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# The Quizzical Queerness of a Generation Left Alone with their Queries: How the COVID-19 Pandemic has affected Queer Trinity Students

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**The Quizzical Queerness of a Generation Left Alone with their Queries:  
How the COVID-19 Pandemic has affected Queer Trinity Students**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Bachelor's Degree in Educational Studies

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## Introduction

When reflecting on my time in isolation and throughout the pandemic, there was one question I consistently kept asking myself. Why is everybody gay all of the sudden? I examined my own experience during the pandemic and wondered how it related to other queer young people. I watched my friends start to identify differently, and witnessed many of my peers from high school come out on social media. One of TV's most visibly queer shows, and one of my favorite shows, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, has had four queens come out as trans during Season 14's filming or release alone, shaking up the original definition of a drag queen. Many celebrities have come out during the pandemic that has made big splashes in the public eye like dancer and megastar Jojo Siwa, pop star Demi Lovato, singer-songwriter Kehlani, and Elliot Page, among many others, all coming out either for the first time or as a different identity. I wanted to explore more what I had been noticing while having a research opportunity to do so, especially to add to academic research about queer people, as a historically under-researched population. I wondered, why in this period of isolation have people come out on the other side with a deeper understanding, confidence, and nuance of who they are? After all of the grief, mourning, national duress, and trauma the pandemic has brought, why are people introspecting on who they fundamentally are? These questions have led me to my own research question, how and why have queer Trinity students' own gender and sexuality perceptions and expressions evolved or changed after the COVID-19 pandemic? What were the factors for these changes?

The COVID-19 pandemic gave the entire world lot more time than we thought we were going to have. Hobbies such as bread making, mask making, whipped coffee, and sewing erupted as people were spending most of their time at home. We all spent our time in isolation in a lot of different ways. This research shares how I found queer Trinity students spent their time during

isolation and the rest of the pandemic and how I came to the conclusion that increased isolation led queer students to interrogate their gender and sexuality due to conversations and time with family, broader engagement with the LGBTQIA+ community on social media, and a fuck-it mentality, that reinforced queer young peoples identities.

The themes and findings I will be discussing further in the Findings section that got me to my answer are threefold. First, queer Trinity students have increased time for reflection leading to a fuck-it mentality, and a 'you only live once' mindset. Students expressed inward interrogation and questioning of genders and sexualities that have been prescribed to these students, or that have been continually performed without any reexamination. Second, students had increased time and connections with families yielding a wide range of positive, negative, and mixed outcomes and experiences. Finally, social media platforms, particularly TikTok, act as a scriptwriter or guidebook for queer young people. This allowed them to be able to see free expressions of queerness and try out different experiments of physical manifestations of gender and sexuality to reinforce and gain more confidence in their identities

### *Trinity Focused*

Trinity College is a small liberal arts college in the Northeast of the United States. I am particularly interested in researching my own institution, located in Hartford, CT, because of my own and other queer friends' experiences as queer people on campus. Pride flags are often targets of vandalization and students are frequently deadnamed (to call a transgender person who changed their name by their name assigned at birth) at large college events. It is also difficult at Trinity to change your gender, sex, name, or identify your pronouns on school records, making processes such as housing incredibly stressful and limiting. I recently inquired how one would go about changing their name on Trinity's school records. I was pointed to various departments and

eventually heard from the Library Help Desk that students can change their preferred name in the Trinity online student portal. The process was not intuitive and the primary name is uneditable for students. Pronoun options are limited and it is unclear where and when pronoun information is shared. For this research, I wanted to focus on Trinity College, the institution I have called home for the past four years, to provide more insight into Trinity's queer population. This research is in part to push decision-makers at the College to consider the growing queer population at Trinity, as efforts are continually made to push Trinity into becoming truly inclusive of the queer community.

## **Literature Review**

### *Impact of COVID on College Students*

There is a small amount of research done on queer college students' experiences during the pandemic, perhaps because of how recent the pandemic is, and the historic under-representation queer people have in academic research (Meyer, 2021). There is, however, general literature on college students in the United States during the pandemic, and the effects of the pandemic on young people in general, most referencing a decline in mental health (Wang 2020, Son 2020, Czeisler 2021, Hagedorn 2021). There is also a notable amount of research on the effects of the pandemic on queer young people outside of the United States (Hawke 2021, Hankel 2021, Gato 2021, Barrientos 2020). There is classic literature that explains gender and sexuality in a theoretical framework that has framed my research (Butler 1988, Foucault 1990). This research uses the theoretical frameworks on discourses of gender and sexuality by Judith Butler and Michel Foucault while reflecting on recent research about the pandemic and other literature on identity formation (Abes 2008), and situates the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on queer young people at Trinity College.

Recent research on the effects of the pandemic on college-aged students in the United States is limited and largely focuses on a decline in mental health. Wang (2020) documents an increase in depression, anxiety, and/or suicidal thoughts in college students due to academic-, health-, and lifestyle-related concerns caused by the pandemic, as found through surveying undergraduate and graduate students at a large public university. Similarly, Son (2020) finds an increase in stress and anxiety among college students and Czeisler (2021) reports an increase in suicidal ideation among adults aged 18-24. Son completed interview surveys with 195 students at a large public university in the United States and Czeisler conducted a literature review, drawing from other research throughout the pandemic. Hagedorn (2021) reports an increase in mental health issues as well as a lack of social balance in a study surveying undergraduate and graduate students at a large university. While there is some research on young people in the pandemic, it disproportionately focuses on mental health, and research is focused on large university's, as these studies show.

Recent research on the effects of the pandemic on specifically queer young people is focused outside of the United States. Hankel (2021) found queer young people in Australia had a deeper connection with the LGBTQIA+ community and their identities through engagement with social media apps. Hankel surveyed 1100 queer young people aged 16-30 within Australia. Hawke (2021) concludes that queer trans youth experienced more mental health deterioration in the pandemic than cisgender youth in Canada, after surveying 29 transgender and gender-diverse youth and 593 cisgender youth. Similarly, Barrientos (2021) cites the pandemic as having a negative emotional impact on adults ages 18-64 in Chile, and Gato (2021) concluded that participants in South America reported feeling "suffocated" at home because they could not express their queer identities with their family in intense isolation. Barrientos surveyed 1181

queer people over the age of 18 online, and Gato used an online survey to gain perspective of queer young adults. Prior research focuses on college students in general, students at large institutions, and queer people outside of the United States. My research intends to situate the effects of the pandemic within the context of queer college students at the small liberal arts college, Trinity College. Additional research on queer young people well before the pandemic sheds light on how identities may evolve due to increased interaction with the queer community, like so many of my participant's experiences.

### *Queer Identity Formation in College*

Elisa S. Abes' (2008) *Applying Queer Theory in Practice with College Students: Transformation of a Researcher's and Participant's Perspectives on Identity* is a narrative inquiry on queer college students' perceptions of gender and sexual identity. Moreover, this article analyzes the story of Jordana (pseudonym) and identifies and tracks how her perceptions and labels of sexuality change and evolve over time. Jordana, through Abes' research project, was able to learn more about queer theory, and therefore was able to validate her own identity. How she labeled her sexuality changed from the beginning of the research project to the end, about 3 years, and is in part attributed to her increase in engagement with queer theory and LGBTQ student organizations. This is potentially helpful for my research, as I could imagine an individual taking quarantine as a time to dive into queer theory either more formally, or casually, like through queer social networks, as Jordana engaged in both. Abes uses queer theory and constructivism as her main theoretical frameworks and perspectives in which she analyzes Jordana's evolution. She says "queer theory recognizes sexual and gender identities as social, multiple, and fluid (Britzman, 1997)," (Abes 2008). My research similarly grounds theoretical framework in my analysis.

## *Theoretical Framework*

French philosopher, Michel Foucault, uncovered sexuality as a social production of power. Foucault explained that sexuality as a social construction “resulted in exhaustive surveillance of sex. Heterosexuals began to monitor their families for healthy sexual behaviors” (Foucault, 1990). If not for the rules, norms, and expectations we impose on ourselves and therefore expect for others, there would be no need to label and categorize a divergence from the status quo of heterosexuality, and there would not be a status quo in the first place. Foucault emphasizes the power sexuality has in our everyday lives, as we seek to control and categorize others and ourselves in the interest of preserving the label of a sexual norm. He writes, “through the various discourses, a norm of sexual development was defined and all the possible deviations were carefully described,” (Foucault 1990). In short, sexuality is constructed by the surveillance of sexual behaviors and categorization and emphasis of the norms and the deviations, which have since been categorized into identities such as gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, asexual, etc. Sexuality is constructed as a conduit of power to maintain the norm of heterosexuality. However, if sexuality can be made and constructed, it can be unmade and deconstructed. My research is interested in the effect of the intensified surveillance of queer young people during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how their sexuality and gender identities were deconstructed and reconstructed.

In Judith Butler’s (1988) *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, Butler, through various philosopher's lenses such as Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Foucault, explains gender as a repetition of acts situated in a historical context, performed through the body. Butler emphasizes the ‘social temporality’ of gender and the fact that gender is contingent on the current expectations and



cultural meanings of gender. She says ‘possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in...in the breaking or subversive repetition,’ (Butler, 1988). In other words, changes in what gender means, culturally or on an individual level, can be discovered if our subconscious acts that reaffirm our gender are destabilized. Butler's emphasis on historical circumstances and social meanings feels particularly prevalent in my research, which explores how the historical COVID-19 pandemic has transformed how people view and label their genders and sexualities. She coins gender as a performance. She defines this by saying “people create gender a stylized repetition acts every day,” (Butler, 1988). In other words, gender is reaffirmed by daily tasks associated with one's gender. The COVID-19 pandemic and related isolation clearly worked in a way that destabilized the repetitious acts that reinforce gender. I am interested in how this period of increased isolation, and in turn, a subversion of our daily repetitive acts, has an effect on gender and sexuality perceptions, expressions, and labels.

Butler explains gender as a reflection of historical circumstances and criticized feminist theories of gender and the idea of a ‘woman’ as a natural fact. She claims ‘the body *is* a historical situation...and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation’ (Butler, 1988). The body is gender because it goes through socially established repetitive acts that are a reflection of the current historical context of what being a ‘man’ and ‘woman’ is. Butler later emphasizes how these acts must happen in social contexts, or else there is no one to perceive that the acts have been done at all.

Gender as a performance is a central framework for this research. I am interested in the idea of gender being a production of a historical situation, and what it means in this current historical situation. What about the historical situation of the COVID-19 pandemic that causes/d people to introspect on their gender and sexuality? How has the pandemic redefined gender?

What does gender mean when social contexts are taken away? What happens if gender is not being performed for others? What happens to gender when the repetitive acts that enforce it are disrupted? Butler and Foucault are theorists that really ground my research and these questions because I became interested in what happens to people's identities when the repetition of acts that reinforce gender are disrupted, and what happens when that surveillance of behavior emerges in different ways as people isolated themselves, and either were overly surveilled, or completely unsurveilled, and what that meant for different identities.

### **Methods**

This research uses qualitative methods to answer my research question. I was interested in speaking with queer youth, defined by the United Nations as ages 15-24. I spoke with ten queer-identified at Trinity College, Hartford CT who were a mix of sophomores and seniors. I connected with students through social and communication networks. This was a small non-probability voluntary sample. This was not a random sample, which limits the generalizability of these findings to all queer youth.

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, I began to collect my primary data source which was 10 semi-structured interviews with queer-identifying Trinity students. Interviewees signed up for an interview slot using the Calendly application. Interviewees were given a written consent form to review before the interview, where they would sign the form in person (See Appendix A). The majority of interviews were in-person, and one interview was over Zoom, where the interviewee signed the consent form electronically. These interviews were recorded for the audio file after the interviewee gave verbal consent. Participants were given a \$10 gift card to Peter B's Espresso or the Underground Coffee House, coffee shops on campus, for their time. Pseudonyms are used for all participants to protect their identity.

Interviewees were asked about how they defined their gender and sexuality currently and prior to the pandemic, around February 2020. Interviewees were asked how their identities physically manifest or manifested through factors such as clothing, hair, makeup, and outward expression. They were asked about factors and realizations that led to different identities, especially if their identity changed from the beginning of the pandemic. Interviewees were asked to define moments related to identity, and level of comfort with being out currently and prior to the pandemic (See Appendix B).

To analyze the data I have collected, I coded interview transcripts and analyzed themes across interviews. Prevalent themes include negative and positive effects of proximity to family, TikTok influence, and increased time for contemplation, which will all be further discussed in the Findings sections. I analyzed across subjects to observe patterns for these themes.

### *Participants*

Participants included representation from a wide array of queer Trinity students. Annie is a senior who identified as a bisexual woman prior to the pandemic and identifies as bisexual femme/non-binary/superhuman presently, at the time of the interview. Beth is a senior who identified as a bisexual cisgender woman before the pandemic and presently. Ella is a sophomore who has always identified as a cisgender woman, identified as bisexual before the pandemic and identifies as bisexual/gay currently. Patricio is a senior who prior to the pandemic and currently identifies as a bisexual cisgender woman and is currently experimenting with the pansexual label. June is a sophomore who identified as straight before the pandemic, presently identifies as bisexual, and identifies as a cisgender woman currently and before the pandemic. River is a senior who identified as a gay man prior to the pandemic and now identifies as queer. Marcus is a senior who identified before the pandemic and presently as a gay man. Maggie is a sophomore

who identified as a bisexual woman before the pandemic and now identifies as queer/bisexual/pansexual and a fluid queer femme. Martha is a sophomore who prior to the pandemic identified as a straight woman, and presently identifies as a lesbian woman. Finally, Thomas identified as a gay man prior to the pandemic and presently identifies as a gay/queer man. It should be noted that presently indicates the time in which the interview took place, which was in March or April of 2022. Any of these identities could have changed at any point since the time of the interview.

### *Limitations and Positionality*

This research has potential limitations. This study includes 10 participants and is not exhaustive of all queer students at Trinity. To participate in this study, participants had to actively sign up for a meeting time, disclosing themselves as queer to a potential stranger, which may have limitations to overarching conclusions about the entirety of the queer community at Trinity. Additionally, only sophomores and seniors signed up for interviews, so this data is not reflective of first-years and juniors at Trinity College.

It is important to shed light on my positionality as the author of this research. As described in the introduction, I became interested in this topic as a queer person who had similar experiences to those of the participants in the pandemic. Additionally, I am a full-time student at Trinity College and knew most of the 10 participants prior to the interview. Participants knowing me as a person prior to the interview may have allowed them to open up and feel more comfortable and candid in their interviews, or it could have caused them to hold back from sharing specific information with a person they know.

## Findings

### *Finding 1: The fuck-it mentality due to increased time of contemplation*

Marcus is a senior from Chicago to whom I have to give credit for the naming of this finding. Marcus concisely states, “I can't pinpoint it, but I can definitely say COVID instilled a lot of like the fuck-it mentality in specifically our generation. Going home for COVID was like, wow, I'm really losing a lot of my college career. I'm not going to have as much as I thought I would.” When we think about the pandemic and particularly the intense period of isolation, we think about the amount of time that was given to us, either for better or for worse. Marcus expresses how the pandemic took away time in a lot of ways, like time within the ‘true’ college experience. The time that was taken away allowed people to embody a seize-the-day type of attitude that allowed young people to start doing things they always wanted to do. Marcus goes on further to say, “COVID gave me more of a reason to like, express myself...It let me do things I'd always wanted to try and never thought I'd get the chance to try...My first crop top was like sophomore year, and that was like the scariest thing to go into Forever 21 and be like fuck it and grab a crop top and walk out or buy makeup from Sephora.” Marcus was able to do something he has always been thinking about, and just bit the bullet and cited COVID as allowing him to be able to do that, because of the free headspace he was in.

Additionally, Patricio is a senior who spoke a lot about the decision to shave her head in the middle of the pandemic. She touches on the true horrors of COVID-19 saying that people could really die at any moment, but this led to an attitude of you only live once, so you might as well do what you've always wanted to do. Because of this fuck-it mentality, people were able to release any fears, however small, they had particularly about how they were expressing themselves externally through hair, clothing, accessories, and other signifiers because nobody

was looking at them. The stakes were a lot lower because people were trying things out in the comfort of their own rooms or around a smaller group of people in their pod.

Queer Trinity students were able to experiment drastically and in ways that have not necessarily continued to throughout the pandemic, but, as Maggie states, “You sitting in your room just being able to experiment without like, fuck I have to go to school the next day and wear my uniform...you were sitting at home. You can play dress-up.” There was room and time to experiment with clothing and expression because there were fewer people around to surveil and perceive these experiments. The pressure was taken off which allowed queer students to feel freer in allowing themselves to play around with expression.

Being able to express yourself outside of your comfort zones allowed people to be more confident in their identities. Queer Trinity students tried something on the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of how they physically express themselves and were able to come back maybe somewhere in the middle, or maybe they ended up expression-wise right back where they started, but with this newfound confidence in their identities. Martha states “When I was in quarantine, I started wearing beanies and experimented with the stereotypical look of like bisexual or gay females. And obviously, that's not how I dress now...I had no way else to try or experiment if I'm like gay or whatever, so I try to put myself into the look, and then I enjoyed it for a little bit.” Martha, while trying to affirm her identity as a lesbian, turned to how she was dressing as a way to experiment with how she fits into the label of a lesbian, however stereotypical. Similarly, Beth states, “Occasionally, I will choose to present more masc and [I was] kind of looking into if that meant anything gender-wise or was it just like playing with presentation and kind of just asking is there something more to this? Do I feel completely comfortable with the pronoun she/her/hers? What does like femininity mean to me?” Before the pandemic, Beth identified as bisexual and

presently identifies as bisexual. Even though her identity did not change, the pandemic allowed Beth the time to interrogate how she is expressing her identity and how she identifies, causing her to be more confident in her identity. Students had the time and privacy to try something else that was not just a repeat of what they did before, as a way to affirm and reinforce their identity, even if they never ended up changing how they label and express themselves in the long term.

*Finding 2: Positive and negative experiences with increased time with families*

All ten participants spent at least some time at home with a parent or parents. The time when most people were at home with their families in intense isolation was in the Summer of 2020. During this summer, when there were a lot of national social justice conversations, a lot of people were doing self-education work, sparked by national, widely covered protests against police brutality and the murder of George Floyd. This air of self-education led to some participants having hard conversations with their parents about their queerness either for the very first time or continued previous conversations. Some were able to have important conversations that led to more acceptance from parents and some had experiences that further drove animosity between parents and their children's queerness, and some remained in the closet around their parents while at home

For example, Thomas has a lot of really intense conversations with his family and was eventually kicked out of the house for a period of time. He cited the aggravation and intensity of the pandemic leading to angst between family members that led to that ultimate outcome. Participants were around their families for a lot more time than they thought they would have to be, leading to added tension at home. Thomas says, "I think it was the aggravation. We were together a lot. And like, they couldn't process because my mom, she was like, I would have never thought you being gay, even though I did play with dolls a little bit...It's kind of shitty for your

parents to say, 'I won't support you and I'll never love you,' because that's literally what my mom said." Thomas has been out to his parents since before he was a teenager, but the increased stress because of the pandemic, as described in the literature cited above, made way for more volatile conversations with queer students and their families.

However, for some, the ability to just be around their parents for such a long amount of time allowed conversations to come up easier, as it did for June, whose queerness is a new identity since the beginning of the pandemic. She says, "I spent a lot more time with my family...I just don't think I would have even had that time to spend with my mom without COVID happening." Additionally, for others, being around their parents made participants want to be more open with them, as it did with Martha who said, "Being stuck in quarantine...I'm spending so much time with my family. I was like, okay I need to tell my parents, I need to be open about it." Both June and Martha were able to casually talk about their queerness with their families and cited the abundance of time around their family aiding this comfortability.

While some participants were able to have really important or volatile conversations with their parents surrounding their queerness, some remained in the closet around their parents when living at home during the pandemic. Despite being in multiple relationships with women, Ella is not out to her parents but noted seeing a shift in her parents being more comfortable talking about queer topics. She says, "My mom became more comfortable talking to me about it. But she isn't going to, ask me outright. So I think that for me, it definitely crossed my mind, like, why don't you just tell them? But then I was like, Well, you're kind of stuck at home right now. So if like anything happened, and I don't think it would. But if anything did happen like this, there's nowhere to go, there's no outlet." Despite recognizing a change in her mom, Ella cited that the circumstance surrounding the pandemic, the inability to leave home, led her to remain in the



closet when at home, despite being out at Trinity. Additionally, Beth cites the inability to be out around her parents as a catalyst for interrogating and reexamining her queerness and identity. She said, “ I can't really be out around my parents, so it was like a lot of like, any conversations I'd have or like maybe article I've been sharing or just like jokes I would make typically at Trinity were all like kind of internalized so I was like well, I can have a dialogue with myself.” Beth was not able to exercise her queerness at home, because she was not out to her parents at home. The only person she could have conversations surrounding queerness with was herself, which led her to be introspective about her identity and queerness.

While participants' relationships with their families and parents varied across the board, students reflected deeply on their time with their parents. For some, this allowed opportunities for conversations that participants have always wanted to have. For others, the stress of the pandemic was cited for negative experiences with families. Furthermore, other participants remained in the closet around their parents, because they were unable to be out to the extent that they would have been if they were not at home due to the circumstances of the pandemic.

### *Finding 3: TikTok as Script Writer*

TikTok is a short-form video social media platform that was originally released in 2017 and rose to worldwide notoriety, particularly in 2020, when the app saw a 180% increase in users since the pandemic broke out and isolation began in March 2020. Users are able to interact with an algorithmically curated ‘For You Page’ of videos based on interests that users like, watch, and interact with. The more one watches and interacts with a certain type of content, the more that content will come up on the feed. All ten participants in their interviews mentioned in some way engaging with queer content on the app, and a large amount declared that they were on ‘gay TikTok’, language to describe that a lot of their For You Page is filled with content by queer

creators, about queer content. As Annie concisely describes, “TikTok, for me, it was just like super gay. Like, TikTok was gay, TikTok with queer, and I was on TikTok consuming that media almost every single day.” River describes the experience of being on gay TikTok by saying, “I feel like I witnessed everybody [on TikTok] become nonbinary in real-time. I watched all the he/him’s and she/her’s turn into he/they’s and she/they’s...I watched real ass people living their daily lives it was great,”. TikTok was effectively a way for participants to script write and draft their queerness while being stuck in isolation. TikTok was a way for participants to interact with queerness when the majority of participants were the only queer person in proximity to their homes. Some participants even made TikToks themselves and interacted with gay TikTok from a creator standpoint. Additionally, participants were able to see a chill, unproduced queerness portrayed by everyday people, which disrupted the way queerness is usually represented in the media.

Queerness in popular media is portrayed in a monolithic way, often highlighting the stories of cis, white, affluent gay men. Many participants expressed comfort in getting to see everyday queer people casually living their lives. Martha, a sophomore from Massachusetts said how impactful it was “seeing these people live openly, like gay or however they affiliate like they don't have to worry about that anymore and can focus on what they want to do with their life.” Martha and others expressed not wanting to have to worry about queerness and expressed how seeing so many people being casually queer affected their ability to also be free and open with their queerness. June who struggled with being able to confidently call herself bisexual said “There were just some mind-opening things on TikTok, even where it was like, like, I'd see like random videos about queerness, and I'd be like, Oh, maybe I do fit into the spectrum in a way that I didn't think I did before.” Seeing so many queer people casually on TikTok gave

participants the confidence to try out different forms of expression and identity because of what they were seeing online in the privacy of their own homes. Participants were able to try out what they were seeing online without any stakes and used TikTok as a scriptwriter for personal expression. Maggie, a micro TikTok influencer herself with tens of thousands of followers conveyed, “I realized there's this whole subfield. There's like all of gay TikTok. Yeah, and it's just so cool seeing everyone's anamorphous like this gayer-self.” While being stuck at home, interviewees expressed ease in which they were able to try out different physical manifestations of queerness, because they were seeing more queer content than ever before on their phones.

In addition to using TikTok as a scriptwriter, participants used the platform as a self-education tool, which helped participants engage with their queerness in a way they might not have prior to the pandemic. Martha said, “if I saw somebody educating people about LGBTQ community, I'd like it and then more would come up on my feed”, and sought out creators who were educating their audiences about the LGBTQ community in a manner that was catered to queer people because it was being communicated through a queer person. Thomas, a sophomore from Chicago, similarly expressed he was “being informed on Tik Tok, like after looking at a video like saying is this actually true? And looking up things, I'm like, oh shit, that's actually true? I think TikTok has a bad rap, but I think it can be very useful as well. We can like educate yourself, not fully, but enough for a start.” TikTok became a space of education and further learning within the queer community.

While the majority of participants expressed positive experiences with the app, one participant expressed his frustrations with the app, which showcases the range of content there is on gay TikTok. While some participants report their positive experiences, Marcus thought that TikTok reinforced how pop media portrayed queer people, which other participants thought it

disrupted. He said, “I definitely think that TikTok exacerbated the idea of being like the skinny gay male or the muscular gay male... what it was like to be queer, how being gay had been over-sexualized.” No matter how participants interacted with gay TikTok, seeing so many people talk about queerness so openly allowed participants to self-reflect on how queerness was manifesting in their own lives. For a multitude of reasons, the pandemic allowed people to be more self contemplative and internally reflective, as people around the globe were sharing their everyday experiences and thoughts on TikTok. For these Trinity students, consuming a large amount of queer content in casual ways aided in being able to affirm, interrogate, and feel confident in their identities. They had more exposure to queer education and resources in the privacy of their own homes. Participants were able to see themselves more confidently in their queer identity, because of the differences and variations in queer identities they are seeing online.

TikTok as a scriptwriting vehicle allowed participants to feel more confident in their identities because they were engaging and seeing themselves represented on gay TikTok. This is very prevalent and similar to a finding in one of the pieces of literature I reviewed. Elisa Abes discovered through her research that increased exposure to LGBTQ+ resources and people made students more confident and comfortable in their identities. This is a theme that resonated in a lot of my participant's experiences. The queer resources and people the participants are interacting with come from the queer content they are consuming on TikTok. Participants are able to feel more confident and comfortable in their identities because they are seeing other people confident and comfortable in their identities online.

### **Discussion**

Increased isolation led queer students to interrogate their gender and sexuality due to a fuck-it mentality, conversations and time with family, and broader engagement with the

LGBTQIA+ community on social media, that reinforced these queer young people's identities, causing them to be more confident, comfortable, and nuanced in their identities. Participants' performances of gender were interrupted as they were forced to grapple with identities that have been prescribed to them. They now had the time and privacy to experiment in ways that interested them, in an effort to play with their gender and sexualities. These queer Trinity students' social media was infiltrated with queer content, exposing participants to individuals being casually queer in a wide variety of identities. As participants slowly came out of intense isolation, these queer young people felt more secure and confident in their identities. They had the time to reinforce who they were to themselves, so, when it came time for others to perceive performances of gender and sexuality, they were more comfortable in who they were than they were at the beginning of the pandemic.

### *Surveillance*

At times, periods of isolation led to more intense surveillance of these queer students by their families. Foucault argues this is how sexuality is constructed, through surveillance and monitorization of healthy sexual behaviors, particularly by family members which cause people to self-discipline to fit themselves into a socially constructed norm. Participants notably described intense conversations with their families that either brought them closer or drove further estrangement from their parents. The pandemic allowed for students to either be hyper surveilled or completely unsurveilled at any moment in time. Students frequently switched from environments such as being in small pods with friends, being at home with close family, and being completely isolated. Some students, such as Thomas, Ella, and Beth had to be conservative with expressing their queerness while at home being closely monitored by their parents, who did not expect or want an outwardly queer child.

While there were some moments of increased surveillance of behavior, participants most frequently describe moments of freedom, rebellion, biting the bullet, and times when they were breaking their idea of norms and deviating from their prescribed gender or sexualities, to be important factors in realizing their identity. These intense moments of either hyper surveillance or complete unsurveillance were vital in participants' identity formations and relations with family members. Foucault argues sexuality is constructed through surveillance, and it is interesting to make sense of what happens to sexuality when it is un surveilled. My findings show that when sexuality is un surveilled, people come out on the other side as more confident, comfortable, and nuanced in their identities.

*Gender is the performance, life is the stage*

Additionally, if gender is a performance, as Judith Butler describes, the intense isolation period in quarantine, as described by the participants themselves, acted as a dress rehearsal. Queer people were able to try things out in the privacy of their own homes, under the guise of feeling as though the world may end tomorrow, 'fuck it', and trying something you've always wanted to try. This rise in people interrogating their gender in this period when everything in the world stopped makes sense if we look at the COVID-19 phenomenon through the lens of Butler. The repetition of acts that reinforce gender, as Butler describes, was interrupted, causing people to reinforce their gender in more conscious ways than just miming the social conventions of what a 'man' or 'woman' is, based on what sex they were assigned at birth. If isolation was the dress rehearsal, TikTok acted as a scriptwriter where people were able to conceptualize who they want to be and what they wanted to do by seeing a wide array of queer people. The queer people on TikTok were everyday normal people which deviated outside of what mainstream media portrays as queer, which is usually white cis, gay men. TikTok allowed people to identify with different

aspects of the queer identity. Participants are using what they see on TikTok as a way to rewrite or revise their own gender identities, because of the freedom of queer expression they have witnessed and the education they have consumed on queer TikTok. Judith Butler described gender as a performance because it implies that identities have to be performed in order to be constructed and maintained. Participants, after the dress rehearsal of intense isolation and scriptwriting qualities of TikTok, have slowly begun to hit the 'stage' with increasing levels of confidence and comfortability in various ways as we continually adapt to a world with COVID-19.

### *Next Steps*

Queer people are a growing population with a multitude of identities and are here and at Trinity. There are vital and simple steps Trinity can take to be more accessible, inclusive, and fair. Trinity needs to implement more gender-inclusive housing and should dissolve housing guidelines that make housing increasingly stressful for queer students, such as students only being able to live in single-sex housing with students of the same legal sex, which does not allow students to self identify their own sex and gender. Trinity only considers the legal sex of students, rearing it impossible to have gender-inclusive housing. There are conversations happening currently surrounding these guidelines, and those conversations need to be transparent and driven by students' needs and opinions, which they are not currently. There should be a dedicated all queer floor as many similar institutions have embedded within the housing system. There should be more gender-neutral bathroom options, especially in dorms, and there should be easy opportunities for students to self-identify their gender and sexuality regardless of legal status during the housing selection process, and at any point in their Trinity experience. Pronoun and name changes should be easy and accessible. Curriculum and monetary changes can be

made to enhance the representation of queer people on campus. At Trinity, professors should be encouraged to include queer authors in their syllabi. Trinity should devote resources dedicated to bringing queer speakers to campus, and producing programming for a wide variety queer identities, in an effort to be a truly inclusive and accepting campus. It is not enough to claim to be a sexuality and gender-inclusive campus, as Trinity often does. Practices should be put into place to actively include the wide array of queer identities Trinity has on its campus.



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## Appendix A

### *Written Consent Form*

#### **Informed Consent to Participate in *Isolation and Queerness: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected how queer youth express and label themselves?***

The purpose of this research study is to learn about queer Trinity's students expressions and perceptions of themselves and their queerness before, and currently during the pandemic. Participants will be asked to participate in a 45-minute interview.

The benefits of this study include increased knowledge and understanding of queer students, which benefits queer students themselves, and Trinity as a whole. The study involves only minimal risk, meaning that the probability of harm or discomfort is not greater than ordinarily encountered in daily life.

To compensate you for participating in this study, you will receive a \$10 gift card to Peter B's Espresso or Underground Coffeehouse.

By signing this form, the participant is aware that the entire process is voluntary, this interview will take about 45 minutes, and that you can stop or withdraw at any time, without being penalized. I would like your permission to record and transcribe your interview, with the reminder that I will not use your name.

By signing this form, the participant is aware that pseudonyms will be used, all of their responses in this study are confidential and to be used only for research purposes.

If the participant has questions or want more information about the study, they are free to contact.

Principal Investigator: CJ Donohoe, [clare.donohoe@trincoll.edu](mailto:clare.donohoe@trincoll.edu), 857-231-2691

Research Supervisor: Daniel Douglas, [daniel.douglas@trincoll.edu](mailto:daniel.douglas@trincoll.edu)

Or contact the Trinity College IRB administrator via email: [irb@trincoll.edu](mailto:irb@trincoll.edu)

Print your name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

All signed forms will remain confidential. Participants may keep a blank form if desired.

## Appendix B

### *Interview Guide*

#### **Introduction**

Thank you so much for being willing to participate in an interview about how the COVID-9 pandemic affected your queerness. This interview will be a part of my Educational Studies Senior Research project

Before I get into my questions, I'll share a bit about the interview process. We'll be talking for about 45 minutes, and I'll be asking you questions about your experiences in the pandemic and your perceptions and expressions of your gender and sexuality. I am interested in learning about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected how queer young people express, label, perceive themselves in any way. You can always skip a question if you don't feel comfortable or stop at any time, we will be talking about the pandemic which was filled with grief so feel free to take your time with anything. You will also receive a gift card to the **Underground** or Peter B's.

I would like your permission to record the interview, to help ensure the accuracy of your comments.

Do I have your permission to record?

Do you have questions for me before we begin?

#### **Questions:**

- How do you identify in terms of race or ethnicity?
  
- How would you describe your family's socioeconomic status?
  
- What are you involved in at Trinity?
  - Work? Outside of Trinity?
  - Are you a part of any LGBTQ+ organizations?
  - Social networks?
  
- (Prefacing research question. To tell you a little bit more about the research project, I am interested in learning about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected how queer young people express, label, perceive themselves in any way.) Tell me a little bit about yourself.
  
- How would you describe your sexuality currently?

- How did you come to realize this identity?
  - Important factors?
  - Where did you learn about this identity?
- How would you describe your gender currently?
  - How did you come to realize this identity?
    - Important factors?
    - Where did you learn about this identity?
    - Where did you learn about this identity? Social media? Online networks?
- How did you describe your sexuality in February 2020, before the pandemic?
  - How did you come to realize that identity?
    - Important factors?
    - Where did you learn about that identity?
- How did you describe your gender in February 2020, before the pandemic?
  - How did you come to realize that identity?
    - Important factors?
    - Where did you learn about that identity? Social media?
- How did you express your identities before the pandemic?
  - What clothes did you wear? Hair? Pronouns? Did you go by a different name? At school? At home? Alone? At work?
- How do you express your identity now?
  - What clothes did you wear? Hair? Pronouns? Did you go by a different name? At school? At home? Alone? At work?
- Were there any defining or particular moments when your identity shifted? Talk about those moments.
- What was your level of comfort with being 'out' prior to the pandemic?
- What is your level of comfort with being 'out' now?

**Closing:**

- Is there anything else you'd like to share that I haven't asked about?
  - Anything that came to your mind?
- Is there anyone else you know I could talk to?
- Do you want your gift card to be to Peter Bs or Underground?