MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE SCREEN: LGBTQ+ COLLEGE STUDENT EXPERIENCE WITH BODY IMAGE DURING COVID-19

by

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GLOSSARY

AFAB: "acronym meaning Assigned Female at Birth. AFAB people may or may not identify as female some or all of the time" (NIH, 2024).

AMAB: "Acronym meaning Assigned Male at Birth. AMAB people may or may not identify as male some or all of the time" (NIH, 2024).

Asexual: "experiencing little or no sexual attraction to others and/or a lack of interest in sexual relationships/behavior" (Safe Zone, 2024).

Cisgender: "a gender description for when someone's sex assigned at birth and gender identity correspond in the expected way...also can be shortened to 'cis'" (Safe Zone, 2024).

Gender Fluid: "a gender identity best described as a dynamic mix of boy and girl" (Safe Zone, 2024).

Gender Queer: "a gender identity label often used by people who do not identify with the binary of man/women [or] an umbrella term for many gender non-conforming or non-binary identities" (Safe Zone, 2024).

Heterosexual: "experiencing attraction solely (or primarily) to some members of a different gender" (Safe Zone, 2024).

LGBTQ+: "shorthand or umbrella term for all folks who have a non-normative (or queer) gender of sexuality... Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer and/or Questioning (...people at [sic] a + at the end in an effort to be more inclusive)" (Safe Zone, 2024).

Non-binary: "refers to people who do not subscribe to the gender binary" (NIH, 2024).

Queer: "an umbrella term to describe individuals who don't identify as straight and/or cisgender" (Safe Zone, 2024).

ABSTRACT

This narrative study shares the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ college students with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research has shown that viewing oneself on the computer screen and time spent viewing social media during COVID-19 has negatively impacted body image in many individuals. Most research on this topic has been completed with cisgender, heterosexual, white women. Expanding the literature to include research with marginalized and underrepresented populations is integral to fully understanding the impact COVID-19 has had on body image. This study interviewed LGBTQ+ college students at Montana State University who had been students at the institution during the spring 2020 and fall 2020 semesters at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research aimed to include the participant stories and offer space to the voices of the LGBTQ+ community on their experience with body image during COVID-19. The dissertation included interviews with six students who provided artifacts representing their experiences. Key findings were presented as four themes: 1. Mirror Image, 2. Time for Reflection, 3. Identity Development, and 4. Relationships, Supports, and Influences. These findings provided a window into the unique experiences of the LGBTQ+ participants and how they viewed body image during the pandemic. This dissertation shares the stories and the experiences to broaden the understanding of this topic within the LGBTQ+ community, expands the understanding of lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and offers insight into providing services and education in a way that fully considers diversity, equity, and inclusion.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020) declared a global pandemic caused by the novel severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), also known by its corresponding disease COVID-19 (henceforth known as COVID-19). The pandemic altered the landscape of many areas of life, including physical, mental, and emotional. Most communities around the world went on lockdown in the spring of 2020, and many individuals were quarantined in their homes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). Limited social interaction and mobility changed the way people work, study, and exist by increasing stress, anxiety, and uncertainty (Wang et al., 2020).

As a human living during a global pandemic, I made personal observations about my own experience throughout this time. I noticed my body image had shifted, and these personal observations led to the inspiration for this research topic on LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and additional minoritized sexual and gender identities) students' body image during COVID-19. LGBTQ+ is often used as a shorthand that is intended to be inclusive to all queer/nonbinary people (Dawson, 2021). As work and school became virtual, I became more aware of my personal body image. This was especially apparent through the mirror effect caused by seeing myself on the computer screen during meetings, classes, and social interactions. The default setting for online platforms such as Zoom, Webex, and Microsoft Teams present a mirror image of the speaker from the webcam in their computer (Rodgers et al., 2020). My job and my education had previously been completed through in-person meetings

with very little virtual interaction. Prior to COVID-19, I have never had a mirror to observe my reflection during regular face-to-face interactions.

> Imagine in the physical workplace, for the entirety of an 8-hr workday, an assistant followed you around with a handheld mirror, and for every single task you did and every conversation you had, they made sure you could see your own face in that mirror. This sounds ridiculous, but in essence this is what happens on Zoom calls (Bailenson 2021, p. 9-10).

I noticed I was going beyond the objective observation of making sure my face was centered in the camera view and in focus, to subjectively making judgements of my facial expressions and appearance. There was an increase in my awareness of my body image, and I wondered if others were also experiencing this same phenomenon.

I was also feeling affected by the closing of my gym and the belief that this would lead to a decreased opportunity for regular physical activity. The Governor in Montana shut down health clubs in March 2020 and only allowed 75% capacity when permission for limited opening was granted in May 2020 (Montana, 2021). Thankfully, I am lucky enough to live in a rural community and could spend time outdoors on walks with my dog and eventually on backpacking trips during the summer of 2020. In October 2020, I was directed by the local health department to remain indoors when I was quarantined for two weeks following close contact with someone who contracted COVID-19. At this time, I recall feeling guilty for leaving my home as I believed activities like walking my dog through my neighborhood may spread the virus in my community. I compromised by only walking my dog after sunset. Yet, despite my opportunity for outdoor activity and temporary close contact quarantine, my initial reaction of fear was connected to losing my regularly scheduled workout routine at a local gym. My concern at that time was that without the opportunity to participate in this workout, I may gain weight. This fear influenced my personal body image.

Although grocery stores remained open, I felt an initial sense of needing to stockpile food in case the supply chain was stalled. As many Americans, I filled my pantry with nonperishables such as rice and pasta. I justified the purchase of Costco-sized bags of tortilla chips and gummy fruit snacks to soothe my anxiety from the pandemic. This panic-induced stocking of my "quarantine pantry" was experienced by individuals and families across the country (Cooper et al., 2022). Rodgers et al. (2020) indicated that "recommendations to limit activities such as grocery shopping, combined with perceptions of the scarcity of certain food products, may heighten attentional focus on food and encourage individuals to stock up on foods more than usual" (p. 1167). Food was readily available in my home and snacking became a normal coping mechanism out of boredom or to handle the emotional response of the fear and unknown of the pandemic.

Research has indicated that "lack of access to in-person social interactions may also lead to an increase in media consumption and use of social media sites" (Cooper, et al., 2022, p. 56). I noticed that I was utilizing online social media sites in an effort to connect with others during the initial COVID-19 quarantine and subsequent months of social distancing. I joined TikTok and spent hours upon hours scrolling through the feed to normalize my feelings of isolation.

A cornerstone article addressing common concerns about the pandemic has presented an array of potential research areas that match my own observations (Rodgers et al., 2020). Researchers have indicated the areas of concern related to body image I have observed during COVID-19 may lead to increased risk for eating disorders (ED) and need to be further studied to develop literature in this area (Rodgers et al., 2020). Rodgers et al. (2020) identify three key areas of study including disruptions in daily routines from social restrictions, increased exposure

to media, and fear of contracting the illness. Specifically, associated with virtual meetings, Rodgers et al. (2020) indicate in their call to research that "the increased use of videoconferencing technologies in the context of 'stay at home' orders may also indirectly contribute to the risk of ED behaviors by increasing preoccupation around appearance" (p. 1168). The increased usage of videoconferencing may relate to concerns with body image as there is amplified attention to viewing one's face on the screen (Rodgers et al., 2020). The mirror effect that I noticed during online interactions throughout COVID-19 is a specific area of interest that Rodgers et al. (2020) indicate for further study. The suggestions presented by Rodgers et al. (2020) on potential areas of research to be studied gave support to my research study.

Historically, White, cisgender, heterosexual women have been the focus of research on body image leaving marginalized and underrepresented groups out of the research on this topic (Beccia et al., 2021; Burke et al., 2020; Mikhail & Klump, 2020). Recent research on body image and COVID-19 has predominately been done on White, cisgender, heterosexual women as Schneider et al. (2022) found only a handful of studies exploring body image of marginalized and underrepresented groups during the pandemic. It is important for research to broaden the scope and explore the lived experiences of a more diverse population. As a bisexual woman, it is important to me to hear the voices of the LGBTQ+ community within research. The experience of body image with LGBTQ+ individuals in Canada during COVID-19 has shown varied results along "a wide spectrum of experiences ranging from radical resistance to pursuit of hegemonic ideals" (Quathamer & Joy, 2021, p. 8). Additional research on LGBTQ+ individuals and body image during COVID-19 offers a platform for better understanding of this population and can

provide health care professionals with an insight into the way to best serve this community of patients (Quathamer & Joy, 2021).

Although the WHO declared the endemic phase of the COVID-19 pandemic ended in May 2023, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to circulate the coronavirus indefinitely (Bartels, 2024). As we have only been living in the COVID-19 pandemic for about four and a half years now, research regarding how COVID-19 has affected mental health, specifically body image, is an important priority (Holmes et al., 2020; O'Connor et al., 2020; Rodgers et al., 2020). Research on this topic can help determine the effect of the pandemic on mental health and lead towards more effective treatments and coping mechanisms (Holmes et al., 2020; O'Connor et al., 2020; Rodgers et al., 2020). Addressing these issues can assist mental health providers with providing effective treatment to acknowledge and support the psychological impact body image and COVID-19 have on LGBTQ+ individuals.

Continuing to close the gap in the research about the COVID-19 pandemic is imperative. This research continues to shed light on the residual effects of the collective trauma people have experienced during this time period. Specifically, this research shares new insights into the body image of the LGBTQ+ experience in the initial onset of COVID-19 and the continuing pandemic. Society made significant changes to adapt to the restrictions of COVID-19, and it is important to better understand how these changes have affected individuals as we move forward.

I know I am not alone in my observations. When I have personally mentioned my thoughts to faculty members and colleagues that I am seeing myself in a "mirror" on my screen in every meeting, classroom, and social aspect during COVID-19, many have agreed with my reflections and acknowledged this has truly been a challenging time for them and their students.

One faculty member stated, “Every time I look at myself on the screen I think, oh my god I need a haircut!” (M. Lockhart, personal communication, January 14, 2021). A fellow classmate noted, “I can’t tell you how many times I have looked at myself before signing onto a meeting or class and thought ‘Wow, is that really my face? Video off today!’” (K. Edwards, personal communication, March 5, 2022).

Working in higher education within the student success and support area, I have had the opportunity to hear about many student concerns with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students have mentioned to me that it has been challenging to generally pay attention in online lectures when it is required to have their cameras on in class. They have stated they cannot focus on what is being taught as they are concerned with their appearance on the screen, but also feel as though they cannot turn off their cameras as many faculty have indicated having the camera turned on is a requirement of the course. This has added extra stress and judgment seeing themselves onscreen throughout class and potentially influences their body image.

Beyond these anecdotal examples, research has been done on this area that found most college students who participated in an online biology class during the COVID-19 lockdown did not turn on their cameras mainly because they were concerned about their appearance (Castelli & Sarvary, 2020). Further research would need to be conducted to determine whether the concern with appearance on screen is specifically associated with body image and how this may impact LGBTQ+ students.

Statement of the Problem

Although the changes and restrictions that have resulted from COVID-19 have affected everyone, college students are an important population to study as they were forced into

emergency remote learning in March 2020 interrupting the traditional college experience (WHO, 2020). COVID-19 has spanned five academic years, and only students who attended college during the 2018−2019 academic year recall a full year of their college experience without living during the pandemic. At some point during the past four plus years, many colleges went online or developed hybrid/blended learning models (WHO, 2020). Many higher education institutions worked to afford students the opportunity to learn during the pandemic as they navigated quarantines and isolation (WHO, 2020). These virtual options may have brought more attention to students' body image and changed the way they feel about themselves and how they interact in the online classroom environment.

The brief time in which we have existed during the COVID-19 pandemic makes it clear that there are gaps in the research. This phenomenon has affected many areas of our lives, including body image. Rodgers et al. (2020) identify this area as potentially impacting and requiring more research to better understand the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on body image. Additionally, qualitative research provides a unique opportunity to learn from people's shared experiences and personal stories. These aspects help fill the gaps in the body of literature on this topic.

From previous research, it is evident that White, heterosexual, cisgender women struggle with body image (Beccia et al., 2021; Burke et al., 2020; Mikhail & Klump, 2020). To expand on the body of research in this area, I explored the topic with the LGBTQ+ student population. This offers a perspective on body image from a different group than that typically studied and explores how body image during COVID-19 was experienced by LGBTQ+ students. Also, this

study's qualitative nature offers the opportunity to learn about the individual experiences of this population with this topic.

Body image issues can lead to disordered eating behaviors and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Tomy et al., 2021). The additional stress of living with a pandemic may increase the negative effect of body dissatisfaction. Exploring this phenomenon within the stated group offers additional insight and may lead to further development of resources and supports for LGBTQ+ individuals struggling with body image.

Body image can be a significant issue for members of the LGBTQ+ community. Societal expectations and body stereotypes based on gender play a role in body image among the LGBTQ+ community (Kalash et al., 2023). As these expectations and stereotypes are typically heteronormative, this can cause body dissatisfaction when comparing oneself to a body that is considered gender-normative. During times of stress, such as COVID-19, LGBTQ+ individuals may experience higher levels of mental health issues that could lead to increased negative body image (Kalash et al., 2023). It is important to expand the research in this area to learn more about this community and offer guidance and support to mental health providers and higher education administrators to better assist this population.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this narrative study is to explore how LGBTQ+ college students experience their body image during the COVID-19 pandemic at Montana State University (MSU), a mid-sized R1 university in the western region. LGBTQ+ people are seen as a marginalized or underrepresented group, and it is important to research the experience of LGBTQ+ students to expand the understanding of the effects of COVID-19 on student

experience. Quathamer and Joy (2021) have explored the importance of further study on body image and the LGBTQ+ community as it assists with a deeper understanding of issues relevant to this group by health providers. This study aims to provide more knowledge to the limited existing literature and examines the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many studies have collected quantitative data on the impact COVID-19 has had on body image, but a saturation of personal stories of this experience are missing in the literature (Schneider, et al., 2022). We do not yet know ultimately how COVID-19 will change society, or how it will fully impact mental health in the long term. As a researcher, it is essential to cement the foundational blocks to set the stage for learning and developing a strong conceptual understanding of this period.

Research Questions

The main research questions guiding this study are the following:

1. What experiences do LGBTQ+ college students have with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do LGBTQ+ college students describe their experiences with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Significance of Study

Higher education student support services and administration has a goal of supporting college student well-being while in college. It is important that administrators and staff members in this area truly understand the experience of COVID-19 for LGBTQ+ college students and how

it has affected their body image and general mental health. There is no full return to how we experienced the world prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only moving forward with a new knowledge of how the pandemic has impacted college students and how higher education can grow to better support LGBTQ+ students.

It is equally important for faculty members to understand how this experience impacts LGBTQ+ college student learning. Faculty assumingly are devoted to utilizing best practices in using online learning formats and would benefit from a clearer understanding of the new challenges students are facing during this time. A deeper understanding of the experience of body image during COVID-19 could help faculty who are questioning why a particular student is not attending or participating in class and offers avenues to connect students to resources and support. This new knowledge for faculty, staff, and higher education administration provides the potential opportunity for developing improved supports for students in college. Baceviciene and Jankauskiene (2021) stress the importance of college campuses having programs associated with "helping students to resist sociocultural pressures towards appearance and to promote positive body image" (p. 2). Student support services can use this knowledge to build on students' inherent positive strengths and protective factors during this time. Being aware of struggles with body image can bring light to the importance for campuses to create an atmosphere that is not focused on isolation and thus providing space to normalize the experience.

Beyond the higher education world, this research is important for additional service providers such as therapists, counselors, and others in the mental health field. Negative body image or body dissatisfaction threatens general well-being and can be associated with behaviors that can cause significant health risks (Grogan, 2017). If our understanding of mental health is

changing during COVID-19, it is important to consider how the field and practice of mental health may need to change to better support clients. This research can provide a window into areas that therapists need to be aware of in order to best help their LGBTQ+ and college student clients. COVID-19 may have increased depression and anxiety across the board, and research must explore how this may have changed the baseline and understanding of these mental health diagnoses. Beyond body image and mental health, a clearer understanding of this topic could lead to more effective suicide prevention and higher college retention.

Videoconferencing companies can learn about potential application adjustments to offer the most efficient and effective product to their customers. This research may benefit videoconferencing companies by providing information on determining the most effective default settings or exploring alternative options rather than the mirror effect of a person seeing themselves on the screen. As COVID-19 moved many interactions including school, work, and social to videoconferencing, it is important that these companies learn about their customers' usage and feedback with their applications.

It is evident that life has shifted during the pandemic, and this has left a gap in the research of human understanding. Researchers have declared a call to action to explore mental health during COVID-19 (O'Connor et al., 2020). As living during the COVID-19 pandemic is a new phenomenon for all people, it is imperative that research explore this experience during this time.

It is important to collect and analyze the experience of LGBTQ+ college student body image during COVID-19 as it leads to a better understanding of this shared experience for students who identify with this group. The understanding presented by this research study could

assist in helping the mental and physical health fields to better support LGBTQ+ individuals struggling with their body image and mental health during and after the pandemic. As researchers learn more about the mental aspect of living through COVID-19, resources and supports could be better defined to serve LGBTQ+ students in higher education. Understanding how LGBTQ+ college students experience this pandemic can lead to better resources moving forward to support LGBTQ+ students who may be struggling with body image issues. This understanding may be extended to improve the student experience for all college students.

Theoretical Framework

I used two theories to ground me in my theoretical framework: Social Comparison Theory and Self-Objectification Theory. Both theories are connected to body image and how social influence shapes a person's self-perception. Both theories also are connected to well-being and the potential negative consequences of society's beauty ideal.

Festinger (1954) developed the Social Comparison Theory using the basis that generally people tend to compare themselves with others. People use the information gained in their social comparisons to evaluate themselves and their standing in society (Festinger, 1954). This theory is relevant to body image as many people compare their bodies with others and society's thin ideal (Cash, 2012). Comparisons can be found amongst peer groups and from social media (Cash, 2012). LGBTQ+ individuals may find comparisons to the societal norm and also comparisons within their own community group (Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003).

Self-Objectification Theory was developed by psychologists Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) and focuses on the idea that women are often objectified in society and reduced to their physical appearance. As this objectification becomes internalized, women begin to see their

worth based on their physical appearance which can lead to negative body image (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Although Self-Objectification Theory originally focused primarily on women, further research has expanded to include members of the LGBTQ+ community (Massey et al., 2021).

Research Design

Positionality

To help readers better understand my interest in this topic, it is important to identify my positionality and history with body image in this introduction chapter. My education has made a significant impact on how I view the world and my research. I hold a bachelor's degree in psychology from MSU in Bozeman, Montana, and a master's degree in counseling psychology from Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. I am currently a doctoral candidate at MSU working towards a PhD in Adult and Higher Education. I value my education and how it has given me multiple lenses through which to make sense of the world around me. I have always been interested in learning more about how different people experience and view the world in which we live.

Additionally, the jobs I have held have assisted in the development of my personal lens. I began a career in psychology working as a family therapist following graduate school. After volunteering to serve as an alumni advisor to my national sorority at a private East Coast university, I changed the course of my career towards higher education. I wanted to support students in higher education as they worked toward graduation. I previously worked at two different private East Coast schools in admission and career counseling. Transitioning to MSU, I began teaching first-year seminar courses and transferred my role as an alumni advisor to the

local chapter of my sorority. I eventually moved into a university staff position focused on sexual assault prevention education and provided interactive learning opportunities to students on topics such as bystander intervention, consent, and healthy relationships. Following this position, I have served as the Assistant Dean of Students at MSU for over five years. In this role, I run the MSU CARE (Campus Assessment Response Evaluation) Program, which focuses on Behavioral Intervention for students of concern. An additional part of my job is to advise the Interfraternity Council and the nine international fraternities on campus. I recognize that working with college students presents an aspect of privilege in comparison to working with low-income families that were mandated to do family therapy at the beginning of my career. I have built upon my experiences throughout my career and have developed additional sets of lenses through which to view the world.

I identify as a White, female, cisgender, bisexual, middle-class, able-bodied feminist. I am in my forties and identify generationally as Xennial as I fall on the cusp of Gen X and Millennial. I recognize the privilege that I have in my race, class status, gender identity, and body function. Although I identify as bisexual, I am aware that many people assume I am heterosexual, and I am not always perceived as belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. I have struggled with my own body image and disordered eating issues throughout my life. I have found support in counselors, life coaches, nutritionists, wellness programs, and fitness, and I realize these outside supports are not available or affordable to everyone. Although I try not to become egocentric about my own experiences with body image, LGBTQ+, and COVID-19, I am aware that I have my own biases connected to my subjective experiences and I am aware of how these biases have created the lens for how I view this topic.

As MSU staff transitioned to working from home at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, I noticed while I was home during lockdown and quarantine that my body image awareness had shifted. This shift was due to extended time seeing myself on Zoom/Webex screens, lack of access to a gym, easy access to my stockpile of food and regular snacking, and a social media fixation creating a fear of gaining weight during the pandemic. Additionally, I am aware of having gained 20 pounds during the first year of the pandemic. My experience is bridled with my research in this area and has heightened my curiosity about whether LGBTQ+ college students are having similar experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, what exactly that experience may be like, and what kind of impact it could be having on their mental health and well-being.

Sample

This study utilized a purposeful sample to determine the experience of body image of a specific group (LGBTQ+ college students) during COVID-19. I conducted narrative interviews with individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ and who attended MSU as students in the spring 2020 and fall 2020 semesters. The sample goal for this narrative study aimed to involve four to five participants and ended up collecting stories from six participants. As previously identified, White, heterosexual women struggling with body image is apparent in the literature (Beccia et al., 2021; Burke et al., 2020; Mikhail & Klump, 2020; Schneider et al., 2022). Schneider et al. (2022) identified the gap in the research on COVID-19 and body image for marginalized and underrepresented groups. As members of the LGBTQ+ community may have increased body image issues during COVID-19 as compared to other groups, there is an important need to study this group (Schneider et al., 2022). This study identified a potential sample consisting of

marginalized individuals to explore a group of students who fall outside the “norm” or outside the demographic that is the typical focus of studies in this area.

Data Collection

Prior to collecting data, I obtained permission through the IRB process at MSU. Each participant reviewed and signed an informed consent document addressing confidentiality and the study's utilization intentions. Participants additionally were offered resources as needed if the minimal risk of interaction with this study required support from professionals in the MSU Counseling and Psychological Services office or other off-campus counselors or service providers. No participants requested additional resources during data collection and analysis.

I interviewed six LGBTQ+ students to discuss their experiences of body image during COVID-19. I recruited students from MSU by marketing within student organizations and used snowball sampling. Additionally, I advertised research participation in the diversity office on campus to those students who identify as LGBTQ+. I utilized social media to market participation in my study to those students who are not active in these groups or who had graduated, stepped out, dropped out, or are no longer attending college.

To collect data for this research project, I utilized narrative interviews, collected artifacts, and kept a research journal documenting my observations and thoughts throughout the process. All interviews were held on Webex, and audio was recorded through this application which provided initial transcription. Video recording was also collected through the Webex interviews. All files were kept on a password-protected computer accessible to only me.

Data Analysis

I used a narrative data analysis process I constructed from three different methods. Portions of James's (2017) method, Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis, and Leggo's (2011) RITES rubric were used to create my unique analysis procedure. My analysis plan included multiple readings/listenings of the collected data through different lenses and resulted in narrative summaries that led to the final narrative construction through five phases.

Operational/Construct Definitions

Body Image

Body image is a multifaceted psychological experience of the body connected to physical appearance and body satisfaction (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). Body image can be perceived as positive, negative, or a combination of both. The objective definition of body image is that everyone has a body, and it has details specific to each person. Body image is more commonly associated with a subjective definition in comparison of one's body to other bodies that are seen as ideal or more pleasing in society (Baker et al., 2019). Body image is how an individual feels about their own body. Within the context of this research project, body image is defined as the personal experience of one's body, including the mental, emotional, and physical responses to the shape, size, color, features, and details of one's body.

Western society has created an ideal body image that defines what society sees as physically attractive (Baker et al., 2019). Initially, this ideal was focused on White women who were thin and subjectively seen as beautiful (Hesse-Biber, 2006). As people compare themselves to this narrowly constructed body ideal, they may feel pressure to attain a specific body shape

and may develop negative feelings about their body, disordered eating, and potentially other mental health disorders (Choate, 2005; Hesse-Biber, 2006).

Body image was defined by the participants during data collection. The participant definitions were combined to create the overall definition of body image for this study. Individual definitions shared verbally during the interview are included in Chapter Four.

COVID-19

COVID-19 is the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 that has grown to a pandemic level across the globe since March 2020 (WHO, 2020). Objectively the pandemic is comprised of the coronavirus and is studied biologically on how it affects human bodies. Subjectively COVID-19 has changed individuals physically, emotionally, and mentally during this period. Humanity is learning about itself on a completely different level. Many people have been dealing with this change differently. The rules put into place around preventing the spread of the virus and the reactions by different people are a part of the essence of the personal experience with COVID-19. Deciding whether to comply with mask mandates, follow quarantine rules, or agree to become vaccinated have all been choices during the pandemic. This experience has made significant changes to the way people interact with each other.

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

Scope

While research on body image and the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to grow, much of this research has focused on White, heterosexual, women, and the voices of the LGBTQ+ community have not been represented (Schneider et al., 2022). The aim of this study is

to share the narratives of LGBTQ+ college students' experiences with body image during COVID-19. This addition to the literature helps to fill the gap and expand the understanding of this pandemic with a broader range of individuals.

The scope of the study was limited to recruiting volunteers over the age of 18 who were students at MSU during the spring 2020 and fall 2020 semesters. I used multiple marketing strategies to recruit these participants. The recruitment period lasted two months until six participants had been identified and agreed to participate in the study. All participants met with me for an interview and were asked to provide one to three artifacts relevant to the topic. I analyzed the narrative data and produced a qualitative dissertation.

Assumptions

An initial assumption is that the COVID-19 pandemic is real and impacted the entire world. The WHO declared COVID-19 a worldwide pandemic in March of 2020 (WHO, 2020). Many individuals doubted the reality or impact of COVID-19 and disagreed with lockdowns, mask mandates, and vaccinations (Skrynnikova & Astafurova, 2022). Based on information from the WHO and CDC, this research paper assumes that COVID-19 was in fact a true pandemic.

Another assumption of this research is that participants presented honest and truthful responses during the interview process. Participants shared their firsthand experiences as LGBTQ+ college students with body image during COVID-19, and it is assumed they were recalling this information to the best of their ability and not sharing false stories. Although it might not be a perfect recall, it was assumed that participants were sharing the truth from their point of view.

Limitations

Since the COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively new phenomenon, it is reasonable to mention the limitation of the lack of existing literature on this topic. Specifically, little research on body image in general, but also during COVID-19, has been done with marginalized or underrepresented populations (Schneider et al., 2022). As we move further into a world that better understands how COVID-19 has affected humans, the existing literature expands our understanding.

I did not receive any funding for this study, and thus there are limitations connected to the budget constraints of this dissertation. I did not apply for any grant funding for this project, and I did not have excessive personal monies dedicated to this project's completion. I initially intended to offer all participants financial appreciation for their participation in my study via gift cards but decided against this as advised by my committee during the proposal process.

Financially, I completed all the writing for this dissertation up to final editing and formatting without paying any additional resources. I used the Webex application for initial transcription as Webex is offered for free through my graduate school and job. Although I was prepared to pay for transcription services if needed, I completed all transcription on my own. I was prepared to edit and format my own dissertation but decided to pay for an editor to help with completing this manuscript as advised by some of my classmates that recently completed their dissertations.

Time constraints were a limitation that prevented me from completing a longitudinal study. I am required to graduate from the PhD program within ten years and complete this dissertation by spring 2026. My timeline allowed for data collection during fall 2023, analysis during spring 2024, and my defense held in fall 2024 for a December 2024 graduation date.

My sample was not representative of the entire population. Although I was seeking representation of the LGBTQ+ community, I did not have any participants who were male-identified or transgender. The gender identities of the participants were gender fluid, queer, or cisgender female-identified. Participants identified their sexual orientation as lesbian, bisexual, asexual, or queer. MSU is a predominately White institution, and five participants in this study self-identified as White and one participant as White, Hispanic. The identities of the LGBTQ+ students who participated in this study may present bias based on their specific identities.

What semester/year students were in their higher education journey and what courses they were taking during the spring 2020 semester (start of the pandemic) may have played a role in their experience and perception of their body image. For many universities, forced emergency online learning initially took place in March/April 2020 when in-person classes were suspended and students were evacuated (Zhai & Du, 2020). This is why I decided to use a sample of MSU students who were enrolled during the spring 2020 and fall 2020 semesters. The further we get from the start of COVID-19, the more participants must depend on their memory of this time period. The idea for this research study was initially identified in spring 2020 and changed over time. The length of time I took to complete my dissertation is a limitation of the study.

Limitations to consider in the interviews were participant comfort/rapport with the interviewer and how that impacted their level of disclosure. I used a narrative approach and hoped to develop a level of comfort and safety during the interview process to allow participants to fully share their stories. Participants may have left out certain details based on their comfort with me during the interview and the comfort of the intended audience of this dissertation. As I

work at the university where I collected data, I had previous interactions with some participants which may have impacted their comfort with me during the interview.

I chose to conduct a narrative research study as I was looking to understand the personal lived experiences of and share the stories of my participants. Additionally, I strive for creativity in my writing and was drawn to the narrative research method for this reason. I realized due to this decision, it would be impossible to interview every single student who matched the population for this study, and therefore, this was a limitation of my study. My sample size has limited representation beyond the students who have participated in the study.

As the pandemic continues, and potentially wanes and ends, the qualitative data collected from participants was based upon fading memories and multiple experiences. Changes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced the recall of the overall experience. Additionally, the onset of the pandemic created a traumatic experience for many individuals, and they may not have been able to recall and identify their true feelings and experiences at the time. Retrospective self-reported data may have resulted in an unclear recall of self during COVID-19.

Another potential limitation was the type of person to opt into participating in an interview for dissertation research may have only shown part of the story. People less likely to voluntarily participate in an interview for research may have had a unique experience that was not included in this study. As only certain people volunteered to participate in this study, the sample cannot be generalizable to the entire population. A limitation of the sample includes the chance that the sample only included those students most likely to volunteer for a research study and does not have representation from all LGBTQ+ students at the institution. Additionally, it is likely that only LGBTQ+ students who were “out” chose to participate in the study. Students

who are not publicly sharing or expressing their identification as LGBTQ+ were more likely not to volunteer to take part in this study.

As a doctoral candidate, I have limited experience with conducting research studies beyond my program coursework. I completed a quantitative study for my master's degree, but my master's thesis study was never published. In fact, I have not published any research papers in my lifetime. Due to this fact, I acknowledge that subjectivity and bias may have played a role in my research project. I will address this further in Chapter Three in my reflexivity section.

Even for the research participants who were not previously known to me, there was an interpersonal relationship developed between me and the research participants in the sharing of their personal stories through the interview process. Thus, I may have unduly influenced the responses of the participants.

Delimitations

I decided to limit my sample to undergraduate and graduate students. Although I considered the narrative of faculty/staff at the university, they were excluded from this study, and I decided to only allow participants who were students during the chosen time period. There were participants in my study that fell under both the category of student (taking courses at MSU) and staff as MSU provides tuition waivers, and there was at least one participant in this study who was a staff member utilizing this benefit to continue their education and learning during the spring 2020 and fall 2020 semesters. I chose to focus on students as in addition to completing work and social interactions online during the initial COVID-19 lockdown, they were also completing classes and coursework in a forced online environment. Also, the typical

college student aged 18−25 is developing their prefrontal cortex and will have a different experience with their critical thinking skills (Renn & Reason, 2013).

I decided to interview students enrolled in spring 2020 (onset of the pandemic) and fall 2020 (first semester of online/mixed learning). For similar reasons as listed in the above paragraph, I determined this time period to be significant to my study. The initial year of the pandemic was of great importance, and I wanted to interview students who were currently in higher education during this time and possibly continuing their education beyond that first year. Although there have been thousands of students who might have attended or are currently attending college during COVID-19, students who were still in high school during the initial lockdown will have had an experience different from those who were already in higher education.

As stated above, it is apparent that much of the research done on body image and even the research on body image and COVID-19 has focused on participants who are White, cisgender female, and heterosexual (Schneider et al., 2022). Choosing LGBTQ+ identifying students offers an opportunity to broaden the research in this area and give space to this community to share their personal experiences. None of the participants in this study identified as heterosexual, although I did have cisgender female and white student participants.

Chapter Summary

This qualitative research dissertation focused on the LGBTQ+ college student experience with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic. I developed this topic through my own experience as a bisexual woman who experienced changes in body image during COVID-19. I identified a gap in the literature for this topic, specifically with LGBTQ+ voices and the

pandemic. This research is important to understanding how best to support LGBTQ+ college student mental health and body image through the lenses of their own experiences.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This qualitative study expands the understanding of LGBTQ+ college students' experience with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic by exploring their lived experiences through narrative analysis. This study explored many areas connected to student experience. The review of the literature includes a variety of interrelated studies within the broad areas connected to understanding body image within a specific population (LGBTQ+ college students) during a specific time (the COVID-19 pandemic). This chapter reviews and synthesizes the existing literature related to my research topic.

This literature review includes various resources including journal articles, books, and media articles found online. My inclusion/exclusion criteria included resources relevant to my research questions. I initially began searching for articles using keyword searches through my academic library search engine, Google Scholar, and the research databases ERIC and PSYCINFO. The initial keywords used included: body image, COVID-19, COVID, pandemic, coronavirus, LGBTQ+, college students, and higher education.

Early in my literature review process, I found the Schneider et al. (2022) systematic review that included research studies on body image and COVID-19. This systematic review also included research articles focused on eating disorders (ED), which is not a specific variable for my study (Schneider et al., 2022). After thoroughly reviewing the Schneider et al. (2022) article, I utilized the citation list from this article to find each reference listed and read through the

abstracts of every article included in the systematic review. Based on the information provided in the abstract, I determined whether the listed study was relevant to my dissertation study based on the presented focus and the connection to my research questions. I collected all studies deemed relevant to my dissertation and read through each study in its entirety. After reading the articles, some of the studies were found not to have a connection to my focus and research questions and were therefore not utilized within this literature review. I read the references of each of the studies that I had pulled from Schneider et al. (2022) and repeated the process of seeking relevant articles by reading abstracts until a point of saturation was reached. I continued to regularly run keyword searches to collect additional literature for review through the above-mentioned search engines.

I also found a literature review focused on body image and COVID-19 by Monthuy-Blanc et al. (2023). I utilized this review to continue to define the articles used in my literature review. Most of the articles included in the Monthuy-Blanc et al. (2023) article were already integrated into my study, but I was able to use this guide to further expand my literature review. New articles that came to light following my proposal were reviewed only if they were deemed critically important (Randolph, 2009).

I utilized a thematic structure for this literature review. The critique of the literature begins by specifically looking at body image, including the history of body image and body image within the LGBTQ+ community. Studies focusing on COVID-19 and the mental health aspects found during the pandemic are woven into the fabric of this literature review. Continued exploration of studies relevant to my topic is filtered in towards the end as studies that become more closely related to my research questions are included.

As COVID-19 is a fairly new phenomenon, my research study fills a gap in the limited research on people's experiences with the pandemic. Additionally, my dissertation expands the previous literature to include LGBTQ+ voices in research on this topic. This gap is evident in the literature and suggested as further research in the discussion sections of many studies on the topic (Monthuy-Blanc et al., 2023; Schneider et al., 2022). Additionally, many studies focused on COVID-19 and body image utilized quantitative methodology (Monthuy-Blanc et al., 2023; Schneider et al., 2022). There is clearly a gap in the literature where qualitative research studies are needed to expand the understanding and lived experiences of people during the pandemic.

In addition to presenting the themes and critiques of the existing literature, this chapter includes my theoretical framework for my study. My theoretical framework includes Self-Objectification Theory and Social Comparison Theory. I will share a brief understanding of each theory and then how they were used as lenses in my research study.

Theoretical Framework

A feminist perspective on body image is a useful key to understanding the social construct of body image (Grogan, 2017). For decades feminist researchers have explored the social construction of women's bodies and have

> suggested that a system of unrealistic beauty norms promoted through media and internalized by women has set up impossible body ideals for women. These unrealistic ideals have been seen as a way to keep women in a subordinate position, by ensuring that they put their energies into vigilance over their bodies and these energies are channeled into the 'fight' for a perfect body. (Grogan, 2017, p. 65)

I utilized this lens of feminism and the social construction of bodies in developing the theoretical framework that contextualizes this study. My theoretical framework includes the theories of Social Comparison Theory and Self-Objectification Theory.

Social Comparison Theory

Festinger (1954) developed Social Comparison Theory looking at the regular evaluation individuals give themselves based on comparison to others. Festinger (1954) found there is an innate drive to compare oneself to others to know where one stands in society. People most often make upward comparisons (comparing themselves to someone they see as better off than them) to improve themselves (Festinger, 1954). Downward comparisons are seen when someone compares themselves to another whom they feel is less than themselves (Festinger, 1954). The information collected from social comparison helps people determine their standing in society and helps people to create goals and definitions of success, both societally and personally.

Social Comparison Theory is often connected to body image research. Most appearance-based social comparison is focused on society's thin ideal (Cash, 2012). Many individuals compare their bodies with the bodies of others around them, including their peer groups (Cash, 2012). Comparisons amongst others have expanded as social media outlets allow for individuals to compare themselves with celebrities, influencers, and others across the globe (Cash, 2012).

LGBTQ+ individuals have additional layers of comparison in society (Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). LGBTQ+ identified people are found to make comparisons to the societal norm and the thin ideal (Cash, 2012; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). Comparisons of this group are also found among their own community as LGBTQ+ individuals, specifically gay men, may be comparing their body image to fellow LGBTQ+ individuals to determine whether they fit into the standards of this community (Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003).

Self-Objectification Theory

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) developed Self-Objectification Theory focusing on the idea that the female body is socially constructed to be a physical object with a focus on appearance. Women and girls are chronically objectified in society for their bodies and sexuality, leading women and girls to internalize these objectified views and begin to accept them as normal (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Women are taught by society and media to view their bodies as objects which leads to self-objectification and body shame (Grogan, 2017). Self-objectification includes the habitual and constant monitoring of one's external features, also known as self-surveillance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Constant body surveillance can lead to negative body image, body dissatisfaction, and mental health issues including anxiety and disordered eating (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Self-Objectification Theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the sociocultural messages women and girls receive about their bodies and attractiveness. Research has identified self-objectification as a contributor to a variety of physical and mental health concerns in college women (Adams et al., 2017). Even when body image only focuses on women, there are many additional factors involved including "sexuality and age, as well as psychological factors such as self-esteem and the internalization of body ideals, [that have an] impact on these gender differences" (Grogan, 2017, p. xi).

Although Self-Objectification Theory originally focused primarily on women, further research has expanded to include members of the LGBTQ+ community (Massey et al., 2021). Gender and sexual orientation are important factors to consider when exploring body image (Massey et al., 2021). Research on Self-Objectification Theory with gay men reports that body dissatisfaction is higher for gay men than for heterosexual men (Martins et al., 2007). Body

shame and disordered eating behavior were linked for bisexual women (Brewster et al., 2014). Although self-objectification may be seen differently between gay men and lesbian women, both groups have been impacted by negative body image and body dissatisfaction (Engeln-Maddox et al., 2011).

Literature Review

The main focus of this study revolves around body image and the experience LGBTQ+ students had with body image during the onset and continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic. I begin the critique of the literature by exploring body image in general, beginning with a brief history of the concept, defining body image, and then narrowing in on how members of the LGBTQ+ community experience body image. This section sets the foundation for the understanding of my research study.

History of Body Image Research

The history of body image is complex and has evolved over time. Culture, social interactions, and psychological understanding play important roles in defining body image and how it has shaped society. Body image research first began in the 1920s but truly gained traction in the 1960s with researcher Paul Schilder (Grogan, 2017). This research focused mainly on distorted body perceptions seen in individuals with brain damage (Grogan, 2017). Schilder (1964) initially defined body image as “the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves” (p. 11). This set the foundation to build upon body image within psychological and sociological frameworks (Grogan, 2017).

Researchers have continued to expand on Schilder's initial definition in several ways since its inception (Grogan, 2017).

For the next 60 years, until the 1980s, body image research was conducted mainly with women and focused on eating disorders (Grogan, 2017). Eating disorders are defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and variants of these behavioral disorders (Maj, 2003). The focus on body image in connection with eating disorders mainly encompassed weight and shape concerns and thus limited the research done on the larger concept of body image (Grogan, 2017). Although eating disorders are historically connected with body image, this study does not focus on the specific construct of eating disorders.

Body image research began to grow throughout the past 40 years as more articles were cited, research journals focusing on body image were created, and the understanding of body image expanded to include not just negative body image, but a focus on building positive body image (Grogan, 2017). Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) broadened the understanding of positive body image to include body appreciation, body acceptance, and a larger concept of what defines beauty. These additions to the concept of body image have developed a fuller, more complete, and holistic understanding of this topic (Grogan, 2017). Multiple measurements were developed during this time period to explore the positive aspects of body image. Research on body image in the 21st century has grown to include more studies on men and boys and gender differences across the spectrum (Grogan, 2017).

Body image is a multifaceted construct that has been defined in a variety of different ways in the literature (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Grogan, 2017; Gullo & Walker, 2021). The

basic concept of body image is the connection between a person's physical appearance and how they perceive their body or their body satisfaction (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Thompson et al., 1999). Grogan (2017) defined body image by attempting to incorporate all key elements explored by multiple researchers by stating that body image is "a person's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about his or her body" (p. 4). This internal view of self "is associated with feelings and thoughts and may even modify [one's] behavior in certain situations" (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 4). These thoughts and feelings can be perceived as both positive or negative and can have a significant impact on a person's view of themselves within their world (Thompson et al., 1999). Many definitions of body image include the constructs of "body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness/muscularity, and self-objectification" (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016, p. 1). This research study includes the mental, emotional, and physical responses to one's body or the appearance-based aspects of body image within the overall definition of what is body image (Thompson et al., 1999).

Body image is subjective, and this has been identified by studying individuals whose perception of their body appears different from what can be objectively viewed by an outside observer (Grogan, 2017). One's body image is determined by social experience and can change over time (Grogan, 2017). The concept of body image helps to place oneself in the world around them as "[o]ur bodies simultaneously express and reflect how we see ourselves and our world" (Richburg & Stewart, 2022, p. 1).

Body Image Ideal

The beauty ideal for women historically has been Eurocentric and focused on young, White, thin, women (Grogan, 2017). The slender body image ideal is found to have originated in

the 1920s with the fashion industry's introduction of the flapper (Gordon, 1990). This ideal has changed in some ways over time to more specifically include muscle tone and curves within this ideal for women (Baker et al., 2019). "Curves" are defined as the parts of the body related to sexual objectification, such as breasts, and hips (Baker et al., 2019). Media still focuses on pictures of toned, slender bodies, which are often airbrushed while at the same time critiques the bodies of celebrities that do not fit this ideal (Grogan, 2017). Baker et al. (2019) found that many women desire to look like women who match the beauty ideal, specifically "thin women, fitness models, and women who were plus-sized or more curvaceous" (p. 280).

Slenderness is also idealized for men, but with more emphasis on muscularity (Grogan, 2017; Martins et al., 2007). Historically the ideal male figure has been seen as muscular and athletic (Grogan, 2017). A muscled and toned body defines one as being in control of oneself, having power, and being successful in today's society (Grogan, 2017). Gay men also have been found to desire a muscular, slim build (Martins et al., 2007).

Body Image and Social Media

When exploring the concept of body image, it is important to not only look at the experiences one has with their own body but also at the culture surrounding the individual (Grogan, 2017). Body image and its connection to social media are important concepts for this research study as during the COVID-19 pandemic the majority of individuals across the world were placed on lockdown and one of the only outlets for social interaction was found on social media sites. Body image research on traditional media historically has been focused on television, magazines, and other advertisement outlets such as billboards (Tiggemann et al., 2018). Since the introduction of the Internet, there have been a variety of social media

outlets/sites that individuals can interact with online. Commonly used social media sites include Facebook and Instagram (Tiggemann et al., 2018). Social media focus changes over time and usage as only a few years ago Facebook was considered the most popular social media site on the Internet (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016, Tiggemann et al., 2018) and now Instagram has grown in popularity due to their focus on images with very little text (Engeln et al., 2020). Both sites provide opportunities for interaction via "active use (e.g., commenting on content, sharing content) and passive use (e.g., looking at images, watching videos)" (Engeln et al., 2020, p. 42). Overall social media interaction has increased such that "adoption rates for social media in general, and Instagram in particular, are growing rapidly, especially among young people" (Engeln et al., 2020, p. 43).

Social media and body image have a connection as social media presents ample opportunity for comparison and focus on physical features (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). In exploring an overview of research on body image and social media, Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) found that correlational, longitudinal, and experimental research identified that "appearance comparisons appear to play an important role in the relationships between social media use and body image concerns" (p. 2). Correlational studies have found that for both men and women, social media use is related to self-objectification and drive for thinness (Fardouly & Vartainian, 2016). The few longitudinal studies on social media indicate that social media usage predicts body dissatisfaction, although not all social media platforms have the same impact on body image (Fardouly & Vartainian, 2016). Fardouly and Vartainian (2016) ultimately concluded that "overall, there is consistent evidence that social media usage (particularly Facebook) is associated with body image concerns among young men and women" (p. 3).

Appearance comparisons are frequently connected with social media and body image (Fardouly et al., 2017; Hendrickse et al., 2017). Fardouly et al. (2017) utilized the theoretical framework of Social Comparison Theory to explore the impact of women's appearance comparisons through social media, traditional media, and in-person interactions. The primary type of comparison found in the study was upward comparisons, or comparing oneself to someone they view as better than themselves, specifically on social media platforms (Fardouly et al., 2017). These upward comparisons were associated with less appearance satisfaction, less positive mood, increased thoughts of diet and exercise, and dieting and exercising behavior (Fardouly et al., 2017). Although the majority of appearance comparisons occur in person, a stronger comparison difference was found with social media (Fardouly et al., 2017). Consistently participants found a larger comparison between themselves and the comparison target when using social media than in person or through traditional media (Fardouly et al., 2017).

Social media has opened up additional opportunities for people to compare their appearance to others (Hendrickse et al., 2017). Hendrickse et al. (2017) found that women who use the social media site Instagram experience a higher drive towards thinness and greater body dissatisfaction as they engage in appearance-related comparisons. As Instagram is mainly a visually based social media site, it offers ample opportunity for users to engage in appearance-related comparisons which leads to body image concerns (Hendrickse et al., 2017). Continued exposure to the thin ideal on social media has a negative influence on body image and leads to body dissatisfaction (Hendrickse et al., 2017).

Rather than the social media experience defining one's body satisfaction, it may be more likely that individuals interact with social media in a specific way based on their body

satisfaction (Cohen et al., 2018). Cohen found that larger numbers of "selfies" (pictures of oneself) posted online were associated with greater body satisfaction while "photo investment" (time spent judging selfies) resulted in lower body satisfaction (Cohen et al., 2018). Individuals who already have higher body satisfaction post more selfies in an effort to receive positive reinforcement through increased "likes" (Cohen et al., 2018). People with decreased body satisfaction spend more time judging their selfies prior to posting online and are likely picking apart specific areas in which they are already concerned (Cohen et al., 2018).

Social media has been found to have a negative impact specifically on the body image of college women (Baker et al., 2019). Baker et al. (2019) utilized a qualitative approach collecting qualitative data through focus groups with college women. It was identified through these focus groups that young women spend large amounts of time both viewing and following others on social media sites. These individuals are looking for both value and validation from others. The construct of value is connected to receiving positive feedback from others through online interactions like comments. Validation is associated with a high number of "likes" on participants' posted images. In exploring this further with the social media outlet Instagram and utilizing a thematic analysis, Baker et al. (2019) found three main themes emerged around their first research question which focused on uses and features of social media: (a) effortful posting, (b) promotion of self, and (c) seeking engagement. Effortful posting was seen with participants reporting significant time and energy focused on choosing the most attractive photos of themselves for social media and utilizing filters before posting. Promotion of self was similar to effortful posting but additionally included comparison to others. Participants were aware of finding the best times to post and seeking engagement through "likes," often resulting in deleting

and reposting to match times with more social media traffic to increase "likes." Four themes surfaced for their second research question pertaining to body image: (a) responding to beauty ideal, (b) comparing self with others, (c) influencing appearance, and (d) display of self. The beauty ideal identified by women in this study matches Grogan's (2017) historic portrayal of a thin body, an hourglass-shaped body, or a body that is muscular and toned (Baker et al., 2019). Comparison with others was frequently mentioned both in body image and with engagement on their social media pages from others. Significant amounts of judgement occurred for women as they criticized their own bodies and their social media engagement, reporting they felt either ugly or confident based on the number of likes. Overall, their Instagram persona was especially important to them, sometimes more so than their real-life persona. Women who compare their appearances on Instagram may be vulnerable to pressure to conform to beauty ideals and may deal with body dissatisfaction (Baker et al., 2019).

Research on negative body image in association with body image has explored the issues with college women. Engeln et al. (2020) found that women college students reported higher levels of self-comparison when using Instagram versus participants who used Facebook or those in the control group. Although both Facebook and Instagram use can lead to an increase in appearance-related thoughts, Instagram use additionally has led to decreases in body satisfaction and positive effects. Therefore, Instagram use may be more problematic than Facebook use, although both can lead to issues with negative body image (Engeln et al., 2020).

Body Image and the LGBTQ+ Community

Body image has historically been an issue focused on "White, affluent, thin, cisgender, heterosexual girls and women" while ignoring that body image is an issue for all races, socio-

economic statuses, body sizes, genders, sexual orientations, and biological sexes (Beccia et al., 2021, p. 2). Members of the LGBTQ+ community have been found to have unique issues with body image due to greater concerns connected to societal pressures to fit pre-determined body ideals based on gender definitions (Beccia et al., 2021). A counter argument is that when LGBTQ+ individuals have and portray a positive body image it may be seen as resisting the oppressive systems that have defined an ideal body image that is not inclusive to all individuals (Richburg & Stewart, 2022).

As all humans have a physical body, they all also have body image. There is a need to expand the previous research by considering the multiple levels of intersectionality individuals experience (Beccia et al., 2021). Including the characteristics of gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and weight issues afforded Beccia et al. (2021) the opportunity to explore the "meaningful intersectionality between these dimensions of social identity/position" within their research on body image (p. 7).

> We position the social patterning of eating-related pathology as a reflection of the ways by gendered body-based pressures/experiences and social stressors are themselves socially patterned, within a wider social environment defined by interlocking systems of power and oppression that influence the nature, salience, and meaning of these factors. (Beccia et al., 2021, p. 3)

Beccia et al. (2021) found that pressures and social stressors associated with intersectional gender identity/expression create social inequality within body image (Beccia et al., 2021).

COVID-19

The following section introduces the construct of the COVID-19 pandemic and integrates its impact on body image and college students. This section discusses the mental health aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic and specific areas related to body image. Research specifically on

college students' experiences during this time is included. The integration of research specific to LGBTQ+ is found in the final section of the critique of the literature.

COVID-19 and Mental Health

In general, researchers agree that "the onset of the COVID-19 crisis has been a stressful experience for everyone, regardless of health status or life situation" (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 58). Common mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic include anxiety and depression (Cooper et al., 2022). "Generalized uncertainty and anxiety associated with the pandemic, as well as weight- and shape-specific uncertainty or changes" may be likely to have an impact on disordered eating behaviors during and after COVID-19 (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 59).

A key recommendation from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) during the COVID-19 pandemic was to social distance by keeping a minimum of six feet between you and others (CDC, 2021; WHO, 2021). Although this strategy may have been effective in containing the spread of the disease, "physical distancing increases the likelihood of experiencing isolation and loneliness" (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 60). Common emotions experienced by individuals during lockdown included "fear or anxiety, loneliness and isolation, anger or frustration, guilt or shame, and hopelessness or depression" (Nutley et al., 2021, p. 6). Being isolated and alone led to some of these emotions, but there was also a fear that interactions with others may lead to transmission of the virus or being exposed to COVID-19 in the process.

COVID-19 and College Students

College students are seen as a vulnerable population as they report higher levels of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and disordered eating as compared to the general population (Browning et al., 2021). Although COVID-19 has made a significant impact on all of humanity, "college students are facing a variety of challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak" (Zhai & Du, 2020, p. 287). Anxiety has increased as many universities closed, and students returned home during the initial onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 (Zhai & Du, 2020). College students report increased anxiety, stress, isolation, and lack of motivation from being negatively impacted by COVID-19 (Browning et al., 2021). Students have faced multiple changes during the pandemic, including changes in education, social distancing, and less time interacting socially (Browning et al., 2021). Additionally, students report concerns including feelings of "entrapment, boredom, fatigue, hopelessness, guilt, and inconvenience to hygiene, sleep, housing, employment, personal finances, and caretaking" (Browning et al., 2021, p. 8). Additional stressors for college students associated with COVID-19 include financial issues and concerns about contracting the virus, either personally or for family members and friends (Zhai & Du, 2020). Stressors related to COVID-19 continue to impact the mental health and well-being of college students (Zhai & Du, 2020).

In general college students' mental health has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim et al., 2021). Specifically, Kim et al. (2021) found increases in depression, binge eating behaviors, and alcohol use disorder for this population. A better understanding of the mental health needs of college students is an urgent need for healthcare and higher education (Kim et al., 2021).

Not all research studies found solely negative impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. Browning et al. (2021) surveyed students about their experience with COVID-19 and found a small number of students reported positive changes from the pandemic. These positive changes included increased optimism, productivity, adaptation, and empathy (Browning et al., 2021). Although there were some positive aspects that came out of the pandemic, "all students surveyed reported being negatively affected by the pandemic in some way" (Browning et al., 2021, p. 19).

COVID-19 and Intersectionality

Multiple researchers have found that gender, specifically being a woman during COVID-19, is a risk factor (Browning et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Ramalho et al., 2022). Browning et al. (2021) identified specific risk factors that predict higher levels of psychological impact on college students during the COVID-19 pandemic include being a woman, being a traditional-aged college student (18–25), having fair or poor general health, spending upwards of eight hours on screens each day, and knowing someone who contracted the coronavirus. Kim et al. (2021) found that women and Black students are especially at higher risk for alcohol use disorder and depression during the pandemic. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown had a higher psychosocial impact on not just women, but also younger participants (<30 years of age) (Ramalho et al., 2022).

COVID-19 and Lockdown

Regardless of gender/sex students were impacted by the social isolation connected to the COVID-19 lockdown (Meda et al., 2021). Specifically, students reported an increase in depressive symptoms during their time when they were restricted to staying at home (Meda et al., 2021). Meda et al. (2021) found that although many students reported feelings associated

with depression during lockdown, most returned to their pre-COVID-19 levels of depressive symptoms as the restrictions lifted. No impact was found in anxiety or obsessive-compulsive symptoms during lockdown. There was one outlier who experienced heightened symptoms of eating disorders, but this student was found to have a history of ED. This literature review addresses the risk involved with a previously diagnosed eating disorder before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in a later section. No other students reported an increase in eating disorder symptoms during this time (Meda et al., 2021). Meda et al. (2021) conclude that mental health workers should be aware of this shift in depressive symptoms in students regardless of whether they have been diagnosed with a mental disorder.

COVID-19 and Body Image

Rodgers et al. (2020) predict that anxiety related to COVID-19 will lead to increased risk associated with disordered eating. Rodgers et al. (2020) proposed three potential pathways where the pandemic might increase disordered eating: (a) disruptions to daily routines and restrictions to activities, (b) increased consumption of media, and (c) fear of contagion of COVID-19. Disruptions and restrictions during COVID-19 were predicted to affect access to mental and physical health care, social support networks, and coping strategies (Rodgers et al., 2020). As screen time increases, concerns arise related to media that may have a negative impact on individuals and may increase anxiety around food, exercise, and weight. The fear of becoming infected with COVID-19 is also connected to anxiety and access to food and supply chain concerns (Rodgers et al., 2020).

Research focused on body image and COVID-19 began to be published in late 2020 (Monthuy-Blanc et al., 2023). Flaudias et al. (2020) utilized a cross-sectional study with

undergraduate college students during the initial onset of the lockdown in France. Higher body dissatisfaction was found to be associated with higher reports of disordered eating behavior such as binge eating and dietary restriction (Flaudias et al., 2020). Participants with higher self-reported body mass index (BMI) and higher levels of depression related to binge eating behaviors. Eating restriction was associated with both low and high BMI scores and exposure to COVID-19 related media (Flaudias et al., 2020).

Pre-existing mental health disorders were exacerbated for those with body image disorders during COVID-19 (Pikoos, 2020). People with weight stigma experience before COVID-19 are considered more vulnerable to psychological distress and binge eating behaviors (Puhl et al., 2020). Individuals who had been diagnosed with an eating disorder prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic experienced heightened symptoms and increased disordered eating behavior as compared to those who had not previously been diagnosed with an eating disorder prior to COVID-19 (Meda et al., 2021). For those who have been diagnosed with an eating disorder prior to the pandemic, increased eating disorder cognitions and behaviors include "rumination, preoccupation with weight or shape…restriction, compulsive exercise, binge/loss-of-control eating episodes, [and] purging" (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 59).

Many aspects of living during the COVID-19 pandemic are thought to cause stress and anxiety and are found to be associated with negative body image and eating behaviors (Czepczor-Bernat et al., 2021; Swami et al., 2021a). Swami et al. (2021a) confirm that COVID-19-related stress and anxiety are associated with more negative body image as opposed to generalized stress and anxiety. When comparing the level of COVID-19 related anxiety and body weight, Czepczor-Bernat et al. (2021) found that women with higher levels of COVID-19

anxiety and excess body weight were found to have the highest levels of body dissatisfaction and negative body image.

Stress associated with COVID-19 has impacted many individuals. This stress has been connected to issues of body image and body appearance satisfaction. Czepczor-Bernat et al. (2021) found that the stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic are having a detrimental impact on mental health, specifically disordered eating behaviors and body image. Czepczor-Bernat et al. (2021) compared "women with excess body weight" to women with "healthy body weight" in their study using BMI (p. 1). Specifically, women with excess weight based on BMI calculations and higher levels of stress and anxiety related to COVID-19 had significantly higher levels of body dissatisfaction and lower levels of satisfaction with their appearance and specific body areas (Czepczor-Bernat et al., 2021). This COVID-19 related stress has also led to higher levels of eating disorder behaviors and negative body image reported by Polish women (Czepczor-Bernat et al., 2021).

Although stress during COVID-19 impacted body image, protective factors were also found to counter this. Swami et al. (2021b) found COVID-19-related stress was linked with body image disturbance. They believe that stress related to COVID-19 impacts body image in extreme ways that can lead to disordered eating. They explored the concept of self-compassion as a protective factor to counteract elevated levels of negative body image and COVID-19 stress (Swami et al., 2021b).

Additional research on stress and body image was conducted to better understand the connections of these variables during COVID-19. Swami et al. (2021a) had a balanced sample of men and women in their study but did not identify gender beyond the male/female binary. They

collected data on body image for both genders using different body image scales (Swami et al., 2021a). For women, they looked at body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness and for men they focused on body fat and muscularity dissatisfaction. Their study confirms that stress and anxiety related to COVID-19 are associated with negative body image for both genders. COVID-19-related anxiety and not COVID-19-related stress were significantly associated with body dissatisfaction in women and with body fat dissatisfaction in men. These findings may be related to how society affects the lived experience of gender and the messaging we receive regarding attractiveness in our culture (Swami et al., 2021a). Standards of attractiveness play a role in one's perception of their value in society as seen through the lens of Social Comparison Theory.

Athletes were a group with specific body image struggles during COVID-19. Buckley et al. (2021) explored the changes current and former athletes had with their body image during COVID-19. As access to training and competitive interaction ceased during the COVID-19 lockdown, participants reported greater concern about weight gain and muscle loss (Buckley et al., 2021). Regardless of whether or not the participants' bodies had physically changed during this time "the fear of anticipatory body changes was enough to indicate a worsened body image" (Buckley et al., 2021, p. 6). Buckley et al. (2021) included qualitative data that indicated participants were more critical about their physical appearance in connection with their increased social media interactions. One participant stated, "I hate attending Zoom meetings because I compare myself to others on the screen" (Buckley et al., 2021, p. 7). Like other non-athlete participants from other studies on this topic, the athlete participants indicated concerns about the lack of ability to control their relationship with food and changes in their living situations during

this time. In addition to body image concerns, this study indicates increased disordered eating behaviors among current and former athletes (Buckley et al., 2021).

Negative body image could lead to depression in connection to online interactions. Choukas-Bradley et al. (2022) explored how body image concerns were associated with depressive symptoms. They found that body image concerns were associated with depressive symptoms during the pandemic and appearance-management routines disruption predicted depressive symptoms at both follow-up assessments (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022). Although they found video-chat interactions did predict higher depressive symptoms at the two-week checkpoint, this was not found at the seven-month follow-up (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022). Choukas-Bradley et al. (2022) believe "it is possible that adolescents acclimated to video-chat interactions" as they continued to live within the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 9). This study is important in indicating the need for "parents and practitioners alike [to focus] on preventing the development of pandemic-related body image concerns" in our nation's adolescents (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022, p. 9).

COVID-19, Body Image, and Lockdown

COVID-19 and the resulting lockdown led to an increase in stressors for college students (Zhai & Du, 2020). Many students were forced to move back to their home of origin during the initial phase of COVID-19 as colleges and universities across the country closed (Zhai & Du, 2020). It is important to note how the change in environment affected individuals and their relationship with their body image. Students who interacted on the social media site Reddit posted content about having to move home to live with their parents due to university closures

during COVID-19 and how this had an impact on their body image, disordered eating behaviors, and mental health (Nutley et al., 2021).

> My college is closed for the remainder of the semester and with that went my support system and all of my friends. School is where I have made the most progress in terms of recovery because I had my boyfriend and friend [sic] provided nothing but positivity and support. However, I can't say that's the same at home. (Nutley et al., 2021, p. 5)

Many individuals lived with family members who were not aware of their disordered eating behavior during the COVID-19 lockdown which led to increased feelings of anxiety and frustration (Nutley et al., 2021). As many individuals were "unable to attend work, school, and social gatherings, [they] grappled with boredom and loneliness" (Nutley et al., 2021, p. 5). This boredom and loneliness led some individuals to obsessive thinking around relationships with food and body weight (Nutley et al., 2021).

Eating behavior changes were indicated during the COVID-19 lockdown connected to the stressors of dealing with the pandemic (Haddad et al., 2020). Haddad et al. (2020) found that the restrictions associated with confinement led to fear surrounding COVID-19 such as fear of contracting the disease, mental health concerns such as anxiety, feelings of anger, and overall boredom. This matches the hypotheses from Rodgers et al. (2020) regarding concerns about COVID-19 and body image. These fears are correlated with concerns about weight and shape and restraint behaviors in eating (Haddad et al., 2020).

Along with changes in eating disorders, concerns regarding changes in weight were evident during COVID-19 (Haddad et al., 2021). Although concerns about gaining weight were indicated by participants, actual weight changes were not found (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021; Haddad et al., 2021; Robertson et al., 2021). It was clear that "[d]ue to the restrictions placed on people's movements and changes to the accessibility of food throughout the day,

lockdown may significantly influence people's eating habits, exercise behaviours, and body image" (Robertson et al., 2021, p. 1). Haddad et al. (2021) further explored the concerns around confinement during lockdown by researching the relationship of COVID-19 factors (i.e., fear of COVID-19, anxiety, anger, boredom, eating disorders, and duration of confinement) with weight perception. Participants reported perceived weight gain changes, but no actual measured variation in BMI was found. Participants with higher levels of anxiety and longer time spent in lockdown had higher weight change perceptions, while participants with higher fear of COVID-19 and higher self-reported weight change had lower weight change perceptions (Haddad et al., 2021).

Baceviciene and Jankauskiene (2021) stated, "it is reasonable to assume that the internalization of the stereotyped beauty ideals, body image concerns and disordered eating in university-aged students might be elevated during the COVID-19-related lockdown compare[d] to [their] pre-lockdown situation" (p. 2). Their study used the gender binary to compare women and men university students' experiences pre- and post-lockdown during COVID-19 (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021). An increase in thin internalization was found among the women participants in the study and increased appearance evaluation was seen for all. The study findings may suggest that lockdown removed external stressors caused by the objectification of appearance in society by not having to prepare one's appearance for going out and being subjected to the public gaze and judgement of others. It is likely that negative body image and disordered eating may increase in the future as people return to pressures connected to the internalized thin ideals of our society. A protective factor for participants during lockdown may be associated with moving home, as many students' parents were in control of and prepared their

meals (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021), but moving home was also seen as a risk factor for many students (Nutley et al., 2021). Interestingly, it was found that fast-food consumption decreased during COVID-19 partially due to the limitations of being able to procure this type of food (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021).

Prior patterns in physical activity and eating behavior played a role in how people handled the COVID-19 lockdown (Martinez-de-Quel et al., 2021). Research warns that "with fitness centers closed en masse and outdoor physical activity complicated by physical distancing efforts, those with heightened weight and shape concerns may experience increased distress" (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 57). Martinez-de-Quel et al. (2021) found that individuals who were actively participating in physical activity prior to the lockdown in Spain struggled with greater issues around sleep quality and perceived well-being than those participants who were physically inactive prior to the lockdown. A small significant increase in overall body weight was observed in the sample, but there was no increase in the risk of developing eating disorders (Martinez-de-Quel et al., 2021). Martinez-de-Quel et al. (2021) did not find evidence to indicate increased concerns around disordered eating during COVID-19 as was found in other research (Robertson et al., 2021). Very few participants in the Robertson et al. (2021) study identified previous diagnoses of eating disorders prior to COVID-19 and being diagnosed with a previous eating disorder has been found to increase risks in disordered eating symptomatology during the pandemic. Additionally, Martinez-de-Quel et al. (2021) found that households with greater numbers of individuals living together increased weight gain and decreased self-perceived well-being. This change for students who returned home could have an impact on COVID-19 stressors.

COVID-19 and Weight Stigma

There has been "a substantial uptick in fatphobia media messaging surrounding diet and exercise" during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 57). Online social media created jokes and memes directed at weight stigma and focused on weight gain during COVID-19 such as "the Quarantine 15" or gaining the "COVID 19" (Keel et al., 2020). Both jokes are a word play on "the Freshmen 15" which insinuates that first-year students gain an average of 15 pounds during their first year in college (Keel et al., 2020, p. 2). The joke indicates the general public is gaining 19 pounds during the pandemic and is associated with the negative weight stigma on this perceived weight gain. It is likely jokes such as these may have influenced disordered eating during this time (Keel et al., 2020).

Beyond online jokes, weight stigma during the COVID-19 pandemic was connected to additional mental health concerns (Puhl et al., 2020). Puhl et al. (2020) researched weight stigma, such as teasing, during COVID-19. They specifically assessed five outcome variables: depressive symptoms, stress, binge eating, eating as a coping strategy, and physical activity. Individuals who experienced weight stigma prior to the pandemic had higher levels of all outcome variables except physical activity. This indicates that people who have experienced previous weight stigma are more vulnerable to psychological distress and binge eating behaviors during COVID-19 (Puhl et al., 2020).

COVID-19 may have increased the societal pressure on people who do not fit into society's ideal body image (Czepczor-Bernat et al., 2021). Czepczor-Bernat et al. (2021) found that women with excess body weight as calculated by BMI score had higher body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behavior during COVID-19. It is outside the scope of this dissertation to discuss the concerns with using BMI as a valid tool to determine the health of a person. BMI is

calculated by dividing weight by height but does not consider an individual's body composition (Grogan, 2017). BMI is a tool that is often used to measure health, but this blunt measurement may not be the best to assess changes in weight or show a full picture in the understanding of body image. As larger bodied individuals already struggle with societal pressures, it makes sense that the COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate stress and anxiety in these individuals who are already feeling pressure to conform.

Many people reported supposed weight gain during COVID-19, but it was likely a perceived weight gain rather than an actual change in BMI (Haddad et al., 2021; Keel et al., 2020; Ramalho et al., 2022). As individuals were restricted to their homes "food and eating remained one of the few pleasurable activities that most people could pursue" during this time (Keel et al., 2020, p. 1). Concerns surrounding weight, shape, and eating increased, likely connected to decreases in physical activity and increases in screen time including watching TV, interacting with social media, and participating in gaming. COVID-19 may have added to concern about body image that "in our weight-obsessed culture, this may translate into increased likelihood of viewing the body as being heavier during this pandemic even if body weight has not changed meaningfully" (Keel et al., 2020, p. 6). Keel et al. (2020) share that people with increased negative body image concerns may be particularly affected by COVID-19 and may have increased risk of developing eating disorders. Keel et al. (2020) suggest weighing oneself regularly during COVID-19 to counter the perception that one has gained weight during this pandemic, when they may have not. They refer to it as exposure therapy, but I find concern with this suggestion due to the behaviors associated with compulsive tendencies and the negative impact this type of activity could cause someone with body image issues.

COVID-19 and Disordered Eating/Eating Disorders

Although this research study is not focused on eating disorders, I have included a section on disordered eating as undiagnosed eating behaviors play a role in perceived body image. I speculated that I might collect data on eating disorders but determined to separate this construct from body image as a whole as they are different factors. Flaudias et al. (2020) found a strong relationship between stress associated with COVID-19 (specifically initial lockdown) and disordered eating behaviors. It was reported that this COVID-19 related stress is associated with higher levels of binge eating behavior and dietary restrictive eating behavior (Flaudias et al., 2020). Phillipou et al. (2020) saw changes in eating behaviors for both individuals with eating disorder diagnoses and the general population in Australia. The specific behaviors explored by the research team included restricting, binge eating, purging, and exercising (Phillipou et al., 2020). Eating behaviors were found to change for all participants regardless of previous diagnoses with an eating disorder.

Women and younger participants (those ages 18–30) reported changes in thoughts and behaviors associated with eating and food (Robertson et al., 2021). This group also reported more time exercising during the initial COVID-19 lockdown. This could be associated with improvements in physical health and used as an effective coping strategy. Alternately, this increased exercising behavior could be associated with compulsivity, which may be connected to heightened anxiety associated with weight and shape concerns (Robertson et al., 2021). Zhou and Wade (2021) found that college-age women who were at-risk for eating disorders had increased disordered eating behavior during COVID-19 than they had previously to the start of the pandemic. In researching perceived changes to eating, exercise, and body image during

lockdown, it was found that women had increased problems with eating regulation, preoccupation with food, and worsening body image (Robertson et al., 2021). Those diagnosed with an eating disorder prior to COVID-19 had significantly greater issues with eating, exercise, and body image (Robertson et al., 2021). Disordered eating behaviors may develop among the general population and worsen in people with eating disorders as the

> collective anxiety about weight gain during lockdown, and stigmatizing media messages about the dangers of higher body weight, might contribute to increased body shame and levels of disordered eating, especially in vulnerable populations such as those with a current or historic eating disorder. (Robertson et al., 2021, p. 2)

Increases in perceived changes in participants' relationship with food were significantly associated with elevated psychological distress (Robertson et al., 2021).

Restrictive behavior is commonly seen in individuals diagnosed with eating disorders and these behaviors were seen to increase during COVID-19. Participants with diagnosed eating disorders fell into three core themes including "social restrictions, functional restrictions, and restrictions in access to mental health services" (Brown, et al., 2021, p. 1). There was significant attention paid to changes in participants' routines and social interactions, specifically "many activities such as the commute to and from work, mealtime routines and food shopping had to be altered" (Brown et al., 2021, p. 5). As routine offers some sense of control many participants struggled with these forced adjustments (Brown et al., 2021). Loneliness stood out as a key concept of social restrictions, especially for those living alone. Due to restrictions during COVID-19, many participants lost contact with their mental health service providers and struggled to find support (Brown et al., 2021).

Few research studies included qualitative data, but there is value in people wanting to share their stories during COVID-19. Simone et al. (2021) explored disordered eating during

COVID-19 using both quantitative and qualitative data. Qualitative data resulted in six themes: (a) mindless eating and snacking, (b) increased food consumption, (c) generalized decrease in appetite or dietary intake, (d) eating to cope, (e) pandemic-related reductions in dietary intake, and (f) reimergence or marked increase in eating disorder symptoms. Mindless eating and snacking consisted of comments surrounding boredom during lockdown. More participants indicated an increase in food consumption, but some participants identified a decrease in appetite or intake of food. As COVID-19 was a period of heightened emotional states, participants identified using food as a coping skill to balance feelings of stress, anger, and fear. Participants in this category specifically included essential workers. Stress played a key role in changes to eating behaviors during the pandemic. Eating disorder symptoms arose during this time, especially for those with a previously diagnosed eating disorder. Over 70% of the sample indicated that their eating behaviors were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost 100% of the study participants opted to provide qualitative data via open-ended questions indicating the desire to share one's story (Simone et al., 2021).

Eating behaviors were sometimes seen as a coping mechanism to deal with the psychological trauma experienced during COVID-19 (Ramalho et al., 2022). Specific disordered eating behaviors indicated by participants include skipping meals, grazing eating behavior, overeating, loss-of-control overeating, and binge eating episodes. Long-lasting psychological trauma, specifically depressive states, is a result of dealing with the crises from COVID-19 (Ramalho et al., 2022).

COVID-19, Body Image, and Social Media

As there has been a history of individuals reporting concerns with body image associated with social media (Baker et al., 2019), it makes sense that as the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns forced individuals into online work, school, and social interactions, that these concerns may increase. There was an increase in the amount of time people spent on social media sites during the lockdown period of COVID-19, which makes it likely these increased appearance comparisons led to increases in negative body image or body dissatisfaction (Nutley et al., 2021). Nutley et al. (2021) reviewed social media posts through the site, Reddit, to conduct qualitative research on the experiences of users during COVID-19 on eating disorder-related discussion forums. Through their analysis they found common emotions expressed during this time were isolation, frustration, and anxiety. Reddit users experienced an increase in eating disorder symptoms and over 65% of posts indicated "users struggled to ignore obsessive thoughts related to food and weight and to refrain from engaging in disordered eating behaviors prompted by loneliness, anxiety, and boredom" (Nutley et al., 2021, p. 4). About 20% of users reported some sort of negative body image due to "having more time to scrutinize their bodies and eating behaviors" (Nutley et al., 2021, p. 4). Many Reddit users indicated an increase in body-checking behaviors and that their body dissatisfaction affected their daily functioning negatively. This negative body image led some users to compensate by restricting, overexercising, vomiting, or using laxatives. Triggers for negative body image included being criticized about body weight or shape by family members (Nutley et al., 2021).

Research has found that it is not necessarily the amount of time you spend on the computer in virtual interactions that influences body image, but the specific interactions we have on screen (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021; Cohen et al., 2018; Pfund et al., 2020). Factors

such as the type of activity and previous body satisfaction level play a role in the effect social media or time on screen relate to body image (Cohen et al., 2018; Pfund et al., 2020). Virtual interactions online vary based on activity and past body image experience.

Increased time online is connected to body image. Baceviciene and Jankauskiene (2021) believe their finding of an "increase in internalization of thin/low fat [body] ideal" for both men and women during COVID-19 may be associated with increased time spent on the internet (p. 6). They acknowledge that this association may have been prevalent since they chose to divide reported screen time between "self-pleasure purposes" and "time spent for work or academic studying" in their study and university students were asked to report solely on screen time associated with "self-pleasure purposes" (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021, p. 6). Thus, the increased time on the internet was only focusing on social networking time versus the overall increased screen time connected to work and school being moved online during the COVID-19 lockdown (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021).

Women and adolescent girls reported higher frequency in usage of all social network sites, and many increased their views of appearance-focused Instagram accounts during the COVID-19 lockdown (Vall-Roque et al., 2021). This increase in viewing of social media led to higher body image disturbances. More time spent on Instagram is associated with body dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, and a higher drive for thinness in younger participants, those who fall into Generation Z. Only drive for thinness was associated with more time spent on Instagram in older participants, Millennials or Generation X in the study (Vall-Roque et al., 2021).

Social media can cause problems associated with body image due to posting weight-stigmatizing content emphasizing the fear of gaining weight during the pandemic (Pearl, 2020). Many online users found that unhealthy examples of body image and "quarantine-related messages that promote unrealistic thin ideals and extreme weight control practices have been flagged as dangerous by eating disorder advocates" (Pearl, 2020, p. 1180). Portrayals of obesity equaling laziness and a higher body weight as negative add to the weight stigma seen on social media sites. These stereotypes may counteract efforts to engage in healthy eating and exercise and lower confidence in the ability to focus on positive health (Pearl, 2020).

Not all interactions online related to negative body image during the COVID-19 pandemic. Branley-Bell and Talbot (2020) found that interactions in online social support groups were a protective factor for participants with eating disorders during COVID-19. Many respondents of their study indicated that they benefited from social distancing in reference to lockdown and suggestions to decrease in-person interactions as it decreased anxiety and offered space to dress comfortably out of the view of society (Branley-Bell & Talbot, 2020). During lockdown, online interactions and "social media can help people to feel connected while practicing social distancing" (Pearl, 2020, p. 1180). Some people felt that COVID-19 gave them a break from societal pressures (Pikoos, 2020; Quathamer & Joy, 2021). A small percentage of Reddit users indicated their eating disorder symptoms were less frequent or less severe during COVID-19 (Nutley et al., 2021). About 12% of users analyzed stated they used this time to focus on recovery (Nutley et al., 2021).

COVID-19, Body Image, and Videoconferencing

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic forcing people online, research around videoconferencing indicated that "users want to be able to see their self-image, but are concerned about their appearance, and that vanity issues can cause distraction and discomfort in sharing communication" (de Vasconcelos Filho et al., 2009, p. 253). Many videoconferencing users indicated the reason they wanted to see their self-image was to ensure it was appropriate, that they were in the frame of view, and to continue an awareness of their appearance throughout the videoconference (de Vasconcelos Filho et al., 2009). Appearance and vanity are seen as the key concerns for wanting access to see one's image onscreen. Although seeing one's own image can be helpful during videoconferencing, some users felt self-conscious about their mirror image and were distracted by seeing themselves throughout the videoconference meeting. Some users continue to glance at their images throughout the videoconference and are thus distracted by watching their own images (de Vasconcelos Filho et al., 2009).

Time spent online along with how that time was spent impacted body image during COVID-19. Gullo and Walker (2021) explored how the amount of time an individual spent on videoconferencing or viewing images of themselves online (selfies) has increased depression and anxiety while also decreasing feelings of attractiveness. As expected, individuals reported more time viewing themselves on screen in videoconferencing during the initial lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic than they had two months prior (Gullo & Walker, 2021). Gullo and Walker (2021) hypothesized that participants' appearance orientation would increase, but found this not to be true, likely in connection with lowered stress related to not having to prepare one's appearance for going outside and only having to dress and style for what was seen on the videoconferencing screen (i.e., no need to wear pants).

It makes sense that the more time one spends comparing their video image to others on the screen would lead to lower reported levels of body and facial satisfaction (Pfund et al., 2020). Videoconferencing users who reported this body and facial dissatisfaction also were more likely to utilize features such as filters to change their virtual appearance and reported spending more time viewing their own image on the screen (Pfund et al., 2020). George et al. (2022) found that women spend more time viewing themselves during videoconferencing meetings than men. This self-monitoring was found to be a distraction to the participants who devoted time to their own image (George et al., 2022).

A common experience of those using videoconferencing during COVID-19 has been coined Zoom Fatigue, which is an exhaustion from online interactions (Bailenson, 2021). There are four potential explanations for why people have been experiencing Zoom Fatigue during COVID-19 (Bailenson, 2021). These include the amount of time one spends gazing at the close-up images portrayed in the virtual Zoom boxes, cognition overload, evaluation of self while seeing the mirror image portrayed on the screen (also known as "mirror anxiety"), and the fact that we are constrained to sit in front of our computers during Zoom meetings (Bailenson, 2021). Ratan et al. (2022) explored how viewing oneself during videoconferences contributes to Zoom Fatigue and could potentially bring negative attention to one's facial features. Ratan et al. (2022) define this type of body dissatisfaction as "Facial dissatisfaction, feeling unhappy about one's own facial appearance" (p. 124). Results indicate that Zoom Fatigue is higher for women than men based on gender and higher for Asian than White participants based on ethnicity (Ratan et al., 2022).

Students were forced into emergency remote instruction during COVID-19 regardless of their field of study and oftentimes spent their time in synchronous videoconferencing sessions for class time (Bedenlier et al., 2021). Bedenlier et al. (2021) explored why German college students do not turn on their cameras during synchronous videoconferencing sessions held for college courses during COVID-19. They found this was related to personal thoughts and feelings (privacy) and whether the course had built a trusting learning environment (Bedenlier et al., 2021).

LGBTQ+ Community

There are very few research articles related to COVID-19 and body that indicate participants identified specifically as part of the LGBTQ+ community (Schneider et al., 2022). I utilize this final section of the critique of the literature to include studies specific to members of the LGBTQ+ community and body image during COVID-19. Very little research has focused on the LGBTQ+ experience with body image during COVID-19 as most participants in body image research are cisgender, heterosexual females (Hart et al., 2022; Schneider et al., 2022; Tabler et al., 2021). A call to action included a specific focus on the importance of researching the impact of COVID-19 and LGBTQ+ individuals (Holmes et al., 2020). As research has indicated unique challenges for LGBTQ+ people associated with body image during COVID-19, it is imperative that this community be more widely researched (Holmes et al., 2020; Quathamer & Joy, 2021; Schneider et al., 2022; Tabler et al., 2021). Cooper et al. (2022) identified that feelings of isolation due to the requirements of social distancing during quarantine may be higher and of greater severity for those individuals in minority populations, including members of the LGBTQ+ community. Additional understanding of the LGBTQ+ community and body image

during COVID-19 will provide practitioners with a clearer direction in how to assist and support their patients and what areas to explore with LGBTQ+ individuals (Tabler et al., 2021).

Body Image, COVID-19, and LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ youth are a vulnerable group that "are likely to be uniquely impacted as a result of the physical distancing implemented to contain the spread of COVID-19" (Fish et al., 2020, p. 451). Fish et al. (2020) reviewed postings from chat-based support groups for LGBTQ+ youth (ages 13−19 years). They found that LGBTQ+ adolescents had exacerbated mental health concerns due to stress, frustration, anxiety, depression, and general mental health struggles. The extra free time due to the COVID-19 lockdown "led to rumination regarding their sexuality and/or gender, which was burdensome" (Fish et al., 2020, p. 451). On the flip side, this time away led to positive opportunities to think about identity without outside stressors. There was an intense loss of support including extracurricular activities, safe spaces, and gender and sexuality alliance (Fish et al., 2020). Many LGBTQ+ youth were stuck at home with parents or other family members who were non-affirming of their identities, which caused increased stress and anxiety (Fish et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2022). With the reduction of in-person support services available during COVID-19, many LGBTQ+ youth took advantage of online formats for support (Fish et al., 2020). Online interactions were important for LGBTQ+ youth during COVID-19 as "youth are maintaining connections through social media and similar platforms" (Fish et al., 2020, p. 451).

Exploring changes in disordered eating behaviors among LGBTQ+ young adults led to further understanding of the difficulties connected to COVID-19 with this population (Hart et al., 2022). LGBTQ+ individuals with previous disordered eating behavior prior to COVID-19

indicated an increase in urge and frequency of restrictive eating, binge eating, and compensatory behaviors (Hart et al., 2022). Living in a non-affirming environment or lacking family support played a role in the restrictive eating and binge eating behaviors of LGBTQ+ participants (Hart et al., 2022).

Gonzales et al. (2020) built upon the additional difficulties for LGBTQ+ students. More than half of the students studied reported dealing with frequent mental distress, anxiety, or depression (Gonzales et al., 2020). This mental distress was more likely for those LGBTQ+ students who were living with unsupportive families during COVID-19. Students had mental distress because they were unable to access mental health care in person (Gonzales et al., 2020).

Members of the LGBTQ+ community have been found to have higher levels of stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison to cisgender and/or heterosexual individuals (Tabler et al., 2021). Also, this stress is associated with increased disordered eating behavior and perceived weight gain during COVID-19. As LGBTQ+ people have comorbidities during COVID-19 connected to mental health and being part of a marginalized/underrepresented group, this community has an increased risk of struggling with areas related to body image. The disruption in routine greatly affected physical movement, exercise routines, and eating behaviors among LGBTQ+ individuals (Tabler et al., 2021).

Research exploring the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic is central to this dissertation. Quathamer and Joy (2021) utilized a lens of Queer Theory and poststructuralism to view their qualitative research. The results varied along “a wide spectrum of experiences ranging from radical resistance to pursuit of hegemonic ideals” (Quathamer & Joy, 2021, p. 8). Some participants challenged the body ideal

norms and worked toward becoming their authentic selves, while others were plagued with disordered eating and body shame. Even though participants were physically separated from hetero-cis-normative society during COVID-19, they continued to feel the impact society makes on their body image. LGBTQ+ individuals "regardless of their sexuality or gender are subjected to surveillance and self-monitoring" connected to body image during COVID-19 (Quathamer & Joy, p. 8). The results were placed into four themes which included "(a) COVID-19 as a time for reflection, (b), a time away from social surveillance, (c) a time to work on oneself, and (d), a time to (dis)connect" (Quathamer & Joy, 2021, p. 4). Research on the LGBTQ+ community and body image during COVID-19 can provide health care professionals with an insight into the way they serve this community of patients (Quathamer & Joy, 2021).

Brownstone et al. (2021) expanded research on COVID-19 and body image focused on gender outside the binary as "COVID-19 has created a sociocultural context likely to increase disordered eating and body distress risk for TGNB [transgender/gender nonbinary] individuals" (p. 2). Brownstone et al. (2021) found five qualitative themes in their research: (a) losing affirming spaces and security, (b) gaining affirming and supportive spaces online, (c) reflecting on embodied gender and identities, (d) realizing new connections and insights, and (e) considering the self in a social context. 50% of the participants reported changes to their gender-affirming spaces, services, or communities during COVID-19. This was especially prevalent in students who moved back home with their families after their colleges were closed due to the pandemic as the college environment provided more access to accepting communities. An increase in disordered eating was reported and the anxiety and stress related to these eating behaviors are connected to participant's experiences in oppressive environments at home. Many

participants were able to find support in online communities during the pandemic. The pandemic offered all participants time and space to reflect on their identities, specifically their intersectionality. Social distancing allowed for the opportunity of self-exploration as there were fewer distractions from the routine body dissatisfaction and gender dysphoria experienced pre-COVID-19. Half of the participants found this time for self-reflection to be a positive experience, while the other half experienced increased body dissatisfaction due to having more time for self-reflection. This time for self-reflection allowed an opportunity for new insights and connections, both personally and through social justice. Most of the participants in the study identified increased disordered eating symptoms, including binge eating and body dissatisfaction (Brownstone et al., 2021). Although participants reported both positive and negative experiences during COVID-19, disordered eating increased during this time.

Chapter Summary

This literature review has given a roadmap to my dissertation focusing on LGBTQ+ college students' experiences with body image during COVID-19. I have outlined my theoretical framework and how I use this lens throughout the research process. I have presented the relevant research on body image and COVID-19 while weaving in the limited research that includes LGBTQ+ participants with these constructs. My dissertation serves to fill the gap in the literature by collecting the voices of LGBTQ+ individuals and sharing their valuable stories to better understand my topic.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative narrative research study was to explore the experiences and stories of LGBTQ+ students' body image during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, I conducted a qualitative narrative research study by interviewing LGBTQ+ students to learn about their experiences and stories with their body image during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this chapter, I explain my research design and methodological decisions made in choosing the plan for this study. I start with the context of the study and my research philosophy, move to the research design, share the data collection techniques, and explain how I completed my data analysis. Additionally, I include my grounding thoughts on quality and rigor prior to the chapter summary.

Context of the Study

At the core of my study is my research philosophy. Using Savin-Baden and Major's (2013) Wheel of Research Choices, I made the decision to center this study on the social constructionism paradigm, using a narrative approach through semi-structured interview data collection and analyzing with a thematic/narrative analysis. These research lenses build upon each other to view the research in a specific way. Social constructionism is the underlying epistemology of narrative research (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). This research design matches this study and fits with my philosophical beliefs.

As a researcher, I believe that as we experience life, we make meaning of it and create a shared social construct with those around us. This aligns with the philosophical perspective of social constructionism as the focus is social rather than individual (Young & Collin, 2004). Social constructionism has a focus on determining meaning from shared interactions with others (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Within this perspective "we never know what universal true or false is, what is good or bad, right or wrong; we know only stories about true, false, good, bad, right or wrong" (Galbin, 2014, p. 82). Our social experiences and interactions with others shape how we interpret the world around us as our understanding of the world is created jointly with those around us (Galbin, 2014). Galbin (2014) shares that "just because we can each say 'I' and have separate bodies does not mean that thoughts and emotions are located solely within individuals. Rather, these exist between individuals. Humans are part of shared collective aims, values, and experiences" (p. 87). As a social constructionist researcher, I agree with Young and Collin (2004) that we create knowledge through our social interactions. Within social constructionism, our culture creates knowledge together within our society (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This culturally created knowledge occurred during the pandemic regardless of lockdown. Life is a shared experience, and individuals interacted with each other during COVID-19. Even if that interaction was virtual, we began to construct our own shared reality and social meaning of this time. Even in lockdown, quarantine, or isolation, there was an opportunity to learn about the world via television and social media. While the experience of COVID-19 may have felt lonely for many individuals, technology provided space for people to share their experiences with others and created a window into how others were experiencing this time. Thus, even during a pandemic, people continued to interact and construct meaning socially.

Social constructionism has been used to unmask "constructs that have possibly served in the exploitation of various individuals and groups for a[n] assortment of reasons" (Young & Collin, 2004, p. 378). Therefore, a social constructionist lens is most appropriate and possibly even considered a critical element for a research study focusing on the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students. Oftentimes we do not focus on the influence dominant social groups have on the social world (Galbin, 2014). As a social constructionist, I am interested in social stories outside of the dominant culture. Society presents us with what is supposed to be "the norm" and I have seen challenges to this idea with the topic of body image within the LGBTQ+ community, specifically in social media. Throughout this study, the identities of the participants play a role in how "meaning is constructed in a social, historical, and cultural context, through action and discourse in which we form relationships and community" (Young & Collin, 2004, p. 378).

Social constructionist research offers space for the researcher and the participants to co-construct meaning through dialogue and negotiation (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The researcher and participants co-construct the reality together within the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I interviewed my participants to participate in this critical aspect of data collection.

It is important to ground oneself in their personal understandings of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology to understand a research study's foundation. I present the following explanations of my understanding of each of these research areas in the section below. These four concepts are the four aspects of the philosophical grounding for the paradigmatic lens guiding my study, or my research paradigm. This serves as a guidepost to understand the decisions I have made in developing my research design.

Ontology

Ontology is the nature of what is reality and for qualitative researchers, such as myself, it is assumed that multiple realities can be seen through multiple views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These multiple perspectives include those of the researcher, the participants of the study, and the readers of the research project (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My personal ontology is that of idealism as our reality is subjective and constructed by ourselves and those around us (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This is matched with my philosophical stance of social constructionism as our reality is socially constructed by actions and perceptions of ourselves and those around us (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

The intent of this study was to report the multiple realities of LGBTQ+ students and their experience with their own body image during the COVID-19 pandemic. Themes found their way to the surface through the actual words of the participants in telling their stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The viewpoint of this research is on the subjective, socially constructed reality of this group.

Epistemology

Building upon ontology's understanding of what reality is, epistemology is how one views knowledge or how we know what we consider to be reality. I understand epistemology by thinking about how I determine knowledge; how do I know what I know? I believe that knowledge about reality is socially constructed. It was important that I played an active role in determining the true experiences of my participants and closing the gap between myself and the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Collectively my participants and I engaged in

conversations to create a shared understanding of each other's experiences. This study leans toward intersubjectivity with the goal of finding a mutually agreed-upon understanding of what is real among a small group of people as our experiences are shaped by our subjectivities and intersubjectivities (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Knowledge is interpretive and individuals place meaning on their own experiences. Josselson and Hammack (2021) define the concept of meaning as "how individuals position themselves in their worlds and make sense of themselves through stories" (p. 5). This meaning is developed through a person's narrative truth, which may not be historically accurate, but is how an individual has constructed their experience in relation to those around them and how they remember events unfolding (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). The stories shared by the participants in this study were viewed through each participant's and my own lens as meaning was developed from the data. What each participant shared during data collection included the meaning they had made from their own experiences. The analysis and interpretation I made of this data reflects the meaning I have made of what has been shared with me by the participants.

Axiology

Axiology focuses on the values that I personally hold and how I bring those into my study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, axiology deals with the question of whether values can or should guide research. I see this as the morals and ethics of my qualitative research. I want to understand how others construct their own realities within the context of their social interactions. To do this, it is important to position myself early on in my writing, which is why I made the decision to include my introduction positionality within Chapter One rather than solely here in Chapter Three. I will take the opportunity to expand on my positionality in this chapter.

Body image has been a research interest of mine throughout my life. I wrote my master's thesis on “The Effect of Feminist Identity on Body Image and Self-Esteem” in 2004. My own methodology included reading books on body image, following social media accounts focused on body image, and discussing the concept of body image with my peers. I have struggled with my own disordered eating and negative thoughts about my own body image throughout my life. I am personally drawn to changing the social construct of the amount of importance and value that is found in one’s physical appearance to be more centrally focused on self-love and acceptance rather than sexual objectivity and societal judgment.

Throughout my life I have held a belief that my sexual orientation is “fluid,” and only within the past decade have I consciously defined my sexuality as bisexual. I have always been a strong ally to the LGBTQ+ community and have begun to embrace my own position within this community. I have slowly begun the process of “coming out” to others in the past few years and continue to determine when and how to place my sexual orientation within my relevant presentation and relationships with others. For example, I choose to share my sexual orientation in research projects, such as presenting about microaggressions with my dissertation chair, as it seems relevant to share my sexual orientation within my positionality with the audience. I do not feel that I need to disclose my sexual orientation in every conversation or social interaction with others unless the topic of conversation is connected and relevant. I believe each person’s coming out story and acceptance of their sexual orientation is a personal part of their own journey, and as I plan to study LGBTQ+ students, this disclosure feels pertinent.

Methodology

Most of the research on the topics I am exploring has been done using quantitative methods (Schneider, 2022). Although I respect quantitative research, I wanted to ask questions about experience that cannot be obtained from using an assessment and running statistical analysis. Additionally, quantitative research is inconsistent with my research paradigm as it is typically situated as postpositivist rather than social constructionist. Moving away from the quantitative mainstream research design, I made the decision early on to focus my research lens on qualitative research methods. As I began my doctoral program, I knew I wanted to utilize my creative thinking within my dissertation, and I determined that for me this would best match with qualitative research. I desire to understand other's experiences through words and stories. Once I was rooted as a qualitative researcher, I began to explore the specific methods in which to anchor my study.

Much thought has gone into my decisions regarding the methodology of this study. I have explored a variety of qualitative research approaches to find the best fit with my areas of interest and the topic I wish to explore. I initially focused on auto-methodologies due to my ardent desire to connect my personal experience within my dissertation. I then considered a phenomenology study to determine the overall essence of my participant's experience during COVID-19. As more time passed between March 2020 when COVID-19 was first declared a pandemic and the year in which I made my dissertation proposal, I began to question whether a phenomenological study was truly the best approach for answering my research question. I am drawn to storytelling and value the sharing of other's experiences. This brought me to explore the possibility of utilizing narrative research for my dissertation. I wanted to hear the lived experiences of others

and how they understood their reality of body image during COVID-19 through their personal sharing and storytelling. Specifically, I researched the LGBTQ+ community as voices of marginalized or underrepresented groups are often silenced in research, and I hoped to give space to their lived experiences within this dissertation. My role in this process was to humbly understand and interpret the stories that have been shared with me to create meaning while dutifully presenting these narratives and bridling myself within the research.

Research Design and Rationale

I completed a qualitative study to learn more about the LGBTQ+ student experience with body image during COVID-19. This study is a narrative study sharing the human experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and their body image during the pandemic. As a narrative researcher, I looked at the meaning of the stories participants shared as they explained their lived reality. Stories are central to how we make meaning in our world, through actions, identities, and time periods (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Narrative inquiry offers the opportunity to "focus on people's experiences, people's lives, situated and shaped by larger cultural, social, familial, institutional and linguistic narratives" and provides a new lens through which to view the lived experience of body image for LGBTQ+ students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Caine et al., 2022, p. 9).

Narrative research provides the opportunity to share the stories of those who might otherwise not have their voices heard (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Schneider et al. (2022) identified that very few research studies on the impact of COVID-19 on body image included participants who identified with "minoritized, racialized, underrepresented, or otherwise marginalized" groups (p. 1). These groups face unique challenges during COVID-19 in addition

to challenges faced by the general population (Schneider et al., 2022). Of the studies reviewed by Schneider et al. (2022), they found "the majority of participants were White, cisgender, heterosexual, highly educated, and of a higher socioeconomic status" (p. 37). Individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ have reported higher stress levels, eating disorder symptoms, and perceived weight gain compared to cisgender and heterosexual men (Tabler et al., 2021).

This dissertation furthers the research around the COVID-19 experience, specifically of the LGBTQ+ experience with body image during the pandemic. Additionally, this dissertation offers LGBTQ+ students the space to share their lived experiences and stories in order to provide more information to add to the varied experiences of this group during the pandemic and offers opportunities for a better understanding of mental health treatment and support within institutions of higher education for this population.

Research Questions

The main research questions guiding this study are:

1. What experiences do LGBTQ+ college students have with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do LGBTQ+ college students describe their experiences with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Data Collection

COVID-19 disrupted the sociocultural context of the world and life as we know it. Several factors may have contributed to students' perceptions of their body image during COVID-19 including social media, lockdown, and fear of the unknown coronavirus (Rodgers et

al., 2020). Therefore, this narrative inquiry explores the participants' stories from the first year of COVID-19 experienced within the social context in which they occurred and the ongoing participants' development throughout the pandemic.

Research Site

I collected data from LGBTQ+ individuals who were registered as students at Montana State University (MSU), a mid-sized R1 research/land-grant university located in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States, during the spring and fall semesters of 2020. In 2020, MSU reported 16,289 students with 14,240 of these students enrolled as undergraduates, 2,009 as graduate students, and the remaining 40 individuals as non-degree-seeking students (MSU, 2022). The gender identity of these students in 2020 was reported as 51.4% male, 48.2% female, and 0.049% as other or unknown (MSU, 2022). This university is a predominately White institution with 83.91% of the students identifying as White in 2020 (MSU, 2022).

MSU has a strong commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion for all students. The MSU diversity office, the Diversity Inclusion Student Commons (DISC), is staffed by two full-time employees and offers space and support to members of the LGBTQ+ community on campus. MSU also has two registered student organizations dedicated to supporting LGBTQ+ students, the Queer Straight Alliance (QSA) and Out-in-Science Technology Engineering and Math (O-STEM). This site was strategically selected based on my involvement as a board member of the Queer Faculty/Staff Association (QFSA) at MSU and my relationships with faculty and staff that advise and support LGBTQ+ students on campus who assisted in participant recruitment.

Sample

Qualitative researchers strive for a purposeful sample as opposed to utilizing probability sampling as quantitative researchers mainly do (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As I collected my qualitative data, I focused on using purposeful sampling for this research study. I also utilized convenience sampling through social media outlets to recruit LGBTQ+ student respondents.

There were three main criteria used in identifying appropriate participants for this research study. These included self-identifying as LGBTQ+, being 18 years or older, and having been enrolled at MSU in both the spring and fall semesters of 2020. Alumni, students who have stepped out, and students who have dropped out since spring 2021 were considered for this study. Faculty and staff were not considered for participation in this study unless they were also enrolled in classes during these semesters.

As the initial start of the pandemic began in the spring 2020 semester, I sought the stories of how body image was experienced at the onset of the pandemic and throughout that first year. Additionally, I explored how the participants' body image had changed and progressed since the start of the pandemic to the present. This time period includes the initial onset of the pandemic and forced online learning and the first full semester of managing higher education during the pandemic. The timeline also offers space for the experience of body image over time as we move through the COVID-19 pandemic.

To provide for diversity within the sample, I strove to recruit a variety of LGBTQ+ students who had different identities within this community. I worked to recruit participants that did not just fall within the same identity within the LGBTQ+ framework (i.e., a sample that was not entirely made up of only lesbian-identifying students). I also recruited individuals within the LGBTQ+ community that defined their gender other than cisgender to expand on the diversity of

my sample. I was aware that even if I was not able to collect data from a diverse group within my population, my sample would inherently be diverse since all participants would identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

I used three recruitment strategies to identify six participants who met the criteria. One, I provided information advertising the study via fliers that were hung on campus, specifically in the DISC office and Student Union Building. Two, I sent advertisements for the study via email to the above-mentioned student groups and faculty and staff advisers of these groups. Three, I utilized social media to advertise this study via online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. This final strategy allowed me to expand my recruitment beyond using solely on-campus advertisement methods. Additionally, using social media for recruitment resulted in word-of-mouth recruitment from social media viewers.

Respondents were recruited from the MSU registered student organizations of QSA and O-STEM. I contacted the QSA and O-STEM chapter presidents to advertise the study with copies of my flier and online promotion. Additionally, students were recruited through the MSU DISC. I provided email advertisement marketing and fliers for the DISC university administrators to share with LGBTQ+ students. This study's recruitment was mentioned at QFSA meetings to prompt faculty and staff to help recruit students to participate.

Potential participants who were not currently enrolled as students at the institution were recruited through word of mouth or social media advertisements. I used a snowballing approach to finding participants via social media. I created posts on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok stating that I was looking for LGBTQ+ individuals who were enrolled as students at MSU during the spring 2020 and fall 2020 semesters. I asked individuals viewing these posts to share these

posts within their own social media communities in the hopes that this would increase the views of potential participants. Additionally, I utilized snowball sampling by asking all participants if they were aware of any other students who might match the sample criteria for this study and were willing to be interviewed for this research.

Narrative research focuses on either an individual story or stories of a small group of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I interviewed six individuals for this study to create a collective story. I continued recruiting participants until enough data was gathered to create a meta-narrative from the individual stories. At the point of sufficiency, I concluded my recruitment period.

Timeline

Following approval of this study proposal and IRB review, I immediately began marketing the recruitment for this study in the fall semester of 2023. I began scheduling interviews as participants became available and agreed to the informed consent. My initial goal for participation was four to five participants. I continued with recruitment until I had completed interviews with six individuals, which was when saturation had been met.

Following IRB approval, I ensured that each participant had agreed to and signed the informed consent form. The informed consent document included general information about the research study, an explanation of the voluntary nature of the study, potential risks of participating in the study, and optional resources for participants to utilize if they believed they were negatively impacted by participation in the study. I answered all questions about the informed consent and my research study before the interview. Participants received no monetary compensation for participation in the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Creswell and Poth (2018) break down data collection into four main categories: interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials. I used each of these categories to collect data in some form. I conducted one-on-one interviews with participants. During these one-on-one interviews, I documented my own observations as a researcher. I kept a research journal and utilized memoing throughout the study as part of my documentation. Finally, I requested artifacts from participants as audiovisual materials that were discussed during the interviews and included in my data collection.

Interviews

I held one-on-one semi-structured interviews with participants to collect my qualitative data. Ideally, these interviews would have been held in person, but since some potential participants were not able to be met in person due to geographic proximity, I completed all interviews via Webex for consistency. I was able to audio and videotape the interviews using the Webex online application. All participants were made aware that these conversations were being recorded in the informed consent form and again verbally at the beginning of each interview. I decided to conduct these interviews from my home office as that is where I spent lockdown and my extended work-from-home period during COVID-19. This decision was important to my data collection process as it used video conferencing which placed me and the participants into the type of communication used during COVID-19.

I conducted all my interviews from my home office. This was the space I worked from during the initial onset of the pandemic and throughout the continuing reimagination of working from home over the next couple of years. As I sat in my office chair during the interviews, I was

reminded of how uncomfortable it was. Sitting in that awful chair, my feet against the cold floor, I was flooded with emotions from spending COVID-19 in this small home office. My dog barked at a passing car and my cat tried to jump onto my lap during interviews, just as they had done while I had spent time working from home during the pandemic. There were memories everywhere that I had set aside once we were given the go-ahead to return to the office. The decision to conduct these interviews from the space where I spent the majority of my time for work and school was influential to this research study as it helped me to ground myself in the thoughts and feelings from the initial onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This decision was also made for consistency with the format of the interviews as two of the participants no longer live in Bozeman and would have been unable to meet for an in-person interview.

As I am aware that seeing oneself on the screen during the Webex interview could impact the interaction, I asked that participants minimize or hide their own personal view of themselves, and I did the same. I did not confirm that they had hidden their image and left that decision up to the participants. This provided the opportunity to focus on speaking with each other rather than focusing on the mirror image of ourselves during the interview. I addressed the mirror image view within the interview as part of data collection. Following the interviews, these recorded conversations were downloaded from their web version, emailed to me from the Webex app, and kept on a password-protected computer accessible only to me. A visual recording was included along with the audio recording and Webex transcription. As my mirror image was hidden during the interviews, I could only see the participant on screen at the time of data collection. Following the interviews, I realized the visual recording provided a view of both my image and the participant on Webex. One participant was unable to turn on her camera during our interview and

thus, I did not have a visual recording for this one participant. Problems with cameras were a real experience for many during COVID-19, including camera delays or cameras not matching with audio, which occurred during at least one of the participants' interviews.

I allowed for lengthy interviews, scheduling 90 minutes for interviews and offered follow-up interviews if there was additional information to be clarified or collected. These interviews ranged in length from 55 minutes to an hour and 28 minutes. The date and time of the interviews were scheduled when it was mutually convenient for both the participant and me. I sent each participant a copy of their transcript offering a follow-up interview. No participants volunteered to take part in a follow-up interview. Each participant responded to the draft of Chapter Four indicating I had fully collected their personal stories during data collection. Only minor edits were provided by participants to help clarify their story.

Demographic information was collected with the informed consent before the interview. I included questions asking participants to share their sexual orientation, gender identity, preferred pronouns, race/ethnicity, age, year they were in school during the spring and fall semesters of 2020, major they held during the spring and fall semesters of 2020, current educational status, and relationship status. This information was used to understand my sample further.

Personal identification was removed from participants and each participant was asked to assign themselves a pseudonym for the research project. One participant chose not to provide a pseudonym, so I assigned one to them. I utilized these pseudonyms for the participants throughout the analysis section. Protecting each participant's identity was an important agreement of my study.

Interviews recorded via Webex are automatically transcribed within the Webex application. I reviewed the collected transcription and edited for any missed or unintelligible words or phrases. In the initial version of the transcripts, I utilized an epic approach and recorded nonverbal cues and filler words to fully capture the unique qualities of the participant's story. I then created another copy of the transcripts omitting filler words for clarity and sent this version to the participants. I uploaded both versions of the transcriptions to my iPad using the application Notability for a full read-through to allow for handwritten documentation within my analysis.

Observation

During the interview process, I maintained a research journal to collect my observations and document my experiences and thoughts. I included these along with the data, not as an autoethnographic exploration, but as additional information to be added to the findings. I include my thoughts and memories as part of the data collection as a qualitative researcher. My thoughts and reactions were part of the co-construction process as I made meaning of the findings based on both my expertise in reviewing the literature and as a person who experienced the pandemic, like the participants.

During the one-on-one interviews, I recorded my own observations. My observations include what I could see visually during the interview, such as the background of the interviewee on the Webex screen, their physical presence during the interview, and any observable behaviors during the interview. No participants used blurred or alternate backgrounds or avatars during the interviews. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) identify three key observations to document during interviews which include facial expression, posture, and eye contact. Additionally, I recorded observations using my five senses as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018): sight, sound, touch,

smell, and taste to ground myself in each interview. These observations helped me to stay present in the moment and connected to the interview process. I presented myself as a complete participant and was fully engaged with the person I was interviewing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the interview and immediately following each interview, I spent time documenting my observations.

Documentation/Memoing

I utilized memoing throughout the dissertation process. This included analytical, theoretical, and methodological memoing. I explored why I made particular decisions within the research process. During the entire data collection and data analysis processes, I kept a journal of my personal experience throughout the research. Journaling gave me the opportunity to share my thoughts during the interview process. The journaling included my own thoughts and feelings during the process and any additional observations not indicated elsewhere. This research journal became a unit of analysis and one of the methods of data collection. My research journal was an important part of defining my reflexivity. This provided fidelity to my research project to show how I experienced the participant's stories throughout the research process (Josselson & Hammack, 2021).

Audiovisual Materials/Artifacts

Before the interview, via email, I asked each participant to share one to three artifacts with me during the interview. Participants could share an artifact that showed how they conceptualized body image, an artifact that influenced their conception of COVID-19, and/or an artifact that reflected their feelings of body image as an LGBTQ+ individual during COVID-19. This could include a picture, symbol, social media post, etc. I began the interviews by having the

participants explain why they chose their specific artifact(s). To address any ethical concerns regarding online data collection, I did not review any of the participants' social media accounts or posts, unless they were personally shared with me as an artifact. Additionally, in the informed consent, I asked that no other individuals be pictured or identified in the artifacts provided.

Each interview began with questions focused on the items participants had chosen as their artifact(s). As I was unable to see the artifacts of the participant without a working camera, she emailed me pictures following our interview. Some artifacts had physical representations that the participants shared with me on screen during our interviews, and some artifacts were described verbally. I requested pictures of artifacts to use in this dissertation via email following our interviews and all participants agreed with my request and provided pictures with permission for use in this dissertation.

It was important to collect multiple forms of data for review in this dissertation. In addition to the interviews themselves, and the audio transcriptions of each interview, I had my observations from the interviews, the participant's abstract, and my research journal/memo during the data collection process. I list the questions connected to each form of data collection in the table below.

Table 1. Data Collection Questions

Interview	Interview questions: 1. Tell me about your definition of body image? 2. Tell me about what has informed your conceptualization of body image? 3. Describe the connection between your COVID-19 pandemic situation and your body image (Quathamer & Joy, 2021).

Table 1 Continued

	4. Tell me about situations that influenced your experience of your body image during COVID-19? 5. Describe what has been difficult/easy surrounding your body image during COVID-19? 6. Tell me about how your body image has changed during COVID-19? 7. Describe the relationship with your sexual orientation/gender identity and your body image during COVID-19? 8. Tell me about your experiences at home during the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to how you feel about your body (Quathamer & Joy, 2021). 9. Tell me about your experiences of supports, or lack of supports, during the COVID-19 pandemic, relating to your body image (Quathamer & Joy, 2021). 10. Tell me more about your experience with social media and body image during COVID-19. 11. Tell me about a time when you noticed how your experience with online learning may have had an impact on your body image during COVID-19? 12. Is there anything else you would like to include that would be relevant in helping me to understand your story and your experience with body image during COVID-19?

Table 1 Continued

Observation	Five prompts to interrogate observations: 1. What did you see during the interview: facial expressions, posture, eye contact, background? 2. What did you hear during the interview: tone, volume, emotion? 3. What did you feel physically during the interview? 4. What did you smell during the interview? 5. What did you taste during the interview?
Documentation	Five prompts to ask myself following each interview to engage in the reflexive process: 1. What feelings came up for you during the interview? 2. What experiences did the participant share that agreed with your experience? 3. What experiences did the participant share that differed from your experience? 4. What connections have you found connected to the literature? 5. Relevant thoughts not documented elsewhere?
Abstracts	Five prompts to ask the participants about their chosen artifacts: 1. Why did you choose this artifact? 2. What is the meaning of this artifact for you? 3. What stands out for you with this artifact? 4. What emotions do you have connected to this artifact? 5. What story or stories do you have about this artifact?

Data Analysis

When I first chose narrative inquiry, I assumed there would be clear direction for a specific type of analysis to use with this method. Narrative analysis does not have a one-size-fits-all or how-to definition of analysis (James, 2018). James (2018) has written extensively on the difficulty in finding a template for narrative analysis and concludes that "no one method exists in which to analyze data narratively" (p. 13). There are many different approaches to narrative inquiry, and researchers have utilized a multitude of different analysis types to code, analyze, and interpret their findings (James, 2018; Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Kim (2016) encourages seeking narrative meaning through a variety of narrative data analysis methods for interpretation. The goals of a narrative analysis and interpretation are to be done "holistically, heuristically, whole-heartedly, and most of all, narratively" (Kim, 2016, p. 14). After reading through several different options of what previous researchers have done to analyze narrative data, I decided to construct a bricolage of my own data analysis method by utilizing pieces of other methods and overlaying them upon one another. I combined the method outlined by James (2017) mixed with a version of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and overlayed with Leggo's (2011) RITES rubric. I offer a brief understanding of each method's phases and then share how I integrated them into my personal analysis for my dissertation.

James (2017) details five steps utilized in creating a method of narrative analysis. She has three phases dedicated to sequential reading/listening to the transcripts/interviews. Each phase features a different process for analyzing the data and includes extensive annotation of the text. The fourth phase presented by James (2017) creates a summary of each participant's story and

the fifth phase constructs a narrative from the summaries. Within these phases, James (2017) utilizes coding to create themes and subthemes.

Thematic analysis is a foundational method for qualitative analysis and can be used by multiple methods including narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) identify six phases of thematic analysis. The first phase is to familiarize yourself with your data which provides space for transcription, reading the data, and noting initial ideas. Initial coding of the data is done in phase two. Once codes have been determined they are collated into potential themes in phase three. Phase four provides an opportunity to review these identified themes and gives space to confirm the themes and codes work together resulting in a thematic map of the analysis. The analysis continues to refine the themes and develop the story through phase five by specifically defining and naming the identified themes. Finally, phase six culminates in the final step in the analysis and relates the data to the research question and literature reviewed in Chapter Two resulting in the written scholarly report, which is the completion of this dissertation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Leggo (2011) uses three guiding principles for understanding narrative inquiry: story, interpretation, and discourse. He indicates that story is "what happened," interpretation is "so what," and discourse is "how we tell the story" (Leggo, 2011, p. 1). Leggo (2011) presents a basic acronymic rubric as a method for interpreting narratives: RITES. Step 1: Read—focuses on reading through the narrative for a general sense of the participant's story. Step 2: Interrogate—provides the researcher space to ask basic who, what, where, when, why, how, and so what questions. Step 3: Thematize—is a second opportunity to read through the data with a thematic lens. Step 4: Expand—is where the researcher draws connections and proposes possible

meanings while expanding on the identified themes. Step 5: Summarize—is a statement that summarizes the new learning from the narrative (Leggo, 2011).

I integrated these three analyses to construct a unique analysis approach for this study. All three analyses indicate the importance of reading and understanding the data. I utilized different lenses and strategies each time I reviewed the data. All three analyses focus on the importance of developing themes to understand the stories. I sought connections and meanings as I reviewed the data. Finally, all three analyses result in a summary to synthesize the shared narrative stories. This final summary or narrative construction gives voice to the stories of the participants in the study.

The model used by James (2017), Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, and Leggo's (2011) RITES include reviewing the data multiple times. For my analysis, I read and listened to the interviews and spent time reading through my memos and observations and exploring the artifacts shared by the participants from multiple angles. I incorporated memo writing throughout the analysis (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). In addition to reviewing the data multiple times from different lenses, I constructed an initial summary of each participant's story and finally constructed a full narrative of the stories. This full narrative is composed of all participant's experiences blended together.

As I collected and transcribed my data personally, this was the beginning of phase one as I familiarized myself with what has been collected. The transcripts were initially created from the Webex platform. My first round of review included reading the Webex transcript along with listening to the audio to check the transcripts for accuracy. Also, the first reading/listening phase included noting what stood out for me in the interview's content. James (2017) made decisions

during her analysis on whether she would read or listen to the transcripts for each stage and each participant as she created her method. I also made the decision on whether to read the transcript along with listening to the interview or read it without listening to the audio for each phase. I utilized an initial lens of clarification to familiarize myself with the data. Additionally, I immersed myself in the data as I started to find meaning and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I began taking notes and writing memos about the analysis process. The final product of round one was clear transcripts and a foundational understanding of the data.

The second round of reading/listening started with a thematic analysis lens review of the data. Again, I read the transcripts both with and without listening to the audio. In this phase, I identified areas of interest and repeated patterns by annotating the data with written notes, highlighting, circling, etc. I utilized thematic analysis to generate initial codes within this first round and searched for initial themes and subthemes for each participant's story. I was diligent in noting any pertinent quotes from the participants to be utilized in Chapter Four of my dissertation. Phase two resulted in a thematic/construct map to understand the participant's story, explored the initial themes visually, and noted the beginning of ideas for codes/themes.

I documented the active choices I made in my thematic analysis to clearly identify where my decisions were coming from (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This provided transparency in how I determined themes and allowed for my study to be transferable to other sample groups (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) state that "a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). I was consistent in my coding as I determined my themes.

Phase three consisted of another round of reading and listening to the data but from a "thinking with theory" lens (Jackson & Mazzei, 2017). This phase provided an opportunity to ask philosophical questions about the data and expand beyond coding and themes "to open up previously *unthought* approaches" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2017, p. 720). I utilized this phase to see things from multiple thresholds and viewpoints as I explored the data from within (Jackson & Mazzei, 2017). Following phase three, I expanded upon my previous codes and themes from phase two to allow for alternative viewpoints within the data. Although this was identified as the final round of reading/listening to the transcripts/interviews and reviewing observations, documentation, and artifacts, I accessed the data multiple times following this phase and included additional reading/listening phases as needed during analysis.

I knew that as I read and listened to the participant stories' transcripts, I would be viewing them through my own experience and ideology (Leggo, 2011). Additionally, I had the lenses of cultural expectations and ideologies that have influenced how I view myself in the world and interpret my own identity (Leggo, 2011). It is a given that "we always bring our cultural, social, economic, political, and spiritual views and experiences to bear on every reading of verbal and visual texts" (Leggo, 2011, p. 8). As I am aware of this, it was imperative that I was open to a clear interpretation of the stories and presented a written discourse that fully represented the participant stories and addressed my own lenses.

Phase four included a written summary of each participant's story. The summary included an abstract; orientation of person, place, and time; depiction of any actions that occurred within the telling of the story; the significance of the story; how I understood the story; and the resolution of the story (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Additionally, this summary included

identified themes, subthemes, and relevant quotes from the transcripts and my notes. The summary presented an overall understanding of each participant's story with a focus on the key themes that emerged from the data collection. This summary was used as a roadmap guiding me toward the full narrative. As people do not always share their stories in a linear way, I needed to determine the beginning of each story and order the information that has been shared (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Oftentimes people will repeat things they believe to be important, so I included parts of the narrative that had particular significance (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Phase four resulted in lengthy summaries of each participant's story.

The final phase, phase five, resulted in the final report of the results and discussion. I initially started this phase by reviewing the summaries of each participant's story. Based on the themes that emerged I made the decision on whether to expand on these summaries to write one narrative that includes all participant stories within the narrative construction. This decision was made once I determined that the participant stories needed to be blended to protect the participants' anonymity. Leggo (2011) believes that there are hardly any new stories so "the real purpose of telling our stories is to tell them in ways that open up new possibilities for understanding and wisdom and transformation" (p. 9). Leggo (2011) stresses the importance of sharing stories in a creative and engaging way while being open to the possibilities of what the story can be and not letting rules define the storytelling as "there is no single way to write narratively" (p. 12). Phase five resulted in my final understanding of the data and written results to be included in Chapter Four of my dissertation.

Participants were imperative in the co-construction of the data analysis as they were the primary sources of the data that I was interpreting. Throughout the first four phases of the

narrative analysis, I contacted the participants for clarification or expansion of ideas as needed. I offered additional time for interviews to allow participants to add to their stories or if they felt they forgot to include information in their initial interview. Some parts of the shared story did not reach a conclusion during the interviews, so I contacted the participants if there was missing information (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). As I was writing during phases four and five, I shared drafts of my summaries and the final narrative as member checking to allow for participants to share feedback and changes in any areas I may have inadvertently misrepresented. It was important for me to ensure I correctly reflected the stories of the participants and make certain that I depicted their voices authentically.

Table 2. My analysis plan and procedures.

Phase	**Process/Features**
1: First listening/reading - Accuracy/ Clarity	• Listen to interviews along with Webex transcripts to ensure the transcripts are accurate • Write notes on initial thoughts from the content/conversation, annotation of transcript • Review my observation and documentation notes • View artifacts through an initial lens Result: Clear Transcript
2: Second listening/reading - Thematic Analysis	• Listen to interviews while reading along with the transcripts • Mark transcripts with notes, highlighting, circling, etc. to identify initial codes • Identify themes and sub themes Result: Thematic/Concept Map

Table 2 Continued

3: Third listening/reading - Thinking with Theory	• Thinking with Theory • Co-read • Threshold Result: Alternative viewpoints
4: Summary	• Review data • Create short summaries for each participant story • Include themes and key phrases Result: Summary of each participant story
5: Narrative Construction/ Final Report	• Determine whether to combine all stories into one narrative construct – or- create separate narrative constructs for each participant • Using themes, identify similarities and differences between stories • Co-constructed with participants—send draft for participant feedback Result: Final product for Chapter four

Narrative research is seen by Wertz (2011) as a combination of "integrating systemic analysis of narrated experience with literary deconstruction and hermeneutic analysis of meaning." I use this definition in my approach to narrative analysis as I have created my methodology from a variety of qualitative genres. I formatted my data analysis to include three phases.

As part of the data analysis, I sent cleaned transcripts to the participants via email and requested any feedback they were willing to share. Only one participant offered a change as I had misspelled a person's name incorrectly in her transcript. I also sent additional follow-up

questions via email to the participants. All participants responded to my follow-up questions via email.

The final version of Chapter Four of this dissertation was shared with the participants via email. I asked for feedback on this chapter of my dissertation to ensure I had captured and shared the participant stories in an authentic way. It was important to me that the meaning that I had created from the data truly reflected the experiences of the participants. Each participant received their own copy to review. Only one participant provided clarification on part of their story. The other participants agreed I had authentically captured their stories. All five chapters of this dissertation were also shared with the participants for a full context of the study prior to defense.

Throughout data analysis, I included my own memories and experiences in relation to those of the participants. As we were all working to make meaning of our lives during COVID-19, it was relevant for me to bridle my experience into this study. My own narrative thoughts are included in the sections below.

Trustworthiness

I used several strategies to ensure quality within my research. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) provide three basic questions to ensure quality within qualitative research including how the researcher views it, how will the researcher and others know that it has been accomplished, and what strategies will the researcher use to ensure quality. I have chosen to include triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and presenting rich, thick descriptions of my data as my guideposts for quality in my dissertation. I define quality through authenticity which matches a social constructionist paradigm where “reality is constructed intersubjectively through socially and experientially developed meanings” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Authenticity within my

research is particularly important to me and something I explore through the lens of my reflexivity. Authenticity within research provides integrity between the blend of the narrative and the research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). It is important to ensure that the stories of the participants are authentically portrayed within the narrative research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Having multiple data sources allows me the use of triangulation as a method of quality. Multiple data points allow for cross-examination of the research data and broaden the opportunity to explore the data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). I collected audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews with my participants. Additionally, I asked each participant to provide an artifact to share during the interview process. This artifact provided additional grounding for the participants in understanding their experience with body image during COVID-19 as an LGBTQ+ individual and is a strategy that elicited a more enriching interview process. This artifact also gave me more insight as a researcher into the participants' experiences and stories. Following each interview, I spent time documenting my own observations and included this within my memoing journal. My research memoing journal included information on decisions I made throughout the process, my own personal biases, and other relevant concerns throughout the research process.

As a social constructionist researcher, I believe it is important for participants to play a role within the research as a type of co-researcher. I utilized member checking to provide participant feedback on my data interpretation. After I cleaned the transcripts, I sent each participant a copy of their interview transcript via email. I acknowledged the length of the transcript and asked that the participant review the transcript and share any additional insight for

the research. I wanted the participants to have access to what was written prior to defense so I could ensure I was portraying their stories as authentically as possible. I provided the participants with rough drafts of sections from my dissertation that shared their stories and were relevant to them as a participant for review throughout the data analysis process. Prior to defense I provided all participants with the full dissertation for review. I collaborated with participants throughout the analysis period to ensure proper interpretation of my results.

Understanding the researcher's position within research is important to determining potential biases and what role the researcher plays within the dissertation (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). I utilized reflexivity by including an initial positionality statement in my introduction chapter as well as an expansion upon this positionality within my methodology chapter to reveal my stance to the reader and minimize any negative impacts my potential biases may have on the research. It is important to understand the lenses through which the researcher views their topic to ground oneself in the process and results of the study. I spent time reflecting on my own experience and identity during the data collection and data analysis processes and explored how these things were influencing the research process (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). I incorporated any relevant observations that expanded on my positionality along the way.

I provided rich, thick descriptions with my data analysis to allow for the transferability of my findings (Maxwell, 2013). I utilized my post-interview observations in my memoing research journal to depict the specific physical space and characteristics of the participants observed during the interview process. I made sure to describe the who, what, where, why, when, and how of the interview experience so that the reader felt immersed in the data collection and analysis.

Throughout the research process, I utilized bridling. My research, from the very inception of this dissertation topic, is based upon my own understandings and assumptions of the research concepts. As I began to collect data and make meaning from other people's stories, it was important that I identified and bridled my own influence on the narrative. I believe it is impossible to entirely bracket oneself out of research and thus it was important to be aware of and intentional about my personal influence on the research I conducted. Using the lens of bridling helped ensure I was acknowledging my own bias and relationships with the topic, while leaving space for new meaning to arise (Vagle et al., 2009). As I explored and analyzed my findings, I also left room to be skeptical of my research process through bridling (Vagle et al., 2009).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined my philosophical framework for my research study. I have explained my research design and rationale. This chapter includes detailed information specific to my data collection and data analysis planning. I have also included my guideposts for ensuring quality and rigor within my research. I completed a narrative research study to understand the experience of LGBTQ+ students' body image during COVID-19.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter will include the qualitative results of the dissertation. The results section begins with the demographic information obtained from the six participants. I then define the variables used in the study in reference to the participants. I ground the reader by sharing personal narrative stories defining my experience in the months leading up to the pandemic. Finally, I present the data by themes in a narrative style including direct quotes from the participants, their personal stories, and pictures of artifacts shared.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ college students' body image during COVID-19. Qualitative data utilized included semi-structured interviews, artifacts chosen by participants, researcher observations, and researcher documentation. Analysis was completed using a narrative approach that included cleaning the transcripts, determining themes, and interpreting the data through the lens of theory. The results are presented including the individual and combined stories of the participants with additional content from my observations and documentation in relation to the data collection and analysis. This link between life and story helps to make meaning of the pandemic for the individuals in this research study.

The main research questions guiding this study were:

1. What experiences do LGBTQ+ college students have with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How do LGBTQ+ college students describe their experiences with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Participant Demographics

The participants in this study include six LGBTQ+ college students who were attending MSU in the spring semester of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic originated and the following semester of fall 2020 when MSU returned in person with restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. To better understand the participants in this study, I collected demographic information on age, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, pronouns, relationship status, and educational background. Five of the six participants created a pseudonym for themselves, and one participant asked me to choose a pseudonym for them. The pseudonyms used were Jeb, Sam, Rose, KK, Olivia, and Snail.

All participants were required to be enrolled as students at MSU in the spring 2020 and fall 2020 semesters. Five of the six participants were enrolled as undergraduate students, and one participant was working toward completion of her graduate degree during this time period. During data collection, two participants were still completing their undergraduate degrees. At the time of this writing, all participants have graduated and are alumni of the institution. Five of the participants were working towards degrees in the College of Letters and Science with one participant in the College of Engineering. The majors of the students in the College of Letters and Science centered around Psychology, Sociology, and Criminology. To protect the identity of the student in the College of Engineering, I am not listing their major.

The undergraduate students in this study fell in the typical age range (18−25) of undergraduate students (Renn & Reason, 2013). During data collection in fall 2023, three

participants were 23 years old, and two were 24 years old, which places these students about four years younger during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The graduate student participant was in her late 20s while she was working on her master's degree at MSU. MSU is a predominately White university, and five participants indicated their race as White/Caucasian or non-Hispanic, with one participant identifying as White, Hispanic.

All participants are members of the LGBTQ+ community through sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Gender identity and sexual orientation were collected using open-ended options so participants could identify themselves as they felt authentic. I made the decision not to use drop-down categories to allow for self-identification in these demographic areas. All participants were reported to be assigned female at birth (AFAB), with three participants identifying as cisgender women, and the other three participants identifying as gender queer, gender fluid, and/or non-binary. No participants in this study identified as transgender. Five of the participants use she/her pronouns and one participant uses they/them pronouns. Three participants identified their sexual orientation as bisexual, one as lesbian, one as queer, and one as asexual. Currently, four of the participants indicated that they are in a relationship with a cisgender, heterosexual man. Two participants reported being currently single during data collection.

Two participants grew up in Montana, while the remaining four are originally from out of state including Idaho, Texas, and California. Five of the participants live in Montana and one has moved out of state after graduation. All students were living in Bozeman at the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 and returned to Bozeman in August of 2020 to complete the fall 2020 semester at MSU.

Definition of Variables

The following section includes definitions of the variables as understood by the participants. The primary constructs of COVID-19 and body image are central to this study's purpose. I include participant quotes and information on how I determined the final definitions for each variable/construct.

Definition of COVID-19

COVID-19 did not need to be formally defined for the study participants as they had all lived through the pandemic and were aware of the coronavirus and lockdown. The definition of COVID-19 shared earlier in this dissertation was utilized during data collection and analysis. The aspect of COVID-19 that was questioned by several participants was the duration of the pandemic. The WHO declared an end to the COVID-19 public health emergency on May 11, 2023, yet their website continues to define COVID-19 as a pandemic (WHO, 2023). When asked about the duration and end date of the COVID-19 pandemic during interviews in fall 2023, I defined that the pandemic still exists, and asked participants to speak to their continuing experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic in this way. Participants agreed that in their experience, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have continued past May 11, 2023, and continues to play a role in their lives.

Definition of Body Image

As indicated in Chapter One, I felt it was important for the participants to create their own definition of body image. The participant definitions focused on physical acceptance, presentation of self, perception from others and self, comfort in one's own body, and the balance

between body and self. Many of the definitions of body image came from identity and thoughts from self and others. The definitions of body image are included in the chart below. I made the decision to include the verbatim definitions of body image in this study as I believe it is important to see how each participant defined body image for themself.

Table 3. Body Image Definitions

Body Image
"Being happy with the body you have and accepting it." - Jeb
"It's an accumulation of everything, of how you present yourself ... and how people perceive me based on what I'm wearing. How RuPaul says, 'you're born naked, and everything's drag.'" - Sam
"I think of my body as a container that holds the human and non-human pieces of me and that my body image is a very fluid conversation with the physical limitations of what that container is. ... Tending to the dance between both ... in any given moment, that's what my body image is. ... Am I honoring the vessel and honoring all of the less tangible things? And if I'm doing fairly well at tending my body image and the way we classically think about it, how I think about how I look feels often good and very alive, and there's a lot of gratitude that pours in and out pretty easily. And if I'm off kilter in one of those less tangible spaces ... the way that I think that I look probably isn't that great. I'm probably at odds with myself and the container." - Rose

Table 3 Continued

“Body image is feeling comfortable or ... the comfort you feel in your own body. ... I see other people that are my size or bigger or smaller and I think they look great, and it doesn’t matter but as soon as it’s my body, it’s something that I’m able to criticize a lot. ... [Body image is] the amount of comfort you have in your own body.” - KK
“How I perceive my body and ... how I think that others perceive my body ... and ... it doesn’t necessarily always align with what my body objectively looks like ... my physical body isn’t changing every day ... but my body image sometimes does.” - Olivia
“More focused on identity. ... It’s how I dress up this carcass.” - Snail

Findings

I honestly would have expected a zombie apocalypse way before I ever would have believed I would be living through a pandemic. How that pandemic would impact us and change us and shift us during the past four years was a complete unknown to everyone. In exploring the participant stories for this dissertation, I also explored my own memories and experiences of living through a pandemic as an LGBTQ+ student. This data was documented in research journals throughout data collection. I specifically journaled before, during, and following each interview and throughout the analysis process. To help ground myself and the reader and return to the thoughts and feelings leading up to COVID-19 and the initial lockdown in spring of 2020, I share this narrative view of how I saw the world at the beginning of 2020.

Personal Memories

"Three ... two ... one ... Happy New Year!" we exclaimed as the clock struck midnight and the year moved to 2020. We embraced, kissed, and clinked our glasses together in anticipation of the best year ever. Little did we know that we were about to embark upon a pandemic adventure beyond anyone's imagination.

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"Coronavirus," I laughed, impressed by the joke my boss had just made. I was convinced he was referencing fraternity men being hungover on a Sunday morning. Then I realized everyone was eyeing me with questions upon their brows and I realized I had misinterpreted the comment for a joke. "It's all over the news," a colleague shared. As I am not a regular viewer of primetime or cable news, it felt as if I had been living under a rock. Regardless, once I learned that coronavirus was not a joke about students over imbibing on Mexican beer, it still did not feel like anything of consequence in my world. For weeks, a colleague and I shared memes back and forth on our Instagram stories poking fun at a virus having a name similar to a beer. Our ignorance was eventually called out by an old friend of mine in how insensitive my jokes were to the people who were ill and dying from coronavirus. I shamefully stopped my social media joking and began to focus on the imminent threat upon us.

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"Do you think you're still going to be able to go to Cuba?" my parents asked me. "Nothing could stop me!" I responded, irritated by their questioning. I was to be leading a group of about a dozen college students on a service spring break trip to Cuba in less than two weeks. I was nervous and excited, but the fear of coronavirus stopping my trip was not on my radar.

Three days later I sat in my office completely stunned. The director of the Office of International Programs had just called to inform me that the university was grounding all university-sponsored international travel for students over spring break. I sobbed alone at my desk. I felt as if it was solely my fault that this group of students was not going to have the opportunity to visit Cuba and volunteer with the people of that country. I understood the director's decision, but I was crushed. Fine, I thought, if I have to stay home for spring break, I will fill it with spa treatments and social activities. I began to schedule massages and add lunch dates into my calendar that would later all be canceled.

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After enjoying a couple of beers, Emily and I swung by the grocery store near campus to pick up some ice cream. We were astounded. The shelves were bare! We laughed as we found two incredibly large cans of clams left on one lonely shelf. I accidentally purchased a bag of orzo from the bulk section thinking I had found the last rice in the state. We nervously laughed as we left the store, thinking maybe this coronavirus thing was a bigger deal than we had originally thought.

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Tears slid down my cheeks as the registrar announced the university would be closing before everyone returned from spring break. We were troubleshooting how to forward the phones and guessing at how much "work from home" time to anticipate. We collected our laptops and headed home.

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"The governor will be declaring a statewide lockdown," my boss told me over the phone. "We'll plan to meet as a team every morning over Webex," he explained. Every week I was to send in a document outlining the work I had done while sitting in my home office amid a global pandemic. My roommate also worked at the university and made her workspace at our dining room table. We would go on walks each evening and practice yoga in the living room in the first couple of weeks. It was scary to be facing the unknown. I set up my home office as the interstate near my house grew quiet.

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Through the analysis process, several central themes began to emerge in the data. The first being "Mirror Image" or the experience of seeing one's image mirrored back to them on the computer screen. This theme presented differently for the participants as it had for me in my own experience. The second theme is "Time for Reflection." Within this "Time for Reflection," the participants explored their body image, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This molded the third theme of "Identity Development," which was impacted by areas such as clothing, pronouns, and gender identity presentation. All participants shared experiences connected to their "Relationships, Supports, and Influences," the study's fourth theme. "Relationships, Supports, and Influences" included romantic partners, family members, roommates, friends, mental health counselors, and pets. Relationships shared within this fourth theme were not always positive and supportive. Significant relationships, whether positive or negative, supportive or not supportive have been included in this section.

Theme One: Mirror Image

The first and most important theme of my research focuses on the experience of seeing one's mirror image portrayed on the screen in classrooms, meetings, and social interactions during COVID-19 as the world went on lockdown and moved towards using virtual communication. Although I personally felt very impacted by seeing myself on the computer screen during COVID-19, most participants did not have the same experience. As online interaction has increased throughout the generations, younger individuals are native speakers of online technology, and I will always be a foreign speaker as my first interactions with the Internet were not until my senior year of high school. Jeb recalls moving online did not seem to be super impactful:

> I remember using Zoom/Webex a lot during the pandemic, but I had used Skype so much growing up to play video games with friends and to communicate with family that I didn't have any thoughts when looking at myself.

Following the interviews, during analysis, I noticed that the participants had not shared many examples of concerns related to body image during COVID-19 associated with seeing themselves on screen. I inquired via email to see if I had neglected to ask specific questions to draw these experiences out. I asked follow-up questions related to this topic and found it had not been neglected during the interview, it just was not a primary concern in connection to the experiences of the participants. Sam shared:

> I don't remember there being any specific experiences. That's kind of one thing I enjoyed about Zoom is that there really weren't expectations of how you should look. I typically just rolled out of bed, threw a hat on, and logged on. For the most part people kept their cameras off and so did I. Even with the camera on people could only see so much, so Webex didn't really have any kind of memorable effect on my body image.

The mirror image associated with seeing one's face during virtual interactions was something easily avoided by the participants. Jeb shared, "I tend to hide the view of myself when I do video calls since I do not like seeing my reflection in general, which is something I have struggled with for a while." Having previous knowledge of how to manage online platforms gave the participants the tools to avoid body image triggers in seeing their image reflected on the screen. It was clear the participants felt bothered by seeing themselves on camera, but they had already developed coping mechanisms to deal with the impact of the mirror image. Additionally, many online classroom experiences offered the option to not share one's video, which was typically not the case in my experience with graduate school and work during COVID-19.

I also anticipated concerns connected to online learning during COVID-19 as I have heard many complaints about the forced shift to the virtual learning environment. Yet, many of the participants thrived in the online learning environment. Classes were mainly recorded lectures, asynchronous and reading-based. Sam enjoyed online learning. She defines herself as someone who can truly hold herself accountable, so she was able to create her own schedule and focus on completing her assignments. She thrived in the structure she created. Although she did have some classes she had to attend virtually, most of them were asynchronous. She acknowledged that not everyone does well with online learning, but she truly loved the experience and believes it is the reason she was able to graduate a semester early.

Living in a small, rural town, KK grew up taking online classes. She loved the opportunities they provided in connecting her to learning outside of her community. The Montana Digital Academy allowed her the option to choose classes not otherwise offered at her school. Being familiar with the format of online courses, she felt the switch to online learning

during the spring semester of 2020 was an easier transition for her than for other students. What she missed was the in-person human connection with her fellow classmates and the chance to meet with her faculty to ask questions during their office hours, “You can only get so connected with people virtually, especially if you’re not having actual lecture classes and you’re just reading slides.” It was evident that some professors had never taught online and did not know how to utilize this type of educational environment. KK continued her online learning and recently completed a graduate degree completely online.

Snail felt like they grew up online and associated being online with happiness. This was where they thrived as they grew up in a small town without a large, active, queer population. Online was already where Snail turned when they needed support, so it felt like a coming home of sorts as we were forced online during the pandemic. They also noted that they felt more in control doing online classes as they could determine a study schedule that worked best for them.

Olivia noted that some of the professors were unprepared for online learning and how to connect with their students in a virtual environment. The education environment during the spring 2020 semester is more commonly known as emergency remote instruction as professors were not given preparation time to create online courses with clear intentions matched to learning outcomes. Professors at MSU were given resources to assist with creating online courses during summer 2020 through the Center for Faculty Excellence, although not all professors utilized these resources. This also impacted Jeb who had some issues moving into a virtual learning environment with unprepared professors:

> I’ve always struggled with math. I sometimes can’t read numbers so getting a teacher that helps me finally understand the math is really important because I actually start to learn. ... I felt like I was actually learning finally. And then the class went online and I [thought] well, I can cheat until the answer’s right, but I’m not

> learning anything anymore. And the whole online setup, I don't think he really knew how to do a class online at all. It was super stressful. ... It was frustrating that I didn't continue to learn.

Olivia, Jeb, and KK shared that their education was impacted by moving online, but they also enjoyed the format to some extent.

Snail found some comfort in the fact that their professors could not see their face during online classes. This gave them a sense of anonymity in the classroom and space to be their authentic self. Additionally, online classes gave Snail the space to grieve their mother's death, who had died of cancer in August 2019, on their own timeline, "I could go cry about my mom and study tomorrow, rather than having to go to class." Control over how to spend their time was helpful in Snail's grieving process and their identity development.

Ultimately the online learning environment and seeing one's mirror image reflected back to them on the screen did not stand out for the participants. Although this was a significant part of my experience and motivation for this dissertation, the participants shared this was less impactful for them. The participants seemed to have had more time online prior to COVID-19 and were able to manage their reactions to the mirror image on the screen, while this experience was more of a surprise for me. This will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

Theme Two: Time for Reflection

The COVID-19 pandemic was a difficult time for many. As of May 5, 2024, over 7 million people have died of complications related to COVID-19, and there have been close to 800 million reported cases of individuals testing positive for the COVID-19 virus (WHO, 2024). But we did not know what these numbers would look like when the pandemic began in 2020. There were so many unknowns to the virus and the disease. We did not, and still do not, know all

the ways COVID-19 would impact society. Unknowns lead people to feel scared. KK was one of the only participants who spoke about her fears at this time:

> I was ... really scared because we didn't know a lot about COVID[-19] at that time. And people were dying everywhere. And I wasn't sick, and we didn't have tests yet that we had at home. So, you were just waiting to see if you were going to die is what it felt like.

Life was impacted and no one knew what was to come next. Especially as different COVID-19 strains were established, and a vaccine was not yet on the market. KK continued to share her concerns about the unknown:

> We had a long time to go before [it ended], but we didn't know that. We didn't know when it was going to end. We didn't know if it was going to end. We didn't know how many people were going to die. ... Everybody was tired. Everybody was exhausted. Everyone was at their wits end because [we were all wondering] when is this going to end?

And these were true fears for everyone. Yet for the participants of this study, there was a sense of hope and an opportunity for growth beyond the fear.

Stuck inside and socially distanced from others, many people were given time and space to focus on personal thoughts they were normally otherwise able to ignore. The extra time away from others and the silence around us offered ample opportunity for self-exploration. Although it was acknowledged that many people recall this time as being one of isolation and doom and gloom, the participants in this study indicated an appreciation for the space and fresh air to find out who they were. Jeb shared, "I had a very good experience during the pandemic. I had a lot of emotional and mental growth." Snail acknowledged that "obviously the pandemic did suck," but they had difficulty finding negative things to share as they liked online learning, lockdown, and the time for reflection.

Montana was a wonderful place to live during the pandemic, as many people from outside the state found out, moving to Bozeman during COVID-19 to share in its space, quiet, nature, and slowness. Many of the participants noted that they took advantage of the opportunities to get outdoors during the pandemic. Hiking commonly came up for participants as a way for body movement and to be away from people. Nature was also seen as a convenient way to clear one's mind and stay positive during lockdown. Jeb recalls her experience:

> I'm just someone who's very fortunate for the circumstances I had during the pandemic. ... I was in the best place in the country to be, because there's no one here. We went hiking all the time. We went backpacking over the summer and I'm someone who likes going out in nature, which is great in a pandemic because you don't want to interact with people.

I also recall feeling fairly positive about my COVID-19 experience. I was able to focus on optimism and positivity throughout lockdown and working from home. I did not initially think of the pandemic as a time for growth, but as the participants shared their stories, I remembered that as the initial lockdown began, I had time to clean out my home office, take an online backpacking course and go on the first of many backpacking trips, and explore my identity.

Time for reflection took different forms for each participant. The place where participants lived during COVID-19 informed the space where they spent time for reflection. Prior to the pandemic, some students lived on-campus in University Student Housing and others lived off-campus in nearby apartments, houses, and even buses. Although on-campus housing was available to students during the entire spring 2020 semester, students were encouraged to stay home after spring break and not return to campus as all classes had moved online. All participants who lived on campus moved off campus or back home during the initial pandemic shutdown in spring 2020. Since MSU reopened its doors to in-person classes in fall 2020, Sam

returned to living on campus. This experience was integral in her self-exploration as she was surrounded by supportive coworkers and friends. Sam found community all around her in people she never would have believed would become her friends. She rarely visited home during COVID-19 as she feared bringing home germs and infecting her grandparents. When she did return home, she would stay secluded from her older relatives to protect their health. The freedom of being away from judgmental family and the people she had grown up with, gave her the space and confidence to figure out her identity and how she wanted to present herself physically. Sitting alone in her dorm, Sam had time to contemplate her sexual orientation. She spent time journaling and thinking about who she was, sharing that, "exposure to yourself makes you more, made me more comfortable with it at least."

The World Health Organization (WHO) advised a quarantine of 14 days following contact with anyone who tested positive for COVID-19 during the initial year of the pandemic (WHO, 2021). In May of 2020, KK was quarantined and isolated to her room to protect her housemates from having to quarantine as well. She spent 14 days alone in her 12' x 12' bedroom, only leaving to use the bathroom. Ironically, this was also the exact same 14 days where KK had been planning to go on a faculty-led abroad trip to Europe that had been canceled due to the pandemic. She felt disconnected and separated as she sat alone in her room. Yet, she also found solace in this time for reflection. She dreamed of a future when she could once again travel and make connections around the world. She felt this part of her identity was taken from her during COVID-19. As she sat in her room she created a sacred structure, a jar, to hold her foreign coins, an expression of hope.

Figure 1. *KK's Jar*



Note. Used with permission from participant.

She described this reflection time as:

> It just allowed me to really understand who I am more and what's important to me. ... Being ... ok with my sexuality and [thinking] it's not a big deal. ... Having that time where you're by yourself and your own mind and really thinking about it was a huge part of me accepting my sexuality and my identity and being willing to share that with ... other people.

KK was grateful for the time she was able to sit with herself and focus on her own feelings and identity, but 14 days of quarantine in her room felt like solitary confinement. She described her mixed feelings as:

> That was a huge part of what COVID[-19] gave to me, while also just absolutely effing up everyone's life. ... I would never wish COVID[-19] on anybody ever again, but I'm grateful for it because it required ... me to slow down. ... It sucked. It was awful. I hated it. But at the same time, I'm really grateful that it did require me to slow down and actually think about who I am and what's important to me and take a breath. ... I don't remember the last time I slowed down since COVID[-19].

As everyone, not just KK, was forced into lockdown and stuck spending time away from others, it gave people the opportunity to explore themselves on a different level than they previously had had the time and space for. KK shared the balance of this time for her as:

> That inherently forced everyone to just see themselves and know themselves more than maybe they had in the past. And sometimes that's a good thing. Sometimes it's a bad thing. And I know I'm an over thinker and if you stare at yourself in the mirror too long, you're eventually gonna see something that you don't like. And I think especially in the early days of figuring out that, 'woah, this is weird, I'm kind of stuck here, I have to be okay with this,' was really uncomfortable.

Addressing the discomfort and sitting with the feelings of fear helped KK acknowledge the impact she had from the pandemic.

Somehow knowing that everyone was in the same boat during lockdown helped Olivia cope with the situation. She would not wish the suffering caused by the pandemic on anyone, but she felt better that we were all in this together trying to survive. Olivia was grateful for her own time for reflection and hopeful that others would also have similar epiphanies.

Without the time for reflection, Snail does not believe they would be as comfortable as they are with their body and their identity. They were able to go home and shut the door of their house and avoid seeing others for several months. People changed during this time, and who we were before the pandemic was partially forgotten. Snail truly believes they are who they are now due to this time for reflection as they shared:

> If we were to have never gone through COVID[-19], I would not be presenting the way that I am now. I think that it would have taken years more for me to reach where I am. I probably would have never come out with they/them pronouns until graduate school.

The time for reflection was an unexpected bonus of the pandemic and specifically the lockdown. This can be seen as a paradox between the participants truly believing the pandemic was a

negative experience and a collective trauma, yet they were all able to find the "silver lining" in having time to reflect amidst the pandemic.

Body Image

Body image is one of the main concepts and foci of this study. As noted above, each participant has their own definition of body image, and each participant also has their own relationship with their body. The lenses in which they view body image during COVID-19 as LGBTQ+ students vary. I did not collect information specific to participants naming their view of their own bodies. Through observation, I noted that the participants presented with various body shapes, sizes, and beliefs about their own body image. Some participants indicated that traditional ideas of body image associated with weight and body size had never impacted them. Others were very aware of their bodies during COVID-19. And a couple began 2020 with the goal of a health journey before them.

Jeb started the new year of 2020 with a focus on health, well-being, and the body. She fought to continue this goal throughout COVID-19. Being naturally skinny, people had often bullied Jeb and mistakenly called her anorexic. She faced her fears and anxiety surrounding body image and began going to the gym, when it eventually reopened, together with her partner during the pandemic. Once the lockdown was lifted and gyms were open and available, Jeb and her partner took to the weight room. Jeb was nervous as she began her fitness journey, but the support from her partner helped her get past the initial anxiety and resulted in a physical transformation of her body during the pandemic. She was able to "bulk up" and gain weight during this time. She described the experience with her partner and his support as:

> There's ... this duality where I'm way too skinny and need to gain and he has issues with losing [weight] sometimes, which I don't notice, but he does, so we kinda had a journey of our own, a body acceptance together. And it started during the pandemic, so it's interesting because we just are different body types, opposite body types, but we still come together in our own way to build each other up despite having opposite body types.

Jeb and her partner additionally spent time cooking healthy meals together during the pandemic and supporting each other through their health journeys.

In parallel with the physical change Jeb experienced during COVID-19 by going to the gym, Jeb also restuffed her beloved stuffed animal, a little dog named Spice. Spice was her forever sidekick. Gifted to her as a child, Spice went everywhere with Jeb. Spice had traveled the world, backpacked up mountains, and offered herself as a pillow for Jeb's head. Spice is quite literally Jeb's emotional support animal. The experience of restuffing Spice was cathartic for Jeb. Although they did not make the decision to restuff the dog as an intentional parallel to their wellness journey during their pandemic experience, looking back she found the symbolism. She shared about the parallels:

> I feel in a lot of ways it's kind of symbolic that during the pandemic I decided not only to improve my health and gain weight, but then do that visually through my stuffed dog as well because I restuffed it.

Figure 2. *Jeb's Dog Spice, Before and After*



Note: Used with permission of participant.

The security of this dog along with Jeb's supportive partner and roommates went a long way in providing Jeb a sanctuary to survive her COVID-19 experience. Jeb believes she is one of the few fortunate and privileged that had a positive experience during this time.

Rose was also on a journey, one with the intention to explore herself, who she is as a woman, and what patterns were creating obstacles in her relationships. Rose noticed negative body image thoughts coming up after comparing herself to women in the yoga community during COVID-19. She acknowledged this and found support by utilizing past coping skills including mental health therapy and artistic expression. Rose experiences her body through dance and art. She expresses herself through free-form movement and contact improv. Her art and dance help her to explore her relationship with her body on a deeper level. Rose is very in tune with her physical and spiritual body and aware of how to honor her body. As she proceeds in her body acceptance and self-love journey, she shares, "I know my body to be useful and functional and also I know what it feels like to move it in a way that is nourishing to me."

When she was leaving an abusive relationship during the pandemic, Rose sought out the contact improv community as a sense of support. This opportunity was not available during the initial phases of the COVID-19 shutdown, which impacted Rose's opportunity for artistic expression and dance, but was eventually reopened to offer a space for healing. Rose described contact improv as:

> You're doing improv, but it's body, it's movement improv, so it's movement improvisation and it's in contact with other bodies. So, you are touching other people's bodies and they are touching your bodies and it's a dance form, but ... also, often these spaces are held in a way that's really trauma informed. It's often a place where people are actively practicing different styles of consent.

Contact improv dancers use their nervous and somatic systems to listen to each other's bodies without talking. All emotions are welcome in the space created by the dancers, and everyone is respectful of releasing emotions within the group. Often the experience will include a debrief at the end so people can share what they felt throughout the movement.

Olivia changed her view on exercise from something she had to do to make her body look a certain way, to an acceptance and love of movement through yoga. This was a part of defining her independence along the journey of finding her true self. A popular YouTube program, Yoga with Adriene, represented both positive and negative things associated with Olivia's body image. During the initial lockdown, Olivia turned to Yoga with Adriene as a workout routine in her apartment. She questioned whether she was practicing yoga for herself or for how she wanted others to perceive her. This was due to the pressure of how she felt she needed to present herself physically to the world. Olivia has a history of disordered eating and overexercising, so the relationship with her body was prominent as she entered the pandemic. She initially felt pressured to participate in at-home exercise as she was viewing content from influencers online focusing on needing to get or stay in shape during COVID-19. When Olivia found Yoga with

Adriene on YouTube, her online exercise routine became much more positive and authentic to her body image journey:

> I was in COVID[-19] and this very soft-spoken lady and her dog are leading me through a yoga flow. I feel like I spent a lot of time with Adriene during COVID[-19] and it became a much more positive experience and so it tied to some of the broader personal growth I had during COVID[-19]. ... It's something that got me through and helped me be more comfortable with myself and more aware of what my needs are compared to what needs are being projected onto me.

Figure 3. *Yoga with Adriene*



Note: From *YouTube* (2024).

After graduation, Olivia moved to a large Midwest city and found an apartment above a yoga studio:

> I found that I really enjoyed those [classes] and it felt empowering, like this is something that I'm doing strictly for myself because I want to do it and I enjoy it, not because I feel like other people are telling me that I need to.

Ultimately Olivia believes her body image became more positive during COVID-19 as she built her confidence and independence during this time. Having space to distance herself from the pressure to maintain beauty standards gave her permission to determine how she wanted to dress and present to the world. Olivia had not previously had the time and space to consider what she wanted her body image and personal identity to be. Pre-COVID-19, Olivia felt she had to present

like the “standard straight woman. ... I need to be pretty. I need to be feminine.” COVID-19 gave Olivia a space for personal growth and changed her mindset to a more positive body image, “You don’t have to be super feminine. You don’t have to be vivacious and curvy and sexy all the time. You can present how you want to present.”

Snail represents their body image during their COVID-19 experience as taking the time to “dress up the carcass” the way they want it to be. Snail has never put much focus on body image in general. They avoid looking in mirrors and do not often perseverate on whether they or others have lost or gained weight. They were able to use the space during COVID-19 to adjust their life to better represent themself including an overhaul of their wardrobe, additional facial piercings, and colorfully dyed hair.

The mandates to wear surgical-type masks when out in public also played a role in body image for some of the participants. KK acknowledged that there was a loss of self with wearing masks during COVID-19. She believes masks hid part of a person’s identity and made it more difficult to make personal connections. KK felt it was as if she did not even know the people around her, “I remember being in class and halfway through the semester someone pulling their mask down to take a drink of water, and I didn’t even recognize them.” Every time she had this experience of seeing a previously hidden half of someone’s face, she felt it was jarring, “It was kinda crazy how much of your identity you can hold in the bottom half of your face.” But she was also aware that masks offered an opportunity to hide and protect yourself from things other than COVID-19. She noticed this specifically when she acknowledged she was hiding her double chin from others. There were certain moments where she admits she felt she looked better with a

mask on. KK had braces from August 2020 to September 2021, which was the perfect time to have adult braces as nobody even knew.

The phenomenon of being able to use masks to both hide and express body image was an unexpected consideration in connection to body image during COVID-19. Wearing masks provided space for less pressure associated with presenting oneself physically. Olivia noted how wearing masks changed her feelings about the physical presentation of her appearance, “Even if I put on make-up, no one can tell because I got my mask. And then I’ve got my glasses. And then my glasses are fogging up because of my mask, so you really can’t see me.” The focus connected to masks was on the stress of the pandemic and this relieved some of the negative feelings around body image. Olivia notes that this improved her body image but made her realize how sad it was that she was worried about how others were perceiving her.

Social Comparison Theory

This dissertation utilized the theoretical framework of Social Comparison Theory. Although this lens was used in analyzing all the data, some specific stories came to the surface to show how Social Comparison Theory played out for the participants. Stories shared by the participants matched this lens as they discussed comparing themselves to others. This was sometimes mentioned as part of body image, but also as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Jeb admitted to comparing her body to others but did not notice this until after gaining weight during COVID-19. In comparison to others who feared gaining weight during the pandemic, Jeb was on a mission to gain weight and muscle to feel healthier. It was after this health journey that Jeb began to notice the bodies of others:

> I guess I didn’t pay attention as much to how my body changes with gaining weight before, until then. And now I’ve noticed if I start losing weight my hip bones start

> protruding more. I'm more observant than I used to be about how weight sits on skinny people. ... I think it was from weight gain and seeing my body change so then I started observing other body types more. ... I will just look at someone and if it's a skinny person I try to look at the weight and how their shoulders are holding the weight along their arms. And if they're super underweight you can tell because you see the bones more than the muscle.

Jeb sees this comparison more as an objective comparison as opposed to subjective and believes this stems from an EMT certification and a wilderness first responder course she took during COVID-19. This course helped her to better understand the human body and then brought on the comparison of other bodies around her.

When she was a little girl the women in KK's family were always talking about their bodies as she was growing up. They often made comments about their own or other people's bodies in a judgmental style, specifically comparing body size and shape:

> I think a lot of it came from growing up in small town Montana with people that grew up in diet culture and harbored not great feelings towards their bodies which then rubbed off on me and my other, mostly female family members.

Ultimately KK believes the women around her were uncomfortable with their bodies and their own body image and portrayed this discomfort on others to manage their anxiety. This is an example of social comparison theory in action.

As people returned to work and school following the initial lockdown and as people removed their previously mandated face masks, there was increased opportunity for social comparison in the form of body size, shape, and facial attractiveness. KK noted that people were judgmental about whether someone had gained or lost weight during the pandemic. After not seeing someone for several months, there was a comparison regarding any noticeable changes in weight and a judgement in assuming how well that person took care of themselves during the pandemic.

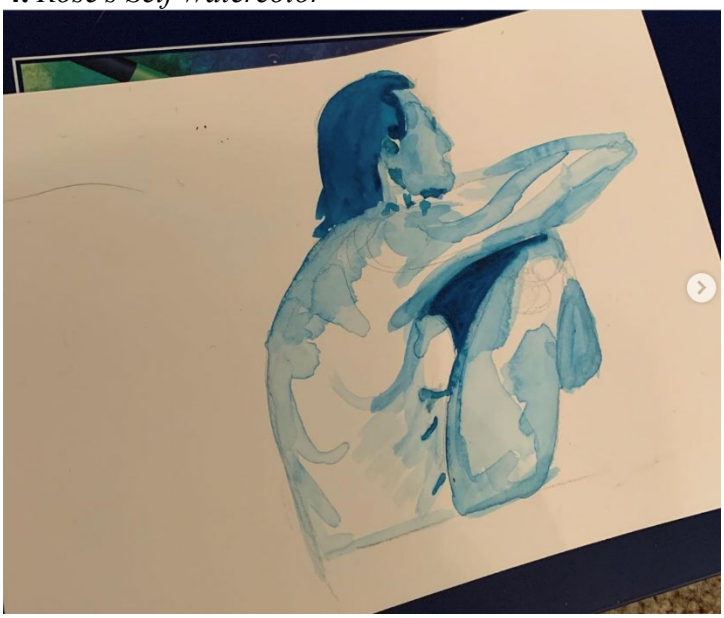
Self-Objectification Theory

The second theoretical framework utilized in this study was Self-Objectification Theory. Again, this theoretical lens was used throughout data analysis, but there were a few places it stood out more than others. A few of the participants indicated an awareness of self-objectification in the form of the "male gaze" or the social constructs of what is the body ideal in society or in certain social circles in which they belonged. Being placed on lockdown and socially distancing during COVID-19 gave participants the opportunity to escape the constant self-objectification thoughts and work towards a positive body image.

To begin her journey with loving her body, Rose began painting other women's bodies and then her own. She chose the medium of watercolors as it is something she could not make perfect. Based on Self-Objectification Theory, women have been trained to view themselves through the male gaze and criticize their bodies and how they differ from the ideal body shape (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Rose found in creating art of other women's bodies she could start to see her own body through a more compassionate lens:

> At first, I started water coloring other women's bodies and of varying shapes and sizes because I recognized that I never thought, I was never disgusted or revolted or had negative connotation with other women's bodies if it was in the context of being a painting or a sculpture.

Figure 4. *Rose's Self Watercolor*



Note. Used with permission by participant.

Rose had a photographer friend who took pictures of her in a bathtub during COVID-19 and she spent time creating paintings through different media from the pictures.

As she was working to unlearn the messaging taught to her as self-objectification and negative body image, Olivia realized that she does not hate or judge other people's bodies the same way she does her own. This realization has helped her see that body image is subjective and often depends on where she is in her own mental space. Olivia also found the strength during COVID-19 to declare that her body belongs to her and is not just there for the "male gaze":

> When I go out for the day, I'm thinking about [how] I'm presenting for myself and not for other people and that's helped me be more comfortable with my body and feel less negative about it than I did previously.

This also played into Olivia's feelings about belonging within the LGBTQ+ community as she realized that she could present authentically without worrying about whether she will be accepted.

Theme Three: Identity Development

Participants shared extensively about their own identity development during this time. They seemed to be asking: Who am I? Who do I want to be? How do I want to portray myself physically? The Time for Reflection made space for Identity Development during the pandemic. Identity Development can be triggered by dissonance, which is certainly something that occurred during COVID-19 (King, 2017).

Olivia spent time reflecting on her sexual orientation during COVID-19 following graduation when she was living alone for the very first time in an apartment with her cat. The animated Netflix series She-Ra and the Princesses of Power gave Olivia permission to explore her sexual orientation in a way that provided her freedom to present her queer identity without a determined list of rules. This permission quieted the self-conscious voices and gave her space to meet people in the queer community who accepted her for who she is authentically. She had previously felt she was not allowed into the queer community as she was in a heterosexual-passing relationship. Olivia did not want to impose on a space that she was not certain would accept her in her current relationship.

Figure 5. *She-Ra Netflix Series Poster*



Note: From *Netflix* (2018).

Finding others who have watched She-Ra and the Princesses of Power gives Olivia the sense that she has found at the very least, an ally. While attending a recent wedding with her partner, she was sat at the miscellaneous friends' table with a woman who had the She-Ra sword tattooed on her arm. Seeing that representation of the show gave Olivia the relief that she had found a safe person to connect with and share her joy and true self in that environment.

Snail had initially been hesitant to reach out and take part in this dissertation research study as they had not previously considered how their body image was impacted by COVID-19. They shared:

> I had originally not thought that COVID[-19] affected my body image that much until I realized that it wasn't necessarily the pandemic that affected it but more of being more online than ever had kind of helped me come to terms with my gender a little bit more.

Snail was able to consider how body image and gender identity played a role together for them during COVID-19 and signed up to participate in this dissertation study.

Coming Out

Whether it is due to the developmental age, or the pandemic, many of the participants came out to their families during this time. Olivia came out to herself first as she spent time reflecting on her sexuality during COVID-19. She was already in a committed monogamous relationship with a cisgender, heterosexual man at this point, and was not interested in exploring her bisexual identity in the physical sense. She has felt difficulty embracing the LGBTQ+ community as she has been in a heterosexual-passing relationship since coming out to family and friends. Although her family accepts her sexual orientation, she does not believe they truly understand it due to her long-term relationship with her heterosexual male partner.

KK had known she was bisexual since she was in middle school, but she did not fully accept her sexual orientation or come out to her friends and family until after graduating from college. When she had tried to come out to her family in 8th grade, her mom and her grandparents told her she was not old enough to know whether that was the truth of her sexual orientation at that time in her life. They admittedly denied her declaration that she was gay. This increased KK's anxiety and uncertainty around her sexual orientation. During COVID-19 she had time to think about herself and who she truly was and how she truly identified. KK was so proud of finally being able to live her true self with the support of her transgender coworker who celebrated her coming out. She participated in the Lavender Celebration on campus as a staff member following her own graduation and posted about how impactful this experience had been, not thinking that her parents, who are not on social media, would have access to this information. She posted, "I'm so grateful for MSU allowing me to explore and grow in my queer identity." Her parents' friends messaged her mom asking about what KK had meant by her post. She ended

up texting her mom a GIF that just said “bisexual” to tell her that she identifies as bisexual. And once that had been made clear, it was never discussed with her family again.

Both Sam and KK shared about the fear of potentially losing their families after coming out. Although KK wanted to believe deep down that her family would not care about her sexual orientation, there was a part of her that worried they would disown her. She had heard them often make off-handed comments when they saw a gay couple on TV, “They [would say] why do they have to have this in every single TV show?” KK found herself constantly defending fictitious gay couples on TV to her family, while secretly defending herself.

After coming out to her best friend, Sam decided it was time to share her truth with her mother. She FaceTimed with her mom from campus during COVID-19 not knowing what to expect but hoping for the best. Sam was prepared to be disowned by her family. She found solace in the fact that she had support from friends on campus and had determined she would be ok, even if her family would not accept her:

> I’m okay without them so if I tell them and it doesn’t go right at least I know I’m going to be alright by myself. ... It’s kind of a weird thing, because you make it such a big deal and then you tell people and then they [say], “oh yeah, I kind of figured.” So, it’s weird because you don’t get the fallout that you’re waiting for. So, you’re just left with this, What the hell? Why did I wait so long? You don’t really know what to do with all of that fear and stuff.

Before coming out to her family, Sam felt like when she went home, she had to go back into the closet. She did not have the freedom to be herself or to express herself authentically around her family. She began to come out to her friends at school before COVID-19, but upon returning home when the university went fully online in March 2020, Sam felt as though her life was put on hold:

> I couldn’t wait to go back to school because I just felt my life was on halts. My freshman year I felt everything was growing. I was becoming this person and then

> it was all halted. And I had to go back to being somebody that I didn't even recognize because for a long few years I was lost, especially when going back and living with my grandparents. I didn't know who I was. I didn't know any of that, so I just couldn't wait to get back to school.

She felt like she was stuck in a limbo and was very disoriented. She could not present how she wanted to, and she had to hide her true self. Although most of Sam's family has been supportive and accepting of her, her sexual orientation, and how she presents herself to the world, she has had interactions with a couple family members that have left lasting and painful emotional wounds:

> I had joked about never wanting to wear a dress again in my life and [my aunt] made the comment, "Oh it's fine, you're just in your tomboy phase. You'll get over it soon." And that stuck with me because I've always been waiting for that, "I'll get over it attitude." One day I'll be comfortable in these clothes or whatever. And so, I just always thought that's what I was supposed to be.

In 2020 while Sam was in lockdown living with her grandparents, she recalls the second familial wound, this time from her grandma:

> I remember very specifically one time we were watching this stupid Hallmark movie and there was a gay couple in it. ... I remember we were sitting there, and my grandma had made the comment, "Why do they have to have them in this movie? They just ruin it." And then she was going on this whole spiel. ... I remember the one sentence that always sticks in my head, and she [said], "Do you think God would make a mistake like that?" And so, I just remember I was [thinking] what the hell am I supposed to do with that?

Luckily, Sam had a supportive friend in her hometown that she could reach out to during this time and process her hurt.

Although I began my process of coming out to select friends and family before the pandemic, it was not until COVID-19 when I felt ready and brave enough to share my sexual orientation with my parents. I felt the same nervousness described by Sam and KK in believing my parents would be accepting, but also fearing for the worst. Like Olivia, I do not think my

parents fully understand as they have never seen me in a relationship with anyone outside of the heteronormative assumptions that I am straight. I am lucky that they accept me unconditionally regardless.

Presentation of Self to the World

The role of clothing and dress as part of the presentation of gender identity was observed by most of the participants. As they worked through their own gender identity during their time for reflection during COVID-19, they became aware of the different outside pressures to present a certain way. Exploring sexuality and gender expression through clothing options played an important role in determining authenticity for many participants. These awarenesses eventually led to clarity in matching their physical presentation to how they truly feel on the inside.

Sam found the ability to reflect on how she wanted to present herself to the world during COVID-19. COVID-19 allowed Sam the space, away from people, to determine who she was. She focused on her gender expression starting with hairstyles and moving on to clothing options. She was able to try on different identities until she found what felt authentic to her:

> During COVID[-19] I started having more time to look at how I presented, and I decided this isn't exactly how I wish to be. And so, I was able to start changing it to how I would more rather present myself because I felt I'm not around all these people all the time so I can see what I like and experiment with how I want to present and stuff. ... It's like being able to look in the mirror and see what I want the world to see.

As Sam became more comfortable with herself and how she was presenting, her confidence began to soar. She was able to take from her experience and share wisdom for others:

> Who gives a rat's ass what you wear? Just wear what you want to wear. Show up how you want to show up in the spaces. ... Find the spaces that you can show up to and be exactly who you want to be. And just present yourself to the world how you want to present yourself to the world.

Jeb expressed that she feels pressure to dress in a feminine way when she goes out in public with her partner:

> We went to a wedding ... this weekend and I'd never met his friends before. I've only heard a lot about them. So, in a lot of ways, I felt pressured to dress more feminine. And that was kind of difficult because I don't know how I'm going to feel. So instead, I just brought my feminine wear. I had two options for that and then I had my masculine wear and two options for that. But I knew in reality I felt a lot more pressure to dress more feminine because it was a wedding for his friends, and he tells them that I'm his girlfriend. I felt like [that] even if I don't know what he says to them directly. I am pretty sure that they view me as girlfriend, not partner.

Like Olivia, Jeb struggles with the assumptions that are made from her being in a heterosexual-passing relationship. Her identity is important to her, and she would like her partner to further embrace that part of her and the queer community.

The concept of dressing androgynous was brought up by Jeb and Rose. Jeb says she feels most comfortable wearing clothing that is androgynous. She joked, "I do a lot of wearing pretty masculine clothes or a lady suit. I dress like Hillary Clinton sometimes." She rarely wears make-up and through most of the pandemic she had to wear a uniform at work. Rose also prefers to dress and present as androgynous. She describes her ideal clothing choices as, "classic, soft-Butch, Lesbian, backwards hats, party t-shirts with the sleeves cuffed, that kind of look."

Many participants noted the desire to wear comfortable clothes while staying home during the pandemic. As people were not leaving their homes, many thought what was the point in putting on pants? Rose reflects that wearing sweatpants was just easier as she was balancing graduate school during the pandemic, and she felt constantly exhausted. During COVID-19, she was dressing for comfort and extended this thinking to her underwear choices, "I [said] fuck it, I'm buying men's boxer brief underwear and throwing all my female-based underwear away. These are not comfortable. I don't know who fucking made these, but they're garbage." KK

found comfort in wearing leggings and a sweatshirt while she was home during COVID-19. She did not care how she presented herself because no one outside of her home could see her. She believed everyone was feeling a similar way, “There [were] less expectations on people with how they presented themselves because we were all in a similar situation. We were all tired. We were all locked away.” Removing the pressure to dress a certain way for going out into the world helped build space for both determining one’s own style and comfort level.

Sam and Snail both commented on their shopping habits during COVID-19 as they were determining their identity. Snail appreciated the ease of online ordering which gave them the ability to overhaul their wardrobe focusing on black, white, and the occasional pop of pink, “I was changing my entire wardrobe to things that I was happy and comfortable in.” Sam did not share specifics about the colors of her wardrobe, but she reflected:

> I went through a lot of different phases of clothes at school. I thought about that the other day. The amount of money I spent on clothes in school is wild, but I just would try different things and I never tried them at home.

Shopping during COVID-19 was easy with online ordering and made wardrobe changes possible when going out in public to shop was not an option.

Snail was the only participant that discussed their love of cosplay. Cosplay played an important role for them as they noted, “You can cosplay as any gender that you want.” Snail described a specific costume they created and sewed for a cosplay event. Throwing up two middle fingers to the camera, Snail declared, “It’s a demon and demons don’t have genders!” Cosplay offered Snail permission to express their gender identity in any way that they desired.

Gender Identity/Sexual Orientation

Gender was seen as a fluid concept by many of the participants. Jeb shared, “My gender kind of changes, depending on the day.” Although Jeb has a leaning toward presenting herself as androgynous, she found that androgyny felt more related to presenting as a man than a woman. Rose also spoke to gender identity and androgyny:

> I gender identify as queer and for me that means a mix between being a woman sometimes and being androgynous others. I don’t feel particularly balanced toward feeling like a man ever or male or masculine, but androgyny is something that very much feels like part of my experience.

Being able to define one’s definition of androgyny was in line with defining their own gender identity. As Rose was stepping into her queerness and identifying what felt comfortable and authentic, she felt moments of “gender euphoria.” She questioned why she had never let herself acknowledge what felt good to her before and why she had just accepted certain things as the way things are. Dressing in a queered way helped Rose to feel empowered.

Just prior to the start of COVID-19, Snail decided to shave their head. They had previously been presenting as “hyper femme.” This was the most masculine presenting they had ever been and was connected to both their gender identity development and sense of self. The decision to shave their head was also to honor the passing of their mother who had died of cancer about six months before the pandemic started. Shaving their head was a pivotal moment in their gender identity development. A vivid memory for Snail is an incident between themselves and a customer at their place of work:

> It was a lady and her dad, and the dad had come in and he [said], “Pretty girls only wear long hair” or ‘[Pretty girls] only have long hair.’ And I [said], “Oh ha ha, whatever.” And he [said], “It’s supposed to be a compliment. You’re supposed to have long hair.” I [said], “Oh ok well my mom just died of cancer.”... And he probably said more than that and I can’t even remember, but that just stuck with

> me. The next customer [said], "I am so sorry you had to deal with that." I [said], "I'm going to get another cashier." And then I went and cried in the back.

This was a pivotal moment in Snail's gender identity as they started to ask themselves: How am I currently presenting? What do I actually like? How do I truly want to present myself? COVID-19 gave Snail the space to become more comfortable with how they presented and what made them genuinely authentic. For Snail COVID-19 gave them, "the time and space to explore and be comfortable with who I was." They began to accept their non-binary queer identity and find comfort in being who they truly were meant to be.

Using they/them pronouns has been a journey for Snail. COVID-19 was the time that Snail changed their name and began to use they/them pronouns more frequently. They are regularly cognizant of how the world may perceive them and how to challenge misconceptions, "I don't want to be misgendered for she/her when I go out in public. I know it's gonna happen, but how do I reduce that?" Snail has attempted to lessen the misgendering by wearing a variety of they/them pins when they are out in public. They have also struggled with where it feels safe to wear they/them pins. Although campus feels like a safe environment, other places around the state, including some of the surrounding towns, do not feel as safe to Snail. This is one of the many reasons being online during COVID-19 felt safer as it protected Snail from having to interact with individuals who might judge or possibly harm them due to their gender identity and specifically for wearing they/them pins. Being able to present their pronouns as they/them without backlash in online formats gave Snail confidence and love for who they are, as people just accepted their online identity without question in the forums they interacted with online during the pandemic. This made it that much more of a struggle for Snail when we returned from lockdown and social distancing. It is the constant stress associated with having to introduce

themself and share their identity over and over that makes Snail miss being online during the lockdown and social distancing of the pandemic. Because Snail could reflect on who they are and how they want to present themselves, wearing they/them pins is focused more on avoiding being misgendered than gender identity expression:

> I feel like a lot of people would assume that the pins have meaning of, "Oh I'm finally who I am." Or a happy thing. And just to reiterate, for me they're not. They're more of an annoyance of, dang it, I have to validate who I am to other people.

Figure 6. *They/Them Pins*



Note: From *Kitty with a Cupcake,* 2024.

Snail recalls during work they kept having to make bigger and bigger they/them pins in an effort to not be misgendered. They shared that it often feels like a battle to help others understand them and why they need to be respected with the correct name and pronouns. This problem did not occur when they were online or in lockdown during the pandemic:

> I didn't have to do that during COVID[-19] or during online. I'm doing that all now when we're back in person and people are seeing us. I didn't have to do that online and I so wish that we were back online.

Online interactions offered Snail a safety and acceptance that they have not fully received in the "real world" once public spaces began opening back up following the initial COVID-19 lockdown.

Theme Four: Relationships, Supports, and Influences

Relationships were a significant factor in persisting through the COVID-19 pandemic. Friends, significant others, and family members influenced the participants' experiences during this time. This is in line with research by Thompson and Coovert (1999) who indicated the three strongest influences on body image belong to media, parents, and peers. Most of the relationships shared by participants are positive, yet there are several examples of negative interactions that lacked opportunity for support for the participants. I have included sections on significant partners, family (specifically, mothers and sisters), friends, the queer community, social media, mental health counselors, and pets.

Partners

Four of the participants are currently paired with cisgender, heterosexual men. Of these four partnerships, three of the couples had already met and committed to their relationships before the pandemic started in March 2020. One couple met through online dating in the first year of the pandemic. Three couples mentioned utilizing online dating apps (Tinder and Bumble) to connect either within their current relationship or in a potential polyamorous relationship. All the participants who are in relationships indicated concern about the assumption others make that they are straight or not in a queer relationship.

Jeb met her partner in January 2020, right before the COVID-19 pandemic started. She mentions that at the time she was presenting as female rather than gender queer. Although she loves her partner dearly, there is a sense of feeling trapped by the perception of her relationship being seen as heterosexual:

> It put me in a box because I'm dating a cis straight man. And I love him, but at the same time, sometimes I wish I had more freedom now. ... I haven't had a lot of experiences with women outside of my dating in high school and a few dates that I had before I started dating him. COVID[-19] kind of put us in a box of being stuck. ... Our relationship literally was just starting at the beginning of the pandemic and by the time it finished, we'd moved into each other's homes [and] now we are in an apartment together without roommates. So, in a lot of ways, it kind of trapped me into being very cis-hetero-presenting. ... It's such a hard thing because there's days where I have so much love for him and I can't imagine life without him. But then I have days where I [think] man, I could be experimenting more with my sexuality. I'm pretty set in my sexuality and my gender orientation, but at the same time there's that side of it'd be fun to experiment.

Jeb's partner still often refers to her as his girlfriend, which causes a lot of animosity between them as she would like to be identified as his partner:

> He's better now, because we talk a lot, but when I first brought it up, it was really hard for him to swap and he even told me I don't think I could ever see you as anything but my girlfriend. But I am more than that.

Jeb continues to work on the relationship with her partner and helping him to respect her gender identity.

KK met her current partner on Bumble, and they began dating during COVID-19 in August 2020. He is aware of KK's sexual orientation and supportive, but they do not talk about it often as they are in a long-term, monogamous relationship. KK feels confident in her committed relationship and does not feel she needs to constantly "out" herself as bisexual based on who she is currently dating.

Olivia's partner has always been a strong support in her body image journey. She shares the support she finds in this relationship in connection with body image:

> I know even on my good days and on my bad days, in terms of my body image, my partner is gonna see me the same way and still compliment me and think that I'm beautiful and that's not going to change.

Olivia moved in with her partner during COVID-19. They are now engaged to be married.

Snail's partner is one of their biggest supports and moved in with them during COVID-19. They have been together since high school.

> He's just supportive in general, so whenever I would come to him with crazy make-up or maybe [ask], "Could you come cut my hair again?" or "Hey I need help bleaching." He would say] "Cool 'kay, whatever."... I love him so much.

Snail and their partner briefly attempted to find an additional partner as a polyamorous couple using the online dating platform Tinder during COVID-19. Their dislike of the site and the assumptions others made about what type of person they were seeking quickly ended that exploration.

Although Rose is currently single, she endured an 18-month abusive relationship with a heterosexual cisgender man during COVID-19. She describes the relationship as emotionally and spiritually abusive from this ex-partner. As this person was prominent in the meditation and land-based spiritual community, Rose found herself comparing her body to what she saw as the archetypal "blonde, beautiful, yoga, spiritual girl" and feeling her body image spiral to an extremely negative place. She also felt she was not free to express her queerness and found the relationship to be based on heteronormative rules.

The anxiety and stress of COVID-19 was twofold for Rose. On the one hand, as mentioned in theme two, Rose was able to set out on her health and well-being journey, but the stress also appeared to be exaggerating issues with romantic partners revolving around attention

seeking. Rose's anxious attachment combined with her partner's avoidant attachment brought up old insecurities around love and this played out in her body image. As we were forced to isolate during COVID-19, Rose found herself craving physical proximity to others and physical intimacy. Rejections during this time brought up old narratives for her around her own body image. When setting ground rules for an argument with an ex-partner, Rose identified that commenting on her body was the only rule she truly needed to be respected, "That is the most tender thing that I need you to not talk about." She recognized the vulnerability connected to her own body image during this time.

Rose has been waxing her body hair consistently since she was 15, but she found that she stopped this practice while in a relationship with her abusive ex-partner to shield herself. Although she admits she was also considering whether the beauty standard connected to waxing fit with her authentic self, she additionally noticed the connection between ending this beauty practice to creating a physical barrier between herself and her ex-partner while in that relationship. As part of her healing journey, Rose recently waxed her body hair and reflected on what this beauty standard means for her and whether it is something she genuinely wants to continue.

Family—Parents (Mothers)

Parental figures played different roles for the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic and in developing their body image and sense of self. Very few participants discussed their relationship with their fathers during their interviews, but almost all participants mentioned the influence of their mothers on their body image. Body image shows up differently in the mother-daughter relationship, as many people learn about body image and how one defines their

experience with their body through the messaging and role modeling presented by their parents, more specifically their mother figure. Rose shared, “My mother and I have a pretty hard dynamic and my mom has some pretty active body image stuff and is always on a diet [and] can’t help herself but make comments about body and how people are looking.” When forced to return to her home of origin during the pandemic, Rose stayed as long as she could tolerate the dynamic with her mother. Once the weather began to warm, she returned to Montana. Rose was home with her family for about three months, during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sam feels that the reason she never struggled with her weight is because her mom was such a good support and was body-positive. Her mom has the same body type as she does and she never presented that as negative, so Sam took value in her strength and size. Sam’s mother bought her a suit for her graduation with matching ties and this act of kindness and understanding made Sam feel completely accepted.

KK’s mother chose elective surgery during COVID-19 in September of 2020 for weight loss. Her mother received gastric sleeve surgery in Las Vegas, Nevada. KK traveled with her mom to her surgery and noted how quiet and desolate Las Vegas seemed shut down during the pandemic. KK’s mom has struggled with her weight for as long as KK can remember. Post-surgery, she now weighs about the same as KK which has been emotionally difficult for KK in wondering if there is something wrong with her own body. Her mother still comments about her own weight, and this makes KK question the amount of value that is placed on her mother’s body, “If you think you’re big do you think I’m big too? Because that’s something that I mirror back on myself. ...We’re built the same way obviously because I’m your child.” Since her mom has lost weight, people have been commenting about how fantastic she looks as though her

mom's worth is directly tied to her weight. This has been confusing to KK as she states, "Your parents always tell you to love yourself the way you are, but then it's hard when they don't do the same thing." KK and her mother have not discussed the impact her surgery has had on KK's body image.

Although Olivia's mother sometimes makes the occasional negative body image comment that makes her feel terrible and gross, she believes her home of origin household has more regulation than many others as the women in her family have all struggled with disordered eating and body image. On occasion, her mother will talk about having to take her daily walk, which is associated with keeping her body looking a certain way. Olivia must remind herself and her mother that the world will not end due to a missed walk around the neighborhood. Olivia is generally able to let her mother know when she has crossed the line and remind her mother of Olivia's body image struggles. Because Olivia is aware of the similarities between herself and her mother, she can identify the things that are triggering to her due to their patterns. She can see when her mother's insecurities about her body image show up and that can sometimes impact Olivia's own body image. Olivia's routine was shaken up a bit by returning to her family of origin during the summer of 2020. When she was in charge of her own meals at home on campus, she felt more in control than when she went home. Mealtimes were shifted and she recalled having less personal space. A general discomfort came over her and led to feelings of negative body image.

Snail's mother passed away from cancer right before Snail started the fall 2019 semester. Snail loved their mother dearly, but was also aware of their mother's biases, especially towards members of the LGBTQ+ community. This made grieving a multi-layered process for Snail, as

they were heartbroken that their mother had died, yet felt they finally had permission to live their life fully how they wanted to present without the added judgment from a beloved family member. Snail turned to their online community for support because those were the people who understood them without judgment,

> I was so happy that we moved online, a lot of relief ... because there's a lot of things to grieve with COVID[-19], besides my mom, and I didn't have to do that in public. I was at home by myself.

Snail's mother's dying wish was for Snail to finish school, and Snail was dedicated to this goal in completing her undergraduate degree.

"My mom's just crazy." Jeb shared. She talked about the difficult and abusive relationship both she and her sister had with their mother. Jeb believes she is "A kid that wasn't really wanted in reality" due to comments her family has made about her mother's pregnancy and suggestions to get an abortion. Jeb struggles with the relationship with many of her family members, stating, "COVID[-19] was a good way to protect myself from my traumatic people." She has placed boundaries with several family members, including her father, limiting their interactions and impact on her heart. Although Jeb has strenuous relationships with her parents, she is remarkably close to her grandma and learned about positive body image from her:

> My grandma is the complete opposite body type as me, which is so funny. She's a short little stubby Latina woman and she is so funny. She's always been someone who [says] "yeah, I'm fat, so what? I like ice cream. I should be more healthy and the weight's not necessarily good for me. But so what? Doesn't matter what other people think." And I grew up hearing that all the time. ... She's my favorite or one of my favorite people.

Jeb was able to visit her grandmother during COVID-19 and continues to maintain their strong relationship.

Family—Siblings (Sisters)

The stress of the pandemic played out differently for everyone. Jeb's sister attempted suicide during the pandemic. It was Jeb herself who contacted her sister's father to warn him that his daughter was talking about overdosing on pills. Jeb's sister spent a couple of months in a mental health hospital following her attempt. Her sister blamed her for a long time but eventually reached out and mended the relationship when she forgave Jeb for breaking her confidence while saving her life. Although in general, Jeb did not feel isolated during the pandemic, this is one instance where she felt separated from her family during her sister's mental health crisis.

Rose's little sister also struggled with mental health in the form of an eating disorder that included both bingeing and purging behaviors. Rose believes stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated her sister's disordered eating behaviors. Concerns around her sister's health forced her to face her own body image issues and try to be a source of strength and a healthy example for her sister:

> I doubled down on taking care of my body in a healthy way ... because I wanted to be setting a healthy example for her. ... I really wanted to model [that] you are perfect totally the way you are. Let me show you. You love me and you think that I am good. So, let me just do that [for you].

Both Jeb's and Rose's sisters continue to work on their mental health.

Friends

Sam felt supported by her coworkers and friends during COVID-19, and it was due to these relationships that she felt comfortable enough to explore her gender presentation and self-expression. Even though she acknowledges that COVID-19 was a difficult time, she believes the good outweighs the bad in her experience. She met her closest friends during this time. She created a healthy routine of balance. She had her own space to reflect on who she is and how she

wants to present herself. Sam never had friends growing up. She was friendly with her schoolmates in her hometown, but only made her first real friend in her senior year of high school. This friend joined her at MSU, and they were roommates during their freshman year. Sam was so desperate to make friends in college that she clung to the first group of people who were nice to her. Looking back, she is grateful for the interruption of COVID-19 with this specific group of friends. None of them have graduated, and she recalls they were fairly judgmental of others. Being forced to take a break in March 2020 and return to campus in August of that year gave Sam the space to separate herself from her unhealthy group of friends and presented her with the supportive friends she still holds dear.

Jeb was blessed with having wonderfully supportive roommates during COVID-19. She believes this is one of the foundational reasons that COVID-19 was not isolating for her, "COVID[-19] didn't really affect me as much because I didn't have friends outside of my roommates." When one of their roommates tested positive for COVID-19, they spent their collective 14-day quarantine at home having "COVID-19 parties," playing Monopoly and eating shrooms. These experiences together formed a close-knit bond and connection resulting in her chosen family:

> There were several times where we would handcuff each other together and go streaking through our neighborhood. And that takes a lot of confidence in your body to do because my partner would never do that, but I had someone who was there during the pandemic, who was kind of boosting me.

Jeb is grateful for her chosen family and their support during the pandemic and believes it is what got her through COVID-19.

Queer Community

Jeb initially became involved in the MSU Queer Straight Alliance (QSA) as a freshman, but due to a falling out with her roommate and fellow QSA member, she avoided this group for several years. It was not until after the group received anonymous threats of harm in spring 2023 that Jeb decided to get involved again, "I saw the impacts it had on others and that's what encouraged me to get more involved on campus." She is now an advocate for other LGBTQ+ students at MSU.

Sam did not become involved with the queer community at MSU while she was a student. Sam believed that the LGBTQ+ students who visited the Diversity Inclusion Student Commons (DISC) or were a part of QSA did not fit into who she was during college. To this day she still does not have any LGBTQ+ friends in her life. Although she acknowledges that LGBTQ+ is part of her identity, "It's just one part of who I am. I'm so much more than just this one thing." As Sam was struggling with her own experience of coming out, she did not think QSA was the right support for her, "I feel I didn't want to be surrounded by people that are just gonna talk about the same sad story that I have about coming out and how tough it is." Snail also mentioned that they do not have a strong connection with the queer community on campus. They are not friends with any other non-binary individuals and received most of their queer community support from online interactions.

Rose had a safe pod of queer people that she had during COVID-19, but unfortunately, a bad interaction with a member of that community impacted her connection to her pod during the pandemic. Rose shared about a nonconsensual sexual experience she had with another woman in her LGBTQ+ community. She shares it was a drunken night that felt "pretty sexual assaulty to me." She explains further that she believes, "Navigating queerness is hard because it's not

dominant culture and there are no rules really. ... The conversation around what [is] consent is a lot blurrier." Due to this experience, Rose distanced herself from her safe pod of queer people during COVID-19, resulting in further isolation and loneliness.

Social Media

Although participants were isolated and disconnected physically from others during COVID-19, a different source of connection, sometimes positive, yet potentially negative, was available: social media. The group of participants was very aware of their social media use and how it impacts them personally, specifically in relation to body image. All participants spoke about their knowledge of how they adjusted their social media usage to best serve them and protect themselves from negative body image content. Healthy boundaries were created around technology to maintain mental health around body image and in general. Jeb shared a concern connected to Social Comparison Theory as she described her online use:

> I don't use social media ever because it's so negative. I literally have time limits for my social media because I don't want to compare myself to people and it's so easy to compare myself. And I want to just accept my body for what it is.

Jeb has struggled with social media interactions since high school and goes through phases of deleting and re-adding social media sites with time limits.

Most participants used the popular social media sites Instagram and Facebook prior to COVID-19 and continued to use these platforms during the pandemic. Although TikTok originated before COVID-19, it became increasingly popular during the initial shutdown. TikTok took over as an outlet for people to share short videos of their lives and connect with others through their postings. Jeb did not spend much time using TikTok as it felt like just "doomscrolling for no reason and brain rotting for no reason" kind of like being a zombie. Snail

found the best way to navigate TikTok as a gender queer person was to immediately search the term “Lesbians” to create a feed that would be accepting and match to the content they were looking to view. This led Snail to find queer videos and non-binary content to help with their gender identity understanding and acceptance during this time.

Sam was also leery of social media. Being aware of its fakeness, she was able to separate it from her life. Sam attributes this again to her relationship with her mom and the body-positive attitude her mom bestowed on both her daughters. Sam chose to follow people that are more body-positive and more like herself.

Rose was aware of social media content triggering a negative body image for her. She worked to change the focus of her algorithm away from influencers who posted the standard, classic beauty content including exercising and toxic wellness, and more towards positive things that represented her authentically. Using information from a course she took at MSU on online research and marketing, she was able to “reverse engineer” her own algorithm. She would mark triggering advertisements as offensive and actively search for things that brought her joy like pages that focused on art and childhood cartoons she had loved.

Influencers on social media impacted KK’s body image during COVID-19. She felt pressured by online personas to focus on exercise and losing weight during the pandemic when she was reeling with feeling anxious and scared. KK noticed the push for losing weight and the focus on the ideal smaller body size online during the pandemic. With the added pressure on exercising, KK felt guilty for not being able to go to the gym or participate in the workout plans influencers were posting online. Although she commends some influencers for trying to motivate people towards wellness during the pandemic, she felt the overall sense was if you were not

exercising to achieve the perfect body, you should feel bad about it. As she was an essential worker, she did not have the time to sit in her living room following online workouts.

Like KK, Olivia initially had negative experiences with social media and felt inundated with COVID-19 workout routines and meal plans with limited calories. Social media influencers regularly portray an overtly positive and oftentimes inaccurate lens of their lives. Olivia saw this messaging from influencers as them stating:

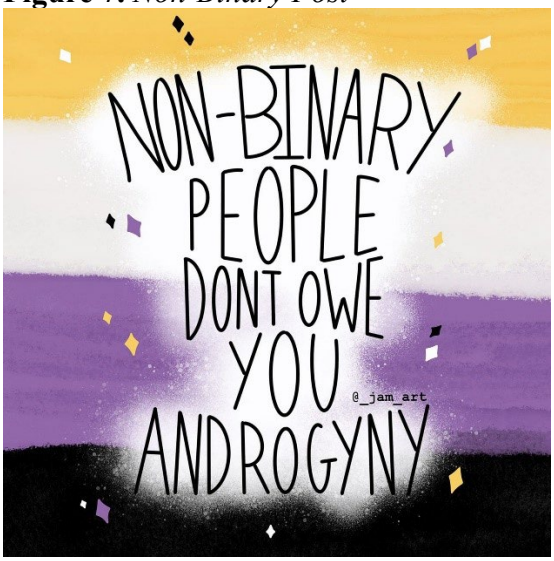
> "This is my beautiful, perfect life and I'm doing things in this way that look like I'm just thriving and nothing is affecting me." ... I think that had a negative impact on my body image, because while objectively I know that no one's life looks like that and we only post the best and we think we look our best and the most fantastic ... that's not how anyone's lives actually are.

Olivia eventually found niche groups of people online that had similar interests and values as her, specifically within the queer community. The content creators that impacted her positive body image focused on areas that they were authentically struggling with and the coping skills they were using to manage the difficulty of the pandemic. These vulnerable stories lifted Olivia up and showed her that the struggles people were having during COVID-19 matched her own and were normal and universal.

Snail attributes being online more during the COVID-19 pandemic to helping them better understand their gender and how they wanted to be perceived. They had begun to use they/them pronouns prior to the pandemic, but only in places they deemed safe to share this aspect of themselves. Online was a safe space for Snail, and they were grateful for the supportive community they found there during the pandemic. A specific post stating "non-binary people don't owe you androgyny" was incredibly impactful to Snail and reflected what they felt personally. Through reflective alone time during COVID-19 they began to feel comfortable

acknowledging that they identify as non-binary regardless of whether they can be perceived as cis-passing at times.

Figure 7. *Non-Binary Post*



Note: From *Facebook – Jamart*, 2020

It was the positive comments underneath the post that truly spoke to Snail. They thought, “Fuck yeah! You’re so right! I don’t owe anyone androgyny. ... Don’t get me wrong, I love androgyny, I love confusing people, but it’s not my style.” They were able to embrace the things they truly enjoyed with how they presented themselves like bright-colored hair and a black and white wardrobe, “I felt more comfortable doing that after seeing that [post] and trying to accept that as a mantra. ... I am who I am, regardless of how other people perceive me.” Online support helped Snail with accepting how they present their gender. The support and time for reflection during COVID-19 gave them the confidence to honestly be themself, “I have become comfortable with who I am, exactly how I am, regardless of what anybody needs.” Snail continues to live authentically and share their story via social media.

Mental Health Counseling

Support outside of family and friends was important for participants during the pandemic. Many participants utilized either on-campus counseling through MSU's Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) or off-campus counseling from providers in the Bozeman community. Jeb had gone to counseling at CPS before the pandemic, but after her sister's suicide attempt, she returned to her counselor on campus. Jeb noted that an obstacle to receiving mental health care as a student is that the university only provides a limited number of counseling sessions through the CPS office on campus. This service is free to all students who pay the health fee, which is required of all Bozeman campus students who take at least seven credits (MSU, 2024). Additionally, after her therapist left MSU, she was placed with a PhD student who had to record their counseling sessions as part of their educational program. This made Jeb feel unsafe in the therapeutic relationship, and she ended up stepping away from therapy for a bit before finding her current counselor off-campus.

Sam also utilized the free on-campus counseling provided by the CPS office. She eventually stopped going to therapy at CPS because she felt pressured by her therapist to connect with QSA. Her therapist brought up the LGBTQ+ community in every session and Sam did not have the confidence to tell her she was not interested and that she needed to come up with other areas of support. She returned to on-campus counseling her senior year and found her new therapist to be helpful in processing what was going on in her life.

The pandemic was an opportunity for a therapeutic healing journey for Rose. She was identifying patterns that kept coming up in her life, specifically around her romantic relationships. COVID-19 had exaggerated some major cracks in Rose's life that felt utterly unhealed. Her initial sessions with her therapist were filled with "word vomit," and her therapist

was able to help her sift through all the things swirling around in her head. Rose was invested and ready to start working on herself. Her therapist was able to gently guide her to take the process slowly and give herself permission to not be constantly working on herself. Rose reflects on her experience with learning to love and accept her body through therapy:

> My journey with my body and my self-image has been very intimate and very bizarre and unsatisfactory, but in a way where I also am finding deeper wells of self-compassion that I've never been able to have before. I think there's a layer of honesty and unconditional loving that's happening, even as I'm regaining how I feel about my body.

Dealing with anxiety and depression had been a common feeling for Rose prior to the pandemic. What surprised her during COVID-19 was the relief in recognizing that the rest of the world had become more aware of the stressors of mental health. She did not have to continue to feel gaslit about her experience with mental health. Rose was grateful for the time and space COVID-19 offered her to tend to her mental health needs. As things began to "return to normal," Rose noted her body struggled with this change as she "wasn't being given the permission anymore to tend to" her body and her mental health. Her panic attacks returned, and she felt as though everyone was questioning why she was not ok. The reprieve COVID-19 had offered had lifted, and she needed once again to dial into her coping skills to balance her mental health. Although Rose acknowledges the collective trauma of living during a pandemic, this time provided space to fill needs she may not have otherwise recognized prior to COVID-19. There is a sense of loss that comes with moving away from the time for reflection that the pandemic offered.

Jeb was the only participant who spoke about seeing her therapist via telehealth. I saw my own therapist via telehealth throughout the pandemic, and I agree with Jeb's observation that telehealth is fine if you have a therapist with whom you have already established rapport. It

would understandably be difficult to make a therapeutic connection with someone you have not met first in person.

Pets

I would be amiss to neglect mentioning the importance of having pets around during the COVID-19 pandemic. My own pets, a cat named Bindi and a beagle named Sidney, were partly what kept me sane during the lockdown. Furry friends played significant roles for the participants and helped comfort them during this time. From cats to rats, pets played an integral role. Both Rose and Olivia spent time with their cats. Rose had a cat who lived with her on her bus turned tiny home, "It was me and a bus and a cat." Like Rose, Olivia also lived alone with a cat. She found that she felt lonely in her apartment after graduation and her cat lifted that sense of loneliness, "Maybe you should be able to live alone without an animal, but...it helped me be like this is my space with my cat...two gals in the big city." Olivia let herself discover who she was and what represented her during this time. Her cat sat with her as she decorated her apartment and made it a healing space to live:

> I have memories of sitting on the floor, trying to get things into frames correctly ... and her just ... watching me ... and ... I think she's supporting me. Maybe she's [thinking] wow, this is a lot, but it just felt like we were making our spot.

Jeb adopted a pair of rats during COVID-19, "Good rats invaded my home and my heart." All these pet interactions helped stave off isolation for the participants.

Chapter Summary

This chapter shares the findings of this qualitative study in a narrative approach. The narrative style uses storytelling and weaves in quotes directly from the participants within four

identified themes: Mirror Image, Time for Reflection, Identity Development, and Relationships, Supports, and Influences. The results paint the picture of the experience these LGBTQ+ students had with body image during COVID-19.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This final chapter discusses my interpretations of the results. I begin by grounding the reader in the study's purpose. I summarize the themes and share my interpretations on each theme. I then share the implications this study has in connection with the literature. In the boundary section, I discuss what I did not anticipate and what could have been different in this study. Finally, this chapter will include both considerations for future research and for future practice.

This qualitative research dissertation explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ college students with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The main research questions that guided this study were:

1. What experiences do LGBTQ+ college students have with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do LGBTQ+ college students describe their experiences with body image during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The overall purpose of this study includes two main areas. First, a goal was to fill a gap in the literature as COVID-19 is a new phenomenon that the world recently lived through. Additionally, the research on the topic of body image and COVID-19 has been limited to White, heterosexual, cisgender females and it is important to expand the understanding of this topic with a broader population. This leads to the second goal which was to learn how the pandemic

impacted LGBTQ+ individuals regarding their body image. Marginalized populations have rarely been studied in body image research and understanding the experiences of members of the LGBTQ+ community expands the knowledge in this field. Finally, traditional-aged college students (18−25 as defined by Renn and Reason [2013]) are moving through an integral time in their development, which makes this population important to explore.

The results of this dissertation were presented in a narrative format which presented four main themes: Mirror Image; Time for Reflection; Identity Development; and Relationships, Supports, and Influences. Participant stories were weaved together with my own memories from the pandemic and interlaced with pictures of artifacts provided by the participants.

Interpretation/Discussion

Theme 1: Mirror Image

Theme 1: Mirror Image was a hypothesized theme based on my experiences with seeing myself on screen during the pandemic. Additionally, the literature shared that individuals were being impacted by seeing themselves on the screen during virtual meetings (de Vasconcelos Filho et al., 2009; Gullo & Walker, 2021) and that these impacts were connected to changes in body image concerns, (Bailenson, 2021; George et al., 2022; Pfund et al., 2020) specifically facial dissatisfaction (Ratan et al., 2022). Rodgers et al. (2020) hypothesized that the phenomenon of seeing oneself so regularly onscreen would impact body image during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically with college students, it was believed that the reason students were choosing to keep their cameras off was connected to concerns about body image (Bedenlier et al., 2021). Although I was impacted by this experience and drawn to study the topic for my dissertation based on my own experiences and the findings within the literature, the results from

the participants' experiences did not match my own or the previously mentioned research. The participants were aware of being bothered by seeing themselves on screen, but they had prior experience with virtual communication and had developed protective factors, such as choosing to not turn on their camera or hiding their mirror image to decrease the impact this experience had on them and their body image.

In addition to differing from the literature mentioned above, the results in the first theme differed from my own perceptions and experience during the pandemic, which was an inspiration for this dissertation. I was most surprised that the data was so different from the prominent experience I had of seeing myself onscreen in meetings, classrooms, and social interactions throughout the pandemic. As I had read through research studies for the literature review, I was convinced this finding would match my own experience and the previous research. I was very struck by seeing my own mirror image and obsessively looking towards that little square that held my face throughout meetings during COVID-19 and surprised that that experience was not universal among the participants. My interpretation of why this may have not been as impactful for the participants in the study is connected to the natural generation gap created by technology. Although I had some experience with computers starting in elementary school, I did not grow up regularly using computers or surfing the web. I had never taken an online course and very rarely utilized virtual meeting platforms to connect with others for work or social interactions. I was immediately concerned with my facial presentation in connection with my own body image journey that can sometimes include intense feelings of negative body image in balance with positive body image. I was perplexed by the faces I made in meetings when I saw them on the screen. What was going on with the crinkling of my chin? Do I always tilt my head that way

while listening? My skin looks so pale! My hair looked ok in the mirror, why does it look so terrible on Webex? Maybe the participants had already had these thoughts and by the time we entered the pandemic, this was the least of their worries as they were accustomed to working online? Maybe being in the generation of Millennials or Gen Z versus Gen X or Xenniel was the divide between our separate experiences? The participants may have acclimated to video chat before COVID-19 or had the skills to acclimate more quickly during COVID-19 as indicated in research by Chokaus-Bradley et al. (2022). Gullo and Walker (2021) also found that their hypothesis of participants increased appearance-related concerns during the pandemic was unfounded as the balance of not having to prepare to present oneself in society's appearance-driven expectations lowered stress around body image.

Although having one's camera on during virtual work meetings was an expectation for most companies, many professors made having cameras on an option, which likely eliminated some of the body image concerns connected to the screen as students were not forced to see themselves during classes. Not seeing oneself on the screen can be seen as a protective factor eliminating the constant drive for social comparison or self-objectification as seen in the theoretical framework. This led me to consider alternate viewpoints on this topic, which will be discussed further in the section for future research.

Growing up in the '80s and '90s, body image was presented differently than it is now. There seemed to be a greater importance in fitting in with the ideal body type and not being viewed as an outsider. This was emphasized in the media through the choices of models on magazine covers, billboards that offered contact information for plastic surgeons, and Victoria's Secret catalogs. Gen Z seems to have shifted to a more universal acceptance of different body

shapes, sizes, and presentations. Participants did not seem to be as impacted by body image in connection to size and shape as I had anticipated. They were aware of the ebb and flow of their feelings about their body but seemed more concerned with authentic body presentation in connection to their gender identity or sexual orientation rather than fitting the ideal body shape or classic ideas of attractiveness. Another consideration for where this difference in the findings came from is that research has not developed the same type of models on body image for LGBTQ+ individuals as it has for cisgender women.

Although there continues to be division and political pushback about accepting sexual orientation and gender identity, the needle is moving. Discrimination laws provide protection for sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in higher education, specifically defined by the Campus Civil Rights Office at MSU (MSU, 2024). Growing up in the ’90s, it was common to hear people making fun of “gay people,” othering them, and using the term “that’s so gay” to describe something someone did not like. LGBTQ+ characters rarely were integrated into TV shows and movies. Celebrities shied away from disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity if it did not fit into the heteronormative acceptance. Younger generations have brave and strong voices that have paved the way to being out and proud. This was evident in the participant’s stories within this dissertation.

Theme 2: Time for Reflection

Theme 2: Time for Reflection focused on the space COVID-19 provided the participants to allow them to reflect on themselves, specifically their gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender presentation. This theme connected to body image as participants were figuring out how they wanted others to view them and how they authentically viewed themselves. Lockdown,

social distancing, and forced emergency remote learning provided distance from societal pressures and offered room for self-exploration.

As we continued to live in a COVID-19 world, people began to become more comfortable. As the participants in this study indicated, lockdown gave them a break from having to dress and present a certain way. This is in line with researchers who presented that COVID-19 essentially removed the need to prepare to go out, which gave individuals a break from the constant focus on their outward appearance (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021). Fish et al. (2020) noted that the opportunity for space away from societal pressures was an opportunity for identity exploration, as was evident in the stories shared by the participants in this dissertation. This reprieve made room for the participants to dive deeper into explorations of themselves in a quiet and reflective way. The regular movement of the workings of the world had slowed down, providing silence and room to breathe. Quathamer and Joy (2021) additionally noted that members of the LGBTQ+ community had the opportunity for personal reflection during COVID-19. Rose and KK noted that they have not reflected on themselves and their experiences in this way since COVID-19 was no longer deemed an active public health emergency.

COVID-19 was indeed a "'queer time' of feeling, being, exploring, and existing" in one's body image (Quathamer & Joy, 2021, p. 407). Throughout analyzing the data, I could see evident connections between my dissertation and Quathamer and Joy's (2021) research on LGBTQ+ body image during the COVID-19 pandemic with Canadians. We both found a theme of "Time for Reflection" within our data, although Quathamer and Joy (2021) used the term "discursive consideration" instead of theme (p. 400). This time away from societal systems helped

participants explore how their body image is influenced and perceived by others (Quathamer & Joy, 2021). This was also in line with Branley-Bell and Talbot's (2020) research indicating that COVID-19 presented a space for individuals to dress comfortably during COVID-19. Rose, Olivia, and KK all mentioned the negative "norms" found on social media during the pandemic surrounding overexercising and restricted eating in parallel with Quathamer and Joy's (2021) third discursive consideration: Time to work on oneself.

Although none of the participants identified any active eating disorders, Nutley et al. (2021) indicated that COVID-19 was additionally a time for recovery for those with eating disorders. This could potentially fit into the theme of a Time for Reflection as people reflected on their mental health. I recall my therapist encouraging me to keep an active journal during this time as an artifact during the pandemic. Advice that I did not heed at the time yet partially led to my decision to keep a research journal as part of the data collection and analysis for this dissertation. Although each participant utilized this Time for Reflection in a different way, the theme drew all the stories together as it set the groundwork for Theme 3: Identity Development.

Theme 3: Identity Development

Theme 3: Identity Development was prominent in the data. Participants spent time seeking their authentic selves and had the opportunity to further develop their identity in the safety and privacy of their homes. Identity Development included accepting one's gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender presentation, along with centering oneself in who they truly are. Research has shown that COVID-19 provided space for LGBTQ+ individuals to further their identity development (Fish et al., 2020; Quathamer & Joy, 2021).

I did not anticipate the emphasis on Identity Development that came to the surface with Theme 2. In hindsight, this should have been an obvious expectation of the data based on developmental theories connected to this age group (Renn & Reason, 2013). With my research study topic focusing on body image, I did not fully consider how important LGBTQ+ identity development would be in connection to this dissertation. It was evident of its importance as the participants shared their stories of coming out and juggling the assumptive need to fit in with the desire to present as their authentic selves. The reprieve given as part of Time for Reflection gave participants the space to explore their true identities and develop into the type of full adult they want to be.

Many people experienced time for reflection during the COVID-19 pandemic, but LGBTQ+ individuals have additional layers of tension connected to body in comparison to the "thin, toned, cisgender, and heterosexual bodies as the ideal," which gave space for gender identity reflection and expression as seen by the participants in both this study and Quathamer and Joy's (2021) research (p. 404). This break from social pressure was also in line with Quathamer and Joy's (2021) second discursive consideration: "Time away from social surveillance" aligned with the participants of this study as both groups had space away from the societal gaze, giving them room to determine and define a gender identity/sexual orientation that authentically fit them. This was prominent for Olivia whose personal description matched the participants in Quathamer and Joy's (2021) study stating that they spent time appreciating "the privilege to express, nourish, and move their body however they wished" (p. 405). Fish et al. (2020) also found that COVID-19 provided a positive opportunity to explore gender identity and sexual orientation, specifically online.

Personally, I have struggled with the legitimacy of being bisexual in the LGBTQ+ community when in relationships with heterosexual men. In different ways, KK, Rose, Olivia, and Jeb shared that their relationships with heterosexual men have brought questions about sexual orientation and left them wondering if they were welcomed in the LGBTQ+ community. This is something I have also questioned and considered within my sexual orientation and position within the LGBTQ+ community. In connection to relationships, as participants were developing their identities during their time for reflection, they were surrounded by different relationships, supports, and influences, which leads us to Theme 4.

Theme 4: Relationships, Supports, and Influences

Theme 4: Relationships, Supports, and Influences indicated the importance of others surrounding the participants during COVID-19. Some of these interactions were negative, but mainly participants sought out others who would support them during this time. Regardless, interactions with others in person and online played an important role in the participant's COVID-19 experience. Family, friends, social media, and pets played important roles in supporting and influencing the participants' body image during COVID-19. The literature has shown that interactions with others, who people lived with during the pandemic, and social media usage impacted LGBTQ+ individuals (Fish et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2022).

Quathamer and Joy's (2021) discursive consideration 4: Time to (dis) connect aligned with relationships and supports for the participants in this dissertation as they determined who was helpful and supportive in their lives and who needed to be removed. Participants could filter out unhealthy or abusive relationships during COVID-19. Jeb and Rose used the pandemic to separate themselves from those relationships that caused pain and trauma. Olivia, KK, Snail, and

Jeb were able to further connect with their partners during COVID-19. Sam and Rose leaned on their friendships as support during the pandemic.

Several weeks into the COVID-19 lockdown, I realized I had not touched another person and identified my own skin hunger. The relationships, supports, and influences participants had during COVID-19 helped mold this time period into one of support and resulted in extensive gratefulness during the pandemic. Jeb spoke about her gratitude to her roommates for helping to make COVID-19 a positive experience for her. Jeb, Snail, KK, and Olivia were grateful for the support of their partners during this time. Having others around them during the pandemic helped to dissipate the negative experiences during COVID-19.

Unhealthy and difficult relationships were also shared by the participants and helped to tell the story of support and influences from different angles. Rose was able to leave an abusive relationship and find support in her dance community. Olivia, Rose, Sam, and KK identified the negative influence of family members and sought out other relationships to support them. Jeb used the pandemic to distance herself from those who had caused trauma in her life. Being forced back into non-affirming households was different for Sam, Rose, and Olivia and had an impact as seen in previous research (Fish et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2022). Snail was able to take time to grieve their mother's passing and celebrate the freedom to be their authentic self.

All participants spent time connecting virtually through online interactions and content during the pandemic. Using online platforms such as Instagram and Facebook helped participants stay connected with their supports during lockdown. Fish et al. (2020) also found the importance for LGBTQ+ individuals in staying connected virtually during the pandemic. The participants were uniquely knowledgeable about the negative impact of social media and had

resources to adjust their social media feeds to avoid triggering content. The ability to "reverse engineer" one's social media feed, as described by Rose, protected the participants from some of the negative impacts found in the research (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021; Vall-Roque et al., 2021). I was also aware of social media being an influence on my COVID-19 experience and began using TikTok during the initial lockdown after having previously avoided the app. I was grateful for this sense of connection in seeing my own experience reflected in other's stories.

The participants of this study echoed previous research focused on identifying Facebook (now known as Meta) and Instagram (also owned by Meta) as the most popular social media sites currently on the internet (Engeln et al., 2020; Tiggeman et al., 2018). Additionally, it was evident that the types of social media used played a role for individuals in the literature (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021; Cohen et al., 2018; Pfund et al., 2020). Although the participants in this study had the knowledge and skills to transform their social media consumption, it is clear that social media played a role in influencing body image during COVID-19 as found by Pearl (2020). Rose, Olivia, and KK were able to adjust their social media timelines to move away from triggering body image content. Jeb, Sam, and Snail set boundaries around social media to aid their mental health. This protected the participants from the negative impacts surrounding body image found from social media use (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021; Nutley et al., 2021; Vall-Roque et al., 2021).

Online interactions were positive for Snail as they found acceptance within their online community. This aligns with Branley-Bell and Talbot (2020) who found online communities to be supportive during the pandemic. Pearl (2020) also identified that social media could be a

positive way to find connections during the pandemic. Specifically for LGBTQ+ youth, online connection is important to maintaining well-being for this group (Fish et al., 2020).

Rose discussed how she noted the changes in acceptance of mental health during this time and the challenge of returning to society after the lockdown. Meda et al. (2021) indicated that the participants in their study returned to pre-COVID-19 levels of depression after the lockdown. This may be due to the stress of COVID-19 being lifted as people returned to the workplace and school. As Rose indicated, the pandemic showed the world that stress and mental health were a regularly occurring experience and should be acknowledged and understood, yet this concept was somewhat forgotten as restrictions were lifted.

Implications

The following section will discuss how this research contributes to the field of study and potentially fills gaps to better understand the experience of LGBTQ+ individuals' body image during the COVID-19 pandemic. I will discuss implications generally, and specifically to the themes identified in Chapter Four. Additionally, I will discuss the importance of using one's creativity and voice in dissertations to allow for more acceptance of this type of research in doctoral programs.

Schneider et al. (2022) completed a systematic review of the research on body image and COVID-19. They found that very few articles indicated participants who identified as marginalized or were underrepresented. Schneider et al. (2022) specifically stated that "further research is required to investigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on body image and eating concerns among minoritized, racialized, underrepresented, or otherwise marginalized participants" (p. 1). This research dissertation had a specific intention to fill the gap in the

literature by including the voices of LGBTQ+ individuals in connection with body image and COVID-19, which have been indicated as missing and needing to be researched further in discussions from previous research (Holmes et al., 2020; Quathamer & Joy, 2021; Schneider et al., 2022; Tabler et al., 2021). From the beginning of this dissertation, it is evident that this focus was an important goal of this study and adds new voices to this topic. As indicated several times in this dissertation, expanding the research to include LGBTQ+ voices on body image is important to fill the gap in the literature. As Yelland and Tiggeman (2003) indicated, it appeared true for this study's participants that not only were they dealing with the ideal body image depicted by society's thin ideal, but they were also comparing themselves to see if they fit into the standards within the LGBTQ+ community (Cash, 2012).

Many research studies have provided quantitative data to explain the experience of body image during COVID-19 (Schneider et al., 2022). This dissertation adds to the previous research on the topic by expanding the understanding using a qualitative approach. Specifically sharing qualitative data in a narrative approach provides important information on the lived experience of LGBTQ+ college students with body image during the pandemic.

I had a goal of using my creativity within my dissertation from my first course in my doctoral program. Utilizing a qualitative, narrative approach weaved through with my own voice gave me the platform to share my creative mind within my research. This sets the groundwork for students who come after me to offer alternative options to dissertation projects that utilize new and innovative methods.

This dissertation expands the use of Social Comparison Theory and Self-Objectification Theory to include LGBTQ+ individuals (Festinger, 1954; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). These

two theories began with a focus on women, but research has begun to include them with work on LGBTQ+ folks. In using these two appearance-related theories in this dissertation, I additionally have strengthened connections with these theories and LGBTQ+ individuals, which leads to further usage of these theories with minoritized populations.

In general, I think people would expect that COVID-19 was full of negative experiences. People were forced into lockdown and feared for the unknown. We were cut off from our social and health networks and concerned we may become sick or that we or someone we know may die from the illness. Through the fear and shared trauma came positive experiences during this time, which was indicated by Browning et al. (2021) in reviewing the impact of COVID-19 on college students. This was also indicated by the participants of this study. This dissertation presents a counternarrative to the negative experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and offers insight into the experience of individuals from a marginalized population. During the pandemic, we often heard the loudest voices through media and news sources. This dissertation allows for the voices of LGBTQ+ folks to share their experiences, which may have differed from the experience of the majority. Within the theme of Time for Reflection, I shared experiences from the participants about whether they felt impacted by the ideal body image portrayed in Western society of being thin. Olivia shared a past belief that she needed to present within this ideal to be accepted, but during COVID-19 was able to reflect on how she wanted to present authentically and was able to begin moving away from this concept. Rose also discussed the comparison of herself and other women in yoga and challenged her own thinking on whether this ideal fit her. KK spoke about the pressure from women in her family to fit this ideal and her mother's weight loss surgery. As a non-binary individual, Snail challenged the ideal as they paved their own way

toward body acceptance. Although this ideal is still strongly integrated into society, younger generations and LGBTQ+ folks are challenging this concept and breaking the mold.

The participants of this study indicated the importance of positive body image and the impacts others have had on their body image. Self-compassion has been found as a protective factor to counteract negative body image (Swami et al., 2021b). Self-compassion may have been a protective factor that the participants used to protect themselves from being impacted by seeing themselves on the screen. Improved health during COVID-19 is also connected to having effective coping strategies (Robertson et al., 2021). As Jeb and Olivia both focused on fitness in connection to body image, this was also apparent in this study. The alternate story that the participants shared in how they survived and possibly even thrived during a pandemic expands the understanding of protective factors related to body image, specifically within the LGBTQ+ community.

Boundaries (Limitations and Delimitations)

Participants

Working towards a doctorate in adult and higher education, it was imperative that my dissertation study focus on higher education. I made the decision that college students should be the population I collected research from with this in mind. I noticed a difference in the information shared by the graduate student who participated in my study in comparison to the undergraduate students. The graduate student was about eight or nine years older than the other participants and her insights were incredibly descriptive and thoughtful. This may have been because this participant is an unusually insightful human, but it could have also been due to the prefrontal cortex being fully developed around the age of 25 or 26 (Renn & Reason, 2013).

Critical thinking skills are connected to this part of the brain. Additional experience in life as one ages also may lead to a greater understanding of one's experiences.

In hindsight, I did not consider enough how faculty and staff in higher education could share a different experience in connection with this topic. Older generations in the working environment of an institution of higher education likely had experiences that were different from students. If I had collected data from faculty and staff who were closer to my age or older, their experiences may have been more similar to my own experience as what information we were given about body image and our limited exposure to the internet and virtual communication may be more comparative. Faculty had their own specific experiences during COVID-19 as they were challenged with learning how to transition to emergency virtual learning mid-semester in spring 2020. The majority of staff at MSU followed work-from-home protocol, but some staff were deemed essential workers and continued their work on campus during the initial onset of the pandemic in spring 2020.

The diversity of the participants was limited as the majority identified as White, non-Hispanic. As MSU is a predominately White institution, this somewhat matched the breakdown of race for the student body. Intersectionality would play an additional role with race and sexual orientation or gender identity.

I had some inclination that the group of participants willing to discuss body image may lean toward AFAB individuals or cisgender women students. I wonder if there would be alternative ways to market the participation in this study to engage assigned male at birth (AMAB) individuals or cisgender men students. Additionally, I had no transgender participants and therefore missed out on the opportunity to share an important portion of this population's

experience. To some degree, non-binary people can be considered to fall into the transgender umbrella, and the experience of the non-binary folks in this dissertation offers insight into the transgender experience.

Although all participants were students in the spring and fall semesters of 2020, during fall 2023 when interviews were completed, not all participants were still living in Bozeman or even Montana. Their recall could have been shifted in relation to the community they lived in at the time of the interview and throughout the continuing pandemic. Many towns, counties, and states had a variety of rules and regulations connected with COVID-19 that differed across borders.

Place

Montana State University was a unique institution from which to collect data as students returned to MSU in fall 2020 to a hybrid/in-person teaching model rather than staying fully online as many schools across the country did. It was convenient to collect data from the institution in which I work and am a PhD candidate, but it also provided insight into the culture of the participants. Future research of a similar type is encouraged in different institutions of higher education outside of Montana and the Northwest region.

Time

It was impossible to plan for a study involving a pandemic that we did not know was going to happen. In an ideal world, I would have collected data from participants during the spring and fall 2020 semesters as the COVID-19 pandemic began. Memory may have faded for participants and recall could have been impacted. This was outside of my control as I was not in a place to collect data for my dissertation that year. Having never believed that I would be living

through a pandemic, I was unaware that this phenomenon would present an opportunity in which to collect data. Now that we have had a pandemic experience, I find value in continuing research on these topics to continue to broaden the literature and understanding.

This dissertation research was not created to be generalizable and captures a snapshot of the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ college students around body image during the COVID-19 pandemic at MSU. Although the findings are not necessarily generalizable, the results may resonate with people, which makes the findings transferable. Seeing oneself in research helps to build on the understanding of the human experience.

Future Research

This dissertation begins to open questions that had not previously been answered in the literature. As mentioned multiple times throughout this dissertation, previous research on body image was limited in the population studied, and this dissertation expands the literature to include the voices of LGBTQ+ individuals, specifically lesbian, bisexual, asexual, and non-binary individuals. As discussed above and mentioned by researchers, continuing to broaden and explore alternate populations would be important to pursue for future research (Schneider et al., 2022). Creating research studies with populations that include broadened race, ethnicity, and age intersected with sexual orientation and gender identity would continue to tell the story of the COVID-19 experience and body image. I made specific decisions as I limited my participants to LGBTQ+ college students who had been enrolled in spring and fall 2020 at MSU. Expanding the opportunity for students to participate in this study, regardless of whether they were on campus in 2020 is an option for future research. Creating a research study with only graduate students is another idea. Future research on this topic could be done with faculty and/or staff in higher

education as opposed to students to see the different experiences between these groups. In general, it is important to continue to expand the understanding of LGBTQ+ individuals in research. Using the methods of this research study to collect data from a different university in a different region of the United States or even a different country around the world would be beneficial in further exploring the human experience of LGBTQ+ individuals' body image during COVID-19. Working to do future research on a more diverse sample of the population would additionally be beneficial. As MSU is a predominantly White university and the majority of the participants in this study identified as White, non-Hispanic (with one as White, Hispanic), looking at this topic with more racial diversity would expand this topic's understanding.

Future research does not need to be limited to LGBTQ+ individuals within higher education. There is an assumption of privilege that comes from having the opportunity to attend an institution of higher education. Although some students maintain busy work schedules and apply for multiple scholarships to pay for college, others depend solely on financial assistance from their parents. Expanding the diversity of the participants in this study to include individuals without higher education or in a different socio-economic status would be helpful.

Building on the definitions of body image provided by the participants in this study could expand the literature to understand the changes in body image in the new generations. Body image continues to change as it is further researched, and each generation and different populations view this construct through a different lens. As the research participants shielded themselves from negative body image, this opens the doors for further body image research.

Recommendations (Practice)

Practitioners and support team members would benefit from informing their practice to be knowledgeable and compassionate of LGBTQ+ individuals. As research expands to incorporate LGBTQ+ voices, this information can help to influence the support community to be aware of the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and their unique experiences with body image and surviving through COVID-19. Knowing we do not yet know how the COVID-19 experiences will have a trickle-down effect on people in the future, it is important to be aware of the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community. Sam's experience with a counselor who focused on their belief that Sam should find support within the LGBTQ+ community offers the understanding that not all issues stem from needing LGBTQ+ connection and safe spaces or identifying as LGBTQ+. LGBTQ+ competence is important for practitioners to make sure they do not minimize or medicalize their LGBTQ+ clients or respond with previous assumptions or negatively to these clients in session.

Many of the participants utilized on-campus counseling services during their time as students at MSU. A few of them shared their concerns about only having access to a limited number of counseling sessions each year through Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS). Expanding the funding to CPS to add additional counselors to better serve the student population and demand for counseling services would be beneficial to this community. Additionally, having off-campus counselors with sliding-scale payment options for students would be helpful as many have out-of-state insurance through their parents that will not cover counselors in the community. Other students may not want their parents to know they are seeking mental health

services due to the stigma or family values around seeking outside supports and may choose not to utilize their health insurance to cover counseling sessions.

In a world that is becoming more and more technologically connected, it is imperative that college professors are educated on online learning platforms and how they can utilize them to be most beneficial in their teaching. Requiring a college teaching course for PhD students could benefit future professors to help connect to students in the classroom. Financial benefits in the way of raises or bonuses when completing a college teaching certificate could be awarded to faculty from the college to provide motivation and incentive to value the student experience in the classroom. Offering free access to teaching programs that include how to successfully teach online courses makes these options more accessible and enticing to faculty members.

Virtual communication services such as Zoom/Webex could change to a default setting that allowed you to see your face on the screen prior to login to determine that your face was centered and viewable in the online window but could hide this view upon login. A pop-up message could indicate if your face moved out of the window during the meeting and offer the option for viewing oneself to readjust before being hidden once again. Developments in AI technology could make this a very real possibility. Although there is an option to hide your self-view within virtual communication, it is not currently the default setting. I do find the idea of using online avatars as an option interesting, and AI technology could additionally expand on these options. I do wonder about the amount of distraction this might cause, as seen during the pandemic in the examples of the lawyer who could not figure out how to turn off the added filters during a virtual court meeting and continued as a “cat” or the professor that led lecture as a “potato.”

Conclusions

This discussion chapter explored the four main themes of this dissertation: Theme 1—Mirror Image, Theme 2—Time for Reflection, Theme 3—Identity Development, and Theme 4—Relationships, Supports, and Influences. I explained my interpretations of the data and connected the data to previous research in the literature. I explored the boundaries within my dissertation and shared ideas for future research and practice.

As I write this final chapter of my dissertation, I think back on the varied experiences that have been shared with me along with my own experience with COVID-19, body image, and being a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Ironically, I came down with my second bout of COVID-19 a week before this last chapter was due to my advisor. As I searched the internet for the current COVID-19 quarantine procedure in the summer of 2024, I thought about KK quarantined in her 12' x 12' room, fearing the worst, but manifesting hope in the form of future travel and in-person connections. I recalled KK sharing about her fear of the unknown and realized how grateful I was that both of my positive COVID-19 tests came years after the initial outbreak. I was incredibly sick, but I was also confident I would survive. I perused Netflix for some mindless shows to bide the time in between COVID-19-induced naps and thought of Olivia stumbling upon She-Ra and the Princesses of Power and the simple joy and validation this cartoon series brought her in her self-love and acceptance journey. On my final day home with this round of COVID-19, I did laundry and a little weeding of my closet, musing about Snail's journey to define how they wanted to present to the world. It takes bravery and confidence to identify what you love and who you are and show up as your authentic self, day after day, even when people are misgendering you and questioning you. As I hung up a new pair of pants with

the tags still on them, I thought about Sam and how she laughed when she remembered how much money she had spent during COVID-19 on clothes in her search for her authentic presentation. I imagined her getting ready with her friends who truly saw her without judgement. After sitting home alone with my cat for five days I realized how much I was craving personal connection with others and thought about how blessed Jeb was to be surrounded by supportive roommates during the pandemic. I laughed to myself thinking I would never have the confidence to handcuff myself to my roommate and run naked in the streets. As I scrolled through Instagram, I stumbled across a post that Rose shared about her summer adventures and celebrating PRIDE month with others in the LGBTQ+ community. I smiled knowing she had once again found her pod.

I have been so honored to be trusted to receive these stories from these amazing humans. I am so grateful to hold the experiences of these authentic people who were so willing to share a piece of themselves with a curious researcher. I hope the data I have formulated into stories in this dissertation will continue to spark others to bring forth the voices of the LGBTQ+ community as we explore our ever-changing body image and reflect on lessons learned from the pandemic.

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