LGBTQ Institute
Southern Survey
Focus Group Findings

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Overview: LGBTQ Institute Southern Survey Focus Groups

The 2021-2022 Southern Survey is the second version of the study conducted by the LGBTQ Institute and Emory University, which sought to amplify the voices of LGTBQ individuals living in the southern United States (US). This study of, by, and for Southern LGBTQ people was supported by more than 30 Southern LGBTQ businesses, grassroots organizations, and interdisciplinary agencies and garnered more than 2,000 respondents. Despite a large number of overall survey respondents, researchers were underwhelmed by the ethnic diversity of the sample, noting the dearth of Asian, Black, Latinx, and multiethnic voices represented in the survey.

Targeted marketing efforts during the recruitment phase of the 2021-2022 Southern Survey failed to increase the diversity of the sample, leading researchers to seek out a different methodological approach to connecting with the ethnic minority sub-groups. In this extension of the Southern Survey, respondents identifying from various ethnic minority backgrounds were invited to participate in focus groups to share more about their lived experiences as LGBTQ folks living in the southern US. Of the total respondents, 94 individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds indicated that they were open to being contacted for future research; 37 of those 94 individuals participated in either the focus groups (*n* = 8) or the open response survey (*n* = 29).

Methods

Qualitative methodologies have been increasingly recognized as valuable and credible approaches to conducting empirical research in the social sciences (Hays & Wood, 2011; Hays et al., 2016). While quantitative survey questions can be interpreted in a myriad of ways by different participants, qualitative methods of data collection such as interviews can provide a richer, more in-depth understanding of phenomena of interest (Nathan et al., 2019). As such, qualitative methodologies can fill in the gaps left by quantitative methodologies, giving voice to participants' lived experiences (Nathan et al., 2019). This extension of the Southern Survey is described below, including information regarding participants, procedures, and methods of data collection and analysis.

Procedure

The final question of the Southern Survey prompted respondents to state if they were willing to be contacted for future research and if so, to share their email address. Of the total number of survey respondents, 94 individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds indicated that they would be willing to participate in future research and shared their contact information. Researchers sent invitations via email to participate in targeted focus groups (i.e., separate focus groups for each of the four ethnic minority sub-groups) to each of these respondents for them to indicate their availability.

From there, researchers identified the time slots that worked best for each sub-group of respondents and scheduled the focus groups to take place via the Zoom web meeting platform. Despite the researchers' best efforts to capture the availability of each respondent, each respondent was not able to make the allotted focus group time. Therefore, the researchers created an open-response survey, with questions identical to that of the focus group interview protocol, for

interested participants to share. Those who participated in the focus group interview received a $50 virtual Visa gift card, and those who participated in the open-response survey received a $20 virtual Visa gift card. (They were not permitted to participate in both the interview and the open-response survey.)

Participants

A total of 37 (n = 37) individuals participated in the focus group interviews or the follow-up survey, with the breakdown of each sub-group as follows: Asian (n = 5), Black (n = 12), Latinx (n = 9), and multiracial/multi-ethnic (n = 11). Of the participants identifying as Asian, Indian, and Filipino descents were represented. Of the participants identifying as Black, African American, Jamaican, and Cameroonian descents were represented. Of the participants identifying as Latinx, Mexican, Colombian, Texan, Costa Rican, Salvadorian, Puerto Rican, and Cuban descents were represented. Of the participants identifying as multiracial/multiethnic, the following descents were represented: Afro-Latinx, African-Native American-Italian, Japanese-European, Black-White American, Mexican-White American, and Irish-Dutch. Across all the sub-groups, all gender identity and sexual orientation statuses were represented.

Methods of Data Collection

Focus group interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes each, and consent procedures were reviewed prior to the recording of each interview (i.e., they were reminded that they could skip or avoid answering any question and that they could leave the interview at any time with no penalty). Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim via a third-party transcription service (i.e., Otter.ai). Following the completion of the transcriptions, audio recordings were destroyed. Each transcription was 'cleaned' by removing all identifying information (e.g., names) and most vocal disfluencies (e.g., "like", "um", "uh", etc.).

For individuals who were not able to attend the focus groups, an open-response survey was provided for them to share their feedback. The same questions used in the focus groups were transferred to the open-response survey.

Methods of Data Analysis

The objective of data analysis was to extract meaning from each participant's narratives about their experiences as LGBTQ folks living in the southern US. In order to analyze and derive meaning from participants' focus group interviews, the researcher performed line-by-line analyses in which within-group themes for each ethnic group were extracted. Subsequently, the researcher compared each ethnic group's themes to observe across-group themes, or similarities each ethnic group's interview revealed. Following the compilation of each ethnic group's themes along with the overarching themes, the research team engaged in member checking, in which the themes were reflected back to the focus group participants for accuracy. In this effort to enhance trustworthiness, participants were instructed to make suggestions or corrections to the themes to ensure that their voices were accurately represented by the themes that the researcher extracted.

Findings: Within Group Themes

First, within-group themes are presented for each of the ethnic group's interviews, highlighting the uniqueness of each ethnic group's lived experiences as they relate to being LGBTQ in the southern US. (An overview of within-group themes can be found in Table 1.) Second, overarching themes are presented to highlight the similarities across each of the ethnic minority groups.

"We Are Not a Monolith": Asian-Queer Intersections

Unique to the queer-Asian intersection as described by the two focus group participants were: (a) inter-ethnic tensions, and (b) historical roots in LGBTQ identities and expressions. Participants shared their lived experiences as they related to being South-and Southeast-Asian, as opposed to East-Asian, whom they believe to hold more privilege within the Asian community: "Sometimes I don't get along, culturally, with East Asians. There's some power dynamics in a lot of those situations," and, "I think there's such a difference when you're not East Asian and this is also something I've noticed in South Asian communities". Participants shared about colorism, the privilege that lighter-skinned Asians have, and the plight of Asians with naturally darker skin tones. They reflected on how in the few Asian-queer communities they know of Asians with lighter skin tend to be in leadership roles and/or the makeup of the entire space. Given this array of within-group differences among queer Asians, participants reflected on their reluctance to participate in research, due to their concern with being "lumped in" with other Asian cultures to whom they personally do not relate: "Sometimes I think Asian folks... We don't feel like our stories are important enough to be told in a lot of ways. So, it's like, why am I going to fill this out? What's going to come of it? And is the sample size even gonna be big enough, because oftentimes, we're just grouped under others. And even among that, it'll still be mainly represented by East Asia." Inter-ethnic tensions, discrimination on the basis of caste and skin tone, and concerns about being considered monolithic have contributed to these participants' hesitance to participate in research geared towards queer Asians.

Another unique finding from the focus group with LGBTQ Asians was the acknowledgment of their historical roots in LGBTQ identities and expressions. Participants briefly shared about historical texts such as the *Kama Sutra* and ancient Hindu and Filipino deities and spiritual leaders (e.g., Ardhanariswara and asog, respectively) which have strong underpinnings in their communities. One participant expressed how the queer and trans history of India is conveniently forgotten and misinterpreted in order to discriminate against present-day queer-Indians:

> *"Why are we so ignorant to our own history where queer and trans people were revered and some were worshipped and loved, looked at as leaders, etc. It breaks my heart that we have to think about it being so long ago, 4,000 years ago... What did that look like? And will I understand any of that? Because [the ancient text] is probably not in English."*

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Knowledge of this history in LGBTQ identities provides a sense of pride and affirmation, but when these historical underpinnings are not validated by the larger Indian or Filipino communities, it puts a damper on the lived experiences of Asians across the diaspora, including the southern US.

"Rewriting the Narrative": Black-Queer Intersections

What was distinct about queer-Black intersections was illuminated through the narratives of the sole focus group participant. As previously stated, she identified as a cis-gender, pansexual, African American woman and she reported having been born and raised between urban New York City (NYC) and metro Atlanta, Georgia. One thing that stood out to her in navigating both NYC and Atlanta queer spaces was the spiritual connection to nature in the south, compared to the north: "I've seen a lot of Black queer people connecting with nature differently in the south, versus what I see in the in the north, NYC specifically." She shared about her own spiritual beliefs and how they are positioned within the majority Christian culture in the South.

Another unique finding was her insistence upon rewriting the narrative about Black communities and their acceptance of LGBTQ folks:

> *"I am very cognizant of this narrative of the Black community being more homophobic than any other group. I push back against that in a lot of ways, because it's not that they are more [anti-LGBTQ] than others; every group can be homophobic. And so, I think that for outsiders looking in, there is a tendency to, especially within research, look at things from a very deficit[-based] model and pathologize the entire experience, not leaving any room for nuance, not necessarily leaning into the ways that people are finding family, whether that's chosen or whatever else."*

Through this quote and the ones surrounding it, the participant shared her own positive coming-out story as well as others within Black queer spaces. Hearing conflicting narratives about Black communities being more anti-LGBTQ than other ethnic groups inspired them to share counter-narratives that work to balance the typically deficit-based view of Black communities.

One online survey respondent shared about her challenges with older generations and hopefulness for future generations: "[the biggest challenge] is being ourselves with older family members," and "[I'm hopeful because] younger adults are more open, but probably [because] we are their parents." In this statement, she communicated how the work of her generation has already yielded some positive results in terms of LGBTQ acceptance, support, and advocacy.

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"Trapped by the Gender-Binary": Queer-Latinx Intersections

According to the focus group participants, unique to the queer-Latinx intersection was the gender binary of the Spanish language and other binary gender-stereotypical expectations. One of the participants who identified as nonbinary shared their experience of their family refusing to use their pronouns: "In my family, people are not open to new pronouns or stuff like that, because Spanish is a very, very gendered language. So, everything is depending on if it's male, or female. And for me, everything would end in -e. Right? And so, they [family] were just like, 'I'm not really willing to make that change just for you'". In this instance, their family was not willing to make changes that would break away from the traditionally gendered Spanish language norms. Another respondent shared about the power of language as it relates to their identity development:

> *"The pronouns they/them filled a gap that I didn't know I was missing, and the term marimacha (dyke) was used against me when I didn't even know the meaning behind it. I even had resentment for the word because I thought it was something I was not, but now I can say that I am one, and no one can hurt me with that word again."*

This same respondent also reported feeling "trapped" by the gender binary, in that they were expected to dress in accordance with the sex assigned at birth. Despite their gender identity and desired expression.

Along the same lines, one participant reflected on stereotypical gender norms of masculinity he was subjected to as a gay Puerto Rican male: "And I think growing up, being queer, and around primarily folks of color, having to hide [my sexuality] and then also present more masculine. So, I always had my hoodie, I had my jeans a little dropped, [although] there are times where I want[ed] to wear joggers, and maybe heels, but I [couldn't] present in that way. Or I felt like I couldn't present in that way. So, this idea of masculinity, what it means to be a man, especially Puerto Rican culture, was really dominant." He also reflected on the pressure from family members to have a traditional family structure of his own:

> *"Having a kid is really critical still, to this day, my mom and my family is very, very much okay with my identity and they advocate for me in so many ways now, but still understand the pressure of what it feels like to be asked about a kid every call, like "Hey, when's this gonna happen? You're [age] now." And then not understanding how expensive the process is going to be for me. And how challenging it can be emotionally, physically; there's so many pieces that this idea of manhood, I think comes up for me often."*

Participants' narratives drew connections between the binary gendered Spanish language and social norms as they relate to gender identity and expression. While these narratives may not be unique to the experiences of being Latinx in the southern US, they were the most prominent descriptions shared by the focus group participants.

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"Geographical Exposure": Multi-Ethnic and Queer Intersections

What was unique to the multi-ethnic focus group participants was their varied experiences across different regions of the US. For example, one participant shared about the various places they have lived throughout their childhood and how it impacted their queer identity development: "I moved around a lot when I was growing up and I went to at least 34 different schools; I lost count of how many schools I actually went to. So, I think that's part of my culture of never rooting anywhere. And so it was always hard to grasp those relationships with people and have that trusting relationship and form those bonds. And so I think that's influenced me later on of not coming out as soon or as much." Other participants reflected on various experiences in different parts of the country. These types of narratives highlight how quantitative surveys fail to provide context or depth to the lived experiences of LGBTQ folks living in the southern US.

Findings: Overarching Themes

While there were similarities within each of the ethnic groups, there were also similarities across each of the ethnic groups. Themes expanded upon below include lack of diversity within Southern queer communities; lack of, and misrepresentation in the media; religion as both a sense of community and an oppressive tool; and different family values. An overview of the overarching themes is also outlined in Table 2.

"Assimilate to survive": A lack of diversity in Southern queer communities

Many of the participants shared about a lack of diversity in queer communities in the south. For example, "The overall LGBTQ community treats whiteness as the default, the "overall" community often means the spaces made by and for white queers with QPOC [queer people of color] being at best an afterthought." When asked to describe what the ideal Southern queer community looked like, one participant responded, "It's like that mythical place doesn't exist in the way we want it to." This same participant also reflected on the tension between their ethnic and queer identities and having to navigate those queer spaces: "There's a fear of always having to pick one over the other," and "I feel like you have to pick and choose what parts of your identity to represent." One online survey respondent shared this poignant message highlighting the difference between White-dominant queer spaces and those informally carved out for queer Black folks:

> *"The biggest difference is a relaxing of my nervous system, I don't have some part of my brain on alert searching for signs [that] things aren't actually safe for me and other QPOC. We have a much more communal solidarity compared to the individuality that drives white-catered spaces, we use familial terms of endearment our mothers and grandmothers would call us. There's more room for coexisting with masculine and feminine energies and labels within one person without necessarily denoting a nonbinary identity, we talk about shared experiences, and largest of all we feel the safety, warmth, and comfort of Blackness without fear of homophobia and transphobia and queerness without racism feeling a levity of soul nestled safely for once at the intersection of Blackness and queerness."*

This is a common narrative shared by individuals who hold more than one marginalized identity; the sense that they cannot navigate those spaces as their full, authentic selves. Another participant shared about their experience in entering predominately White queer spaces, describing a sense of a lack of belonging: "It's this idea that gayness is something you deserve. It's not something you are, it's something you have to earn under the White gaze." This poignant statement highlights the permeating effects of White individuals dominating queer spaces, which further alienates queer folks of color. Lastly, although this theme represents a common experience across each of the groups, some individuals chose to reflect on their communal interactions with other groups besides their own. A participant within the Latinx focus group shared about losing some of his Black queer friends due to a lack of inclusivity in queer spaces:

> *"I think Miami struggles with the Black queer community. I've had so many of my Black folks leave Miami, some of my closest friends because they just don't feel necessarily safe or a sense of belonging here. Even though Miami can be as diverse as it is, it's not as inclusive. It's very segregated in a lot of ways."*

That is to say, even within queer spaces that feel ethnically diverse, some individuals are cognizant of the fact that some ethnic groups may feel ostracized or like they do not belong. For example, one multi-ethnic survey respondent reported, "We are the culture. We are the ones all the other gays want to emulate but exclude at the same time," and, "We face a double rejection sometimes: rejection by our family and then rejection by the community-at-large for not fitting into the prototype. We have to create our own spaces since there aren't readily available ones for us." As such, these individuals are forced to assimilate in order to survive in these spaces. This leads to the next theme which further explicates how sometimes, mere representation is not enough.

"White voices at the forefront": (Mis)representation in the media

The media, including movies, television shows, and other marketing materials, was a common reference throughout each of the focus group interviews. Some participants felt accurately represented by certain media sources. A Black pansexual participant expressed the positive impact of the HBO show *The Wire* had on her sexual identity development:

> *"My first understanding that I was experiencing attraction different was literally a character on The Wire, the HBO show, in the character called "Snoop". Seeing that, I think really did a lot for me. I'm sure there were other representations, but that was the one that spoke to me because I was like, 'Wow, look at these different ways to exist as a queer person, especially as a Black queer woman.'"*

On the other hand, one participant reflected on the harm that misrepresentation in the media can have when persons are not portrayed in accordance with historical events, especially given that the media is a main source of information for a lot of folks:

> *"The Stonewall movie had a White male lead, showing that the uprising in New York had this White male that started it. And that's not true. Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, two trans women of color led that and again, history is being told in the wrong way, because that's how a lot of people learn their history through media and movies. So like, I feel like a lot of representation is truly missing."*

In this example, queer history was whitewashed in order to put White voices and narratives at the forefront, at the expense of queer persons of color and their contributions. Moreover, participants also reflected on the impact of harmful media sources that vilify or sought to facetiously

misrepresent queer people. One participant referenced the movie *Ace Ventura,* including reactions from his family members:

> *"I think how I saw trans folks in Ace Ventura, it was something nasty, it was something as just an "other". Again, something to be laughed at and hidden. So I think that was kind of my experience growing up and then everything I watched was validated by my family, so they would also laugh at those jokes or they would also laugh at those things."*

While some individuals were able to identify positive forms of media that positively impacted their identity development, others reflected on the harm of historical inaccuracies and media as a tool to further ostracize queer folks. Relatedly, some respondents in the open-response survey reported their lack of exposure to face-to-face spaces, which led them to pursue online LGBTQ communities in order to connect with others. Overall, the qualitative study revealed that queer folks are either underrepresented or misrepresented, in the media.

"A double-edged sword": Religion as a sense of community and an oppressive tool

Many individuals in each of the focus groups reflected on the complex relationship between queer southern communities and religious spaces. Some of them shared about how the communities of their ethnic group were centered around the Catholic church: "We grew up very Catholic. And I think that's how a lot of Filipino spaces are built, around the church. And so, as a built-in space, a lot of community and other things are revolved around that." Survey respondents also shared: "We are still expected to go to church or at least be religious in some ways," and, "We are so deeply connected to the church and are often involved within the same churches that condemn us." Another participant reinforced this idea by explaining the strength of religion, particularly in southern families and communities: "But the religiosity of the American South I think can touch us in particular ways because of how strongly religious identity is intertwined in our families and our communities." Others reinforced the above ideas, and also identified the church as a primary source of family and identity development, which was not welcoming or accepting of queer identities:

> *"Church replaced biological family as the center of our social lives and the source of identity and influence for who we were supposed to be. And certainly, for us, being queer in any way was not a part of the acceptable range of identities. It wasn't discussed at home at all."*

One participant, who moved from the northeast to the southeast, shared his experience with religion sort of "trumping" ethnicity, queerness, and other identities:

> *"Coming from the north to the south, it's a Bible Belt issue. We're dealing with religious factors here. So, it's a lot different now that I've left the north and come*

> *to the south, because I found that it doesn't matter what your ethnicity is. It's really the Bible Belt that we're dealing with."*

All in all, the impact of the religious south cannot be denied across the focus group participants shared experiences. Given that the church has provided a strong sense of community all while being used as an oppressive tool to limit the expression and acceptance of queer identities, it was described as a "double-edged sword" for queer folks of color in the south.

"Different family values": Collectivism & Ethnic Minority LGBTQ Individuals

The most consistent narrative across each of the ethnic minority groups was the theme of cultural collectivism. Collectivism is defined as a culture in which the well-being of the group takes priority over the well-being of its individual members (Baldwin & Hopkins, 1990; Gushue & Constantine, 2003). As such, within collectivistic cultures, individuals tend to value relationship dynamics despite individual needs or differences. One participant shared about the collectivism in Latinx cultures from the perspective of his coming out process:

> *"That's the thing that transcends so many Latin American, Spanish cultures, just that love is really deep. Like no matter what, I knew my father was gonna love me, and I knew that, but I was willing to hide [my sexuality] for so long. I came out at 21 and I had to hide that because I wasn't afraid of not being loved but a feeling like an 'other'. But I just knew that that deep attachment wouldn't go away."*

Moreover, while mainstream queer culture spotlights the narrative of individuals being outcasted or cut off from their families following coming out, some reflected on the differences between themselves and their White counterparts:

> *"I feel that for a lot of my friends who are White and queer, there's a lack of a deep attachment to their families. Like it kind of goes both ways, when their family's just like, 'Oh, you came out as queer. So you've gotta go.' And in my Hispanic family, that would never happen. Like no matter how bad things got, you just don't cut family off like that. That will not happen. I've not seen that happen."*

Another cornerstone of collectivistic cultures involves multigenerational homes in which it is not uncommon for a great-grandparent to have a close bond with their grandchildren and great-grandchildren under the same roof. A participant in the Asian/Asian American focus group shared:

> *"I think our family structures are legit different. I think a lot of White families like to do that, 'Once you're 18 you move out' and everyone has a nuclear family. Well, a lot of Asian families and other families of color are multigenerational, kind of like my great aunts were my babysitters, et cetera."*

That same participant also reflected on the interconnectedness of Filipino culture. This interconnectedness meant that if they had an issue with one family member, that would also cause a ripple effect for them to have issues with other family members. As such, they navigated potential rifts by negotiating and being strategic about what to talk about, and with whom. "I just don't want to be cut off from so many people, like, it would be different, if it was just my parents, but someone would say something to someone else. And then that would cut off relationships, with my nephews, or like other people who I know would love me regardless." All in all, participants in each of the ethnic minority focus groups reported more collectivistic dynamics in their familial relationships. These relationships were represented by in-depth love, connection, and sometimes having to strategize in order to maintain the order of the group, which they reported as being different from what they've learned from their White queer friends and acquaintances.

Conclusion & Future Directions

The Southern Survey focus groups were conducted to help fill in the gaps from the Southern Survey which resulted in a predominately white participant pool based on quantitative items. The research team sought to learn more about the lived experiences of LGBTQ people of color living in the south by tapping further into the Southern Survey questions and allowing individuals to expand upon their responses in qualitative formats (i.e., focus groups and open-response surveys). Themes included within groups topics (i.e., unique to each ethnic group) as well as overarching themes (i.e., consistencies across each ethnic group). Overall, responses reflected the need for more mixed methodology approaches in research due to the richness of the data gathered from the focus groups and the complexity of their responses. As one participant stated regarding their filling out the quantitative survey:

> *"Sometimes it doesn't actually represent you, depending on if you're trying to choose something from a list of values on there, versus something that maybe you don't fit into one of those particular values on there and say, maybe this doesn't actually represent me. If there's not an option to fill in the blank and provide additional context around that; people might not feel that [the response] accurately represents them."*

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Table 1

Within-Group Themes

Ethnic Group	Theme	Example(s)
Asian	Inter-ethnic tensions	Tensions between South-Asians and East-Asians, caste-ism, colorism
	Historical roots in LGBTQ identities	*Kama Sutra* (ancient Indian text with a chapter on homosexual behavior), Ardhanariswara (androgynous Hindu deity), asog (cross-dressing Filipino spiritual leaders)
Black	Nature and spirituality	North vs. south
	Re-writing anti-LGBTQ narratives	Positive coming out stories, strengths-based lenses
Latinx	Gender-binary language and norms	Traditionally feminine and masculine nouns and descriptors, expectations of cis-heterosexual family planning, and gender stereotypes
Multi-ethnic	Regional differences	Northeastern US as more gender- and sexuality-diverse and accepting than the Southern US

Table 2

Overarching Themes

Theme	Example(s)
Lack of diversity in queer communities	White dominant spaces, lack of within-group diversity, "assimilating to survive"
(Mis)representation in the media	Lack of representation in film and television, or harmful misrepresentation
Religion as an oppressive tool	Southern "Bible belt" and the norm of universally enforced anti-LGBTQ ideals, church as a source of community and social support
Collectivism	Interdependence on family, multigenerational households, non-stereotypical experiences with coming out, "pack mentality"

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