Article

Queer Experiences of Religion: How Marginalization within a Religion Affects Its Queer Members

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Abstract: We sought to understand how the mental state of religious queer individuals is affected by religious marginalization and queer identity. Using a multi-method approach, we analyzed data from 626 participants to assess how a queer status affected psychological distress and life satisfaction, the mediating effect of strength of faith on the relationship between the queer status and life satisfaction, and the moderating effect of experiences with marginalization on the relationship between the strength of faith, psychological distress, and life satisfaction. Queer status was found to have a significant impact on queer individuals' psychological wellness and life satisfaction. Marginalization experiences decreased psychological wellness and life satisfaction. Our qualitative analyses add to these results, describing the weaponization of queer identity in religious settings. These results can be attributed to the strong main effects of queer status and strength of faith on psychological distress and life satisfaction rather than tertiary variables.

Keywords: sexual orientation; gender identity; marginalization; religion; concealable stigmatized identity; reflexive thematic analysis; minority stress

1. Introduction

Religious identity and queer status have a complicated relationship, as shown in popular culture (e.g., Eric Effiong in the Netflix show "Sex Education"), the psychological literature [1], and even in the religious texts of worldwide faith systems. Some examples of this within Christianity include Leviticus 18:12 ("You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination") and Genesis 1:27 ("So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them"). Within the Islamic faith, the Qur'an leaves little room for interpretation in Qur'an 4:16 ("If two men among you are guilty of lewdness, punish them both"). While some point to these passages in support of anti-queer rhetoric (colloquially referred to as "clobber passages"), others attempt to deconstruct these phrases and show divine support for queer people. How does the tension between religious marginalization and queer status affect the mental states of religious queer individuals?

The word 'queer' is an umbrella term, generally referring to anyone who identifies as LGBTQ+. A recent Gallup poll shows that 7.1% of the US identifies as queer in some capacity, an estimated 23 million people, which is an increase from 5.6% in 2020 [2]. 'Queerness' generally refers to a deviation from cisheteronormative culture. Most often, this is seen in the LGBT+ community through identification with minoritized sexual and gender identities. Queerness, as a sociopolitical ipseity, has two primary poles of identification: gender and sexuality. 'Cisgender' is descriptive terminology for people with gender identities (hereafter referred to as 'gender') that align with the gender assigned to them at birth (assigned gender at birth; AGAB). Those with gender identities that do not align with their AGAB often choose to identify as 'transgender' and/or 'non-binary' (transgender and

gender non-conforming; TGNC), and can be described as queer. In terms of sexuality, the descriptive terminology 'queer' is used when romantic or sexual attraction is not exclusive to the opposite end of the binary from their AGAB. In other words, anyone who is a sexual minority (SM) can also be described as queer.

While the authors recognize the importance of abstaining from majority-centered language—using 'queer' instead of 'sexual minority'—we use the terms 'queer' and 'sexual minority' in this paper interchangeably, due to: (a) the current discourse within the LGBT+ community about the use of the word 'queer', (b) the conflation of the sexual minority status with the gender minority status, and (c) the inclusive language recommendations from the American Psychological Association [3]. While most TGNC individuals identify as SM (77%), some TGNC individuals identify as heterosexual [4]. Throughout this paper, we operationalize 'queer status' as SM, TGNC, or a combination.

1.1. Religiosity

Religiosity could be one factor contributing to a decision to conceal one's queer status. Some individuals have cited feelings of insecurity and a fear of loneliness as reasons for concealing their identities and staying within their religious and/or spiritual communities [5]. Additionally, the struggle between the competing desires for identity acceptance and religious community maintenance was magnified when the revealing of a queer status came with a threat of expulsion from the religious organization [1].

Within a religious community, individuals who hold a queer status have an increased likelihood of experiencing some form of impact on their strength of faith. TGNC individuals have been found to refer to teachings from their faith to support their TGNC identities [6]. However, the perception of God or a religious institution as a negative force can have a negative (vs. positive) impact on how TGNC individuals interact with their religion [7]. Thus, religion and spirituality have a strong connection with queer status; negative cultural and theistic beliefs can influence one to hide their CSIs, whereas positive teachings and beliefs can lead to greater confidence in one's CSI.

Religion and Psychological Distress

The strength of one's faith has a positive influence on individual depression, anxiety, stress (hereon collectively referred to as 'psychological distress'), and life satisfaction. Researchers have supported a connection between religious affiliation, psychological distress, and life satisfaction among the general population [8]. Additional nuanced results in this same vein have shown that attendance to religious and/or spiritual meaning-making groups (e.g., church, temple, mosque, holy book study, etc.) can serve to bolster psychological wellness and life satisfaction for those with spiritual/religious identities [9].

However, the results have suggested that queer individuals who were raised Christian reported higher levels of overall interpersonal and religious self-doubt [10]. In more extreme cases, formal religious practices increased suicidal ideation within queer communities [11]. When conflict between one's queer status and religious affiliation occurred, the intensity of these negative thoughts increased. Thus, interactions with religious customs have been associated with changes in psychological distress and life satisfaction for queer individuals.

1.2. Marginalization

According to the Minority Stress Model [12], stressors which disproportionately affect the queer minority include experiencing prejudiced events, expecting rejection and discrimination, having to disclose or conceal one's identity, and internalizing negative societal attitudes. Collectively, we refer to these stressors as "marginalization". Researchers have found that marginalization had a direct effect on physical health such that queer people who experienced more marginalization (vs. less marginalization) had worse physical health [13]. Other researchers found that marginalization led to an increase in both general and psychological distress in SM individuals [14,15]. Marginalization can also appear within the queer community. For example, a study by Skakoon-Sparling and colleagues

(2022) found that bisexual men reported the least connection to the queer community and the highest levels of internalized homophobia and identity concealment when compared to homosexual and queer men [16].

Some religious teachings use marginalization tactics (e.g., negative attitudes and stigma) to actively disparage TGNC members [7]. When transgender adolescents grow up in Christian homes with gender-disaffirming messaging, researchers found that their participants experienced a decrease in health, an increase in psychological distress, and an increase in ambiguous loss (i.e., unresolved feelings relating to the loss of a relationship with God or religious family members) [17]. Alternatively, some queer people have reported that they have used their religiosity and spirituality as tools to buffer against possible struggles during the coming-out and/or transition process [6]. Even when TGNC and/or SM religious people recognize how religious institutions have contributed to their marginalization, some individuals endorse hope for institutions becoming more accepting [18].

Queer Religious Marginalization

Within the context of belief systems historically marginalized in the West (e.g., Judaism or Islam), queer individuals are still subject to discrimination. Causes of queer religious marginalization can be traced to the view of queer and religious identities being incompatible due to the 'disorder' of public norms caused by queerness [19]. For example, the incompatibility of queer existence within Indonesian Islamic culture arises through misunderstandings of queer culture (e.g., confusion between gay and transgender identification and concomitant negative stereotypes), conflict between national identity and queer identity (if you exist as both a Muslim and queer individual, are you as ethnolocally Indonesian as your heterosexual peers?), and an emphasis of adherence to doctrine for upholding social and religious norms (while Islam positively regards sex as a "gift from God" (p. 578), queer relationships break both the norm of the marriage contract between families and the norm of nuclear family creation).

However, the apparently predominant view among gay Muslims is that intercourse between two men, and by extension, existing as a queer individual, is not sinful [19]. Arguments for viewing queerness as non-sinful include perspectives such as: (a) being gay is a test from God to see if one can overcome one's own desires to commit to a cisheteronormative lifestyle, (b) feeling or identifying as gay is alright as long as one does not act upon it, and (c) asserting that God's omnipotence is the cause for individuals being gay and is, therefore, part of His plan. Regarding the case of Indonesian gay men, it is important to note that these issues do not originate from Islamic teachings with sustained negative references to queerness. Rather, researchers have noted two connected factors. First, within the Islamic doctrine, male sexuality is not commented on as a sin as there are only incidental references to male queerness [19]. As a result, the incongruence of the queer and Muslim identity comes from the aforementioned expectation to maintain the nuclear family rather than from direct Islamic doctrine (p. 578). Second, Indonesian youths are not exposed to the concept of "gay" through traditional means such as elders, family, school, or global travel. Rather, gay Indonesians learn through social media and friends as to what "gayness" is and what it means to be gay—a comment on the sociocultural nature of identity labels. Similar queer marginalization has been seen in other historically marginalized religious groups as well.

Jewish women and queer individuals in the Reform Jewish tradition have been noted for recreating religious customs from which they have been traditionally barred using both progressive and traditional thought [20]. For example, Reform Jewish congregations have inclusively adjusted the traditionally male-centered rituals of the Sh'ma Yisrael prayer and Tashlich—both practices that act as public declarations of devotion to God and Jewish belief. In the Reform congregations studied, leaders in both New York City and Tel-Aviv made the inclusion of women and queer members a priority in these practices, despite their historical exclusion. One researcher has likened these physical, public declarations of devotion to the process of coming out as queer, serving to elucidate the complicated nature

of the relationship between religiosity and queerness [21]. Although seen as unacceptable in some interpretations of the holy texts of several world religions, other interpretations of the same texts can and have centered the inclusivity of queer people. Given the ways in which some queer religious individuals have adapted and reclaimed their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices to draw their circles of faith wider, not smaller, we wanted to explore this phenomenon further.

1.3. The Current Study

The guiding research question of the current study is how do queer people choose to interact within religious cultures that marginalize them? Surrounding that question, our study contains three hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that a queer status—defined as any TGNC, SM, or combination TGNC/SM identity—will lead to decreased life satisfaction and an increase in psychological distress. Second, we hypothesized that the relationship between one's queer status and both life satisfaction and psychological distress will be mediated by their strength of faith, such that more strength of faith would lead to more life satisfaction and less psychological distress. We have no hypothesized relationship between the queer status and strength of faith as previous researchers have supported both positive and negative relationships. Third, we hypothesized that experiences with marginalization will moderate the relationship between strength of faith and psychological distress and life satisfaction such that more experiences with marginalization will decrease the relationship between strength of faith and life satisfaction or psychological distress.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

This study was conducted through Prolific (www.prolific.com) [2 February 2024], a vetted online research participant database. Participants were included in the survey if they were over the age of 18. We also limited participation to those from the U.S. in order to control our sampling frame. All participants completed a standard informed consent process approved by two institutional IRBs. Participants were paid USD 0.94 for their participation in our surveys which took, on average, seven minutes to complete.

The current survey itself was divided into two parts. The first was a seven-minute quantitative measure of demographics and our four main study variables: a measure of strength of faith, a measure of marginalization within religion, and measures of psychological distress and life satisfaction. Second, participants who indicated that they were LGBT+ had the option to opt-in to write a short-answer response to a question concerning their experiences with marginalization in their religion. These open-ended responses were qualitatively analyzed. Participants who opted in provided a qualitative response and were paid an additional USD 0.50.

All participants (n = 626) resided in the US with a mean age of 41.17 years (SD = 14.82; range 18–84). Our participant's demographics largely match the comparison frame to a general U.S. population sample [22–24]. For example, our study saw a slight undersampling of women (our sample, 47.4%; U.S. pop., 50.4%). We also saw an oversampling of non-binary participants (our sample, 16.3%; U.S. pop., 1.0%) and transgender participants (our sample, 9.6%; U.S. pop., 1.6%). Likewise, our sample had an oversampling of SM participants (our sample, 47.3%; U.S. pop., 5.5%) and an undersampling of White participants (our sample, 62.8%; U.S. pop., 75.5%). The participants in our sample were identified with a myriad of organized faith systems, the largest of which were Catholic (20.3%) and Baptist (10.2%), which matches the U.S. population framing (see Supplementary Materials Table S1 for complete demographics). We also saw a matching or oversampling of atheist, agnostic, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and Pagan participants. Economically, 42.5% of our participants indicated earning between USD 25,000 and USD 74,999 annually. See Table 1 for sexual orientation and gender identity demographics.

Table 1. Participant sexual orientation and gender identity demographics.

Item	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Woman	297	47.4
Man	219	35.0
Non-Binary	104	16.6
Prefer to self-describe	4	1.0
Transgender Status		
Transgender	60	9.6
Non-binary	102	16.3
Cisgender	464	74.1
Sexuality		
Straight/Heterosexual	331	52.9
Attracted to multiple genders	192	30.7
Gay/Homosexual	74	11.8
Asexual or aromantic	29	4.5

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Queer Status

Queer status was measured as a four-level variable. Participants were able to indicate their identities as (a) transgender, (b) non-binary, or (c) neither transgender nor non-binary. Participants who identified as either (a) transgender or (b) non-binary were grouped into one "TGNC" category. Participants were also able to indicate if they were (a) straight/heterosexual, (b) gay/homosexual, (c) attracted to multiple genders, or (d) asexual or aromantic. Participants who identified as either (b) gay, (c) attracted to multiple genders, or (d) asexual or aromantic were grouped into one "SM" category for analysis.

From these two categories, participants were split into four groups: cisgender/heterosexual (n = 322), cisgender/SM (n = 142), TGNC/heterosexual (n = 10), and TGNC/SM (n = 152), indicating a stepwise increase in hypothesized marginalization from the former to the latter.

2.2.2. Psychological Distress

Psychological distress was measured through scores on the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21), a 21-item short version of the DASS with measure subscales of depression, anxiety, and stress [25]. Participants rated their agreement with items using a 4-point Likert-like scale (0 = did not apply to me at all, 3 = applied to me very much, or most of the time), using the previous week as a response anchor.

The DASS-21 consists of an overall score and three subscales measuring depression, anxiety, and stress. Examples of items include: "I felt that I had nothing to look forward to" (depression), "I felt I was close to panic" (anxiety), and "I found myself getting agitated" (stress). The overall and unweighted composite subscale scores of the DASS-21 were used as primary outcome variables, with higher scores indicating greater psychological distress. The DASS-21 was chosen as it is highly valid and reliable ($\alpha = 0.93$) [26] and has a low completion time (2.45 min at 7 s per scale item).

2.2.3. Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was measured through scores on the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), a five-item measure of general life satisfaction. Participants rated their agreement with items on a 7-point Likert-like scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) [27]. Items on the SWLS include: "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" and "So far I have gotten the important things I want in life". The SWLS is calculated as an overall score created as an average of the five items, such that lower scores indicate lower life satisfaction. The SWLS was chosen due to its brevity (five items; one minute), high validity ($\alpha = 0.87$) [27], and recognition within the field as a strong measure of life satisfaction. Due to an error in survey construction, we measured the SWLS on a 4-point Likert scale.

To bring this to parity with the original scaling, we developed a mapping scheme and transformed responses such that: 1 = 1, 2 = 3, 3 = 5, and 4 = 7. While we may have lost some specificity from this approach, it allowed us to maintain data integrity (e.g., score distributions) and scaling with the original Likert-like anchors.

2.2.4. Strength of Faith

Strength of faith was measured through scores on the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SCSRFQ) [28], a 10-item measure of connection to religious faith. Participants rated their agreement on questions concerning their faith on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree). Items on the SCSRFQ include: "my religious faith is extremely important to me" and "I look to my faith as providing meaning and purpose in my life". The SCSRFQ was chosen due to its valuable psychometric properties ($\alpha = 0.95$) [28], its brevity (10 items; one minute), and the broad nature of the scale's items.

While the SCSRFQ was intended to apply to a broad conceptualization of faith, it is largely applicable to and used with those who follow Abrahamic conceptualizations of religion. As a result, it is important to note that our team of researchers adapted some aspects of question framing to make the questionnaire inclusive of a broader range of faiths (e.g., "I pray daily" was changed to "I practice my faith daily").

2.2.5. Marginalization

Marginalization was measured through the Lifetime Experiences with Marginalization Scale (LEMS) [29], a 4-item measure of marginalization experiences. Participants rated their agreement on questions concerning marginalization on a 7-point Likert-like scale (1 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree). It is important to note that our team of researchers adapted the scale to measure experiences of marginalization within the participants' religious community rather than all experiences with marginalization (e.g., "I have been unable to escape feeling marginalized" was changed to "I have been unable to escape feeling marginalized within my religious community").

The LEMS was chosen due to its brevity (4 items), high validity ($\alpha = 0.94$) and its inclusion of the word "marginalization" in its questions [29]. We chose this scale over a scale measuring marginalization of queer individuals as this scale was inclusive to our non-queer participants and could better measure compound effects of those with multiple marginalized identities (e.g., a Black, asexual, and non-binary individual).

2.3. Procedure

2.3.1. Quantitative

To evaluate if the participants' strength of faith impacted the relationship between their queer status and resulting life satisfaction and psychological distress (H1 and H2), the researchers conducted analysis of variance procedures and regression methods, respectively. The proposed moderation effect of marginalization on the relationship between strength of faith, life satisfaction, and psychological distress (H3) was evaluated by multiple linear regression. All mediation and moderation effects were analyzed using SPSS with the PROCESS macro.

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power [30] to determine the minimum sample size needed to test hypothesis one. We calculated our necessary sample with parameters that included a medium effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.25$) and an alpha of 0.05. Results showed that a total sample of 128 participants was required to achieve a power of 0.80. We also conducted an a priori power analysis to determine the minimum sample size needed to test hypothesis two. We calculated our necessary sample with parameters that included a medium effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.15$) and an alpha of 0.05. Results showed that a total sample of 55 participants was required to achieve a power of 0.80. Given the results of our power analysis, we can be confident that our sample size of 626 was sufficient for our analyses of interest.

2.3.2. Qualitative

Participant qualitative data were collected and analyzed via collaborative and iterative reflexive thematic analysis [31]. All members of the research team reviewed participant responses to the statement "please spend at least one minute writing about your experiences with either support of your queer identity or prejudice/discrimination against your queer identity within your religion." Then, after individually identifying holistic themes that were generated from participant responses, the research team agreed on a final set of themes that best represented participant experiences.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Analysis

The analyses were conducted in SPSS (v. 25 with PROCESS v. 4.2) and jamovi (v. 2.4). We first hypothesized that psychological distress, quantified by scores on the DASS-21, would increase based on the queer status: i.e., holding any TGNC, SM, or combined TGNC/SM identity. This hypothesis was supported by a one-way ANOVA, as there were significant differences in the DASS scores between cisgender/heterosexual participants (M = 34.38, SD = 11.73), cisgender/SM participants (M = 37.40, SD = 12.94), and TGNC/SM participants (M = 43.36, SD = 12.40), $F(2, 615) = 28.04$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$. Tukey's HSD post hoc tests revealed that the DASS scores significantly differed between the cisgender/heterosexual participants and TGNC/SM participants ($p < 0.001$), between cisgender/SM participants and TGNC/SM participants ($p < 0.001$), and between cisgender/heterosexual and cisgender/SM participants ($p < 0.05$). All other group differences were nonsignificant. This nonsignificance was due, in part, to our limited sample of TGNC/heterosexual participants (0.01% of the total sample), who were excluded from these analyses. The primary results of all analyses can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of Moderation and Mediation Analyses.

Predictor	Outcome/ Interaction	b	SE	t	p	95% CI
			Mediation			
Queer status	Distress	2.87	0.40	7.25	<0.001	[2.09, 3.65]
	Life satisfaction	−0.76	0.23	−3.26	0.001	[−1.22, −0.30]
	αβ (strength of faith)	0.07	0.05			[−0.003, 0.19]
			Moderation			
Strength of faith	Distress	0.42	0.19	2.22	0.027	[0.05, 0.79]
	Life satisfaction	−0.31	0.11	−2.75	0.006	[−0.53, −0.09]
	αβ (marginalization)	−0.01	0.01	−1.55	0.123	[−0.03, 0.003]

We conducted a series of mediation analyses using PROCESS v. 4.2 to examine whether strength of faith mediated the relationship between the queer status and two outcomes: distress and life satisfaction. Bootstrap sampling with 5000 resamples was used to estimate the indirect effects, and all confidence intervals were set at 95%.

The first mediation model (Figure 1) examined the effect of the queer status on distress, with strength of faith acting as the mediator. The overall model was significant, $F(2,623) = 30.53$, $p < 0.001$, and explained 8.93% of the variance in distress ($R^2 = 0.089$). Queer status was a significant positive predictor of distress ($t = 7.25$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that individuals with a higher queer status reported greater distress. Strength of faith was also a significant predictor of distress ($b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 2.39$, $p = 0.017$). However, the indirect effect of the queer status on distress via strength of faith was not statistically significant (CI [0.03, 0.27]). This suggests that strength of faith did not significantly mediate the relationship between the queer status and distress.
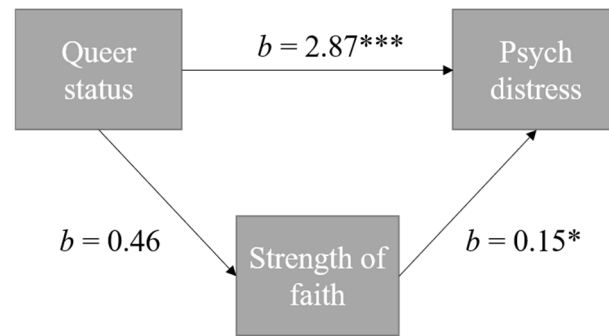
Figure 1. Strength of faith mediating the relationship between queer status and psychological distress. Note: * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The second mediation in H2 (Figure 2) investigated the effect of the queer status on life satisfaction, with strength of faith acting as a mediator. The model was significant, $F(2,623) = 13.93$, $p < 0.001$, and explained 4.28% of the variance in distress ($R^2 = 0.043$). The queer status was a significant negative predictor of life satisfaction ($t = -3.26$, $p = 0.001$), indicating that individuals with a higher queer status reported lower life satisfaction. Strength of faith was also a significant negative predictor of life satisfaction ($t = -3.91$, $p < 0.001$). Based on the confidence interval (-0.22, -0.07), the indirect effect of the queer status on life satisfaction via the strength of faith was significant. This suggests that a lower strength of faith partially mediated the relationship between he queer status and lower life satisfaction.
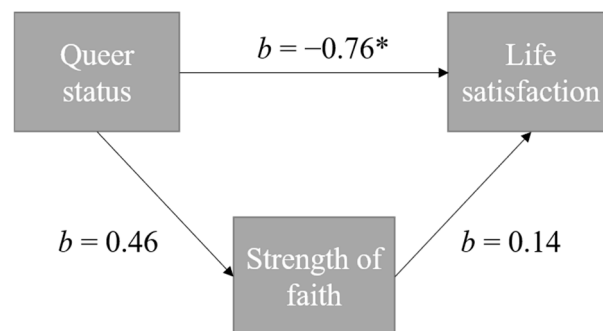

Figure 2. Strength of faith mediating the relationship between queer status and life satisfaction. Note: * $p < 0.05$.

Finally, we conducted a series of moderation analyses to examine whether experiences with marginalization moderated the relationship between strength of faith and psychological distress and life satisfaction (H3). Bootstrap sampling with 5000 resamples was used to estimate the interaction effects, and all confidence intervals were set at 95%

Our first moderation analysis (Figure 3) examined whether experiences with marginalization moderated the relationship between strength of faith and psychological distress. The overall model was significant, $F(3,622) = 24.01$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 10.38% of the variance in psychological distress ($R^2 = 0.104$). Strength of faith was a significant predictor of psychological distress ($t = 2.22$, $p = 0.27$). However, experiences with marginalization were not a significant predictor of distress ($t = 0.30$, $p = 0.76$. The interaction between strength of faith and experiences with marginalization was not significant ($t = -1.55$, $p = 0.12$). The R^2 change due to the interaction was also nonsignificant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.003$, $F(1,622) = 2.39$, $p = 0.123$). This suggests that marginalization did not significantly moderate the relationship between strength of faith and psychological distress.
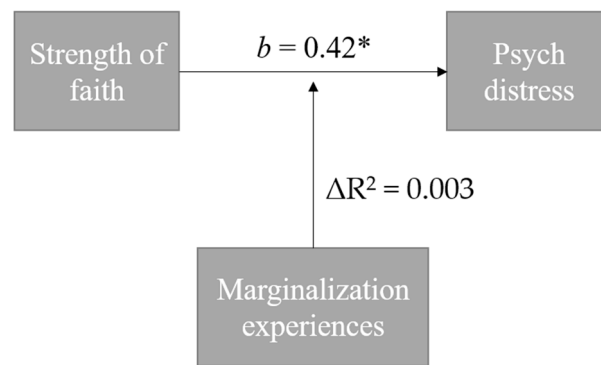
Figure 3. Experiences with marginalization moderating the relationship between strength of faith and psychological distress. Note: * $p < 0.05$.

The second moderation analysis (Figure 4) investigated whether experiences with marginalization moderated the relationship between strength of faith and life satisfaction. The overall model was significant, $F(3,622) = 10.28$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 4.74% of the variance in life satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.047$). Strength of faith was a significant predictor of life satisfaction ($t = -2.75$, $p < 0.01$). However, experiences with marginalization were not a significant predictor of life satisfaction ($t = -1.01$, $p = 0.313$). The interaction between strength of faith and marginalization was also nonsignificant ($t = 1.55$, $p = 0.121$). The R^2 change due to the interaction was also nonsignificant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.004$, $F(1,622) = 2.41$, $p = 0.12$. These results suggest that marginalization did not significantly moderate the relationship between strength of faith and life satisfaction in our sample.
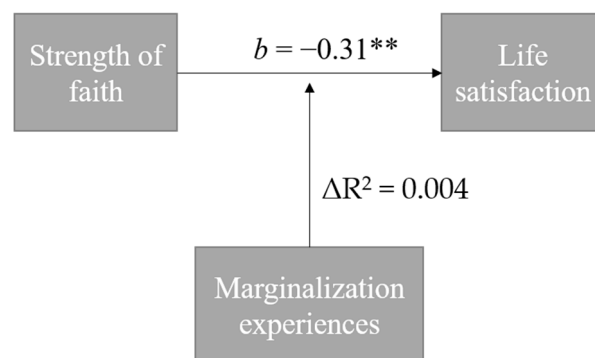

Figure 4. Experiences with marginalization moderating the relationship between strength of faith and life satisfaction. Note: ** $p < 0.01$.

3.2. Qualitative Analysis

Some participants (n = 140) chose to participate in our single qualitative question. All responses were first coded into either positive (n = 35), negative (n = 44), or both positive and negative (n = 62) categories before further analysis. The responses were further coded into two broad themes based on the latent meaning of the data: ideals or actions. These broad themes were then broken down into three sub-themes for ideals: expected discrimination, "...Hate the sin", and progressive religion; and five sub-themes for actions: caution, community, targeting LGBTQ+ individuals, the religious journey, and self-oriented. Each sub-theme was differentiated by positive, negative, or neutral valence according to the majority of participant responses within that sub-theme. A path diagram of the primary qualitative results can be found in Figure 5, and a complete qualitative analysis with codes and sub-themes can be found in Supplementary Materials Table S2.
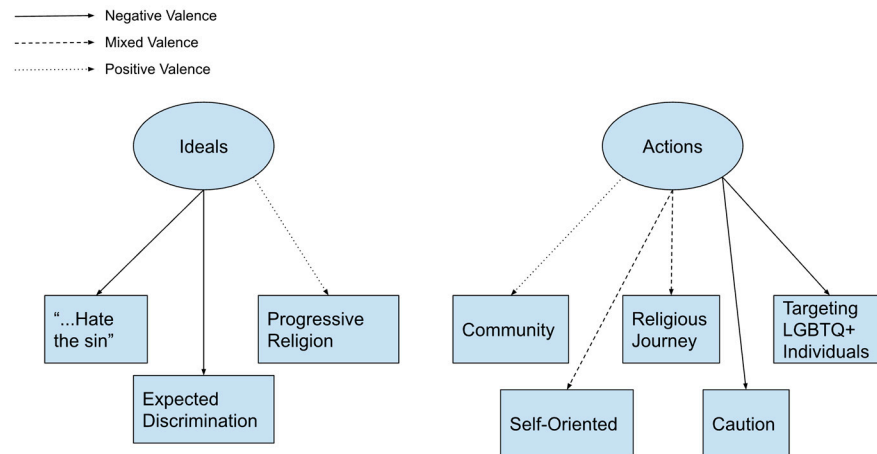
Figure 5. Path diagram of qualitative results.

3.2.1. Ideals

Two of the three sub-themes that were encompassed by the category of ideals, expected discrimination, and "...Hate the sin" were negatively charged. Expected discrimination refers to participant responses that mentioned an experience of either encountering prejudiced ideals in their religious community or anticipating that members of their community held prejudiced beliefs against queer people. This theme included mentions of cisheteronormative, socially conservative, and/or colonial ideals pushed by religious communities which made participants feel excluded. In addition, experiences where participants anticipated, but had not yet experienced, discrimination were included under this sub-theme. One participant described their experience with cisheteronormative ideals and anticipating prejudice from their religious community:

> I much preferred the doctrine of Orthodoxy but knew there was no place for my queerness there. Ever since then, I have not affiliated myself with any one denomination over another, and instead think of myself as 'just Jewish'. I still struggle with accepting my queerness knowing what I do about Torah Judaism, and have not returned to any Orthodox spaces because I know I would be marginalized.

The theme "...Hate the sin" refers to participant responses that reported experiences related to the ideal "Hate the sin, love the sinner", which was common among participants who were or had once been involved in denominations of Christianity. The saying is intended to encourage compassion towards those who are "committing sin" (in this case, being queer) while still holding disapproval for queerness, which is perceived as being contrary to religious ideals in some cases. Other ideals represented in this sub-theme include being wary of Christianity, often expressed by participants who were not Christian, feeling shame, and feeling as though their queerness was "just [their] cross to bear". Also included in "...Hate the sin" was the idea of the "queer oxymoron", wherein the participant mentioned that they felt like a person could not be both religious and queer at the same time. One participant reported encountering "...hate the sin" rhetoric:

> Growing up the church would always say things like it was evil or against God for me to like girls, dress androgynously, or have dreams or goals that did not involve motherhood and marriage. My family was very religious and I got dragged to things a lot and was always told they would pray for me or pray that I would find salvation for my 'sins'. I was always a good kid, never drank or did drugs, was not promiscuous, gave to the poor, did volunteer work, etc but simply because I was LGBT I was never good enough because of my 'sins'.

Another participant described their experience with the "queer oxymoron", having a "cross to bear", and receiving conditional support from a religious authority:

> For the longest time I thought I can't be LGBTQ AND religious. I could either have the dangerous, exciting, glittery, smoky haze of being queer or the soft, wholesome light of faith, but not both. I didn't come out til I was 13 as bisexual–my youth pastor told me that so long as I never acted upon feelings for the same sex, I would go to heaven. Like this was just my cross to bear.

The last sub-theme included in the category of ideals is progressive religion, which is made up of codes with a positive valence. Progressive religion refers to responses that mentioned that their religious doctrine was accepting of them as a person, regardless of their queer identity, therefore emphasizing their personhood rather than identity labels. Some participants reported that their religious doctrine taught followers to be respectful and accepting of everyone, often in the context of Buddhism. Other participants remarked that their religion pushed the importance of individualism and following one's own path. One participant mentioned their positive experience with Buddhism:

> I'm really lucky because, in the Buddhist community I'm part of, people are cool with me being non-binary. Buddhism is all about understanding and kindness, so the folks around me are supportive…This acceptance lets me be myself without feeling left out. Buddhism's teachings about being mindful and compassionate really help create an environment where everyone, no matter their identity, is treated with respect. It's nice to see how Buddhism can be a way for people to come together and accept each other, making it easier for me to be true to who I am.

3.2.2. Actions

There were five sub-themes which were encompassed by the category of actions. Two were each negatively valenced and mixed valence, and one was positively valenced.

Positive Valence

The positively valenced sub-theme of actions was community. Community refers to actions taken by others within the participant's religious community to welcome queer individuals into the religious space. These actions may be taken by other individuals in the community or by authority figures. For example, one participant talked about their congregation's level of queerness and support of the queer community:

> Our local congregation is overwhelmingly queer (we joke that we have one or two token straight folks), we participate in local pride events all throughout the state, we attend queer cultural events. I myself am a member of our local Rocky Horror cast and several members of our congregation are regular attendees at our shows.

Negative Valence

The two negatively valenced sub-themes of actions were caution and targeting LGBTQ+ individuals. Caution refers to participants indicating some sort of concern or fear of being targeted, tokenized, or shunned by the religious community for their queer identity, and includes the codes of CSI, hypervigilance, isolation, shared fear, tokenism, and selectivity. Through this fear of differential treatment, queer individuals made efforts to ensure that their queer identity was hidden and actively avoided interactions with hateful or demeaning members. One participant described their efforts to conceal their identity and maintain a hypervigilant state while involved with religious activities:

> As a Christian, it's really hard to be gay, and even harder to express a gender identity outside of cis. I realized I was queer when I was about 13 years old and it terrified me, because I grew up understanding that my religion looked at gay people as an abomination, or something to be disgusted by. It was painful, and a journey. But now, I feel more at peace knowing that the God I believe in is not that way.

Another individual shared their experience of fearing that their queer identity would create a barrier to their further involvement with religion outside of their immediate community:

> Thankfully, I have always been around progressive members of my own faith so acceptance of my queer identity has always been a privilege for me. But there is still that fear that the moment I step out of my own small community, that I will experience prejudice from those in the broader sense of my religion. I suppose that's why I'm often scared to truly immerse myself in my faith.

Targeting LGBTQ+ Individuals refers to actions taken by individuals within the religious community that targets queer members with the intent of degrading the queer individual's identity to push them from the religious organization, and includes the codes of targeted exclusion, ideological weaponization, misgendering, microaggressions, disapproval from authority, ignore hate, and family. With the display of actions such as microaggressions and misgendering, participants reported this targeting as concerning and making them feel unaccepted and unwanted. Two participants shared their frustrations with family and community not taking efforts to address the individual properly and include them within the religious community:

> I am out to a considerable amount of people and I am always misgendered and dead-named. I hate that even my family will not respect my identity, so I try hard to distance myself from them. I find myself more accepted by people I barely know than my whole family.

> I went to a Korean Roman Catholic church. A majority of the attendees and priests were Korean, the Saint we honored was Korean, and even the Sunday school program was taught by Korean teachers. I mention this because the way queerness was treated in my church was impacted both by culture and religion. The only priest who treated queerness with positivity or at the very least neutrality was the only priest in our church who wasn't Korean. Among everyone else, queerness was kept hush hush and many things that were considered 'terrible' or 'immoral' were kept under wraps. I didn't even have the opportunity to explore my queerness until I left my church, and it was after I left that I felt such a weight lifted off of me.

Another participant expressed how, as they continued to become older and more open with their queer identity, an increase in targeted exclusion and ideological weaponization occurred:

> As I became more open about my identity growing up, many members of my family disowned me and called me the ugliest things imaginable in the name of "love" for the same god I believe in. I went to college in a very Christian/religious community where many people actively voiced their hatred/disgust/contempt for queer people under the guise of religion. However, I stand firmly in the belief that Jesus' teachings were about loving, accepting, and extending grace to the marginalized.

Mixed Valence

The two mixed-valence sub-themes of actions were religious journey and self-oriented. Religious journey refers to changes in the participant's religious orientation throughout their life. This sub-theme included the codes of disaffiliation and conversion. When looking back on their old religion, one participant stated "when I was younger, I technically identified as a Christian. Back then, I definitely felt set apart from my so-called community".

Another participant remarked highly of their experiences in their new religion: "It was shortly thereafter I was introduced to Wicca. My cousin, A Wiccan High Priestess and all other Wiccans I have come in contact with have been open, inclusive, supportive and compassionate".

Self-oriented refers to solitary religious practices. This sub-theme included the codes of no local community, solitary practice, self-exploration, and own relationship with God. Many participants referred to their practice as self-oriented, such as two who said "my religion, or spirituality as I prefer to refer to it rather than religion, is solitary" and "[my religion is] a religion that stresses individual exploration, and experience". Others referenced their practices as public, but to stay positive in the face of marginalization, "try to focus instead on my own beliefs and relationship with God", or even that they "don't have religious community that is of the same religion as my own locally".

4. Discussion

Hypothesis one posited that the queer status would lead to a decrease in life satisfaction, and an increase in psychological distress (defined as depression, anxiety, and stress). This hypothesis was supported; TGNC/SM participants showed an increase in psychological distress and a decrease in overall life satisfaction compared to cishet participants. Our second hypothesis, an extension of hypothesis one, posited a mediating effect of strength of faith on psychological distress and life satisfaction. Our analyses indicate that queer status had a direct effect on distress and life satisfaction. While strength of faith was not a significant mediator in the relationship between queer status and distress, it did significantly mediate the relationship between queer status and life satisfaction. Specifically, lower strength of faith partially explained the lower life satisfaction reported by individuals with a higher queer status (increased marginalization). Our second hypothesis is partially supported by these results.

Hypothesis three, that marginalization would moderate the relationship between strength of faith and psychological distress and overall life satisfaction, was not supported. The results of the moderation analyses indicate that strength of faith is a significant predictor of both psychological distress and life satisfaction. However, experiences with marginalization did not significantly moderate these relationships, as the interaction terms for both models were nonsignificant and the change in the explanatory power was minimal and nonsignificant. Thus, the effect of strength of faith on psychological distress and life satisfaction did not appear to vary by levels of marginalization in our sample.

Lastly, we had no hypothesis considering whether the queer status would relate to strength of faith. This was due to conflicting findings on the relationship between the queer status and strength of faith in previous research [8,10,11]. We found that there is no relationship between the queer status and strength of faith; the only significant difference in strength of faith was between the cisgender/heterosexual group (M = 50.83, SD = 7.91) and the cisgender/SM group (M = 53.08, SD = 8.32). This shows that queer people are no less religious than non-queer people. However, the results of our study indicate that queer people may be less happy in their religions, and they may practice more progressive religions.

4.1. Experiences with Marginalization

Our qualitative analyses reaffirmed the results in the extant literature. For example, like Anderson and McGuire (2021) [17], our participants responded with stories of transgender and non-binary people having their queerness weaponized as sinful, with the narrative indicating the requirement of some sort of repentance to resolve the sin. We also had stories of those viewing God as hateful and punishing towards them due to their queerness. Additionally, we found that these identity-based moral discrimination practices left participants feeling alienated from their community despite its physical presence and the group's shared connection to a God figure, once again reaffirming the extant results [17].

Our analyses also showed support for the findings from Best and Weerakoon (2021) [1]. Specifically, our results indicate the participants' desire to hold on to their connection to the sacred, results bolstered by many participants reporting a still-positive view of the sacred despite a waning connection to their religious community. Our results also show support for identity concealment as an attempt to maintain a positive relationship with religious

communities. Further, also reaffirming previous results, we found that participants would attempt to mitigate the self-religion disconnect by following progressive teachings or staying out of a faith community to practice in solitary [2].

The results of the current study were mostly (but not entirely) found within Christian faith communities. In line with research about non-Christian faith, we found that participants reported positive connections between their queer identity and their religion in progressive, supportive, and explicitly queer-welcoming communities [6]. We also found low amounts of support coming from family members and, once again, a positive relationship with the sacred or the God figure despite a lack of connection with the faith community.

Altogether, our qualitative analyses were supported by, and expand upon, the extant literature: queer participants are happier in progressive faith communities but will tend towards practicing their faith alone to maintain a relationship with the sacred before leaving the faith community. A lack of support for queerness was shown through faith communities misgendering or alienating queer individuals, pushing cisheteronormative ideals or "duties" onto them, or stating that their queer identities are bad, and the participant should change or will be punished.

4.2. Concealing Stigmatized Identities and Marginalization

Queer status has been categorized as a concealable stigmatized identity (CSI), defined as any physiological, intrapsychic, or identity-based attribute that is not immediately identifiable to an outside observer [32]. A core component of CSI is the presence of valenced assumptions about these attributes, which can involve positive or negative beliefs about an individual (e.g., anticipated stigma, discrimination). Since CSIs are inherently unknown to observers, most individuals with these held identities undergo a disclosure experience—disclosure-based reactions can have profound effects on how the disclosing individual perceives themself and their identities [32]. Reception of disclosure experiences can also vary based on identity centrality (i.e., how much an individual feels they are defined by their CSI) and salience (i.e., how frequently an individual thinks about their CSI).

The determinants of queer identity disclosure include the devaluation of societal acceptance, stress of hiding, a desire for authenticity, sufficient perceived social support, a sense of readiness to come out, comfort with identity, perceived personal safety, trustworthiness of other individuals, the perception that their queer status is obvious or already known to others, and others directly asking [33]. The determinants of queer identity concealment include a high perceived value in societal acceptance, an insufficient support system, dependence on family, not feeling prepared to disclose, discomfort with queer identity, safety concerns, fear of personal stigma, low trustworthiness of the other individual, and conversion therapy [33].

As noted by researchers [33,34], there are a wide variety of variables that can influence queer identity disclosure. Additionally, there are a variety of negative effects from continuing to conceal a queer status, such as lower self-esteem and job satisfaction and increased depression and acceptance concerns [35,36]. When considering the marginalization tactics many religions take to target TGNC and SM individuals [7], and the direct negative impact that increased marginalization can have on physical health and psychological distress [14,15], how should one choose between revealing or concealing a CSI? In our complete qualitative data (see Supplemental Table S2), three responses mentioned the concealment of queer identity. Of these responses, all three were coded as having a negative experience with religion. These participants were also coded for negative experiences with the facets of hierarchical teachings (n = 2), prejudice (n = 2), and fear (n = 1). The exception to this pattern was one report of the progressive religion facet. However, it should be noted that the context for this response was a comparison of progressive urban churches to the respondent's more frequent experiences with non-progressive religious teachings. The general trend in negatively valenced facets, in connection to marginalization or a fear of marginalization, suggests that there is a connection between concealing a stigmatized

identity and the experience of marginalization. This is important to consider for future research, as it could be imperative to account for the impact of marginalization on revealing a concealed stigmatized identity for queer individuals. Extending to future studies, a benefit could be found in further qualitative analysis into both the marginalized and non-marginalized experiences that impact queer individuals' choice to reveal or conceal their CSI.

4.3. Strengths and Limitations

The limitations of this study include an uneven spread of demographics in our sample, with the majority of our participants in the study being cisgender, heterosexual, and White (although our sample demographics are reflective of the population window in the U.S., with an oversampling of participants with various marginalized queer and gender identities). Our sample was especially limited regarding people who identified as both transgender and heterosexual (n = 10), although this can be expected due to the availability of persons with this demographic characteristic [4]. Additionally, the mean score on the measure used for negative emotional symptomatology was below what would be considered average (M = 1.77, SD = 0.58); this indicates that our sample, in general, had low negative emotional symptomatology. As a more specific measure of participant mood, future studies might consider using a measure that taps into positive emotional states.

Our study also had many strengths, including that our quantitative analyses were more than sufficiently powered, with 626 total participants. The number of participants who gave qualitative data was also large for our type of investigation (n = 141), which gives support that the themes discovered in the study are representative of this population. Religious diversity was also present in our study to a degree that is not often found in the current psychological literature. Fourteen different religious identities were endorsed in our sample, including the matching or oversampling of minoritized religious identities, including: Judaism, Islam, Paganism, Hinduism, and Indigenous spiritualities.

5. Conclusions

The findings of our study demonstrate that queer individuals, especially those who identify as transgender, experience increased psychological distress and decreased life satisfaction when compared to non-queer individuals, with a particularly salient impact from the moderating effect of religious marginalization. Future directions for research in this field could include equalizing the number of participants from our queer status categories. Additionally, conducting this study with different measures for happiness, mood, and life satisfaction, especially those with more complex factor structures, could yield significant contributions to the field. An additional study for the further analysis of qualitative-based studies could prove useful, as this would provide more deep and rich information to help assess strategies to decrease marginalization towards queer individuals within religious environments.

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