

“I Want To Be Free The Lebanese Way”: An Interpretative Phenomenology Examination of
Lebanese American Queer Youth’s Experiences of Family Secrecy

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ABSTRACT

Limited knowledge is available around the experiences of queer Lebanese American young adults, specifically around family secrecy around their sexuality. This gap in the marriage and family therapy research has significant implications, and erases the experiences of queer Arab young adults around disclosure of their sexual identity. This study examined the experiences of 19 Lebanese American young adults navigating secrecy around their sexual identity. Research questions presented were the following: a) How do queer Lebanese American young adults experience family secrecy surrounding their sexual identity and relationship? b) How do queer Lebanese American young adults interpret the process of family secrecy and are impacted by family secrecy? c) What are queer Lebanese American young adults' experiences of shifts in boundaries and alliances as a result of family secrecy? The study utilized structural family therapy or SFT (Minuchin, 1974) as the theoretical framework to guide the conceptualization of family dynamics and how they are impacted by the family secrecy surrounding the participants’ sexuality. Findings illustrated the complexity of the family secrecy process, which is fraught with complex emotions, which resulted in a decision-making process around who to include in the secret, who to keep out of the secrecy, as well as strategies employed to maintain the secrecy and protect the family members from the implications of disclosure. Participants described the process as stressful and signifying shame around their sexual identities, and feeling as though their two identities, Lebanese and queer, were conflicting

and could not coexist together. Findings also demonstrated the family unit's resilience and collectivism through participants relying on their family members, particularly mothers and siblings, to navigate this complex landscape. The findings have research and clinical implications, emphasizing the need to extend the discourse around sexual identity and disclosure to include Lebanese and Middle Eastern families within the field of family science.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Limited knowledge is available around the experiences of queer Lebanese American young adults, specifically around family secrecy surrounding their sexuality. Past studies have focused on the experience of queer White individuals disclosing to their families, but very little has been known about the experience of Middle Eastern and Arab queer youth. The purpose of this study was to experience the emotions and meaning made around the secrecy, as well as the secrecy's impact on the family relationships and structure. The research questions presented were a) How do queer Lebanese American young adults experience family secrecy surrounding their sexual identity and relationship? b) How do queer Lebanese American young adults interpret the process of family secrecy and are impacted by family secrecy? c) What are queer Lebanese American young adults' experiences of shifts in boundaries and alliances as a result of family secrecy? Based on an analysis of 19 interviews, structural family therapy was used as a theory to frame the findings and help understand the impact of secrecy on the family relationships and structure, as well as the meaning and emotion experienced as a result of the secrecy. Overall, analysis revealed several key findings. The experience of disclosure and secrecy around sexuality is highly relational, in order to remain connected to their families. The experience of secrecy is not "all good" or "all bad". Strategies around secrecy were adopted by both queer Arab young adults and their families, and mothers or mother figures in particular played a crucial role in dictating the way secrecy was navigated, who was included in the secrecy process, as well as

co-creating strategies with queer young adults on how to deal with extended family. This study has important clinical and research implications, in continuing to expand the conversation around disclosure and queerness, as well as amplifying the voices of Lebanese American young adults and their families.

Dedication

To my family and loves: Austin, Roula, Nabil and Yara. Thank you for always being there for me, for supporting me just the way I needed. I couldn't have done this without you. I am who I am today because of you.

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Chapter I: INTRODUCTION

Arab American ethnic identity appears to be influenced by multiple factors, and the complexities it involves sometimes lead not only to a paradoxical positioning within U.S. society (Naber, 2000), but also has an impact on Arab American family dynamics. Naber (2000) has argued that four critical paradoxes shape Arab American identity development. First, Arab Americans belong to complex and diverse communities but are often portrayed in a monolithic way in popular media. Second, Arab Americans are often simultaneously characterized as White Americans and as non-White Americans (Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007). Lastly, the interaction between Arab American religious identity and U.S. racial identity helps to produce a unique and sometimes conflicting configuration. Naber (2000) also has noted that the events of 9/11 have impacted the perception of a collective ethnic identity for many Arab Americans. Triggered by these events, issues of xenophobia, racism, and stereotypes have interacted, and have served to reinforce positive and negative attitudes about Arab Americans that are already present in U.S. society.

Youth experiencing acculturation stress combined with their identity formation have been shown to be at a high risk for depression and anxiety (Romero & Roberts, 2003). Indeed, recent research has suggested that, like other immigrant youth, Arab American youth experience significant stress associated with acculturation (Ahmed, Kia-Keating, & Tsai, 2011). This acculturation process has been found to be particularly challenging for those who experience discrimination or negative stereotypes (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). In fact, their ethnic identity development can be a challenge due to both perceived discrimination and competing cultural demands (Sirin et.al, 2013). Discrimination for immigrant youth has been shown to lead to high levels of acculturative stress, internalizing symptoms, and overall lower life satisfaction

and self-esteem (Lahti, 2000). Thus, Arab American youth and families could be considered a highly vulnerable and underserved group in terms of accessing mental health care (Goforth et.al, 2016), and they are wholly underrepresented in mental health research. They seem to be at increased risk for physical and psychological health problems, due to their exposure to pre- and post- migration stressors (Jamil et.al, 2009; Arnetz et.al, 2010). Pre-migration stressors are due largely to unrest in the Middle East, including exposure to prolonged war and political conflict, whereas post-migration stressors include language and cultural barriers.

Adding to the complexity of aforementioned stressors, queer Arab American youth tend to experience an additional layer of discrimination regarding their sexual identities, both within and outside of their communities. The queer narrative as it stands remains Westernized and focused mainly on privileged, White individuals and families rather than encompassing other cultures (van Eeden Moorefield et.al, 2018). The dominant research narrative tends to reproduce the closetedness/outness binary that suggests outness as the most positive outcome, which does not always capture the complex experiences and cultural considerations of Middle Eastern populations (Seidman, 1994).

In fact, secrecy can be a protective strategy that emerging adults who are not quite launched from their families may use to navigate this complex process; by exercising control over their privacy concerning their sexual identity, emerging adults can also preserve their close intimate relationships. A manifestation of this agency is *secrecy*, which is the control of what information is withheld from, traded, and shared with family members and extended kin. According to Imber-Black (1993), secrets are a systemic phenomenon that define the boundaries of who is “in” and who is “out”. Therefore, the question of who knows the secret and who does not can reveal a lot about family dynamics. In distinguishing between secrecy and privacy,

Imber-Black (1998) asserted that privacy did not have an impact on emotional and mental health in the way that secrecy could. Since privacy and secrecy are culturally defined, Imber-Black admitted that the distinction is not quite as clear cut. Overall, Imber-Black asserted that secrecy is considered unhealthy in contrast to privacy, and that some secrets reduced trust, created coalitions, and caused stress on the family.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate and describe the essence of the experience of family secrecy for Lebanese American queer youth. The focus on Lebanese Americans rather than Arab Americans has partly to do with the fact that the largest percentage of Arab Americans happen to be Lebanese Christians, followed by Egyptians and Syrians (Ajrouch, 2000; Rose, 2002; Brittingham & de la Cruz, 2005; de la Cruz & Brittingham, 2003). In addition, Lebanese Americans provide family science researchers with a unique opportunity to examine the numerous contradictions that exist within the larger Lebanese cultural narrative and what those contradictions mean for queer Lebanese American youth. For instance, Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, is seen as the most progressive city in the Middle East and a blooming gay paradise, which reinforces its status as the “Paris of the Middle East” (Moussawi, 2013). However, in Beirut, Christianity and Islam as practiced still views queerness as a threat to children, to religion, and to heterosexual marriage (Qubaiova, 2019). Due to the fact that the practices of Christian and Muslim religious groups dominate Lebanese cultural narratives, queerness is framed as “unnatural.” Violence and discrimination that are rooted in homophobia and heteronormativity remain a constant threat to queer Lebanese people. Beirut is therefore uniquely positioned as both progressive and conservative (thus, discriminatory) to queer people.

Guided by the theory underpinning structural family therapy (Minuchin, 1994), this study will be conducted using interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2007). I believe IPA would be the best method for several reasons. First, since there is a gap not only in the marriage and family therapy literature, but also in the family science in general regarding this topic and more importantly, this population, it is then beneficial to conduct an interpretative phenomenology study first, to bring a fuller, richer understanding of the experiences of queer Lebanese American youth. Second, the overall goal of the study would be to shed light on the lived experiences of queer Lebanese American youth navigating family secrecy. Given the focus on language and the essence of the experience, IPA is an excellent candidate for trying to capture their lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Furthermore, the nature of IPA methodology gives the participant control over the interview process (Smith & Osborn, 2008), since it is first and foremost interested in their experiences and the meaning they make out of them. It is hoped that this study will be critical in laying the groundwork for future research in this area and population.

The goal is to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 Lebanese American emerging young adult participants identifying as queer; a typical size for a phenomenology study (Morse, 2000; 2001). Some of the research questions for this study focus on the content of the secrecy and messaging embedded, while others focus on the structural component of the family shifts in boundaries, alliances and connection per structural theory. The research questions are:

1. How do Lebanese American emerging adults currently or in a prior intimate partnership with a person of the same or different gender experience family secrecy surrounding their sexual identity and relationship?

2. How do Lebanese American emerging adults interpret messaging embedded in the relational process of family secrecy?
3. What are Lebanese American emerging young adults' experiences of shifts in boundaries and alliances as a result of family secrecy?

Thus, the significance of the study is multifold. First, the population at hand, Lebanese American queer youth, is not prominent in family science and mental health research (Goforth et.al, 2016). Conducting this study would shed light on the experiences of Lebanese American queer youth and how they navigate family secrecy in the context of their sexual identity. Second, this research may help practitioners develop a multi-layered understanding of Lebanese American families and their experience of secrecy. Third, the study would aim to reevaluate the utilization, function and process of family secrecy in the context of Lebanese American families.

Chapter II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I will review the extant literature on family secrecy, disclosure of sexual identity, and identify gaps in the family secrecy and disclosure literature. Then, I will delve into Middle Eastern families, before specifically diving into Lebanese families and the intersectionality between queer and Arab identities. Finally, I also will discuss the theoretical framework that guides this study.

Reviewing Family Secrecy

First, I will begin with an overview of the family secrecy literature within family science, detailing the functions of secrecy as well as its impact on the family dynamics according to various foundational researchers (Imber-Black, 1993; Karpel, 1980; Vangelisti, 1994).

Family Secrecy

Secrecy within families involves intentional concealment of information by one or more family members from others who may be impacted by it (Bok, 1982). Secrecy functions primarily as defense against being stigmatized or rejected by others; the primary motivation is therefore to protect one's reputation, or one's relationship. Reasons for secrecy seem to therefore be primarily defensive and protective, rather than non-defensive (Piazza & Bering, 2010). As Karpel (1980) mentioned, the primary function of secrecy is protective, but the real question is "who is protected, and from what?" Karpel (1980) noted that family secrets specifically can take on different forms, depending on how the secret was disseminated throughout the family. One form occurred when the whole family was aware of the secret and withheld it from non-family members, such as in the case of one family member struggling with substance abuse. Another form occurred when family members kept the secret from other family members, otherwise

described as “intra-family secrets.” These secrets are ones where some family members know, but others do not (Karpel, 1980). A final form is when a secret is kept from the family, where individual family members may engage in activities that they decide to conceal from their families. While this secret may only be known by one family member, it does affect the relationships between family members, even if indirectly. Karpel (1980) stated that the expression “living a lie” adequately captured one of the consequences of maintaining the family secret. Some family members might know of the secret while others do not. It is clear in these situations that “what we do not know does hurt us” (Karpel, 1980, p. 4).

Functions of Secrecy

An important component to consider is the function of family secrecy (Vangelisti, 1994). There can be varying motivations to keeping secrets within the family. One identified motivation is creating and maintaining intimacy, such as using those secrets to confirm the uniqueness and closeness of the family. Another is to build and maintain group cohesiveness, which enables individuals to become part of the group through rules, traditions and rituals that are not discussed outside the family. Secrets also often function to protect the family structure and prevent the family from falling apart. Another function of family secrecy is a less extreme version of the formerly listed function, which is to protect family members from social disapproval or rejection if the secret itself is perceived as inconsistent with the family’s desired self-image.

Impact on Family

Both the form and the function of the secret can have an impact on the individuals involved in maintaining the family secret. Vangelisti (1994) hypothesized that if the whole family was involved in the secret, particularly to maintain family intimacy and cohesion, the

secret was most likely to have a positive impact on individuals involved. Likewise, if some individuals within the family are part of the secret while others are not, maintaining the secret can prove to be taxing and stressful. Karpel (1980) added that the cognitive effort to maintain a secret can be extremely stressful and can lead the individual to dwell on the secret far more than they otherwise would, particularly in situations where only select individuals are aware of the family secret. Moreover, Vangelisti (1994) categorized family secrets into three broad categories: taboos, rule violations and conventional secrets. Taboo topics were often a secret that involved the whole family, and less often solely an individual. Taboo topics included marital difficulties, substance use, finances, mental health, and abuse. When taboo topics were “intra-family”, meaning when they were held by some family members from others, this led to the most stress on the family relationships. Rule violations were secrets that broke the rules that the family tried to enforce. A few examples of these secrets were premarital pregnancy, cohabitation, drinking or partying, sexual relationships. Rule violation secrets were the opposite of taboo secrets, as in most frequently held by individuals and least often preserved by the entire family. Finally, conventional secrets were deemed inappropriate to discuss with non-family members, such as death, religion, traditions and anecdotes and dating partners. Vangelisti (1994) stated as a motivation to maintain the secret was to protect the self or the family from evaluation. Finally, Vangelisti (1994) emphasized that while individual’s perceptions of family secrecy were important since it had an impact on family relationships, that data might differ from actual events.

Revealing Family Secrets

Vangelisti et.al (2001) is a noteworthy study to consider due to its foundational nature; however the study suffers from various limitations that I will outline further down. Vangelisti

et.al (2001) found several reasons for revealing a family secret in a study involving undergraduates in a southwestern university. The description of the sample lacked significant demographics besides gender. Two hundred thirty-four participants were female, while one hundred and nineteen were men; the average age was 20.25. Another limitation was that the questionnaire items and prompts related to secrecy were hypothetical by nature. The findings were the following: first, an individual may choose to disclose a secret when the cost of keeping the secret becomes too great, such as when it is causing great psychological and emotional stress. Second, revealing the secret also was likely when the individual carrying the secret perceived the potential confidante as likely to respond positively; closeness to said confidante increased the likelihood of revealing the secret. Confidantes were assessed on multiple levels, such as likelihood to be judgmental or open, discreet, and helpful in their suggestions on problems associated with the secret. Third, if the outcome of the disclosure was perceived as positive in its impact on family members, the likelihood of disclosing naturally increased. Revealing the secret could provide emotional support, or a solution to problems associated with the secret. Fourth, a conversation providing context for an opening could also lead to disclosure; in that sense, individuals often responded to another person's disclosure with their own. Finally, if disclosure itself may lead to a reward, it becomes more likely to take place. This reward could be in the form of empathetic response, social validation, social status, or in more extreme cases, separation from family members if these individuals became disillusioned with their family (Vangelisti et.al, 2001). The findings of Vangelisti et.al's study (2001) were the following: first, despite previous findings showing that *trust* and relational intimacy predicted self-disclosure (see, e.g., Derlega et al., 1993), *relational security* in and of itself, was not a major predictor of people's tendency to reveal their family secrets. Follow up analyses suggested that instead, this criterion

operated as a moderator for four other criteria (*intimate exchange, exposure, permission, and never*) in predicting secret-telling. In each case, the more individuals reported that relational security would be necessary for them to divulge their secret, the less likely the other criteria were to predict the chances people would tell. These findings suggest that, at least in some cases, relational security may serve as a minimum criterion for revealing family secrets. Second, having an *important reason* was a significant consideration that appeared to supersede other considerations. Third, people's perceptions of the secret mattered and influenced what criteria were weighed when thinking about revealing a secret. For instance, if participants saw the secret as part of their identity, then they were likely to consider the nature of their relationship with the other person before telling their secret, and were unlikely to reveal their secret just because it fit into the conversation. Along those lines, if participants felt that their secret was highly negative, they reported that they would have to feel more secure about their relationship with the person they might tell, and that they would only tell if they felt the person would accept them or if the person revealed similar information to them. An interesting finding was that seeing the secret as negative generated more criteria that needed to be met in order to reveal it than identifying with the secret. Therefore, the impact of the secret on the relationships of the participants was just as, if not more important in predicting secret-telling than identifying with the secret. Fourth, *perceived intimacy* of the secret appears to significantly discourage secret-telling, and deactivate a number of criteria that would otherwise make revealing the secret acceptable. Last but not least, *psychological closeness* to a potential disclosure target made participants more likely to consider a number of criteria before making a decision to reveal the secret. Therefore, while closeness to a family member created a context for disclosure, it also led participants to weigh more criteria prior to deciding to reveal.

The secrets that served the function of defense or maintenance of the family were the ones that were least likely to be disclosed, even if the content of the secret itself was positive, or if the secret was not a major part of the family members' identity. Therefore, the negative consequences of revealing the family secret overshadowed both the topic of the secret and the family member's identification with the secret. Perhaps, the most strikingly consistent finding is the determination of family members to keep secrets that helped them avoid negative evaluations, conflict, stress, and overall negative outcomes. Furthermore, the person they chose to disclose the family secret to did not necessarily have to be someone with whom they were in frequent contact. Rather, the confidante was often someone they saw themselves as close or similar to (Vangelisti et.al, 2001). A noteworthy limitation of the study was the fact that hypothetical criteria evaluated in the context of family secrecy may not be the same as the ones used when facing this situation in reality.

Past research has shown that maintaining secrecy within families has been emotionally taxing, leading to confusion, anxiety, isolation and potential family dysfunction (Berger & Paul, 2008). Furthermore, the presence of a secret creates barriers and boundaries between secret holders and those not privy to the secret, which impacts the family system as a whole (Imber-Black, 1998; Karpel, 1980). Systemically, secrecy can create "cliques" and alliances, as well as emotional distancing as a function of the silence between family members (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997).

While most systemic conceptualization of family secrecy highlights the negative impact a secret may have on the family structure, a new perspective has recently emerged where the focus shifted to the dynamic process of disclosure, rather than on secrecy itself. This perspective encourages the understanding of disclosure as an ongoing, dynamic process, rather than a unique

instance (Indekeu et al., 2013; Rober et al., 2012). It also aims to both highlight the importance of the systemic perspective and the danger of the toxicity of secrecy within families, while also emphasizing the importance of creating a safe space to discuss sensitive issues within families, which is not necessarily synonymous to full disclosure (Rober & Rosenblatt, 2015). In fact, theorists have often called for the need to rethink the “Western way” of disclosure (Rousseau et al., 2013, p. 129), and instead embrace the cultural variations in intrafamily communication (Dalgaard & Montgomery, 2015; DeHaene et.al, 2012).

Specific to LGBTQ secrets, Watson (2014) coined the concept of a “family closet” (p. 105) in a study looking at bisexuality within families. The “family closet” refers to the varying ways in which secrecy and disclosure are managed in a family context. The sample consisted of 47 participants between ages 19 and 67, of which 15 identified as male, 15 identified as female, and 17 identified as sex/gender-diverse persons. Various terms were used to describe participants’ sexuality, such as “bisexual,” “queer”, or individually chosen terms. A key relational process in the “family closet” is the construction and maintenance of family secrets. Like Joos and Broad (2007), Watson (2014) found that the family closet occurred in two ways: withholding information from family members, as well as keeping information within the family from outsiders. As Watson eloquently put it, “the family closet is drawn in complex ways that sees it as a source of both sanctuary and censorship depending upon family dynamics” (p. 107). For participants in her study, the process of contemplating disclosure was often fraught with apprehension of rejection due to their conservative upbringing. Of participants who disclosed their orientation to their families, some of them were met with silent denial on the matter of their bisexuality, in what Watson describes as a “protective cloak of silence” (p. 112). Participants alternatively sought refuge in refusing to broach the topic again. In other cases, disclosure was

partial and selective. For example, while siblings were sometimes let into the secret, parents were often left in the dark. Another central theme that emerged from the study was the use of secrecy and silence as a strategy to navigate the sensitive topic of sexual orientation, therefore transforming it into a coping tool. For some families, the secrecy was reconstructed in a way that changed bisexuality into something unspoken; participants stated that “we just don’t talk about it” (Watson, 2014, p. 115). The secret, therefore, is given a form in which the content is hidden from view and surrounded by shame, guilt or judgment. Clearly, the process of family secrecy and disclosure is a complex one.

Notes on Family Secrecy Literature

Critique of early, foundational studies. Regarding the family secrecy literature, there are a number of gaps to note. For instance, there is a great dearth in the literature about family secrecy as a phenomenon. The only notable foundational studies addressing family secrecy directly date as far back as 1980 (Karpel, 1980; Imber-Black, 1993; Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti et.al, 2001). Second, lack of demographic data is blatant in early publications: the authors mention little beyond gender and average age within the sample. Furthermore, the samples used are convenience samples, such as undergraduate students (Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti et.al, 2001). This leads us to believe that the samples used were not diverse, which is a major limitation in these studies, as we have established that family dynamics such as secrecy can be highly dependent on culture. Furthermore, these studies have asserted based on these samples that secrecy topics such as sexual identity are just as likely to be revealed as a secret topic like illness in the family (Vangelisti et.al, 2001); this finding has also been contradicted by later studies and may be indicative of lack of attention to cultural nuances (Watson, 2014; Jhang, 2018). There exists little research on non-White samples, which calls for the need to expand the

literature to include more diversity. family secrecy itself, rather than the disclosure process with the objective of being out.

Focus on Disclosure in LGBTQ Family Process. Disclosure literature has been the subject of increased attention from researchers that hope to examine the difficulty and complexity of coming out to family. As mentioned above, coming-out studies have focused on: (1) predictors of disclosure of one's sexual orientation (Heatherington & Lavner; 2008); (2) parental reactions to disclosure (LaSala, 2000; Merighi & Grimes, 2000; Rossi, 2010; Scherrer et.al, 2015); and (3) psychological, interpersonal, social, and health implications of disclosure (D'Amico et.al, 2015; Meyer, 2003; Needham & Austin, 2010). These studies have led to various conceptualizations of coming out, such as acknowledging one's sexual orientation to oneself (Baptist & Allen, 2008) or disclosing to others (Grafsky et al., 2018; Legate et.al, 2012; Merighi & Grimes; 2000; Rossi, 2010; Valentine et.al, 2003). Researchers took it further and went in depth into the variations and nuances within the outness process. For example, Morris's (1997) contribution was to crystallize the coming out process as multidimensional, and dependent upon multiple factors such as religion, culture, race and ethnicity. Orne (2011) reframed coming out as "strategic outness" (p. 7), which defies the notion of a set end point to coming out. Instead, he introduced the notion that individuals may live both in and outside the closet, and therefore manage their identities according to the different social contexts. Denes and Afifi (2014) discussed the "coming out again" phenomenon, in which individuals may find the need to come out a second time to their family members depending upon their own understanding of their sexual identity shifting, or their family's reactions.

Although coming out has been expanded upon and studied extensively in the past decades, several important aspects of coming out require further investigation. Similarly to the

family secrecy literature, most of the coming-out literature relies primarily on White gay men and lesbians' stories embedded in Western culture and contexts (e.g., Goodrich, 2009; Phillips & Ancis, 2008). We return again to the call to include different cultures in our samples to understand the role that culture plays in the strategies surrounding disclosure of sexual identity. Furthermore, Jhang's (2018) study on a Taiwanese LGBTQ youth sample navigating coming out within their families included a focus on "open secrecy" as a scaffolding strategy (p.9). Jhang (2018) brought up a crucial point that another main gap in the literature thus far has been the lack of data on disclosure to family members that does not ultimately result in "being out" as a finite, end goal. The end result does not always have to result in outness, nor is it always a linear, binary process, a criticism that is later emphasized in queer Arab literature (Georgis, 2013).

Middle Eastern Families and Lebanese Families

In this section, I will review the existing literature on Middle Eastern culture and families at large, before diving deeper into Lebanese culture specifically, as well as the existing research and literature on queer Arabs.

Middle Eastern Families

Although Middle Easterners are a diverse group, with their own complex histories and cultural nuances constituting within-group variability, there are some common cultural characteristics that are shared by all. Essentially, family plays a central role in their lives (Abudabbeh, 1996; Haboush, 2007). Family obligations are often given priority, and there is a high level of family interdependence. Parental involvement is high and remains so for the remainder of the children's lives, similarly to other collectivistic cultures. For instance, in more traditional families, children do not leave the home until they are married (Haboush, 2007). Until

then, they remain under the parents' responsibility. Furthermore, the concept of family extends beyond nuclear family, and includes extended family as well. Family goals are prioritized over individual goals and desires. Respect for elders is expected, and there is a clear hierarchy within the family. Most relevant to this research, privacy in particular is paramount to Arab families, as it is crucial to maintaining the honor and good name of the family (Abudabbeh, 1996).

Lebanese Families. *Sharaf* (honor) as well as *Ayb* (shame) are crucial concepts in Arab culture, and by extension within Lebanese culture as well. Due to the collectivistic nature of these societies, exposure towards others is important. This, paired with the greater emphasis on the group rather than on the individual, leads to a greater focus on shame within Arab, and specifically Lebanese families. In contrast, Lebanon seems to contain a greater degree of personal freedom compared to other Arab countries (Haboush, 2005). A big difference seems to be the overwhelming amount of Christian population within the country, which leads to stronger ties to the West. In fact, Western influence can be primarily found through Western and European schools founded in Lebanon, as well as Western businesses. A variety of different cultural and religious groups coexist within Lebanon, which can all have a set of different values depending on where they lie on the Christian/Western and Arab/Islamic spectrum. Therefore, values and identity are closely tied to religion and family, rather than to an overall sense of nationalism (Haddad, 2002; Hofman & Shahin, 1989).

Another factor to keep in mind is that the largest percentage of Arab Americans happen to be Lebanese Christians, followed by Egyptians and Syrians (Ajrouch, 2000; Rose, 2002; Brittingham & de la Cruz, 2005; de la Cruz & Brittingham, 2003). Most Arab Americans are second and third-generation, which points to a certain degree of acculturation in the West. In comparison to other immigrants, Arab Americans tend to have a higher level of income and

education, which allows for an easier assimilation and adaptation to Western culture (Kulczycki & Lobo, 2002). To add an additional layer of complexity, many Arab Christians have identified more strongly with Western culture than with Arab culture, which they associate with Islam (Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001). In Lebanon particularly, this has occurred due to the French rule between 1920 and 1946, and the subsequent French protection of the Maronites (Mackey, 1991). It is clear then that religion and family structure are generally considered two main pillars of Arab culture (Dwairy & Van Sickle, 1996). The importance of religion and family structure cannot be understated. For this reason, taking into account degree of acculturation and identification with Western culture is crucial in understanding what influences queer Lebanese Americans to selectively disclose, or maintain the secret. In fact, numerous studies in collectivistic societies have found that the interplay between secrecy and selective disclosure was primarily centered on maintaining family ties and preserving the status quo in the family (Jhang, 2018; Georgis, 2013; McCormick, 2006), and that the ultimate goal was in fact not disclosure, but preserving stable family relationships through a scaffolding process. As noted by Jhang (2018), “explicit disclosure is not a prerequisite to a reconciled expectation for some; rather, knowing when and how to slowly inch forward or back away in a tacit manner may help maintain stable family relationships” (p.172).

While violence against LGBTQ population continues within the US and across the world, its manifestations vary widely across cultures and in different societies. For Lebanese queer youth, a tight knit community in a small country, negotiating sexual identities takes place under a variety of local and geopolitical tensions (Georgis, 2013). For instance, the Lebanese penal code contains Article 534 which punishes “sexual intercourse contrary to nature” with up to a year of imprisonment, according to Helem, a Lebanese organization dedicated to fighting for LGBTQ

individuals' human rights in Lebanon (Dib et.al, 2020). Even though enforcement of this law is limited and Lebanon is considered more accepting of sexual rights than the rest of the Arabic-speaking world, the cultural, legal, and financial implications such as losing their health insurance or job, remain relevant (Dib et.al, 2020). In fact, this law has been enthusiastically wielded to persecute LGBT people, often affecting particularly vulnerable groups including transgender women and Syrian refugees. Therefore, Beirut presents an interesting case in the Arab world where, on one hand, it is being hailed as the “new Provincetown” of the Arab Middle East (Healy, 2009), especially in the perception of its “openness to homosexuality” and primarily due to the somewhat open gay and lesbian events, bars, clubs and an LGBT travel agency (Moussawi, 2013). On the other hand, stories of crackdowns, arrests and anal probes are not unheard of, and they especially target individuals or groups of people who already occupy marginalized positions in society, most notably, refugees and migrant workers (Makarem, 2011).

As Georgis (2013) stated, “queer Arab becoming is postcolonial: mixed, completely hybrid, and unfinished” (p. 3). In contrast to some Western narratives that hopes to overcome shame, the Arab queer community seeks to recreate itself *through* shame. In fact, for many Lebanese queer youth, the price of coming out is often the loss of family ties and belonging, a sacrifice many are unwilling to make (Georgis, 2013). There are very limited sources on non-heterosexual sexualities in the Middle East, particularly among women. To different degrees, sexual identity for Arabs is a painful concept, whether abroad or in their homes. This is compounded by the lack of Arabic expressions within that language, which makes queer people in Lebanon more likely to resort to English or French to explain or express their identity, where those words exist more freely and where sexual identity is visible and tangible. It is therefore becoming harder for queer Arabs to conceptualize sexuality outside of Western constructs such

as LGBTQ and pride (Ibish, 2001). There is a collective queer narrative and community in Lebanon emerging from the challenges of having to grapple, much like their Western counterparts, with cultural censure, social repression, and collective suffering, that is also compounded by an additional layer of discrimination and racism that Arab Americans experience in the United States (Ibish, 2001; 2003).

Queer Arab Emerging Adults

While the coming out narrative in Western societies has driven forward the pursuit of LGBTQ rights, it has also been critiqued by queer theorists for representing namely privileged, white LGBTQ individuals. This narrative tends to reproduce the closetedness/outness binary, which does not always capture the complex experience of non-white, non-middle class, non-Western populations (Seidman, 1994). Therefore, it tends to have an undertone that suggests that the coming out of queers of color represents them stepping out of the shadows of their oppressive and traditional cultures (Ahmed, 2011, p. 131; Cantu, 2009). In order to capture the experiences of queer youth of color, particularly within the Lebanese culture, it is then essential to abandon the binary lens of coming out as being an expression of authenticity and freedom, and to incorporate multiple elements such as gender, class, as well as religion to understand decisions surrounding coming out, or in some situations, not coming out (Georgis, 2013).

As mentioned previously, shame is a central piece of Lebanese culture, and the word “*Ayb*” is used conversationally to represent what is deemed wrong or inappropriate by society. For many Lebanese individuals, fear of shaming the family in the eyes of others, especially the eyes of the extended family, seems to be more powerful than religious forces. Therefore, as

Georgis (2013) stated, “the fear of social retribution and ostracization in a culture that intensely values family ties and religious/sectarian loyalty is the emotional reality for most Arabs” (p. 12).

Unfortunately, in most of the literature surrounding families and queer youth, Arab families are often left out of the narrative, which leaves out an important piece of the puzzle. In a culture where shame is such a powerful dynamic, navigating self-disclosure of sexual identities around family and friends becomes a complex process that may differ from the experiences of white, Euro-American LGBTQ youth. These additional layers of complexity have yet to be studied in the family therapy literature, which silences the voices of the Lebanese queer youth and their experiences. In addition, the various systemic ongoing changes both within the Lebanese society and across the world create a backdrop that informs researchers of how Lebanese families are making sense of non-heterosexual identities. This lies within changing narratives on a legal, societal and political level and leads to a continuous pull between disclosure and secrecy for many LGBTQ youth, as they fight to maintain their family ties while attempting to express their identity authentically.

Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical framework adopted in this research will be Structural Family Therapy (SFT) by Salvador Minuchin (1974), which touches on the invisible rules, hierarchies, coalitions, boundaries and power dynamics that exist within a family system. I will first examine the various processes outlined in Structural Family Therapy, before connecting these processes with the family secrecy phenomenon.

According to Minuchin, family dysfunction is determined by its reaction to various stressors, a reaction which depends on how clear and appropriate the boundaries within the

system are (Minuchin, 1974). Structural family therapy focuses on the covert rules and interactional patterns that make up the family structure, and are not usually explicitly stated (Minuchin, 1974). These rules and patterns are set through interactions and communication, both overt and covert. Structural family therapy is particularly salient here due to its attentiveness to culture, which is acknowledged to impact the family's interaction and transactional patterns (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). This is crucial as we attempt to understand the way family secrecy is experienced by Lebanese queer youth within their family and their culture. In this particular case, the stressor would be the Lebanese youth's queer identity or them engaging in a same-sex relationship, due to the continued taboo nature of queer sexual identity in Lebanese culture. A structural approach would pay attention to context as well as culture, in an attempt to understand the system fully.

Another concept in the theory is boundaries within the various subsystems in the family. Minuchin acknowledges that families can be highly complex systems that are also composed of various subsystems such as the extended family, the parental subsystem, the sibling system and such (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). This is of particular interest because it provides a framework to understand the way family secrecy disrupts the boundaries between the various subsystems in the family, as well as the alliances that form as a result of the family secret. As mentioned above, a select few family members could be privy to the secret, such as in "intra-family secrets" (Najsleti, 1980). This could lead to covert coalitions, a term coined by Minuchin and Fishman (1981) where in the instance of conflict and tension, family members join against each other, creating more conflict. This is confirmed by other theorists, who hypothesize that systemically, secrecy can create "cliques" and alliances, as well as emotional distancing as a function of the silence between family members (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997).

The concept of boundaries is an important one in structural family therapy. Boundaries are directly associated with the interactions within subsystems. One can assess the clarity of boundaries in a subsystem by observing their communication, interactions, engagement. A variety of boundaries can take place, such as diffuse, rigid or clear boundaries, with the two extremes on the continuum being diffuse and rigid boundaries (Minuchin, 1974). Rigid boundaries are characterized by over-structured, restrictive interactional patterns, and potentially leading to disengagement. Diffuse boundaries on the other hand, can lead to intense communications and overinvolvement, as well as potentially leading to enmeshment. Minuchin (1974) displays his attunement to culture once again here, by stating that boundaries are developed and maintained by cultural norms, intergenerational influences, experiences and values. To connect this back to family secrecy, the maintenance of a family secret could be a form of boundary that only certain family members are allowed to discuss or know of. Privacy boundaries must therefore shift and change to accommodate the needs and circumstances of the individuals carrying the secret (Petronio, 2010). Negotiating secrecy is therefore a catalyst for boundary shifts within the family; the presence of a secret creates barriers and boundaries between secret holders and those not privy to the secret, which impacts the family system as a whole (Imber-Black, 1998; Karpel, 1980).

Chapter III: METHODS

Design of the Study

This study used a phenomenological research design, which encompasses the lived experiences of individuals involved in a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Interpretative phenomenology intends to explore how individuals make sense of an experience without the assumptions of the researchers (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2007). This approach is most fitting to the topic at hand, because it allows participants to express and describe their experience in their own words. This helps researchers gain insight into how Lebanese LGBTQ youth navigate family secrecy.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were considered eligible for this study by meeting the following criteria: a) identifying as Lebanese American; b) identifying as belonging to the LGBTQ+ community or as “queer,” c) between the ages of 18 and 30; and d) is currently experiencing some form of family secrecy surrounding their sexual identity or a same-gender relationship. Limiting this study to a single age group ensured that each participant experienced the same societal and technological developments (Serafino, 2018). The age sample was initially 18 to 24, however after beginning sampling and realizing that the majority of participants reaching out to the recruitment fell into a greater age range, I reached out to the IRB and requested to change the age range to include a broader range of participants, extending into late twenties. This allowed me to consider a larger sample but remain in the same generation cohort. On a psychosocial level, emerging young adults are engaging in identity formation as well as developing their capacity for intimacy (Zimmer-Gembeck & Petherick, 2006). For this reason, participants were ultimately selected to be between the ages of 18 and 30. The geographical location of this sample varied greatly, as

recruiting happened online through social media, word of mouth and snowball sampling (Wasserman et al., 2005), due to the vulnerable nature of the population. I posted the flier of the study on Facebook and Instagram, and asked friends on social media to share the study on their own pages in an attempt to reach participants who qualified. At the end of the research interview, I inquired with participants if they knew anyone who would fit the criteria of the study and who would be interested in participating (i.e., snowball sampling; Browne, 2015). Several participants referred family members or friends who fit the criteria, who reached out to me personally via email and expressed interest in participating in the study. Finally, IPA's approach is idiographic and concerned by the particular, unique experiences of individuals rather than being concerned with generalizations. The analysis process was committed to understanding how a specific group of people experience a phenomenon in a very specific, particular context. This meant that I used a purposive type of sampling, which involved a small, carefully selected sample (Smith et.al, 2009).

Sample Demographics

A significant number of participants reached out to express interest in the study. After screening all potential participants for eligibility, 19 participants met all the criteria and formed the final sample. For a strong phenomenological inquiry, Creswell (2007) recommends a heterogeneous sample consisting of 10-15 participants. All participants identified as part of the LGBTQ community, as well as Lebanese-American. Length of time residing in the United States varied significantly between participants, ranging between two years of residency to thirty years and spanning two generations. Understanding the participant's immigration experience will help consider their acculturation level, as well as their connection to the Lebanese culture and values

at large, which can help frame their experiences (Kulczycki & Lobo, 2002; Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001). At the time of the survey, eleven participants stated “Yes” when asked if they had disclosed their relationship (current or past) to one or more family members; whereas 9 participants answered no to the same question. The majority of participants (n=11) identified their family religion as Christian, which included Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic or other. The second largest group of participants (n=6) identified their family religion as Muslim, with only two participants identifying their family religion as Druze, and one participant identifying their family religion as “Other”. When it came to their personal religion, a large portion of the sample (n=6) identified as “none”, with an equal amount of participants (n=8) equally spread between Christian (n=4) and Muslim (n=4). A significant number of participants (n=5) identified as “Other”, with only one participant personally identifying as Druze (see Appendix G). This distinction between personal and family religion was important to make, due to the role that religion has played in creating tension, guilt and shame for many folks identifying as part of the queer community (Yip, 2005). Based on participant preferences, Lebanese pseudonyms were used as identifiers throughout the dissertation. Table 2 in Appendix G outlines the sample demographics.

Pre-Interview Procedures

Recruitment relied primarily on social media accounts and sites, such as Facebook and Instagram to gather participants in this study. Potential participants received the informed consent forms, the recruitment email as well as screening questions to be completed.

Furthermore, the informed consent detailed the purpose of the study, potential risks and benefits to participation, the participants' ability to withdraw from the study at any point, as well as confidentiality; participants also received a second link that sent them to a demographic questionnaire through Qualtrics to be completed and returned prior to the actual interview. The participants were also informed of the encrypted, secure nature of HIPPA-compliant Zoom provided by Virginia Tech as the interview platform.

Interview Protocol

The interviews occurred online, through recorded Zoom meetings, due to the nature of the sampling process, as well as the variety of geographic locations that the participants would be in. Time and financial constraints, geographical dispersion, and physical mobility boundaries of research populations are issues that were addressed through that online interview modality (Cater, 2011). The Zoom calls lasted between 30 and 75 minutes, with an average interview length of 60 minutes.

Open-ended interview questions (see Appendix B) were used to expand the interview and allow the participants to provide rich, detailed descriptions of their experiences. Semi-structured interviews were used to guide the participant into a dialogue that is participant-led, and to ensure participant comfort throughout the process. The interview questions were informed by the expansive literature review on family secrecy experiences of queer Arabs detailed above, and focused on how participants experienced and derived meaning out of family secrecy surrounding their sexual identity, particularly taking into account their culture and religion. One example was "How do you think Lebanese culture, if at all, plays a role in how you manage your secret about your sexual identity?". Other questions were aimed at understanding the secrecy process as it unfolded within the participant's family, in order to get a sense of the participants' essence of the

experience. An example of those questions is “Has secrecy around your sexual identity affected your relationship with your own family?” with follow-up prompts to better glean the participants’ emotions and meaning-making process. Prompts were used to help participants in case the questions are too vague, or if the participants were having a hard time responding (Smith & Osborn, 2008), as well as to go deeper into the essence of the experience for each participant. At the outset of the interview, I provided a brief introduction of myself and a summary of the study. The introduction included my name, gender pronouns, and identity as a queer graduate student and cisgender female of Lebanese origin. I intentionally shared these components of my identity to develop researcher-participant trust and create a safe environment for the participants, particularly due to prior research showing that Arab participants were less trusting of researchers in general (Al-Krenawi, 1999a, 1999b; Al Krenawi & Graham, 2000). At the end of the interview, as mentioned above, participants were asked if they knew anyone who would fit the criteria of the study and willing to participate. Towards the end of the interview, I asked the participants if there was anything they wanted to share about their secrecy experience that I did not specifically ask about. This gave participants the opportunity to provide additional context and information that they felt was pertinent to the essence of their experience, and that stood out to them on an emotional, or meaning level. The detailed interview protocol will be included in the Appendix C.

Post Interview Procedures

Participants were emailed a \$25 Amazon gift card shortly after their interview process. Several participants (n=4) did not want the gift card, and stated that participating in the study itself and reflecting on their experiences, as well as knowing that they contributed to amplifying the voices of queer Lebanese Americans was rewarding enough for them. Member checking was

used to validate interpretations and was incorporated throughout the interview process by frequently checking for understanding, clarity, and by asking for assurance that the researcher understood the experience correctly. An iterative process, one based on analysis and participant feedback, helped to ensure that the researcher accurately captured and explained the “essence” of the participants’ experiences as queer Lebanese Americans. Following the analysis process, all participants were sent a summary of the findings (Appendix H) via email, where their contributions and the findings of the study were acknowledged.

Researcher’s Role

Per Lincoln and Guba (1985), I acted as guide and interpreter of the participants’ experiences throughout the interviews. I was aware of my own feelings throughout the process, and it was a balancing act to remain aware while not letting my feelings and reactions guide my questions and interpretations. My efforts to “bracket” my interpretations and impressions was done in an effort to treat every participant’s interview on its own, without making connections with other participants’ transcripts and stories or my own, on a preliminary basis (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). A research journal was kept throughout the process in order to keep in mind my biases, interpretations and reactions as a Lebanese queer individual myself immediately following the interviews. The interview process was quite emotional at times after some particularly emotionally salient interviews, and it was helpful to jot down my immediate feelings in order to separate my own experiences from the participants.

Data Analysis

IPA is a method where researchers are concerned about understanding in depth the participant’s psychological world (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Meaning is central to the analysis

piece; thus, the researcher must engage in an interpretative relationship with the transcript. Each transcript was given an initial read following each interview, during which no comments or markings were made on the page. The purpose of this initial read was to familiarize myself with the data, and to ensure that no errors were made while putting together the transcripts. The second reading involved me jotting down notes, first impressions and comments of the interviews, which were written as comments in the word documents. This preliminary level of analysis helped me familiarize myself with the text, and to take note of interesting words and phrases that stood out in the text without putting meaning on it. This process was exploratory by nature, and allowed me to begin asking myself questions, and be familiar and aware of each participant's story and experience.

Reading the transcript a number of times was necessary in order to engage with the participant's account deeply and reflectively. The IPA method is described as iterative and inductive (Smith, 2007), having the goal of understanding the participant's point of view, experience and meaning-making process. This analysis is exploratory by nature; this interpretive note taking process organically followed the richness of the transcript, instead of enforcing a specific structure (Smith et.al, 2009). Descriptive codes with a distinct phenomenological focus were crucial because I hoped to stay as close as possible to what the participant really meant and what mattered to them, with a special emphasis on frequency and repetition of words used and the meaning of specific word choices and expressions for each participant. These descriptive

code comments aimed to take the data at face value and highlight what mattered to a specific participant case through these descriptions.

In this study, linguistic or in-vivo coding was necessary for participants who felt like the English language may not adequately capture their experience, and preferred to rely on Arabic or French expressions to convey meaning (Creswell, 2013, p. 288; Smith et.al, 2009; Ibish, 2001). Several participants used Arabic expressions in particular in order to convey a cultural element, or way of thinking; this was important to preserve in the analysis, as translation could take away from the meaning ascribed.

Finally, conceptual code comments involved engaging with the data on a more abstract and interpretive level. These codes can be interrogative as well to further the analysis, even if those questions end up unanswered. This does necessitate some level of moving away from the participant's explicit claims, towards an overarching, broader understanding of the participant's experience (Smith et.al, 2009). As I moved through the transcript, I engaged in an analytic dialogue with the transcript, where I was reflecting on what each statement means to both myself as a researcher as well as to the participant. I also noted contradictions, similarities as well as differences, repetitions and amplifications within the transcript. Then, I identified emergent themes by mapping out the connections and patterns between the exploratory notes made. Themes were not just selected based on their prevalence, but also their richness as well as how they helped illuminate the account (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The interpretive notes were

reorganized into themes that condensed the information into the *essence of the experience*; this combined both the participants' original thoughts as well as the researcher's interpretations. Clusters of related themes were formed; emerging patterns and connections between the different themes took place, first within a single case, and later across multiple cases. The themes were finally organized in terms of how they connected to each other as superordinate themes, as well as underlying overarching themes that were then connected to the research questions. This interactive process reflects the double hermeneutic nature of IPA (Smith et. al, 2009); the hermeneutic circle referring to the back and forth between different ways of thinking about the data, and bouncing between the researcher and the participant's interpretation rather than a linear, step by step fashion. Table 1 in Appendix F refers to the various themes explored and their frequency.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

This section will cover my attempts as a researcher to strive towards rigor and trustworthiness in this study. First, I engaged in the process of "bracketing", where the researcher is vigilant and sets aside my preconceived notions, beliefs and assumptions without abandoning them fully in order to focus on the participants' accounts with an open mind (Gearing, 2004; Sokolowski, 2000; van Manen, 1990). Second, memos were written throughout the data analysis in order to help me process my ideas and reactions as I engaged with the participants' account. Memos also had the added benefit of consisting in an audit trail which increases credibility. I

kept track of my thoughts, reactions and impressions throughout the analysis as well as how it shaped my interpretation and understanding of the data (Cutcliffe, 2003; Finlay, 2002).

Transferability is enabled by thick descriptions of data so that future researchers can evaluate just how applicable to other people and situations the findings from this data can be (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this particular study, member checking constituted an important part of insuring rigor and trustworthiness (Alase, 2017), due to the sensitive nature of the data, the vulnerability of the population, as well as the additional layer of mistrust that often exists between Arab participants and researchers as well as mental health professionals (Al-Krenawi, 1999a, 1999b; Al Krenawi & Graham, 2000). I followed up with a few participants with clarifying questions in order to ensure I was capturing the true experience and meaning of the participant, rather than my own assumptions. This is especially salient due to the sample consisting of marginalized cultural and sexual identities that are often misrepresented in both research and media. My dissertation chair took on the role of an external auditor in order to ensure that my interpretation and understanding of the participants' experiences was not skewed or impacted by my own experience, assumptions and biases (Creswell, 2016). My dissertation chair also assisted with transcribing along with me 3 complete interviews, as well as refinement of codes and challenging assumptions I made in my early analysis about participants' intended meaning. Following her review, we engaged in extensive discussions about the themes that emerged from

the data and discussed my interpretations of their meaning. This iterative process was an effective strategy to discuss ideas and confirm the objectivity of the findings.

The dissertation committee's review of methods and findings will increase dependability, while confirmability is enhanced through concurring on results and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, the importance of engaging in reflexivity, the process in which the researcher considers his/her biases, assumptions, and interests regarding the area of inquiry (McCormack & Joseph, 2018), cannot be understated. A reflexive position informs how research is developed and conducted, as well as how the researcher interacts with and represents the participants' data. Consequently, it is imperative to both be familiar with one's positioning as well as consider how it affects the research process. In this study, I, the researcher, am Lebanese as well as identifying as queer. which leads to personal beliefs stemming from life experiences about family secrecy being harmful and anxiety-provoking to queer Lebanese American youth, as well as assumptions that having lived in America would constitute an easier experience than growing up in Lebanon, due to the lack of freedom and personal agency that I personally experienced in Lebanon. This belief would be at risk of impacting the data analysis process as far as what themes are seen as emerging from the data. This reflexivity statement will be disclosed in the findings to enhance trustworthiness through transparency (McCormack & Joseph, 2018).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings of interpretive phenomenology analysis of nineteen queer Lebanese American individuals navigating a form of family secrecy regarding their relationship or sexual identity. I will begin by describing the Lebanese cultural elements which are front and center, since those elements permeate participant responses to all research questions and are infused in every part of the process. It is difficult to speak about family secrecy for Lebanese American youth without exploring the intricacies of Lebanese culture and identity, and what this cultural identity means to each participant as they navigate this complex process. Before presenting the major themes that address the three research questions, it is important for us to describe participants' experiences of Lebanese culture elements, which helps frame why and how they engaged in family secrecy. These various elements include heteronormative expectations, the concept of "saving face" and image management, homophobia and stigma, as well as religious elements (see Table 1 in Appendix F for a break down of the themes explored).

Lebanese Cultural Elements

I will open up this section with a quote from participant Siham who shared the difficulty of conveying the cultural elements she struggles with to her white therapist:

With my white therapist she asks...I don't mind. I want her to ask about my culture, but I don't want to explain that to her. I know she doesn't understand that without me having to explain it to her. I don't mind it. I want to explain it. If you

understand it, it's different. It's different if you understand it and someone else is explaining it to you. See, a culture is not something you explain. It's something you live with; it's something you grew up with.

This poignant quote conveys how hard it is to describe culture and to put it into words, without experiencing pieces of it. Through my participants' quotes, I hope to convey their experience of how culture impacts their experience of secrecy around their sexuality with their families and loved ones. These cultural expectations and elements will be explored in detail, particularly in relation to their role in creating a catalyst for creating and maintaining family secrecy.

Heteronormative Expectations

Many participants ($n = 12$) expressed struggling with the heteronormative expectations that their families, particularly parents and relatives, were putting on them that made navigating family secrecy challenging for them. For example, Maha captured this experience by referring to extended family's questions around marriage, which conveyed expectations of the participant being in a heterosexual marriage in the future.

When I was younger they would come up kind of like 'oh are you dating anyone?' or 'are you doing anything like that?' I would just say 'oh school is my priority', 'I gotta get through school', and 'I'm not focusing on boys' and that's like the most respectful thing you can say. And now when I'm out of school, and I

think it was as soon as I turned 24 or 23 people started calling on my birthday. They would say ‘how are you? So when are you getting married?’, or ‘have you found someone?’; ‘By 25 you gotta be married or been engaged or found somebody’. And I would just be like, ‘Oh I just started my career, I have to focus on my career first. I have to make sure that I’m stable and done and well set and ready to take on the world before getting married’.

Another participant shared that not being asked those types of questions anymore now that that particular family member knew about her sexuality, conveyed a difference in the acceptance and pride experience of the parent towards them compared to a heterosexual sibling. Marwa shared her feeling about her mother not really wanting her to get married and have children after she disclosed that she was gay. She reflected about her mother’s excitement about her heterosexual sister’s potential as a bride and mother:

The pride with my older sister was totally different. She would ask follow-up questions like ‘Oh when are you gonna get married? Do you guys want to have kids?’ She doesn't ask those questions for me because she doesn't want those things.

Another participant, Nadia, shared how leaning into those heteronormative expectations gave her a sense of belonging within her family, and a way to remove the tension that she felt when presenting in a more masculine way. Pretending to ascribe to those

heteronormative expectations allowed her to fit in, and connect with her family despite their perceptions of her based on her gender presentation. She stated:

I think my family started playing along with it because it was easy and it just kept me from embarrassment. It also kept me in the family. Had I not pushed boyfriends onto everybody they would have...banished me. So it was helpful. The whole boyfriend narrative gave them the sense that I was normal or like them. So it was okay. It helped. I think it really helped; all these poor boyfriends. I probably would have had a harder time fitting in. Other family members already had their hard time talking to me and still have a hard time talking to me. But the thing is I really don't think I'm that abnormal. The way that they interact with me there's always some tension and I've always felt that tension ever since I started presenting more gay. I needed scapegoats to connect with everybody and the boyfriends were a good way to do that because everybody wanted to hear about my American boyfriend. That gave me an 'in' and so all that family stuff that I was missing out on...because they just didn't...see me as normal. It normalized me.

Male-identifying participants also struggled with an additional layer of heteronormative expectations, such as being expected to carry on the family name through marriage and having children. Ghassan discussed this struggle and burden he carries, particularly his

awareness of someday not meeting those expectations and having to carry this secret that would defy those expectations for himself and future family:

Well I mean that's always been a pretty sensitive thing because I always made aware very early that I was like the only son and that I will have my kids and that they will, you know carry the name and all of that and and very early in my life I knew that was probably not gonna happen. I mean, it was never like I revelation for me that I was gay. I grew up knowing it. I just didn't really know what it was because I didn't have gay people around me, you know. So like to give you an idea when I was like, I think at nine or ten or eleven, my plan for my life was like to become a priest so that I don't burn in hell, like that was that was my life plan, but so I know that that's an important thing especially for my dad's family. (...) I don't think people realize how hard it is, like there are no words that can describe how hard it is to be the outcast all the time, even though people around you don't know, but you know, and that the fact that you have this big secret, and you're just a child, you're not made to deal with like such big secrets. And these secrets are not made to be secrets, it's just a society that we built that kind of makes it that way, and I don't think people understand.. like you're eight or nine and you're thinking and you have this thing, it's right here, you know, it's right here, like right there, every day with your friendships, your family.. And you know, in Lebanon

it's like “*abelik, abelak* , everything about life is about marriage and finding someone, and so it's such a burden that you carry, so early on.

Abelik, abelak roughly translates as “We hope you are next”. The significance of this cultural colloquialism is that there is an expectation rooted in culture that your life should unfold in a specific way. In this case, the expectation is marriage to a person of a different sex. This expression illustrates the heteronormative expectations embedded in Lebanese language and culture.

Concern over Image

The majority of participants reported their experience of the Lebanese culture’s concern over image, particularly in the eyes of extended family, as well as other families in their community. *Saving Face* signifies a desire—or defines a strategy—to avoid humiliation or embarrassment, to maintain dignity or preserve reputation (Semaan, Dosono & Britton, 2017). Siham shared her awareness of her parents’ worries and their dilemma between accepting the sexual identity of their child and facing other people’s judgment:

A big part of it is, parents are worried about what other people think. That's a big thing. Like, ‘oh what this person's gonna say about that?’ And that’s why they're afraid. That's also a big thing why some parents might be accepting of their child,

but they're just so afraid of what other people are gonna think. It's a major thing in Lebanese culture, and Arab culture in general.

Similar to Siham, Amal commented on her perception that an awareness of other people's judgment and thoughts was ingrained in Lebanese culture, and how this connected to her own struggle with personally not caring about other people's opinions, yet also keeping her identity to herself:

I think for my parents, it really really is about "what are people gonna say?" the community, and yeah. I think it's an Arab thing. 100%. Like I always make this joke, and it's such a bad joke, but I always say, if we were ever born with a disability, we would be stuck in the basement. Because I mean.. again, it's such a bad joke, and it's so bad to phrase it like this, but physical appearances, the way you carry yourself, the way you speak, the way you sit, the way your hair is parted.. it's so so important to them when you're out in the community. What will people think? It's so ingrained, and there's so much unlearning you have to do. Because again, with me, I don't give a shit about what the community has to say, but I'll never announce publicly that I'm gay. Because there's still this ingrained thing about like.. I don't know. I'm fucking gay as hell, but I would never be able to do that. I don't know why.

Marwa elaborated on the ramifications and repercussions of the family name on the family's connections and ties in the community as well as small business incomes:

I would say with culture, it's more how it looked to other people. If that makes sense, your reputation as a family... I think that's a really big, heavy weight in Lebanese culture. Because Lebanese people love their reputation.... Reputation is huge, especially because a lot of Lebanese people own businesses, so that could affect business in a way. Also ties, just relationships my family has with other people. I think that was a huge thing with keeping reputation because... what am I gonna talk about when I'm there at dinner with my friends? Am I gonna tell them that my daughter's gay? Are they gonna ask me if my daughter smokes or drinks? To them that means a lot. Reputation is a lot.

Ghassan explored how his own observations of his extended family's dynamics and ways of discussing and coping with his cousin's sexuality, demonstrated Lebanese culture's way of navigating these dilemmas. Ghassan's commentary on Lebanese culture illustrated a discomfort with making the implicit explicit, as well as ignoring something sensitive and delicate in order to avoid creating waves, rocking the boat and having an uncomfortable conversation.

Well, Lebanese culture is very.. The way we deal with things, I don't know if I can generalize, but my experiences show me we aren't very expressive of

sensitive subjects and we like to pretend a lot. Play the pretend game. Everything is fine, the food is delicious, and that's it. For example, I have a cousin who is very feminine, it's so obvious he's gay, and everyone knows, but no one says it. But they will say things like "oh, he's not gonna get married".. Like they refer to it, but they do not name it, and as long as they pretend it's not a thing, then it's not happening. Everyone is fine with it. But if you name it and address the issue, that's when Lebanese culture gets destabilized, because we aren't good at uncomfortable conversations. And that applies to a lot of things, not just this, really any uncomfortable situation. You ignore it until you can't ignore it anymore.

Religious Elements

In a broad sense, several participants commented on religious components playing a role in discriminating against sexuality, and setting the tone for the lack of acceptance that continues to be prevalent in Lebanese society. Marwa shared that:

Religion and sexuality...it created the secret. The religion created the secret, and it is a secret because religion sees it as disgusting in a way. They see that...they interpret religion as telling them 'being gay, it's not right.' Specifically in Islamic, it's linked to anal rape. It doesn't have a good... it has a bad stigma on it already. That definitely increased my wanting to keep it a secret.

Adel stressed the importance of what religion means to different family cultures, and specific individuals' interpretations of religious texts and discourse. He also shared the struggles of not knowing how to respond when family members believed so strongly in something irrevocable in their eyes, such as the belief that he would be going to Hell for being gay. Adel explored how religion can mean something different for everyone, which then dictates their level of acceptance of his queerness and marriage.

I think it plays a major part because this is where you lose the debate. Because you lose the debate because they're like, 'this is *haram*.' When your mom tells you, she's afraid, she's praying for me every day because she doesn't want to see in Hell. How can you debate with something core to their belief? You can fight traditions and change hearts and mind but even though...I've been trying to push my parents, although they're intellectuals, to continue reading more and more and more, religion can work with intellectualism and thinking, but I think it depends on the family, it depends on how open minded somebody is. One of my best best friends is Moroccan. She is super religious. Faith is so important to her, but she loves me and [my husband] like anything. The way she interprets religion is different from how others interpret religion.

Haram translates into "forbidden" in Arabic language, and in some dialects, means "what a pity" or "what a shame." This expression highlights the salience of shame in Lebanese

culture, and the role it plays in the family's desire to protect their image and standing within the community.

Homophobia and stigma

Most participants (n=16) expressed having experiences of stigma and homophobia within their social circles and in their extended families. The word “disgusting” (n=7) in particular was used to describe homosexuality in their family members' eyes. Amal illustrated through her observations of family and friends, her experience of the blatant and overt homophobia that is still prevalent in Lebanese culture, and how connected it is to the experience of shame for many Lebanese people:

I don't know. I um.. like I said before.. they are very homophobic. My mother would say "that's disgusting". Quick story. I had a friend in high school that killed herself because her parents kicked her out, because she came out as gay to them.

When I told that to my mom in high school, she said, "that's better, she caused enough shame to her parents" or something like that.

It's difficult to speak about homophobia in Lebanon without mentioning the impact of religion, as many participants drew that connection between family and relatives' views, and the influence of their religious beliefs. Many participants ($n = 7$) observed the way their family and relatives participated in the discourse around the subject of non-heterosexuality, and shared their experience of hearing some of the negative views and

ways of understanding non-heterosexuality. Maha explained further by delineating the distinction between a Westernized view of homophobia, and the discrimination that is influenced by Lebanese culture and views. Maha described how homophobia in Lebanon seems to be, from her experiences, about seeing the person as sick, or ill, and how this would bring much grief and shame to parents and family members upon finding out their child was gay:

There have been so many situations where...it's not...the negativity wasn't directed towards me, but we would have somebody be like, 'Ah, this person is dating someone of the same sex' or 'Oh, didn't you know, this person is gay' or 'Ugh this person is dressed like a woman' and "Why is this guy wearing makeup?'. These sorts of things would come up. If there was a movie playing, something would be said and it would be...it's not negative. Americanized homophobia is so 'this person's going to Hell', 'this person sucks'. But it's like, *haram*, he's sick. It's like.. everybody's free to do what they want to do, but if this was to happen to my kid or happened in my situation, it would be the worst thing in the world. It would be horrible and negative, and I never wanted to inflict that pain on them.

It is clear from many participants' accounts (n=11) that these observations played a large role in their fears and worries around their own families' reactions and potential

struggles, as well as the discrimination they could potentially face from their own community and support systems. Maha continued on to share her own experience of the difference between rural and urban reactions to queerness in Lebanon, and how this might impact her own family in the future:

I think ten or so years ago, there's this one guy who, all the Lebanese news put out that he came to the U.S. and got married to his husband. All the small towns in the small villages were like 'if you ever come to this village, we will shoot you.' His mom and his family all came to the US and I don't think he ever set foot back. I wouldn't want to put my family, my parents ... I don't think it would happen now, where it would have happened 10 or 12 years ago. But I wouldn't want to put my family in that situation and I wouldn't want to risk it. Because Beirut is perfectly fine. There are so many queer people in Beirut and if you know the places to go, it's fun and LGBT-friendly and great. But if you go to certain villages and you go to certain outskirts of Lebanon, it's like the 1960s and 1950s.

Chadi shared his observation of his grandmother, the family matriarch, navigating relationships with queer and gay friends by being friendly on the surface, before voicing negative, homophobic things behind their backs. Chadi shared how this led to internalizing these messages, and the painful experience of feeling like those messages were directed at him:

So on to that paradox, my grandmother had a lot of friends. She had a lot of gay friends that she was very close to and in the family as well, like we had gay family members that were her age. When they would come over here and visit her, they would have a wonderful time and the moment they would leave, she would say the most awful things about them that were homophobic - and that was always so interesting to watch. Cause I remember when I was a little kid and I was like.. maybe I'm gay? I knew that a young age, maybe I was gay. I remember when she would get along so well with her gay friends. I was like, so.. um happy to see that. And then when they would leave and she would say [those things], it felt like she was saying those things to me basically.

In the eyes of the participants, Lebanese culture and discourse still had a long way to go in normalizing queerness. Their observations of their friends and family's homophobic responses directly played a role in their fears around disclosure, and in some cases, motivated them to maintain the secret.

Secrecy Function

Vangelisti (1994) explored the function of secrecy and the way it helps protect family members from the consequences of disclosing the secret. A primary function to explore is the desire to build and maintain group cohesiveness, which enables individuals to become part of the group through rules, traditions and rituals that are not discussed

outside the family. Secrets also often function to protect the family structure and prevent the family from falling apart. Another function of family secrecy is a less extreme version of the formerly listed function, which is to protect family members from social disapproval or rejection if the secret itself is perceived as inconsistent with the family's desired self-image. In this study, we identified the primary function of the family secrecy as threefold: to protect the family from the community's discrimination and judgment, to protect the family from within by maintaining family connections internally as well as the family ideology, as well as self-protection from perceived harm and judgment.

Protecting Family From Within

Maha discussed the considerations that she has in mind when choosing to maintain the secrecy, in part stemming from a desire to protect her parent's idea of her, and their dreams and hopes for her and her future. Maha detailed her empathy and consideration for her parents' potential grieving process, as well as how this might impact her relationship with them long term.

I've technically never come out to my family. They caught me. And it was never communicated. I would never...I don't think I would have ever come out if I had the option. Not because I am afraid of the consequences, or I know they would be accepting. It's the...I think it's...I perceive it as a selfless act. Spare my family the trouble of dealing with it. In my personal opinion, God created me to be who I

am. If the church wants to call it a sin or whatever, I don't care. Because what the church says versus my spirituality are two different things. I'm going to incorporate my relationship with God a certain way. So when it comes to the church, it doesn't.. that's not why I keep it a secret. I keep it more of a secret to preserve...the thought and the perception that my family has of me that I don't want to break. Yeah. Every parent and family member has manifested their own opinion and dream of the kid: of me. And why...to me I wouldn't...I wouldn't want to break that.

Maha expressed how this protectiveness was less about her own image, instead it was about preserving her parents' feelings, hopes and dreams for her. Adel considered an additional layer that comes into play when reflecting on the function of secrecy in protecting the family, which is the geographical distance and the role it plays in complicating the process of letting parents in on his secret. Adel shared a desire to have positive memories in the limited time he has to spend in person with his parents, rather than risking conflict as a result of him coming out. Adel demonstrated an awareness of how difficult disclosure may be for his parents, and wanting to shield them from the pain of the process:

I'll tell you something ... the reason why I'm not completely out in Lebanon and among family members is because I don't want to hurt my parents. Remember

when I told you I hit the brakes because I realized it's too much for them? It's harder for them to understand. I respect that because I know that they love me in their own way. Life is short and whatever is left in life...especially that I'm living far away...when I meet them we need to make sure we have good times together; instead of fighting. The train has passed. It's not ideal, but at the same time they didn't give me up, even if they knew. Now am I afraid if I tell them something, how they're gonna react to it? I don't know. Maybe they react in a way that their culture and tradition makes them disavow me.

In that same vein, Ghayab went into detail about expecting things to be confrontational between him and his father as a result of his disclosure; in Ghayab's eyes, avoiding that risk was rewarding enough to maintain a connection with his father and preserve the peace in the family:

I would have more encounters with him, more confrontations with him. My dad can be very vocal and he can be very intense. To avoid that and to avoid having to confront him...Also if he's happy with whatever fantasy he has of me in his mind, I'm okay with that. I would love to visit Lebanon with my boyfriend and with some of my other friends and not have to lie. Because there is lying involved, there is definitely constant lying. If he asked me if I'm dating anyone I'm like, 'no.'

Protecting those relationships within the family was a significant consideration for many participants ($n = 10$), and desiring to maintain harmony within those ties. For those participants, the risk of losing those ties outweighed the internal benefit of coming out. In choosing to protect those connections and ties, participants put their families and bonds first over their own desire to be out and open about their sexuality.

Protecting Family From Outside

While reflecting on the function of secrecy, many participants also shared their awareness of how the exposure of the secret may impact their family's status and connections within the community, due to the dominant discourse in Lebanon around homosexuality. Maha elaborated on these concerns by sharing that despite not having any fears of the nuclear family being broken up by this disclosure, there was a very distinct possibility of the family name, image, and connections being impacted by coming out:

I wouldn't want to put my parents in the situation where they had to choose between their daughter or their sister or their brother or their niece and nephew. So to me, it's like why break up this huge family over something that...when it comes to the grand scheme of who I am, it's a part but not a whole. [...] I don't think it would break up the whole family. I think my parents would absolutely love me and my mother has told me that she would love me no matter what. But I know for a fact that there would be certain people in the family that would

distance themselves. Or not want me around. I know it would be hard for me to go back to certain spots in Lebanon. I think having an American citizenship is gonna make sure nothing bad happens to me, but I wouldn't want any hostility or violence or negativity surrounding my family. I'd want to preserve the thought and the respect that my family has. [...] Yeah, it's who my family is... Who my family is connected to.

It is worth noting that Maha's view of her sexuality as only being one part of her identity, with other parts such as family connection and belonging being just as important and salient for her. Rana explored a similar fear, and her awareness of how coming out might impact her family's life in a negative way through the Lebanese community's backlash:

I'm also afraid of making their lives harder. I don't want them to be talked about because we live, we live in [a Midwestern city]. It would be very hard for them to have to explain to everyone. I also want to have the means to not live in [Midwestern city] anymore if I decide to come out. I would rather be away from it, away from the backlash. Yeah, absolutely, I do want to protect them.

Marwa's desire to protect family stemmed from a very different dynamic, one where her sister also had come out to her as gay. Marwa consciously and intentionally stepped into the role of her sister's shield, feeling confident that she could "take the hits" and protect her from other people's judgment or attacks:

We decided to do it together because I'm a very protective person over her. I'm so protective of her. Anything that makes her feel anxious or fearful, I realize later in

life that I didn't like the way I just protected her from it. I do want her exposed to fear and anxiety to an extent, to want her to be able to do it on her own. But when it comes to something that someone could attack her, on if there's a way for that to happen: I don't want it to happen. I'd rather step in and do that.

Clearly, participants' consciousness and awareness of how their coming out process might impact their families' social standing and reputation played a role in their desire to maintain secrecy in one way or another.

The Secrecy Process

This section will delve into the essence of the experience of participants as they navigated the emotions coming up around the secrecy process, as well as the meaning they made out of this experience with different family members, and the subsequent impact the secrecy or disclosure had on these relationships. Participants also went into detail around their decision making process around secrecy, such as the factors considered and fears and concerns around their future as a result of the secrecy. Finally, participants also discussed and explored their strategies put into place to maintain and manage the family secrecy. I, in consultation with my dissertation advisor, decided to specify in each particular section if it was a strategy used by the participant, their family, or both in some instances. One thing worth noting is that it is challenging to write about secrecy without considering the process of disclosure, since both processes are closely intertwined in many of these participants' experiences. There cannot be selective disclosure without decisions around secrecy. In many cases, the participants' decision-

making process involved examining who would be safe to disclose to as well as who would not be. Selective disclosure seemed to be the catalyst for secrecy in these participants' experiences, rather than leading to incrementally gradual disclosure.

Emotional Impact of Secrecy

Almost all participants (n=16) reported having many intense emotions around the secrecy process, and finding different facets of the experience challenging on an emotional level. Chadi shared in this account the way he struggled with code switching around a close family member:

It was incredibly traumatizing. I think every you know gay or LGBTQ kid grows up to some extent editing their behavior around their family members, even if they have the most liberal family. Like you have.. you have reservations about coming out right. But with her ... I really really was acting 24/7. I tried so hard to come off not effeminate or not gay, whatever that means. So it was very difficult, yeah. I struggled with it for a long time, and I probably still do.

Another participant, Ghassan, shared in his account the heaviness of the burden of secrecy, as well as the various emotions he experienced while maintaining the secret, and finally releasing it to his parents:

You can only hide something for so long. And my whole life, I was like.. I don't know if it ever happened to you, like you dread something that you know might

possibly happen, and it's like your whole life you're dreading it, and the moment comes, and at the same time you're like oh my god, it's happening, at the same time you're terrified, but you're looking forward for it to be done. It's such a liberating feeling. Right now, with all the issues that came with it, and with the fact that I'm not talking to my father, I have to say, it's such a liberating feeling to be like.. Whether we talk again or not, it's finally out, it's done. And it's over. This hard thing that you dreaded all your life, it's behind you. Whether it went well or not is a whole other story. It's behind you. And secrets are heavy you know? Even though it was not as important to tell him as it was to tell my mom, obviously it was pretty important, because it's a heavy thing. I'm close to my family. I see them every weekend. I talk to them every day so secrets are heavy to carry. Releasing a secret can only be liberating even if it goes bad.

Marwa shared the difficult of having to compartmentalize and share only parts of her life with her father, and the pain of not being able to share everything with him without holding back and filtering:

It's literally not being able to be yourself around someone you love so much. At dinner... (sighs) It kills me when I'm at dinner with my dad and he asks me about my day or how I've been. I can't tell him, 'Oh me and my partner just had our anniversary' or the steps that we're taking or the things I'm learning in my

relationships that I find so valuable. Because my parents are divorced, I have always had trouble with relationships and with commitment. My development and relationships are so gratifying and important to me that I want to share those things so badly with him, but I can't. I simply can't do it. It makes me a little sad to think about.

Siham elaborated on the struggle of not being able to share oneself fully with loved ones as a result of the secrecy around her sexual identity. For Siham, the secret meant her family members did not truly know her, as she acknowledged the potential for this secrecy to be so destructive on an emotional level for her.

Because living a lie is so hard. I can't do it. I'm living in a lie. I'm lying to them every day about who I am. They don't know me. They don't know me. Yeah, they don't know me. I can't live like that. They're either gonna know me and accept it or accept it or not accept it; it's up to them. I can't live in a lie like that. It will destroy me. It will really affect me if I don't say anything to them.

It is clear that participants expressed heavy emotions around the secrecy, despite having agency over the decision to maintain the secrecy.

Meaning Making Around Secrecy

For many participants (n= 13), the secrecy conveyed a feeling of shame and lack of acceptance from their family members. For Nadia, in particular, it conveyed a sense of

not belonging and not fully fitting in with her extended family, which then acted as a barrier to feel connected and supported by her community:

I think there's a lot of shame around it. They're ashamed for me. I don't mind having the conversation, but somehow they're embarrassed for me. To me, it's not embarrassing anymore. It's not a big deal anymore. But to them, they're talking about this really taboo thing. It's almost like talking about like pornography or something. It's not some casual conversation that you bring up at the dining table to them. It's a lot of shame; a lot of disappointment. Just not meeting expectations.

The awareness of not meeting parental expectations seemed to be a heavy one for many participants, and played a significant role in how they assigned meaning to the family secrecy. For Leila, the thought of further disappointing her parents, after not following the expected path in life they had in mind for her, was an additional motivator to maintain secrecy:

I think part of it is, not wanting to be the shaker all the time, and like maintaining a certain level of peace and not having to ... I constantly feel like I'm a let down, because I'm constantly doing the wrong thing, because I'm not following their expectations. You know, I haven't had a child yet. My parents are really pushing for children. I'm not convinced I want them. I guess I would be a rebel. This is just something that ... if I don't have to fight this fight, I'd rather not to.

For other participants, such as Elham, having to maintain the secrecy around their romantic partner felt invalidating of the relationship that they were in, and diminished her partner's status, as well as reinforced the messaging that being queer meant rejection, and being looked down upon. Elham shared in this segment that despite knowing that her mother accepted her and her partner, there was still a larger sense of not being accepted by extended family members, and the community at large:

I have family in Cancun, and they went down there a couple years ago and reconnected and mom's like, 'Oh I cannot wait for you to come down and reconnect and rekindle! But I'm not sure about your partner? I don't think you would tell them about her.' I was like, 'really?!' and she's like, 'yeah, I don't know if it's a good idea for you guys to stay at the hotel. I don't think you guys would be comfortable.' Then my mom's like, 'You could always tell them you're really good friends'. But that completely diminishes our relationship. That diminishes... It's really invalidating. I don't think my mom means it like...I know where my mom stands. I think my mom likes my partner more than she likes me at this point. I'm fine within my immediate life and I don't necessarily care for their judgments, but it sucks that my relationship with someone, who's a really good person, might lead to this immediate rejection and being looked down upon just because of who I'm with.

Being urged to maintain secrecy by her mother meant to Elham that her romantic relationship was invalidated and reduced into something invisible in the eyes of many. In that sense, maintaining the secrecy has conveyed the ongoing lack of acceptance that Elham will be facing around extended family. Like Elham and Leila, many participants made sense of the secrecy differently, depending on the circumstances and factors involved.

Impact on Relationships As A Result of Secrecy

While reflecting on the meaning and emotions around the secrecy process, participants also spent time examining how this secrecy impacted their family relationships. For some participants, the secret played an instrumental role in maintaining a connection, where disclosure would have created a rupture between the participant and their family member. This is the case for Elham, who reflected on how her father's lack of knowledge about her queer relationship allowed them to remain close and connected:

I just think I can't tell him. I don't know. I don't know what he'll think if we sleep in the same bed. Maybe he thinks, 'Oh, they're girlfriends.' I think my dad would never assume. I don't know how at this point. He has a head injury, but I just completely want to avoid it. I do not want to even...it's fine. The secret is maintaining the relationship.

Many participants (n=5) shared the impact of not being able to share important pieces of their life, their romantic relationships, and their development and growth with loved ones as a result of the secrecy. Nadia described a desire and longing to share parts of her marriage with her family, but being unable to do so. This consequently felt like an erasure of her relationship with her wife, a very significant part of her life:

I want to share that with people. I want to talk about how lovely she is and how smart she is and how supportive she is, but I can't. It's like she doesn't exist but she's such a big part of my life. It's weird. It's so weird. It's almost like this isn't even a reality. It gets completely erased as soon as I set foot in Lebanon. It's like all this life that I have here for myself just doesn't exist.

For other participants such as Maha, whose mother knew about the secret and was still struggling to accept it, the secrecy had put a strain on the relationship and led to ups and downs in their ability to connect and be close. Maha noticed that her own walls have been up due to not feeling ready to be as open about the secret with her mother, which exacerbated the tension around the subject. In her experience, the secret remained unspoken, yet something both family members were acutely aware of as it created a barrier to connection and closeness:

My relationship with my mom was at a very high point, and since [disclosure] then, it kind of...She's trying to get really close, but I have a huge wall up. And I

kind of have to fight with that wall every once in a while. And sometimes it's down and we're best friends, and other times I just don't want to tell her as much as I used to. I think it reaches a point where the discussions can turn into talking about my sexuality and I'm not ready to have that conversation with her. So I try not to bring up what I'm doing, because I'm living with my partner now full-time. I'm living in a house with my partner's aunts who are also gay. So it's like ... I'm not gonna tell you how we all sat there and watched the *L Word* or how we just hung out with a bunch of sixty-year old lesbians for a night and had dinner. I'm not gonna tell you that. I'm not gonna tell you what I did today. I don't think she tries because it has built up in her head to the point where it comes out. Not because she thought about it and she's ready to have the conversation. Yeah, this has been a secret for six months. We haven't talked about it in six months. I'm gonna bring it up and there's one spurt of ten minute conversation and then we're both gonna hang up on each other. And then we'll never talk about it again for another six months.

Rana shared a similar struggle with her mother, who was not brought into the secret of her sexuality and same-sex relationship. Rana shared the difficulty of having to put distance between herself and her mother in order to maintain the secret, and how this barrier was felt by both mother and daughter:

It's also hard to hide when my mom talks to me about her. Because I'm overthinking my reaction to what she says. When she said the daughter-in-law thing, I was like 'Oh yeah, she's awesome...' What am I gonna say!? I always am conscious not to talk too highly of her, in front of them. It does in the sense that when I'm lying I have to distance myself. Because I mean otherwise, I would just be truthful ... that I'm hanging out with her all the time. I have to make up things, like 'I'm working late' or I'm just...My mom's starting to think I don't like hanging out with her. I visit less, but it's because my girlfriend's over a lot. So that sucks when my mom says 'I don't like hanging out with her' or stuff like that.

Many participants ($n=15$) shared an acute awareness of how secrecy has affected their relationships in a negative sense, primarily through them putting up a barrier to closeness from family members who were not included in the secrecy. Having to maintain the secret led them to hold their family members at an arm's length, and withhold parts of themselves. However, in some cases, whenever family members were included and let in on the secret, the secrecy dynamic seemed to have a positive effect in creating a sense of alliance and support. Participants reflected on experiences where the secrecy was "bonding" (e.g., Leila), creating a sense of alliance and closeness (e.g., Nadia, Ghassan, Marwa, Jamil, Ghayab, Jameela; $n = 11$). Jameela explored the double-edged aspect of the secrecy process in this excerpt:

I think while it was secretive, it created a little bit of distance. Feeling like there's a part of me that they don't know about and...that whole part of me that they're unaware of. It just creates a barrier and distance. Then after telling them, it did bring us closer and now you know this major part of my life. For example, when I was going through a breakup and my mom realized...she knew what was going on and she was supportive and talked to me about it.

Family's Role in The Process

Whether it be a supportive role that created an alliance, or a more distant and disengaged role, it is worth noting that in many participants' stories ($n = 14$), the mother played a significant and impactful role in their secrecy process, and she often became a powerful ally in helping come up with strategies to manage the secrecy. By contrast, in many stories ($n = 8$), the father was often disengaged, distant, or unaware of the secrecy dynamic, and in some cases, intentionally left out of the secrecy process. Siblings and cousins often were supportive figures for many participants, primarily due to the generational component and similar levels of exposure to new, fresh and Westernized discourses around sexuality.

Mother's role in the process

The vast majority of participants expressed that their mother played an instrumental role in facilitating the secrecy, as well as helping to guide them in the

challenges of maintaining the secret within their immediate and extended families. For so many participants, their mothers played the roles of the gatekeeper, the shield or defender, the facilitator and ally. In some cases, such as in Ghassan's, his mother played a large role in helping him manage the secrecy with his father:

So when I first came out to her, um, what I really love about my mom is that my mom has traveled much less around than my dad, and my dad has had much much more education but my mom somehow was able to question her principles and develop herself more than my dad. So when I came out to her, I didn't have to go through the whole like "it's not a disease and stuff." It's not like you know, it was just for her she was sad because she was worried for me because she knew like the society were in, especially the background and it was never about like shaming me or any of that, but she just ... one of the things that she said was "What will your dad think or do?" But interestingly, a couple years later, she started talking to me about whether I'm thinking about telling him, and when he moved back with us, she asked me like, "So are you planning on telling him?" So at first, yes, the first reaction was "What is he going to think? I don't think we should tell him." And then it kind of changed into "We should tell him; you should tell him but when you're ready." Keep in mind that like we always have, things are never just that happening, so that we always had other issues happening

like my dad's paperwork, immigration, and their own relationships stuff so obviously like there was always things happening that you're like "oh now is not a good time, now it's not a good time". So yeah, it was never like working.

Ghassan discussed how his relationship with his mother shifted from one of gatekeeping and strategizing around the secret to gently guiding him towards considering sharing with his father. His mother's support and acceptance was clear and undeniable. Ghassan elaborated on his alliance with his mother, and his acknowledgment of her burden in carrying this secret with him:

So for the longest time, like I mean, that was our secret, you know, that was our secret was just you know, among us and I think it was a heavy one to carry for her but at the same time, it made sense to like wait, because we all you know, like we all knew it was gonna be like a thing. It was gonna be like draining when it comes to my dad, so I think like, it was kind of like the consensus that it makes sense that we don't tell him right away.

Ghassan continued on to share that his motivation for revealing the secret to his father stemmed from a desire to protect his mother, and release her from the burden of hiding the secret from her husband. Ghassan expressed his empathy for his mother's sacrifice and challenge in maintaining the secret within the family:

Yes. I mean, she was holding that burden for long enough, and now I didn't want it to become more complicated. She had done enough. Let me just.. Let me do this and whatever happens after, at least you won't have to be lying anymore. I think I was doing it more for the family than for me because I never had this urge to tell him like I did for my mom. Um.. to make sure my mom is shielded from any.. I didn't want her to lie. Because once she starts lying, then it's her fault. So I wanted to shield her from that. And honestly, it's funny because my whole life, I never thought I would tell him, but also I knew at some point, the way life is, it's bound to happen. You can only hide something for so long.

Marwa shared a similar process to Ghassan's when discussing her mother's role as a shield and protector from her father's inquiries. Marwa shared that her mother would deflect or normalize her daughters defying gender presentation, and pacifying their father in the process. By doing so, her mother assists in maintaining the secret while encouraging acceptance:

When they do talk, I think they've had very few conversations, like about us getting married and my mom basically says 'when they're ready to get married, they'll get married.' That's her way of diverting from him, and he even comments like 'why do they dress that way? Why do they dress more masculine?' She's like 'They've always dressed like that since they're babies.' She just tells him like it's a

normal thing. Because we are; we've always been a little more rugged. I think she tries to help him understand that that's just who we are, without telling him that it's because of being gay, it's just who we are.

For Nadia, her mother assisted with navigating complex family situations, particularly with extended family that she was more familiar with. In that sense, Nadia's mother acted as a guide and ally in the secrecy process:

Yeah, I definitely was getting a lot of pointers from my mom in terms of who was okay to talk to and who wasn't okay. She would warn me beforehand, if we were going to somebody's house she would give me...not forcing them upon me. It was something we would agree on and I would ask 'How does this family member...?' We would discuss who they were and what their habits were. She would give me some kind of report of the family, and then we would agree on how I would behave with her. That's usually how we navigated all these situations and it worked pretty well.

Nadia's acknowledgment of her mother's support and allyship went further than simply strategizing around maintaining the secret. Nadia explained that her mother had encouraged her to move to the United States upon finding out her daughter's sexuality, and the protective nature of this sacrifice:

I think her first instinct was to ship me out to the US. She was literally like 'yeet' but not in a bad way. More like, this child is gay and she's growing up in an environment that's very homophobic. It was even in a Lebanese community that's even more homophobic because it's Cameroon. Cameroon is homophobic, but the Lebanese community in Cameroon is even more homophobic. I think she really was afraid for me. She really was concerned about my growth. She wanted me to be happy and to flourish and to be my own person, but I'm talking two years later after I first came out and the whole ordeal with the hair came about. She knew that if I stayed there, I would never be able to be out. I would never be able to be openly in a relationship with a girl. She didn't want that for me, so she was like 'Okay you need to go.' She is still worried. We still call every day. She definitely was calling me every day making sure that I was okay; making sure that I was happy. There were a lot of times where I would be begging to go back home, I was having fun but I was homesick. She just kept being like, 'No, you need to stay here. This is good for you. You're gonna grow into this beautiful person and you're gonna be so happy.' A repeating topic with her was 'Oh people in the States are so open-minded. You'll never have to hide. You can be whoever you want.' She kept pushing me to stay here and it was really tough. I feel pretty grateful. I think it's the best thing she could have done for me. Had I stayed in

Cameroon or even in Lebanon, I think I would have definitely...honestly I probably would have committed suicide. I was unhappy. I came out and then everything shifted for me even with my friend group in Cameroon. The dynamics shifted so much and I suddenly felt like I didn't belong. I love Cameroon, it really was my home and I was so happy. I felt like I fit in and then I came out and then suddenly I didn't belong there anymore.

Nadia explored the impact of her mother's decision and sacrifice, and how this ultimately saved her in more ways than one. For Nadia, her mother was the ultimate ally and protector, by looking out for her mental health and ensuring that her daughter could flourish and be accepted. Jamil also shared a similar experience with his mother, and her stepping forward as the gatekeeper of the family, not just for Jamil but for his siblings as well. This excerpt illustrated the alliance that existed between mother and siblings, in strategizing what to share and when, particular with their father:

Right, yes. She's very much the gatekeeper to the secrecy. She knows everything about everyone and my dad is shielded from it. I feel that maybe that isn't the best relationship strategy that they have going on, it's not my place to judge what they're doing with that. My mom is definitely the gatekeeper of all the secrets. My dad works a lot. He works 12 hour days every day and comes home exhausted. She just doesn't want to add drama to his life. That's something that can be

appreciated... it's definitely something that maybe can be a good thing in certain moments. Where she can feel out his vibe and make sure that she's not ruining his day for no reason. Maybe wait a day to tell him something. But when it comes to holding onto a secret for ten years, I'm just like, 'Are you ever gonna tell him?' We've hidden car accidents and losing really expensive sunglasses or just dumb things, and then sometimes it can be more serious. There's a huge secret right now that my dad doesn't know and I'm not gonna go further into that. It's interesting because I know that it's something that she'll take to the grave because she's a very considerate person. She wants to make sure that all parties are okay, even though sometimes it's not the greatest method. Secrecy is not really a great thing. She knows the right thing to say; she's definitely Libra. I think that my siblings and I, we all go to her and we know that she's this little gatekeeper so we treat her as such. It's nice because she's always the ally that we have. In a world of enemies, she's the one person that you can be like, 'Hey we need to talk about this and no one else can know.' It's nice to have someone like that.

Similarly, Elham's mother took on the role of shield and defender when it came to protecting her daughter from prejudice and stigma in relation to her sexuality. Elham expressed the impact of her mother's acceptance:

I couldn't handle it if my mom saw me differently. I genuinely couldn't. If my mom couldn't accept me. I thank her so much for that truly. She defended me the other day from another Lebanese person! Another Lebanese from our church, our old fucking church! It was a pretty rude post, very very homophobic, very anti. My mom was like, 'that's rude!' The lady was trying to call my mom and apologize but it just goes to show how close minded people are still!

A few participants ($n = 5$) expressed not being out to their mother, or not receiving the acceptance that participants above described. For instance, Marwa described a bittersweet experience of feeling accepted by her mother in her identity, and still struggling to let go of heteronormative hopes and dreams:

Sometimes I laugh about it. Sometimes I think it's funny because as accepting as she thinks she is, those comments do tell me otherwise. I understand she still loves me and still will accept me but not accept my future. In the moments of those conversations, I get really frustrated. I get super frustrated because she aligns with my identity, she understands that, but she doesn't align with my future.

That creates disconnect.

In Zahra's case, her coming out to her mother was conditional, and was encouraged by her father's absence in their lives due to her parents' separation. Zahra reflected on the

divorce's positive impact on her relationship with her mother, and therefore the disclosure process:

When my dad was here, she was more caring for my dad. Cooking and all that. I mean she still cooks but. Her main goal was to supply for my dad.. she was his life. So she better make sure everything's good for him. She would have time for us but our relationship wouldn't be that close. She's still my mom. She still does her mother job and...I don't know...When they left, it was just me and her most of the time because my brothers each have their own lives, so it was me and her most of the time. So we built a stronger relationship.

Father's role in the process

For many participants ($n = 10$), fathers played a more subdued and distant role in the process overall. In fact, fathers were often described as more traditional and patriarchal, as well as less communicative overall, which led to less involvement on their part in the secrecy process. Furthermore, in many cases, fathers were kept out of the secret deliberately by participants and their mothers, due to a perceived lack of acceptance. Jameela explored the impact that her father's lack of communication had on the secrecy process, particularly in relation to her mother:

The communication piece. He doesn't communicate. He never says, 'I love you' to us. So it's like we have become stunted because of having that. Whereas my mom on the other hand isn't like that. We were trying to gauge whether he knew and his ideas about it and everything. Once, a couple years ago, he even asked my mom 'do you think Jameela is a tomboy?' And I think by tomboy he meant lesbian, but he didn't know the correct terminology. She was like, 'What? What do you mean?' And he was like, 'Does she like guys? I never see her with guys or anything?' My mom said 'I don't know. I don't know!' He's like, 'You're her mom: ask her' or 'How do you not know? Obviously, you know.' She's like, 'I don't know.' And then my mom walks up to me, we're in Vegas at the time, and she's like, 'Your dad just asked me! Your dad just asked me!' I was like, 'Oh, why didn't you just tell him?' She's like, 'I don't know! I don't know!' She panicked. Yeah, so is this all of us trying to figure out if he knows, what he'll think and how to tell him.

Jameela's father's silence around this subject increased her mother's stress, as evidenced by her panicked response to his inquiries. In this scenario, it was almost an expectation on his end that Jameela's mother would know what was going on, since he approached her for answers rather than approaching Jameela directly. This incident illustrated the

father's lack of involvement in the secret, and the family members' attempts to gauge his acceptance around Jameela's secrecy before including him in the secret.

Ghayab described a similar experience to Jameela, in that his mother was yet again the ally in guiding him towards maintaining the secret and keeping his father out of the process:

My mom has voiced, for various reasons, to keep it simple and just don't post it and don't publish it because people are gonna talk and it's gonna go back to your dad. It had more to do, I think growing up, when we weren't independent. Now I'm fully financially independent, so whether my dad knows and if he lashes it out, and doesn't give me an inheritance, it's whatever. I don't depend on him financially, so I'm okay with that. It was more when we were growing up and we were still dependent on him financially. I think that also is a key point: financially my dad always was the major influence. Because my mom didn't have the opportunity to have a full-time job and she was just a stay-at-home mom. He was really the one that was in control. Now it's a different story. Growing up he was the one in control.

In Ghayab's family, the patriarchal and traditional arrangement made it so that his father had financial control, which made it imperative for Ghayab and his mother to maintain the secret and keep his father out, to prevent Ghayab from losing financial support.

Therefore, Ghayab's mother took on a gatekeeping role to prevent rumors from returning to his father, and by doing so, sought to protect Ghayab from repercussions that may impact him and his future.

Ghassan described the alliance between him, his mother and his sisters around the secret to have brought them all closer together, and yet also operated in a way that highlighted their shared struggles with their father, and led to a rupture in the family. Ghassan described his experience of his father as rigid in his expectations, as well as a victim of his upbringing. In Ghassan's eyes, these elements made it more challenging to let his father in on the secret:

The fact that they knew something, that I opened up to them, for something that they knew was very personal, and that they knew but not other people like my dad, I think it does bring you closer because sharing a secret brings you closer. I do believe it. I think that's what happened. But also, I think what brings you closer is going through hardships together, so like we've all had issues with my dad, I'm not going to go into details, and the fact that coming out to him was problematic and that the reaction was not very pleasant and all of that, that brought us closer because it brought all of our issues together. Like coming out also brought out a lot of family issues with my father, and that brought us much

closer. So yes, keeping a secret brought us closer, but also unloading the secret and the repercussions brought us even closer.

So he found out that my mom knew early on. He was, he made her feel bad about it but not as much as I expected he would. It was kind of, one of the details for him, but it was not the main issue. I did not want my mom to be in the middle, and also like, I did not want him to unload his negativity on her because it could've easily gone this way, but it didn't. I think what happened is because my other sisters have had issues with him, my younger sister also right now is not on great terms with him. It turned into something much bigger and brought out other family issues. If I learned something from coming out to my father, it's that there is a better way to raise our men. I saw him as the child who is not able to process feelings. It's very sad, in a way he's a victim of how he was raised. You're this adult who is so capable and responsible, and yet intimate conversations in your family make you shut down, and you lose relationships, hopefully only temporarily. You're able to give up on important beautiful things because you're not able to accept that things go differently sometimes.

For Ghassan and others, fathers upheld the patriarchal and heteronormative expectations that made letting fathers in on the secret particularly challenging and unsafe. Ghassan shared his experience of letting his father in on the secret after a few years, and his father

expressing plainly that he expected grandchildren from his only son, the one who carried the family name:

Well the way my father works, is that he absorbs and then he will react a couple of days later. And I knew, I know how he functions, I knew that would happen, so he absorbed *chuckles*, and then a couple of days later, he called me. And he was, the thing is, my dad thinks that conversations are open between us and him, but he also doesn't realize that if things don't go his way, he shuts down completely. And that applies to other issues we've had in the family, and with my sisters. My father and my sisters would stop talking for a while, it was kind of cyclical. And he will pretend that he's understanding and listening, but then he will bring back his point, and if you don't go his way, then he blocks. So it didn't go well, it's not that there was yelling and a fight or anything, but there was more like a refusal to want to understand. Refusing to question his way of thinking or understanding of things. To him, he insisted that it was a choice. It was messy as in like, when I thought that he might start to understand, he came back to me with the exact same points. He pretty much told me that I owed him grandkids. When you meet my dad, you would never imagine he would react the way he did, he's a very worldly guy, very social, social butterfly, sweet talker, very diplomatic. But coming out to him made the conservative Arab guy come out. Which was never

who he was, but it's always there with Arab men, it's always there somewhere. So he said a few things where I was like "wow, I can't believe you went there".

For many participants, fathers were overall less involved and delegated many of the child rearing responsibilities to mothers, until their expectations were defied. As Ghassan described above, his father presented as a worldly, educated and open-minded man until his expectations were unmet, or his traditional values challenged. For participants who did not have their mother as an ally on the secret like Amal, her mother leaned into the patriarchal elements of the situation to gain leverage:

I just denied everything. I said we're just friends, I'm not gay, it's a phase.. I made every single excuse up because she also.. she would do this thing where she would call my dad. And at the time, my dad was more controlling over the family. So like the whole house would just crumble if there was a fight. It was.. it was not a good time. So, now.. she doesn't really use that as a threat. She just says "if your dad finds out, he'll have a heart attack", so she uses his health against you.

Amal expressed how this dynamic led her to deny her sexuality from her mother, due to the alliance that existed between her parents. For two other participants, the dynamic with their father involved involuntary disclosure, where their father confronted them and intimidated them. Nadia shared an experience of her father confronting her over

presenting as a tomboy, which ended with Nadia disclosing her sexuality followed by a physical altercation:

That's also another thing I didn't decide. Somehow he found out, and we were spending the summer in Lebanon. We were staying at a motel and he was like 'Let's go for ice cream.' I was like, 'Oh my god, great ice cream!' By then, I was probably 16. We go and he corners me in the car and he's like, 'Why do you behave like this?' We were in the car and he was like, 'You need to stop behaving like this. Why are you behaving like this?' I think he was referring to me being a tomboy and wanting short hair and being kind of masculine. He was like, 'Why are you doing this? Why are you acting this way?' And he again kept pushing me, and eventually I was like 'I'm gay' and he's like 'No.' We had a fight and then I think...I can't remember. I think I slapped him or he slapped me. I think we both slapped each other at some point. He had never...he's a very gentle guy so he had never raised his hand on me or anything like that. I can't remember though, I feel I also slapped him at some point. But he might have slapped me first. Then I left. I left and started walking in the middle of nowhere; in Lebanon in the middle of the night. Then he was looking for me. I didn't tell him. I didn't choose to tell him.

Every time I've come out, it's been pushed on me.

For Maha, physical safety as a result of involuntary disclosure was not a concern, however her father expressed disappointment in a way that marked her emotionally and caused intense guilt:

Yes, I went and watched the Imitation game. And we went into the back corner, just making out and so I didn't notice that my dad walked in. Saw it. Walked out. The movie ended and I walked out to the car and he was asking me how the movie was and who was there and I said, 'Oh, a big group of friends went! We were having such a great time! We watched this great movie!' And he was like, 'I know you're lying. You were with that girl. I'm gonna tell you right now you should never see that girl again. It's not good'. We didn't talk about what happened. We didn't talk about the making out; he was just like, 'I saw that you were with that girl. Just don't go again. Don't put yourself in this situation. You're going down a wrong path. Get out now before it gets too hard'. Oh, my heart dropped. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. The moment my heart dropped, I couldn't look at him for a good six or seven months. I couldn't look him in the eye. He knew what I did. He saw me. It's one thing...if he saw me making out with a guy, I still couldn't look him in the eye. But he saw me making out with a girl. And I was just figuring out my sexuality was... what my sexuality was and I didn't clearly know.

Elham shared her experience of the shift that occurred in her family dynamic once her father suffered his traumatic brain injury, and her experience as his caregiver. Elham explored her complex relationship with her father, and how her experience as a queer person shifted along with the power dynamic at home:

The head injury does play a significant role in that too. I think if my dad was in his right mind, I would attempt. Having had the opportunity to even be myself. I do feel I would attempt to talk to him about it. I'm just not willing to find out what happens because I know that in my dad's mind, that's a very wrong thing still. He still has his old school mentality and he's getting older and older. Our relationship is good as it is. I am more of a caregiver but I don't see absolutely any positive outcome from it. If my father didn't have the injury, it would be very scary. I think it would be very hard for me to even have explored my sexuality, let alone date or move out. I had a very different upbringing because I didn't have the typical upbringing once he had the injury. I just went and did my thing. I probably wouldn't even be here talking to you because I would probably still be in secret. He still tells me to this day, 'You need to find yourself a nice Lebanese boy or a nice man'. I'm like, 'Yes, dad! Yes! Yes!'

In Elham's experience, the patriarchal elements of her relationship with her dad had eased up, enough to give her the courage to explore her sexuality and develop romantic

relationships. However, Elham continued to prefer to keep her father out of the secret, due to wanting to preserve their relationship. If the injury did not drastically change the power dynamics at home however, Elham expressed that she would've been scared and completely closeted, due to prominence of her father's beliefs.

Siblings' role in the process

In many participants' stories, siblings were a considerable asset that participants leaned on for support and alliance in navigating the secret around their sexuality. Nadia both described their sister and mother creating a supportive group that helped strategize and navigate the secrecy:

When my sister came to live with us I would first run it by my mom and then she would call in my sister for advice. We would often strategize in the bathroom, in my mom's bathroom. It's where we would have our family meetings. The three of us. It was always the two of them and even now it's the two of them. Every time I struggle with something or I need something these are the two people I reach out to.

Maha shared that her mother had initially taken on the gatekeeper role and asked her to keep her brother out of the sexuality secret. However, her brother had opened up the disclosure process and allowed Maha to be open with him in turn:

My brother knows but we use the term 'flamingo' when talking about it. Because I'm not comfortable saying it to him yet. We're saying it to dummy it. So when I discuss ...where we're discussing my partner or anything like that, we'll use the word 'flamingo' as a code word. My brother is a...he passes for your typical white, Southern Comfort, Vineyard Vine wearing, frat boy. He's not the most accepting guy in the world, but he loves his sister and he will have the conversation with me and be secretly accepting on the side. And so my code word of comfort... he came up with the word 'flamingo' because he was like, 'You're gay! What the hell do you want me to call you, a 'flamingo'?' And so we just went with 'flamingo'.

For Maha, the mutual use of a code word conveyed acceptance and an alliance with her brother as they mutually agreed to use a less emotionally charged word to communicate around the secret. Similarly, Jameela expressed the feeling that having her sister by her side in this process provided a sense of comfort and safety: "Probably telling my sister because that opened the door to telling everyone else and having her support while I was in the rest of the process. Just having that comfort and fallback like, 'Oh, my sister will support me if shit doesn't go well'.

Marwa reflected on the significance of having her sister be privy to her sexuality secret, in what ended up being a mutual disclosure when both sisters revealed to each

other that they identified as gay. Marwa shared the initial awareness that this other person knew your secret, and the intense vulnerability of that process:

Because now that a secret was out, it wasn't the fact that we were both gay, but it was the fact that we both knew something that no one else did. We got a little weird for a second; we got weird for two weeks. We felt a little off. I think it was because of the fact that me and her had an intimate moment that was only dealing with me and her and had nothing to do with my parents fighting. It's that we're sharing with each other and having such a vulnerable moment with a family member that you've never done before. It shifted how I viewed her. Because now I'm like, 'Well, this person knows my secret.' I think in her head, she was like 'This person knows my secret, this could make or break me in the family and this person knows it now.' Even though the other was also gay, it was still...I think it was just processing the vulnerability of it all.

For Marwa, there was an acknowledgment of the immense power of the secret, and its potential to destroy family bonds. The act of sharing this secret with her sister was a meaningful, yet still a vulnerable one.

Extended family's role in the process

Many participants ($n = 8$) spoke about their extended families in one capacity or other and explored how these connections played a part in their secrecy process.

Participants spoke of how their extended family members were allies in the process in some cases and were let in on the secret, or were excluded from the secrecy. Participants outlined how they were able to rely on cousins, or aunts that were considered trustworthy, and where they felt they could open up and feel safe. Siham expressed in her story a desire to feel close to her cousins and her relationship with them meaning a lot to her, which led her to come out to them first:

When I called her, I told her and she was very supportive and she gave me the time to actually say it out loud, because it took a while. My other cousin I came out to her after a couple of months, the same thing, we're really close and I just wanted her to know. Because we talk about dating and stuff. I just...I don't want to lie. I don't want to say, 'oh, I don't know anybody' or 'I'm not interested in dating' or stuff like that. I was just lying when it comes to this and I don't want to because they mean a lot to me and I just want to tell them the truth.

Leila expressed a similar sentiment when she had the opportunity to process her sexuality with her cousin in Lebanon, who had come out to her first and by doing so set the stage for a reciprocation. Leila expressed the experience being a very “bonding” one, and allowed them to feel validated by each other’s sexual identity process:

But anyway, so she ended up like, just kind of blooming in her own little corner, and she kind of came toward me, and like I think we kind of found kindred spirits

in each other. And so it was very, it was like a bonding experience for us because she's like, hey I'm dating a woman and well, my mom is the one who told me like "hey by the way your cousin is dating a woman". I was like "oh my god, that's wonderful!". And I didn't say anything to her directly, she needed to come to me with that, and so um, she ended up saying something to me and I'm like, " hey, by the way, like I found women attractive too, I've never been in a relationship but I don't think it's weird, I think this is totally normal". So it ended up just being a very bonding experience, especially since I think it was scary for her. So her family is a lot more traditional, she's the youngest of four boys, her mom covers, her father is the oldest male of his household of thirteen, so he takes his responsibility very seriously. So it was a lot more scary for her. I think she was relieved, so yeah, it was nice.

Other participants expressed an awareness of their extended family's conservative views and beliefs, which deterred them from opening up to them about their secret. Chadi expressed his awareness of the matriarchal role that his grandmother played in his family, and felt unable to come out until her passing as a result of her conservative views. Chadi also expressed the fundamental role that his aunt played in facilitating him disclosing his sexual orientation to his brother:

I was upset with her, um, the way that I came out to her was in a melodramatic letter in that typical gay fashion *laughs*. And I did explicitly say not to tell anyone because I wanted it to be on my terms, and as far as I know the only person she told was my brother and her intentions were good, her intentions were.. she wanted me to feel like I wasn't alone in the family, which is profoundly nice um she she thought there was no one better to talk to me about it than him. And she wasn't incorrect about that. So at the time I was upset, but I didn't.. Yeah, it was a good thing.

For many Lebanese participants, extended families often represented the community that participants engaged in outside of their nuclear families, both in America as well as in Lebanon. Despite the significance of extended family in Lebanese families, participants did not share that their relatives played a crucial role in the strategizing around secrecy. Instead, their relatives seemed to be a symbol of Lebanese culture at large, and a place where participants could continue practicing their agency around secrecy. This could be due to geographical distance, due to participants' extended family living largely in Lebanon in the majority of the cases.

Decision Making Process Around Secrecy

In this section, participants elaborated on their process around deciding who to include in the secrecy process, as well as who not to disclose to. Participants were able to

articulate their filtering process of relatives, and how they decided that someone was safe to share with, or on the other hand, unsafe as a confidante. Factors considered enabled participants to gauge the likelihood of acceptance and trustworthiness of a relative, as well as the possibility of negative consequences if the secret was to be revealed.

Factors Considered

Geographical Location. Geographical proximity was a big consideration for many participants who lived in the United States, yet had family nearby, or on the other hand, abroad. The closer participants were to their family members, the more they were likely to report being cautious with their decision making process around the secrecy. Nayla shared feeling this tension in particular due to living with her mother, and therefore unconsciously holding onto the secret for as long as possible due to that factor. In fact, Nayla revealed her secret to her mother around her sexuality last, for that very reason:

It's funny; I've never really considered why she was the last one. I never intended it to be or it wasn't an intention like, 'Oh I'm not gonna tell her.' I live with her and I lived with her on and off for years. I think that's maybe why, subconsciously, because I live with her. She sees me every day and I'm like, 'We're already so intimate'. So to open up that layer then I have to face you every day and wonder.. are you gonna ask me a million questions? and things like that.

Adel had a markedly different experience around geographical distance; he shared maintaining the secrecy precisely because he was so distant from his family, and wanted

to make the most out of the limited time they had together in person, rather than fighting:

“Life is short and whatever is left in life - especially that I'm living far away - when I meet them we need to make sure we have good times together; instead of fighting. The train has passed.”. For Adel, the window of sharing and opening up to his parents had closed when he left Lebanon, and the focus became more about maintaining a positive relationship with his family despite the distance, rather than risking their bond for the sake of disclosure.

Jameela shared a similar experience to Adel, in that the geographical distance made it easier to maintain the secrecy as opposed to living close to his family: “This past summer I was with someone else, and she started to come around a lot. I would go there and we would spend a lot of time together so it was also gonna be obvious - and I was like, ‘Okay, now we're living together again’ because I wasn't living at home for three and a half years. It wasn't as hard to hide. I was here in the States, they were in Lebanon, [and] they would visit occasionally. They would visit twice a year, but just for a few weeks.”

Age and generational components. Several participants mentioned age as a consideration, and correlated age with views adopted, and the likelihood of being homophobic or sexist. Many participants viewed younger generations as more likely to

be accepting or liberal, and older generations as adopting outdated views that discriminated against queer folks.

Views and beliefs. Views and beliefs were a high consideration for many participants (n= 11). Gauging a relative's beliefs and attitudes towards queerness was something that was considered when trying to identify who was safe to disclose to, and who was not.

Elham explained this evaluation of a family member's beliefs:

Which is shitty, but it's my own judgment of them. Knowing what their beliefs are and where they stand on things. I have to assume where their morals and values stand in what they believe in. My assumption comes from...again the culture. The culture that we grew up in and the culture that they know. (...) Yeah, things that they believe; things that they say. I think of all of it. All of it. Having this conversation with you too: I'm nervous and I'm scared.

Nadia elaborated on the elements in her relative's life that played a part in shaping their views and beliefs, and gave her an idea of the level of acceptance that may be given by said relative:

I looked at cultural lifestyle and belief systems. I looked at where people lived, what areas they were from. Most of my family is from majority Muslim villages. To those people, I kept it...I still keep it a secret. They don't know. I looked at the way they treated their own children and how their own kids behaved. In terms of

my cousins, my older cousins for example, their dad was such a masculine guy...and they were very...The language they used when they would hang out with me and make all kinds of sexist and homophobic jokes. I would be like 'yeah, those people definitely don't need to know.' Because the language they used was very aggressive.

Ghassan shared having shared his sexuality with his sisters without hesitating, due to knowing their openness and being exposed to other sexualities through friendships: "Because my sister, I mean, I know how they think, they're very open-minded, both of them, they're you know, very progressive, they had gay friends.. and it wasn't a shock to them, like this guy is like never dating anyone and it takes a special talent in denial to like be shocked."

On the other end of the spectrum, participants shared refusing to share with some older family members due to gauging their views as old-fashioned or heteronormative, such as Amal who stated her reasoning for not disclosing her sexuality to her grandparents:

They'll just never understand it. My grandparents are very very old school. My grandfather doesn't want my grandmother driving on the highway by herself. And also they're old. I'm not gonna try.. two years ago, I got into a massive fight with my grandmother, because she was like" there's a guy at the church, and we're

gonna set you up”.. and I was like "I'm not getting married". And I've been saying this for years now. I'm never getting married. I don't believe in marriage.

Participants ($n = 10$) shared observing their family members closely to see their responses to the representation of non heterosexual relationships in the media, in order to identify where their relatives were in terms of acceptance and understanding of their sexuality. Jameela shared this process of observing her mother's reactions and ways of engaging with the dominant discourse in Lebanon around sexuality in order to get a sense of how her mother might react to her sexuality:

I also know my mom. I know she's very open-minded and more progressive than many in Lebanon. Because we watch a lot of American TV; they did live in the States; they used to go to the States all the time; and we have family here. We watched shows with lesbians or gay people and I once had the situation with a friend who was rumored to be a lesbian. My mom was just like, 'Why is everybody on her case? Just leave her alone. She was born this way'. She even said that and was like, 'She can't do anything about it'. I was like, 'okay' so I had that idea like, 'my mom understands this'.

Getting a sense of someone's views and beliefs around sexuality not only enabled disclosure and letting them in on the secret, but also dictated the level of closeness that participants felt comfortable allowing with that same individual and family member.

Jameela explained this by sharing the way she made decisions around secrecy with family members based on their views and beliefs:

I have some that I really don't mind telling. I know they grew up in the States and they've been living here their whole lives. I know they would not care at all and I know they're open-minded and progressive so I wouldn't mind telling them at all. It's just that I hadn't told my dad, so I was like, 'let me tell my dad first'. But I do have some cousins who still live in Lebanon and I know are super religious and super anti-LGBTQ+. I don't personally care if they know. I'm not that close to them. I'll see them once or twice max when I go visit.

The intersection between geographical location and views and beliefs is a marked one for these two participants, who share that relatives living in the United States meant more exposure to liberal views, which then conveyed acceptance of the participants' sexuality.

Closeness of the relationship. Closeness of the relationship was an important consideration for many participants ($n = 6$) when they shared the reasoning behind deciding to disclose to family members. Participant Siham explained that deciding to open up to her cousins was coming from a desire to have said family member truly know them, as well as not wanting to lie to them and hide aspects of her life with them:

For my two cousins, I just thought that we're really really close and I really wanted them to know who I really am. How did I come to that decision? The first

person I ever ever came out to was my first therapist. After two sessions I called my cousin and I told her (...) When I called her, I told her she was very supportive and she gave me the time to actually say it out loud, because it took a while. My other cousin I came out to her after a couple of months, the same thing, we're really close and I just wanted her to know. Because we talk about dating and stuff. I just... I don't want to lie. I don't want to say, 'oh, I don't know anybody' or 'I'm not interested in dating' or stuff like that.

Similar to Siham, participant Marwa shared her experience of the closeness and intimacy with her sister giving her a sense of safety, and being the driving force behind wanting to let her in on the secret:

She is less religious than everyone. She's not as religious, so I knew it wasn't a moral thing for her. Our values are very similar and again we're so close. We got potty trained around the same time. I helped potty train her. I was her little role model. We've always been doing the same thing with each other all the time. We were just best friends like she was the perfect person I thought to tell within my family. It felt the safest.

On the flip side, the lack of closeness was also a factor that encouraged maintaining secrecy. Several participants shared not feeling the need to share their sexuality with

someone they weren't close to, such as Ghayab who shared feeling okay with not opening up about his sexuality with his father due to the lack of closeness:

I don't feel the emotional connection to him where I need to be honest with him about it. I mean in an ideal world I wish I could just be intimate and more close to my dad, but he's made choices in opposition to that. He's made choices to break the family apart in his way. I'm okay having this kind of more business-as-usual level relationship with him. It's okay.

The lack of emotional connection and closeness experienced allowed for the presence of secrecy to exist. For Chadi, lack of closeness as well as religious views intersected to act as a catalyst for secrecy with his mother. Chadi explained how this influenced his decision making process in choosing to leave her out of the secret:

I never felt comfortable telling my mother because we weren't close. So since my parents divorced which I managed - I managed that divorce between the attorneys because I thought it was so desperately important they got divorced when I was I think 15 or 16, and I just didn't really have much relationship with her then. She became religious soon after that sort of like, just talking about Christianity all the time. And I just think you know, obviously LGBTQ people have a very strained relationship with religion for obvious reasons. So yeah, I didn't feel comfortable telling her.

Romantic relationship. For the participants who were currently engaged in a romantic relationship, the dilemma around selective disclosure took on a different dimension. Four participants shared that the struggle to maintain the secret would feel more painful if there was a romantic partner involved in the equation, due to it feeling like a bigger secret, involving a bigger part of the participant's life.

Siham explained that acknowledging the potential for the secrecy to become more challenging if she were in a relationship made it more difficult to commit to someone else, in anticipation of the challenges that would come up if the relationship were to become serious:

Yeah. I can't commit to anybody because they don't know I can't be there for them anytime because sometimes....If I really got close to someone it's really gonna be apparent. Then I would have to come out sooner than I'm ready to. So it really affects my ability to be committed and you know that also sucks as well. I feel it's because I'm not out and ...yeah. (...) It's hard to be too close, yeah.

Because I feel at some point it's either we're definitely gonna go for it...because anything serious, I'm just gonna have to come out to them. So I just cut it before it gets too close, because then there's no way I can hide it. If I'm in love, it's really gonna show.

Ayah shared the same feeling of apprehension as Siham at the thought of being in a non-heterosexual relationship, and knowing that it would be too challenging to maintain secrecy in that case, due to a desire to have their families know their romantic partner:

Because I feel the only way I would allow myself to be that vulnerable to them about a topic as serious as that, is if I actually was in a long-term relationship with a girl. In which I haven't. I'm not. I feel if that was the case, then I would feel the dire need to want them to get to know the person. I obviously would have to tell them because I wouldn't want to keep...because then it would go from just a secret to a huge part of my life. To the point where I can't hide that from them anymore.

Participants expressed valuing their romantic relationships so much that it felt “wrong” to keep such a big part of their life a secret from their families; Elham hypothesized that this would probably feel different for her if she wasn't involved in a romantic relationship:

Maybe it would be different if I wasn't with someone. But I'm with someone and I have been for a while. I share my life with someone else. I can't imagine keeping this...literally half of my life away. That would be tremendously hard. I don't think I could do it. I don't think I would feel okay mentally holding on to that.

In all these participant's accounts, the secret felt bigger and heavier to maintain whenever another person, a romantic partner, was so involved in their life.

Immigration Factors. A few participants shared their immigration status and journey as a factor to consider, whenever they contemplated selective disclosure and being completely out. One participant in particular, Nadia, shared her experience shifting depending on what was going on politically and how this might impact her status, since she was on student visa:

It was really stressful. I sometimes...I go between feeling panicked and being like 'This is it. I'm gonna die. I'm gonna get arrested at the airport as soon as I set foot' and being like 'I don't care. They can see whatever they want. I'm 26. I'm my own woman.' I go back and forth. I'm either shitting myself or feeling really confident it depends on the day. (...) Yeah. It varies. I think it depends on how stable I feel in my life; how financially secure I feel; how I feel about my documents. I'm here on a student visa. If I feel my student is about to get reported or something, I tone it down a lot. Because I'm like, 'I have to go back to Lebanon.' If I feel everything is fine; Trump is no longer president; I feel safe here then it's like 'Look! Look at me! I'm gay!' So it depends on the situation.

For Nadia, the temporary status of her student visa brought about a sense of uncertainty and instability, which then directly impacted her ability to be open about her sexuality, in fear of having to suddenly return to Lebanon and spend her life there, therefore returning to a completely closeted status with her sexuality. For other participants like Maha,

having an American citizenship helped create a sense of security when contemplating going back to Lebanon: “I know it would be hard for me to go back to certain spots in Lebanon. I think having an American citizenship is gonna make sure nothing bad happens to me, but I wouldn't want any hostility or violence or negativity surrounding my family”.

Concerns around the Future

Despite participants weighing numerous factors before making decisions around secrecy or selective disclosure, they still shared a variety of fears and concerns around the future that they also took into account throughout the ongoing process of decision making around secrecy.

Fears Around Disclosure. The overwhelming majority of participants expressed numerous fears around disclosure that they had to consider prior to making a decision. Amal illustrated how ingrained this fear had become for her after spending twenty years thinking about the potential fallout of disclosure:

So since that age, I've been building it within myself: you don't need your family, you can be yourself, if something happens, you're gonna need to move out, you're gonna need to make money, you're gonna need to be self-sufficient, financially stable, etc, etc. You're talking over 20ish years of constantly building this defense mechanism to... if this time comes that they ever do find out, I'll be.. this is my

thing. For example, I do fear that they would kick me out. I don't know that they would now, I've been living with cancer for three years, so I don't know that they would kick a cancer patient out on the street with her dog *laughs*, but I still have this inkling that they would not be supportive. And that is very much a "my way or the highway". So not so much now, but it could still come up.

For Amal, relying on her parents was not an option, because she anticipated a lack of support from her family, and still continues to. Amal expressed a fear of being kicked out, and not receiving financial or practical support from her parents if they ever did find out about her sexuality. Chadi also shared a similar concern of losing support and shelter upon his grandmother finding out about his sexuality, particularly the loss of the safe haven he found in his aunts' home due to his nuclear family grappling with mental illness and abuse:

Yeah, yeah, no, I really thought that she was like going to try to put me in conversion therapy or something which my father would not have allowed but um - I'll characterize it this way. Despite my grandmother's issues, you know as a closeted kid, I had to find a relationship with her. Now other than the unspoken drama, she lived with my aunt in his house that I'm living in now temporarily and so I was really afraid that if I had come out that would really harm that resource, because my father was an alcoholic, my mother was mentally ill, there were both

abusive, and you know being at home was unendingly traumatizing. Whenever I knew my dad was coming home, it was just like terrible, and so I would go to my aunt and grandmother's house which was literally two streets away, and spend a lot of time there, and there might have been some subconscious trauma, but it was worth it. Literally physically safe.

The loss of resources and support was a significant one for a few participants ($n = 4$) upon anticipating their family's reactions. Marwa shared the fear of losing physical safety and ties with her family upon disclosure:

It's gone all the way through like 'will it be physically dangerous?' He had been physically aggressive in the past when I was younger. Then we stopped living together so that stopped. That has cropped in my mind: 'Is it physically safe to tell him? Will he stop talking to me completely? Will he cut off the ties with my aunt and uncle and therefore my presence from me?'

For other participants who did not fear for their safety, their concerns centered around disappointing their parents, and losing the closeness that they had established with their family members. For Marwa, her fear centered around losing the connection with her sister due to the overall stigma around homosexuality:

There's also this weird pedophilic, incestual stigma on homosexuality, that I don't feel at all connected to that stigma. But in my head, it's a stupid thing to think

because I know we've never thought that way, but when it comes to being...when it comes to revealing that part of myself that passes through my head and I'm like, 'Will she think of me differently. Will she think of me differently? Will she look at me differently? Will she feel weird around me? We share the same room; will she feel weird changing in front of me? Those things do pass through my head, even though there's nothing there.

Marwa illustrated that despite knowing this concern would be completely unfounded, there was still an internal fear and worry for her that her sister would be influenced by the stigma, and allow them to impact their relationship. For Maha, the fear centered more around the idea of disappointing her parents deeply after all the sacrifices they made for her and her siblings, and how this led to a deep sense of guilt for her:

I was just. I think I didn't comprehend everything. I think I felt really guilty. I felt really... Damn, you did all this to bring us to the US and you spent your entire life trying to improve us and this is how... I did you wrong.' I just...I completely let you down. It wasn't what you wanted and needed out of a daughter. I feel like a lot of these dads are either these really quiet guys, who don't talk about the conversation. Or they're like, 'let me get the belt out and teach you'. He was the quiet guy. He never brought it up again. He gave me his opinion and that was that.

Reconciling Identities. For some participants ($n = 4$), one piece of the struggle for them was reconciling their identities as both queer and Lebanese, and not necessarily feeling like there was room for both, in social circles (e.g., Lebanese communities in the U.S. and Lebanon; immediate and extended family). Amal illustrated this tension between both identities well when she shared:

I've started meeting people who are Lebanese, who are out and proud gay, and it puts me in a very conflicted place. Because I was like, wow finally, my Arab-ness and my queerness can come together and they don't cancel each other out.

Because when you go hang out with the Lebanese, you don't dare say that you're gay. And when you hang out with the gay people, you don't really wanna say you're Lebanese. So the space I've created and founded is great, but again, it puts me in a conflicted situation with my family and my culture, and.. yeah.

Marwa shared a similar feeling when describing the lack of exposure around the intersection between Lebanese, Muslim and queer, and how this continued to influence the perception around these three intersecting identities:

I'm open to spreading...I see it as spreading more awareness and spreading more education on what it means to be Muslim, Lebanese, and gay. You can do all three. I just don't think [my mom's] friends have seen it done and [my mom] hasn't seen it done. To them, it's incorrect. If you've never seen a purple flower,

you're gonna think it's a mutation. And so to them they've never seen a gay Lebanese Muslim or at least one that's proud. To them they can see that as incorrect or...I want to stay proud about it, because I don't want it to be something that's like, 'Oh she seems she's not proud about it and she knows it's not right.' Does that make sense?

Siham also expressed her struggle in trying to fit into both Lebanese and queer communities at once, and how for her, it felt challenging still to fully be part of both:

I don't know if that Facebook... You kind of feel if you're Lebanese and you're part of the LGBTQ community, you can't be part of both. You feel if you're part of the LGBTQ you can't...or your Lebanese identity will be limited. It will limit it. You want to be part of both, because there are certain things in the Lebanese culture that you can't do. Like visiting family and telling them all about ...like if you meet someone and you want to take them somewhere, you can't do that. You got to hide a big part of yourself.

For Siham, the tension between both identities revolves around seeking acceptance and a space where both identities could exist without tension or rejection, where she could fully be herself and explore her queerness without repercussions, or feeling limited in her expression. Maha shared her longing to be able to reconcile both identities and embracing

being Lebanese and queer at the same time, not just for herself but for her wife and potential children in the future:

I think one thing that's hard about secrecy and coming out is the future. I think that's something that I think about very often. The day-to-day stuff is really easy. Keeping the secret day-to-day is so easy, and you get into your routine of what you're doing that day and that week and that month that it's so simple. You have those really hard moments but in general, it's really not bad. It's when you think about... 'Wow if I want to get married to this person, and if I'm in a relationship with a female or a trans person, I can't get married the way I always dreamed and thought about getting married'. I can't have a *zaffe* (*group celebration*) and have everybody there and get married in the church that I've always wanted to get married in growing up. I can't get married in the country that is a huge part of me and a huge part of my existence. My kids can't be Lebanese. Like that... gets me the most I think, of the secrecy and the coming out and the 'is all of this really worth it?' Because we all have that huge commitment to Lebanon. If you're an expat, or if you fled, if you grew up in the US ... whatever relationship you have with Lebanon you were either raised or you've experienced Lebanon enough to know that Lebanon is your country. Yeah, I'm American and I'm a patriot and I love this country. But I would go to war for Lebanon. You're Lebanese! It's such

a huge part of you. Especially now with the revolution and I hope we get these feminist rights. I hope we get more rights for our mothers and us. Even if we don't get queer equality in Lebanon, if I can just have enough rights to merge that tradition and that culture into my kids and be okay, and feel safe taking them to Lebanon. Even if I am just that crazy lady that adopted kids, they don't have to know the whole story but to be able to move that tradition and feel safe.

Continuing to be Lebanese, without having to deal with all the hardships. I think that's the hardest...that's the only thing that really is painful. Yeah, it's the effect and the future that that secret is gonna have on my long-term life and my kids, if I have kids, my kids life. And everything surrounding my home in Lebanon and the land, and it's like 'Can I take my kids and my wife or my partner to go and eat the Lebanese fruit that I kill for every summer?' That I need. A *khyara* (cucumber) in *Lebnen* (Lebanon) is so different. Every fruit is just so special in *Lebnen* and just going to a *wedeh* (valley) or just a place to have a picnic and relax. Or go hiking in the mountains. It's not even the parties and how extra we are at restaurants and cafes. It's the land and the part of like...I can buy a billion houses in Lebanon, but I can't give those houses to my kids. And have them carry a Lebanese passport and feel confident going back to their country. And feel that it's theirs. That's what gets me the most. The rest I don't care about. If I was American and I never

told my parents or my aunts and uncles like - that's fine. Generations after generations have done that. I don't care about that. But being able to have tasted American homosexual freedom and the stuff that I will never...I probably won't see in my lifetime as a Lebanese person...is rough. Yeah, yeah, it's like...(sigh) it's like you have it, but you don't. Yeah, it's like a really hard in-between space. That like, I can be totally free, but I don't want to be free because I want it...I want it the Lebanese way. The way that I grew up having it.

For Maha, the freedom she experienced having an American citizenship and living in the US was not what she longed for. Instead, it was being able to fully embrace her Lebanese identity while being queer, as well as being able to return to Lebanon with her future queer family and feeling accepted and free there as well.

Future relationships and marriage. Along those same lines, as participants expressed struggling with the secret feeling heavier and more challenging to hold onto if they ever met someone and developed a romantic relationship, similarly, many of them also expressed concerns over what their life might look like if they ever decided to get married, and have a queer long term relationship. Marriage seemed to be the point after which keeping the secret no longer felt okay, since it incorporated such a large part of the participants' life. The thought of concealing something so big from family felt

unconscionable for many participants. Rana shared her experience of avoidance and worry around the thought of her relationship becoming more serious:

I feel like I just got used to it. It's a thing in the back of my brain that I'm postponing until I can deal with it. I'm just accustomed to it. I just have to lie, that's just how it is. I mean when I think about taking [the] next steps in my relationship that's when I start getting anxious. How do I explain if I want to live with her...or something like that. What would I even do...yeah. So I just feel like postponing those thoughts.

Elham shared the same thoughts and concerns as Rana, and anticipated the difficulty of navigating the secrecy when confronted with the thought of marriage. Elham expressed choosing to focus on the people who do support her queerness, rather than continuing to worry about extended family's reactions:

I don't post my relationship online for them to see because that makes me feel uncomfortable. I'm weary and I'm hesitant and I know if I were to be like, 'oh...' I can't even imagine if we were to decide to get married one day, I haven't even thought about that stuff. And where that stands? It would be very difficult. That would be very very difficult to announce to my family. I think people would freak out. To me, it's not worth keeping things a secret. It's my life. It's my life and I'm

not gonna...Their acceptance or lack thereof...I have the people closest to me who accept me and that matters the most.

Strategies to Manage Secrecy

In this section, I will explore the participants' experiences and strategies around managing secrecy, and the way they navigated challenging situations with their families. Some of these themes involved family members' strategies as well, if and once they were let in on the secret; this also illustrated the alliance between participants and their confidantes. I decided to denote within the text if it was a family versus a participant strategy. This section will hope to answer two research questions: "What are queer Lebanese American young adults' experiences of shifts in boundaries and alliances as a result of family secrecy?" as well as "How do queer Lebanese American young adults experience family secrecy surrounding their sexual identity and relationship?"

Visibility Management

A few participants ($n = 5$) reflected on the role of adjusting their gender presentation, and its ability to allow them to blend in and evade questions in larger family settings. Jameela reflected on her own experience in this regard:

I don't know. It depends on the type of gathering. Maybe Christmas dinner wouldn't be such a big deal because I do have an aunt that doesn't dress feminine at all. We've theorized that she might be gay, but I don't know. So I don't know,

with my mom's side of the family it might just be whatever. But if it's a big event, a wedding or something and I come in a tux or suit or something. That would be like, 'what?!' It would have to be a more feminine looking jumpsuit. I don't know. For my sister's wedding last year, for example, I did wear a dress. For big events here, I still don't know what I would wear. I don't know. I don't like dresses. But I don't know what I would wear to a big event. At least in Lebanon, there seems like there's that expectation. Like, 'this is how you have to dress' or you stand out. Similarly, Marwa elaborated on the way dressing more feminine helped her maintain the secret and avoid questions:

It's not like I don't dress femininely. Femme meaning, tighter fitting clothing brings that...shows your assets of a woman. Just more feminine clothing; more colorful. I would wear more of that...I wear some femme clothing and masculine clothing. I like both, but I wouldn't wear... Oh, so people wouldn't question why I'm wearing a collared shirt. Questions like 'Why do you wear that? Why don't you put makeup on?' I don't want to answer those questions. In general I don't want them questioning me about it. But if they were to ever be like 'Why don't you like dresses?' I would just be like 'gay or not, I just don't like dresses.' You can be not gay and not like dresses. To avoid questions I would make sure I was femme, keeping the radar low.

In Marwa's experience, dressing more feminine made her less likely to stand out. Marwa elaborated on an experience with her father that illustrated how dressing more masculine brought up questions and suspicions around her and her sister's sexuality:

If he ever comments like 'Why do they dress that way? Why do they dress more masculine?' She's like 'They've always dressed like that since they're babies.' She just tells him like it's a normal thing. Because we are; we've always been a little more rugged. I think she tries to help him understand that that's just who we are, without telling him that it's because of being gay, it's just who we are. For example, at one of my cousin's engagements my dad asked my older sister like 'Are they gonna wear dresses?' And then my older sister was like 'I'm not sure. I'll have to ask them.' He's like, 'They better wear dresses.' My older sister was like, 'I mean, I'll let them know.' But he said something that makes me think he knows something. He said: 'They better wear dresses because...just because we know something's happening doesn't mean everyone else should know something's happening.' This makes me think that he has an idea that we're gay.

Maha shared a similar experience whenever she would be around extended family or visiting in Lebanon, and demonstrated her awareness of the Lebanese gender presentation norms and expectations. Not following those norms would mean standing out, and additional questions and scrutiny would ensue:

So to me, it's like...if you're in Lebanon and you're going out with your friends, or you're going out with family. You're sitting...you know, you go to a restaurant, you have to dress up, you have to put makeup on. You have to dress overly formal for what you're going to do. You know, you're sitting one leg over the other...like a certain way, your nails are always done, your hair is always done. You always have earrings on and bracelets on and you're gossiping. I know those sorts of certain things. It's how I blend in.

Boiling Frog Theory & Scaffolding

This strategy was used by the participants rather than their family members, in hopes of softening the blow and getting their family members more comfortable with the idea of the participant not being heterosexual. Marwa explored the intention behind scaffolding in this excerpt:

Yeah because I feel it's less dramatic. Let's say there's something, I know it sounds weird, paranormal happening in your house. When a door quickly opens, it scares you. If the doors slowly opens, you almost don't notice it, until it's fully open and you realize 'that wasn't open before.' If I tell one at a time, it's a lot of pressure for someone else. If I tell my dad, my aunt, my uncle...each one of them will feel pressure to keep a secret or it will become a big deal to tell the rest of the

people. Almost like outing me to everyone else. I just think it would be better that they all slowly realize.

Ghassan explored his intentions behind scaffolding, and how this allowed him to manage expectations of family members in an indirect way, and slowly ease them into potential acceptance in case of disclosure:

To kind of, start planting the seed, you know, like if it was ever gonna come out, at least at least I wasn't lying the whole time. And what I was staying like was partly true, like the little things that I said were not lies and while I did not think that I was ever gonna come out to him, I did not want to eliminate completely the options so I didn't want to make it harder if eventually it was gonna happen, you know. Because I know like.. I lost touch with that friend who used to have this crazy double life. I don't even know if he's out to his parents. I don't think he is. But if he were to come out, it would be so much harder, because you've led this whole theatrical life, so the expectations are even bigger on the other side.

For Ghassan and Marwa, planting the seed seemed gentler and less abrupt and kinder to their relatives, in comparison to a public coming out process. Managing expectations, and easing their family members into it came for them from a place of wanting to be considerate, and make the process less challenging or stressful for everyone. Amal shared a similar intention behind her narrative, and leaning on her feminist beliefs to lower

expectations around marriage. In Amal's case, she was seeking to address and manage heteronormative expectations, in case of potential disclosure:

I used to say that I just don't wanna get married. Then I used to say.. I don't believe in marriage because the origin of marriage was women being treated like fucking cattle. So I will bring that up. And recently, I tell my mom straight up, I will never marry a man. So over the last two years, I've been more expressive about being more of a man hater, in case I ever do come out, it's not so much of a blow. Which, I know my mom, she will still be shocked by it.

Deflection Strategies

Both participants and their families leaned heavily into deflection strategies to help manage extended family and relatives' expectations and questions. Deflection strategies ensured questions were kept at bay, and delayed the process of having to explain why they were not married yet, per heteronormative expectations. Maha shared the process in more detail:

When I was younger they would come up kind of like 'oh are you dating anyone?' or 'are you doing anything like that?' I would just say 'oh school is my priority', 'I gotta get through school', and 'I'm not focusing on boys' and that's like the most respectful thing you can say. And it's like people your age are like, 'oh you're that goody two shoes'. And parents and aunts and uncles are like, 'oh

you're such an angel'. It plays well when you're in school. And now when I'm out of school and I think it was as soon as I turned 24 or 23 people started calling on my birthday. They would say 'how are you? So when are you getting married?', or 'have you found someone?'; 'by 25 you gotta be married or been engaged or found somebody'. And I would just be like, 'oh I just started my career, I have to focus on my career first. I have to make sure that I'm stable and done and well set and ready to take on the world before getting married'. So that's where I'm at now. Curving the conversation: 'I'm still, I'm still early on.'

Leaning into school and career as a deflection strategy was a common strategy that many participants and their families adopted, due to the socially acceptable nature of such pursuits. Nadia elaborated on how her mother became involved in the deflection process as well, to help draw family members' attention away from her daughter's relationship status and marital prospects:

Yeah, one time this woman wanted me to marry her son. I'm educated. I'm good-looking. I'm healthy. Except for the septum ring, that's another issue. But other than the septum ring, I'm educated; I got degrees; I've got a job. I look okay. My family is all right. My mom is a respectable woman. My sisters are respectable girls. She was like...insisting too, 'I really want your daughter to meet my son and I think they would make such a good couple.' My mom was like 'no. She's

still in school. She really wants to focus on her studies. I think she's seeing someone else.'

Leila explored how she had become comfortable with deflections when faced with questions from her family, through subtle things like pronoun use when referring to the queer community to distance herself.

But you know, it's so easy to deflect, and like to find little loopholes, to not answer the question directly. Another thing is like, um when talking about the LGBT community, and I don't know if you've noticed this, I talk about "them", not "we". I think that's definitely kind of a defense mechanism of like, oh that community over there. I think that's definitely another mechanism. I think part of it comes from... I think it's just that it's so multifaceted, like not just protecting myself from potential questions.

Maintaining ambiguity. Rather than outwardly deflecting, some participants chose to lean into ambiguity in an attempt to draw attention away from their romantic lives. Jamil explained the process and how this connected to Lebanese culture overall:

Like I said, Lebanon is so fractured. There's all these different...I can't say that my household is maybe a traditional Lebanese household. Or maybe it is. I can't tell you. I think that there's this disconnect between reality and this illusion that people are putting out there. It's like those memes that are like 'expectation versus

reality.' We want to keep the expectation alive as long as we can. If they want to draw their own conclusions, then we just let them. As opposed to just feeding the beast we... let it do its own thing.

For these participants, letting relatives draw their own conclusions was a way to keep questions at bay, as well as managing expectations. Therefore, "keeping the expectation alive" prevented disappointment and scrutiny from developing. For Jamil, creating a sense of ambiguity also allowed him to get some distance and not care as much about other people's perspectives and opinions. In this way, this helped him protect his mental health, and reduce the stress of having to navigate this process:

I'm gonna leave the sense of ambiguity because I genuinely...I stopped caring because I had to. Prior, when I did care; when I was so afraid, it was eating me alive. My hair fell out when I was 17 and I think it has something to do with it.

When I was able to finally accept myself and my situation and what's going on: I was able to throw the fear out the window. Obviously I'm not gonna...I don't know.

Denial

Several participants expressed the use of denial as a coping strategy used by their families to help manage and cope with the possibility of their child not being heterosexual. Despite suspicions and inklings, parents did not confront the subject

directly and instead chose to let it go. Siham described her mother's questions and suspicions around her current relationship, and ultimately her choice to accept her daughter's explanations rather than pushing for a confrontation.

I always feel...she kind of possibly...I think she's in deep denial. When they talk about that subject, I defended it. Then my brother, I feel, is possibly in denial; he's like, 'Oh no, she has to advocate for the LGBTQ because she's a therapist. She should accept everyone.' It's like NO! Not because I'm a therapist! No, I accept them! I advocate for them, even if I wasn't in this field. She once suspected something between me and the person I'm currently seeing and she just let it go. She was living around an hour from me. I used to go all day and spend the day there. I used to tell them, 'Oh it's just because she's far away.' And it was during COVID. I'll just spend the day there. I'll take my work. I was working from home. I'll just take my work and work there. Spend the day. I think she...I think when I was advocating, because there was like a time where she would...that topic really came up several times. It came up. She's like, 'Oh what do you go and do there all day? What do you do?' I was like, 'What do you mean? She's my really good friend and I go and see her all day and she's far. That's why I stay there.' Then she's like, 'Oh okay'. But she was saying, 'I'm suspecting something with her' in her tone of voice.

Suspicious from family members did not seem to lead to direct and open conversations between some participants and their parents. Amal explored how despite her mother's suspicions, there never seemed to be a direct acknowledgment of her sexuality or relationships. Instead, suspicions were communicated in an indirect way, that allowed Amal's mother to continue to avoid acknowledging the elephant in the room:

Actually, there is one thing I need to mention. When I bring girls home, my mom knows the difference between a friend and someone I'm dating without ever telling me. So I'll bring friends home, and we'll go up to my room, hang out, close the door, chill, grab a drink downstairs.. she doesn't say a word. If I'm bringing home a girl I'm dating, and we're headed upstairs, she will say in Arabic "do not close your door". I don't know if she realizes if she does that.. but she does that. I'm telling you, I was dating this one girl, and we were sitting on the couch, we're sitting close together, and she's not happy about that. And we were heading upstairs, and she was like "Where are you going?" and as we're going upstairs, she says in Arabic so the girl doesn't see that she was talking about her, she was like "Don't close the door". She knows. Somewhere deep down inside, she knows that something is not "right", and she knows that.. maybe she senses. She's a mom, she's not stupid. They do have this sixth sense thing. So she knows that something else is here. Maybe she doesn't want to acknowledge it to herself, I don't know.

Amal reflected on how this dynamic could tie into her mother's lack of direct acknowledgment and naming of what was at play, while still being able to maintain denial around this very issue. In contrast, Maha elaborated on how her mother's approach in adopting a gatekeeping role allowed her to maintain denial around her daughter's sexuality, and to delay having to deal with it:

I don't know why she thought she needed to protect my brother, but protect him from what she thought was temporary and probably protect herself from dealing with it. I think she said for Lent this year, she is praying to accept me as who I am and accept the situation. And so to me, I think she spent a whole lot of time denying it. And thinking this is just a mental thing and a phase, to now being 'This could be a phase, this could not be a phase, this could be a phase that she sticks with for her entire life; but I need to accept it for who she is'. Yes. I don't know how long it will last. I think it will go back to denying it. I think a part of her is still praying that I'll change. Some part of her is trying to accept it.

Despite trying to prolong facing the issue of her daughter's sexuality, in Maha's mother's case, confrontation did occur sporadically whenever the grief and tension was too much to hold onto internally. Only then, was the subject ever brought up between them, before going back to ignoring it for months afterwards. Maha further elaborated on how this denial has impacted their relationship and created tension:

It depends on the mindset that she's in. She knows certain things, and she's like, 'don't lie to me. Just tell me!' And there's other moments that, when you tell her, she goes on this rant, 'What are you doing to your life?! This is bad, get out of it! When are you gonna realize that this is wrong and when are you gonna get married and give me grandkids!?' I don't think she tries, because it has built up in her head to the point where it comes out. Not because she thought about it and she's ready to have the conversation. Yeah, this has been a secret for six months. We haven't talked about it in six months. I'm gonna bring it up and there's one spurt of ten minute conversation, and then we're both gonna hang up on each other. And then we'll never talk about it again for another six months. Yeah, because if you don't relieve the pressure for the pressure cooker then something's gonna come up...and some other conversation with somebody else that you don't want to know. She's not gonna want to vent to my aunts. And if she's sitting there...I'm at the point where my cousins are married or getting married or are in a long-term relationship in which a marriage is gonna happen in another year or two. And so she's talking to my aunts and my aunts, who are telling her about how their new son-in-law, or their future son-in-law, is all these great things. And she's in her head being like, 'My daughter doesn't have that. I can't gloat about that. I have nothing to gloat about'. So that's when it comes out.

Maha's mother was clearly still struggling between accepting her daughter's sexuality, and bargaining with her daughter whenever keeping the secret became too painful for her. Denial was only effective enough for her to keep it in for some time, before the tension and grief would get too painful and lead to an outburst.

Unspoken Consensus

The presence of "unspoken consensus" (Jhang, 2018, p. 169) was a bittersweet reality for a few participants; this strategy of omission and silence was adopted by their families in an attempt to cope or preserve peace. Parents knew their child's sexual orientation, and their child knew that they knew, however the open secret was never mentioned explicitly. For example, Adel's experience with his family was captured by his frequent use of the "don't ask, don't tell" idiom to illustrate his family's way of coping:

When I was twenty in that room at night... and then in Atlanta when I said I had the experiences, and then when I moved in with somebody, it happened over the years little by little. What saddens me is I really thought that things were gonna accelerate since 2014. They didn't. Because I feel in my head, *drob frem* (hit the brakes), because, to me.. okay, I did my part. I want her now to do her part. I thought she needed her time to absorb it. Now over time I feel there are instances, like when I was sick, deep inside, she's happy that someone is in my life. But she

really doesn't know. The problem is until now it's 'don't ask; don't tell.' They don't know that I'm married.

Adel expressed a desire to slow down for his family to catch up to where he was, as well as his awareness that they preferred to keep the secret to remain as an unspoken thing between them that wouldn't be directly acknowledged or talked about. For Amal, having this secret remain unspoken also allowed the family to avoid the inevitable tension that might come up as a result of naming the secret:

And on New years actually, my dad has this thing, he has to start and finish the New Year with us. And this New Year, he was like *kes* (cheers) whatever, and he said "I want you guys to promise me that no matter what, every New Year, we are together. If you have significant others, I want you to bring them". And I'm like.. "I don't want to talk about this. I'm never gonna have a significant other because you guys are never gonna accept my significant other". And I said that outloud. Yeah.. and he's like, he doesn't.. it's not like he's stupid, maybe I'm using big language. My mother got it, my sisters got it, and my middle sister was like "Let's change topic, let's not talk about this". Because it'll turn into a disagreement. When we get into fights, it's very very tense. Very very fucking tense. You can hear the walls cracking.

In Amal's family, talking about the secret indirectly, and maintaining the silence around it allowed the family to preserve their connections and harmony, and avoid conflict.

Amal reflected on how the unspoken consensus dynamic felt like with her mother especially, even as Amal attempted to open up the subject on her end:

To my point, when my mom was talking about "what are we gonna do, your sister is dating this Iranian guy?", I was like "I don't know. I've lied about all the relationships I've been in because I knew you wouldn't accept those people". And I never say he/she, I just say "those people". And I've said it so many times, and in so many different ways, waiting for her to ask more about it.. she never does. She never pushes. On certain things, if she knows the answer is gonna be "it's a woman", she never pushes about that. We don't wanna know, because we don't wanna deal with it. Middle Eastern people don't ever wanna deal with something that's uncomfortable, or difficult. They would rather just not talk about it.

Several participants connected this strategy as belonging to Lebanese culture in general, or even Middle Eastern culture overall. Ghassan expressed a similar sentiment to Amal, and commented on Lebanese culture's way of coping with discomfort and tension around sexual identity:

Well, Lebanese culture is very.. The way we deal with things, I don't know if I can generalize, but my experiences show me we aren't very expressive of

sensitive subjects and we like to pretend a lot. Play the pretend game. Everything is fine, the food is delicious, and that's it. For example, I have a cousin who is very feminine, it's so obvious he's gay, and everyone knows but no one says it. But they will say things like "Oh he's not gonna get married". Like they refer to it, but they do not name it, and as long as they pretend it's not a thing, that it's not happening, everyone is fine with it. But as long as you name it, and address the issue, that's when Lebanese culture gets destabilized, because we aren't good at uncomfortable conversations. And that applies to a lot of things, not just this, really any uncomfortable situation. You ignore it until you can't ignore it anymore.

In Ghassan's experiences, "play the pretend game" and "ignoring it until you can't anymore" was a direct manifestation of Lebanese culture's discomfort around something that many may be aware of, but reluctant to bring into light or draw too much attention to. Naming it and making it explicit has the potential to make the open secret impossible to ignore.

For one participant, Zahra, not talking about it was a positive indicator, particularly in contrast to her friend's experience, which Zahra described as "a nightmare":

It's fine [because] I'll have my friend, she's Mexican and her parents are real strict. And it's like a nightmare. [It's] like hell and a nightmare for her because her mom brings that up every day. So it's fine. Basically and I know she's gonna talk about it, [but] it won't be bad. She just tries...to [intelligible] stuff in my head that maybe I'll change maybe...she was never hurtful to me. She never said hurtful stuff to me, compared to my friend.

This illustrates the way an unspoken consensus could feel positive or comforting for participants, who have witnessed greater conflict in their friends' or relative's lives. The absence of hurt and conflict seemed greatly preferred in Zahra's eyes, even in the absence of conversations and openness.

Labeling Around Romantic Relationships. Part of the omission and silence strategy adopted by the participants and their families was the conscientious lack of use of labels to continue to avoid bringing the secret into the spotlight. Rana described masking the nature of the relationship by presenting her girlfriend as a "good friend", in an attempt to maintain connection with her parents, who were not aware of her sexual orientation at the time of the interview:

Well, I lie. I lie about the nature of my relationships. I'm dating a girl, they've met her. They've sat with her. They love her, but they think she's one of my good friends. Which kind of makes it easier that she's also a Lebanese girl because we

can just go out in public and no one thinks twice about it. It's just lying and covering up is a strategy. It sucks. It really sucks. It sucks because I know how much they love her and my mom has said things to me like 'I wish I had a daughter-in-law like her.' She's probably thinking I want to hook her up with my brother or something. It's just so weird sometimes.

Adel illustrated how the lack of use of the term "husband" or "partner" allowed him to protect his mother from discomfort, as well as maintaining a sense of ambiguity around his relationship, despite them knowing of his sexuality:

Personally, I don't care. I will say it but my mom is the one that's told me not to say it. She even says, 'Just let them figure it out. You don't need to be in their face about it. You don't need to...At the same time, I make it a strong point not to ever call him my friend. If I'm introducing him to a new family member, I say 'this is Hadi.' I don't say 'this is my husband' or 'this is my friend.' I just say 'this is Hadi.' Period. You can take what you want with that information, because I'm not gonna make my mom feel uncomfortable. I'm not gonna make the other person feel uncomfortable.

Maha expressed a similar sentiment when she discussed her lack of use of the term "partner": to protect her family's feelings, and avoid drawing too much attention to her

sexuality. This allowed the family to maintain a semblance of normalcy, rather than having to face the issue directly:

I go by gay or queer. Queer works for me. My mom and dad know. I live with my partner. So they know, but it's not discussed. They've never said 'you're gay' or anything like that. But they know. I think it's the same reason why I'd want to keep it a secret now. And still kind of maintain that secrecy. I've never gone out to my mother and said, 'this is my partner of a few years'. I will never do that. I think it's because I just want to preserve the Maha that they have always thought I was and the person that they want me to be. I just kind of want to preserve that family picture that they have in their head.

Participants seemed willing to take part in their family's strategy of omission and silence, in the unspoken consensus to preserve harmony and protect their parents from the discomfort of having to face the problem directly. By doing so, participants could exist in an in-between space where the secret was open, but the family was able to proceed along as if it wasn't impacted by it.

Use of Deception

Taking the omission a degree further meant participants and their families often had to engage in deception to maintain the secret, both from within their families as well as from outsiders. In Nadia's case, her mother and sisters were allies and accomplices

that helped her in the strategizing, creation and maintenance of the lies around her relationship status:

I would be doing so more closely to my mom and my sister, my oldest sister. It was both of them. When my sister came to live with us, I would first run it by my mom and then she would call in my sister for advice. We would often strategize in the bathroom, in my mom's bathroom, where we would have our family meetings. The three of us. It was always the two of them, and even now it's the two of them. Every time I struggle with something or I need something, these are the two people I reached out to. At this point, we're such good liars. I could make up a boyfriend on the spot. I could invent a whole life narrative for me right now on the spot and I wouldn't even think...I think both of them are able to do that for me too. We can course correct as we lie. In case one of us fucks up. For example, I had a guy called Jake and my mom said Mike, so then we were like 'his first name is Jake, but his middle name is Mike.'

Nadia explored how her mother and sister were always there for her when she needed them, and always seamlessly stepped in to come up with a lie so as not to arouse suspicion in the eyes of extended family. Nadia also illustrated in this example how coordinated and connected they were as a family, so as to easily navigate complex situations.

Social Media Management

A few participants lived away from their extended families, who would still be residing in Lebanon. This necessitated the reliance on social media to maintain connection with family members, and therefore, managing social media accounts became another space to navigate carefully and intentionally in order to maintain secrecy.

Participants such as Nadia explored how they had filtered their social media connections into different tiers, in order to allow safe people more of a glimpse into their married life and expression of queerness, while restricting others from having access to the same content:

I do struggle with social media. I never know how much to put on there because I never really know who's seeing it. On Facebook, you can make a list of people who want to see your posts. I have different degrees. I have like 'definitely no queer feminist content' and then I have close family who can like see my wedding posts, pictures me of my and my wife and what we're up to. I have tiers of gayness that I allow. I don't know if that makes sense. Yeah, there are different lists for different tiers of gay.

Adel expressed a similar level of awareness and continuous editing of social media content, which illustrated a level of caution and intentionality in what type of content was allowed:

For example, for Facebook or Instagram now you have your timeline. So I'm censoring my Facebook. If you go to my Facebook you realize, if you're stalking me, you realize there's something going on between them two. But essentially there's nothing. I'm not sharing happy Anniversary, happy Valentine's. My status is not married, so my Facebook is the space that is open to both worlds. I've been navigating it just fine and nobody seems to comment on anything that is exposing. I didn't have to put anybody, maybe once in my life, like sometimes people say 'we miss you guys', and if somebody's reading that, they would infer. But there's nothing explicit, and so it's been fine. I continuously monitor the situation and make sure that I'm not outed completely.

Other participants, such as Nayla, chose to walk the fine line between posting some content that expressed their queerness, with enough ambiguity so as to let people draw their own conclusions:

For example, on Instagram I have this picture posted and the caption is like, 'still here, still queer!' But I wrote queer with a 'K' and I post things about my research and interests. So if they want to speculate they can ask me.

In short, social media was a space that participants navigated with the same level of awareness and intentionality that they did in interactions offline, and this strategy allowed

them to continue to maintain secrecy with extended family members that were deemed unsafe.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Research surrounding Middle Eastern families has been scarce, particularly within the field of Marriage and Family therapy. This study's aim was to investigate the lived experiences of Lebanese American queer youth navigating family secrecy around their sexual identity and their queer relationships. The contribution that this study makes is my focus on secrecy and the role it might play for those queer young adults navigating a rather complex relational landscape. As mentioned previously, we cannot explore the experience of disclosure without diving into the experience of secrecy; for many queer Arab youth, the two are intertwined, particularly as they made decisions around selective disclosure, and who to let in on the secret.

The three research questions in this study aimed to bridge the existing gap in the literature that ignores the experiences of Middle Eastern families around queerness and sexuality. The goal was to highlight the essence of the experience of Lebanese American queer youth as they negotiated with family members around their secret and attempted to reconcile their seemingly discordant identities—Lebanese American and queer.

Throughout the study, participants explored the impact that Lebanese culture had on their experiences, and these cultural elements are interwoven throughout their narratives in such a way that it would be challenging to tease apart the role that culture played in how participants answered the protocol questions in this study. Therefore, Lebanese culture is

front and center in the study. The first research question, “How do queer Lebanese American young adults experience family secrecy surrounding their sexual identity and relationship?” was answered through the description of their decision-making process around family secrecy, the factors weighed and their fears around their futures. The second research question, “How do queer Lebanese American young adults interpret the process of family secrecy and are impacted by family secrecy?” was answered through the themes embedded within the secrecy process, such as the emotional impact of the secret, the meaning making process, as well as the impact of the secret on their family relationships. Finally, the third research question aimed to answer the way the secret has affected the family on a structural level: “What are queer Lebanese American young adults' experiences of shifts in boundaries and alliances as a result of family secrecy?” This question was answered through the participants’ exploration of strategies around the secrecy, how this process involved different family members, and by doing so, how the secrecy has reshaped family boundaries.

Lebanese Culture and The Centrality of Family Preservation

In the second chapter, I discussed the Lebanese cultural factors that a few studies have explored, such as the importance of the family (Abbudabbeh, 1996; Haboush, 2007). Haboush (2007) emphasized the importance of family within all Middle Eastern cultures, particularly the importance of “maintaining family stability, honor, [and]

cohesiveness” (p. 188). Moreover, it was reported that children often were encouraged to look within their families for solutions, rather than relying on themselves. This relational dynamic was directly corroborated in my study, where a large number of participants instinctively sought solutions within their families for support in strategizing their secret, rather than relying on themselves or separating themselves. Only two participants chose to maintain secrecy alone, without turning to their families for guidance.

It also is impossible to discuss Lebanese culture without discussing the importance of shame or “*ayb*” as a concept and cultural factor, one that is wielded to ensure that children do not bring dishonor to their families, particularly in the eyes of others (Bierbrauer, 1992). An awareness of family expectations, and what would bring shame to the family, is therefore necessary to successfully navigate this complex landscape. Participants often observed how their family members, immediate or extended, responded to the disclosure or gender presentation of other distant relatives. This observation allowed them to gauge the way that their families made sense of queerness, and how coming out might have a ripple effect on the family’s status and reputation. Participants explored how they were impacted by this awareness, and how it motivated them not to prioritize coming out for the sake of individual fulfillment, but instead to consider family first.

Concern over image or the concept of “saving face” (Semaan, Dosono & Britton, 2017) is an important one in Lebanese culture. Impression management is maintained on a communal, collective level rather than on an individual level such as in Western societies (Semaan et.al, 2017). Therefore, upholding shared values of the group is an important facet of impression management within Lebanese culture. The way that an individual is perceived by a collectivistic, high context society is a direct reflection of their families and their values. Many participants ($n = 9$) articulated an awareness of this element of Lebanese culture, and how this cultural factor played a large role in their parents’ reactions around sexuality and queerness, as well as the motivation for secrecy.

It is worth noting that the concept of “saving face” directly connects to another layer of my study, which is the purpose and function of secrecy. Vangelisti (1994) detailed how secrecy within families could have multiple functions depending on context. One function that Vangelisti explored was how secrecy could function as a way to protect the family’s image, especially if the secret went against the desired image and values that the family sought to project. This finding also was clearly delineated in this study of Lebanese American queer young adults, where multiple participants ($n = 9$) discussed how the secrecy allowed them to protect their parents’ reputation and to avoid judgment as a repercussion. Vangelisti (1994) also mentioned that another goal of the secrecy was to ensure group cohesiveness, which enabled individuals to become part of the group

through rules, traditions and rituals. In this way, it is theorized that secrecy could function as a way to protect and maintain the family's structure from within, and ensure that everyone is upholding these shared values (Semaan et.al, 2017).

Finally, all participants talked about how they had to manage and negotiate heteronormative expectations expressed by their families and communities in order to preserve family reputation and belongingness. For instance, in this study, some participants discussed the pressure on men in the family to have children in order to preserve and maintain the family name. A significant gender role expectation that is worth noting that is particular to Lebanese culture, is the pressure on men in the family to have children in order to preserve and maintain the family name. Interestingly enough, all participants talked about how they had to manage and negotiate heteronormative expectations expressed by their families and communities in order to preserve family reputation and belongingness. This showed up as focusing on ways of expressing oneself through gender presentation, conducting oneself in family gatherings, and focusing on appearing in a way that allowed participants to blend in and avoid scrutiny. Participants expressed this tension between their desire to be their authentic selves, and living up to cultural norms and expectations around gender presentation in settings where coming out was not safe. Female identifying participants in particular commented on the pressure to dress and appear feminine, such as having long hair and wearing skirts and dresses, in

order to pass as heterosexual. Interestingly, those who decided not to live up to these expectations were often seen as succumbing to Western influence, which in a way represents a view of them as no longer fitting into Lebanese culture.

Impact of Secrecy on Family Structure

Family's Role in the Process

The majority of participants described the role of their families as assisting them with the maintenance of their secret identity and romantic relationships. What stands out in particular is the involvement of the mothers in the secret-keeping process, and their role in gatekeeping and shielding the participants from potential repercussions within the family. Mothers often were front and center in assisting with strategies to maintain the secret, bringing in other alliances such as the participants' siblings. According to participants, mothers ensured that less accepting family members were kept out of the secret. These family preservation strategies seem to align on the surface with research on the patriarchal structure of Middle Eastern families (Abudabbeh, 1996; Haboush, 2007). However, in my study, the reality of maternal role and power proved to be more nuanced than what is often described in research on Middle Eastern families. For instance, more than providing emotional support, mothers used their influence to ensure that harmony was maintained and that their children were protected from the repercussions of not ascribing to heteronormative expectations. They were agentic and strategic behind the

scenes by maintaining the semblance of a heteronormative structure. In family systems that are structured to abide by heteronormative expectations (e.g., Middle Eastern families), mothers shouldered the burden of perceived non-compliance and took on the majority of the emotional labor in contrast to fathers. Thus, it can be theorized that it is no coincidence that the majority of participants had their mothers involved in the maintaining of the secret ($n = 14$), whereas fathers were only mentioned when they were largely left out of the secret ($n = 8$). Despite fathers' lack of direct involvement in the secrecy itself, fathers remained a salient part of the dynamic through what they represented, which was commonly patriarchal and conservative beliefs mirrored in Lebanese society. In many ways, the secrecy functioned as a way to protect fathers from having to deal with the socio-emotional ramifications of it, and it could be argued that the fathers' silence emphasized that dynamic further. Only one participant actually disclosed to her father first due to having a close relationship with him. This observation does bring up a call for further research on the unique roles that mothers play in this process, and how maternal power and agency may potentially connect to the gender and cultural socialization process of queer young adults within Lebanese communities. For example, some participants' mothers played a crucial role in paving the way for their children to defy cultural and gender expectations, by being single mothers or breadwinners and choosing not to ascribe to heteronormative standards. Furthermore, it is interesting to

note that several participants referred to being aware of their mothers, not fathers, being potentially blamed for their children's queerness; perhaps, it is because childrearing still remains the responsibility of mothers in the eyes of many. This finding might explain mothers' desire to be involved in and control the secrecy process to an extent given an outing outcome might directly reflect on them and their perceived inadequacy as mothers within the Lebanese community. It would be interesting to explore Lebanese mothers' lived experiences in this complex and challenging space of wanting to support and protect their children, as well as their sense of responsibility for preserving the family's image in their communities.

Participants also reflected upon their mothers working through their ingrained homophobic and heteronormative beliefs while also attempting to navigate the meaning of their children's queer identities. Participants reflected on their mother's willingness to try to learn and understand their child's queerness, despite the clash it created with their religious beliefs. Mothers who struggled visibly still attempted to negotiate with their children around disclosure, despite the distress they were experiencing. Participants also spoke of their mothers relying on their religion to cope and work through their fears, disappointment and ingrained beliefs about queerness. Mothers often found themselves caught in between two worlds; the traditional, family-centered, religious world they grew up in and raised their children in, and their child's queerness. By being so central to the

secrecy process and an important link for their children within the Lebanese culture and extended family, mothers embraced a bigger role within the family structure, by being the trusted gatekeeper who guided participants with disclosure decision-making, as well as strategies to adopt to maintain the secret. Mothers often seamlessly stepped in to curb relatives' questions, and to manage the fathers' suspicions. Being fluent in the language of Lebanese culture and society allowed mothers to transfer their knowledge to their queer children to make the process easier, and protect their children and their family by minimizing the risk of conflict and stigma. Despite the patriarchal nature of Lebanese families, mothers clearly played an influential role in this process, and dictated the way conversations took place around the secrecy, and who was included, whether it be siblings or relatives who were deemed safe. Furthermore, mothers' level of openness and acceptance around their child's queerness played a role in how much control they wielded over the gatekeeping process, and whether they discouraged their child from coming out to other family members. The more mothers struggled with their child's identity, the more uncomfortable they seemed to be around their child coming out to others, and the more they needed to manage the dissemination of information.

Siblings and extended family relatives played a more supportive role in general in the participants' lives, and acted as a shield in some cases to protect their sibling and ensure their emotional safety. Participants spoke fondly of their siblings' contribution to

the secrecy process with regards to strategies adopted, and expressed feeling supported and accepted in a majority of the cases. A few participants even spoke of a shared code co-created between them and their siblings or cousins, that was used to facilitate conversation around the secret, which created ease of communication between them and their confidantes without creating discomfort. This finding illustrates the depth of the alliance and support that existed in many of the participants' stories with family members within nuclear or extended families in their age group.

Gatekeeping

Scherrer, Kayzak, and Schmitz (2015) found that gatekeeping's function was to help manage the dissemination of the information. This played out as the gatekeeper offering advice to their queer child about who not to disclose to, or not including their romantic partner in a family vacation to avoid raising questions. Gatekeeping as a role was found to be adopted by several family members (e.g., mothers, siblings, aunts), sometimes to the request of the participants themselves ($n = 10$). Mothers, in particular, embraced the role, and used it as an opportunity to guide their queer child in navigating complex family situations, such as being around extended family and social situations (e.g., visiting family in Lebanon, family gatherings, etc.). The gatekeeper took on the role of encouraging their queer family member to open up to a particular family member when anticipating the benefit of a disclosure taking place in only three cases. Given the

extensive involvement of gatekeepers in ensuring that the harmony within the family was preserved, this finding reaffirms the need to incorporate more family members' perspectives on the secrecy process. It would be interesting to explore the ways in which different family members made sense of their family member's queer identity, and how that meaning-making process impacted the role they adopted in the secrecy process. The intricate complexity of family systems was highlighted by the fact that Lebanese American queer youth desired to have different levels of openness and disclosure with different family members, thus impacting the boundaries and alliances within the family. Honoring the collectivistic nature of Lebanese culture means that exploring therapeutic interventions that seek to involve the families of queer Lebanese American youth, particularly family members who are involved in the secrecy process and feel emotionally safe for the queer youth, might be an important consideration, one that warrants further research.

Alliances and Boundaries

Structural family therapy was the chosen theory for this study, and the findings illustrate how structural theory concepts came into play in my participants' stories. In fact, many participants explored how boundaries within their family system shifted to accommodate the scope of the secret, and created alliances within the system, such as between siblings, as well as often between the queer youth, their siblings and their mother

($n = 9$). In numerous cases, fathers were often not privy to the secret for an extended period of time, due to their perceived conservative values. This common dynamic inevitably led to a boundary between the individuals who were involved in the secret, and those who were excluded (Imber-Black, 1998; Karpel, 1980). Many participants explored how they felt closer and supported by the people they chose to disclose to, and how this alliance helped validate concerns they were already having with the family members who were not privy to the secret. When fathers were excluded, they were prevented from having information that they might have needed to make decisions for the family. Therefore, the exclusion of fathers might be a way for queer Lebanese American youth and their mothers to combat the patriarchal dynamic of Lebanese families, and to challenge it in a covert way by bypassing the father's verdict and disapproval. This also allowed room for family members to connect over their grievances and to be able to find their voice within an alliance that felt safe and validating. As Minuchin (1964) stated, boundaries in a family system are dictated by cultural norms, values and intergenerational influences. In participant's stories, the decisions around secrecy were informed by their perception of their family member's values, their religiosity, and the likelihood of them being accepting of their sexuality. Participants also took into account their immigration status and its precariousness when making decisions around secrecy, since complete disclosure might carry stigma and ostracization should they ever have to return to

Lebanon. Therefore, these cultural contexts are an essential component of managing secrecy, and establishing boundaries around the secret. Understanding the cultural backdrop is crucial to making sense of why such boundaries are being considered, their function within that particular family system, and how they serve to protect the status quo within the family system. Negotiating secrecy is a negotiation of boundaries (Petronio, 2010), where boundaries within the family system then shift to accommodate who is included in the secret, and who is excluded.

In participants' stories, secrecy was often a way to allow Lebanese American queer youth to maintain agency over their realities and lived experiences, and make the choices that felt safest to them, rather than deferring to the family figure with the most power and authority, which was typically the father. Mothers took it upon themselves to make decisions that benefited the family's status and social standing, that maintained harmony within the family unit, while also protecting their children from negative repercussions. In situations where mothers were not privy to the secret in a disclosure sense, they still had suspicions and asked questions, and engaged in an unspoken consensus with their children when a dialogue was not taking place. It is difficult to understate how crucial and instrumental mothers' role can be in navigating this process, and how much of a powerful ally they can be for Lebanese American queer youth. This finding has tremendous implications for family therapy research and clinical practice

specifically, in that further research is needed to understand the different ways mothers and fathers within Lebanese families exercise their power, and how this plays a role in secrecy management for Lebanese American families. Understanding the importance of having a safe ally in this process and taking into account cultural considerations, without insisting on complete disclosure as an end goal, would allow therapists to empower Lebanese American queer youth in making decisions around how they wanted to be supported in their process and who to turn to for advice, guidance and support, depending on their unique family circumstances.

Strategies to manage secrecy

The research on disclosure strategies is plentiful (Grafsky et al., 2018; Legate et.al, 2012; Merighi & Grimes; 2000; Rossi, 2010; Valentine et.al, 2003), however very little is known about secrecy strategies, particularly around the subject of sexual orientation. Participants in the study often adopted certain strategies in order to help navigate challenging situations, and in some cases enlisted family members to co-create strategies. Family members also seemed to adopt strategies on their own to cope with the secret whenever there was no alliance between them and the secret holder.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding was a salient strategy in my participants' stories, one that was adopted to avoid confrontation, and help ease the family into a different narrative around

cultural norms and values. Jhang's (2018) study explored *scaffolding* as an iterative strategy adopted by Taiwanese LGB individuals when trying to persuade their parents into accepting their identity. Jhang's study demonstrated that a dimension of the scaffolding process was the *boiling frog process*, where participants attempted to slowly introduce LGB concepts to their parents in an attempt to get them to adjust to their child's sexual orientation or romantic relationships. This tactic of easing their parents into a state of acceptance was also adopted by participants in this study in an attempt to anticipate their parent's reactions, and make the process less abrupt for them. For instance, this study's participants discussed how this technique allowed them to manage their parent's heteronormative expectations. Examples included stating they were against marriage, vocalizing feminist beliefs that questioned marriage as an institution and criticized men for female participants, or reframing their purpose and goals as centering around their friendships and careers. Participants explained that this allowed them to maintain consistency in their parents' eyes in case they ever came out to them one day, while also lowering their expectations and ensuring that the potential reveal was not too unexpected. Hence, participants were very aware of their parents' expectations and attempted to manage their parents' hopes and dreams by "softening the blow" and by introducing them to their sexuality slowly. In one particular case, a participant's mother and siblings also participated in this process by attempting to question the father's assumptions of what

happiness and fulfillment meant, whenever he inquired about his son's relationship status. This illustrates yet another shift in the boundaries within the family structure, where the mother and siblings who were allowed access to the secret played an influential role in shaping the family narrative, in a way that challenged heteronormative expectations. The boiling frog process is therefore a means of influencing the family narrative and addressing parental expectations, in order to emotionally prepare family members for a potential disclosure.

Unspoken consensus

Another form of scaffolding that was commonly mentioned by participants was the unspoken consensus (Jhang, 2018; Nordqvist & Smart, 2014), where participants and their parents would enter into a covert agreement not to discuss the subject of their romantic lives or sexual identity, and seamlessly navigate around the tense subject if it ever threatened to come up in family settings. Participants described their parents or siblings effortlessly changing subject or ignoring pointed comments, in an effort to preserve the harmony in the family. In these situations, the parents knew or at the very least strongly suspected their child's sexual identity, and the participants knew of their parents' suspicions, but both parties agreed not to touch on the subject. This dynamic within family systems could be arguably tied to collectivistic cultures, where preserving harmony within the family is deemed more important than one's own personal feelings

and desires (Abudabbeh, 1996). Prioritizing family and community over individuality is a value instilled within Lebanese culture, and could easily give way to a dynamic such as “unspoken consensus” to maintain the peace between family members. This also brings to light the notion that the negotiation of secrecy does not always have to be explicit or take place within intimate conversations. Family norms and values seemed to be so ingrained into interactions within families, so much that these dynamics organically took place without words being exchanged. This is also corroborated by the concept of high-context culture (Hall, 1976), which emphasizes a deep involvement between family members, where an individual’s inner feelings are kept internal and information is shared through hints. There is a desire to maintain harmony within high-context cultures, which leads to a roundabout, indirect way of expressing oneself in order to minimize confrontation and ensure that communication goes smoothly. Having a major disagreement could lead to losing face and be indicative of a lack of self-control, both of which are undesirable in a high-context culture. Therefore, the use of hints and an unspoken consensus taking place would make sense within a high-context culture such as Lebanese culture.

Deflection

A high-context culture (Hall, 1976) tends to favor indirect communication rather than direct confrontation, and this is evidenced by the fact that the majority of

participants and their families ($n = 11$) relied on deflection in order to navigate difficult conversations. Participants shared relying on this strategy whenever relatives and family members questioned them about their love lives, asked them questions about marriage, and communicated heteronormative expectations. Participants reported their allies participating in this strategy as well, and stepping in to deflect questions and share that their child wanted to focus on their school or career for the time being. This strategy symbolizes the alliance between the secret keeper and their confidante, who seamlessly steps in to help with challenging situations and get the focus off of their family member. Participants did not share that the deflection strategy was explicitly discussed beforehand with their family members, which supports the notion of unspoken rules and strategies that take place within high-context cultures (Hall, 1976).

Visibility Management

Another strategy adopted by participants was the notion of visibility management (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003; Schmitz & Tyler, 2018), where participants were acutely aware of the way they were presenting, and how this might deviate from the typical gender expression within Lebanese culture. Participants shared being aware of the way they dressed, the way they expressed themselves, and how deviating from gender norms of presentation would likely lead to reactions and questions from relatives and family members. Some participants expressed consciously dressing differently whenever they

would visit their family in Lebanon, such as dressing more feminine or masculine to blend in, and avoid creating discomfort. Lasser and Tharinger (2003) used the *theory of visibility management* in their study which explored how queer youth managed their visibility according to existing environmental stressors, such as potential discrimination and hostility. Lasser and Tharinger (2003) argued that by managing their visibility, people “[shape] their world and [are] being shaped by their world” (p. 241). In that sense, visibility is managed by both the queer individual and those around them; cultural context is therefore a part of the visibility management process as queer individuals take in others’ attitudes, beliefs and responses and adapt their presentation and visibility accordingly. Visibility management is a strategy that allows the queer individual to engage with the world around them depending on the various cultural contexts they find themselves in. For instance, participants in this current study explored their ability to assess their environment and make decisions regarding their gender presentation and visibility, whether they were around extended family, visiting Lebanon, or staying in the United States. Only eight participants shared that they were able to relax in the United States around their visibility and presentation, whereas visiting Lebanon necessitated more management of their identity and presentation in that sense. This finding supports Lasser and Tharinger’s (2003) findings, and serves as additional incentive for therapists and mental health professionals to be curious about their Lebanese American queer

clients' visibility management process as it ties into their culture, and the way that it serves to make them feel safe and create a sense of agency in different social settings.

Conflicting identities

For Lebanese American queer individuals, their identities often felt contradictory or incompatible, in the sense that they experienced discrimination and stigma due to being of two social identities. Being queer lent itself to stigma within the Lebanese community (Dib et.al, 2020) and being Middle Eastern or Arab led to participants feeling stigma within Western circles (Naber, 2000). This dual othering of Lebanese American queer individuals contributed to participants feeling as though these two identities could not coexist together, and instead had to be compartmentalized. This proved to be a challenging balancing act for Lebanese American queer individuals, who may have felt the need to repress one aspect of their identity, whether their queerness or Arabness, depending on the setting they found themselves in. These conflicting identities made the experience of reconciling these two parts of self rather difficult, and necessitated trust and safety in order to even consider integrating these two aspects of their life. This finding calls for further research into the identity management process of Lebanese American queer individuals in order to examine how they made sense of these conflicting identities, how it impacted their relationships and their decision-making process around concealing parts of themselves depending on context. This finding supports the notion that the

experience of Lebanese American queer individuals is a highly contextual one, ever-shifting based on the different spaces they find themselves navigating.

The Essence of the Experience

Meaning-Making Process and Emotions Experienced

The essence of the experience is a crucial point in any phenomenological study, and participants gave a rich, poignant account of their experiences around family secrecy, as well as the emotions they experienced and the meaning they made out of their experience. Participants described multiple aspects of the secrecy as being challenging, from the lack of acceptance of themselves for being queer, to the feeling that they were “living a lie” (Siham, 2020). Participants explored their fears of rejection and judgment, of being the outcast and not fitting in within their families in the event of coming out. For three participants, the lying and secrecy itself was not necessarily the painful part, but rather their anticipation of how challenging their futures would be if they ever wanted to get married or pursue a long-term relationship. Being in a long-term relationship would make the secret even more challenging to maintain and hide. As for the meaning that participants derived from the secrecy, many viewed it as an indicator of shame, rejection, and of not fitting in completely due to knowing that this part of them was not accepted. By the same token, many participants ($n = 13$) articulated the necessity of the secret in allowing them to remain close with their families, and immersed in their culture. Therefore, it is difficult to paint secrecy in a strictly positive or negative light; instead, the complexity of the emotional experience of secrecy was highlighted in the participants’ accounts. This finding contradicts Karpel (1980)’s assumption that “what we do not know, does hurt us”, and calls for a more nuanced understanding of how the secrecy feels

for the secret bearer and the people involved in the secret. On the other hand, this finding supports Georgis (2013) who hypothesized that the Arab queer community sought to recreate itself through shame, rather than seeking to abandon shame altogether. Existing in a collectivistic culture, while simultaneously fearing judgment and ostracization for an aspect of one's identity, was a complex dynamic that came up in participant's accounts repeatedly. Shame was not something to be rejected by stepping into pride; participants instead seemed to accept shame as part of their cultural dynamics. Participants spoke of self-acceptance and becoming comfortable with themselves as they went through the process, yet they did not necessarily separate that from the way queerness was still viewed within Lebanese culture. Furthermore, as Karpel (1980) stated, the secret's nature was protective for many, and offered them the opportunity to protect their parents from the repercussions of coming out, or the disappointment they may experience from their child not living up to their heteronormative hopes and dreams. Furthermore, four participants expressed that selective disclosure to one family member alone, particularly their mother, was often enough to give them the feeling of being accepted and supported in their identity. Disclosing to one essential family member removed the need to disclose to others altogether. In this way, participants' accounts demonstrated that disclosing to everyone and being completely out was not necessary to gain a positive experience of support and alliance. This finding is essential to developing a nuanced understanding in the literature of how disclosure and secrecy can easily become interwoven, depending on the cultural elements at play. Rather than prioritizing a Western understanding of the coming out process as a linear one, with the finite end goal of being "out and proud," it is

essential to take into account how this could manifest differently within a collectivistic society.

Decision-making Process

Participants in the study took into account numerous factors when making decisions around revealing the secret; geographical location, age and generational components, religiosity and views and beliefs, closeness of the relationship, as well as immigration contextual factors. These factors were carefully weighed by participants before deciding to take an emotional risk, and letting a family member into the secret. The foundational study by Vangelisti et. al (2001) suggested that secret keepers' minimum requirement to disclose a secret was closeness to their confidante, which was confirmed in this study when 14 participants consistently shared evaluating their closeness to a person and how it played a role in feeling the need to disclose to them. On the other hand, lack of closeness was a big deterrent for participants, and led them to not feel the need to disclose to this particular family member.

Vangelisti et. al (2001) found that closeness to their confidante led participants to seek more criteria to be met before revealing the secret, which was not the case in this current study. In fact, closeness and relational security was often mentioned as a notable criteria on its own to prompt disclosure in many cases. According to Vangelisti et. al (2001), geographical closeness and frequency of contact was not a significant predictor of the likelihood of disclosure compared to closeness; this finding was also corroborated by

this study due to geographical proximity, albeit being considered, was not consistently used as a reason to disclose. In short, despite geographical closeness being a consideration, there was no consistent theme between participants, and other factors (e.g., closeness and attachment security) seemed to hold more weight.

One factor seemed to be a recurring theme among many participants in the decision-making process, which was the potential confidante holding similar views and beliefs to the secret keeper. Participants paid special attention to their family members' beliefs and discourse around sexuality, and whether they had progressive views overall. Though Vangelisti et.al (2001) briefly mentioned that participants in their study were more likely to disclose to people similar to them, they did not go as far as to investigate what similarity meant, and what kinds of similarities were significant in the secret keeper's eyes. Finally, particularly salient to this study was the immigration contextual factors that participants were immersed in. Perceiving their status as temporary or precarious was an important factor that one participant in particular expressed drove her to be more motivated to keep her identity a secret, due to the possibility of having to return to Lebanon someday and wanting to protect themselves through secrecy in anticipation of this possibility.

Implications, Limitations and Future Directions

Research Implications

The findings in this study have illustrated the complexity and nuance behind Lebanese American queer individuals in their attempts to navigate different landscapes, family relationships and social contexts. Lebanese American queer individuals must make full use of their arsenal in order to manage their visibility, evaluate different family members for their potential allyship, make decisions around secrecy, protect themselves and their families from stigma and ostracization, all while attempting to preserve their cherished connections and bonds. This finding highlights a need for further research that seeks to understand and highlight the systemic nature of the secrecy process, as it involves not only the Lebanese American queer individual, but their families as well. Furthermore, research should be expanded to encompass the experiences of Lebanese American queer individuals' families, in particular the primary confidantes and allies, the ones most involved in the secrecy process. Due to Lebanese culture being so focused on the importance of family preservation, capturing the experience of the family beyond the queer individual themselves could enrich our understanding of family secrecy as a dynamic, one that is not limited to the individual's experience. Furthermore, mothers of Lebanese American queer individuals could benefit from greater attention in the research,

due to the instrumental role they seem to play in gatekeeping and managing family interaction.

Clinical Implications

The field of marriage and family therapy (or MFT) as a whole has thus far ignored Arab and Middle Eastern families, and there is little to no research to be found on marriage and family therapy interventions adapted specifically to Middle Eastern families. While some models such as Structural Family Therapy call for the consideration of cultural factors (Minuchin, 1974), that is where the inclusion typically ends. MFTs have a responsibility to consider families of Middle Eastern descent in their treatment conceptualization, as well as their interventions. I will outline adjustments that can be made to encompass Lebanese cultural factors, since ignoring those factors can often make clients feel misunderstood and invisible to their therapist. The importance of family connection and ties remains crucial to consider when a Lebanese individual is in the process of making decisions around their marginalized identity, and inviting conversation and reflection around family components would be a great way to understand a Lebanese American individual's challenges. Inviting reflection around the role of shame in Lebanese culture can be such a validating experience for many, as they might struggle to articulate the cultural pressure to fit in and meet family expectations. Structural family therapy principles typically pay close attention to the family hierarchy, alliances,

boundaries and differing roles that family members can adopt in order to maintain the status quo. Even when working with the individual, inquiring about these different structural factors and their influence can provide richness and depth into clients' understanding of the different pressures they are under, as well as understanding how secrecy can directly impact boundaries in their families. Furthermore, an emphasis on the indirect agency that Lebanese American queer individuals may have through the secrecy strategy can be a great tool to empower clients to make the decisions that make them feel safest, and allow them to preserve their connections to their family. Lebanese American queer individuals can often feel powerless in the face of their family's expectations and values, and reframing secrecy as a form of agency has the potential to be a valuable tool. Finally, encouraging the Lebanese American queer individual to invite family members of their choice, particularly a confidante and ally, into therapy can be a great way to not only remind the client that they do have access to support and allyship, but also give the queer individual and their family members an opportunity to reflect and process the meaning they've made around the client's queerness and secrecy. Therapists should ask questions about the family's shared belief systems, expectations, as well as the communication process around the secrecy. This approach can help bring these components from the implicit realm into the explicit, and allow the family to have more open conversations around each family member's role, understanding of the process and

individual considerations and concerns. It is also highly encouraged to use family mapping as a structural therapy technique (Minuchin & Fisherman, 1981) in order to better conceptualize the way the secrecy has shifted the boundaries and hierarchies within the family, and to get a better sense of alliances and coalitions in a visual manner.

Finally, there tends to be a large emphasis on authenticity and openness in most therapy approaches, which can clash and contradict a therapeutic lens that encourages and supports secrecy in this cultural context. Therapists are encouraged to embrace the notion that authenticity can mean something different to every client, and consider the concept of being “authentic enough” with those select individuals, family members or otherwise, that queer individuals choose to be vulnerable with on their terms.

Limitations

The sample demographics were heterogeneous as far as age, geographical location, immigration experience, as well as participant and family religiosity (Table 1). This allowed for the study to encompass a variety of experiences. On one hand, the heterogeneous nature of the sample allowed for diversity of experiences; on the other hand, it also made it challenging to generalize findings due to the uniqueness of each participants’ context, story and experiences. Little research has been done to investigate how each of the factors listed may impact the participants’ experience of secrecy within their families; this is an additional layer of depth to the study that is currently missing, and could be remedied with further research, such as mixed methods or quantitative methods. One other limitation to consider is the online nature of the study, due to interviews being conducted in 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. By

encouraging participants to use the web camera if they are comfortable, interactions throughout the interview can be comparable to in-person by providing nonverbal and social cues (Stewart & Williams, 2005; Sullivan, 2012). One participant, Zahra, declined to use the camera throughout the interview and did not share much information throughout the interview, which directly impacted the depth of her experience.

Zoom and Skype interviews are faced with the same ethical issues and challenges that in-person interviews (Janghorban et.al, 2014). Participants were made fully aware of the recorded nature of the meeting, which only involved audio; interviews were recorded through computer-based recording software and then transcribed (Cater, 2011; Fox et.al, 2007). The online format did give participants the freedom to withdraw from the process if it became uncomfortable or triggering from them, simply by clicking a button. On a positive note, time and financial resources were not wasted if this occurs (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). Verbal and nonverbal cues over Skype or Zoom provided a layer of authenticity similar to face-to-face interviews (Sullivan, 2012). However, some researchers suggested that the relative anonymity of online interactions and the lack of a shared social network online may increase presentation of self and authenticity compared with face-to-face interviews (Bargh et.al, 2002; Ellison et.al, 2006).

A final limitation is my positioning in the research as a cultural insider. I related intimately to the experiences of my participants, which in turn allowed them to feel safe with me and share their stories and vulnerability with me. This is especially important due to prior research showing that Middle Eastern research participants did not trust researchers (Al-

Krenawi, 1999a, 1999b; Al Krenawi & Graham, 2000). Participants knew I understood what they meant when they used Arabic expressions, or spoke about the cultural intricacies they experienced. In turn, there is a distinct possibility that despite my best efforts, there could be nuances that were missed due to my emotional proximity to the participants' stories, that a cultural outsider could've picked up on due to being more removed from the process. This is an important limitation to consider when thinking about further research to be conducted with this population.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Several larger themes have emerged as a result of the interviews conducted; the first theme that was recurring through numerous participants' interviews was the theme of the centrality of the family, which directly connects to the collectivistic elements of Lebanese culture (Abudabbeh, 1996; Haboush, 2007). The findings showed that many participants took into consideration their family's status within Lebanese society, as well as how disclosing the secret could impact their relationships with extended family. Second, the findings confirmed that the experience of family secrecy for participants was a complex and contextual one, carrying themes of shame, empathy for their family members, awareness of the burden of secrecy, as well as a desire to protect their families from within and from outsiders' judgment and ostracization. The secrecy was a heavy burden to carry when it created distance from family members, yet also brought some participants closer to their chosen confidantes. Third, the findings showed that despite the mainly patriarchal structure of the participants' families, the secrecy often put participants' mothers in the powerful role of gatekeeper and guide, and allowed mothers to take an active role in helping participants navigate the secrecy, as well as co-creating strategies around secret-keeping. Therefore, the family structure within participants' families shifted and changed to accommodate the secret, as a result of newly formed boundaries and alliances. These findings have important implications for future research,

as well as the clinical practice involving Lebanese American families. MFTs have a responsibility to make space for Lebanese American families and their stories, in order to provide clinical support as well as inclusive research that considers and honors their systemic needs.

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Appendix A: Interview Script**Participant Name** _____**Participant Informed Consent**

Do you agree to participate in this study? By agreeing, you acknowledge that you understand the consent form and conditions of the project, and that all of your current questions have been answered.

_____ Yes _____ No

Do you agree to have this conversation audio-recorded?

_____ Yes _____ No

_____ I certify that I have explained the study to this participant, answered any questions, and obtained permission to proceed with the interview.

_____ I certify that I have explained the study to this person, answered any questions, and politely terminated the telephone call when the person declined to participate.

Interviewer's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for talking with me today. Before I begin, do you have any initial questions for me?

If not, let's start off with a general question

So that I can get an idea about how communication occurs in your family generally, please tell me about who are the key influencers in your family?

Prompt: And why are they the main players?

Who are the gatekeepers of secrets in your family and why?

Tell me a story about how secrets are handled in the family generally?

Prompt: How does this handling happen?

Prompt: Who is likely to be involved?

Prompt: How does the secret tend to become revealed?

What are your personal experiences with family secrecy around your sexual identity?

What messages do you understand about sexuality from how your family talks about sexuality?

What are the reasons why you believe that you cannot reveal your sexual identity with your family?

Has secrecy around your sexual identity affected your relationship with your own family? If so, how?

Are there people in your family who know about your sexual identity?

Prompt: Who knows about your secret?

Prompt: To whom did you disclose your secret to first and why?

How did you decide to disclose the secret to a family member?

Prompt: What factors did you consider before disclosing to your family member?

What factors did you weigh when deciding not to disclose to them?

What strategies do you use to keep your secret from your family? Please share a couple of examples.

Prompt: Are there people who help keep your secret?

Prompt: What are some ways you ensure the secret is well contained?

If you can, tell me a story about a time when you let a family member in on the secret.

Prompt: How did each family member respond to your disclosure?

- How did, if at all, your secret affect the family member's relationship with other family members? Please provide a couple of examples.

Prompt: Have you noticed that this family member has grown closer or further apart since?

Appendix C: Interview Flier



Share your experience of family secrecy around queer identity and/or queer relationships:**Who:**

Participants are needed for a Virginia Tech Human Development and Family Science research study (IRB # 20-937).

What:

The purpose of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of Lebanese American young adults' experience of family secrecy surrounding their queer identity and/or queer relationships. Participants will be compensated with a \$25 Amazon gift card for completing the interview.

Eligible participants:

- Between ages 18 to 30.
- Lebanese American.
- Identifying as queer or as part of the LGBTQ+ community.
- Experiencing and navigating family secrecy regarding their queer identity and/or queer relationships.

Details about the interview:

- Single interview lasting 45-60 minutes, and quick 15 minute follow up as needed.
- Interviews will be conducted through HIPAA-compliant Zoom and audio-recorded.
- All identifiable information will remain confidential.

For more information, please contact:

- Lea El Helou, MS, Doctoral Candidate, Virginia Tech
- lhelou@vt.edu

Appendix D: Screening & Eligibility Questionnaire

Eligibility Screening Questions:

Are you Lebanese American?

- Yes
- No

Are you between the ages of 18 to 30?

- Yes
- No

Do you identify as queer or as part of the LGBTQ+ community?

- Yes
- No

Are you navigating family secrecy around a past or current queer relationship, or a queer identity?

- Yes
- No

Demographics Questionnaire:

Q0 Please state your age: _____

Q1 How long have you and/or your family been residing in the United States?

Q2 Were you or are you currently engaged in a secret queer romantic relationship?

- Yes
- No

Q3 Was this relationship disclosed to one or more members of your family?

- Yes
- No

Q4 To what extent do family members know about your secret? Mark as many options that apply to you:

- Family of origin only
- A select few individuals within the family
- Extended family members
- None

Q5 What is your family's religion?

- Muslim (includes Sunni or Shia)
- Christian (includes Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic or other)
- Druze
- My family is not religious.
- Other: _____

Q6 What is your religion?

- Muslim (includes Sunni or Shia)
- Christian (includes Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic or other)
- Druze
- I am not religious.
- Other: _____

Q7 How important would you say religion is to you?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Moderately important
- Slightly important
- Not at all important

Q8 How important would you say religion is to your family?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Moderately important
- Slightly important
- Not at all important

Q9 How important is the Lebanese community to you?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Moderately important
- Slightly important
- Not at all important

Q10 How important is the Lebanese community to your family?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Moderately important

- Slightly important
- Not at all important

Q11 How important is the LGBTQ+ community to you?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Moderately important
- Slightly important
- Not at all important

Q12 What is the best method to contact you? Please write your email address: _____

Q13 Part of this study involves completing a Zoom interview of 45-60 minutes. Please mark the best days and times that you are able to participate in a private setting. You will be contacted by lhelou@vt.edu with the subject line “Virginia Tech Interests” to confirm the scheduled interview:

- Monday 9am-12pm MST
- Tuesday 9am-12pm MST
- Wednesday 9am-12pm MST
- Thursday 9am-12pm MST
- Friday 9am-12pm MST
- Saturday 4pm-7pm MST

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form



Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: April Few-Demo, Ph.D. Email: alfew@vt.edu
IRB# and Title of Study: IRB #20-937. Lebanese American Queer Youth's Experiences of Family Secrecy

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

I am a graduate/undergraduate Human Development and Family Studies student at Virginia Tech, and I am conducting this research as part of my course work.

➤ WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?

If you decide to participate in this study and you fit the eligibility criteria outlined, we ask that you complete a brief online demographics survey. The survey should take no longer than 10 minutes and your task will be to complete questions that focus on your demographics. The second part of this research study includes an interview. The interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes, covering several open-ended questions. These questions will focus on your experience with navigating family secrecy regarding your identity or a past or current queer relationship. The interview will be audio-recorded, and information provided by you will be deidentified and stored in encrypted external hard-drives, which are kept in locked boxes. The only information collected will be the audio-recordings of the interview, your name and email address.

The study should take approximately 45-60 minutes of your time.

The risks associated with this study are the following:

Risk of Breach of Confidentiality: The only people with access to identifying information will be the interviewer and the co-investigator. The protection of participant information will be taken

seriously during all phases of the study and after the study. Confidential study information is not discussed outside of the research settings unless prompted by you, the participant.

Risk of Disclosure of Personal Information: Personal identifying information is not required in this study, but such information may be shared during the course of the study. If any identifying information is provided throughout the study, the researchers will ensure privacy and confidentiality by removing any identifying information from collected data.

Participants may experience emotional distress (i.e., distress that occurs as a result of personal experiences) as a result of participating in the survey or interview. Such distress may be due to the nature of identifying as a sexual minority, discussing their experiences with discrimination, and/or relational distress with their family. If a participant's confidentiality is compromised, there is the potential risk of violence, discrimination, and/or harassment. The fear of, or experience of, family and/or community homophobia is a serious consideration as disclosure may increase stress and strain family relationships. Disruption may originate from either the person who is the recipient of disclosure or by another person who becomes aware of one's sexual orientation through the original disclosure recipient. This stress could then be furthered through a lack of resources given their geographic location and/or other demographic information.

Risk of Damage to Financial Standing, Employability, Housing, or Reputation: If a participant's confidentiality is compromised, there is the potential risk of the participant experiencing discrimination and marginalization as a result of others knowing they identify as a sexual minority. This, in turn, may lead to the financial or work-related discrimination, including a failure to hire, firing, or a change in job position, responsibilities, or privileges. Although there are non-discrimination laws, others' knowledge of one's sexual orientation may lead to unintended consequences. A more general effect may be damage to one's reputation, which might permeate a variety of personal and social boundaries.

Risk of damaged family relationships, anti-gay violence, discrimination, and harassment. If a participant's confidentiality is compromised, there is the potential risk of anti-gay violence, discrimination, and/or harassment. Participants will self-select when to participate and the format will be online, mitigating the threat of their confidentiality being compromised due to participation in an unsafe location or at an unsafe time.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

➤ CONFIDENTIALITY

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. Your interview will be audio-recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed. The researchers will code the transcripts using a pseudonym (false name). Identifying information such as consent forms and demographic data and debriefing forms will be stored on an encrypted USB external hard drive (Drive #1) separate from the video, audio recordings and transcription data on another encrypted USB external hard drive (Drive #2). They will be stored in different locked file cabinets and a combination safe in a locked office. The researchers will maintain a list that includes a key to the codes. The master key and the recordings will be stored for 3 years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

➤ WHO CAN I TALK TO?

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact **April Few Demo, Ph.D. – Project Advisor: alfew@vt.edu**

Lea El Helou - Doctoral Candidate: lhelou@vt.edu

You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Please print out a copy of this information sheet for your records.

Appendix F: Summary of Findings

Table 1: Themes organized by frequency

Themes	Exemplary Quotes	Participants	N = 19
Lebanese Cultural Elements	“A culture is not something you explain. It's something you live with; it's something you grew up with” - Siham		10/19
Heteronormative Expectations	<p>They would say ‘how are you? So when are you getting married?’, or ‘have you found someone?’; ‘By 25 you gotta be married or been engaged or found somebody’ - Maha</p> <p>And you know, in Lebanon it's like “abelik, abelak , everything about life is about marriage and finding someone, and so it's such a burden that you carry, so early on. - Ghassan,</p> <p>The whole boyfriend narrative gave them the sense that I was normal or like them. - Nadia</p>	Y2, Y3, Y13, Y9, Y1, Y4, Y8, Y11, Y15, Y17, Y18, Y19	12/19
Concern over Image	<p>A big part of it is, parents are worried about what other people think. That's a big thing. Like, ‘oh what this person's gonna say about that?’ And that’s why they're afraid. - Siham</p> <p>I think for my parents, it really really is about "what are people gonna say?" the community, and yeah. I think it's an Arab thing. - Amal</p> <p>I would say with culture, it's more how it looked to other people. If that makes sense, your reputation as a family... I think that's a really big, heavy weight in Lebanese culture - Marwa</p>	Y9, Y1, Y2, Y4, Y8, Y18, Y6, Y14, Y11	9/19
Religious Elements	<p>They see that...they interpret religion as telling them ‘being gay, it's not right.’ Specifically in Islamic it's linked to anal rape. It doesn't have a good... it has a bad stigma on it already - Marwa</p> <p>When your mom tells you, she's afraid, she’s praying for me every day because she doesn't want to see in hell - Ghassan</p> <p>I do believe in my religion, but at the same time I think that it can be so toxic, especially in terms of same sex relations and same sex marriage - Ayah</p> <p>Religion really says, ‘If you are gay you can be gay, but it's a sin if you act on it’. Like, ‘okay, you're gay. Just don't act on it. Don't go on dates. Don't go have sex with people if you're the same gender. Just don't do anything about it.’ - Siham</p> <p>For my mom too, yeah. It was emotional... No mom wants to see her daughter that way. They want to just see their daughter getting married and stuff. Maybe that's what was emotional and then she was like ‘It’s just a phase. It can’t be true because you’re always listening to religious chants and</p>	Y1, Y2, Y3, Y4, Y6, Y7, Y8, Y9, Y11, Y12, Y13, Y14, Y15, Y17, Y18, Y19	16/19

	<p>church. I'm like 'that doesn't stop me from being that way.' In the States you hear a lot about preachers and...even overseas in Mosques they rape kids. They abuse kids. It doesn't stop the holiest person from being a certain way. She was like 'that's true.' But I know deep down inside that until today, she's still waiting for me to change. - Zahra</p>		
Homophobia and Stigma	<p>I might say something like "oh I think women are attractive", and she's like "oh, I think it's gross", or "I think people who like the same sex are gross" - Leila</p> <p>Quick story, I had a friend in high school that killed herself because her parents kicked her out, because she came out as gay to them. When I told that to my mom in high school, she said "that's better, she caused enough shame to her parents" or something like that - Amal</p> <p>But it's like, haram, he's sick. It's like.. everybody's free to do what they want to do, but if this was to happen to my kid or happened in my situation, it would be the worst thing in the world. It would be horrible and negative and I never wanted to inflict that pain on them - Maha</p> <p>When we got there my cousins and I took out our cameras to take pictures of ourselves and we were very promptly told not to take pictures or else we'd get kicked out. That was an experience that I think about in terms of like, 'oh, being queer or being gay in Lebanon still carries that notion it's supposed to be a secret.' - Nayla</p>	Y1, Y2, Y3, Y4, Y6, Y7, Y8, Y9, Y11, Y12, Y13, Y14, Y15, Y17, Y18, Y19	16/19
Secrecy Function			
Protect family from outside	<p>I wouldn't want to put my parents in the situation where they had to choose between their daughter or their sister or their brother or their niece and nephew. So to me, it's like why break up this huge family over something that...when it comes to the grand scheme of who I am, it's a part but not a whole - Maha</p> <p>I'm also afraid of making their lives harder. I don't want them to be talked about because we live, we live in Dearborn. It would be very hard for them to have to explain to everyone - Rana</p> <p>I'll tell you something: the reason why I'm not completely out in Lebanon and among family members is because I don't want to hurt my parents - Adel</p>	Y6, Y17, Y8	3/19
Protect family from within	<p>I keep it more of a secret to preserve...the thought and the perception that my family has of me that I don't want to break. - Maha</p> <p>Life is short and whatever is left in life...especially that I'm living far away...when I meet them we need to make sure we have good times together; instead of fighting. - Adel</p> <p>To avoid that and to avoid having to confront him...Also if he's happy with whatever fantasy he has of me in his mind, I'm okay with that. - Ghayab</p>	Y12, Y8, Y13, Y6, Y1, Y2, Y4, Y9, Y11, Y18	10/19

Secrecy Process			
Emotional Impact	<p>I really really was acting 24/7. I tried so hard to come off not effeminate or not gay, whatever that means. So it was very difficult, yeah. I struggled with it for a long time, and I probably still do. - Chadi</p> <p>I grew up not confident at all - growing up gay, I don't think people realize how hard it is, like there are no words that can describe how hard it is to be the outcast all the time, even though people around you don't know, but you know, and that the fact that you have this big secret, and you're just a child, you're not made to deal with like such big secrets. - Ghassan</p> <p>Because living a lie is so hard. I can't do it. I'm living in a lie. I'm lying to them every day about who I am. They don't know me. They don't know me. Yeah, they don't know me. I can't live like that. - Siham</p> <p>The judgment. The rejection. Lack of acceptance for sure, that would hurt my feelings so bad. - Elham</p>	Y1, Y2, Y3, Y4, Y6, Y7, Y8, Y9, Y11, Y12, Y13, Y14, Y15, Y17, Y18, Y19	16/19
Meaning Making	<p>I think there's a lot of shame around it. They're ashamed for me. I don't mind having the conversation, but somehow they're embarrassed for me. - Nadia</p> <p>You know, I haven't had a child yet, my parents are really pushing for children. I'm not convinced I want them. I guess I would be a rebel, this is just something that.. if I don't have to fight this fight, I'd rather not to. - Leila</p> <p>The hard parts were not keeping the secret, because again it felt natural to do it, [it was] the fact that I couldn't share...sometimes the most favorite part of myself with people that I love. - Marwa</p> <p>I'm fine within my immediate life and I don't necessarily care for their judgments but it sucks that my relationship with someone, who's a really good person, might would [lead to] this immediate rejection [and] looked down upon because of just who I'm with. - Elham</p>	Y2, Y3, Y11, Y18, Y4, Y13, Y9, Y8, Y1, Y12, Y14, Y17, Y15	13/19
Impact on relationships	<p>I think while it was secretive it created a little bit of distance. Feeling like there's a part of me that they don't know about and...that whole part of me that they're unaware of. It just creates a barrier and distance. - Jameela</p> <p>The secret is maintaining the relationship. - Elham</p> <p>It's weird. It's so weird. It's almost like this isn't even a reality. It gets completely erased as soon as I set foot in Lebanon. It's like all this life that I have here for myself just doesn't exist. - Nadia</p>	Y7, Y8, Y18, Y13, Y3, Y1, Y2, Y4, Y6, Y9, Y11, Y12, Y13, Y14, Y19	15/19
Family's role in the process			

<p><i>Mother's role</i></p>	<p>I think she tries to help him understand that that's just who we are, without telling him that it's because of being gay, it's just who we are. - Marwa</p> <p>I would be doing so more closely to my mom and my sister, my oldest sister. It was both of them. When my sister came to live with us I would first run it by my mom and then she would call in my sister for advice - Nadia</p> <p>Yeah. I think that my siblings and [I] we all go to her and we know that she's this little gatekeeper so we treat her as such. It's nice because she's always the ally that we have. In a world of enemies she's the one person that you can be like, 'hey we need to talk about this and no one else can know.' It's nice to have someone like that - Jamil</p> <p>What I meant to say was after I told my mom the need to tell people dissipated. - Ghayab</p> <p>When my dad was here she was more caring for my dad. Cooking and all that. I mean she still cooks but. Her main goal was to supply for my dad but...she's his life. So she better make sure everything's good for him. She would have time for us but our relationship wouldn't be that close. She's still my mom. She still does her mother job and...I don't know...When they left, it was just me and her most of the time because my brothers each have their own lives, so it was me and her most of the time. So we built a stronger relationship - Zahra</p>	<p>Y1, Y2, Y3, Y6, Y7, Y8, Y9, Y11, Y12, Y13, Y14, Y15, Y17, Y18</p>	<p>14/19</p>
<p><i>Father's role</i></p>	<p>I think that him being more religious did impact how long it took me to come out to him. Because we didn't know [how] we could engage [him] or how he would think about it. Even my mom couldn't - Jameela</p> <p>My mom has voiced, for various reasons, to keep it simple and just don't post it and don't publish it because people are gonna talk and it's gonna go back to your dad. It had more to do, I think growing up, when we weren't independent. Now I'm fully financially independent, so whether my dad knows and if he lashes it out, and doesn't give me an inheritance [it's] whatever. I don't depend on him financially, so I'm okay with that - Ghayab</p> <p>She would do this thing where she would call my dad. And at the time, my dad was more controlling over the family. So like the whole house would just crumble if there was a fight. It was.. it was not a good time. So, now.. she doesn't really use that as a threat. She just says "if your dad finds out, he'll have a heart attack", so she uses his health against you - Amal</p> <p>The way he was processing it.. It brought out issues with my little sister. So we would meet, through Facetime or at my sister's, and my mom would join afterwards to plan how we were going to do this - Ghassan</p> <p>Maybe because my dad is pretty distant when it comes to expressing anything. He's the financial figure and then he just doesn't get involved with anything else. But my mom's the one who's keeping up with everyone's life and making important decisions. My dad just goes with the flow - Rana</p>	<p>Y7, Y12, Y1, Y2, Y6, Y8, Y13, Y14</p>	<p>8/19</p>

	<p>I probably wouldn't have had to come out to my dad. I don't wanna say I don't trust him...even though they say <i>l bent la baya</i>, or whatever, <i>ghannoujit baya</i>. I don't want to share stuff like that because I don't think he has anything to do with it. I guess the idea of a father babying his daughter, or changing diapers for his daughter. No, that's not what my dad does. Yeah I feel it's awkward to come and tell my dad hey, I'm gay - Zahra</p>		
<i>Siblings' role</i>	<p>The fact that we're sharing with each other and having such a vulnerable moment with your family that you've never done before it shifted how I view her.</p> <p>Because now I'm like, 'well this person knows my secret.' I think in her head she's like 'this person knows my secret this could make or break me in the family and this person knows it now. - Marwa</p> <p>I'm not comfortable saying it to him yet. We're saying it to dummy it. So when I discuss ...where we're discussing my partner or anything like that, we'll use the word 'flamingo' as a code word - Maha</p> <p>Probably telling my sister because that opened the door to telling everyone else and having her support while I was in the rest of the process. Just having that comfort and fall back like, 'Oh my sister will support me if shit doesn't go well' - Jameela</p>	Y2, Y3, Y4, Y6, Y7, Y12, Y13, Y14, Y18,	9/19
<i>Extended family's role</i>	<p>For my two cousins, I just thought that we're really really close and I really wanted them to know who I really am - Siham</p> <p>Then my grandpa called me one day out of the blue, and we don't talk very much on the phone but I see him pretty often, and he was just like, 'hey, I'm just calling to let you know that we love you! Just [for] who you are!' It's weird because he doesn't really have the language either - Elham</p> <p>But anyway, so I ended up just kind of blooming in her own little corner, and she kind of came toward me, and like I think we kind of found kindred spirits in each other. And so it was very, it was like a bonding experience for us - Leila</p> <p>Extended family is the issue because I haven't disclosed it to aunts and uncles. I don't really feel it's necessary for me to disclose that, I wouldn't gain anything from it. - Nayla</p>	Y2, Y9, Y13, Y11, Y4, Y8, Y14, Y19	8/19
Decision making process around secrecy			
<i>Factors considered</i>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Geographic Location</i> 	I lived with her and I lived with her on and off for years. I think that's maybe why, subconsciously, because I live with her. She sees me every day and I'm		

	<p>like, 'we're already so intimate'. So to open up that layer then I have to face you every day and wonder are you gonna ask me a million questions and things like that - Nayla</p> <p>Life is short and whatever is left in life...especially that I'm living far away...when I meet them we need to make sure we have good times together; instead of fighting - Adel</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Age and generational components</i> 	<p>With the younger people of my family I don't feel like I have to hide. Here we go, that's a thing age. Age is a big one. The younger people in my family know. I know I can be my authentic self - Elham</p> <p>My mom is 65 now, so six years ago, she wasn't 60 yet. You start feeling that they're getting older and she's the most important person for me and so I'm like, 'I'm not gonna come out to her when she's 70 or 80 and her body can't take it! Let me come out to her when she's strong and has time to process it. - Adel</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Religiosity</i> 	<p>Yes, it also depends on which cousins too, because I have some like religious cousins where I wouldn't go there at all, and I have like the cousins who are around my age and the ones I grew up with and I was close to them, yes - Ghassan</p> <p>She became religious soon after that sort of like, just talking about Christianity all the time. And I just think you know, obviously LGBTQ people have a very strained relationship with religion for obvious reasons. So yeah, I didn't feel comfortable telling her - Chadi</p> <p>She is less religious than everyone. She's not as religious, so I knew it wasn't a moral thing for her. Our values are very similar and again we're so close. We were just best friends like she was the perfect person I thought to tell in my family. It felt the safest - Marwa</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Views and beliefs</i> 	<p>My assumption comes from...again the culture. The culture that we grew up in and the culture that they know. (...) Yeah, things that they believe; things that they say. I think all of it - Elham</p> <p>I looked at cultural lifestyle and belief systems. I looked at where people lived, what areas they were from. Most of my family is from majority Muslim villages. To those people, I kept it...I still keep it a secret. They don't know - Nadia</p> <p>Because my sister, I mean, I know how they think, they're very open-minded, both of them, they're you know, very progressive, they had gay friends... and it wasn't a shock to them. - Ghassan</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Closeness of relationship</i> 	<p>My other cousin I came out to her after a couple of months, the same thing, we're really close and I just wanted her to know. Because we talk about dating and stuff. I just stop...I don't want to lie - Siham</p> <p>I also did trust my sister a lot. Even now we're very very close. We are very close and I know she would never do anything to harm me - Nadia</p>		

	<p>I never felt comfortable telling my mother because we weren't close - Chadi</p> <p>I don't feel the emotional connection to him where I need to be honest with him about it. I mean in an ideal world I wish I could just be intimate and more close to my dad, but he's made choices in opposition to that - Ghayab</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Immigration experiences</i> 	<p>I think it depends on how stable I feel in my life; how financially secure I feel; how I feel about my documents. I'm here on a student visa. If I feel my student is about to get reported or something, I tone it down a lot. Because I'm like, 'I have to go back to Lebanon.' - Nadia</p> <p>I know it would be hard for me to go back to certain spots in Lebanon. I think having an American citizenship is gonna make sure nothing bad happens to me, but I wouldn't want any hostility or violence or negativity surrounding my family - Maha</p>	Y3, Y6	2/19
<i>Concerns around future</i>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Reconciling Identities</i> 	<p>I think I'm still kind of figuring it out. I think. It's my sexuality and my Lebanese identity and like the secret of it has kind of morphed into a split between my American-ness and my Lebanese-ness - Maha</p> <p>Because when you go hang out with the Lebanese, you don't dare say that you're gay. And when you hang out with the gay people, you don't really wanna say you're Lebanese - Amal</p> <p>To them it's incorrect. If you've never seen a purple flower, you're gonna think it's a mutation. And so to them they've never seen a gay Lebanese Muslim or at least one that's proud - Marwa</p> <p>I don't know if that Facebook... You kind of feel if you're Lebanese and you're part of the LGBTQ community, if you can't be part of both. You feel if you're part of the LGBTQ you can't...or your Lebanese identity will be limited - Siham</p>	Y6, Y1, Y18, Y9	4/19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Future relationships and marriage</i> 	<p>I can't even imagine if we were to decide to get married one day, I haven't even thought about that stuff. And where that stands? It would be very difficult - Elham</p> <p>I mean when I think about taking [the] next steps in my relationship that's when I start getting anxious. How do I explain if I want to live with her...or something like that. What would I even do...yeah. So I just feel like postponing those thoughts. - Rana</p>	Y6, Y13, Y17, Y18, Y8, Y2, Y3, Y9, Y15	9/19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Fears around disclosure</i> 	<p>I've come to points where I wanted to just say it but when it comes to us coming out, Middle Eastern[er]s, it's not just coming out; it's safety, it's thinking [about a] smart [way] of how to do it - Siham</p> <p>I don't want to cause any drama. I don't want to get in anyone's face about what they believe in - Elham</p>		

	<p>I don't want to just tell them and then never get with anyone. And then [them] thinking of me as a loser or something - Ayah</p> <p>That has cropped in my mind: 'is it physically safe to tell him? Will he stop talking to me completely? Will he cut off the ties with my aunt and uncle and therefore my presence from me?' - Marwa</p> <p>I'm afraid I'm never going to be what you want me to be. And that matters so much to you when you're young of course - Chadi</p>		
Strategies to manage secrecy			
<i>Visibility Management</i>	<p>When I do travel to Lebanon I try to tone it down. I've been growing out my hair; usually I don't have a ponytail. I keep it pretty short. I'm exhausted from being stared at when I go and being noticed. I usually...I dress differently especially if I'm gonna be in our village. It's very hard for me to go out and socialize. I just feel scared. I just don't feel comfortable - Nadia</p> <p>I don't want to answer those questions. In general I don't want them questioning me about it. But if they were to ever be like 'Why don't you like dresses?' I would just be like 'gay or not, I just don't like dresses.' You can be not gay and not like dresses. To avoid questions I would make sure I was femme, keeping the radar low - Marwa</p> <p>There have been so many situations where...it's not...the negativity wasn't directed towards me, but we would have...somebody be like, 'ah, this person is dating same sex' or 'Oh, didn't you know, this person is gay' or 'ugh this person is dressed like a woman and why is this guy wearing makeup?' These sort of things would come up - Maha</p>	Y3, Y18, Y6, Y7, Y4	5/19
<i>Boiling Frog theory</i>	<p>I feel it's less dramatic. Let's say there's something, I know it sounds weird, paranormal happening in your house. When a door quickly opens, it scares you. If the doors slowly opens, you almost don't notice it, until it's fully open and you realize 'that wasn't open before. - Marwa</p> <p>To kind of, start planting the seed, you know, like if it was ever gonna come out, at least at least I wasn't lying the whole time. And what I was staying like was partly true, like the little things that I said were not lies - Ghassan</p> <p>So over the last two years, I've been more expressive about being more of a man hater, in case I ever do come out, it's not so much of a blow - Amal</p>	Y18, Y7, Y2, Y1	4/19
<i>Deflection strategies</i>	<p>When I was younger they would come up kind of like 'oh are you dating anyone?' or 'are you doing anything like that?' I would just say 'oh school is my priority', 'I gotta get through school', and 'I'm not focusing on boys' and that's like the most respectful thing you can say - Maha</p> <p>My mom was like 'no. She's still in school. She really wants to focus on her studies. I think she's seeing someone else.' - Nadia</p> <p>But you know, it's so easy to deflect, and like to find little loopholes, to not answer the question directly. Another thing is like, um when talking about the</p>	Y11, Y3, Y6, Y1, Y2, Y7, Y8, Y9, Y13, Y14, Y18	11/19

	LGBT community, and I don't know if you've noticed this, I talk about "them", not "we" - Leila		
<i>Denial</i>	<p>She knows. Somewhere deep down inside, she knows that something is not "right", and she knows that.. maybe she senses. She's a mom, she's not stupid. They do have this sixth sense thing. So she knows that something else is here. Maybe she doesn't want to acknowledge it to herself, I don't know - Amal</p> <p>I think she said for Lent this year, she is praying to accept me as who I am and accept the situation. And so to me, I think she spent a whole lot of time denying it. And thinking this is just a mental thing and a phase - Maha</p>	Y1, Y6, Y8, Y9, Y18	5/19
<i>Use of deception</i>	<p>At this point, we're such good liars. I could make up a boyfriend on the spot. I could invent a whole life narrative for me right now on the spot and I wouldn't even think - Nadia</p> <p>I still act on it, but I feel like I'm living a lie, I feel like I'm lying to them the whole time. When I go out on a date and I just tell my brother something else or my mom, hide who I've been hanging out with...stuff like that. I just hate doing that. I hate lying to them - Siham</p> <p>The movie ended and I walked out to the car and he was asking me how the movie was and who was there and I said, 'oh, a big group of friends went! We were having such a great time! We watched this great movie!' And he was like, 'I know you're lying. You were with that girl. I'm gonna tell you right now you should never see that girl again. It's not good' - Maha</p> <p>I would love to visit Lebanon with my boyfriend and with some of my other friends and. not have to lie. Because there is lying involved there is definitely constant lying. If he asked me if I'm dating anyone I'm like, 'no.' - Ghayab</p>	Y3, Y1, Y6, Y12, Y9	5/19
<i>Unspoken consensus</i>	<p>"I don't want to talk about this. I'm never gonna have a significant other because you guys are never gonna accept my significant other". And I said that outloud. Yeah.. and he's like, he doesn't.. it's not like he's stupid, maybe I'm using big language. My mother got it, my sisters got it, and my middle sister was like "Let's change topic, let's not talk about this" - Amal</p> <p>Well, Lebanese culture is very.. The way we deal with things, I don't know if I can generalize, but my experiences show me we aren't very expressive of sensitive subjects and we like to pretend a lot. Play the pretend game. Everything is fine, the food is delicious, and that's it - Ghassan</p> <p>It's fine [because] I'll have my friend, she's Mexican and her parents are real strict. And it's like a nightmare. [It's] like hell and a nightmare for her because her mom brings that up every day. So it's fine. Basically and I know she's gonna talk about it, [but] it won't be bad. She just tries...to [intelligible] stuff in my head that maybe I'll change maybe...she was never hurtful to me. She never said hurtful stuff to me, compared to my friend - Zahra</p>	Y1, Y2, Y6, Y8, Y9, Y13, Y17, Y18	8/19
<i>Social media management</i>	I have different degrees. I have like 'definitely no queer feminist content' and then I have close family who can like see my wedding posts, pictures me of my and my wife and what we're up to. I have tiers of gayness that I allow - Nadia	Y3, Y8, Y1, Y19	4/19

	<p>I don't know if I can answer that. Years ago, I would never dare follow anything gay, because my mom could see. So I would never. Or like, what groups I like. Now.. I don't give a shit - Amal</p> <p>For example, on Instagram I have this picture posted and the caption is like, 'still here, still queer!' But I wrote queer with a 'K' and I post things about my research and interests. So if they want to speculate they can ask me - Nayla</p>		
<p><i>Financial independence</i></p>	<p>I've been building it myself: you don't need your family, you can be yourself, if something happens, you're gonna need to move out, you're gonna need to make money. you're gonna need to be self-sufficient, financially stable, etc, etc. You're talking over 20ish years of constantly building this defense mechanism - Amal</p> <p>I think if I was 14 and scared and terrified and not financially independent and [worried] about living my life I would be a lot more upset with it; but now it's more okay. He has no reach over me so I don't feel unsafe about him knowing. He can't harm me. He doesn't have any kind of financial control over me - Nadia</p> <p>My mom has voiced, for various reasons, to keep it simple and just don't post it and don't publish it because people are gonna talk and it's gonna go back to your dad. It had more to do, I think growing up, when we weren't independent. Now I'm fully financially independent, so whether my dad knows and if he lashes it out, and doesn't give me an inheritance [it's] whatever. I don't depend on him financially, so I'm okay with that - Ghayab</p>	<p>Y1, Y12, Y3</p>	<p>3/19</p>

Appendix G: Sample Demographics

Sample Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Religiosity	Family Religiosity
Amal	27	Lebanese	Christian	Christian
Ghassan	29	Lebanese	None	Christian
Nadia	25	Lebanese	Muslim	Muslim
Chadi	26	Lebanese	None	Christian
Maha	24	Lebanese	Christian	Christian
Jameela	25	Lebanese	None	Both Christian and Muslim
Adel	31	Lebanese	Muslim	Muslim
Siham	25	Lebanese	Druze	Druze
Zahra	27	Lebanese	Knows a little bit about Druze religion but more into Christianity	Druze
Leila	31	Lebanese	Mostly Agnostic	Muslim
Ghayab	27	Lebanese	Eclectic, Spiritual	Christian
Elham	31	Lebanese	None	Christian
Jamil	24	Lebanese	None	Christian
Ayah	21	Lebanese	Christian	Christian
Maysa	26	Lebanese	Christian	Christian
Rana	24	Lebanese	Agnostic	Muslim
Marwa	24	Lebanese	Muslim	Muslim
Nayla	30	Lebanese	Muslim	Muslim

Appendix H: Returning of Findings

“I Want To Be Free The Lebanese Way”: An Interpretive
Phenomenology Examining the Experience of Lebanese American Queer Youth

What we wanted to learn

Limited knowledge is available around the experiences of queer Lebanese American young adults, specifically around family secrecy around their sexuality. This gap in the marriage and family therapy research has significant implications, and erases the experiences of queer Arab young adults around disclosure of their sexual identity. This is why we’ve relied on you, to get a first-hand account of your experience, and contribute to the research and literature, as well as the mental health field recommendations on how to best support queer Arab young adults.

What we did

We conducted one-on-one interviews via Zoom or phone call with 19 young adults who had to navigate secrecy around their queer identity, or their queer relationships. I asked questions about your experience and strategies that you and your family employed to navigate this difficult situation. I then examined your reports and analyzed our interviews to develop a description of your experience through this process, and the meaning you made around it.

What we learned

• **Past Studies:** Past studies have focused on the experience of queer White individuals and their families, but very little was known about the experience of Middle Eastern and Arab queer youth. Most studies in the past have also focused on White, Eurocentric families around queer identity, with a focus on disclosure and coming out as the ultimate goal, without taking into account the necessity of secrecy in collectivistic cultures, particularly ones where non-heterosexuality was still taboo and unacceptable.

• **Common Themes:**

- Secrecy is an essential process, one that seeks to protect families from stigma and ostracization, preserve relationships within the family, and maintain ties with the Lebanese community and extended families.
- Secrecy has altered the family structure in many cases, where mothers really stepped into their role and took charge of the process, embraced gatekeeping as a strategy, and alliances took place between participants and their siblings, cousins or mothers to help maintain the secrecy
- Ways to navigate the secrecy involved the “boiling frog” strategy of slowly shifting the family narrative to navigate family expectations, visibility management such as altering gender presentation depending on context, deception such as making up partners to quell relative’s questions, deflection strategies to cope with heteronormative questions from

relatives, denial on part of the participants' families at times, and the "unspoken consensus" strategy which is an unspoken agreement not to talk about the subject to alleviate tension.

• **Major findings:** Overall, analysis revealed three key findings. (1) The experience of disclosure and secrecy around sexuality is highly relational, in order to remain connected to their families. (2) The experience of secrecy is not "all good" or "all bad". Instead, the experience is highly subjective and in many cases has allowed queer Arab young adults to maintain their connections within their families and Lebanese culture while also embracing their truth with select confidantes. (3) Strategies around secrecy were adopted by both queer Arab young adults and their families, and mothers or mother figures in particular played a crucial role in dictating the way secrecy was navigated, who was included in the secrecy process, as well as co-creating strategies with queer young adults on how to deal with extended family.

Why this matters

This study contributes to a nuanced and culturally sensitive understanding of the experiences of Arab queer young adults, outside the lens of White, Eurocentric families which dominate the family science field currently. An objective understanding will also help enrich the understanding of mental health professionals and allow them to support queer Arab young adults in the ways they need, and the way that honors their culture.

Thank you!

Your voices have been instrumental in helping us build a deeper understanding of this experience.

I am grateful to each one of you for your thoughtfulness and openness. Thank you once again for being an important part of this study and I wish you all the best as you continue to utilize your experience in meaningful and beautiful ways!