sexual/gender identity, and spirituality/religion.

### ***Summary and objectives***

Overall, the extant literature suggests that the development of a positive gender and sexual identity may undergo different pathways for spiritual/religious LGBTQ+ BIPOC, and finding affirmation for their various identities may not rest in exclusively LGBTQ+ spaces. Indeed, cultural, family, and religious narratives may contribute to positive identity in the self, and self in relation to community. Positive identity development may be complicated and



contradicting, all the while challenging heteronormative, white-dominant scripts. We rely on participants' reports of identity *expression* in everyday events and interactions (Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008) as an assessment of the enacted processes relevant for positive identity formation. However, we predict that the act of narrating the events and interactions will also prompt participants toward a *reflective* stance on the content of their identities. We seek to answer the following questions: 1) What are the everyday positive identity experiences of religious/spiritual LGBTQ+ BIPOC? 2) How are everyday positive identity experiences linked to broader identity conceptualizations?

## **Method**

### ***Research design and analytic framework***

As part of a larger project aimed at understanding the phenomenology of positive identity for spiritual/religious LGBTQ+ BIPOC, we collected 5–10 minute voice clips of participants' everyday experiences of positive identity via experience sampling method (ESM). Given the intimacy rooted in sharing personal and vulnerable details about identity development, particularly around contentious issues of faith, queer and trans identities, and racialized experiences, it is important to honor participants in ways that are as process- and rapport-oriented as possible, and also address power imbalances in the historical control and ownership of research (Glesne, 2016). In the on-boarding orientation session, the first author opened up discussion on what forms of reciprocity participants would like to see beyond monetary compensation. In anticipating discussion of difficult topics, the first author compiled a list of affirming trauma-informed resources to which participants could avail themselves, so that the invitation to difficult dialogue was as responsible and ethical as possible. "Caring reflexivity"

(Rallis & Rossman, 2010) deeply implicates us in supporting each other in interdependence and intersubjectivity.

An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) is appropriate to develop greater insight into the ontology of positive identity (Creswell, 2013). As an analytic framework, IPA seeks to articulate an idiographic phenomenological exploration of the meaning participants ascribe to their experiences within a particular domain. Analyses framed within IPA do not seek to generate new theory or generalizable constructs, but rather seek to holistically understand a phenomenon in a manner that intentionally attends to context. IPA has been used frequently as an analytic method that embraces an intersectional framework by attuning to context, privilege and oppression, and holistic experience (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Consistent with the framework of IPA, we observed narrative complexity, differentiation and integration of thought, multiple points of view, mixed motivation, and complex emotional experiences. In our analysis, we also explicitly incorporated Van Manen's (1997) phenomenological approach to spatiality (lived space), corporeality (lived embodiment), temporality (lived time), and relationality/communality (lived relations).

### ***Positionality***

As researchers, our positionalities can be both enriching and limiting; the authors' varying identity configurations, which align with the communities of interest and the study's purpose to varying degrees, provide insight where each other's gaps exist. We are also grateful to participants who, through member-checking, generously offered corrections, additions, amendments, or ways of orienting to their voice diaries.

As the first author reflects on her own spiritual/religious, queer, ethnic, cultural identities and communities as a lesbian Chinese-Canadian Anglican educated cisgender woman, she is

particularly cognizant of themes of “both/and” tensions, liminality, incommensurability, hybridity, and “traditional”/“contemporary” values. This is the perspective that informed how she read and understood the participants, particularly those who reflected on their biracial and/or bicultural positionalities and articulated the tensions of straddling dominant and minority spaces. The second author is a European American, able-bodied, highly educated, cisgender woman who does not claim a particular sexual identity label, but accrues all privilege associated with heterosexual status through participation in heterosexual marriage. The second author was raised in a Christian tradition, but currently identifies as agnostic. The third author is a transgender non-binary spiritual white person, who is sensitive to themes of corporality, binary gender tensions, and identity creation within a void. This perspective allows the third author to personally understand the gendered nuance existing between expression and identity. The third author does not have a personal understanding of the non-dominant racial experiences/oppression of BIPOC, thereby restricting their analysis. The fourth author is a gay Navajo/Diné Indigenous cisgender male. Identifying as a queer BIPOC, this perspective allowed the fourth author to resonate with participants’ experiences and intersectionality’s of being queer people of color, along with their respective traditional practices. The fifth author is an agender asexual aromantic white person and barely spiritual atheist. The fifth author feels they have a keen understanding of many less talked about queer identities. As a research team, the authors relied on their varied perspectives to add richness and depth to their interpretations of the data.

### ***Participants***

After obtaining approval from the Utah State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), an eligibility questionnaire was distributed through the first author’s social connections to LGBTQ+ BIPOC individuals and social media. Recruitment snowballed as other LGBTQ+

BIPOC shared on social media. Interested individuals were directed to a Qualtrics survey that included a consent form, outline of compensation (\$100 for the completion of the study; \$30 for three to five 5–10 min voice clips and \$70 for other activities not relevant for this study), a demographic information survey, and an option to share their e-mail address to be contacted for scheduling. Individuals who did not meet the inclusion criteria (18 years of age or older, and identifying as LGBTQ+, spiritual/religious, and as an ethnic/racial minority) had their information deleted. To address limited data on other religions (e.g., Animism, Pagan) and racial/ethnic identities (e.g., Asian, Latinx), individuals were intentionally selected to broaden the range of representation in the literature; 29 individuals from the US and Canada filled out the survey, 13 were invited to participate, 11 completed onboarding, and 10 participated in the voice diaries. Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics. According to the approved IRB protocol, participants were given the option to provide a pseudonym or to use their real names. All but two participants chose to use their own names to identify their quotes, reporting that sharing their true identities was an act of self-affirmation, authenticity, and advocacy.

### ***Procedure***

Data was collected in from September to December 2020. An onboarding Zoom session was used to review study procedures, explain how to use the ESM application, Ethica, on mobile devices, and provide an opportunity for participant questions and discuss reciprocity. Following onboarding, participants received the following prompt every day for two weeks on their mobile device: “Take a few minutes to recall your day, and think of a moment where you felt a strong sense of feeling *seen, loved, authentic, joy, creative, connected, whole, positive, proud, powerful, pleasure, or free*, particularly as a religious/spiritual LGBTQ+ Black, Indigenous, Person of Color. Please tell us about what happened in the moment – who was there, what kind of space

was it, what was the context, and any kind of sensory details (e.g., taste, touch) you would like to share.” The prompts were provided at random times throughout the day; participants were asked to choose three to five prompts to respond to over the course of the two weeks. Two participants were given 1–2 extra weeks to complete their audio recordings because of unforeseen circumstances that prevented them from completing the task in the two-week time frame. The 5–10 minute ESM audio recordings were transcribed verbatim: 1 participant provided 1 clip, 1 participant provided 2 clips, 6 participants provided 3 clips, 1 provided 5 clips, and 1 provided 11 clips.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

The first author conducted all onboarding zoom sessions and was responsible for all communication with participants over the course of participation. The first and fifth author both transcribed a portion of the data and reflected on the data throughout data collection via field notes, research journals, and bi-weekly discussions on their observations. As data collection and transcription proceeded, all authors were involved in regular (i.e., at least weekly) conversations about the developing themes observed by the first and fifth author. New data collection was suspended when all authors agreed that saturation had been achieved.

The first author assigned participants to authors for individual review and preliminary coding, ensuring that voice clips for each participant were read individually by 3–4 authors. Prior to meeting, authors engaged in line-by-line coding of their assigned transcripts, highlighting emerging themes, identifying exemplar quotes, and making notes about potential hierarchical structure of themes and subthemes. In the first coding meeting, authors collaboratively reviewed the data from each participant one by one, with each author who read that participant’s transcripts providing their observations and interpretations. In a second coding meeting, the

collection of observations from the review of each individual participant were synthesized across participants into a final thematic structure, and exemplar quotes for each them and subthemes were identified. Transcripts and an outline of results were sent by e-mail to participants for review. Only three participants responded to the member checking; one of those participants provided extensive feedback and another provided an additional voice memo, both of which were incorporated into final themes.

### **Results**

Participants provided 36 voice clips (and 1 follow-up clip during member checking) that offered both micro and macro content based on the events of their days. Participants provided a range of 1 (Levyi) to 11 clips (Sea), and the average was 3 clips. The voice diaries ranged from a length of 3 minutes, 6 seconds to 11 minutes, 1 second, and the average duration of voice clips was 6 minutes, 33 seconds. Participants provided reflections of daily events, like going out for a walk or a drive, eating dinner, sitting in front of the tv, praying, getting dressed, meditating, reading a book, playing music, or cleaning. These real-time concrete events prompted participants to reflect on their broader identity conceptualizations across time (past, present, and future) through the experiences of presence and gratitude.

The dimensional and blurry nature of the micro-macro distinction, as outlined by Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al. (2008), was evident in our participants' descriptions of their everyday identity expression. The prompt specifically asked participants to relay an event or experience from their day, requesting detail about the setting, feelings, and context of the event. As such, we directed participants toward an analysis of real time, "in the moment," expression of positive identity in their daily lives. However, our participants automatically enriched their descriptions of the specific events of the day by making connections between the past, present, and future,

and weaving complicated stories that linked specific (and sometimes mundane) interactions or events to very broad and integrated conceptualizations of the self and their place in the world.

“Everyday” experiences varied in temporality as participants reminisced, recounted, and reflected on events of the hour or over the past several days, weeks, months, or years. As such “real-time” identity may include processing experiences through meta-reflection and meaning-making of the far- past alongside the recent-past in the present. Participants’ experience of “presence” drew on van Manen’s (1997) phenomenological routes including time, body, relationships, and contexts, and cemented the incorporation of said experience into broader conceptualizations of the self. Gratitude experiences involved the evaluation of participants’ material goods, relational dynamics, and self- growth, and reflections across time, space, and relationality. While experiences of “presence” and “gratitude” were somewhat inextricably interwoven, we articulate the two themes separately here.

### ***Presence***

Participants’ experiences of presence ranged from tending to altars, praying, self-care, setting bound- aries, meditating and remembering, playing the harp, choosing clothing and accessories, music, reading, or talking about their favorite subjects. A., Iman, Sea, Lily, Luka, Sumaiya, and Anthony spoke about events that jolted them out of the sense of the ordinary. The sense of positive identity gained here was an expansion of who they could be, along with experiencing everyday moments of joy. Iman (they/them) went on a drive out in the countryside, whereas they would usually “stay within the confines . . . the comfort of home” to avoid anxiety-inducing experiences. This moment of presence was an interruption of Iman’s day-to-day and provided an opportunity for them to connect more deeply with themselves, their mother, and nature. As they contemplated the beauty of the countryside and noticed sensory and

embodied feelings linked to their mother treating them to a Tim Hortons sandwich, Boston cream and white hot chocolate, Iman shared how these “simple joys and pleasures of the day-to-day . . . these small things were able to ground [them] in the moment and give [them] a sense of appreciation.” Overall, this event was contrary to their typical desires, but Iman was able to be “entirely present in the moment, aware of [their] surroundings, and [find] inner peace, and stillness.” Their experience of staying present in the moment opened up feelings of joy, pleasure, and gratitude.

Participants voiced their desire for and/or connections to comforting, grounding, reassuring, safe spaces, whether it was found in nature, home, digital realm, school, or religious institutions. Positive use of “presence,” particularly in gaining authenticity, freedom, and gratitude of being, is in being in the now. In A. Silvera’s (she/her) awe-experience of a salmon run, she paints a picture of presence, gratitude, and connection to being wholly present:

I was really taken by watching the salmon. I was really taken by just being in nature, near the water, and being able to breathe, breathe deeply, and breathe in something that’s real. And remind myself that even though things have been challenging and things have been difficult, there’s still a grounded reality beyond illness, beyond stress, and that grounded reality is something that I can access whenever I want.

As A. took in the experience of beauty, she was empowered to return to practices that the COVID-19 pandemic had prevented her from accessing, such as making offerings, doing trance work, meditating, or saying prayers. She continued to reflect on her blackness and womanhood through her interconnections with the land, “as a Black Canadian woman, this isn’t my traditional land or my traditional territory and I think about what it means to be walking y’know on someone else’s home and I think about how beautiful that home is and at the same time how



much has been done to that home.” In this everyday moment, more global conceptions of citizenship, racial and gender identity converged with a spatial metaphor of home-making. Beauty was beheld within the context of colonialism, environmental injustice, and reconnecting to her spiritual practices, ancestors, and greater sociohistorical contexts. A.’s gratitude for the here-and-now with her loved one, the space, her body, and her awareness of the convergence of the phenomenological aspects of spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality, enabled her to stay rooted in the “real-ness” of the moment.

In Luka’s (they/them) second clip, they talked about a change to their daily meditation practice. The topic was prompted by observing that they had engaged more effectively in a difficult conversation with another person that day, as somebody who is “very highly connected with and overly or sometimes to distressing level, attuned to other people.” In their experience of that day, Luka noted “I’ve felt so energized since that moment in realizing how one of the most difficult things in my life that’s always been there my whole life . . . every day . . . is figuring something out that you didn’t realize before.” In their practice, they imagined their breath and energy moving up and down along them as if they were a tree, rooted, and it allowed them to feel “completely capable of being present in the space, being present with the other people, being present with myself.” Thinking about the continual reestablishment of their connection to self, and mindful awareness of the wisdoms within, enabled them to be present with themselves, others, and spatially.

Later, Luka shared a clip they came across on Tumblr, “this cartoon that someone made set to this really smooth song and is just so catchy.” They noted how they “got caught off guard” with this video. In contemplating larger messages on blackness, they decided to talk about creative embodiment and rhythm, as a way to keep their ties to their ancestors, their resilience,

and traditional practices, “even when those traditions were forced away, we always kept that, and we always had that to lean back on in terms of celebration and in terms of feeling in ourselves. And that’s how I felt this morning.” Rhythm for Luka was about connecting to their blackness, their gifts “that run in my blood and my ancestry,” and a way for self-definition that was autonomous. Luka’s embodied experience and reflections about music tied their “presence” in the local – daily events, conversations, and social media posts – to global concepts of their blackness through ancestry and history.

Some participants made explicit linkages between queerness and spirituality in their everyday moments. Others found the experience of the divine, music, ancestry, and racial identity to be strongly connected. For example, in Marilyn’s (she/her; they/them) first day of waking without a fever after falling ill from COVID-19, she found energy to play the harp and share that through her voice diary. She shared how God speaks to her sometimes through the harp; God is experienced in the space, where it is “just me and God. Just me and God and whatever silence I can manage.” As she continues strumming their harp, they note the wind surrounding and offer, “maybe that’s God’s way of making music right back.” Marilyn’s embodied experiences of presence was rooted in her connection to the divine and articulated her beliefs and practice of her spiritual and queer identities. Marilyn used her moment of recovery from COVID to bring to light the messages that queer spiritual people have to hold, and the ways she found her worth in God’s messages even when others in her faith community embrace other meanings. In the moment of the clip, she intertwined different (and difficult) reactions she had to church members, how she understood God’s messages around worthiness and healing and resilience, and her relationship to God, space, her embodiment, and wove these reflections in layers of harp strumming.

Marilyn reflected how being a “spiritual queer body” means being “on edge about how you’re perceived, how your worthiness is perceived. But I think the most beautiful part is how God reminds you that your worthiness, your worth is not a variable that should ever come into question.” This connected to broader concepts around queer freedom and acceptance that comes with knowing that “you were shaped, created, as you are.” For Marilyn, creating alternatives: imagining, and envisioning futures, was connected to both their queer and spiritual/religious identities. She connected her Christianity to queer imperatives, “there’s also something very specific to being Christian where you’re supposed to create alternatives.” This was demonstrated in how she moved in with her partner in hopes of building a future against religious and cultural scripts that she did not want to define her. Marilyn expressed their connection between their body, their spirit, the present, and connection to the divine, and reflected on how to orient to the future and to their surrounding communities.

Lily’s reflections about the deliberate ways she decided to “show up” in her contexts combined her desires to embody herself in a particular way and relate to others by offering “signals” about herself. Engaging with intentional expressions of herself in her everyday interactions was important for her “self-assurance” and authenticity. She shared her nervousness about “signaling” parts of her identities that were less visible, like wearing a “patch [from] Etsy with a little ace [asexual] flag on it . . . shaped like a cat” to a small party. Even though she recognized that not everyone would notice it, it was a symbol of her own comfort in her identity to make it visible. Similarly, in her third voice clip, she contemplated about choosing between traditional- or inspired- Mexican clothing in celebration of Mexican Independence Day. She reflected on her facial features being “somewhat [racially] ambiguous” which leads to not being immediately read as Mexican or Latinx. Alongside interacting less with Latinx communities

since she started living on her own in the city, she “rarely [has] a reason to speak Spanish outside of talking to [her] mom on the phone.” As such, she employs “signals” at her disposal, like wearing her Mexican clothes, which helped her feel “connected” like she was “representing more of [herself].”

Concurrent with her contemplation of authentically living out her ethnic identities and national connections, Lily reflected about her gender presentation, and how to pair her Mexican clothing with other styles of shirts, dresses, or skirts, and the way she enjoyed playing with masculine, feminine, and androgynous styles. She expressed ambivalence about her personal style veering toward androgyny, “it’s very tied to LGBTQ when you want to be more androgynous.” She contextualized, “on some days, I guess I feel like a little more like proudly weird and queer and I put on something that’s very masculine or something, but other times I just want it to be like a normal human thing.” For Lily, she is aware of how embodied representation and style is queerly and ethnically coded, and finding ways to normalize her representation, and also highlight her differences was important to her. Her intention for self-expression was rooted in planning for how different people would read her, and also as a way to connect to parts of her cultural identities that felt authentic to her – these localized expressions were purposeful in expressing her broader conceptualizations of herself.

### ***Gratitude***

Feeling and practicing gratitude is common in reflecting on the day itself or about personal growth (7 out of 10 participants). Moving beyond simply describing the details of the event or interaction they chose to narrate, participants often cited feeling grateful as they reflected on change over the past month or years, what they have overcome, their current privileges (home, shelter, clothes, food), and their interconnectedness. Whether it was through

family, friends, partners, communities, or ancestral connections, participants appreciated support, affirmation, and validation.

In her initial clip, Sumaiya Willow Lewis (she/her; they/them) denied the prompt's relevance to her life. Within two weeks, after moving to a different space and experiencing people who validated her and nurtured a sense of safety, she was able to more easily access the positive qualities of her being. In contrast to the toxic environments in which Sumaiya had been prior, a new roommate arrangement provided a context for gestures of care that helped her feel more connected, more able to reciprocate and be herself. She shared, "I'm so glad I have a safe space to go to just be me and feel okay. The same roommate had also made a cedar water that my partner and I had gotten to bathe with. It was incredibly healing for the both of us. I just felt a lot of gratitude in the moment just for people's unconditional kindness." These moments of daily living with her roommates, of space-making, informed her larger connection to community, rooted in shared values, and compassionate engagement. Being able to live with people who were on a similar journey and shared the same values helped establish a sense of safety and bring out her authenticity. A supportive environment emboldened Sumaiya to cut their hair short after contemplating it their "entire life"; these changes happened within the temporality and spatiality of good relationality. Thus, across the course of their participation in the study, Sumaiya demonstrated the contextualized and malleable nature of her positive sense of self.

Sumaiya also shared a story of going to a restricted natural area that gave her a sense of being connected with the earth, people, her partner, her purpose: "just felt like a force calling you and I just felt completely safe. It almost felt like it wasn't real, I was in a different type of consciousness almost." She pulled back from the story, however, reflecting on being a person of colour in a forest or restricted area, and fear of getting "booked by the law." She withdrew from

the extraordinary experience of connection and authenticity to note how sociocultural forces do not provide a safe space for people of colour to access this kind of experience. Sumaiya's attunement to interpersonal spaces that are compassionate is joined by similarly strong attunement to the structural forces that enable or disable the sense of freedom she feels. Sumaiya's gratitude for the present was done in comparing past and present moments of being surrounded by affirming contexts, and was highlighted through bodily and relational experiences of bathing with their partner.

Iman shared two discrete moments where others' affirmation supported their self-confidence. In reflecting on achievements over the summer of starting a mutual aid website to signal boost crowd funding requests for marginalized folks, and recording a podcast about mutual aid, they shared their journey of claiming space by valuing their voice and perspective. Their sense of self-worth was impacted positively through community appreciation, which in turn solidified their greater sense of purpose: "people who I didn't know, commending me on the episode and just supporting me really made me feel affirmed and cherished . . . those words of acknowledgement, people championing me on their personal stories, or on Twitter, [. . .] just made me feel as I was being bathed in warmth and kindness." This was also echoed by their parents during a dinner conversation, "just the fact that my parents admire me . . . and that they are able to identify or celebrate things that I am often quick to diminish is something that's very meaningful and very beneficial to my own sense of self." Something "incredibly affirming was that they were identifying something they saw in me . . . they said that I have a wealth of spirit and with respect to the knowledge I have." Gratitude for recognition within the community and among esteemed parental figures enabled Iman to behold their position, talents, achievements,

and self-worth with meaning and orientation toward their future and purpose, linking everyday affirmations to broader goals for self-development.

### **Discussion**

Salient pieces of identity – spiritual/religious, queer and trans identities, and racial/ethnic identities – varied based on the people, troubles, and spaces in which participants interacted.

Where our participants found a sense of positive identity, their connection to the everyday was found in authenticity, agency, and gratitude nurtured by their practices or people. There was no “neat” way of being, and each participant shared what self-acceptance meant in broader contexts of their narrative and everyday struggles. The interwoven and idiosyncratic narratives of presence and gratitude appeared as a pathway to appreciating or articulating positive identity.

#### ***Connecting the micro to the macro in identity***

Discrete, real-time identity related experiences are automatically and inextricably linked to broad- erreflections on identity development over time and in context (Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008). This can be seen within Anthony’s questions about his commitment to his siblings prompted by a family event, Marilyn’s evolving commitment to her church linked to disparaging remarks from church members, and Iman’s posture toward social media usage in their experience of validation. Thomas and Azmitia (2016) found that increased exploration over time was linked to changes in narrative theme, catalyzed by experiences of prejudice, or connection to culture. Linkages between exploration and narratives across their ethnicity-related experiences can also be seen for Sumaiya and Sea who deepened their identity commitment and pride by exploring them in safe and supportive interpersonal, academic, and familial environments. The recorded video clips provide a window into that process as our participants verbally worked their way through the connection between their “in the moment” experiences and their global sense of self.

We suspect that our methodology provided a structure for our participants to state out loud an identity making process that typically unfolds automatically and outside of awareness.

Self-connection episodes, particularly relevant for global identity, show how certain experiences are salient and selectively constructed to become part of the larger narrative of self. As demonstrated by voice clips around connection to ancestors, cultural communities, and spiritual communities, connection between past, present, and future lies at the heart of construction of social identities (Vignoles, 2011). Ethnic identity is not just personal sense of self-continuity, but links to a collective self-continuity that depends on continued existence of one's group from past into future (Sani et al., 2008). Our finding of participants automatically connecting numerous past experiences to their descriptions of "in the moment" identity-relevant experiences is also resonant with narrative identity research that emphasizes the process of connecting the past in "autobiographical reasoning" (McLean & Syed, 2016).

### ***Embracing the complexity of identity configurations***

Erikson (1968) proposed that identity formation is an "evolving configuration" (p. 125) that attempts to reorganize, synthesize, and transform the self's numerous and possibly conflicting childhood identifications into an integrated "invigorating sense of personal sameness and historical continuity" (p. 18). However, from a number of clips that reflected personal growth and change by reflecting on differences, participants did not necessarily organize their configurations for the purpose of "personal sameness and historical continuity." Schachter (2004) identified numerous contemporary theorists (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Sorell & Montgomery, 2001) who have challenged the idea that an "integrated" identity should be privileged as a marker of psychological maturity, as socially constructed constraints on personal sameness and continuity coerce individuals to choose within social dichotomies, which might not



reflect their lived realities that are multifaceted, changing, and contradictory (Gergen, 1968). For Schachter (2004), identity configurations represent the varied strategies that individuals employ to configure “potentially conflicting identifications in the process of identity formation” (p. 167). As individuals develop a working identity configuration to address conflicting or competing values, beliefs, experiences, and membership priorities in the everyday, it also reveals the negotiation of structural-interpersonal identity process and content through personal, alternative, or master narratives (McLean et al., 2017).

The sense of “coherence” from Marilyn, as a “queer spiritual body” is a demonstration of being where these different aspects are celebrated – while Marilyn did not necessarily see the difference aspects of identity as harmonious, there was also no expectation of a smooth and conflict-free integration. Rosenkrantz et al.’s (2016) exploration of positive aspects of holding both religious/ spiritual and LGBTQ identities revealed that many participants see their interactions as synergistic, and that both communities can be significant sources of strength and support. Our participants reveal that they do not necessarily think about how to “integrate” their identities; rather, their experiences reflect contextualized decisions about expressing their identity constellation, in existence as is (Boellstorff, 2005). Perhaps in the contemporary sociocultural context, understanding the configuration of one’s integrated self – not necessarily integration in the sense of coherence, sameness or continuity, but instead, as a dynamic constellation of identity networks, domains, and roles – allows us to understand how individuals differentially and flexibly employ the strategies of conflict, compartmentalization, and coherence to manage their self-concepts (Galliher et al., 2017).

***“Presence” and gratitude as phenomenologically rich experiences for positive identity conceptions***

Yalom (2002) drew on Heidegger's two modes of existence: the everyday and ontological modes. In the everyday mode, one is filled with wonderment about "how things are" in the world, and in the ontological mode, one is focused on being itself and filled with wonderment "that things are" in the world. Shifting from the everyday to ontological mode takes a "boundary experience," one that jolts us out of "everydayness" and brings attention to "being" itself. While engaging in routine enables us to achieve a sense of "sameness and continuity" (Erikson, 1968), being able to do something different may cultivate one's sense of growth, greater purpose, and connection to others.

Of the participants who were able to experience "presence," that presence involved awareness of the interconnectedness of all realms of "being-ness" as framed by van Manen's (1990) phenomenological themes of spatiality, relationality (interpersonal relationships), corporeality (intrapersonal experiences), and temporality. Flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) speak to optimal experiences that can happen in the everyday or on occasion. Where flow involves active engagement in everyday activities that provide a sense of enjoyment, a merge of awareness and activity, peak experiences (Maslow, 1964) involve an intense sense of "highest happiness and fulfillment," one of transcendence, awe, unity, and well-being. We saw a mix of these optimal experiences in participants' voice clips where "presence" was emphasized, including flow experiences of meditation, prayers, music-making, or journaling, and peak experiences of beholding nature, "seeing" God, or sharing spontaneous moments with family and friends. Where participants experienced "presence" real-time, this presence required an active awareness and engagement in an activity that strengthened an individual's sense of self, purpose, and connection to greater humanity.

Participants felt gratitude toward their partners, ancestors, economic circumstances, small sensory pleasures, housing arrangement, kindness of others, changes in sleep, learning, body, creation and divine gifts. Experiences of gratitude emerged as a positive identity catalyst for most participants, and this aligns with Fredrickson et al.'s (2004) Broaden and Build theory, where a positive feedback loop of positive affect supports motivation, activities, and well-being. Gratitude is also a spiritual practice to be framed around one's purpose and blessings. Acknowledging the good in existence, such as gifts and strengths, relationships, spiritual practices, and support systems, affirms identity and enriches and strengthens individuals' relationships to themselves, others, and the divine.

Gratitude also offers a strategy for dealing with difficult, painful, or traumatic experiences. A., Luka, Sea, Marilyn, and Cat chose to articulate everyday experiences that were challenging, and described gratitude enabling them to orient to a different way of understanding the experience. In the complex intersections of oppression, where these spiritual/religious affiliations have been oppressed by the Christian-mainstream, gratitude toward one's ancestors, ancestral practices, and cultural traditions, is a way to inoculate against the derailing of minoritized religions and spiritualities, and affirm one's rootedness in relationships with spirits and deities. However, while gratitude can be a strategy to address challenge, it is not until the severity of a challenge, conflict, or trauma is understood, felt, and empathized with, that the process would be helpful for individuals. Direct refusal of the diary prompt reveals the strong affective reactions participants had to things that were more salient in their life – whether it was about strained familial relationships, discriminatory treatment or vicarious trauma from the church or mosque, or ruptures in friendships or relationships, participants took time to sit with and reflect on the difficulty of everyday strains.

*Managing oppressive structures and cultural expectations*

Sexual and gender minorities face homophobic, transphobic, and heteronormative rhetoric in numerous spiritual and religious spaces (Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Nadal & Griffin, 2012). Levyi alluded to the direct and vicarious trauma he has faced at churches and mosques. Yet, within their expression of living within the contexts of oppressive spiritual/religious structures, participants were agentic and found ways of experiencing spiritual/religious freedom, community, and purpose. This offers another alternative to being – one that does not negate the stress, trauma, or oppression (anti-black racism, racism, queerphobia, transphobia, capitalism). This alternative is also embedded into “everyday” experiences of presence and gratitude that bring participants’ attention to multiple aspects of their identity to feel positive about: an alternative that is invested in building community with like-minded individuals (Sumaiya), finding “small-joys” with family (Iman), experiencing creatures and creation in the moment (A.), connecting to their craft (Anthony), learning from books, dance, music, and festivals (Sea), using fashion to highlight their identities (Lily), delighting in growth (Cat), remembering their ancestry and spiritual practices (Luka), imagining futures (Marilyn), and trusting in themselves (Levyi).

As we learn what particular identity specifiers allow people to celebrate their identities, we cannot assume that the homophobia, transphobia, or queerphobia may be the most salient form of discrimination for particular cultural or spiritual/religious spaces (Adams & Phillips, 2009). The idiosyncratic experiences we observed in this study suggest that attending to these particular real-time experiences of “presence” and gratitude, can help foster individuals’ ethnic interconnections with sexual and gender identity experiences, and explore how societal histories and knowledge, social roles, and spiritual valuation impact their identity development (Adams & Phillips, 2009).

### **Limitations and conclusions**

This is an exploratory study of spiritual/religious LGBTQ+ BIPOC; the sample of ten participants are not meant to speak for the populations of all spiritual/religious LGBTQ+ BIPOC. Rather, a number of the participants in their various identities have expressed varied positionalities toward their communities and it is with this generativity, that we embrace the multiplicity people hold around their identities. We own how our perspectives have colored our analysis, as part of the iterative IPA process. Further, our participants provided us a window in to their experiences at a discrete and unique time during the COVID-19 pandemic. These discrete snippets reflect only in part the participants' global and local experiences, and our analytic method extracts meaning out of these discrete and specific slivers of daily life. Participants varied in providing their voice clips, ranging from 1–11 clips; as such, the variability in their responses may be another limitation in generalizing the interpretation of the results. Still, within this moment, it is useful to understand how being-ness is experienced in real-time. The definition of positive identity experiences was provided to participants by the first author based on concepts she gleaned from the literature; gratitude was not an expected finding and reflects the ways in which the existing literature on positive identity may lack. Participants may have had difficulty engaging with the prompt given the limitations of the first author's conceptualization of what constitutes positive identity experiences. Yet, the participants opened up an avenue to explore gratitude and presence, neither of which were in the original prompt, to reflect on parts of their identity most salient and significant to them.

Our findings speak particularly to the “contingent models that defy tidy developmental stories” (Galliher et al., 2017, p. 2012) of how interpersonal, spatial, and embodied practices of being come together in a person's experience of the self. Using Galliher et al.'s (2017) frame, we

examined positive identity in everyday events, and were able to capture these in “real-time” voice diaries. Given identity conflict’s far-reaching impacts, exploring positive identity strategies that people use to combat such conflict can inform therapeutic interventions. Being pulled out of “routine” was important in one’s sense of identity, as much as routine actions of the everyday builds a sense of safety and stability in being.

In-the-moment reflections on identity were frequently linked to history and past growth or challenge. It may prove more useful to accept that there are diverse possible types of relationships that individuals create among their varying identifications, and that different configurations are used by different individuals for different purposes (Schachter, 2004). These are ways in which our participants have resisted oppressive structures and messaging to cultivate agency and relationality, set in the everyday. Understanding the concrete points at which spiritual/religious LGBTQ+ BIPOC can tap into a sense of presence and gratitude in the everyday facilitates positive identity experiences and connection to self, purpose, others, and surrounding environments.

#### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Table 1. *Participant Demographic and Participation Characteristics*

Name	Pronouns	Age	Spirituality/Religion	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Racial and/or Ethnic Identity	USA/Canada	Household Income	Education	Voice Clips	Min / Max Time	Ave Voice Clip
Sea	she/her; they/them	22	I define my spirituality as interpersonal or being as authentic and unapologetic about who I am.	Genderqueer/ Genderfluid - I see the beauty of being masculine and feminine, and I embrace them both.	Pansexual/ Queer. I'm attracted mostly by someone's soul, energy, or vibe (connection) rather than physical appearances.	Latix/Peruvian, trying to accept the American part as well.	USA	Prefer not to answer	Bachelor's Degree	11	5:07-8:55	7:23
A. Silvera	she/her	28	Ancestral Veneration based (Afro-Diasporic Animism)	Cisgendered woman	Queer (Lesbian)	Black Canadian/ Caribbean-Canadian	Canada	\$100 000 to 149 999	Master's, Professional, Doctorate Degree	3	6:53-11:01	9:15
Anthony Raymond Yu	he/him	29	Pagan/Witch/ Spellcrafter	Cisgender man	Gay	Chinese-Filipino (1st gen Canadian)	Canada	\$25 000 to 49 999	Bachelor's Degree	5 + 1	5:13-8:24	7:21
Levyi-Alexander Love	he/him	25	A person who borrows from Islam and Christianity	Dude :) a dude of Trans experience	I likes boys, and girls and every other gender haha! But romantically, I'm into girls	Black with a splash of Black	Canada	\$1 to \$9 999	Some College, Associate's Degree	1	3:55	3:55
Luka Roderique	they/them	33	Animist/pagan and student of the Dharma	Multigendered/ Non-binary	Pansexual	I am Black/ Biracial	Canada	\$1 to \$9 999	Some College, Associate's Degree	3	7:03-9:56	8:50
Marilyn Yogarajah	she/her; they/them	28	Christian / Mysticism	Genderqueer, Nonbinary femme	Bisexual/ Pansexual	South Asian / Tamil	Canada	\$50 000 to 74 999	Bachelor's Degree	3	3:09-10:40	7:38
Lily	she/her	21	The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	Female	Asexual	Mixed Latinx (Mexican and white)	USA	Prefer not to answer	Some College, Associate's Degree	3	4:02 – 8:52	7:09
Sumaiya Willow Lewis	she/her; they/them	19	Pulling from multiple theological and spiritual practices	Female	Queer	I am Black; Canadian/Afro-Caribbean	Canada	\$1 to \$9 999	High School	2	3:06-5:13	3:52

Cat	she/her	25	Spirituality by nature, believe in all Gods	Female	Pansexual	Filipino	Canada	\$10 000 to \$24 999	High School	2	4:21- 4:46	4:33
Iman	they/them	20	Muslim	Non-binary	Bisexual	Black	Canada	Prefer not to answer	Bachelor's Degree	3	5:26 - 5:57	5:41