Identity Development and Cultural Expectations: Exploring the Identities of LGBTQ+ Individuals Through the Lens of Master Narratives

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Exploring the Identities of LGBTQ+ Individuals

Through a Master Narrative Framework

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to better understand how LGBTQ+ individuals understand and make meaning out of their identities in relation to societal expectations that are prevalent in the United States. In my research, I employed the master narrative framework (McLean & Syed, 2015b), which shifts focus in the study of identity from the individual to the intersection of self and society, highlighting the role of culture within the identity development process (McLean et al., 2017). This framework involves master narratives, culturally shared stories that provide a foundation within which individuals can organize and story their own experiences, beliefs, and values (McLean & Syed, 2015b; Syed & McLean, 2023). In my study, I had participants (N = 21) complete in-depth, semi-structured interviews in which they reflected upon their life experiences and how they came to understand themselves as LGBTQ+ identifying individuals. My research was guided by two research questions surrounding (1) the construction of master narratives and (2) how LGBTQ+ individuals align with and deviate from it. Upon conducting a thematic analysis of the data, I was able to reveal how LGBTQ+ individuals are aware of different cultural expectations that have been imposed on them. Analysis of the data revealed the existence of distinct master narratives of a good life for straight individuals and a good life for LGBTQ+ individuals, each encompassing unique cultural expectations. In a case study, I was also able to highlight the complexity of alignment and deviation within these narratives, emphasizing the need for further research to explore the nuanced ways individuals navigate master narratives.

Key Words: identity, LGBTQ+, master narratives, narrative identity, cultural expectations

Author's Note

This study was registered with the State University of New York at New Paltz Human Research Ethics Board (Identifier: STUDY00011362) with two modifications (Identifiers: MOD00002746, MOD00002775). Correspondence concerning this thesis should be addressed to Gavriel J. Goldstein, Department of Psychology, State University of New York at New Paltz, New Paltz, NY 12561, United States. Email: goldsteg2@newpaltz.edu.

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Exploring the Identities of LGBTQ+ Individuals Through a Master Narrative Framework

Research in developmental psychology broadly accepts the understanding of personal identity as including an individual's construction of the subjective story of who they are. Such a story provides individuals a sense of personal continuity across time, contexts, and culture (Erikson, 1968; McAdams & Olson, 2010; McLean et al., 2017; Pasupathi et al., 2007). Definitions of what is included in one's identity vary widely across research such that definitions can even become fluid within one researcher's work. One theme that stretches across the body of identity research is the notion that an individual's identity is a reflection of how they view themselves at their core and in totality (Kroger, 2015; McAdams, 2013; McAdams & Olson, 2010).

Identity development is understood to be an essential marker of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966; McAdams & Olson, 2010), and it is especially important during adolescence and emerging adulthood (see Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2015; Erikson, 1968; McAdams, 2015). However, identity development is a lifelong process that remains relevant throughout the entire lifespan of the individual (Crocetti & Meeus, 2015; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Kroger, 2015; McLean et al., 2017). Identity development helps to fulfill the human need to understand one's self; it is a distillation of one's life experiences and perceptions and it shapes future experiences and decisions (Erikson, 1963; 1968; McAdams, 2013; McAdams & Olson, 2010).

Stage Theories & Status Theories Versus Narrative Theories of Identity Development

Stage Theories & Status Theories

Within identity development literature, different approaches emerge to understanding and defining identity. For years, developmental psychologists have defined identity by categorizing different stages or statuses in which an individual finds themselves (e.g., Crocetti, 2017; Crocetti & Meeus, 2015; Erikson, 1956; 1963; Marcia, 1966). The application of rigid categorizations of life stages is known as a *stage theory*, or *stage theories*, and the application of rigid categorizations of statuses applicable at different periods is known as a *status theory*, or *status theories*. Different stage theories and status theories have been used to understand and define identity development as a linear process of stages/statuses that individuals navigate throughout their lifespan (McLean et al., 2017).

Stage theories have been predominant in identity development literature, with Erikson's (1963) psychosocial theory of development being one of the early and influential models. Erikson (1963) began a pattern of studying development as something that could be easily measured in stages: *trust versus mistrust*, *autonomy versus shame/doubt*, *initiative versus guilt*, *industry versus inferiority*, *identity versus role confusion*, *intimacy versus isolation*, *generativity versus stagnation*, *ego integrity versus despair*. Erikson's (1963) *identity versus role confusion*, which an individual is expected to navigate through at 11–19 years of age, addresses an individual's social relationships in building an understanding of self. Although Erikson's (1963) stage theory centers around development that is not specific to identity formation, the theory sets precedent for the study of identity in stages.

Leading to the development of modern theories of identity development, there have been several identity theories that define identity as something that is achieved through an individual's exploration of self and commitment in how they understand themself. Rooted in Erikson's (1963) theory, Marcia (1966) proposed four statuses in which an individual may find oneself at any given point while forming an identity: *identity achievemen*t, *identity moratorium*, *identity foreclosure, and identity diffusion*. According to Marcia (1966), an individual's identity status is dependent on the presence of an individual's exploration of alternative identities and commitment to an identity: *Identity achievement* involves exploration and commitment, *identity diffusion* involves no exploration nor commitment, *identity moratorium* involves exploration but no commitment, and *identity foreclosure* involves no exploration but commitment. Crocetti's (2017) Three-Factor Identity Model distinguishes the different stages people are in during the process of forming and revising their identity, including *commitment*, *reconsideration of commitment*, and *in-depth exploration*. According to Crocetti (2017), an individual finds themselves in a cycle of either reinforcing their identity or revising their identity through their commitments to their identity. This is viewed as a lifelong process.

Stage theories and status theories are helpful in the study of identity in that they provide a standardized way of understanding identify development. Such theories place individuals into categories that are comprehensible and distinguishable from one another. However, these theories have their shortcomings. Stage theories and status theories are prescriptive, being rooted in assumptions that individuals belong in one box or another (Adler et al., 2017; McLean & Syed, 2015a), which are limiting and may not truly capture all possible factors within an individual's identity development (Adler et al., 2017; McLean & Syed, 2015a). Another

limitation is that most stage theories and status theories emphasize the individual without consideration for the cultural contexts in which identity processes are situated (Adler et al., 2017; McLean & Syed, 2015a; McLean et al., 2017; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009; Syed & McLean, 2022).

Consistent with the exclusion of cultural context, stage theories and status theories often fall short in their application to groups of individuals whose life experiences deviate meaningfully for those of the majority of mainstream populations. For example, Cass (1979) acknowledges that many stage theories inadequately address LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, and she constructs her own stage theory that has become acknowledged as the most comprehensive approach to identity development in LGBTQ+ identifying individuals (Goodrich & Brammer, 2021). This theory is known as the six-stage theory of homosexual identity formation. Cass' (1979) theory classifies stages that many LGBTQ+ individuals navigate through in forming their identity. Each of Cass' (1979) stages involves a level of an individual's exploration and acceptance of who they are: *identity confusion*, where a heterosexual individual questions their feelings of homosexuality; *identity comparison*, where an individual compares themself to others and feels expectations to be heterosexual; *identity tolerance*, where an individual acknowledges to themselves that they may not be heterosexual; *identity acceptance*, where an individual acknowledges and accepts themself as not being heterosexual (Cass (1979) describes how this leads to increasing contact with other people who are not heterosexual); *identity pride*, where an individual completely accepts themself as not being heterosexual and can publicly denounce a heterosexual lifestyle; and *identity synthesis*, where an individual integrates their non-heterosexual identity into their full identity. (Cass (1979) explains that reaching this final stage means that an individual's homosexual identity does not become the

focal point of their life.) According to Cass (1979), if an individual decides to not develop any further before reaching the final stage of identity development, they enter identity foreclosure. It may be worth noting that Cass' research is limited to the explicit mention of the people who are Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB), but it would appear that her findings may extend to the broader LGBTQ+ community.

A strength of Cass' (1979) theory is that the differences between identity and behavior are clearly stated, something that emphasizes how an individual's actions do not define and/or restrict an individual's identity (Goodrich & Brammer, 2021). Regardless, Cass' (1979) theory is not without criticism. One critique of Cass' (1979) theory is that it restricts an individual's development to external stimuli while ignoring internal stressors that impact how people develop (Goodrich & Brammer, 2021). Cass' (1979) theory assumes a framework of a society that only validates heterosexuality and does not acknowledge any cultural validation of being LGBTQ+ (Goodrich & Brammer, 2021). It is important to acknowledge how stage theories and status theories are limited in addressing diverse groups of individuals.

Stage theories and status theories are referred to throughout literature on identity development; in fact, they serve as the prevailing foundational model within the discipline of developmental psychology. However, almost every stage theory and status theory fails to acknowledge the unique experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals. Stage theories and status theories may simply not apply to individuals belonging to marginalized communities because of the different experiences in life that are unique to those communities.

Narrative Theories

An alternative to stage theories and status theories of identity development are narrative theories. Whereas stage theories are prescriptive and focus on an individual's state relative to a specific framework, narrative theories build more comprehensive profiles, taking into account a complex understanding of factors, including an individual's culture, perceptions, societal influences, etc. Narrative theories examine ways that an individual constructs meaning in relation to their life experiences to further understand their own identity (McAdams, 1996; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009; Thorne, 2004). Narrative identity is the integration of the reconstructed past, perceived present, and the imagined future into a story that provides an individual with a sense of consistency and significance (Adler et al., 2017). Narrative theories are not as predominant as stage theories in identity development literature, but they provide helpful frameworks to understanding identity. Most narrative theories have emerged within the relatively recent past (e.g., Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McLean & Syed, 2015b; Pasupathi et al., 2007), and their emergence demonstrates a growing interest in the narrative approach to identity.

As mentioned above, a major limitation of the predominant discourse surrounding identity development is the emphasis on the individual without the consideration of identity processes situated within cultural contexts (McLean & Syed, 2015b; McLean et al., 2017; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009; Syed & McLean, 2022; 2023; Syed et al., 2020, Syed & McLean 2022; 2023). Narrative theories combat the limitations of stage theories by explicitly addressing culture and how cultures are integrated into individuals' lives (McLean et al., 2017, Syed et al., 2020). Additionally, narrative theories acknowledge the cognitive effort required for an

individual to find a balance between culture and self (Habermas & Köber, 2015; Harter & Monsour, 1992; Thorne, 2004).

Narrative theories, like many other theoretical approaches, merit criticism of their own. Since the narrative approach involves stories that individuals construct themselves, it is possible that the stories individuals construct are not necessarily accurate responses to events that actually transpired (Adler et al., 2017). Another challenge of the narrative approach is that the approach is a labor-intensive self-report measure (Adler et al., 2017). However, such criticisms of the narrative approach are dismissive of what the approach sets out to accomplish (Adler et al., 2017): to understand the complex relationships between the retrieval of memories and the impacts memories have on an individual's narrative (Adler et al., 2017).

Predating the school of narrative identity theory, developmental psychologists, such as Bronfenbrenner, acknowledge the importance of understanding the complex environment in which individuals develop. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory of human development, for example, focuses on an individual's interactions with the environment and how those interactions impact that individual's development. In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, there are several contexts, or *systems*, of an individual's environment, the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and *macrosystem*—four systems that each interact in complex ways. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems involve an individual's surrounding environment, from immediate family and school/work settings to broad cultural values, customs, and laws. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory is an excellent framework for understanding the complex nature of identity, and although it considers the importance of understanding the different contexts in an individual's life, the theory organizes an individual's identity in a way that prioritizes some

aspects to identity over others (Adler et al., 2017; McLean & Syed, 2015b; Syed & McLean, 2023). Specifically, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory places structural factors, such as culture and history, as peripheral aspects to an individual's identity, limiting the more complex understanding of identity that has culture and history integrated throughout one's entire identity (Adler et al., 2017; Syed & McLean, 2023). Syed and McLean (2023) specify that structural systems, such as those that uphold patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and Christianity, are not only contexts that fit within an individual's identity but are rather integral facets to an individual's every day life. In contrast to Bronfenbrenner's theory that considers such contexts as external systems to consider, the more modern narrative approach addresses the complicated and integrated context of an individual's life without prioritizing specific systems over others, offering an approach to that explores the more fluid and homogeneous understanding of identity.

One narrative approach to understanding identity is the *life story*, an autobiographical narrative of an individual's life that articulates how an individual remembers and understands their life experiences (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Pasupathi et al., 2007; Thorne, 2004; Thorne & Nam, 2007). Habermas and Bluck (2000) explain that in a life story, there is a close association between remembering, reasoning, and narrating. In narrative psychology, stories are generally viewed as dynamic constructions of an individual's understanding of their past experiences, present concerns, and future anticipations, and along with autobiographical reasoning, stories become integrated into an individual's life story, and in turn, an individual's identity (Habermas & Köber, 2015; Syed et al., 2020). Specifically, life stories address an individual's personal identity by allowing an individual to remember and make sense of their past experiences

(Pasupathi et al., 2007). Additionally, life stories constantly grow and change as people experience their lives; however, they remain consistent in providing themes relevant to an individual's identity (McAdams & Olson, 2010; Pasupathi et al., 2007; Thorne & Nam, 2007).

A life story is valuable in that it allows individuals to remember their own life experiences and make sense of how each life experience has shaped their lives. Pasupathi et al. (2007) acknowledge that it is difficult to study narrative identity in empirical research due to its complexity; however, there have been identity researchers who have been attempting to formalize efficient ways to study life stories.

One approach to understanding narrative identity is based on the Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2007). The Life Story Interview asks interviewees to divide their life into chapters, specify notable episodes from previous experiences, narrate qualities of a predicted future, contemplate challenges from throughout life, reveal ideology and worldview, and define an overarching theme of their life (McAdams, 2007). The interview helps build a detailed picture of an individual's life, as understood by individuals themselves.

The Life Story Interview is an example of inductive qualitative inquiry, a research methodology that builds a posteriori elaborations. Qualitative inquiry expands on identity stage theories and status theories to allow an individual to narrate their own sense of self while revealing their own connections to culture and societal influences (Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Morrow, 2005; Rosiek, 2003). Unlike many quantitative approaches, qualitative inquiry captures phenomena through the prioritization of interviews that researchers conduct for thorough analysis (Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Morrow, 2005; Rosiek, 2003). Terry & Hayfield (2021) argue that their *thematic analysis*, a practice of analyzing interviews to generate codes and themes, is

an efficient method for researchers to analyze qualitative research. Qualitative methodologies, including interviews and thematic analysis, complement narrative theories in building understandings of an individual's identity.

Although qualitative inquiry is an efficient way to reveal an individual's narrative identity, qualitative research is not without criticism (Rolfe, 2006; Morrow, 2005). For years, there have been researchers who debate the validity of qualitative research and to what degree qualitative research can be generalized (Rolfe, 2006; Morrow, 2005). To combat such criticism, Rolfe (2006) argues how qualitative research involves *trustworthiness*, something that he divides into *credibility*, *dependability*, *transferability*, and *confirmability*, four attributes that respectively compare to internal validity, reliability, external validity, and presentation of quantitative research. Criticisms of qualitative research are similar to those of narrative research in that they undermine what the methodology sets out to accomplish: providing a holistic methodology in researching the unique narratives belonging to an individual (Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

The Master Narrative Framework

McLean and Syed (2015b) expanded the narrative approach to the life story and proposed an organized methodology to assess narrative identity: the master narrative framework. The master narrative framework shifts focus in the study of identity from the individual to the intersection of self and society (McLean & Syed, 2015b; Syed & McLean, 2023). The master narrative framework also highlights culture within the study of identity development, along with the addition of emphasizing the important role that power and oppression play in identity development (McLean & Syed, 2015b; McLean et al., 2017; Syed & McLean, 2023). The master

narrative framework follows an inclusive assessment of identity and provides a comprehensive understanding of identity.

The master narrative framework surrounds *master narratives*, culturally shared stories that provide a foundation within which individuals can organize and story their own experiences, beliefs, and values (McLean & Syed, 2015b; McLean et al., 2017; Syed & McLean, 2023). Individuals can internalize and resist master narratives both consciously and unconsciously (McLean & Syed, 2015b). While being culturally-specific, master narratives share five principles: *ubiquity*, *utility*, *invisibility*, *rigidity*, and a *compulsory nature* (McLean & Syed, 2015b). McLean and Syed (2015b) explain that the principle of *ubiquity* surrounds the idea that master narratives are known by the majority of people. The principle of *utility* involves master narratives serving the purpose of defining acceptable and valued foundations for defining the self, and the principle of *invisibility* is the concept that many people are unaware of how they conform to cultural expectations in defining themselves. The principle of *rigidity* highlights how master narratives hold power in society and are difficult to change, and the principle of *compulsory nature* emphasizes that individuals whose personal narratives do not align with the master narrative tell stories that are less valued by the majority of people in that individual's society, and such people are frequently placed in a more marginalized position in society (McLean & Syed, 2015b; McLean et al., 2017).

In addition to the five principles shared among master narratives, McLean and Syed (2015b) further classify master narratives into three different types: *episodic*, *structural*, *and biographical* (McLean & Syed, 2015b). Episodic master narratives surround specific events, such as the events of 9/11 (McLean & Syed, 2015b). Structural master narratives surround

different concepts that are integrated into society, such as redemption stories (McLean & Syed, 2015b). Biographical master narratives concern the framework for how individuals expect a life should be lived (McLean & Syed, 2015b). McLean et al. (2017) explain that biographical master narratives may be internalized as specific types of events that should occur in one's lifetime in a given culture (e.g., getting married or graduating from school), as well as the timing of specific events in one's lifetime (e.g., getting married before having children). The three types of master narratives are not mutually exclusive (McLean & Syed, 2015b).

Overall, individuals whose personal narratives align with the master narrative typically construct identities that are culturally accepted and even valued, while individuals whose personal narratives do not align with the master narrative typically construct identities that deviate from cultural expectations (McLean et al., 2017; Syed & McLean, 2023). It is interesting to acknowledge that besides the higher likelihood of someone feeling marginalized and oppressed due to their personal narratives not aligning with the master narrative, the people who deviate from the master narrative are commonly more aware of the master narrative itself (McLean et al., 2017; Syed & McLean, 2023); therefore, individuals typically internalize master narratives unconsciously and are unaware of how greatly they rely on master narratives to define themselves (McLean & Syed, 2015b). Consequently, the awareness of master narratives materializes partly in response to the fact that deviation from the master narrative frequently results in social sanctions (McLean et al., 2017). The master narrative framework provides a useful foundation to understand why some individuals feel like they do not fit in within a society and can be used to build up an understanding towards correcting for the stress that individuals face in such scenarios (Syed & McLean, 2023).

McLean and Syed (2015b) coined the term *alternative narrative* in reference to personal narratives formed by individuals who deviate from master narratives. Individuals who deviate from the master narrative are faced with reconstructing their identities, and may begin using alternative narratives in establishing their identities. It is possible for people to find comfort in using alternative narratives that already exist among other groups of people (McLean et al., 2017). McLean et al. (2017) clarify that if enough people use a certain alternative narrative, the alternative narrative may subsume the master narrative. However, there are challenges in assessing alternative narratives because they are not always referenced in conversation as an alternative to the master narrative due to individuals preferring more focus on narratives that are accepted and require less explanation and more rigidity (McLean et al., 2016).

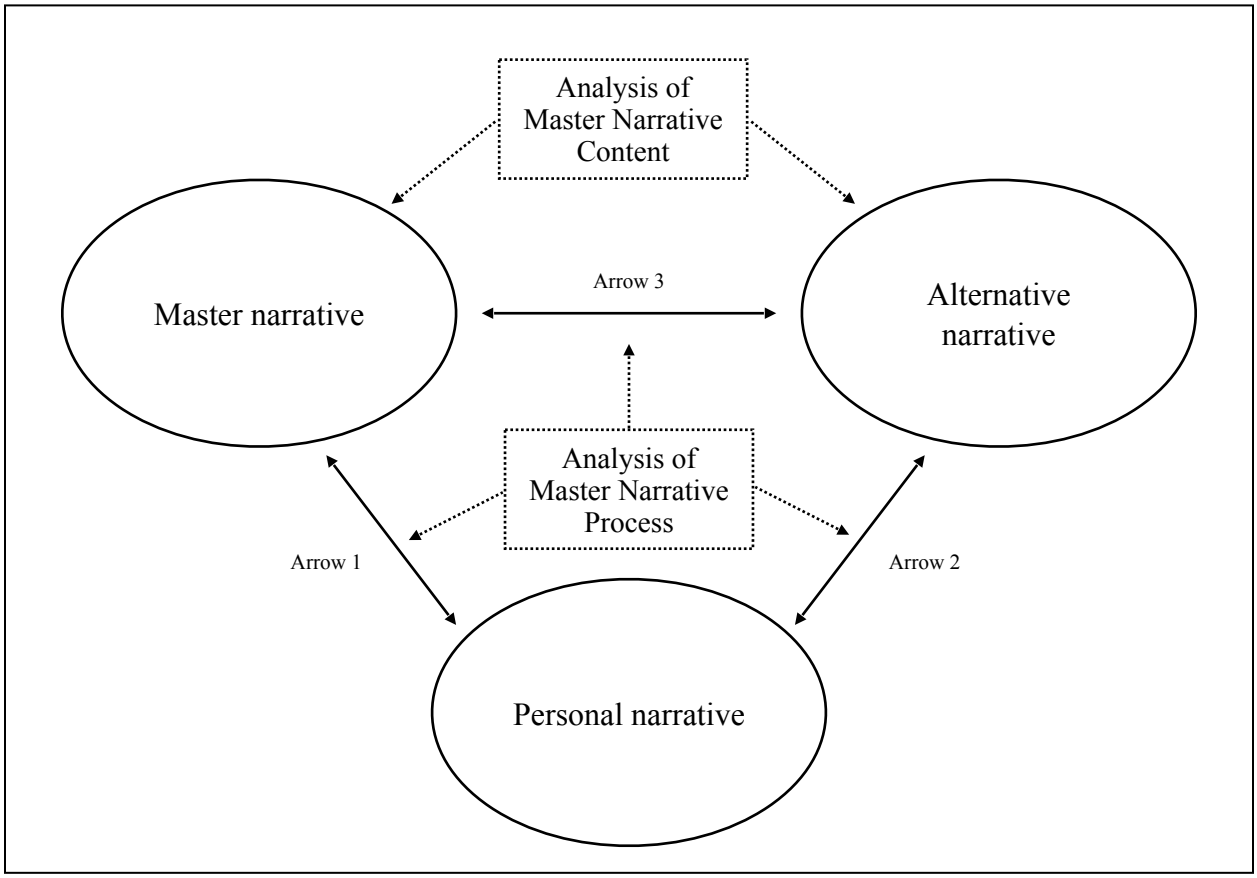
McLean and Syed (2015b) explain that each individual's personal narrative is greatly informed by the degree to which an individual aligns with the master narrative or potential alternative narrative. Individuals who mostly align with the master narrative strengthen the master narrative, and individuals who do not align with the master narrative and construct and alternative narrative also strengthen the master narrative through acknowledging and potentially validating its existence (McLean & Syed, 2015b). At the same time, alternative narratives can eventually change the master narrative, although such changes are typically slow and require a lot of effort and time (McLean & Syed, 2015b). Typically, the more people realize that their life deviates from the master narrative, the stronger the alternative narrative becomes (Syed et al., 2020). A modified depiction of the master narrative model is in Figure 1, displaying the bidirectional relationships between the personal narrative, master narrative, and alternative narrative and how the master narrative framework can be studied.

It is important to acknowledge how alternative narratives are sometimes also referred to as *counter narratives*, but the former term is preferred to indicate the intention and agency that frequently surrounds the formation and maintenance of alternative narratives (Syed & McLean, 2023). While master narratives are customarily integrated into an individual's personal narrative unconsciously, alternative narratives are commonly integrated into an individual's personal narrative intentionally (Syed & McLean, 2023).

Syed and McLean (2022) discuss how a method to assess cultural expectations on individuals is to ask about the *good life*, which is associated with culturally-valued—and often prescriptive—stories about how to be happy (see also Bauer, 2021; Schwab, 2020). Although previous research associates the good life with well-being, Syed and McLean (2022) argue that what is associated with the good life is much bigger than just well-being, surrounding more complex feelings that may be embedded in broader society, transcending individual fulfillment and surrounding personal connections to others and a sense of belonging. Syed and McLean (2022) posit that the good life is thus associated with the master narrative, and people can align with or deviate from it, potentially associating the good life with an alternative narratives. For many marginalized groups, for example, the good life may consist of meaningful connections to groups, deviating from the master narrative of the good life as being something acquired through personal pursuits, successes, and self-actualization (McLean et al., 2017; Syed & McLean, 2023). However, assuming a universal concept of the good life may be limiting, as it overlooks the varied and distinct expectations different marginalized groups of individuals may associate with a fulfilling life.

Figure 1

The Master Narrative Framework



Source. Syed and McLean (2023).

McLean and Syed (2015b) posit how the master narrative framework involves two psychological processes: a negotiation between self and society and an internalization of the master narrative. As displayed in Figure 1, the bidirectional arrows indicate that an individual, through their personal narrative, contributes to and incorporates master narratives (arrow 1) and alternative narratives (arrow 2), and Figure 1 also displays how master narratives and alternative narratives exist in relation to one another (arrow 3) (Syed & McLean, 2023). The analysis of master narrative content focuses on the content contained within each the master narrative and the alternative narrative, while the analysis of the master narrative process focuses on how

individuals actively and flexibly engage with these narratives through negotiation, resistance, internalization, and perpetuation (Syed & McLean, 2023).

Syed and McLean (2023) compile different methodologies that researchers may choose to employ in exploring both master narrative content and master narrative process. For example, researchers may descriptively explore master narrative content by investigating participants' life stories, which contain rich information regarding to participants' personal experiences and personal narratives, and life scripts, which contain prescribed events that are expected for individuals to navigate (Syed & McLean, 2023). Alternatively, researchers may assess master narrative processes by investigating how participants deviate from master narratives (Syed & McLean, 2023). Syed and McLean (2023) explain that the methods they present can be used and adapted to many different frameworks and methodologies is assessing the content and process of master narratives.

The master narrative framework offers a comprehensive lens through which to explore identity development and the role that culture and societal expectations play. The master narrative framework highlights the interaction between personal narratives, the master narrative, and alternative narratives, and it provides an inclusive way to assess the content of master narrative and the processes involved in engaging with it. In my study, I employ the master narrative framework, analyzing both the content and processes of master narratives, which each contribute to a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate and construct their identities within cultural frameworks.

Acknowledging Experiences of LGBTQ+ Individuals

McLean and Syed (2015b) acknowledge the importance of the master narrative framework in understanding the complexities of minority groups, including sexual minorities. In the case of sexual minorities, McLean and Syed (2015b) point out how individuals who identity as being LGBTQ+ experience life differently than people who are straight; simply identifying as anything other than *straight* places an individual into a category of deviation. It is interesting to note that in the case of sexual orientation, the term *straight* itself implies that heterosexuality is assumed (McLean & Syed, 2015b; McLean et al., 2017). Expectations may be placed on people who deviate from the master narrative; for LGBTQ+ individuals, for example, the expectation to *come out* is the expectation for an individual's public statement of their deviation from society's expectations.

McLean and Syed (2015b) argue the importance in acknowledging the history of cultures and groups of people in understanding the master narrative. For LGBTQ+ individuals, for example, same-sex marriage is illegal in many places and only become legal in the United States recently (McLean & Syed, 2015b). The denial of marriage is one example of how legal structures of society denies LGBTQ+ individuals opportunities to meet expected life events (McLean & Syed, 2015b; McLean et al., 2017). Although there have been improvements in recent years, the history—both distant and recent—of legal and societal discrimination greatly influences how LGBTQ+ individuals build their identity in relation to society and societal pressures. The legacy of marginalization and exclusion still impacts the lived experiences and identity development of LGBTQ+ individuals today.

When exploring the identities of LGBTQ+ individuals, it is important to acknowledge certain additional common life experiences they may encounter. Existing literature addresses some of these common experiences. It is common for LGBTQ+ individuals to have a negative self-image (Deguara, 2018) and a negative body image (Parker & Harriger, 2020). Individuals who identify as being LGBTQ+ are also more likely to suffer from stress and to struggle with eating disorders and disordered-eating behaviors (Parker & Harriger, 2020). In addition, many LGBTQ+ identifying individuals are the target of violence and crime (Haynes et al., 2023). Unfortunately, there are challenges in identifying hate crimes against individuals belonging to minority groups (Haynes et al., 2023). Furthermore, LGBTQ+ identifying individuals may experience low family support, which can increase difficulty in finding a safe space upon facing discrimination and bullying (Azmitia et al, 2023). The challenges facing LGBTQ+ individuals meaningfully and adversely impact their lives and by extension, their identity development.

Present Study

Employing a narrative approach—specifically the master narrative framework—to assess identity provides a more comprehensive picture of an individual's identity and is especially important when assessing identity within marginalized populations that may not fit neatly into more conventional rigid methodologies. Specifically, the master narrative framework is crucial in assessing identity in individuals who identify as LGBTQ+.

In my study, I use qualitative inquiry in collecting data, as it provides rich, detailed information that captures the complexity of participants' experiences and how they came to develop their identity. My primary research questions guiding my investigation include:

1. How do LGTBQ+ individuals describe and experience the master narrative of a good life? Are there distinct master narratives for a straight good life and an LGBTQ+ good life?
2. How do LGBTQ+ individuals align with or deviate from the master narrative of a good life?

Although previous research explores a singular type of good life for people, my study places a particular focus on how LGBTQ+ individuals may align with or deviate from the conventional master narrative of living a "straight good life" and explores the nuanced ways in which they may align with or deviate from a master narrative of living an "LGBTQ+ good life." This perspective is innovative as it shifts the focus from the more frequently researched deviations from broader cultural expectations—like marriage, childbearing, and other expectations about how to live—to the expectations within the LGBTQ+ community on how to embody one's identity as Gay, Trans, or generally as an LGBTQ+ individual.

By employing qualitative inquiry and drawing inspiration from methods such as the Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2007), my study captures the complex realities of LGBTQ+ individuals and also bridges a significant gap in the identity literature by focusing on both the content and processes of master and alternative narratives within the LGBTQ+ context. The master narrative framework, as employed in my study, uncovers the dynamic interplay between personal narratives and cultural expectations, offering a deeper, more nuanced understanding of LGBTQ+ identity development.

Method

Participants

I recruited 21 participants using SUNY New Paltz's student subject pool, social media, and word of mouth. Participants recruited through SUNY New Paltz's student subject pool received research credit, while those recruited outside of the subject pool received no compensation. To qualify, participants had to be at least 18 years old and identify as being LGBTQ+.

I collected participants' demographic information during the interview, asking them to specify their age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, residing location, relationship with religion, and the environment in which they grew up with open-ended questions. For the purpose of this thesis, I categorized participants' locations into five regions: Northeast, Southeast, Northwest, Southwest, and Outside the U.S., with specific countries or regions noted for those outside the United States. I further labeled locations as urban, suburban, or rural if participants disclosed such information.

I intentionally asked participants to describe their demographic information in detail with open-ended questions to capture the nuances behind such complex data. In Appendix A, I provide a summarized version of the participants' demographic information. The sample of 21 participants included nine females, 10 males (three of whom identified as Trans), and two non-binary individuals, with a mean age of 25.24 (SD = 8.20, range = 19-50). Regarding sexual orientation, 10 participants identified as Gay, nine as Bisexual, and two as Pansexual. Racially and ethnically, the participants were diverse: six identified as Hispanic, five as white, five as Jewish, four as Asian American and Pacific Islander, and one as mixed. Concerning religious

backgrounds, 10 were raised Roman Catholic, five were raised Jewish (three of these in Orthodox households), two were raised atheist, and four were raised as something other. Interestingly, only the Jewish and the atheist participants continued to align with their religious upbringing in terms of current religious affiliation; all other participants reported a change or disaffiliation from their initial religious upbringing. The majority of participants were raised or currently reside in the Northeastern United States. See Appendix A for table of demographic information.

Instrument & Design

I employed the master narrative framework (McLean & Syed, 2015b), as articulated by Syed and McLean (2023), to examine the identity development of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+. This framework organizes the study of master narratives into content and process dimensions: Master narrative content includes the static elements of master and alternative narratives, and how these narratives are defined and conceptualized, while master narrative process includes the dynamic interactions individuals have with these narratives through negotiation, resistance, internalization, and perpetuation (Syed & McLean, 2023). In my study, I adapt methodologies that Syed and McLean (2023) posit are efficient ways to assess master narrative content and process: I descriptively explore master narrative content by investigating participants' life stories and life scripts and by exploring how participants deviate from the master narratives I construct. Specifically, I designed semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to articulate personal events and life experiences, thereby enabling an examination of both narrative content and processes as they pertain to identity formation. These interviews

sought to uncover how LGBTQ+ individuals perceive and engage with societal expectations, navigating through prescribed life scripts and potentially deviating from them.

The Interview

The interviews consisted of 25 semi-structured questions, most lasting between 40 to 60 minutes. Each session began with a comprehensive briefing on my study's objectives and the informed consent process, ensuring participants understood their rights and my study's procedures. See Appendix B for the entire interview.

To assess master narrative content, I took different approaches within the interview. I asked participants to narrate their personal life stories, which included specific questions borrowed from the Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2007). For example, I asked participants:

> Looking back over your entire life, please identify and describe what you now consider to be the greatest single challenge you have faced in your life. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? And what significance does this challenge hold in your life? (McAdams, 2007)

This allowed participants to articulate their individual experiences and perspectives, providing insights into their personal narratives which could be analyzed along with other participants' personal narratives to build an understanding of the master narrative (see Syed & McLean, 2023). Also, participants were prompted to describe fictional stories detailing what society prescribes as the *good life* for both straight and LGBTQ+ individuals (see Syed & McLean, 2022). For example, I asked participants to "please share a fictional story of what society tells us is the 'good life' for an LGBTQ+ identifying individual." These fictional stories enabled

participants to express culturally expected life scripts (see Syed & McLean, 2023), thereby uncovering the master narrative surrounding the good life that is prevalent in society. In addition to these questions asking participants to relate fictional stories, other questions in the interview focused on societal expectations placed on participants, further enriching the assessment of master narrative content by revealing normative expectations and how participants perceive them (see Syed & McLean, 2023).

To assess the master narrative process, I asked participants how their actual lives compare with the fictional stories they described. I asked participants, "how is your life similar or different to what you shared in your story?" This line of questioning was designed to explore the extent to which participants conform to or deviate from these narratives. Additionally, I explored how participants' experiences described throughout their interviews aligned with or deviated from the master narratives they described. Analyzing participants' responses to questions allowed for a deeper understanding of the dynamic interaction between participants' lived experiences and the master narrative, shedding light on the processes of negotiation, resistance, and internalization of the master narrative.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim using the professional version of MacWhisper (Bruin, 2024), ensuring accuracy and comprehensiveness. After transcription, all audio recordings were securely discarded to maintain participant confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Following the transcription of each interview, I fully immersed myself into the transcribed data. My analysis was guided by the qualitative research methodology outlined by Terry and Hayfield (2021). Employing a primarily bottom-up, inductive approach, I

meticulously read each interview several times, annotating and highlighting potential themes or noteworthy points. This careful and repeated engagement with the data allowed me to become deeply familiar with each participant's narrative, striving to understand their experiences and perspectives as they chose to describe them in their interviews. I do recognize, however, that my understanding is limited to what participants shared. While I hope that participants' accounts remained authentic and reflective of their true experiences, I recognize that, as with any narrative approach, there is always a degree of uncertainty regarding the full accuracy of stories conveyed.

To systematically organize the data, I created detailed spreadsheets focusing on the master narratives of the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life. For each participant, I extracted relevant information related to these narratives, especially from the responses to questions about societal expectations and how their own lives compared or contrasted with such expectations. This process included identifying potential instances of alignment with and deviation from these cultural narratives, which I noted in the spreadsheets for further analysis. Additionally, I developed a separate spreadsheet dedicated to mapping out the content of the master narratives themselves. This involved a careful review of each interview to identify specific expectations associated with the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life. Each time I identified a cultural expectation, I recorded and categorized it, helping me to group similar expectations into broader themes. This categorization process was crucial for understanding the overarching cultural scripts that emerged from the participants' narratives.

Throughout the analysis process, I conducted several audits with my advisor to ensure consistency and rigor in my analysis. These audits helped to refine the coding framework and verify that the data were being treated with the necessary care and attention. This process

ensured that the analysis was both comprehensive and grounded in the participants' lived experiences.

I assigned each participant a pseudonym to ensure that their information was kept as anonymous as possible; the use of pseudonyms protects the participants' identities and also allows for a more immersive and comprehensive understanding of each participant, as each pseudonym carries its own story tied to the narrative data. This approach honors the depth of individual narratives and enabled a more comprehensive analysis that respects the diversity and richness of the participants' perspectives.

To specifically apply the master narrative framework, as directed by Syed and McLean (2023), I distinguished between analyzing narrative content and narrative process. For master narrative content, I carefully analyzed each participant's life story and fictional *good life* stories to identify the themes and elements that participants perceive as normative or ideal within their cultural contexts. This process involved analyzing how participants described the societal expectations embedded in these stories and how they align or contrast with participants' personal experiences and identities.

Regarding master narrative process, I examined how participants interacted with both their personal life stories and their fictional *good life* stories by assessing their responses to direct comparisons between these shared stories and their actual life experiences. This included assessing instances of negotiation, where participants articulated their agreement or alignment with societal expectations, and resistance, where they identified divergences or rejections of societal expectations. The analysis also focused on how participants internalized the master and

alternative narratives, as demonstrated by the profound impact these cultural and societal stories had on their personal identity narratives and decision-making processes.

By integrating these analytical lenses, the study not only captures the explicit content of the master narrative but also the subtler processes by which these narratives are engaged, challenged, and reshaped by individuals. My approach to analysis aligns with Syed and McLean's (2023) emphasis on the dynamic interplay between the content of master narratives and the processes through which individuals relate to them, guiding my research to build a comprehensive picture of the influence of master narratives on identity formation among LGBTQ+ individuals.

Results

The Master Narratives of the Good Life

From my analysis, I have identified key expectations that can be categorized into distinct themes, which have allowed me to construct a clearer understanding of the prevailing master narratives of the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life. My data confirmed the assumption that different good lives exist for straight people and LGBTQ+ individuals.

The Straight Good Life

Within the master narrative of the straight good life, I have identified several themes that encompass the cultural expectations participants feel are imposed upon them. These themes include the *American Dream*, *religion*, *keeping up appearances*, and *gender roles*. In the following subsections pertaining to each theme, I break down each theme under the master narrative of the straight good life and discuss the specific expectations associated with them. Table 1, displayed below, provides a comprehensive overview of the expectations and master

Table 1

The Master Narrative of the Straight Good Life

Participant	The Straight Good Life															
	The American Dream								Religion			Keeping Up Appearances			Gender Roles	
	Live a suburban lifestyle		Have a family					Be financially secure or have a high-paying job	Be religious	Be a religious Christian	Pursue being religious of your own free will	Be straight-*presenting*	Do not *openly* display being anything but straight	Pursue only "straight" relationships	Follow your gender role (e.g. "be a lady")	As a child: Play as a character who embodies your gender
	Live in a house in the suburbs	Have a "white picket fence"*	Date/find partner (at a young age)	Be married	Have children	"Build" or "establish" your family*	Have a "nuclear" family*									
Alex	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X		X	X			X
Aubrey	X	X		X	X			X							X	
Barbara	X		X	X		X						X	X	X		
Bennie	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X		X	X			
Brooke	X	X		X	X			X								
David	X		X	X	X			X					X			
Dustin	X	X		X	X			X								
Em	X			X	X		X	X	X	X		X				
Georgette	X			X	X	X	X									
Jada		X•	X	X	X				X	X		X				
Jonathan			X	X	X			X				X				
Kaitlyn				X	X			X	X	X		X	X		X	
Monica	X	X		X	X							X		X	X•	
Rachel				X	X											
Robert				X	X	X		X	X		X					
Seth	X	X		X	X		X	X								
Steven				X	X			X				X				
Taylor	X	X•		X	X				X		X			X	X	
William				X	X	X		X				X			X	
Zachary				X	X			X								
Zeke				X	X	X	X		X	X			X			

X = Participant explicitly contributed to the expectation associated with the specified master narrative.

X• = Participant specifically stated something similar to the expectation.

* Participants specifically mentioned the words in quotes.

narrative of the straight good life revealed in the data.

As stated above, it is crucial to explore the expectations associated with the straight good life from the perspectives of LGBTQ+ individuals because these expectations are frequently imposed on people, including LGBTQ+ individuals, from a young age. In other words, LGBTQ+ individuals feel expectations associated with straight people. Participants consistently expressed an awareness of the expectations set for straight individuals regardless of any alignment to such norms.

The American Dream. In discussing what they associate with the straight good life, almost every participant described what has come to be thought of as the quintessential American Dream. This included a variety of components pertaining to expectations associated with (a) living a suburban lifestyle, (b) having a family, and (c) being financially secure or having a high-paying job. The concept of the suburban lifestyle is central to this theme, with over half participants specifying this as a hallmark of a straight good life. The expectation extends to nuances such as the *white picket fence*, explicitly mentioned by a third of participants as symbolic of this ideal. Also, the expectations to have a family and to become financially secure are also central to the theme of the American Dream, with nearly all participants specifying that these expectations are distinct aspects to the straight good life. Every single participant mentioned that marriage is an expectation associated within the straight good life. The insights gained from these expectations allowed me to construct a comprehensive portrayal of aspects belonging the master narrative of the straight good life.

The expectations associated with the American Dream are captured by one participant, named Em, who outlined the sequence expected of a straight individual to progress through a good life:

> Go through school, go through college, get a successful—get some sort of successful job in which you're making a lot of money to support a theoretical family that you one day will have, theoretical children that you one day will have. All that's generally expected. I would probably say mid-to-late 20's is when that's generally expected of people. … I feel like normally, like broader in America, people will expect some sort of suburban lifestyle. … Yeah, typically it's always that like—what's the word I'm looking for? I suppose like *nuclear* family is what I'm looking for. It's all very centered around the idea of children—this is something that I notice a lot.

Em's reflection provides insight into the expectations of living the American Dream, detailing the educational and career expectations, financial success, and the suburban family life that people should have to live a straight good life. Although some participants addressed the American Dream without explicitly acknowledging its existence, some participants named it, with some even explicitly acknowledging the pressure to fit expectations associated with it. For example, Bennie revealed that throughout his life, he felt the "need to kind of suppress whatever doesn't fit with that defined role of like an American Dream." Bennie acknowledged his awareness of the American Dream and his feeling associated with strictly adhering to expectations associated with the American Dream.

Another participant, Dustin, echoed the above sentiment, linking the American Dream explicitly to the suburban, nuclear family model:

> The first thing I thought was, like, American Dream. Like, white picket fence and suburban house with, like, two kids. And you have, like, a good paying job and a wife as a man or a husband as a woman. And, yeah, … just work hard for capitalist gain and then have a job and then be successful.

Dustin, along with other participants, also stressed the importance of seeking financial success to live a straight good life.

The narratives provided by participants highlight the pervasive and prescriptive nature of the master narrative surrounding the straight good life. Such narratives reveal the expectations imposed along with the awareness of these narratives by those who feel in conflict with them, providing a comprehensive view of the scripted lives individuals are expected to lead.

Religion. Many participants highlighted the significant role of religion in the master narrative of the straight good life. This theme, revealing expectations associated with being a religious individual, emerged prominently from the data, with over a third of participants specifying this expectation as a distinct characteristic of a straight good life. It is particularly striking that so many participants addressed religious expectations despite not being directly asked about religion, demonstrating the deep cultural connection between religion and the straight good life. Additionally, almost each of these participant specifically mentioned that the expectation involves being Christian (such as being Roman Catholic), revealing the strong cultural ties between Christianity and the straight good life narrative.

Interestingly, participants with Christian backgrounds expressed religious expectations that were not completely parallel to those belonging to participants with a Jewish background. Jewish participants did not emphasize the same association of the straight good life with religion,

but those who have addressed religious expectations in a different light: Jewish participants associated religious expectations with the need to pursue their religion of their own free will.

One participant, Jada, who grew up with no experience with religion, revealed the cultural pressures to be a religious Christian as part of the straight good life:

> Men and women meet and marry and have kids and have like this little house with a fence in like a rural area. And they have like, I don't know, they go to church and all of that. And I don't, like, I try very hard to not speak down on religion just because that's not something that I was exposed to [growing up]. So I don't really know that much about it. But I feel like, you know, especially in America, like Christian, you know: your kids go to church and youth club and they, you know, are very like "PTA mom" type kind of stuff.

While Jada revealed how she did not grow up in a Christian household, she still feels cultural pressures to be a religious Christian, aligning with the experiences shared by other participants with Christian backgrounds. For instance, Kaitlyn, who grew up Roman Catholic, noted that "religion, too," among other expectations, "is usually the presumed affiliation" and "the foundation" of expectations associated with the straight good life. When asked to clarify, Kaitlyn confirmed she was referring to Christianity, and she did so because of her experiences with being raised Christian. Jada, albeit lacking the background in the Christian faith, reveals the prevalences of the Christian faith and the pressure of being religious as a part of the master narrative of the straight good life. This aligns with the characteristic of master narratives being invisible to many until they deviate from cultural expectations; in Jada's experiences, her lacking

of a religious background may have allowed her to explicitly become aware of such cultural expectations.

Interestingly, even participants from non-Christian religious backgrounds reported similar pressures to be religious. For example, Alex, who was raised Hindu, recounted his mother's expectations regarding religion:

> Ever since [I came out to my parents], my mom, even when I go home, she'll be kind to me, but she'll often do this thing of like, "we should go to church," which doesn't make sense, because we're Hindu—we go to temple, we worship entirely different gods. And she'll be like, "no, we should go to church, you should feel G-d, because I've had a vision, and this is just a phase."

Alex disclosed how the cultural pressures to be religious impacts not only his understandings of the straight good life but also his Hindu family in navigating the straight good life. The experiences conveyed by Alex, in navigating his mother's expectations to follow the straight good life, is shared by Bennie, who discussed his parents' expectations to be in "a straight marriage, blessed by the church" with children who are baptized and "go through all their sacraments and everything." In discussing the expectations their parents place on them, participants like Alex and Bennie reveal the cultural expectations that have impacted the way their families have navigated the master narrative of the straight good life.

As mentioned above, Jewish participants associated religious expectations with the need to pursue their religion of their own free will. For example, in discussing expectations they have felt imposed on them throughout their life, Taylor related the following:

> I had to determine whether or not I was just being religious because my parents, the expectation was that I was gonna grow up and be religious and be Orthodox and practice Judaism in some very specific ways. And I had to determine whether or not that is what actually I wanted. And it turns out it was, though it did manifest differently than it manifest for my parents, but Judaism and Orthodoxy is important to me. … And dealing with those expectations and expectations to be straight and dealing with those expectations and being like, "I'm still religious, but I'm not religious, I wear pants [instead of only skirts]." I'm not gonna list off all the other things, but that's the most obvious marker [of felt expectations]. I, before I came out to my parents, I came out to my parents about wearing pants.

To explain Taylor's mention of wearing pants, for many Orthodox Jewish individuals, wearing skirts is a sign of modesty and a marker of maintaining religious practice; although this expectation does not hold true for all Orthodox Jewish communities, wearing skirts was a significant aspect of Taylor's cultural expectations to remain religious. Robert, another Jewish participant who addressed religion in discussing the straight good life, mentioned how "religious growth" was specifically expected of him. Just like how Taylor explained, Robert conveyed how he not only had to navigate the expectations associated with the straight good life; Robert was expected to find "value" in being religious and to pursue religion "not only because they were expected" of him. Both Robert's and Taylor's narrative highlight the relationship between religious expectations and expectations to live a straight good life from Orthodox Jewish individuals' perspectives.

The narratives provided by participants reveal the pervasive expectation of religious adherence within the master narrative of the straight good life. They highlight how religion is associated with societal expectations of living a successful and culturally acceptable life as a straight individual.

Keeping Up Appearances. Many participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a certain image or facade to look straight, a theme I identified as Keeping Up Appearances. This theme encompasses expectations related to (1) presenting oneself as straight, (2) adhering to societal norms of not *openly* revealing one's true LGBTQ+ identity, and (3) pursuing only "straight" relationships. The first two expectations, addressed by under half the participants, are two that involve pursuing a public image that is considered socially acceptable. The third expectation was discussed by two participants, each of whom are Bisexual individuals who have each experienced conflicting expectations regarding their sexual identity.

Participants highlighted that being straight-presenting is a significant expectation within the straight good life. This expectation extends beyond simply identifying as straight; it includes outward behavior and public persona. For example, Bennie, when discussing his experiences of realizing his LGBTQ+ identity and the expectations he faced to hide such an identity, shared:

> I could say probably on some level, I was probably conscious of [being Gay] as far back as like elementary school. But then I don't think I could fully like understand and grasp it until high school. And then, even then, like all my friends were straight. My parents very much had that expectation that like, "oh, I'm gonna go to college. I'm going to meet a woman, marry, have a family." And even through college, and shortly after college, I kind of forced myself into that mold. So again, I feel like I probably wasn't able to fully

> form like those ideas that, "oh, shit, I'm not, I'm not straight," really, until maybe freshman or sophomore year of high school, although I had probably like ideas of it along the way and at a much younger age.

Bennie's narrative reflects the intense pressure to conform to a straight-presenting lifestyle, even when one's true identity differs from such a lifestyle. Bennie explained how he forced himself to fit the *mold* of the expectations placed on him to be straight, dating girls and ignoring his own feelings that he might be Gay. The expectations surrounding being straight-presenting is not only about living as a straight individual but about maintaining appearances and fitting societal norms, including norms pertaining to the expectations surrounding forming a family.

Some participants explained that even LGBTQ+ individuals are expected not to *openly* display their non-straight identity. David, for instance, pointed out the societal pressure to keep one's LGBTQ+ identity discreet: to live a good life, society expects that an LGBTQ+ individual not "thrust [the fact that they are LGBTQ+] upon other people" and "[live] half in the closet, half not, as long as they're not throwing it in society's face that they're Gay." Other participants expressed similar sentiments, such as Barbara, who related how from a societal perspective, "it's fine to like be LGBTQ+, but like do it in your basement where no one knows what's going on." Additionally, Barbara shares how for LGBTQ+ individuals, "you can live your life how you want to live it as long as nobody knows that you're living your life how you want to live it." David's and Barbara's comments highlight the societal expectation for LGBTQ+ individuals to avoid openly presenting their LGBTQ+ identities in public. This reinforces the notion that a straight good life is one where non-heteronormative behaviors are kept hidden.

The expectation to maintain a straight-presenting image extends to Bisexual individuals in a unique way. Two Bisexual participants, Barbara and Taylor, addressed how individuals who are Bisexual may feel compelled to pursue relationships with the opposite sex to conform to societal norms. This expectation contrasts with what some participants reveal to be an expectation associated with being Bisexual in living an LGBTQ+ good life, discussed below. Barbara, in discussing her Bisexual identity, highlighted such expectations to pursue strictly straight relationships:

> There's always this thing of like, "oh, people who identify as Bisexual and then they end up marrying straight." And so that's kind of something that gets pushed or said or whatever. And I think for a little bit in college, I was like, "I don't want to be that person who then goes through all this," quote unquote, to then just end up in a heterosexual relationship. … I felt like that's what was expected. And I kind of pushed that until I, thank G-d, matured a little bit and was like, "oh, no matter who I end up with, whether it is a cis-male or cis-female or Trans-male, Trans-, whoever I end up with, I am Bisexual."

Barbara's experience highlights the societal expectation for Bisexual individuals to pursue and to ultimately settle into heterosexual relationships, reinforcing the expectations surrounding the master narrative of the straight good life.

Similarly, Taylor addressed the expectation to find a partner of the opposite sex and the potential negative consequences of deviating from this norm. Reflecting on their past plans to come out to their family, Taylor explained:

> I was like, "well, obviously I'm gonna still marry a man, even though I'm Bi." So my whole plan always was like, "okay, I'm gonna marry a guy, and then after I'm married to

> a guy—so it's never gonna affect their life—then I'll come out to my parents." And then they're gonna be like, "well, why do you even have to come out? Why does it matter, because you're marrying a guy." I'm like, it's not the point.

Taylor's narrative reveals the complexities and compromises that Bisexual individuals might consider to align with the master narrative of the straight good life. The expectation to maintain a straight-presenting relationship may leads to strategic decisions about disclosure and identity management to minimize familial and societal backlash.

The narratives provided by participants reveal illustrate how the theme of keeping up appearances manifests in the lives of individuals to maintain a straight good life. This remains true for Bisexual individuals, who navigate the dual pressures of conforming to heterosexual norms while honoring their true identities. The pervasive expectation to appear straight, even when identifying as Bisexual, highlights the broader societal challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals.

Gender Roles. A significant aspect of the master narrative of the straight good life involves adhering to traditional gender roles. This theme emerged from the data, with almost a quarter of participants specifying this expectation as a distinct characteristic of a straight good life.

Kaitlyn, a female participant, highlighted the expectations placed on her by her mother from a young age: "my mom, when I was younger, I would say during my entire life, … had her own ideas of what a girl, first of all, should be like, as, like, a lady." Kaitlyn's experience underscores the persistent pressure to conform to traditional feminine roles throughout her life.

Taylor, a participant who identifies as a gender-nonconforming (non-binary) woman, shared similar sentiments to Kaitlyn. Reflecting on societal expectations to be "lady"-like, Taylor described how such pressures are compounded by their body size:

> As a plus-sized woman, I just constantly feel like I'm failing because there is this ideal woman that everyone's supposed to be who is pretty and dainty and gentle and graceful and all of these different things. And I just, I could never be that because I physically cannot be dainty or, I mean, I'm graceful in movement, but there's a weight to every step. … So I just always felt like I was failing like a woman all the time and there was nothing I can do. And even when I would perform femininity to the peak capacity, just like, it just felt like I was never good enough. … And I was saying that I just like hated that this is like what it was like and that I could never be like woman enough.

Taylor further discussed how fat-phobia intersects with gender expectations:

> I was thinking a lot about fat-phobia and stuff and I was thinking about how in some ways, being fat is the most non-binary experience because men don't view themselves as being fat. Men don't view you enough like a man to respect you and they don't view you enough as an object of attraction to respect you. So you just kind of exist, like you're not man enough for them, but you're not woman enough for them. … It's stuff like that, that like is inherently in some way shaping my experience.

Taylor's reflections illustrate how societal expectations surrounding gender roles can be deeply intertwined with body image issues, emphasizing the multifaceted pressures faced by individuals who do not conform to expected gender roles.

Alex, a Trans man, shared how from a young age, they felt expectations to "play Disney princesses" and have crushes on boys, which influenced his identity development. This narrative highlights the early and pervasive nature of gender role expectations.

William, a male participant, discussed the expectations he faced to conform to male gender norms:

> There was always enormous expectations on … obviously, gender norms. That came from my own culture and American culture, trying to fit into what it meant to be male. And obviously what it meant to live in a heterosexist country and culture where you have to adjust to all these norms in every way, meaning there was enormous amounts of impression management before I, when I've, I guess, grasped my sexual orientation.

William emphasized how these societal pressures impacted his development, growing up trying to "fit into a heterosexist society and being closeted because of not knowing whether [he] would be accepted." William's account reflects the expectation to be straight-presenting while emphasizing the significant role that adhering to gender roles plays in shaping individuals' lives. The narratives participants share illustrate the powerful influence of gender role expectations within the master narrative of the straight good life, revealing how individuals are expected to live a straight good life.

The LGBTQ+ Good Life

Within the master narrative of the LGBTQ+ good life, I have identified several themes that encompass the cultural expectations participants feel are imposed upon them. These themes include *the "Gay lifestyle"* and *religion*. In the following subsections pertaining to each theme, I break down each theme under the master narrative of the LGBTQ+ good life and discuss the

Table 2

The Master Narratives of the LGBTQ+ Good Life

	The LGBTQ+ Good Life											
	The "Gay Lifestyle"									Religion		
	Live a classy urban lifestyle		**Have a family** or stay single**				Fit the stereotype			Be secular	Do not practice your Faith	
Participant	Live in the city	Have a successful career	**Marry**** / Do not marry	**Have Children**** / Do not have children	Marriage and/or children is less emphasized for LGBTQ+ individuals	Pursue a lifestyle of hooking up	Be the "ideal" LGBTQ+ individual (white Gay cis-male)	For women: Appear masculine	For Bi and Pan individuals: Be *strictly* Gay			
Alex	X	X					X					
Aubrey												
Barbara						X			X	X•		
Bennie		X	X**	X**	X							
Brooke			X**	X**					X			
David				X								
Dustin			X**									
Em								X				
Georgette				X	X							
Jada				X**					X			
Jonathan		X			X							
Kaitlyn												
Monica	X							X				
Rachel			X**						X•			
Robert		X	X	X	X	X				X	X	
Seth												
Steven			X				X					
Taylor		X	X**	X**	X	X						
William												
Zachary												
Zeke		X			X							

X = Participant explicitly contributed to the expectation associated with the specified master narrative.

X• = Participant specifically stated something similar to the expectation.

* Participants specifically mentioned the words in quotes.

** There are two versions of the LGBTQ+ good life that capture either expectations surrounding staying single or expectations surrounding having a family. The expectations associated with family align with the master narrative of the straight good life and are displayed in bold with two asterisks (" ** ").

specific expectations associated with them. Table 2, displayed below, provides a comprehensive overview of the expectations and master narrative of the LGBTQ+ good life revealed in the data. Despite each participant identifying as LGBTQ+, the expectations associated with the LGBTQ+ good life varied among the participants and was less directly addressed by participants as was the

straight good life, however, the information participants provided still contributed to the construction of the master narrative of the LGBTQ+ straight life.

As stated above, exploring the expectations associated with the LGBTQ+ good life is important because it provides an opportunity for individuals to reveal expectations associated with a good life that differs from the predominant and assumed straight good life. Participants consistently expressed an awareness of the expectations set for LGBTQ+ individuals regardless of any alignment to such norms.

The "Gay Lifestyle." In exploring the master narrative of the LGBTQ+ good life, over three quarters of the participants described different expectations that have come to be thought of as the typical "Gay lifestyle." This theme encompasses a variety of expectations about how LGBTQ+ individuals should live, act, and look. Due to the overlapping nature of some expectations, I grouped them into sub-themes under the "Gay lifestyle," which include (a) living a classy urban lifestyle, (b) having a family or staying single, and (c) fitting the stereotypes.

Living a classy urban lifestyle, which was addressed by a third of the participants, includes the expectations stated by participants for LGBTQ+ individuals to live in the city, to live a classy lifestyle, and to have a successful career. The expectations of having a family or staying single, which was addressed by almost three quarters of participants, highlight the existence of two distinct versions of the LGBTQ+ good life as articulated by participants. One version involves the expectations to get married and have children, while the other version revolves around the expectation to stay single, avoiding marriage and refraining from having children. Five participants contributed to the former version, five participants contributed to the latter, and one participant reported a mix of each. The former version reflects the traditional

markers of family life associated with the straight good life master narrative, while the latter version perpetuates a stereotype of perpetual singlehood and casual relationships within the LGBTQ+ community. Interestingly, almost a third of participants, despite their contributions to the expectations of having a family or staying single, mentioned how getting married and having children is less emphasized in the LGBTQ+ good life.

Fitting the stereotypes, addressed by a third of participants, includes expectations for LGBTQ+ individuals to be the "ideal" LGBTQ+ individual, typically envisioned as a white Gay cis-male. This sub-theme also includes the expectations for LGBTQ+ women to be masculine and for Bisexual and Pansexual individuals to be *strictly* Gay, which limits the recognition and acceptance of diverse sexual orientations within the LGBTQ+ community.

Through a detailed analysis of the data, the expectations associated with the "Gay lifestyle" were explicitly addressed by a diverse group of participants, with some expectations more commonly highlighted than others. The insights gleaned from these discussions have allowed me to construct a comprehensive portrayal of the "Gay lifestyle" as part of the master narrative of the LGBTQ+ good life.

The expectations associated with the "Gay lifestyle" were captured by Alex, who described the urban, classy lifestyle expected of LGBTQ+ individuals:

> I think the fictional life for an LGBTQ+ individual is usually, it is a cis white man who has his partner and they live in some apartment in New York and they both do high-paying jobs and are into fashion and they will live and die by their charcuterie and wine. And that is exactly how I feel when people talk about what society expects from Gay individuals or even Trans individuals in a lot of cases.

Alex's description summarizes the expectations for LGBTQ+ individuals to live in the city, have a successful career, and live a classy life of "charcuterie and wine," also mentioning having a partner, a concept explored by other participants.

Jada, who described the contrast in how LGBTQ+ individuals are expected to live a good life compared to straight individuals, captured expectations that overlap with those shared above by Alex:

> They're like, they live in the city or something. I don't know what it is. I don't know like why it's like straight people live in like a suburban kind of place and then Gay people live in the city. And it's like, … children is a thing that a lot of people want. I feel like, you know, it doesn't necessarily matter if you're straight, Gay, anything. Like a lot of people want kids. I feel like that is usually the next step in any like, you know, romantic like partnership, marriage, prolonged, like, you know, dating, whatever anyone wants to be in. Usually, usually it's kids. (Jada)

Jada emphasized the expectation for LGBTQ+ individuals to live in the city and discussed additional expectations for LGBTQ+ individuals to be married and have children. This expectation, which is consistent with what other participants shared, conflicts with the sentiment that several participants shared regarding the expectation that LGBTQ+ individuals should remain single, avoiding marriage and having children.

For instance, Robert shared his views on what society dictates for LGBTQ+ individuals to live a good life:

> There is a much higher emphasis on sexual liberation for LGBTQ people. … I'll speak for a Gay man, I think at least, because I can't speak for all the various people within the

> LGBTQ community, but as a Gay man I think I see norms in the spaces that I encounter, at least in New York City, that is very not monogamous. And the idea of, how do I put it? I think that sex plays a much larger role in one's life as a Gay man in New York City than for any standard straight person. And the idea of having children isn't as emphasized. I'd say sex and career are the two most focused on things in the Gay narrative, I think. And I see people that prioritize those things above all else more than family.

Robert emphasized the focus on career and sexual liberation over family and children within the LGBTQ+ narrative, highlighting a divergence from traditional family-oriented expectations. Robert continued describing his relationship with monogamy and how he felt pressured to conform to the expectations of pursuing a lifestyle of hooking up:

> I feel happier when I feel connected to one person. And when I've tried experimenting in the hookup culture and a more liberated sexual lifestyle, I found myself suffering emotionally because I would feel very attached to someone. And the typical practice isn't to start a relationship with a random person that you hooked up with in the Gay space. So I kind of felt like my needs were at odds with that Gay social expectation. … I just need one person. I don't need there to be a whole sea of people compatible with me.

Despite Robert's desires to pursue a monogamous relationship with someone without prioritizing the need to hookup, the expectations placed on Robert influenced how he explored relationships in the past. Robert reveals how cultural expectations can impact the way in which individuals go about navigating their identity.

Taylor complemented Robert's sentiments by discussing the LGBTQ+ good life, particularly in New York City:

> What is the good life of a Queer individual, especially a Queer individual in New York City? You go—you have this hot partner that you guys love all over each other. You go clubbing, you have drinks, you have your queer friends. You're like up super late and into like interesting sex stuff. You like get brunch probably like every week. You definitely are friends with at least one drag queen. You like are partnered and like maybe you're like gonna get married, but probably not 'till you're in like your mid 30s. Long-term, maybe you'll do some, some means of having a child and be like the "Gay couple" in the community.

Taylor described a vibrant, nightlife-oriented lifestyle with potential partnerships and eventually children, reflecting the diversity of expectations within the LGBTQ+ good life.

Barbara further explored the idea that a lifestyle of hooking up is associated with an LGBTQ+ good life. In revealing her experiences in overcoming societal pressures to develop her sense of self, Barbara had to overcome pressures to prioritize a lifestyle of hooking up by "taking out the sexual aspect" of pursuing potential relationships with others.

As discussed above, the master narrative diverges along the expectations to get married and to have children; some participants express the expectation to get married and have children, while others express the expectation to not marry nor have children. Some participants addressed the nuances in the LGBTQ+ good life, with almost a third of the participants noting that getting married and having children is less prioritized for LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, Georgette, in conveying the expectations she feels to live an LGBTQ+ good life, described how children, although potentially desired by some, are less prioritized:

> There's not so much of an emphasis on having kids, but I guess that's probably a desire. But I think maybe because it's more difficult to either have kids or adopt kids, it makes it —maybe that's why I'm saying there's less emphasis on it, just because it's more challenging. But I feel like some people are—I don't know. In a lot of the LGBTQ relationships I've seen, I feel like they're happy with just the significant other and without any extended family or kids.

Georgette further explains that the expectations for LGBTQ+ individuals to have children differ from those for straight individuals, which is something that straight individuals "strive for." The sentiment shared by Georgette was shared by other participates, such as Robert, who shared that for LGBTQ+ individuals, "the idea of having children isn't as emphasized."

In describing the expectations associated with the LGBTQ+ good life, Bennie shared expectations that involve less of a prioritization of LGBTQ+ partners getting married:

> [An LGBTQ+ good life involves] a monogamous relationship that is long lasting, financially secure. Again, it could be living in a house or wherever. And, you know, both partners in that relationship, hopefully they're married. I don't necessarily think marriage is part of the LGBT equation, like it's mandatory. But yeah, they're monogamous, living together, very happy.

Bennie mentions that living with a partner is part of the LGBTQ+ good life, but marriage is less of a priority for LGBTQ+ individuals. Although Bennie does not mention children in his version of the LGBTQ+ good life, his views reflect Georgette's sentiment that this aspect is less emphasized compared to the straight good life.

The existence of two versions of the LGBTQ+ good life was directly addressed by Barbara, who mentioned the following: "I feel like there're like two sides [to the LGBTQ+ good life]. It like depends who 'society' is. Like nowadays, there are very two, like, worlds in the world that we're living in." Barbara addresses the diverging versions of the LGBTQ+ good life by revealing how there could exist contrasting expectations that exist simultaneously.

The "Gay lifestyle" also includes additional expectations surrounding how LGBTQ+ individuals should fit the stereotypes of being LGBTQ+. Referring back to Alex's comments, the LGBTQ+ good life features the stereotype of a "cis white man." Steven echoed what Alex shared, discussing the influence of media in shaping the LGBTQ+ good life and the expectation to be something that many individuals are not:

> [The LGBTQ+ good life consists of] mostly like, white Gay men. And like, who do they fall in love with? Another white Gay man. And it's like, "oh, but like, they got married." And "oh, like, they probably adopted like, a little kid." And like, "oh, they have like, the same life that [straight people] have." And like, it's that like, parallelism. It's like that mirroring. And it's like, "oh wait, they live exactly the same as we [straight people] do." You know? Like, other white people. And so then, they start seeing like, "oh, that's a Black Gay person? Oh, that's weird." But then like, the uncomfortability comes from that two-factor thing. And it's like, it's that same imposition of like, you have to get married, you have to have children. And like, then there's that whole other side where it's like, "Gay people shouldn't get married." (Steven)

Steven highlighted how media and societal expectations often present a narrow, stereotypical image of the LGBTQ+ good life, marginalizing those who do not fit this mold. Steven highlights

the expectation that an LGBTQ+ individual is someone who is a white Gay cis-male, an unfortunate expectation that marginalizes individuals who are not born white, Gay, and cis-male. Additionally, Steven highlights the diverging expectations placed on LGBTQ+ individuals in how they should live their lives: there exists the expectation for LGBTQ+ individuals to marry and have children, while simultaneously, there exists the expectation for LGBTQ+ individuals to not.

Although there exists this expectation that an LGBTQ+ individual is white, Gay, and cis-male, there are additional expectations for individuals to uphold stereotypes regarding physical appearance. Such an expectation is highlighted by Em, a Lesbian, who described the pressure to adhere to the stereotype that LGBTQ+ women should be masculine:

> I don't particularly think that I conform to—that I conform to heterosexuality, if that makes any sense. I'm very—at no point do I ever say "I want to appear heterosexual." But at the same time, I do think I can be a very feminine person, and maybe that's not what's expected of LGBT women. And it can be at times, but it's a whole thing. I don't know, yeah, it's interesting. I always feel like I have a lot of very, quote unquote, "typical straight girl interests." Like I did cheer in high school, things like that. Those are things that—it's almost archetypically associated with, not heterosexuality, but it's very classic "high school girl" of things like that.

Em captured the expectation for LGBTQ+ women to be more masculine than straight women, who are expected to be more feminine. What Em shares complements the expectations surrounding gender roles for the straight good life, particularly with what Taylor had shared, detailed above, regarding femininity for straight women.

To contrast the expectations of the straight good life that Bisexual participants expressed, discussed above, a few participants expressed the expectation to strictly pursue relationships with others of the same sex. For example, in discussing her experiences in navigating relationships, Brooke described: "People … would use like the umbrella term like 'Gay' … even though I was Bisexual—they would just like say I was Gay and I was like, 'but I'm not.'" Brooke explained how people would expect her as being strictly Gay when, in fact, she is Bisexual. Reflecting what Brooke shared regarding expectations to be strictly Gay, Jada described how her friends also expected her to adhere to expectations surrounding being strictly Gay:

> I was like, "oh, I'm definitely straight. I like men. I've only had boyfriends." … But, you know, coming to college definitely kind of pushed things along in that a lot of friends were kind of, not in a mean way, but it was just like, "[Jada], look at yourself. You don't look straight." I got that so much from so many people, which it wasn't meant in a bad way. It was more like, "we're all Gay, you're like me, you must be Gay."

It is interesting how participants expressed the expectation that if they are LGBTQ+, they must be strictly Gay. Additionally, Jada highlighted how the way she presented herself contributed to expectations surrounding her sexual identity.

The varied accounts from participants illustrate the complexities and sometimes conflicting expectations within the LGBTQ+ good life narrative, encompassing diverse aspects such as career success, urban living, partnership, and societal perceptions of physical appearance and lifestyle choices.

Religion. In discussing expectations associated with the LGBTQ+ good life, a few participants mentioned religion. Among them, one participant highlighted the role of being non-

religious as a distinct characteristic of the LGBTQ+ good life. This theme emerged from the data, revealing expectations for LGBTQ+ individuals to avoid practicing religion or faith.

The data include a single participant, Robert, who explored this expectation to not practice religion or faith. As a practicing Orthodox Jewish individual, Robert described the clash between traditional values and societal expectations for LGBTQ+ individuals:

> I think there is definitely a clash between traditional values and I think the values of societal expectations for an LGBTQ person. For one thing, I believe, based on my experiences, that a Gay person, especially one who comes from a religious background, is expected to be fully liberated, in a sense, from religious expectations and/or traditional expectations.

Robert distinguished traditional values from societal expectations, noting how modern society often views being religious as non-liberating and as not a part of the good life for an LGBTQ+ individual. Robert explained how society expects LGBTQ+ individuals to not be religious, further emphasizing the expectation of a "liberated" lifestyle within the LGBTQ+ community.

Robert shared his experience as someone who values his faith, feeling like a minority within the LGBTQ+ community:

> I do consider my faith very important to me. And that very much puts me in a minority in the LGBTQ community, in the Gay space. And it's difficult standing out in a group of people who are, you know, a minority. It can be very lonely. I am someone who definitely has the ideal of finding a monogamous relationship, a long-term committed relationship, which also is not seemingly aligned practically with the typical Gay male lifestyle, so to speak. Again, in this space, at least, I'd like to think that New York City is

> certainly an exceptional area, but from what I've seen in the modern day, that tends to be where there's much more of a, like I said, a liberated sexual lifestyle.

Robert's narrative reveals the disenfranchisement he feels within the LGBTQ+ community as someone who values practicing his faith, contrasting with the more commonly associated "liberated sexual lifestyle" within the LGBTQ+ good life. Robert reveals how he is a minority within a minority. The expectation to be secular is tied to the broader expectation of being more sexually free or "liberated," as explored in the "Gay lifestyle" section.

Although Robert was the only participant to discuss the expectation to be non-religious, his perspective significantly contributes to understanding the master narrative of the LGBTQ+ good life. As someone who clearly deviates from this master narrative, Robert's awareness reveals the existence of these expectations within the community.

Alignment and Deviation: A Case Study

The previous section constructed the master narratives of the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life, providing a comprehensive view of the expectations within these narratives. However, the previous section did not focus on how participants actively and flexibly engage with these master narratives through processes of negotiation, resistance, internalization, and perpetuation. In this section, I will explore precisely that: the ways in which participants align with and deviate from the master narratives of the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life.

Due to the complexity and breadth of exploring the extent of individual alignment and deviation, I will focus on one participant, Bennie. This focused approach allows for a deeper examination of the participants' unique experiences and how they interact with these cultural narratives. While I initially considered a broader range of participants, I selected Bennie for his

distinct background and life experiences, which offer a diverse perspective on the master narratives and on an LGBTQ+ individual's life journey. Bennie's case study will provide insight into how an LGBTQ+ individual may navigate, challenge, or conform to cultural expectations, aspects belonging to the dynamic nature of the master narrative process.

Background

Bennie, a 39-year-old Gay man of Pacific Islander descent, grew up in a Roman Catholic household. Although Bennie's parents, who immigrated to the United States before he was born, raised him as Catholic, Bennie now identifies as Agnostic. Bennie grew up in a suburban community in the Northeastern United States and continues to reside in a suburban environment today. His journey from a religious upbringing to his current beliefs reflects a broader narrative of personal discovery and cultural negotiation.

The Straight Good Life

Bennie's understanding of the straight good life encompasses each of the cultural expectations associated with the American Dream, religion, keeping up appearances, and gender roles. Although Bennie directly addressed some of these expectations, his alignment and deviation of expectations are revealed through the rich data he provided in his complete interview, including his reflections in his life story.

The American Dream. Bennie described the straight good life as being the American Dream, which includes "a straight white family, white picket fences, … suburban house, dog, kids." In many ways, Bennie aligns with the expectations associated with the American Dream: he lives in a suburban house with a yard and a fence, enjoying a comfortable lifestyle with his

husband and their dog. These aspects of Bennie's life reflect traditional elements of the American Dream, showing how Bennie has internalized some societal expectations.

However, Bennie's life also deviates from the expectations associated with the American Dream. As a Gay man, Bennie's marriage does not fit the conventional heterosexual family model often depicted in this dream. This deviation highlights Bennie's complex negotiation with societal expectations, balancing his identity with expected traditional norms. His marriage, though not the heterosexual marriage often envisioned in this dream, represents a fulfillment of personal aspirations and challenges the master narrative. Bennie's approach illustrates how individuals can selectively internalize certain aspects of cultural expectations, such as financial stability and suburban living, while rejecting others that do not align with their identity.

> In reflecting on how his life compares to the traditional American Dream, Bennie shared: Well, I'm married to my husband, happily married. I don't have any kids. I have a dog. But otherwise right now, I mean, I have a very nice comfortable house. Not a white picket fence, but a fence, backyard. Great dog that I could take him out on the backyard or down the street. And yeah, I mean, it's not too dissimilar except for the fact that I'm not straight and no kids.

Despite his misalignment with some aspects to the straight good life he shared, Bennie remains in alignment with several aspects to the expectations he shared. Bennie's alignment with many expectations associated with the straight good life contributes to his deviation from expectations associated with the LGBTQ+ good life, discussed below.

Religion. Bennie's journey from being raised Roman Catholic to identifying as Agnostic reflects a nuanced negotiation with the expectation to be religious. He described growing up

with a strong religious influence, where traditional Catholic values dictated much of his upbringing, including the expectation to marry a woman and form a family blessed by the church.

Bennie related his experiences with religion and how it contributed to a fear of coming out and breaking the straight-person facade he felt pressured to maintain:

> Growing up, in high school and through college, I felt I was in this like very hetero role, where I, you know, all my friends were straight, had a very heavy Catholic background. I was a leader of my fraternity. And then I just felt like everything that I had built reputation-wise would just come like crashing down if I admitted to myself and to my family and to my peers, you know, about myself.

Bennie's shift to being Agnostic reveals a form of resistance against the rigid religious structures that did not accommodate his LGBTQ+ identity. In discussing his faith, Bennie explained: "I believe in a higher power but I just don't believe in like organized religion, so I believe agnostic is the appropriate label." By moving away from organized religion, Bennie sought a more personal and less prescriptive spiritual path. He retains a belief in a higher power, which suggests a selective internalization of spiritual elements while discarding the institutional and dogmatic aspects of religion. This transition emphasizes Bennie's negotiation with the master narrative of the straight good life, where he navigates the pressures of his religious upbringing while forging a path that aligns more closely with his true self.

Keeping Up Appearances. The expectation to maintain certain appearances involves conforming to societal norms by hiding one's own LGBTQ+ identity. Bennie recalled his earlier experiences of keeping up appearances, where he felt compelled to adopt a more "straight-

presenting" persona to fit into cultural expectations. This included dressing conservatively and engaging in traditionally masculine activities, forcing himself to fit the "mold" of the expectations placed on him to be straight-presenting. Bennie described how he used to date girls and ignore his own feelings that he might be Gay:

> I could say probably on some level, I was probably conscious of [being Gay] as far back as like elementary school. But then I don't think I could fully like understand and grasp it until high school. And then, even then, like all my friends were straight. My parents very much had that expectation that like, "oh, I'm gonna go to college. I'm going to meet a woman, marry, have a family." And even through college, and shortly after college, I kind of forced myself into that mold. So again, I feel like I probably wasn't able to fully form like those ideas that, "oh, shit, I'm not, I'm not straight," really, until maybe freshman or sophomore year of high school, although I had probably like ideas of it along the way and at a much younger age.

As discussed above, Bennie revealed the pressure to conform to a straight-presenting lifestyle, even when his true identity differed from such a lifestyle.

Bennie's comfort with his identity grew with time, leading him to challenge the expectations to hide aspects to his identity. Bennie began to express himself more authentically, no longer feeling the need to adhere strictly to traditional masculine norms and straight-presenting norms. Bennie described this change:

> Before, I was very—I'm going to use the term hetero, like very just like straight acting and, you know, bro-ish. And, you know, I've quote unquote "let my hair down." I'm like, I don't give a shit. Like, you know, I'm going to wear like a skimpy outfit. I'm

going to just be more emotive and be more expressive. And I feel like it's allowed me to be more genuine and honest with myself.

Bennie's journey highlights the struggle LGBTQ+ individuals may face in balancing personal authenticity with cultural expectations to restrict how one should present their true self. Bennie's rejection of restrictive cultural expectations represents a conscious decision to prioritize his well-being and happiness over societal approval.

Gender Roles. Growing up, Bennie felt the pressure to conform to the traditional male role, including the expectation to marry a woman and provide for a family. According to Benny, he "forced [himself] into that mold" of a straight life: maintaining a "bro-ish" persona, dating women, picturing a straight family with a wife and children. As an adult, Bennie actively negotiated the expected straight role imposed on him, choosing to embrace his identity as a Gay man and reject the heteronormative expectations associated with traditional gender roles. His marriage to his husband both defies the traditional expectations for a straight good life and expands the understanding of what it means to fulfill gender roles. Bennie's approach to navigating expectations by actively seeking out self-acceptance illustrates the complexity of navigating these roles and the courage required to live authentically.

Navigating and Reshaping the Straight Good Life Narrative

Bennie's life story provides a nuanced exploration of the master narrative processes involved in aligning with and deviating from the straight good life. He negotiates the expectations of the American Dream by embracing its aspects of suburban living and financial stability while redefining these expectations in the context of his identity. Additionally, by rejecting the expectations to be religious and being straight-presenting, Bennie challenges the

restrictive structures of the straight good life. His shift to being Agnostic and his decision to live openly as a Gay man exemplifies his resistance, as he carves out a space that respects his personal beliefs and identity.

Despite his deviation from expectations belonging to the master narrative of the straight good life, Bennie also aligns with and internalizes certain elements of the straight good life, particularly those that resonate with his values, such as living in a house in the suburbs, married. This internalization reflects a nuanced engagement with cultural expectations, where Bennie accepts some aspects to the master narrative that align with his personal aspirations and discards other aspects to the master narrative that do not.

Bennie perpetuates a more inclusive narrative of the straight good life by living authentically and openly, providing himself with the opportunity to remain open and negotiate with the expectations of the straight good life that he aligns with. Bennie's life story contributes to expanding the understanding of cultural scripts, demonstrating that the pursuit of a straight good life can encompass a diverse range of identities and experiences.

Through Bennie's narrative, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals engage with cultural expectations, negotiate their identities, and ultimately contribute to the broader cultural discourse on what constitutes a good life. His story is a testament to the complexity and diversity of cultural expectations, challenging traditional norms and offering a more rich, more inclusive vision of the straight good life.

The LGBTQ+ Good Life

Bennie's understanding of the LGBTQ+ good life encompasses cultural expectations associated with the "Gay lifestyle" and religion. Although Bennie touched upon some of these

expectations, his alignment and deviation of expectations are revealed through the rich data he provided in his complete interview, including the data he provided regarding his life story.

The "Gay Lifestyle." In describing the LGBTQ+ good life, Bennie revealed expectations that mostly belongs to the version that aligns with the straight good life. Reflecting on expectations associated with the LGBTQ+ good life, Bennie revealed that an LGBTQ+ good life is one that involves marriage, financial success, a home, and, potentially, a lack of traditional family structures such as children. According to Bennie:

> [An LGBTQ+ good life involves] a monogamous relationship that is long lasting, financially secure. Again, it could be living in a house or wherever. And, you know, both partners in that relationship, hopefully they're married. I don't necessarily think marriage is part of the LGBT equation, like it's mandatory. But yeah, they're monogamous, living together, very happy.

Bennie aligns with some aspects of the "Gay lifestyle," particularly in terms of valuing financial stability and enjoying a classy lifestyle. However, Bennie also deviates from several aspects of the "Gay lifestyle": unlike the stereotype of a socially active single LGBTQ+ individual living in the city, Bennie prefers a more settled and suburban life. Bennie's preference for suburban living, combined with his openness to possibly having children in the future, as addressed above, contrasts with the version of the LGBTQ+ good life that dictates that LGBTQ+ individuals prioritize personal freedom over traditional family structures. Bennie's relationship with the expectations of the "Gay lifestyle" highlights his negotiation with the expectations associated with the master narratives of the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life.

Religion. Bennie's journey from a Roman Catholic upbringing to identifying as Agnostic aligns with this expectation for LGBTQ+ individuals to be secular. Bennie describes his shift in religious affiliation as a process of distancing himself from organized religion, which he felt did not accommodate his identity as an LGBTQ+ individual. Bennie's move towards a more personal spirituality and away from traditional religious structures may reflect a common theme within the LGBTQ+ community, where individuals seek spiritual paths that affirm rather than negate their identities.

While Bennie rejects the rigid structures of his Roman Catholic upbringing, however, he retains a belief in a higher power, indicating a selective internalization of spiritual elements that resonate with him. Despite his deviation from traditional religious practices, Bennie internalizes the expectation of being non-religious to some extent, as seen in his self-identification as Agnostic. This internalization reflects an engagement with the broader narrative that positions LGBTQ+ individuals as secular, aligning with a cultural shift away from organized religion. Bennie's narrative also perpetuates the idea that spirituality and LGBTQ+ identity are not mutually exclusive, contributing to a more inclusive understanding of what it means to live a good life within the LGBTQ+ community.

Navigating and Reshaping the LGBTQ+ Good Life Narrative

Bennie's life story offers a rich exploration of how individuals navigate the master narrative of the LGBTQ+ good life. Through negotiation with prescribed expectations, he balances the expectations of the "Gay lifestyle" with his personal preferences for stability and comfort. Bennie's resistance to the master narrative is evident in his deviation from the urban, single life associated with this narrative, as well as in his nuanced approach to religion. By

internalizing aspects of the LGBTQ+ good life that resonate with him, such as a focus on personal authenticity and a rejection of rigid religious structures, Bennie demonstrates how these narratives can be adapted to fit individual experiences.

Bennie's experiences highlight the complexity of identity navigation within the LGBTQ+ community, illustrating how individuals can simultaneously align with, deviate from, and reshape cultural expectations. Through Bennie's narrative, it becomes possible to gain a deeper understanding of how the master narrative of the LGBTQ+ good life operates, providing a nuanced view of the expectations and experiences that shape the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. Bennie's story is a testament to the diversity within the community and the ongoing evolution of cultural narratives surrounding LGBTQ+ identities.

Reflections on Navigating Master Narratives

Bennie's life journey offers a profound exploration of navigating the master narratives of both the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life. His experiences are marked by personal growth, resilience, and a commitment to authenticity, reflecting the complex interplay between cultural expectations and individual identity. Bennie exemplifies how alignment and deviation from these narratives are not straightforward but involve nuanced and dynamic engagement with cultural scripts.

A significant aspect of Bennie's story is the pressure he felt to uphold the American Dream, shaped by his parents' expectations. His parents migrated to the United States with hopes of achieving success and stability, instilling in Bennie the importance of striving for what they perceived as the quintessential American Dream. Bennie described this pressure, stating, "my parents sacrificed a lot to move to this country to be successful and laid that foundation of

success for me … that I had to comply." The expectations associated with the American Dream were not only about financial success but also about upholding an image that his parents associated with their sacrifices and aspirations in America.

An additional and significant pressure Bennie faced was the expectation to be white, an unachievable standard that nonetheless influenced his understanding of success. Reflecting on the straight good life, Bennie mentioned the American Dream and how being white is a part of it. As quoted above, Bennie conveyed that "the American Dream is to be a straight white family, white picket fences, suburban house, white picket fences, ... dog, kids." The expectation to be white reveals the racial dimensions of the American Dream, highlighting how certain racial and cultural identities are often marginalized or excluded from this narrative, a narrative that such marginalized or excluded individuals are still told to strive for. Bennie reveals the experiences of someone navigating a life with parents who immigrated to the United States, grappling with complex expectations around career success, lifestyle choices, and personal identity.

Bennie's journey also includes a significant religious aspect, stemming from his upbringing in a Roman Catholic household. Bennie faced challenges and trauma related to religious expectations imposed on him, which conflicted with his emerging identity as a Gay man, contributed to a fear of coming and and breaking the straight-person facade he felt pressured to maintain. Additionally, Bennie's transition from identifying as Catholic to Agnostic was a form of resistance against rigid religious structures, as he sought a more personal and less prescriptive spiritual path. His journey involved considerable self-reflection and therapy, illustrating Bennie's resilience and commitment to overcoming traumas from his past. Bennie further explained his father's slow acceptance to him being Gay:

> [My father] had these certain expectations of me, which, you know, he thought I would grow up and age and go into like that sort of dream that he had for me. And I wasn't gonna make it.

Despite Bennie's difficult journey in coming out, his family, including his father, began to accept the truth surrounding Bennie's identity. Bennie revealed that it was the expectations for Bennie to live a certain life and not meeting them that was more upsetting for his parents than the actual fact that he is Gay. Bennie's journey in achieving acceptance from his parents emphasizes the role expectations—both cultural and personal—play in shaping people's feelings and how they navigate experiences.

In exploring the LGBTQ+ good life, Bennie encountered the expectations of the "Gay Lifestyle," characterized by urban living, upholding stereotypes regarding physical appearance, and a focus on a single life over traditional family structures. Although he would deviate from such expectations, Bennie shared a version of the LGBTQ+ good life that overlaps with the expectations surrounding the straight good life, particularly regarding marriage and potentially having children. Bennie aligns with the version of the "Gay Lifestyle" that includes marriage and possibly children; Bennie's version of the LGBTQ+ good life includes the same expectations he described in the straight good life. When asked about how his life compared to the LGBTQ+ good life he shared, Bennie said, "I'm living exactly that." The straight good life and LGBTQ+ good life that Bennie shared displays a negotiation with the master narratives, balancing cultural expectations with his own values and preferences.

Bennie also deviates from other expectations within the "Gay Lifestyle," however, such as the stereotype that LGBTQ+ individuals should live a lifestyle centered around casual

relationships or hookups. Additionally, as a person of Pacific Islander descent, Bennie finds the expectation to be white—also in expectations associated with the "Gay lifestyle"—unachievable. Bennie's deviation from these expectations highlight the diverse ways that individuals can understand and experience the LGBTQ+ good life, challenging the idea that there is a single master narrative that fits all.

Bennie's commitment to mental health and community further illustrates his nuanced engagement with the LGBTQ+ good life. Reflecting on his journey, Bennie stated, "I'm a big advocate of like mental health and like that journey." He emphasized the importance of mental health support, particularly in the LGBTQ+ community, which often faces unique challenges. Bennie's prioritization of mental health following a low point in his life was a major turning point for him, allowing him to become the "best version of [himself]." Bennie's active involvement in prioritizing others he can be authentic with demonstrates a deep understanding of the importance of prioritizing mental health and the need for authentic support systems within the LGBTQ+ community.

Bennie's case study illustrates the complexity of aligning with and deviating from master narratives. He aligns with some aspects of the straight good life, such as valuing financial stability and a married lifestyle, while deviating from others, like keeping up a false appearance and religious expectations. Similarly, Bennie aligns with certain aspects of the LGBTQ+ good life, such as prioritizing financial success and being secular, while deviating from others, like the stereotypical urban and single lifestyle. The nuanced engagement between Bennie and the master narratives of the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life emphasizes that alignment

and deviation to master narratives are not strictly dichotomous; rather, they involve a dynamic negotiation with societal norms and personal identity.

Additionally, Bennie's understanding of the LGBTQ+ good life contrasts with that of some participants, highlighting the diversity of experiences and interpretations of cultural expectations. The difference in participants' understanding of the master narrative highlights that cultural expectations are not monolithic but can vary widely based on individual experiences and perspectives. Bennie's personal narrative, therefore, challenges the traditional norms of the straight good life but also broadens the understanding of the LGBTQ+ good life by showing that there is no single way to embody these identities.

Bennie's life story provides a rich and nuanced case study of how individuals navigate and reshape the master narratives of the straight and LGBTQ+ good lives. His experiences of personal growth, resilience, and authenticity stress the importance of individual agency in challenging and redefining cultural scripts. Through his journey, Bennie illustrates the diverse ways in which cultural expectations can be negotiated, resisted, internalized, and perpetuated, offering a broader and more inclusive understanding of what it means to live a good life. His story serves as a testament to the complexity and diversity of human experiences, challenging traditional norms and expanding the narrative to encompass a wider range of identities and life paths. Bennie's experiences emphasize that personal identity and the understanding of cultural expectations are complex, shaped by a profusion of factors including family background, cultural expectations, and personal experiences. His narrative presents the challenge to recognize and appreciate the diverse ways that individuals navigate the complexity in the pursuit of their authentic selves.

Discussion

Main Findings and Implications

Distinguishing Master Narratives and Understanding Their Complexity

This study undertook a nuanced exploration of cultural expectations, distinguishing between two prominent master narratives: the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life. By examining the experiences and perspectives of 21 LGBTQ+ participants, the research highlights the distinct cultural scripts that define what constitutes a good life for individuals, focusing on distinguishing different expectations to live different versions of a good life. The findings in the results validate the existence of these distinguishable master narratives and accentuate the need to understand their intersections and divergences. Additionally, this research provides much-needed descriptive information regarding master narratives, addressing a gap identified in existing literature (see Syed & McLean, 2023). This study reveals the complexities of navigating cultural expectations, offering a deeper insight into how LGBTQ+ individuals engage with, resist, and redefine these expectations.

A major finding in this study was that master narratives of the straight good life and LGBTQ+ do exist but are not mutually exclusive; rather, the expectations associated with the straight good life and with the LGBTQ+ good life conflict and intersect. The straight good life, often characterized among LGBTQ+ individuals by traditional markers such as marriage, children, a suburban home, and financial stability, is well-known and widely recognized. Participants frequently mentioned elements like the “white picket fence,” highlighting its pervasive nature. In contrast, the LGBTQ+ good life is less clearly defined but includes expectations such as living an urban, socially vibrant lifestyle, and often places less emphasis on

traditional family structures. The results reveal that while some LGBTQ+ individuals align with such aspects of the LGBTQ+ good life, others navigate a version of the LGBTQ+ good life that reflects the straight good life, illustrating the complexity surrounding identity and cultural expectations. The blending of the two master narratives suggests that the boundaries between cultural expectations are not rigid, despite master narratives themselves being rigid in nature, according to the master narrative framework. As this research shows, individuals may draw from both master narratives to construct their own understanding of a good life.

One of the significant findings of this research is the heightened awareness among LGBTQ+ individuals of the straight good life narrative. This heightened awareness aligns with McLean and Syed's (2015b) assertion that, in the master narrative framework, individuals often become more cognizant of master narratives when they deviate from them. The participants in this study, many of whom have lived experiences that diverge from traditional heteronormative expectations, frequently mentioned elements of the straight good life, such as marriage, children, and suburban living. This awareness reveals the pervasiveness of the straight good life master narrative and its influence on societal norms. Interestingly, while LGBTQ+ individuals may be more aware of the expectations of the straight good life, the reverse is not necessarily true; individuals who may align with the straight good life may not always recognize or understand the complexities of the LGBTQ+ good life. This asymmetry in awareness of expectations associated with the master narratives highlights the more dominant status of heteronormative expectations in shaping understanding of cultural expectations.

Building on this, another critical insight from the study is the concept that master narratives may be nested within one another (imagine Russian nesting dolls, except the fact that

master narratives can overlap each other like circles in a Venn diagram). This idea suggests that certain cultural expectations are not exclusive to a single narrative, such as the straight good life or the LGBTQ+ good life, but instead exist within a broader societal framework of what constitutes a good life. For instance, the expectation of achieving financial security emerged as a common theme across both the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life. This finding indicates that some values, such as financial stability and success, are universally recognized and may transcend specific cultural or identity-based master narratives. The overlapping expectations suggest that master narratives can be overlapping and layered, with some elements being more prevalent and others more context-specific. This nested structure underscores the complexity of master narratives and the multifaceted nature of alignment and deviation. Understanding this layering can help clarify why individuals may align with certain expectations while simultaneously deviating from others.

The Complexity of Alignment and Deviation

The complexity of alignment and deviation within these master narratives cannot be understated. My research reveals the need for a more nuanced and formalized approach to understanding how individuals engage with cultural expectations. Alignment and deviation are not simply binary opposites; rather, they exist on a spectrum and can vary across different aspects of an individual's life. For example, a participant may align with the expectation of having children but deviate in the sense that they presently do not have any children. This complexity is further compounded by the psychological and physical dimensions of alignment and deviation. An individual may internally agree with certain cultural expectations (psychological alignment) but find themselves unable to fulfill them due to external

circumstances (physical deviation). As in the above example, an individual may psychologically align with the expectation to have children—maybe they want children, potentially identifying with such an expectation—but physically deviate from it—maybe they cannot have children. This complexity of alignment and deviation highlights the need for a deeper exploration of these concepts, potentially leading to the development of more refined tools and methodologies for assessing alignment and deviation. The lack of formalization and clarification in defining what exactly constitutes an alignment and deviation may represent a flaw within the master narrative framework itself, indicating a crucial area for refinement. By better understanding the processes of alignment and deviation, researchers can gain richer insights into how people navigate and negotiate their identities within the framework of master narratives.

The case study of Bennie exemplifies the intricate nature of alignment and deviation within the master narratives of the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life. Bennie's experiences, as explored in the case study, reveal the multifaceted ways individuals navigate cultural expectations, often aligning with certain aspects while deviating from others. For instance, Bennie's life aligns with some traditional aspects of the American Dream, such as living in a suburban home with a stable income, yet he also deviates from other expectations, such as the traditional family structure. Through this case study, I have demonstrated a methodology for exploring alignment and deviation that does not solely rely on explicitly categorizing an individual's adherence to cultural norms. By investigating an individual's life story and constructing a narrative that encompasses their experiences with expectations, this approach allows for a rich and nuanced understanding of how people engage with master narratives. This narrative methodology highlights the fluidity and complexity of identity

navigation, providing a holistic view of the complex interplay between cultural expectations and personal identity.

As mentioned above, the results emphasize the need for future research to further explore the origins and influences of cultural expectations within master narratives. Understanding where these expectations come from—whether from media portrayals, community norms, or broader societal influences—is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of how they shape individual identities. For instance, media representations plays a significant role in constructing and perpetuating cultural narratives, as seen in the portrayal of the LGBTQ+ good life. This highlights the need for research to examine how different sources contribute to the formation and reinforcement of these narratives. Additionally, exploring the impact of community dynamics and geographical factors, such as urban versus suburban settings, can provide deeper insights into the diverse ways individuals experience and interpret these narratives. Notably, some participants stressed that living in the city, particularly in New York City, is associated with expectations to live a more "liberated" lifestyle, emphasizing the role of location in shaping cultural expectations. By identifying the various influences on master narratives, researchers can better understand the complexities of identity formation and the ways in which individuals navigate and resist these cultural expectations.

Geographical Context and Traditional Versus Modern Values

The influence of geographical and cultural contexts on the expectations associated with the LGBTQ+ good life cannot be overstated. As some participants noted, the urban environment of New York City is often linked with a more liberated lifestyle, suggesting that location plays a significant role in the perceived norms and values within the LGBTQ+ community. For instance,

Robert highlighted a tension between traditional expectations and modern expectations, observing that LGBTQ+ individuals in more progressive urban settings might feel pressure to embody a liberated lifestyle, which includes being more open about sexuality and less constrained by traditional family structures. He mentioned that residing in New York City, a hub of progressive values, fosters a more modern understanding of the LGBTQ+ good life, contrasting sharply with more traditional or conservative expectations that may be prevalent in suburban or rural areas. The divergence of expectations to remain tradition or to be modern illustrates how individual experiences and geographical contexts contribute to the prioritization of values.

Future research should explore how the context of geographical location interacts with cultural expectations, potentially leading to variations in the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals across different regions. By examining the intersection of geographical location, cultural expectations, and identity, researchers may gain a more comprehensive understanding of how master narratives are constructed, maintained, and challenged in various settings. This approach can also shed light on the ways in which individuals negotiate their identities in relation to more dominant master narratives that are prevalent in their specific environments.

Intersectionality and Cultural Expectations

The complexity of identity negotiation for LGBTQ+ individuals is significantly influenced by intersecting factors that are under-explored in research. These intersecting factors, such as cultural and familial background, sexual identity, and religious identity, were highlighted by participants in this study, who described how these intersections shaped their experiences and the expectations they navigate.

The case study of Bennie, along with information provided by other participants with parents who had immigrated to the United States, highlighted the influence of parents' expectations that were shaped by experiences as immigrants striving for the American Dream. Participants from immigrant families expressed additional pressures to succeed in specific ways, such as achieving financial stability, upholding family honor, and adhering to cultural traditions. Such pressures can sometimes conflict with personal aspirations or the realities of living in a diverse society, leading to complex negotiations of identity.

The American Dream, specifically, is imbued with additional layers of expectations on top of the expectations participants feel to live a good life. The participants from immigrant backgrounds expressed a heightened sense of responsibility to fulfill their parents' sacrifices and aspirations, which include expectations surrounding family and success. Bennie, for example, felt the pressure to comply with his parents' vision of success. This pressure to uphold the American Dream is further complicated by racial and cultural expectations, such as the expectation to assimilate into a predominantly white, heteronormative society. The expectation to conform to familial expectations may place LGBTQ+ individuals from immigrant families in a challenging position as they navigate the intersection of their cultural heritage with their sexual identity. Future research should further explore the ways in which cultural and familial expectations impact identity formation and the relationship between personal narratives and master narratives, particularly in the context of individuals from immigrant families.

Bisexual and Pansexual participants highlighted the relationship between their sexual identity and cultural expectations. By addressing their unique experiences, these participants revealed that they face challenges within the LGBTQ+ community that are unique to their

identities. Bisexual and Pansexual individuals may experience pressures to conform to expectations surrounding a either a straight norms or Gay norms, potentially ignoring the nuanced experiences that Bisexual and Pansexual individuals live. For instance, when dating someone of the opposite sex, they may face pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations, while dating someone of the same sex may present expectations to adhere to a strictly "Gay lifestyle." Regardless of expectations, Bisexual and Pansexual individuals are frequently viewed as either being straight or Gay, depending on how they present themselves or who they are dating.

Rachel, a Bisexual participant, clearly articulated this unique lived experience of being Bisexual: when she had previously dated a men, people perceived her as living a "normal" straight life, but when she had dated women, people perceived her as living a "Gay lifestyle." Rachel also highlighted that when dating women, she was aware of how she chose to live a "Gay but straight life," revealing prescribed expectations by others to be something other when dating others of the same sex. Similar experiences and expectations were addressed by other Bisexual and Pansexual participants, who navigate a life of prescribed labels and expectations to conform to binary norms of sexual identity. This unique and complex navigation between different sets of expectations highlights the complexity of the experiences lived by Bisexual and Pansexual individuals and the need for more nuanced research that addresses these intersections.

Religious identity adds a significant dimension to the complexity of the intersection between identities for LGBTQ+ individuals. Robert's narrative, for example, reveals a tension between traditional religious values and the expectations of a more "liberated" "Gay lifestyle." Robert discussed the challenges of maintaining his Orthodox Jewish faith while navigating a

cultural narrative that often associates LGBTQ+ identity with being secular. Similarly, other Jewish participants expressed how their Jewish identities intersect with their LGBTQ+ identities, sometimes leading to experiences of marginalization within the broader LGBTQ+ community due to anti-Semitism. These accounts illustrate that religious identity can either conflict with or complement one's LGBTQ+ identity, further complicating the negotiation of personal narratives and master narratives. Future research should continue to explore such intersections, particularly focusing on how marginalized identities within the LGBTQ+ community, such as those from religious backgrounds, experience and navigate master narratives. Including religious diversity in future research will illuminate the full spectrum of LGBTQ+ experiences and how individuals reconcile or resist overlapping cultural expectations.

It is important to acknowledge the experiences and feelings that Jewish participants shared, regarding their Jewish identities. Participants described Judaism and Jewishness as encompassing much more than just religious beliefs; they view it as a rich cultural identity that includes traditions, values, and shared history. For many, being Jewish is also an ethnicity and a race, shaped by historical experiences of persecution and resilience. This multifaceted identity influences people's lives in profound ways, impacting their values, community affiliations, and how they navigate societal expectations. Future research should investigate how these complex layers of Jewish identity intersect with other aspects of identity to provide a fuller understanding of the diverse experiences within the Jewish LGBTQ+ community.

The intersection of LGBTQ+ identity and Jewishness brings forth unique challenges that individuals navigate, especially concerning experiences of anti-Semitism. Participants like Taylor shared how rising anti-Semitic sentiments affected their ability to feel safe in spaces

previously considered welcoming for LGBTQ+ people. This double marginalization—facing discrimination as both a Jewish person and an LGBTQ+ individual—complicates identity navigation and community belonging. Such experiences highlight the importance of recognizing the specific needs of Jewish LGBTQ+ individuals, which are often overlooked in broader discussions of Jewish or LGBTQ+ experiences. The need for safe spaces acknowledging both aspects of Jewish LGBTQ+ identity is crucial, yet often unmet, emphasizing a gap in research and community support structures.

Overall, the intersectionality between LGBTQ+ identity and other aspects of identity, such as cultural and familial background, sexual identity, and religious identity, stresses the complexity of identity development and navigation of expectations. This research highlights how it is imperative that research further explore the experiences of individuals from diverse backgrounds, particularly those from under-explored groups, focusing on the intersection between simultaneously existing identities. Individuals with conflicting identities unfortunately face double- (or multiple-) marginalization and unique challenges that may be shared by others across varying cultures and identities. Understanding these intersectional experiences is crucial for providing a more inclusive and comprehensive view of identity and cultural expectations.

A Further Exploration of Religious Expectations

The role of religion adds another dimension to the complexity of intersecting identities for LGBTQ+ individuals. Results revealed how most participants expressed the expectation to be religious as a sole factor in the straight good life, while Jewish participants associated religious expectations with the need to pursue religion of their own free will. This difference in

perspective highlights how cultural and religious backgrounds shape the understanding and navigation of identity.

Christian participants frequently discussed the expectation to be religious, often highlighting Christianity (including Roman Catholicism) as integral to the straight good life. It is possible that Christian participants appeared as being more aware of this expectation due to their deviation from it. Reviewing the demographic information provided by the participants, almost all of those with a Christian background no longer affiliate themselves with the Christian faith. Jada is the only exception, never having had any experiences with religion; Jada still expressed cultural pressures to be religious—specifically, Christian—as part of the straight good life. This aligns with the notion that master narratives become more visible when individuals deviate from cultural expectations.

In contrast, Jewish participants described religious expectations differently. They emphasized the importance of pursuing religion out of their own free will. Each Jewish participant who described a background in Judaism currently associates themselves with being Jewish. For instance, both Taylor and Robert are participants who grew up Jewish and remain identifying with the Jewish faith. It is possible that alignment with their religious upbringing contributes to an invisibility to the expectation to be religious. Perhaps the expectation to be religious is more accurately depicted in an overarching good life (as discussed above) for Jewish individuals, rather than the straight good life, specifically.

The differing experiences between Christian and Jewish participants further emphasize the need for more nuanced research into the complexity of religious identity. Understanding how individuals navigate religious expectations and how these intersect with other aspects of their

identity is crucial. The findings suggest that religious identity is multifaceted and that the intersection of religion with LGBTQ+ identity can vary significantly across different cultural and religious contexts. Future research should continue to explore these intersections, particularly focusing on how marginalized identities within the LGBTQ+ community, such as those from religious backgrounds, experience and navigate master narratives.

The Prevalence of Religion in the Straight Good Life

An intriguing finding in this study is the prominence of religious expectations in the narratives of many participants, despite the fact that participants were not directly asked about religion. This unexpected emphasis on religion highlights the deep cultural connection between religious beliefs and practices and the master narrative of the straight good life. What makes this finding particularly noteworthy is the broader context of declining participation in formal religious practices in the United States in recent years (see, e.g., Pew Research Center, 2022). Despite this decline, religious expectations remain a significant part of the cultural narrative for many individuals. This suggests that religion continues to play a powerful role in shaping societal expectations, even as traditional religious participation appears to diminish. Future research should explore how participants navigate these religious expectations, specifically examining why such expectations continue to be prevalent in their lives (cf. Gemar, 2023, who quantitatively explored the potential influences of religious belief, attitudes, and practices in individuals). Such studies could provide valuable insights into the persistent influence of religion on the master narrative of the straight good life, and how individuals navigate such expectations with their personal beliefs and personal narratives.

Influence of Media

Another significant area for future research is the role of media in shaping and reinforcing the master narratives of the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life. As mentioned above, several participants mentioned the influence of media portrayals in their understanding of what constitutes an LGBTQ+ good life. Media representations often present idealized images of both straight and LGBTQ+ lifestyles, which can create unrealistic expectations and pressures for individuals. For instance, participants noted that media often portrays LGBTQ+ individuals as living overly dramatic or happy lifestyles, which may not reflect the diverse experiences and desires of the LGBTQ+ community. This portrayal can lead to a narrow understanding of what it means to live a fulfilling life as an LGBTQ+ person, excluding individuals who may seek more nuanced and realistic lives. Future studies should investigate how media portrayals influence individuals' perceptions of the good life, specifically the LGBTQ+ good life, and individuals' own identities and how individuals may perpetuate or challenge master narratives. This research could provide valuable insights into the ways media shapes cultural expectations and individuals' experiences.

Cultural Influence on Identity and Identity Development

The narrative approach employed in this study specifically emphasizes the significant influence of cultural expectations. This study provides a nuanced exploration of the master narratives of the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life, revealing the complexity and diversity of cultural expectations. The findings reveal the importance of understanding how individuals navigate cultural expectations, negotiate their identities, and align with or deviate from dominant cultural scripts. Furthermore, the findings suggest that identity cannot be

adequately captured by rigid stages or statuses. Traditional frameworks that classify identity development into distinct stages (e.g., Cass, 1979; Crocetti, 2017; Crocetti & Meeus, 2015; Erikson, 1956; 1963; Marcia, 1966) may overlook the malleable and dynamic nature of identity, particularly among diverse groups of individuals. This study contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to identity research, one that considers the unique experiences of individuals from various cultural backgrounds.

Additionally, my research highlights the complex relationship between identity and cultural expectations, confirming the existing narrative identity research that acknowledges how identity is influenced by master narratives (see McLean & Syed, 2015b; Syed & McLean, 2023). Through the case study of Bennie, the data indicate that master narratives play a significant role in shaping the lives of participants. This is evident through Bennie's experiences of navigating cultural expectations along with the overall complexity of alignment and deviation, as discussed above, reflecting the intricate nature of identity and how it evolves over time.

My findings challenge the status and stage theories of identity development that attempt to define identity by classifying it into distinct categories. By supporting the notion from narrative identity research that identity is complex and cannot be captured in limiting labels, my research also advocates for the use of the master narrative framework to further explore under-explored master narratives among diverse cultures and marginalized groups. Additionally, this study expands on existing research on the good life (see Syed & McLean, 2022), revealing the potential for several, simultaneously existing good lives, some of which may embody others, as discussed above.

The study also highlights the need for further research to explore the layered and intersecting nature of these narratives, including the roles of race, religion, geography, and media. By considering these factors, future research can deepen our understanding of the multifaceted nature of identity and cultural expectations. Moreover, this study suggests that the master narrative framework would benefit from a more formalized approach to defining and assessing alignment and deviation. This enhancement could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ways individuals engage with cultural narratives and the impact on their identity development. The insights gained from this research have important implications for psychological theories of identity, as well as practical implications for supporting diverse communities in navigating cultural expectations.

Study Limitations and Future Research

Broad Scope of the Interview and its Phrasing

One limitation of this study is that the interviews were quite broad, covering a wide range of topics rather than focusing solely on cultural expectations. This broad scope required a reliance on explicit information provided by participants to construct the master narratives. A more focused interview structure, specifically targeting cultural expectations, may have allowed for a more analytical approach to constructing the master narratives and for a more deep inference of the subtler aspects of these narratives. Future research could benefit from a more targeted approach in asking about cultural expectations, potentially honing in on specific cultural expectations participants disclose and how they navigate them.

Another limitation lies in the phrasing used in the interviews. Participants were asked to describe a “fictional story of what society tells us” is the straight good life and the LGBTQ+

good life. This wording may have confused some participants, potentially leading them to think about a good life that does not actually exist, thereby potentially obscuring more concrete and prevalent cultural expectations. Future studies could improve on this by asking more direct questions about what constitutes the straight good life and the LGBTQ+ good life, thus obtaining more clear and actionable data.

Interpretations of the LGBTQ+ Good Life and General Nature of Expectations

In determining the LGBTQ+ good life, it became apparent that there are diverse versions or interpretations of this master narrative. The assumption that the "default" LGBTQ+ good life conflicts with the straight good life may not hold true universally. This assumption overlooks the potentially nested and overlapping nature of master narratives, as posed above, where multiple versions of master narratives can coexist. Future research should consider this complexity and allow for the existence of multiple, simultaneous master narratives within the same cultural framework.

A further limitation is the general nature of the questions asked about expectations. In the interview, I asked participants a question pertaining to expectations they have felt, in general, at any given point in their lives. Participants discussed expectations they felt throughout their lives without necessarily associating them with the straight good life or the LGBTQ+ good life. This lack of specificity prevented from disclosed expectations to belong to either version of the good life I explored, but may have contributed to the existence of an overarching good life master narrative that encompasses both the straight good life and LGBTQ+ good life. For example, many participants discussed expectations related to achievement, such as doing well in school or pursuing higher education, which were difficult to categorize under either master narrative.

Future research should carefully delineate these expectations and consider the possibility of a more inclusive, overarching master narrative.

Distinguishing Cultural Expectations from Societal Expectations

Another limitation is the lack of distinction between cultural expectations and societal expectations in this study. I used both terms interchangeably, based on the understanding that society and culture each consist of people and that there is limited research distinguishing one from another. However, this approach may ignore potential differences between culture and society. For instance, individuals may view society as a broad and more invisible entity that exists beyond our control, while culture may be seen as more limited and comprehensive. Future research should further explore the distinctions between culture and society, providing distinguishable methods to assess them in ways that capture exactly what researchers intend to reach.

The Focus On Master Narratives and Not On Alternative Narratives

A limitation of this study may be its exclusive focus on the construction of master narratives, their prevalence in LGBTQ+ individuals' lives, and how these individuals align with and/or deviate from them. Although alternative narratives are a significant component of the master narrative framework, this study does not explore them in depth. However, this omission should not be interpreted as a dismissal of their existence. In their paper using the concept of the good life to assess master narratives, Syed and McLean (2022) identify a limitation in existing research: the tendency to focus solely on master narratives while neglecting alternative narratives. In contrast to this potential limitation, the present study intentionally centers around master narratives. This decision was partly due to the difficulty in distinguishing alternative

narratives from master narratives, but more importantly, it was motivated by a desire to avoid imposing assumptions about which narratives participants described belonged to which category.

As Syed and McLean (2022, 2023) explain, a critical feature of alternative narratives is that they are constructed in relation to—and often in opposition to—master narratives. However, distinguishing cultural expectations as either belonging to master narratives or alternative narratives can conflict with the goals of the master narrative framework, which acknowledges power dynamics and oppression, and with the broader goals of narrative identity research, which aims to avoid rigid categorizations and labels. For example, Syed and McLean (2022) describe how the master narrative of the (singular) good life commonly involves the pursuit of happiness, meaning, and success, while alternative narratives, often articulated by individuals from marginalized groups, emphasize meaningful connections with others. Although some participants in this study did describe aspects of the good life that align with the alternative narrative described by Syed and McLean (2022), it is important to carefully explore whether these aspects are genuinely perceived by participants as part of a master narrative or as an alternative.

Without explicit clarification from participants on how the expectations they feel are constructed in relation to or in opposition to other expectations, it is difficult to definitively categorize certain expectations as belonging to either a master narrative or an alternative narrative. It is crucial to consider how various expectations, such as those related to the good life, could all belong to distinct master narratives. The existence and delineation of alternative narratives require further refinement within the master narrative framework. In this study, I deliberately avoided categorizing the narratives shared by participants as either master narratives

or alternative narratives. Instead, I treated the expectations participants described as belonging to distinct master narratives. The narratives provided by participants, whether they fall within a master narrative or an alternative narrative, still capture the cultural expectations they feel are imposed upon them. Thus, my findings remain consistent with the intent of the master narrative framework, even while focusing solely on master narratives.

Future Directions

A Master Narrative Questionnaire. To address some of the above limitations, a potential future direction could involve the creation of a master narrative questionnaire. This instrument would assess the prevalence of certain expectations and measure how individuals align with or deviate from them. By explicitly asking participants to endorse specific expectations identified in this study and then rate their alignment or deviation, researchers could obtain a more direct and quantifiable understanding of these narratives. This questionnaire would both build on the foundational insights provided by my research and set the stage for a more in-depth exploration of master narratives. It would offer an alternative structured and potentially more systematic way to explore how widely certain expectations are shared within and across different communities, and how individuals navigate these expectations in their daily lives. Furthermore, such a tool could help to clarify the nuances of alignment and deviation, providing a clearer picture of how these processes operate in different contexts.

A Longitudinal Design. Additionally, the study's design involved interviewing individuals at a single point in time. While the interviews provided rich data, they only captured participants' perceptions and experiences at that moment. A longitudinal design could offer deeper insights into how understandings of societal pressures and expectations evolve over time.

Implementing such a design poses challenges, however, particularly regarding the confidentiality and sensitivity of the information disclosed by participants, but it remains a valuable avenue for future research to consider.

Studying Straight Individuals. Another promising area for future research could involve exploring how straight individuals perceive the expectations associated with the straight good life, as well as those linked to the LGBTQ+ good life. Researchers could investigate whether straight individuals are aware of the expectations that the participants of this study described and how straight individuals perceive such expectations as being imposed upon themselves—this is likely more relevant to the straight good life master narrative, however. Such research could offer valuable insights into the master narratives of the good life and how the master narratives described in this study may influence not just those within the LGBTQ+ community but also those outside of it.

Considering Age in Exploring Master Narratives. In addition to a longitudinal approach, future research could also benefit from a focused exploration of how age influences the navigation of master narratives. Age may play a crucial role in how participants interpret and respond to societal expectations, with possible cohort effects emerging between younger and older individuals. While this study collected participants' ages as part of their demographics, it did not deeply investigate how age might have shaped the information they shared. Future studies should consider examining master narratives through the lens of age, exploring how people at different stages of life perceive, interact with, and navigate master narratives. Such research could provide valuable insights into the potential differences in narrative experiences

across generations, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of identity development.

Exploring the Origins of Cultural Expectations. Another significant area for future research lies in exploring the origins of the cultural expectations within master narratives. The present study did not attempt to determine the origins of cultural expectations, leaving a gap in understanding where participants are feeling imposed expectations from. This gap is critical especially in understanding the origins of the LGBTQ+ good life. Future studies should investigate where expectations belonging to master narratives come form, potentially focusing on whether expectations associated with the LGBTQ+ good life are imposed by broader societal norms, shaped in contrast to a heteronormative narrative, or cultivated within the LGBTQ+ community itself. Additionally, it is vital to explore potential sources of expectations that may not be immediately apparent.

One potential source of master narratives is media, which is discussed above. Media may shape individuals' perceptions of what constitutes a good life, both reflecting and contributing to master narratives. Beyond media, other areas of life, such as family, friends, school, and community, may also contribute to the formation and reinforcement of these narratives. Understanding the origins of cultural expectations is essential for further understanding master narrative, understanding the pressures and challenges faced by different ground of individuals, and for assessing the internal and external narratives that influence individuals' identity development.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of master narratives surrounding the good life, particularly as they relate to LGBTQ+ individuals. Through in-depth interviews and the careful analysis of participants' experiences, this research has highlighted the diverse ways in which individuals align with, deviate from, and negotiate these cultural expectations. It also stresses the need for further exploration into the nuances of alignment and deviation, particularly in relation to intersectional identities and varying socio-cultural contexts. The findings presented here offer valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners interested in the dynamics of master narratives, identity formation, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. In proceeding with future research, it is imperative to continue refining our methodologies and expanding our frameworks to more accurately capture the complexities of master narratives and how individuals experience them. This work sets the stage for future research to deeper explore cultural expectations, with the ultimate goal of fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the diverse pathways individuals navigate in their pursuit of a good life.

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Appendix A

Participant Demographic Information

Participant*	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Religious Background	Present Religious Affiliation	Residing Location	Location Raised
Alex	21	American Indian or Asian	Trans Male	Gay	Hindu	Non-practicing Hindu	Northeast, Suburban	Southwest, Urban
Aubrey	19	Mixed Hispanic	Non-binary	Bisexual	Atheist	Atheist	Northeast, Rural	Northeast, Suburban/ Rural
Barbara	24	Jewish	Female	Bisexual	Orthodox Jewish	Orthodox Jewish	Southeast, Urban	Northeast, Urban
Bennie	39	Pacific Islander	Male	Gay	Roman Catholic	Agnostic	Northeast, Suburban	Northeast, Suburban
Brooke	19	White	Female	Bisexual	Roman Catholic	Unsure	Northeast, Suburban	Northeast, Suburban
David	33	Hispanic White	Male	Gay	Roman Catholic	Atheist	Southeast, Urban	Southeast, Suburban/ Urban
Dustin	21	White	Male	Pansexual	Methodist Christian	None	Northeast, Suburban	Northeast, Suburban
Em	20	Hispanic	Female	Lesbian	Roman Catholic	None	Northeast, Urban	Northeast, Urban
Georgette	21	German Italian White	Female	Bisexual	Roman Catholic-ish	None	Northeast, Suburban	Northeast, Suburban
Jada	19	Jewish	Female	Bisexual, leaning towards Lesbian	Atheist	Atheist	Northeast, Suburban/ Urban	Northeast, Urban
Jonathan	36	Jewish	Male	Gay	Jewish (with a Christian mother)	Jewish	Southeast, Urban	Northeast, Suburban
Kaitlyn	19	African American and South Asian	Female	Bisexual	Roman Catholic	None	Northeast, Suburban	Northeast, Suburban
Monica	24	Asian and Hispanic	Female	Pansexual	Roman Catholic	Agnostic	Northeast, Suburban	Northeast, Urban
Rachel	22	Jewish	Female	Bisexual	Jewish	Jewish	Northeast, Urban/ Suburban	Northeast, Urban

*Each participant was each given a pseudonym

Table continues on next page

Participant Demographic Information (Continued)

Participant*	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Religious Background	Present Religious Affiliation	Residing Location	Location Raised
Robert	25	Jewish	Male	Gay	Orthodox Jewish	Orthodox Jewish	Northeast, Urban	Northeast, Urban
Seth	34	Italian White	Male	Gay	Roman Catholic	Agnostic	Northeast, Suburban	Northeast, Suburban
Steven	19	Hispanic	Trans	Queer	Roman Catholic	Agnostic	Northeast, Suburban	Northeast, Suburban
Taylor	26	Persian and Middle Eastern Jewish	Female and Non-binary	Bisexual	Orthodox Jewish	Orthodox Jewish	Northeast, Urban	Northeast, Suburban
William	50	Vietnamese Asian	Male	Gay	Buddhist/ Christian	Agnostic	Northeast, Rural & Urban	Vietnam, then Northwest Suburban
Zachary	20	Hispanic	Demi-boy	Bisexual	None	Unsure	Northeast, Urban	Northeast, Urban
Zeke	19	Salvadoran American Latino	Trans Male	Bisexual	Roman Catholic/ Evangelical Christian	Culturally Catholic	Northeast, Suburban	Northeast

*Each participant was each given a pseudonym

Appendix B

The Interview

- **Demographic information**

1. "What is your age?"

2. "How do you describe your race/ethnicity?"

3. "What is your highest educational degree you hold?"

4. "How do you describe your gender identity?"

5. "How do you describe your sexual identity?"

6. "How would you describe your religious background? How would you describe your religious identity today?

7. "Please describe the environment in which you currently live."

8. "Please describe the environment in which you grew up."

- **The master narrative of living a straight life.**

9. "Please share a fictional story of what society tells us is the 'good life' for a straight individual."

- **Deviation from the master narrative of living a straight life.**

10. "How is your life similar or different to what you just shared in your story?"

    A. (If participant specifies that they differ from the good life because of their young age, ask:) "How do you expect your future life to compare or contrast with what you shared in your story?"

- **The master narrative of living an LGBTQ+ life.**

11. "Were there certain points in your life where you felt expectations placed on you? If so, please describe the expectations and the points in your life where you have felt them."
12. "How have you responded to expectations placed on you?"
13. "Please share a fictional story of what society tells us is the 'good life' for an LGBTQ+ identifying individual."

- **Deviation from the master narrative of living an LGBTQ+ life.**

14. "How is your life similar or different to what you shared in your story?"
    A. (If participant specifies that they differ from the good life because of their young age, ask:) "How do you expect your future life to compare or contrast with what you shared in your story?"

- **The participant's life story, part A**

15. "Please tell me how you came to identify as a(n) [insert appropriate sexual identity]?"
16. "How did you expect people to respond when you told them (or when they found out) that you identify as being LGBTQ+? How did people actually respond?"
17. "Today, how do you explore/express your identity? How did you explore/express your identity in the past?"

- **The participant's life story, part B**

18. "Think of positive experiences in your life that stand out to you. Please describe a scene, episode, or moment in your life that stands out as an especially positive experience. This might be *the* 'high point' or an especially happy, joyous, exciting, or wonderful moment in

your life. Please describe this high point scene in detail. What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling?"

19. "Please share a little bit about what you think this event says about you as a person or about your life."
20. "Think of negative experiences in your life. Please describe a scene, episode, or moment in your life that stands out as an especially negative experience. This might be a low point in your life, if not *the* low point of your life. Even though this may be unpleasant, please try your best to provide as much detail as you can. What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling?"
21. "Please share a little bit about what you think this event says about you as a person or about your life."
22. "Do you have a 'turning point' or moment of important change in your life? If so, please identify a particular episode in your life that you now see as a turning point. What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling?"
23. "Please share a little bit about what you think this event says about you as a person or about your life."
24. "Looking back over your entire life, please identify and describe what you now consider to be the greatest single challenge you have faced in your life. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? And what significance does this challenge hold in your life?"
25. "Please share a fictional story of an LGBTQ+ identifying individual actually living the 'good life.'"