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**QUEER ARAB AMERICAN EXPERIENCES:
NAVIGATING CROSS CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS
OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

by

GABRIELA M. MANSOUR

B.A. University of Central Florida, 2019.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Anthropology
in the College of Sciences
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ABSTRACT

The understanding of the experiences of queer Arab Americans and the ways in which they navigate cross cultural expectations of gender and sexuality is limited in the anthropology or social sciences scholarship. The available scholarship focuses primarily on queerness in juxtaposition to Islam, which is not relatable to all Arab Americans as they are a religiously diverse group. Through an intersectional approach, this research, conducted from April 2020 to May 2021, explores the lived experiences of queer Arab Americans from across the United States (U.S.) while seeking to identify potential commonalities that could encompass a more general queer Arab American experience in an attempt to broaden the understanding of an underrepresented population. Over the course of four months from June to September 2020, I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews that explored how participants navigated their worlds as queer Arab Americans. I conducted media analysis to contextualize the primary data. The narrative data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify significant themes and subthemes, and capture the diversity of explanations. The findings in this study were divided into two article manuscripts. The first article examines participants' experiences through their interpersonal connections with their families of origin and communities. I argue that, although religion plays a role in anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes, Arab families are predominantly anti-LGBTQ+ to prevent social ostracization from their communities. Additionally, a lack of public representation for queer Arab Americans creates hardship and delay in coming to terms with their gender identities and sexualities and perpetuates this population's invisibility. Ultimately, acceptance by an inclusive community strengthened individuals' confidence in their identities and helped alleviate the effects of rejection and isolation felt by the participants. The second

article examines the positionality of queer Arab Americans resulting from cultural othering due to historically strained U.S. relations with the Arab world. As a result, participants felt invalidated and alienated by people from both Arab and American communities, however they felt their existences as queer Arabs defied the opposition aimed at them. Additionally, they perceived American stereotyping of the Arab world hypocritical as the Queer community is still marginalized and without nationwide legal protections in the U.S.

To all the LGBTQ+ humans of SWANA descent, no matter what any individual, organization, country, or ideology says, your feelings are valid and the way, in your heart, that you know you are meant to exist is exactly right. I hope this research sheds some light on queer Arab American experiences and helps to pave the way for more visibility and a greater understanding—both academically and publicly. I pursued this topic out of love and a hope that one day the world will be better place for us all. Until then, be strong and know that you are worthy of love, respect, and kindness.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A long-standing tradition of Orientalist discourses and representations, as argued by literary critic Edward Said (1978), has adversely affected how Arabs have been and continue to be perceived in the United States. In many ways, Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) have been painted in western scholarship as the inverse to the western world, particularly, the United States (U.S.) and Europe: “the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West” (Said 1978, 132). The SWANA region is portrayed as backward and uncivilized—homophobic and sexist—while the western world is portrayed as the standard to be achieved—progressive and feminist (Salaita 2005). Said ultimately shows that “Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (1978, 138). Said’s rich analysis continues to be salient for how the Arab world is (mis)understood by America. In the U.S., popular media tends to conflate Arab identity with fundamentalist Islamic ideology, ignoring the fact that Arab peoples come from religiously diverse backgrounds and that Islamic fundamentalist values do not reflect those of the larger Muslim community. Furthermore, as the remnants of post-9/11 hostilities are reignited due to the Islamophobia and xenophobia perpetuated by the former Trump administration, queer Arab Americans are further alienated as they face prejudice in mainstream America as well as a result of the Arab community’s own complex expectations regarding gender identity, gender roles, and sexuality. Anthropological as well as other social science research has focused on Arab Americans in the past, but experiences and perspectives of Arab Americans who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community specifically have been understudied.

Inspired by intersectional theory (Carastathis 2016, Crenshaw 1991) and queer (of color) theory (Albrecht 2018; Weston 1993; Wilson 2019), which offer further criticism on research and perspectives that remain white, middle-class, and heteronormative, this study seeks to shift the conversation to queer Arab American individuals and how their unique intersection of identities—queer, Arab, and American—affect their experiences as individuals living in 21st century America.

I want to acknowledge that in this research study I justify using the term “queer” because it captures the broadness of gender and sexuality and has been useful in acknowledging an individual is not heterosexual without having to elaborate (Rand 2014). In the past it has been used in a derogatory manner against individuals who defied heteronormative expectations, but in more recent times, it has been reclaimed by younger generations of LGBTQ+ individuals (Perlman 2019; Rocheleau 2019). Ultimately, it can be helpful for those who are questioning, still coming to terms with their sexuality, or those that want to acknowledge that sexuality is fluid and can change over time.

As this thesis will demonstrate, those who identify as Arab American and queer must navigate not only what it means to be perceived as Arab in the United States, but also the homophobia and transphobia directed at them from both the American and Arab communities; together, this demands a unique journey toward understanding one’s sexuality, gender identity, and positionality in the world. In addition to broadening the understanding of the intrapersonal journey that queer Arab Americans undergo when coming to terms with their gender identities and sexualities in a heteronormative world, my goal was to challenge the expectation evident in popular discourses that Islam and/or religion plays the main role in anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments in

Arab American communities. Although most Arabs—Muslim or not—have an unavoidable connection to Islam due to a history of Orientalism and troubled U.S.-SWANA relations, I found that scholarship in anthropology and social sciences that takes as its focus an analysis of queer Arab Americans’ experiences without the assumption of religion as the underlying basis for these experiences is scarce. To address these gaps in existing scholarship, I designed a research study guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do queer Arab Americans navigate their sexuality and gender identity, and to what extent, if any, do they feel their experiences are different specifically because of their intersecting identities of queer, Arab, and American?
- 2) How do queer Arab Americans navigate their identities and positionalities within the Arab American community and American society as a minority that is perceived within the context of America’s strained socio-political relationship with the SWANA world?

Originally, the intention was to approach the data collection portion of this research both in-person and remotely in order to gain access to a diverse and well-rounded sample and employ both participant observation and interviews to collect data. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection transformed into a fully remote approach, using the videotelephony program Zoom. I collected data utilizing semi-structured interviews which followed an 18-item Interview Guide (attached in Appendix B). Semi-structured interviews lend themselves well to anthropological and qualitative research because they allow for a space where participants have enough room to share their own personal stories while also remaining relevant to the research goals (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Fetterman 2010). This study was conducted from June 2020 until May 2021. I

submitted my study to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Central Florida in late April of 2020. It received IRB approval in early June but had to be updated in early July to accommodate a change in recruitment strategy which consisted of a new flyer and the addition of an incentive in the form of a five-dollar Starbucks gift card. I collected data from early June until early September 2020. I began the process of analyzing my data through the transcribing and coding of the interviews shortly after I finished the data collection phase. Additionally, I reviewed the contemporary portrayal (or lack thereof) of Arab Americans in American media—both fictional (i.e., *Orange is the New Black*) and real-world examples. This included analyzing the ways Arab Americans are depicted on various news outlets and how the current political situation, including the U.S.'s tense relationship with the Arab world, affects their portrayal. The narrative encouraged by media has affected the way Arab Americans are perceived and how they perceive themselves. A careful media analysis allowed me to better understand these shifting relationships, conduct more effective interviews, and better analyze the data that was gathered. Data analysis lasted from September to December 2020, after which I wrote two articles for peer-reviewed scholarly journals from January 2021 to May 2021.

In this thesis, I report my study data in the form of direct quotes and personal accounts gathered from one-on-one interviews. This approach supports the idea that, although it is impossible to homogenize and simplify the experiences of such a complex and varied population, reoccurring themes and commonalities can be identified within the queer Arab American experience, including commonalities influenced both by normative sex and gender expectations from both the Arab world and American society as well as the socio-political context of U.S.-

SWANA relations. In reporting project data, I utilize pseudonyms to protect the identities of all my participants.

The results of this study serve as the foundation for two articles. Each article contains the relevant background literature and a detailed description of the methodology pertaining to the study focus for the given manuscript. The first article aims to show that queer Arab American experiences, although unique for every individual, are comparable to the experiences of other LGBTQ+ Americans. I argue that although we should consider cultural differences, many of my participants' experiences were similar to mainstream American "coming out" experiences. Additionally, although the Arab world is heavily associated with religion and opposition to LGBTQ+ individuals, many of my participants experienced secular opposition to their non-normative genders and sexualities. The second article aims to show that queer Arab American experiences are heavily affected by the longstanding political tension that exists between the U.S. and the SWANA world. I argue that queer Arab Americans are directly involved in knowledge production as they are self-aware about the ways mainstream Arab culture stigmatizes LGBTQ+ individuals while also criticizing the U.S.'s own prejudice toward the LGBTQ+ community. Both articles adhere to the intended journal's specific formatting and style guidelines. I aim to submit the articles to the journals in the Fall of 2021, following the incorporation of my M.A. Thesis Committee's recommended revisions.

CHAPTER 2: ARTICLE #1

Rejection, Repression, Compromise, and Belonging: Queer Arab American Experiences in the United States

Abstract

Arabs in America are generally plagued by the contradictory experience of having both an invisible and hyper visible existence. Arab Americans are invisible in the sense that there is little positive media representation of them in addition to being racially categorized as white by the United States government making it difficult to find content or scholarship that includes Arab Americans as a distinct and important category. In contrast, the hypervisibility of Arab Americans is rooted in racist and harmful stereotyping stemming from the complicated relationship between the United States and the Arab world and Islam. Regardless of their actual religious affiliation, Arab Americans tend to be conflated with Islam, including extreme Islamic beliefs and traditionalist views. The struggle is magnified for queer Arab Americans who are not only an ethnic minority, but also a sexual and/or gender minority. Through an intersectional approach, this paper explores the lived experiences of queer Arab Americans from across the US while seeking to identify potential commonalities that could encompass a more general queer Arab American experience. While every individual's experience is unique, after conducting 16 semi-structured interviews, four significant themes emerged across the interview narratives, including: (1) rejection from families of origin for non-religious reasons, (2) the repression of one's sexuality and/or gender identity until later in life, (3) compromising and negotiating one's identity, and (4) a sense of belonging that came after finding or creating a space—whether physical or virtual—inclusive to queer Arab Americans. Ultimately, acceptance by an inclusive community strengthened individuals' confidence in their identities and helped alleviate the effects of rejection and isolation felt by the participants.

Keywords: Arab Americans; queer anthropology; Arab invisibility; intersectionality; community as a site of belonging

Introduction

This paper will explore the ways in which individuals who self-identify as both queer and Arab American navigate their complex positionality within both the Arab American community and the queer American community. Whilst the interactions between queer Arab Americans and people who are solely Arab American but not queer, or queer but not of Arab descent, are not always negative, frequently, as this paper will demonstrate, individuals who identify as queer and Arab American are left feeling isolated and misunderstood due to a lack representation and visibility. This invisibility is in part due to Arabs' complicated history in the United States (U.S.), and the complex socio-political relationship they have with America. This study attempts to address this by giving "ethnographic attention on how place-making shapes cultural conceptions of...community and belonging" as discussed by Tom Boellstorff (2007, 24) and in reference to Gupta and Ferguson 1992. I will discuss the common but varied feelings of alienation and erasure amongst the participants in this study, the ways in which they seek out or carve out a space for themselves where one does not already exist, and the rejection (at various levels) that the participants experience at the hands of their families of origin and the Arab American community, as well as the rejection experienced at the hands of the queer American community. I will also explore my participants' rationalization for why they experience this rejection and how it leads them to their "found families". In particular, I was inspired by Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod's concept of the "ethnography of the particular" (1991: 466), whereby I sought to record, in this research, the unique and individual experiences of a community as varied as the queer Arab American community. As a researcher, one of my aims is to avoid perpetuating stereotypes or for the reader to take the findings as

applicable to all individuals who belong to this community. The experiences in this study are nuanced and unique to the individuals who experienced them, and this should not be taken for granted. Furthermore, as an anthropologist, I recognize that culture is not static and that it is constantly changing. Nevertheless, the overlapping experiences of the queer Arab American community identified in this study are important and should not be downplayed.

Defining “Arab”

It is helpful to first establish a definition for the term “Arab,” as it is loaded with a complex history and politics as an identifier. One consideration for its mainstream usage is the role of language. Arabic is the official or co-official language of 25 countries¹ located across Asia and Africa, but within those countries there are hundreds of ethnic groups, and the Arab identity is not one with which everyone relates. Typically, in the west, many of those ethnic groups are categorized under this overarching term because they are close geographically or happen to speak the Arabic language (Naber, 2012). However, it is important to shed light on this homogenization because Arab nationalism, which glorifies Arab civilization, has been recognized as harmful to minority ethnic groups, such as the Kurds who hail from the same geographic area but suffer at the hands of Arab hegemony and the attempts of “Arabization” of their culture, for example, the standardization of the language in the national education system and the forced displacement of Kurds (Houston, 2009; Wenner, 1963). In particular, language suppression is often used as a tool by the state to suppress ethnic minorities by denying them a significant part of their identity. This leads to cultural genocide and may be followed by ethnic

¹ Based on a report by Babbel Magazine of the language learning app Babbel
<https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/how-many-people-speak-arabic>

cleansing which is a systematic expulsion or killing of a population (Houston, 2009; Lemkin, 2005). I do not wish to perpetuate the erasure or forced assimilation that many ethnic minorities have faced. Even so, I utilize the terms Arab and Arab American in this study because these are terms with which many individuals of Southwest Asian and/or North African (SWANA) descent who live in the U.S. identify, and therefore their emic self-identification serves a useful purpose in anthropological research by aiding me in defining a population.

Arabs in the United States

Records of Arab immigration into the U.S. date back to the late 19th Century when most of the Arab immigrants were Levantine (Syrian and Lebanese) Christians (Naber, 2000, 2012). Since that time, there have been various waves of Arab immigration into the U.S. Today, the individuals that encompass the diaspora group known as Arab Americans hail from many different countries throughout Southwest Asia and North Africa and practice a number of religious traditions. Some are first-generation Americans while others have lived in the U.S. for multiple generations (Naber, 2000, 2012). The levels of integration in these communities vary from person to person, and other factors, especially religion, have a great impact on how Arab Americans are perceived by other Americans in the U.S. Moreover, western notions of what it means to be an Arab are saturated with Orientalist (Said, 1978) beliefs that conflate being Arab with being a practicing Muslim. For this reason, in the present day, Arab Americans of all religious backgrounds have experienced a cultural othering due to their perceived proximity to Islam, regardless of actual religious affiliation (Talib, 2006). The degree of othering varies even among the practicing Muslim population; those that are more visibly Muslim than others (i.e., hijabis—individuals who wear headscarves for religious reasons) tend to experience heightened

levels of prejudice (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013; Unkelbach et al., 2008). This study is not limited to exploring the experiences of queer Arab Americans that identify as Muslim, but also those who do not identify as such, however it is important to acknowledge the impact that the perceived proximity to Islam has on societies' perceptions of Arab Americans. This perception is also therefore relevant to the experiences of participants in this research.

Defining "American"

Although my aim is not to perpetuate the notion that culture can be delineated easily, this research is dependent on identifiers such as *Arab* and *American* and communities within what I reference to as the *western world* and the *SWANA world*. As discussed by Gupta and Ferguson (1992), anthropologists should tread carefully when defining cultures for there is a fine line between acknowledging differences and perpetuating "us" versus "them" dynamics. Although these identifiers are dependent on time, place, and context, and they mean different things to different people, it would be a disservice to pretend as if these constructs did not impact the daily lives of my participants. As social constructs, these have a great impact on the ways in which the participants perceive themselves, perceive the world, and how others perceive them. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that these terms shape the context within which the lived experience takes place.

In this study, research participants are eligible to take part if they self-identify as queer, Arab, and American. Some of my participants were born in America and some of my participants were born elsewhere. Some of them lived their whole lives in the U.S. while others moved to the U.S. later in life or spent their lives moving across different countries.

Although at first glance this research seems to focus on the importance of recognizing the differences between queer Arab Americans as the main subject versus others, my aim is to deconstruct the idea there is a “progressive” western (American) world and an “intolerant” eastern world (SWANA). To be Arab, to be queer, and to be American are all dependent on the individual, and their self-identification.

Intersectionality theory

This study is primarily informed by intersectionality theory. An intersectional framework calls for research that is cognizant of power dynamics, specifically, the way in which an individuals’ multiple identities, such as race, gender, and sexuality, cannot be compartmentalized and instead should be seen as intertwined in their lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectionality is especially relevant to this research as it concerns a population that is an ethnic/cultural minority in the United States. Additionally, queer Arab American individuals face further hardships due to their non-traditional expressions of gender and sexuality, which may include non-cisgender and/or not straight expressions. Approaching this study from an intersectional perspective, there is an expectation that together these identities may create an intersecting set of discriminatory experiences that are different from someone who is not both Arab and queer. Queer Arab Americans therefore may face xenophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and sexism from both the Arab and American communities. It is important to reflect on these complex experiences through an intersectional lens because people do not exist apart from the ways in which they are perceived or the ways in which they identify; in fact, their identities overlap and act as a “double jeopardy” (Carastathis, 2016: 55; Crenshaw, 1991) A queer Arab American individual’s experience with queerness is not separate from their

identity as an Arab American. In the same way, a queer Arab American navigates Arab and American expectations of gender and sexuality as both an Arab American and an individual who identifies as queer. Furthermore, within the queer Arab American community, an intersectional framework allows me to highlight how one participant's experience may differ from another's based on their gender identity, socioeconomic class, or even how white passing they may be.

Queer theory

This study is further informed by queer anthropology which focuses on “variations in the expression of sexuality and gender, and the ways that societies treat such differences” (Wilson, 2019: 1) and challenges the heteronormative assumptions about sexuality and gender.

Anthropologist Kath Weston (1993) offers a critique on how early lesbian and gay ethnography use Anglo-European notions of gender and sex as implicit points of comparison. I engage with queer theory in an effort to begin to address this erasure of queer Arabs. Queer theory therefore forms the basis for how this study has been conceived and is designed. Specifically, the research topic in itself subverts Anglo-European norms by focusing on a population that is so often portrayed in direct opposition to the western world (Mikdashy & Puar, 2016; Said, 1978).

Furthermore, by using non-gendered language, such as they/them pronouns, throughout this paper I am contributing to the dismantling of the binary “she” or “he” conceptual and linguistic constructs. Additionally, at the beginning of every interview I ask the participants to share their gender identity, sexuality, and pronouns, therefore undermining heteronormative assumptions that genders and sexualities can be inferred through an individuals' appearance. Another aspect of queer theory that I engage is the concept of normative discourse, as opposed to a generalized notion of culture (Wilson, 2019), to avoid feeding into Orientalist narratives which depict the

Arab American community as a conservative, patriarchal, monolithic “culture” (Said, 1978). By thinking in terms of normative discourse, my goal is to stress that there are norms that change over time and space and are heavily dependent on the individual and the context. Furthermore, although the data in this study may to some degree set Arab culture apart and sometimes at odds with American culture, my participants’ experiences nevertheless reveal many blurred cultural boundaries when it comes to being queer in a world where cisgender and straight is the norm. Ultimately, queer theory serves as a key analytical lens to examine the ways in which queer Arab Americans personally navigate and express their queer identities as well as challenge or struggle against normative discourses as shaped by their unique experiences as Arabs living in the U.S.

The current study

The goal of this research is to better understand a community that is underrepresented in both popular media and in social science literature. It is only in recent years that scholars have begun focusing on queer Arab voices, and much of this literature focuses on being both Muslim and queer (Talib, 2006; Thompson, 2019). The literature that focuses specifically on queer Arab Americans and does not simultaneously focus on religion is still lacking. Additionally, Arab Americans, in general, are plagued by an invisibility that stems from being racially categorized as white but not being perceived as so. Arabs do not benefit from the same social privileges that white (European) Americans benefit from. Queer Arab Americans are further alienated and made vulnerable as they experience transphobia and homophobia from both the American and Arab communities, in addition to the xenophobia and Islamophobia of which they are frequent targets (Mansour, 2019; Naber, 2000, 2012). Anthropologist Nadine Naber, in her ethnographic research with Arab Americans (2012), argues that Arab American families justify their anti-LGBTQ+

sentiment by conflating queerness with what they perceive are American values (i.e., a rejection of one's Arab roots). Queer Arab Americans are therefore condemned for being influenced by American sexual transgression wherein queerness is viewed as un-Arab, ignoring the fact that queer Arabs have always existed (Naber, 2012: 83-91). To be American, or to be Arab—these two identities are depicted as a rigid binary between which the individuals must choose. Queer Arab Americans therefore, Naber argues, are “betraying” their “Arabness” by living a life that is not heteronormative. Additionally, Arab American communities are diverse, and it would be false to assume that the same set of beliefs or norms exists across this sizable diaspora. Moreover, critiques of homophobia and transphobia within the Arab American community, while important to identify, may also fuel further Islamophobic and xenophobic attitudes toward these communities. This research does not assume that Arab American communities are promoting compulsory heterosexual expectations and a heteronormative lifestyle a priori. Instead, my research will explore the experiences of queer Arab Americans as understood in their own emic perspectives (Fetterman, 2010). Moreover, my own perspective as a queer Arab American or “partially native,” as Bahira Sherif (2001: 446) posits, “can help generate new perspectives on the state of the human condition that are insightful and may aid in overcoming generalizations that border on racism,” and in the case of this research, xenophobic and/or homophobic assumptions. To address these gaps in existing research, in this study I explore the following questions: How do queer Arab Americans navigate their sexuality and gender identity, and to what extent, if any, do they feel their experiences are different specifically because of their intersecting identities of queer, Arab, and American?

Research method

I took a qualitative approach and collected data utilizing semi-structured interviews which followed an 18-item interview guide. Semi-structured interviews lend themselves well to anthropological and qualitative research because they allow for a space where participants have enough room to share their own personal stories while also maintaining relevance to the research (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Fetterman, 2010). The data presented in the form of direct quotes and personal accounts gathered from one-on-one interviews supports the common but varied experiences of queer Arabs within the U.S. I utilize pseudonyms to protect the identities of all my participants.

Sampling strategies

This study recruited participants that fit the inclusion criteria of self-identifying as queer and Arab American and who were at least 18 years of age. Not every participant who identified with the term considered themselves an ethnic Arab; every participant however would fall under the descriptor of someone with ethnic ties to Southwest Asia and/or North Africa. The participants themselves decided whether they identified with the label or not. Participants who volunteered to be interviewed identified this way to some extent, however some participants shared their criticisms of Arab nationalism—the glorification of Arab civilization at the expense of other ethnic minorities in Southwest Asia and North Africa. In retrospect, it would have been more appropriate to use Southwest Asian and/or North African as opposed to Arab, but for the sake of transparency and authenticity, I will continue to use the term Arab which I utilized throughout the duration of my recruitment and data collection phases.

The recruitment of queer Arab American participants was overall challenging. Recruitment took place from early June to early September 2020, using purposeful and snowball sampling (Fetterman, 2010). A study flyer distributed via the social media platforms Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, and e-mailed to people and/or organizations such as the Center Orlando, the Zebra Coalition, the University of Central Florida's Pride Student Association, Arab American LGBT rights activist Jacob Tobia, LGBT Detroit, Phoenix Pride, and the SWANA Rainbow podcast (name changed for confidentiality). The Center Orlando organization posted the flyer at their physical locations. On Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, I began by posting the flyer on my profile, and some of my associates shared the flyer to their profiles. Eventually, my recruitment became more proactive out of necessity resulting from a lack of traction. On Facebook, I used the search box to find American pages and groups across the U.S. with variations of "LGBTQ+" and/or "pride" in their name, and directly messaged them. The pages I contacted were ISU Pride, Pride Student Union at the University of Florida, Capital Pride, Portland Pride, Chattanooga Pride/Tennessee Valley Pride, Heartland Pride, Honolulu Pride: A Project of the Hawaii LGBT Legacy Foundation, Central Oregon Pride, Miami University Graduate Student Pride Association, Phoenix Pride, Michigan Pride, and Albuquerque Pride. One of my participants also gave me access to a closed Facebook group that I will refrain from listing to maintain the group's confidentiality. Since passively posting the flyer did not yield many results, I also directly messaged users to share the study information on Twitter and Instagram if they indicated that they were both LGBTQ+ and Southwest Asian and/or North African on their profiles. I found them by typing words/phrases such as "queer," "Arab American," and variations of "LGBTQ+" on both platforms. I was most successful when I

directly messaged people on Twitter or when Twitter pages with larger followings retweeted my flyer. The SWANA Rainbow podcast retweeted my flyer, which brought the most attention to my study. Additionally, the study recruitment protocol was later revised to include compensation in the form of a \$5 Starbucks gift card for the participants' time, and this change was reflected on an edited flyer. This flyer replaced the original one by the end of July 2020. I used snowball sampling with each research participant, which aided in the expansion of the sample (Fetterman, 2010). These efforts yielded 16 participants that fit the recruitment criteria, ranging from 19 to 35 in age. The sample includes individuals living in Florida, North Carolina, California, Washington D. C., Missouri, Virginia, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Nevada, Maryland, and New York. Participants have ethnic ties to countries from the geographic areas of Southwest Asia and North Africa with some participants identifying as mixed. Ethnicities included two mixed Egyptian and Puerto Rican individuals, a mixed Lebanese and Honduran individual, an Egyptian individual, a mixed Tunisian and Moroccan individual, a mixed Saudi and white American individual, a mixed Egyptian-Saudi-Syrian-Turkish individual, a Lebanese Druze individual, a mixed Egyptian and white American individual, a mixed Palestinian and white American individual, a mixed Lebanese and Syrian individual, two Palestinian individuals, and three Lebanese individuals. The sample is religiously diverse including participants that were raised Muslim, Christian, interfaith, and one Druze participant.

Data collection and analysis

The majority of the participants shared their experiences in a forthcoming manner and expanded on the interview questions resulting in interviews that, in some cases, lasted over 60 minutes. The research was designed for data collection either in-person or remotely, without limitations regarding the location of participants in the U.S. However due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom. The interviews were conducted one-on-one on Zoom and audio-recorded using QuickTime Player on a MacBook Pro. My interview guide included demographic questions relevant for this study, including ethnic background, pronouns, sexual identity, and gender identity, as well as more in-depth and open-ended questions about experiences as queer Arab Americans. The data were stored in a password-protected folder on a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher. Each interview was transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Words transcription tool and then edited to capture any nuance lost via the automated transcription. After transcription was completed, the audio recordings were destroyed. I analyzed the transcripts by creating a coding scheme/codebook to identify common themes and subthemes, as well as to identify the outlying themes or unusual instances in order to capture the diversity and range of explanations (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Fetterman, 2010). Due to my insider and outsider status (Sherif, 2001), an important component of my analysis strategy was to practice reflexivity by being aware of my positionality as a halfie anthropologist—someone who is of mixed cultural or ethnic identity (Abu-Lughod, 1991).

Results and discussions

Four major themes surfaced at the conclusion of this study. The themes are (1) participants' experiences of their families of origin rejecting them due to the families' fear of being judged or ostracized by society, (2) participants repressing their sexualities and gender identities until later in life, (3) participants compromising parts of their identity to better fit into spaces where there is a lack of intersectionality, and (4) the desire for representation and belonging leading to the creation of an inclusive space and the ways in which it helps my participants to reconcile their nuanced identities. These themes are presented below and supported by emblematic quotes selected from the data that my participants contributed to the study. Each quote is supported through further discussion and analysis.

A non-religious reason for rejection: the notion that queerness reflects badly on the family

One of the most prominent findings in this study is that participants experienced some level of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments within their families of origin. In the United States, one of the more common justifications given for anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment is an individual's right to religious freedom by which they interpret religious doctrine as being against homosexuality, despite the fact that most religious texts encourage individuals to love thy neighbor (Herek, 1984). Allport and Ross (1967) described this as practicing religion extrinsically by using it to justify one's perception of how the world should be and to maintain normative discourses around gender and sexuality, as opposed to practicing religion intrinsically and using it as a method to better understand the world at large. These findings have been supported by newer research, which also identifies religious institutions that promote binary gender norms as important drivers for the perpetuation of negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ persons (Janssen & Scheepers, 2019).

For this reason, I expected to see predominantly religion-based rejection aimed at my participants, but this was not always the case. These experiences were interpreted by the research participants as stemming not always from religion-based reasoning, but often from the fear that acknowledging or openly supporting a queer relative would reflect badly on the whole family.

My participants came from diverse religious backgrounds, but it would be unproductive to ignore the perceived proximity that they have to Islam due to the fact that they identify as Arab. Additionally, the western conversations surrounding Islam tend to paint it as the religion of intolerance (GhaneaBassiri, 2013). The narratives in this study challenge the notion that religion—specifically, Islam—is the main cause of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment within Arab American communities. Yet, my participants’ fear at facing religion-based repercussion is not unfounded. In the case of Islam and Christianity—which the majority of my participants identified with—many religious authorities uphold the notion that homosexuality is unnatural and unacceptable. Additionally, nations with a majority Islamic population have a reputation for extreme punishment of same-sex relations, including the death penalty (Rehman and Polymenopoulou, 2013). While some of the participants did experience religion-based rejection at the hands of their families to some degrees, much of the time it was not their families’ primary concern that the participants’ queer identities went against their religious values. Some of my participants also considered the ways their religion may be compatible with their sexuality and/or gender identity. For example, they brought up the prominence of gender non-conforming individuals who were assigned male at birth in Islamic arts and poetry at the time of the Prophet, an argument also identified in queer studies scholarship (Rehman and Polymenopoulou, 2013). This highlights the complex relationship that individuals may have with religion based on

specific time periods and contexts, and interpretation of religious texts. What was once interpreted as acceptable may not be so in the present time. Despite my expectations regarding the role of religion in anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination aimed at my participants, the typical concern for many participants' families was over what others in the community would think of the family. These concerns made it difficult for participants to speak openly about their identity.

For example, Nadia, a 23-year-old who self-identifies as lesbian and attends religious services at the mosque or Sunday school, explained that being open about her sexuality was framed by religious discourses, and by extension her family, as a “selfish” desire:

You're taught to not prioritize, not only yourself, but your pleasure, especially sexually and romantically. This makes it harder to follow your heart even if you're straight, let alone if you're not. It makes it seem a lot more selfish.

Although her experiences occurred in religious settings, the language used is not inherently religious. Instead, the focus is on the traits of selfishness versus selflessness, rather than a religious text or any attribution of being queer to committing a sinful act. She explained that the typical narratives she encountered in her family convey a collectivistic culture, therefore individuals may have a difficult time coming to terms with their sexuality and/or gender identity because it is framed as a selfish choice that exposes the family to social criticism. Another participant, Amina, a 35-year-old who self-identifies as queer and/or lesbian, expressed similar sentiments sharing:

Most, if not all, Arab societies are very communal, so there is a particular significance placed on family and how whatever an individual does directly reflects on the whole family versus in the United States, which is a very individualistic society.

Amina is of white American descent on her mother's side and Saudi Arabian descent on her father's side. She is out to most people in her mother's family, but only a select few in her father's, to whom she only came out because they approached her first. She goes on to explain:

The common response for those who asked me on my dad's side was, 'Ok, I'm okay with it, but don't tell anyone else in the family,' and that side of the family lacks in the element of publicly supporting a queer family member, so it's like, 'Okay, we can talk about this in private, but don't say anything to anyone else' was the general reaction.

This observation highlights how queerness is not necessarily in conflict with any personal values that any family members may hold, but they are wary of the effects that such a revelation would have on the participant's as well as the family's public image. Therefore, Amina's relatives essentially asked that she remains closeted. Another participant, Kamilah, a 22-year-old who self-identifies as lesbian, discusses a similar observation based on her experiences:

I feel that in Arab culture, it's more so about appearance and reputation and how everybody else will see you because everybody is so connected to each other. More often, I see Americans just having issues with religion, which Arab Americans also have, but I feel like for us it's more about what you look like to other people.

Likewise, Kamilah, who self-identifies as a lesbian, is now away for college and living on her own. She explained the strained relationship between her and her father ever since she came out: "My father, particularly, is still upset over how he will look to other people and not so much how my life will be, but more so how his persona is going to look to others." Kamilah believes that her father struggles with accepting the idea of a non-heteronormative family. Interestingly, she also feels that if the rest of her family was accepting of her, and LGBTQ+

people in general, that it would also help her father to come to terms with her sexuality because then there would be no shame associated with having a lesbian daughter. This reinforces the idea that public image is held at high importance, but if public acceptance becomes more widespread then personal opinions on LGBTQ+ matters may become more positive as well. Unexpectedly, Kamilah shares that, despite the lack of support, she never feared being shunned or cut-off financially. She compared this to her perception of American culture which she views as one that encourages young adults to leave their houses by the age of 18 and become financially independent. For her, being an unmarried woman living away from home carries a stigma. Anthropologist and gender scholar Kath Weston observed similar feelings among her Chinese American research participants who shared that their families' priority has been for the "family unit" to be preserved "even if people [are] killing each other," (1997: 118) which mirrors how Kamilah's family thinks. This is not surprising as both Weston's participants and Kamilah come from cultures typically characterized by scholars as collectivist (Buda & Elsayed-Elkhoully, 1998).

Additionally, another participant's experience sheds light on where familial anxieties may stem from. Jaden, a 20-year-old who self-identifies as asexual and gender non-conforming, argues that the tendency for Arabs to hold community relations in high regard leads to a connectedness whereby word travels more quickly in Arab communities:

Here [in the U.S] people would probably not hear about their distant cousin coming out or if someone in their town came out, but I feel like in Lebanese culture, it's kind of like everyone hears about it, and people are quick to judge. People are judgmental.

Similarly, another participant whose family roots are in Lebanon, Osama, a 22-year-old self-identified gay man, was forced to come out as gay when someone from the Lebanese community reported to his mother that he had posted an LGBT-related tweet. As a consequence, his family disowned him for seven months, but eventually his mother had a change of heart and became more sympathetic because of a conversation that she had with another Lebanese friend who happened to have a gay son. This change of heart reinforces the perception that strong familial bonds are of high priority in the Arab community, however his parents are adamant they will not attend his future wedding. Because Osama identifies as “technically bisexual,” his mom holds out hope that he will marry a woman instead of a man, despite him being primarily attracted to men. Though his parents have not fully come to terms with his sexuality, presently, they maintain “a great relationship” and provide him with financial support. This example highlights the complexity of relationships; Osama overlooks his parents’ invalidation of his sexuality, and his parents overlook Osama’s attraction toward men on the grounds that they are family, and they love each other. Osama’s experience of being outed by someone from the Arab community who saw his LGBT-related tweet serves as a prime example of the type of scenario that Jaden was alluding to.

Jaden’s experience, along with Nadia’s, Amina’s, Kamilah’s, and Osama’s depict instances where participants are perceiving a cultural difference in obstacles regarding their queer identities compared to the obstacles that their queer, American—usually white—counterparts might face. Many of these responses surfaced naturally in the conversation centered around how the participants felt they had to navigate their sexuality and gender identities in comparison to their queer American counterparts who are not of Arab descent.

The above experiences can be understood in the context of the scholarship centered around normative discourses relating to gender and sexuality present within families (Haines et al., 2018). Although any person who identifies as queer may potentially face hardship, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which the experience is different for the queer Arab American community. Additionally, participants expressed that they perceived a cultural difference between their experience of queerness versus LGBTQ+ people who are not of Arab descent's experience of queerness. In fact, my participants perceived that their relationships with their queer identities were either more difficult or difficult in a different way because they were of Arab descent. This notion is reinforced by existing scholarship. For instance, Weston asserts that "people of color, whites with strong ethnic ties, and people who considered themselves working class" face difficulties in coming out to their families that are different from the ones that individuals who identify as queer but are part of a "standardized American family" may face (1997: 56).

The goal of this section is to shed light on a non-religious reason for anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment in a community that is so heavily associated with religious extremism. My participants came from predominantly Muslim and Christian families, and while some participants considered their families religious, others felt that religiosity within their families was present but not intensely so. Many participants were accepted by, or part of, progressive religious spheres such as clubs, churches, and mosques. While not undermining the very real and negative impact that religion-backed anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment has had on the queer Arab American community, I argue that the more important focus that emerges from these data is on perceived cultural norms within the Arab community other than religion. The Arab communities that my participants were a part of

were characterized by them as being collectivist in prioritizing the family's interests, and this had both positive and negative impacts on them. For example, an unfortunate consequence of the familial and community closeness was that gossip was rampant, and an honorable public image needed to be maintained for the sake of one's family. If someone came out as queer or was outed by another community member—which was a common fear due to the closeness of the community—the revelation would travel quickly. To contrast, a positive consequence of the closeness of the community was that many participants felt that the prioritization of the family unit allowed relationships to be maintained with family members despite conflicting worldviews. This was a cultural norm that many participants expressed appreciation for as they perceived American families that were not Arab to be less close and more willing to cut people off.

Religious versus secular discourses: prejudice against the LGBTQ+ community

Although in my discussion I focus primarily on secular reasons for prejudice against the Queer Arab American community, I want to acknowledge that many of my participants also faced religious based prejudice. The participants came from households ranging from very religious to not very religious, and their religious backgrounds also varied, many even coming from multireligious households. The reasoning behind focusing on secular prejudice is because the common assumption is that religion is more extremist and relevant in the Arab community when compared to the American community. I would argue that although the U.S. boasts the separation of church and state, many of our anti-LGBTQ+ legislature is rooted in our history as a majority Christian nation. Additionally, although religious values were discussed, more of the ethnographically rich accounts focused on secular objections to the LGBTQ+ community.

Repression of sexuality until later in life

Another prominent theme in this study revealed that participants either realized they were queer early in life but repressed these feelings for a period of time or realized they were queer nearing the end of adolescence only once they were exposed to LGBT circles or were in a space where they could more safely and freely explore their own sexualities and/or genders. The realization and exploration of one's own gender and sexuality is unique to the individual, however the absence of a safe space in the formative years when these realizations are emerging for queer Arab Americans makes it challenging for them to come out about their gender and/or sexuality. Lack of positive media portrayal for people who identify as both queer and Arab reinforces the invisibility of this population. Queer representation in traditional and newer forms of media is important both for the Queer community and for people who are not queer; representation of queer identities can help LGBTQ+ people to figure out their own identities, and for heterosexual and cisgender people, it can help them to better understand the Queer community, and diversity in general (McInroy & Craig, 2017). All my participants struggled with this absence of safe and encouraging spaces in one way or another, however, it is also important to note the varied range of experiences related in participants' narratives. Some remain closeted for fear of being physically harmed by their families, while others explained they never feared being shunned or cut off financially by their families because their perception was that, for Arabs, family came first, whether they held prejudice toward the LGBTQ+ community or not.

For example, Salma, who is 24 years old and self-identifies as queer but leaning more toward identifying as lesbian as she gets older, shared:

In elementary school I knew I was different...when I got to high school, I knew for sure. I did put it off before I fully came to terms with it for, you know, my mental health, and then my nephew came out to me—I don't know when that was exactly, but he came out to me— and, I think, at that point, I was like okay, this is bigger than myself. I can't sit here and tell you to live your truth and be proud of yourself if I'm not living my truth and being proud of myself.

Salma's desire to normalize queerness for the younger generations in her family also motivated her coming to terms with her own identity. She understood that unless she could "live her own truth," queer Arab Americans would remain an invisible minority.

For others, a more independent, college life allowed them the space and safety to acknowledge and explore their identity. For example, Amina told me:

I would say at 19 is when it clicked for me and when I actually acknowledged it to myself. It was when I was in college and a friend invited me to go with her to a queer—it was called QSU, it means Queer and Straight Unity—group, and I went, and I don't know—I felt like I was at home in a way I wasn't expecting, and then I realized why I felt that way.

Likely, Amina feeling as though she was "at home" was generated by the presence of like-minded people at QSU. Other participants also waited until college to come to terms with themselves. For example, Rebecca, who is currently 20 years old and identifies as bisexual, only realized that she was bisexual when she was around 18 but suppressed it until the present time. She attributed her ability to finally accept her identity to moving out of the family home and away for college. Again, distance from a family of origin with heteronormative expectations

allows participants to accept themselves in new and safer environments. Recent research data show that the average age of coming out is getting lower; a survey conducted by Pew Research Center shows that younger generations of LGBT Americans have a lower median age of coming out (Survey of LGBT Americans 2013). This particular study did not take race into account, but when race is considered, Arab Americans are either included in the white racial category or excluded altogether making it difficult to compare queer Arab American experiences of coming out to the experiences of other queer American youth.

Another participant, Laura, who is currently 21 years old and identifies as bisexual, realized that she was bisexual when she was 19 years old because she developed romantic feelings for another girl in college. While for Nour, a 25-year-old who self-identifies as both gay and queer and nonbinary/third gender, figuring out their sexuality was “easy,” but gender exploration began after adolescence:

Figuring out I was gay was easy, you know, just a slow realization around middle school between sixth and seventh grade. Well, I started questioning whether or not I was asexual by the time I was 18, and to be honest, that’s still a question...that’s still something I’m questioning, and it’s probably going to stay questioning for a while...and exploring my gender started when I was around 19, and it all really developed in college.

Nour explains that they use they/them pronouns, but recently became comfortable with she/her as well. She is out to her parents as gay, but not nonbinary, because she feels her parents would not understand it. Their parents view their femininity as being tied to their gay sexuality. Additionally, it is understandable that for some individuals gender exploration would be even more difficult because being visibly trans could put many people in danger. This is not to say

that sexuality cannot create the same risks, but typically nontraditional expressions of gender are difficult to hide because so much of how the world perceives gender is linked to outward appearance (Plemons, 2017).

Some participants, like Samantha, who is 19 years old, shares, “[I don’t] like labels, but I would say I’m a lesbian.” She also expressed feelings of knowing she was queer at a young age but suppressing it until later. She explained that she was “shoving” her sexuality down on various occasions:

I feel like I went through these phases of knowing and then I would, like, shove it back down. I kind of knew—probably for the first time—in like fifth grade, but I shoved it down until seventh grade, and eventually I came out to my friend for the first time in tenth grade, at the very end.

Samantha was able to come out to a friend during high school, which is earlier than most participants in this study. Another participant, Serena, who is 20 years old and identifies as queer and/or bisexual/pansexual, also realized she was queer in middle school, but did not identify with any specific label until college:

How old are you when you’re in seventh grade? I think 12...or 11. It was one of those things I kept in the back of my mind. I had known I was fascinated with girls, and I had known about queerness, and I was developing that, but I didn’t identify until like high school—or college really.

For many participants, there was a coming out to the self and a coming out to the rest of the world, although arguably, someone who is LGBTQ+ is never finished coming out but instead must do it multiple times throughout the course of their lifetime including every time they meet

somebody new. This is important because research shows that coming out as well as coming out and receiving a positive reaction is correlated with better mental health among queer Americans (Ryan et al., 2015). Some participants were able to come to conditional understandings with their families that worked for maintaining civil and even good relationships between them. Other participants are out in some places, for example online, at work, or among their school friends, but not to their families. Lastly, some participants decided to come out to some people in their family and accepted the fact that there were family members whom they could never be fully themselves with.

Negotiations and compromises

The major theme that encompasses this research is identity, which is understood as personhood as specifically related to sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, and nationality, and how the participants identify themselves based on their personal conception of the self, coupled with how society at large—including friends, family, and strangers—interacts with them (Butler, 1990; Falu, 2019; Valentine, 2007). The initial recruitment for this study relied on participants self-identifying as Arab American and queer, although how they understood these labels varied. As participants' narratives have shown thus far, many felt the need to suppress their LGBTQ+ identities until later in life whether they were self-aware of their desires early on or not. Another finding of this research is the experience of having to compromise one's identity or the self. Once the participants acknowledged to themselves that they were LGBTQ+, could they, in fact, be both LGBTQ+ and Arab American or were those identities at odds? Many participants felt they could not simultaneously be Arab and queer because of two distinct and significant reasons. First, the notion that queerness is a western

phenomenon (Rahman, 2014) can create a sense of alienation for queer Arab Americans generated by experiences of backlash from the Arab American community. Second, the lack of visible representation for queer Arab Americans in the public discourses or media, including those generated by queer communities themselves, can be experienced as a form of marginalization tolerated by the American queer community, and likewise contribute to a feeling of alienation for queer Arab American individuals (McInroy & Craig, 2017).

Visible representation is crucial for individuals in the LGBTQ+ community who are trying to understand themselves or affirm their identities and also for creating accessible depictions of marginalized groups which helps to promote a broader understanding of, in this case, queer identities (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Indeed, the American LGBTQ+ movement can be alienating to queer Arab Americans for lack of consideration for their experience, including through discourses that equate being Arab to being a Muslim extremist, or describing Islam as a religion intolerant to LGBTQ+ people without considering how the United States and its historically Christian ideals also continue to oppress LGBTQ+ people. This results in a double standard. An example of the attitudes this rhetoric breeds is a comment on the popular, video-creating and sharing application known as TikTok. In this comment—left under a video that condemned the airstrikes on Syria that U.S. President Joe Biden ordered a month into his presidency (Cooper and Schmitt 2021)—one of the users declared, “the Middle East has been getting away with too much shit especially to what they’re doing to the lgbt so yes u deserve it.” The implication that a whole country deserves to suffer at the hands of U.S. imperialism because of the homophobia of some is unsettling. The irony is that this user describes their page as a safe place for LGBTQ+ people but fails to consider that there are LGBTQ+ Syrians who will be

negatively affected by the aforementioned actions of the U.S. military. Such rhetoric and its assumptions alienate queer Arab Americans and treat being queer and being Arab American as mutually exclusive. It paints queerness as western exceptionalism (Rahman, 2014). Not all prejudice however is as blatant as an air strike on a country to which one has ethnic ties. Numerous social media posts can be identified that perpetuate the fear or hatred of the “Middle East” as an oppressor, and research has identified these discourses (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Likewise, participants in this study reported personal encounters in which they were faced with anti-Arab microaggressions in spaces such as LGBTQ+ university clubs—which prided themselves on being inclusive—as well as progressive religious spaces, and even encounters with race-based fetishization or rejection in the dating scene. Many participants shared that, at numerous points in their lives, their unique intersection of identities made them feel like misfits since there were very few—if any—queer Arab Americans in their communities. For this reason, many decided to negotiate or renounce parts of their identity.

Salma, who identifies as Latine and Arab, shared that she often felt like an imposter for not fitting perfectly within any one group. She recounts:

I’ve been in a conversation where someone tried to tell me that I was safer with them than I am with the Muslim Arab community because the Muslim Arab community doesn’t accept me. It was an individual who wasn’t Arab, wasn’t Muslim, speaking for Arabs and Muslims in a way that furthered misconceptions and cultural divides.

Experiences much like this micro-aggression further alienate individuals like Salma. Many of the participants in this study were of mixed ancestry or they described themselves as white passing, and due to these experiences, some of them either distanced or considered

distancing themselves from their Arab ethnicity as a way to avoid these hostilities, and/or separate themselves from a community that, at that point in time, they perceived as unaccepting and oppressive to them. Eventually, many of the participants realized that neither being queer, nor Arab American invalidated the other identity.

One participant, Caleb, a 20-year-old who self-identifies as queer, nonbinary transmasculine and has Tunisian and Moroccan roots, shares a troubling experience that highlights the lasting effects that alienation and lack of representation can have on queer Arab Americans:

Specific to my experience with my trans identity, I went through a phase where I wanted to reject my culture, so I ended up picking a name that's very western in nature and that isn't used in Arab settings. Later, I regretted that immensely, but it felt like it was too late because I had already formed an attachment to this name. I compensated by adding an Arab sounding middle name.

Caleb expressed dismay at choosing a western-style name at a time when they were trying to separate their trans identity from their Tunisian and Moroccan identities. They discussed their belief that a queer Arab American is less inclined to feel pride and instead more shame in their LGBTQ+ identity. In their case, their family was blatant in their rejection of Caleb, so at one point in time, Caleb chose to fully embrace their queer identity while discarding their Arab side. They also shared that, presently, they feel proud to be both queer and Arab, and they wished that their name, which can be a significant part of a person's identity, reflected this fact. In the cases where participants wanted to distance themselves from their SWANA ancestry,

it was usually because their family of origin was intolerant on some level, creating an environment where an individual felt forced to choose between one identifier or the other.

Another participant, Yasir, a 25-year-old who self-identifies as gay, shares his thoughts on belonging when it comes to Arab Americans:

One thing that happens a lot with Arab Americans—because we’re such a diverse bunch of people— is if you can pass as a group that more or less already has a community in America, you rush to do that. I knew other Arab Americans, and if they looked white, as far as anyone else was concerned, they were.

The fact that Arab Americans are categorized as white by the U.S. government creates an unusual dichotomy in which Arab Americans are both highly visible and invisible. They are highly visible at times when the U.S. has a need for a specific political narrative that assigns traditionalism, terrorism, and paints the SWANA region as the antithesis to western progress, and invisible in every other sense. Yasir himself is both Egyptian and Puerto Rican, and during our interview he muses on how he could have chosen to assimilate fully into the Latine LGBTQ+ community since his Egyptian father was not accepting of him. However, Yasir—proud to be both Egyptian and Puerto Rican—wanted to remain connected to both parts of his ethnic identity.

Communities are idealized as sites of belonging with which individuals can identify, but they can also serve as sites of ostracization and grief (Naber, 2012; Weston, 1997). Due to the fact that communities and identities can and do intersect, it is important to consider the impact that an unsupportive community has on an individual’s identity. The three communities discussed by the research participants in this study as potential sources of belonging are the

Queer community, mainstream America communities, and the Arab American community. Often times, these are also used as identifiers of important and permanent components of the self. To have to negotiate and compromise oneself—as the participants of this study shared—can cause inner turmoil, in particular when coupled with external prejudices from people with whom one identifies. It may lead to distressing experiences. Furthermore, when forced to choose between being queer and being Arab, being queer was more important for the participants. If LGBTQ+ individuals as a subset of the Arab American population are forced to denounce their Arab identity, it will only reinforce the invisibility that played a role in compromising their identities in the first place. In general, the participants seemed to prefer to embrace all aspects of their identity, and they were doing much better mentally and emotionally when they were allowed to do so. This coincides with existing scholarship that has found that LGBTQ+ individuals—especially queer youth—who are closeted or forced to compromise their identity are at high risk for poor mental health and even suicide (Russell & Fish, 2016; Ryan et al., 2015).

Finding a sense of belonging

Shani Abboud, a fictional character played by Lebanese American actress Marie-Lou Nahhas, is a lesbian, Egyptian detainee on season seven of the Netflix original series, “Orange is the New Black.”² Nahhas’ character is groundbreaking in that she is not only representing a SWANA person in popular media but is also openly and explicitly a lesbian. Shani’s story revolves around the fact that she is fleeing persecution by her family in Egypt because of her sexual orientation. Shani Abboud, the character, is a rare occurrence in that virtually no other depictions of queer Arabs in American media exist. Shani’s story is important as it is reminiscent

² See website for cast listing in ‘Orange is the New Black’: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2372162/fullcredits>

of the real and tragic story of a lesbian activist Sarah Hegazi who sought asylum in Canada after being jailed and tortured in her home country, Egypt, for waving a rainbow pride flag at a Mashrou' Leila concert. Unable to cope with her Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Hegazi ended her life in June of 2020 (Walsh 2020). Although Hegazi's story proves that narratives such as Abboud's are valid and real, they do not represent the experience of all queer Arabs and/or queer Arab Americans. There is so little representation of Arab Americans—much less queer Arab Americans—in mainstream media that when the few depictions appear, these only serve to remind queer Arab Americans of LGBTQ+ acceptance as western exceptionalism and homophobia as eastern traditionalism (Rahman, 2014). The scarcity of representation can feel disheartening and alienating. Not only did the research participants express a desire to see themselves in mainstream media, but also the desire to live authentically and be a part of a community where they felt included and represented. For the individuals that participated in this study, it was rare to come across fellow queer Arab Americans at school, work, or even in specifically queer settings such as LGBTQ+ clubs at their respective universities. Many participants had to go out of their way to find other members of the queer Arab American community. Additionally, many of them took it upon themselves to create that representation or carve out that space in their communities. Creating visible representation and cultivating a safe space where queer Arab Americans do not have to compromise parts of their identity was extremely important for reconciling the relationship between their Arab and queer identities, which are frequently misrepresented as mutually exclusive.

For example, Nour, who was previously mentioned, found a sense of belonging in a Punk Arab community in Philadelphia, specifically in the festival known as Yalla Punk³ which was full of queer Arabs. They also found community in non-profit groups such as TarabNYC⁴ of New York, which is an organization promoting the inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in the SWANA community. Nour mused:

I'd be interested in seeing the differences between LGBT Arabs who don't have a community of other LGBT Arabs to rely on and build and have support, versus those of us who do because for me that made a world of difference. A lot of the extreme and chronic isolation that I felt before finding that community was really pulling my life back. Once you find it and are able to form friendships there...I think that's the start up towards healing.

For Nour, to belong meant that their mental health and quality of life improved because previously they were living a life of isolation. Nour's experiences highlight the importance of one's own community and why some participants were drawn to create that space. The participants' sites of belonging were not all physical spaces. Amina, whom I introduced earlier, shared with me that she started and co-hosts a podcast that focuses on the LGBTQ+ Arab community because she could not find any podcasts that focused specifically on that intersection of identities. She felt isolated before she took up this project, but since the start of the podcast, she has had the opportunity to connect with many queer Arabs:

³ See: <https://yallapunk.com/>

⁴ See: <https://tarabnyc.org/>

It's been really eye opening, for me, through this podcast, to see just how many queer Arabs exist. I know it sounds really basic, in a way, but the difference between before the podcast and then after and just seeing that there's this huge queer Arab community...it's really amazing to find a space specific to that. There are so many people who you'll connect with, and it's hard to do that in just queer spaces or just Arab spaces, but if you have a space dedicated to that particular intersection of identities...it was just really eye-opening for me to see how many people are out there, and how many people really needed that space.

One of the youngest participants in this study chose a platform more popular amongst younger millennials and the older subset of generation Z which altogether means individuals born roughly from 1996 to 2008. This participant, Samantha, the 19-year-old who usually forgoes labels but for the purpose of the study self-identified as lesbian, creates videos on TikTok that other queer Arabs can relate to. Samantha shares that sometimes she is reluctant to continue posting because of the harsh comments she sometimes receives, but says:

I make a lot of my TikTok content about being gay and being Arab, and I think that part of the reason for that is because I do recognize that there's a lack of representation, and I'm really hoping that other people can see my videos and, this sounds cheesy, but I hope—I'm not like famous but—I want people to see, and you know, to feel like they relate, and like on some of my videos I see people commenting things like 'Oh! I've been in the same position. I feel the same way. I've experienced the same thing in the Arab community' so I feel like I'm trying to—because I don't see that community—I'm trying to build it and build my own thing.

During her interview, Samantha also discussed a character, Catra, from the animated Netflix show *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018)⁵ to illustrate her desire to see facets of who she is represented in popular media. This character is a rebooted version of one from the original *She-Ra* from the 1980s who is native to a place called “Purrsia” suggesting that she might be of SWANA descent. The original character is phenotypically white, but rebooted Catra is brown, and although no real-world ethnicities have been assigned to any characters, the show’s creator Noelle Stevenson tweeted in June 2020 that they supported the headcanon—a fan interpretation of a piece of fiction that is not explicitly a part of the source material thereby not officially canon—that she was Persian. Many fans of the show, Samantha and myself included, felt a sense of pride when the creator validated our perception that a focal, lesbian character could be SWANA. It also highlights the strong desire queer Arab Americans have to see themselves represented, even if it is in the form of an animated character.

Although Catra does not explicitly represent any one real-world ethnicity, she is undeniably a brown lesbian, and for a brief moment, SWANA lesbians felt validated. This is important to acknowledge because many stories focus on the queer experiences of white people which are vastly different from the queer experiences of people of color (Rosenberg, 2016). Media representation creates visibility and sets the foundation for recognition and an accepting environment. Reflecting on the section focused on my participants’ coming out experiences, consider how those experiences could have been different if there were greater visibility for

⁵ The 2018 reboot of *She-Ra: Princess of Power* created by Noelle Stevenson: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/She-Ra_and_the_Princesses_of_Power

queer Arab Americans. Would the average ages of coming out to the self and to others have been lower? Would my participants have felt the need to compromise or negotiate their identity?

Community building (and rejection)

The birth of these spaces of belonging can be understood through the concept of “secondary marginalization” a term developed by political scientist and African American social activist Cathy Cohen (1999). Secondary marginalization examines how stratification occurs within stratified groups. Arab Americans already face hardship and queer Arab Americans are rejected in cultural spaces that they previously felt they could identify with. Creating spaces—both physical and virtual—in which my participants felt a sense of belonging was just another natural step in their queer experience and journey. These spaces allowed them to connect with a community that, to them, felt scarce while they were coming to terms with their own sexualities and gender identities. Moreover, these spaces serve as a bridge to connect my participants’ queer identity with their ethnic identity as queer Arab Americans. As discussed by Katrina Daly Thompson, my participants were able to form “narratives of belonging” in order to combat the rejection faced otherwise (2019, 123).

Lastly, these spaces will be there for future generations of queer Arab Americans in the ways that older generations could only have hoped for.

Conclusions

The goal of this study was to encourage a focus on recording the Arab American queer experience outside the context of the U.S.’s political relationship with the SWANA world. Through the collection and analysis of interviews from queer Arab Americans across the United

States, the creation of their specific intersection of identities and the challenges along this journey are clearer.

The experiences shared by the 16 participants depicted both strikingly similar and vastly different circumstances. Although it is impossible to use just 16 unique life histories to construct an overarching queer Arab American experience, the data point toward the unanimous desire for acceptance, freedom of expression and the ability to be unapologetic about their conceptualizations of the self. There also exists a longing for positive media representation that could generate both a sense intrinsic understanding of the self for queer Arab Americans, and the understanding and acceptance of the public. Ultimately, I have concluded that when these desires are not met, queer Arab Americans will feel inclined to find spaces where they feel a sense of community and belonging. If these spaces are not easily accessible, queer Arab Americans will create them—whether physically or virtually.

CHAPTER 3: ARTICLE #2

On the Positionality of Queer Arab Americans: How U.S.-SWANA Relations Affect the Every Day Lives of LGBTQ+ Arabs in the United States

Abstract

This paper aims to contextualize queer Arab American experiences by analyzing the lived experiences of 16 LGBTQ+ Arab Americans in the United States. At the center of two cultures that are perceived as diametrically opposed to each other, queer Arab Americans must reconcile their queer and ethnic identities while being constantly interrogated or invalidated by both the Arab community and American community at large. While every individual's experience is unique, there were common themes woven throughout each interview allowing me to understand the effects of the United States' (U.S.) politically-charged relationship with the Arab world's on queer Arab American identity—both how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. The major findings discussed in the following paper include: (1) the notion that queerness is acceptable unless the individual is a part of the Arab community, (2) the idea that accepting queerness is succumbing to western hegemony, and (3) dealing with stereotypical assumptions and portrayals of Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA). Lastly, the participants share their thoughts on how queer Arab Americans subvert stereotypical notions of the SWANA world and discuss their perception that the U.S. is as much anti-LGBTQ+ as the Arab world. This study aims to address the gap in scholarship focusing on queer Arab American experiences in hopes that this population will gain visibility and their experiences, a greater understanding.

Keywords: Queer Arab Americans; identity; American imperialism; orientalism; LGBT studies; queer anthropology

Introduction

This paper explores some of the hardships that individuals who self-identify as both queer and Arab American face in the United States (U.S.) due to the complex socio-political relationship that America has with the Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) world. These hardships will be examined through an analysis of the common rhetoric, perpetuated both within the Arab community and outside of it, that “queerness” and “Arabness” are mutually exclusive and inherently incompatible. During 16 semi-structured interviews, participants relayed their experiences in understanding and coming to terms with their identities, while dealing with ideas such as the conditional acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities within their families of origin, the conflation of acceptance of queerness with the acceptance of western hegemony, the stereotyping of the SWANA region as backwards by western media, and, finally, the perception that the west is exceptional whilst the SWANA world is frozen in tradition (Abu-Lughod 2013, Rahman 2014). The relationship between the U.S. and the SWANA world is complex and nuanced, and as an anthropologist, I aim to avoid a reductionist portrayal of this relationship. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize how the political world intersects with the everyday lives of the queer Arab Americans who participated in this study. I hope to bring attention to a particular subset of queer Arab American experiences by exploring the themes of Orientalism (Said 1978), homonationalism (Puar 2017), pinkwashing (Schulman 2012), and Islamophobia which were brought up by the participants of this study. This topic is especially relevant given events involving the SWANA world during the freshly concluded Trump

presidency in the U.S, such as the travel ban⁶, and the 2016 Pulse Nightclub Shooting⁷ that took place in Orlando, Florida, which dealt directly with this study's three main communities of interest: the Queer community, the U.S. and the Arab world. This study attempts to decolonize the perspective of the SWANA world in relation to LGBTQ+ rights, as discussed by Rahman (2020), by utilizing my perspective as both a native and halfie ethnographer (Abu-Lughod 1991, Sherif 2001) to give voice to queer Arab American experiences.

“Arab” as an identifier

The term *Arab* as an identifier is loaded with a complex history and politics and it is therefore important to provide a clarification of its usage. One consideration for its mainstream usage is the role of language. Arabic is the official or co-official language of 25 countries⁸ located across Asia and Africa, but within those countries there are hundreds of ethnic groups and the Arab identity is not one with which everyone relates. Typically, in the west, many of those ethnic groups are categorized under this overarching term because they are close geographically or happen to speak the Arabic language (Naber 2012). This homogenization based on language reflects Arab nationalism, which glorifies Arab civilization and has been recognized as harmful to some minority ethnic groups, in particular Kurds (Houston 2009; Wenner 1963). I do not wish to perpetuate the erasure or forced assimilation that many ethnic minorities have faced; even so, I utilize the terms Arab and Arab American in this study because

⁶ Executive order 13769 colloquially known as the ‘Muslim travel ban’ was implemented in 2017 by former U.S. President Donald Trump. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38781302>

⁷ This was a mass shooting that took place in a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. The perpetrator, Omar Mateen, was aligned with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/06/12/orlando-nightclub-shooting-about-20-dead-in-domestic-terror-incident-at-gay-club/>

⁸ Based on a report by Babbel Magazine of the language learning app Babbel <https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/how-many-people-speak-arabic>

these are terms with which many individuals of SWANA descent who live in the United States identify, and therefore their emic self-identification serves a useful purpose in research by aiding me in defining a population.

Representations and presence of SWANA in the U.S.

The impact of tensions in the U.S.-SWANA relations is at the core of this study and emerges from a long history. The individuals that encompass the diaspora group known as Arab Americans in the U.S. are diverse, consist of a population of approximately 3.7 million, hail from many different countries throughout Southwest Asia and North Africa, and practice many religious traditions.⁹ Arab immigration into the U.S. dates back to the late 1880s when most of the Arab immigrants were Levantine (Syrian and Lebanese) Christians (Naber 2000; Naber 2012). Since that time, there have been various waves of Arab people immigrating into the U.S. Some are first-generation Americans while others have lived in the U.S. for multiple generations (Naber 2000; Naber 2012). Each Arab American's level of integration varies; factors such as religion affect the perception of Arab Americans in the U.S. by other Americans (Al Wekhian 2015). In the west, being Arab is often conflated with being a practicing Muslim, a belief that is based on Orientalist discourses and assumptions (Said 1978). For this reason, a Muslim Arab may feel more othered as opposed to assimilated or integrated into mainstream American society. As Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said has argued in his foundational work that has since sparked a wealth of scholarship and debates about this relationship, the Middle East has long been painted as the antithesis to the western world: 'the Orient is an idea that has a history

⁹ See demographic data compiled by the Arab American Institute, based on U.S. Census data: <https://www.aaiusa.org/about-arab-americans>

and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West' (1978:138). The Middle East is portrayed as backward and uncivilized—homophobic and sexist—while the western world is portrayed as the standard to be achieved—progressive and feminist (Salaita 2005). Religion is often the perceived core difference as Arab Americans of all religious backgrounds have experienced a cultural othering due to their perceived proximity to Islam, regardless of actual religious affiliation (Talib 2006). The degree of othering varies, however those that are Muslim and visibly religious (i.e., hijabis—individuals who wear headscarves) tend to experience heightened levels of prejudice (Ghumman and Ryan 2013; Unkelbach et al. 2008). This study is not limited to exploring the experiences of queer Arab Americans that identify as Muslim, but also those who do not identify as such, however it is important to acknowledge the impact that the perceived proximity to Islam has on Americans' perceptions of Arab Americans. This perception is also therefore relevant to the experiences of participants in this research. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the intensified scrutiny that Arab Americans have received in a post-9/11 America fighting the global 'war on terrorism' (Jamal and Naber 2008; Salaita 2005), and how the Trump administration's inflammatory rhetoric exacerbated prejudice toward the Arab American population (Haynes 2017).

“American” as an identifier

Much like the term *Arab*, to be *American* is also complex but equally important to this study. As discussed by Gupta and Ferguson (1992), it is important to avoid generalizations of culture that promote an “us” versus “them” depictions. To be American means many different things to many different people, but it would be a disservice to pretend as if labels such as Arab or American did not impact the daily lives of my participants. As social constructs, they impact

the ways in which individuals perceive themselves, perceive the world, and how others perceive them. In this study, to be American was also dependent on the participants self-identification as such. Some of my participants were born in the U.S., while others were born in other countries. Some of them were raised in the U.S. while others moved to the U.S. later in life or spent their childhoods moving across different countries.

In the context of this study, America is everything the Orient is not. In other words, the U.S. and/or the western world is the concept otherwise known as the Occident which is just as much a fiction as the Orient (Said 1978). To be Arab American is to be caught in between worlds portrayed as polar opposites.

Lastly, although at first glance this research appears to highlight the differences between queer Arab Americans and everyone else, my goal is to deconstruct the idea there is a progressive western (American) world and an intolerant eastern world (SWANA). Instead such constructs of being Arab, queer, and American are all dependent on both the individual and the way societies construct these categories.

Identities, intersectionality, and queer theory: theoretical considerations

The focus of this paper is queer Arab Americans' experiences at the intersection of political and cultural tensions generated by the power dynamics and discourses arising from the long-term contentious U.S-SWANA relationship. The concept of intersectionality is especially relevant to this research as it concerns a population that is an ethnic/cultural minority in the United States. An intersectional approach requires research that highlights the power dynamics, specifically, the way in which a individuals' multiple identities, such as race and gender, cannot be separated and instead should be seen as intertwined and connected to the way people navigate

the world (Crenshaw 1989). Much like the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, queer Arab American individuals face further hardships due to their non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, but these hardships should be understood through an intersectional lens that takes their Arab culture into consideration, rather than solely viewing it from a Eurocentric standard; there is an expectation that being both queer and Arab creates an intersecting set of discriminatory experiences that are different from someone who is not both Arab and queer. The queer Arab American experience will therefore be influenced by prejudice from both the Arab community and American community. The importance of analyzing the resulting experiences through an intersectional lens is high because queer Arab Americans overlapping identities act as a ‘double jeopardy’ (Carastathis 2016, 55; Crenshaw 1991). A queer Arab American individual’s experience cannot be compartmentalized into the experience of an LGBTQ+ person in the U.S. or the experience of an Arab person in the U.S; the identities work in combination to color both the lived experience of the individual and also the ways in which others will perceive them. The unique experiences that are born from this intersection of identities are apparent in the way that the Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting was discussed in the media. Cultural historian Tavia Nyong’o put it best when he described the inability of the US media to reconcile their own presuppositions about Omar Mateen, the perpetrator of the massacre, as ‘[t]he very inability to frame Mateen neatly as domestic or foreign, homosexual or homophobic, in itself reflects the assemblage of queer and terroristic tendencies that intersected in his suicidal violence’ (Puar 2017, xiv). Building on Nyong’o’s observation, this study draws attention to the hardships experienced by queer Arab American as a consequence of these political contradictions.

This study is further informed by queer anthropology which deals with ‘variations in the expression of sexuality and gender, and the ways that societies treat such differences’ (Wilson 2019, 1). Anthropologist Kath Weston (1993) offers a critique on how lesbian and gay ethnography use Anglo-European notions of gender and sex as implicit points of comparison. I engage with queer theory in an effort to begin to address this erasure of queer Arabs. Queer theory therefore forms the basis for how this study is designed. Specifically, the research topic in itself subverts Anglo-European norms by focusing on a population that is so often portrayed in direct opposition to the western world (Mikdash and Puar 2016; Said 1978). Furthermore, by using non-gendered language, such as they/them pronouns, throughout this paper I am contributing to the dismantling of the binary ‘she’ or ‘he’ conceptual and linguistic constructs. Additionally, at the beginning of every interview I ask the participants to share their gender identity, sexuality, and pronouns, therefore undermining heteronormative assumptions that genders and sexualities can be inferred through an individual’s appearance. In order to deconstruct Orientalist narratives which depict Arab culture as a monolithic encompassed by “non-progressive” values (Said 1978), I engage with the concept of normative discourses to avoid preserving an overgeneralized notion of culture which treats the Arab world as static. The notion of normative discourses underscores the fluid nature over time, space, and context. Furthermore, although the narratives collected in this study may to some degree set Arab culture apart and sometimes at odds from American culture, my participants’ experiences highlight nevertheless the many blurred cultural boundaries when it comes to being queer and Arab American. Ultimately, queer theory serves as a key analytical lens to examine the ways in which

queer Arab Americans personally navigate and express their queer identities as shaped by their unique experiences as Arabs living in the U.S.

The current study: queer Arab American experiences in the U.S.

The goal of this research is to better understand a community that is underrepresented in both popular media and in social science literature. It is only in recent years that scholars have begun focusing more on queer Arab voices, and much of this literature focuses on being both Muslim and queer (Talib 2006; Thompson 2019). The literature that focuses specifically on queer Arab Americans and does not simultaneously focus on religion is still lacking. Nonetheless, Islam is an underlying theme in this article because it is crucial to acknowledge how the west's Orientalist and politically charged depiction of Islam affects all Arab Americans, regardless of their religious affiliation. Additionally, Arab Americans, in general, are plagued by an invisibility that stems from being racially categorized as white but not being perceived as so. Arabs do not benefit from the same social privileges that white (European) Americans benefit from. Queer Arab Americans are further alienated and made vulnerable as they experience transphobia and homophobia from both the American and Arab communities in addition to the xenophobia and Islamophobia of which they are frequent targets of (Mansour 2019; Naber 2000; Naber 2012). Anthropologist Nadine Naber, in her ethnographic research with Arab Americans (2012), argues that Arab American families justify their anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment by conflating queerness with what they perceive are American values (i.e., a rejection of one's Arab roots). Queer Arab Americans are therefore condemned for being influenced by American sexual transgression wherein queerness is viewed as un-Arab, ignoring the fact that queer Arabs have always existed (Naber 2012, 83-91). To be American, or to be Arab—these two identities are

depicted as a rigid binary between which the individuals must choose; queer Arab Americans therefore, Naber argues, are ‘betraying’ their ‘Arabness’ by living a life that is not heteronormative. To address these gaps in existing research, in this study I explore the following question: How do queer Arab Americans navigate their identities and positionalities within the Arab American community and American society as a minority that is perceived within the context of America’s strained socio-political relationship with the SWANA world?

Research method

I took a qualitative approach and collected data utilizing semi-structured interviews which followed an 18-item interview guide. Semi-structured interviews lend themselves well to anthropological and qualitative research because they allow for a space where participants have enough room to share their own personal stories while also maintaining relevance to the research (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Fetterman 2010). The data presented in the form of direct quotes and personal accounts gathered from one-on-one interviews supports the common but varied experiences of queer Arabs within the U.S. I utilize pseudonyms to protect the identities of all my participants.

Sampling strategies

This study recruited participants that fit the inclusion criteria of self-identifying as queer and Arab American and who were at least 18 years of age. Not every participant who identified with the term considered themselves an ethnic Arab; every participant however would fall under the descriptor of someone with ethnic ties to Southwest Asia and/or North Africa. The participants themselves decided whether they identified with the label or not. Participants who volunteered to be interviewed identified this way to some extent, however some participants

shared their criticisms of Arab nationalism – the glorification of Arab civilization at the expense of other ethnic minorities in Southwest Asia and North Africa. In retrospect, it would have been better to use Southwest Asian and/or North African as opposed to Arab, but for the sake of transparency and authenticity, I will continue to use the term Arab which I utilized throughout the duration of my recruitment and data collection phases.

The recruitment of queer Arab American participants was overall challenging. Recruitment took place from early June to early September 2020, using purposeful and snowball sampling (Fetterman 2010). A study flyer distributed via social media on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, and e-mailed to people and/or organizations such as the Center Orlando, the Zebra Coalition, the University of Central Florida's Pride Student Association, Arab American LGBT rights activist Jacob Tobia, LGBT Detroit, Phoenix Pride, and the SWANA Rainbow podcast (name changed for confidentiality). The Center Orlando organization posted the flyer at their physical locations. On Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, I began by posting the flyer on my profile, and some of my associates shared the flyer to their profiles. Eventually, my recruitment became more proactive out of necessity resulting from a lack of traction. On Facebook, I used the search box to find American pages and groups across the U.S. with variations of 'LGBTQ+' and/or 'pride' in their name, and directly messaged them. The pages I contacted were ISU Pride, Pride Student Union at the University of Florida, Capital Pride, Portland Pride, Chattanooga Pride/Tennessee Valley Pride, Heartland Pride, Honolulu Pride: A Project of the Hawaii LGBT Legacy Foundation, Central Oregon Pride, Miami University Graduate Student Pride Association, Phoenix Pride, Michigan Pride, and Albuquerque Pride. One of my participants also gave me access to a closed Facebook group that I will refrain from

listing to maintain the group's confidentiality. Since passively posting the flyer did not yield many results, I also directly messaged users to share the study information on Twitter and Instagram if they indicated that they were both LGBTQ+ and Southwest Asian and/or North African on their profiles. I found them by typing words/phrases such as "queer," "Arab American," and variations of "LGBTQ+" on both platforms. I was most successful when I directly messaged people on Twitter or when Twitter pages with larger followings retweeted my flyer. The SWANA Rainbow podcast retweeted my flyer, which brought the most attention to my study. Additionally, the study recruitment protocol was later revised to include compensation in the form of a \$5 Starbucks gift card for the participants' time, and this change was reflected on an edited flyer. This flyer replaced the original one by the end of July 2020. I used snowball sampling with each research participant, which aided in the expansion of the sample (Fetterman 2010). These efforts yielded 16 participants that fit the recruitment criteria, ranging from 19 to 35 in age. The sample includes individuals living in Florida, North Carolina, California, Washington D. C., Missouri, Virginia, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Nevada, Maryland, and New York. Participants have ethnic ties to countries from the geographic areas of Southwest Asia and North Africa with some participants identifying as mixed. Ethnicities included two mixed Egyptian and Puerto Rican individuals, a mixed Lebanese and Honduran individual, an Egyptian individual, a mixed Tunisian and Moroccan individual, a mixed Saudi and white American individual, a mixed Egyptian-Saudi-Syrian-Turkish individual, a Lebanese Druze individual, a mixed Egyptian and white American individual, a mixed Palestinian and white American individual, a mixed Lebanese and Syrian individual, two Palestinian individuals,

and three Lebanese individuals. The sample is religiously diverse including participants that were raised Muslim, Christian, interfaith, and one Druze participant.

Data collection and analysis

The majority of the participants shared their experiences and expanded on the questions resulting in interviews that, in some cases, lasted over 60 minutes. The research was designed for data collection either in-person or remotely, without limitations regarding the location of participants in the U.S. However due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom. The interviews were conducted one-on-one on Zoom and audio-recorded using QuickTime Player on a MacBook Pro. My Interview Guide included demographic questions relevant for this study, including ethnic background, pronouns, sexual identity, and gender identity, as well as more in-depth and open-ended questions about experiences as queer Arab Americans. The data was stored in a password-protected folder on a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher. Each interview was transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Words transcription tool and then edited to capture any nuance lost via the automated transcription. After transcription was completed, the audio recordings were destroyed. I analyzed transcripts by creating a coding scheme/codebook to identify common themes and subthemes, as well as to identify the outlying themes or unusual instances in order to capture the diversity and range of explanations (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Fetterman 2010). Due to my insider and outsider status (Sherif 2001), an important component of my analysis strategy was to practice reflexivity by being aware of my positionality as a halfie anthropologist—someone who is of mixed cultural or ethnic identity (Abu-Lughod 1991).

Results and discussions

Four major topics surfaced at the conclusion of this study. The themes are (1) the idea that being queer and being Arab are incompatible, (2) the notion that to accept queerness is to accept western hegemony over the Arab world, (3) dealing with the stereotyping of the Arab world, and (4) the myth that the U.S. is exceptional in its progressiveness and the SWANA region is ‘backwards’. These discussions are presented below and supported by emblematic quotes selected from the data that my participants contributed to the study. Each quote is supported through further discussion and analysis.

“It’s okay to be gay unless you’re one of us”

The narratives in this study reveal that the research participants frequently interacted with Arab Americans that consider themselves pro-LGBTQ+ rights—unless the queer individuals in question are also of Arab descent. The experiences conveying this conditional support of LGBTQ+ rights came from both my participants’ families of origin and other Arab Americans in their communities. This conditional support stems from a generalization that ‘the orient’ and ‘the occident’ are inherently in opposition to each other. To exemplify this contradiction, I focus on two particular instances which encapsulate this contradiction in support for LGBTQ+ rights.

The first experience involves Nadia, a 23-year-old lesbian, university student. Nadia contacted her university’s Muslim Student Association (MSA) and asked them to approve an LGBTQ+ related post on the association’s Facebook page. She assumed there would be no issues with getting the post approved because the MSA had been outwardly supportive of LGBTQ+ rights in the past, however the MSA rejected the post multiple times, and when Nadia confronted them about it, one of the MSA’s executives responded:

It's okay for people to be however they are, but they can't act on it, and if we post this, we're sending the message that we approve of these acts. It's *haram* to act on it, so I can't condone this.

Haram in the Arabic language means 'forbidden,' and the term is defined as sinful or forbidden in Islam. This response confused Nadia because earlier that semester, the MSA had shown support publicly for the Queer community. She explains that the MSA was trying to avoid controversy by displaying that they were allied with LGBTQ+ people. Nadia reflected on her experience as a queer Arab interacting with the MSA and compared it to the support the organization offers to queer individuals who are not of Arab descent. Nadia shares that she came to the conclusion that her school's MSA would only show support to the queer community if the people involved lacked an obvious cultural or religious connection to them. However, to allow Nadia—a fellow Arab American and, more importantly, a fellow Muslim—to speak openly about queer topics, would be crossing a line.

The second experience that exemplifies the limits of support for queer individuals involves Jad, a 27-year-old who uses 'any pronouns said with respect'¹⁰ and describes both their gender identity and sexuality as queer. Jad's father is an *imam* which means he is the one who leads prayer in a mosque, and therefore in a position of authority. After the Pulse Nightclub shooting, which was attributed to extremist Islamic ideology, Jad's father publicly came out and showed support for the Queer community in the mosque by declaring that Muslims stand in solidarity with the victims of the massacre and that they do not condone such an act of terrorism.

¹⁰ Out of respect for participants with multiple pronouns as well as in the spirit of queer anthropology—which aims to subvert norms—I will use all their pronouns interchangeably throughout the text.

However, in his statement of solidarity, Jad's father failed to mention Jad or any of his other children—all of whom either identify as queer or have had queer experiences in their lifetimes.

Jad's father is aware of his children's identities. Jad shares:

At the time, my brother had just gotten married to a man and so it really upset me. I don't know if my father realized that I could have very well been one of the victims. It could have easily been any one of his children. It also bothered me because it could have been an opportunity to show the Muslim community here that there are queer Muslims and that we exist and are part of the community, particularly, the children of an imam, who are very identifiable. It was a failed opportunity in my eyes.

Both stories are examples of the limited nature of support for LGBTQ+ people within the Arab community, which reinforces the invisibility of queer Arab Americans. In Nadia's experience, the MSA shows clear prejudice toward queer Arabs going as far as to say that acting on queer desires is sinful, despite the group's earlier support of the Queer community. Their support was conditional based on the queer individual's proximity to the organization. Jad's experience is less abrasive but more emotionally devastating as their father, who is a respected figure in the community's Muslim population, misses a pivotal opportunity to bridge Muslims and LGBTQ+ people by failing to acknowledge any of his children—all of whom are Muslim and have had queer experiences. Although Nadia's and Jad's experiences were shared with me in the most detail, the notion that being queer was acceptable unless the individual was of Arab descent was one with which the majority of my participants dealt with. Besides perpetuating the myth that queer Arabs do not exist, this mentality also upholds orientalist ideas about western

and/or American exceptionalism and the SWANA world's traditionalism. It also aids in strengthening the racist belief that eastern cultures are homogenous and static.

To accept queerness is to accept western hegemony...or is it?

When reflecting on the conditional nature of support demonstrated above, one possible explanation for the prevalence of the suppression of queer Arab Americans within the Arab community arises from a reoccurring theme in the interviews that accepting queerness was accepting western hegemony, therefore subjecting Arab culture and values to western and, more specifically, American colonization. Although this was not the only reason for anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment coming from within the Arab community, many participants reported moments in which prejudice stemmed directly from the perception that queerness is a western phenomenon. The idea that queerness is not compatible with Arab culture or Islam is reflected in these observations conveyed by Serena, a 20-year-old who identifies as queer, bisexual, and pansexual:

It just feels like being Arab and queer are on these two opposite ends of the spectrum for them [Arab American community], so I have to choose one or the other, and I can't be both. That's what it feels like in particularly Arab spaces.

Serena was specifically referring to both the Arab student association at their university and the Arab American community at large. This attitude was present not only in physical spaces but also the virtual world, as Serena shares:

On Arab Twitter or Muslim Twitter, there's this idea that queerness is the white man colonizing your brain. It's sort of this accepted thing that queerness is incompatible with Islam and that it's western ideals being pushed onto us.

Serena's own interpretation is that colonization has actually led to these anti-LGBTQ+ beliefs. Moreover, they were not the only participant to express this sentiment. For example, Nour, a 25-year-old Lebanese Druze¹¹, nonbinary individual who identifies as both queer and gay, explained to me that they felt the Arab community's current understanding of gender and sexuality was incompatible with the religious teaching that dictates people should accept God's creations as they are and that to deny LGBTQ+ people's sexualities and gender identities would be questioning God's will. This perspective reveals how queer Arab Americans—who may also prioritize religion and spirituality—subvert normative discourses that promote homophobia and transphobia and instead, form their own understandings of religious ideas and religious texts. Nour also shared that as a queer Arab American who is also Druze, they create art and feels the process is “integral to [her] decolonization [of the self] and healing process.” Although stances on LGBTQ+ rights can vary greatly, it is clear that homophobia, transphobia, and the overall naïve ignorance on the subject of queerness is present in Arab and Arab American spaces. In response to the question of whether they were able to express themselves safely and comfortably via social media, Jad, discussed earlier, revealed an experience of being subjected to ignorance and prejudice on the social media platform known as Instagram. Jad posted a picture to Instagram wearing a cap with the Islamic saying, “lower your gaze”¹² which was reposted onto a popular Instagram page which resulted in the image getting significantly more traffic. Jad, who has a Palestinian father and a white American mother and whose Instagram handle makes it obvious that she is queer, explains:

¹¹ Druze are a religious minority of the SWANA region.

¹² This phrase—present on the cap which was part of the 2018 ‘Muslim Girl’ hat collection—is specific to Islam and calls for ‘the individual to avoid temptation by ‘lowering their gaze’. <https://muslimgirl.com/the-first-muslim-girl-hat-collection-just-dropped/>

I don't look Arab, so many people assumed I was a revert¹³ and that I had co-opted Islam to be trendy and that I had no understanding of what that phrase even means or where it comes from, and that it's talking about women and all these other things. It was the first time that a broad range of people who also felt represented by [this page] felt isolated or marginalized by the page's reposting of my picture. It became this whole narrative around being a revert versus being born Muslim. It was wild to me because it drips of, one, Arab supremacy that within Islam, Arabs are the only ones who have any say over the faith, and two, how much queerness is associated with western identity.

Jad expressed his sadness at the fact that so many were quick to "undermine [his] entire experience." She related that some people defended her by pointing to her "authenticity" by virtue of her Islamic name, but she felt ambivalent about them explaining that in bringing attention to her name to confirm that she was, in fact, Palestinian and raised Muslim, they were "reiterating those same [nationalist] values" and promoting Arab supremacy.

It is important to prioritize the voices of queer Arabs in any conversation centered around LGBTQ+ issues in SWANA communities as well as challenge the rhetoric which posits or implies that acceptance of queerness is anti-Arab. Many participants disclosed feeling as if their existence was inherently politicized because of who they were. They felt invalidated as individuals who identified as both queer and Arab American. While prejudice coming from within the Arab community was attributed to combatting western colonization over Arab culture, queer Arab American individuals felt that their communities' anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments stemmed from Eurocentric ideas of gender and sexuality which tainted a previously, more diverse Arab

¹³ A Muslim convert is commonly known as a revert.

culture. Lastly, many participants did not feel that Arab culture was inherently any more or any less incompatible with queerness.

SWANA stereotypes and American double standards

When considering the experiences of individuals who are both queer and Arab in the U.S., one must reflect on the ways in which their very existence has become politicized as a consequence of the strained relationship between the U.S. and the Arab world. The Arab world is often framed as being in direct opposition to western progress (Puar 2017; Rahman 2014; Said 1978) and because of this, Arab Americans are frequently demonized or alienated. Queer Arab Americans are marginalized or pitied for what others assume they deal with at home: traditionalist and homophobic families—stereotypes commonly attributed to SWANA cultures (Abu-Lughod 2013). Is there validity to the long-held idea that the SWANA region is worse than the western world—and more specifically, the U.S—when it concerns the human rights of the LGBTQ+ community, or does the idea of western exceptionalism (Rahman 2014) simply serve as a tool to maintain the double standard perpetuated by the U.S.?

The connection between nationalism and LGBTQ+ rights, captured by gender studies scholar Jasbir K. Puar's concept of homonationalism (2017) is especially relevant to understanding the discourses surrounding queer Arab Americans. The depictions of U.S. Arabs as associated with foreign terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism imply that the U.S. has a “duty” to fight against these regressive tendencies (Salaita 2005). By characterizing the Arab world as un-feminist and anti-LGBTQ+, the American public may more easily sympathize with U.S. military intervention which is often framed as heroic rather than imperialist. A further consequence of homonationalism is a phenomenon known as pinkwashing, a term developed in

2011 by journalist and activist Sarah Schulman in a *New York Times* article to describe the instrumental use of LGBTQ+ rights advances to detract from negative political actions (Papantonopoulou 2014; Schulman and Chávez 2019). It was specifically coined to describe the Israeli-Palestine conflict but can be applied to the actions of any entity, organization, or government. Essentially, pinkwashing is public relations for human rights abuses. This concept is important because both the U.S. and Israel use it to further vilify the rest of the SWANA region. This vilification process, in turn, affects the ways Arab Americans move about the world. Yet, this perspective exposes a double standard, Schulman and Chávez note, as the majority of Israelis that stand against Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land are queer, and Israeli forces have used violence against them, too (Schulman and Chávez 2019). Although this article is not an analysis of Israel's occupation of Palestine, it is important to contextualize the narrative that the U.S. and Israel promote at the expense of the SWANA world and its people, including the research participants in this study.

Thinking back to Jad's father, the progressive Palestinian imam who failed to validate his child as a simultaneously queer, Arab, and Muslim individual, it is revealing to now consider the reaction that Jad's white American mother had to the Pulse Nightclub shooting. Jad divulged that upon hearing the news about the tragedy, her mother texted her saying, "what do you do when your right hand hits your left?" Jad explained, "immediately, it offended me that she said that because, it's like, why do I have to own both sides of this event?" Jad's mother was insinuating that Jad's identities—queer and Muslim Arab—were at odds with each other, which caused discomfort at the way his mother so readily positioned him at the center of queer issues while also expecting Jad to make sense of the violent incident related to extremist Islamic ideology.

This is a reoccurring theme in my participants' experiences. Many of them were interrogated about Islam, terrorism, and LGBTQ+ rights in the SWANA region by peers or, in Jad's case, family members, who were not of Arab descent. It is an interesting and potentially traumatizing situation to be forced into. Another participant, Laura, a 21-year-old bisexual woman shared a hurtful exchange that she had with a queer classmate:

A year ago, there was this girl in my chemistry group who was just like, 'why do you even believe in your religion because they hate people like me,' she was bi, and she was like, 'they'd probably stone me or this and this and this.' I mean, back then, I was like, oh, she's right, but not all of us are like that, you know? Cause...I don't know. I wasn't out yet, but I loved the LGBTQ+ community before I knew I was, you know, bi.

Laura found herself in a stressful situation as an individual who was coming to terms with her own sexuality but still considered herself a practicing Muslim. At the time, she felt she was a supportive Muslim ally to the Queer community. In contrast, other participants shared their observation that Americans who were perceived as belonging to the status quo—often, white and middle-class (Weston 1993, 56)—are not made to answer in the same way for the actions of white mass shooters. In both scenarios described above, Jad and Laura are questioned by Americans with no ties to Arab culture or Islam and pressed to make sense of situations that are not relevant to either of them as individuals and/or to explain a stereotypical version of the SWANA world. This ignores the fact that neither Islam or the SWANA world are the sole perpetrators of homophobia and transphobia—prejudices that are also significant in mainstream American culture and its dominant religion, Christianity.

Serena also reflected on how the Arab world is characterized as close-minded, homophobic, and transphobic in her interview. They agreed that SWANA nations were not always progressive, but the discourse that highlights this problem as unique to that region was enforcing an “orientalist dichotomy.” She shares:

The west is doing the exact same thing to trans and queer people, and so emphasizing the SWANA region’s intolerance is perpetuating a double standard in which you’re not addressing the violence in your home country [the United States]. Trans people are killed in the United States as well; it’s just not done by the government.

Serena’s observation could arguably also apply to the American government, even if in an indirect sense, when we consider that queer individuals—especially transgender individuals—lack legal protections against discrimination or access to resources that would improve the mental health and quality of life of trans individuals. According to Human Rights Campaign, the year 2021 so far “with an unprecedented number of anti-LGBTQ measures sweeping through state legislatures across the country” has been the worst year in recent history for the American queer community (Ronan 2021).

Other participants feel that business relations with the U.S. are further encouraging tolerance for the LGBTQ+ community because the SWANA world must keep up with the policies of economically influential nations such as the U.S. This observation about the Gulf countries was made by Osama, a 22-year-old who identifies as gay and bisexual:

There’s no way you can maintain a growing relationship with the markets in the west if you are not adhering to the ways that western industry is changing, right? I think it might be led partially by Arabs in the west. Like, if I’m very powerful one day—I mean, I don’t

think I'll be powerful in a business context at all, but if I was and I established relationships with Lebanon, I would expect—even if my sister did this, she's a heterosexual woman, she would expect that the company she's working with there would stand for the values that she values as an Arab American going to and supporting her home country, right? She wouldn't work with the conservative Christian church to implement a business strategy.

Osama shares a unique and optimistic perspective wherein he suggests that Arab diaspora could be the pioneers for social and cultural transformations in their countries of origin. This outlook contrasts with political scientist Joseph Massad's concept of "the gay international" (2002) as a white, middle-class version of LGBTQ+ rights treated as a universally applicable much like white feminism which was seen as another tool for western imperialism (Amos and Parmar 1984). Massad suggests that the Arab world's strong contestation of queerness may be a consequence of the U.S.'s exported but un-vernacularized version of LGBTQ+ rights (the gay international) that is reminiscent of a cultural imperialism that the SWANA world is all too familiar with. Although Massad's argument that sexuality and gender identity do not manifest in the same manner globally is reasonable, Osama's point of view is especially meaningful because it acknowledges the ways positive change may be enacted from within.

Conclusions

The orientalist narrative encountered by the research participants in this study that associates the SWANA world with extremists who oppose LGBTQ+ rights is unjust and highly problematic to queer Arab Americans who are positioned at the intersection of two worlds and at times forced to choose between them. In my participants' experiences, queerness was perceived

as foreign and incompatible with Arab peoples by their fellow Arabs and Arab Americans—whose home countries have been subject to long-term western imperialism. On the other hand, many Americans (who were not of Arab descent) subjected participants in this study to harmful stereotypes born out of the dominant discourses emerging from the U.S.’s socio-political relationship with the SWANA world. Consequently, queer Arab Americans are forced to navigate their identities carefully while being both invalidated and alienated by people from both sides of their worlds. My participants—eager to embrace all aspects of their identities—felt their very existences as queer Arabs defied the opposition aimed at them. They also found the U.S. hypocritical, as the American LGBTQ+ community is still marginalized, and many LGBTQ+ individuals in America continue to live in fear due to lack of, or inadequate, legal nationwide protections of their rights. The U.S. should focus on addressing the systematic prejudice—which usually harms low-income, people of color the most—toward the American queer community that is still in place in the present time.

Knowledge production by participants

Despite the difficulties experienced, queer Arab Americans—though invisible to most other Americans—are unapologetically existing and pushing social and cultural boundaries both in the U.S. and abroad. Additionally, the securing of LGBTQ+ visibility and rights in the SWANA world is a task that need not fall upon the U.S. as a state power, sustaining decades of cultural imperialism. Instead, this research demonstrates that queer Arab Americans are already addressing anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment within their communities as well as bringing attention to the U.S.’s façade of progress and social equality. For example, as discussed by many of the

Palestinian participants specifically, the subject of queer liberation in Palestine and their criticisms of Israel and the U.S. policies.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

This thesis builds on and contributes to literature in cultural anthropology and other social science disciplines on the topic of queer Arab American experiences, specifically the ways in which the intersection of Arab and American cultural expectations of gender and sexuality, as well as the political dynamics resulting from tense U.S.-SWANA relations inform the ways that queer Arab Americans navigate the world. This topic was explored within two main contexts, and the data were broken down into two cohesive articles that, although related, deal with slightly different conceptualizations of queer Arab American experiences.

In the first article, which focused on the interpersonal understandings of what it means to be both queer and Arab American by the participants as well as their families of origin and communities, I have shown how participants felt alienated and invalidated due to misinformed understandings that queerness and “Arabness” are mutually exclusive by both the Arab community and Americans who were not of Arab descent. I have argued that ultimately, this created an environment where the queer Arab participants sought out intersectional spaces—virtual and physical—where they felt a sense of understanding and belonging that was not previously present in their lives. Additionally, my research showed that it was very important that the participants formed relationships with other queer Arab Americans, and this led to an even better understanding of their own selves.

In the second article, which focused on the question of queer Arab American identity in the context of long-standing and strained history of U.S.-SWANA socio-political relationships, my work highlights that queer Arab American experiences are immersed in this political macro-scheme, therefore understanding this historical context is important as the Arab world continues

to be characterized through Orientalist narratives by the western world. Additionally, the Arab world's tense relationship with the U.S. has led to a rejection of ideas perceived within Arab communities as western cultural imperialism; "queerness" is included in these rejected ideas, as reported by my research participants. My work also reveals the participants' critiques of the standards by which American society judges the SWANA region as hypocritical given the fact that LGBTQ+ individuals—specifically LGBTQ+ people of color—in the U.S. are still suffering disproportionately.

Ultimately, despite the marginalization or invalidation of their identities by the communities they are a part of, queer Arab Americans are taking important actions to take ownership and pride in their intersecting set of identities. Participating in this research study to contribute their experiences, perspectives, and stories was one such step.

This research is significant because it brings attention to a population that is invisible in most aspects of American society, and yet highly visible when the conversation shifts to terrorism, war, and human rights. This leaves queer Arab Americans feeling alienated and desperate for a community that will consider their experiences outside of preconceived notions of what a queer person or Arab person is or is not. Additionally, this study makes a contribution to knowledge that broadens the view of queer Arab Americans. Specifically, the scholarship that exists on queer Arab Americans has a tendency to also focus on Islam as the backdrop for lived experiences, and while Islam plays an important role in the lives of many Arab Americans, my work shows that certain challenges and hardships encountered by Arab Americans and queer Arabs exist independent of Islam. Therefore, it is valuable to explore reasons other than religious intolerance for anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments that exist within the Arab community and are being

directed against queer Arab Americans. My study also contributes a broader understanding of how historical and political contexts affects the formation of identity both for the self and those perceiving the individual. In this way, the findings from my research call attention to the need for sustained scholarly, cultural, activist, and political efforts to dissociate the SWANA world from religious extremism and intolerance, and instead shed light on the detrimental effects of homophobia and transphobia that, I argue, all cultures contribute to. For this reason, I hope my work will encourage future research focused on the experiences of queer SWANA peoples across a variety of disciplines.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Institutional Review Board

FWA00000351
IRB00001138, IRB00012110
Office of Research
12201 Research Parkway
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

June 3, 2020

Dear Gabriela Mansour:

On 6/3/2020, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

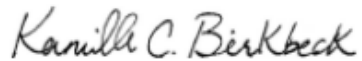
Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Experiences of Queer Arab-Americans
Investigator:	Gabriela Mansour
IRB ID:	STUDY00001730
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• HRP 251 Mansour.pdf, Category: Faculty Research Approval;• HRP 254 Mansour reviewed.pdf, Category: Consent Form;• HRP 255 Mansour reviewed .docx, Category: IRB Protocol;• Interview guide Mansour.docx, Category: Interview / Focus Questions;• Mansour flyer final reviewed.docx, Category: Recruitment Materials;

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please submit a modification request to the IRB. Guidance on submitting Modifications and Administrative Check-in are detailed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Due to current COVID-19 restrictions, in-person research is not permitted to begin until you receive further correspondence from the Office of Research stating that the restrictions have been lifted.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kamille C. Birkbeck".

Kamille Birkbeck
Designated Reviewer

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide (Preliminary) for Research Project: “Experiences of Queer Arab-Americans”

Thank you for agreeing to chat with me today. My name is Gabriela Mansour, and I’m an anthropology Master’s student at the University of Central Florida. Regarding today’s interview, I am interested in hearing about your experiences as someone who identifies as both Queer/LGBTQ+ and Arab-American. Everything we discuss today will be confidential, and a pseudonym or number will be utilized to ensure that your identity is protected. This interview is voluntary, and you are free to stop it at any point in time. You don’t have to answer any questions you don’t want to. Would it be okay to record the interview for research purposes or would you prefer I didn’t? May we begin?

Pseudonym/number: _____ Research/recruitment Site: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

Demographics:

1. What is your ethnic background? _____
2. What are your pronouns? _____
3. How old are you? _____
4. How would you label/describe your sexuality? _____
5. How would you label/describe your gender identity? _____

Questions about experiences:

1. As a participant in this research, you have chosen to self-identify as Arab. Do you feel there is a cultural difference for a queer Arab-Americans when compared to other Americans or no?
[Probes: If yes, in what ways? What are some of the elements of their Arab influences? How do these mix or not with the LGBTQ+ side of the identity?]
2. At what age did you realize you were queer and/or LGBTQ+?
[Probes: What prompted the realization?]
3. Are you “out” to friends? Are you “out” to family?
[Probes: Why or why not. If yes, were they accepting? At what age did you come out? If have not out: Why?]
4. Are there spaces where you feel welcome? (Do you feel like you *belong*?)
[Probes: places like work or school, places with family? Places with friends? Online somewhere? Other places/spaces? What does *belonging* mean to you?]

5. Are there spaces where you feel represented (in real life, in media)?
[Probes: If no, why do you think that is? How would you like to be represented? If yes, is it an accurate representation? Can you share examples?]
6. What is your religious background, if any?
 - a. Do you consider yourself a religious person or no?
 - b. How religious is your family?

[Probes: Has this impacted the way, negatively and/or positively, in which you view yourself or no? If so, could you explain? Do you think that your family's religious affiliation affects how they view or behave towards you?]
7. How do you feel about the word "queer"?
[Probes: Would you ever use to it describe yourself or not?]
8. What kinds of online spaces do you frequent?
 - a. Do you feel that you can really express yourself freely there or not?

[Probes: How so? Or Why not? Explain. Can you give an example?]
9. Do you frequently interact with other LGBTQ+ Arab-American individuals or not?
10. Do you ever feel alienated from the LGBTQ+ world as an Arab-American?
[Probes: Does it align with Arab cultural values? Is there any conflict? Do you feel represented?]
11. Is there anything that you have experienced that you feel happened because you are both Arab and LGBTQ+?
12. Is there anything related to the topics we've covered you wanted to add that I didn't ask you about?
13. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for your time. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any concerns or anything that you would like to add. My contact information is as follows: Gabriela Mansour, Phone: (407) 353-8792 (call or text; text preferred), E-mail: gmansour@knights.ucf.edu.

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT MATERIALS



**LGBTQ+?
&
Arab-American?**



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Volunteers Needed for research! Experiences of LGBTQ+ Arab-Americans: An Anthropological Approach



Details:

The purpose of this research is to **explore the ways in which the overlapping identities of LGBTQ+ and Arab-American** affect how an individual is perceived both by others and themselves.

ARE YOU ELIGIBLE? If you identify as **BOTH Arab-American & LGBTQ+** and are **at least 18 years of age**, you are eligible to participate.

In this study, **you will be asked to participate in an interview (25-60mins)** conducted either virtually (skype or zoom) or in-person.

*The interview will be **CONFIDENTIAL** and all personal information will be kept secure and deleted after the interview is transcribed.

*This project has been **approved by the University of Central Florida.**



Contact Information:

Principle Investigator: Gabriela Mansour

Phone: (407) 353-8792

E-mail: gmansour@knights.ucf.edu

Address: University of Central Florida, Dept. of Anthro.
4297 Andromeda Loop N, Orlando, FL 32816



GET **\$5** FOR
STARBUCKS AS
THANKS FOR
PARTICIPATING!

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!!!

Experiences of LGBTQ+ Arab-Americans



Details:

This research seeks to **understand the experiences of persons who identify as both LGBTQ+ and Arab-American**, including any experiences of discrimination or support they may have received in their communities.

ARE YOU ELIGIBLE? If you identify as **BOTH Arab-American & LGBTQ+** and are **at least 18 years of age**, you are eligible to participate.

In this study, **you will be asked to participate in an interview (~30 mins.)** conducted either virtually (zoom or phone) or in-person.

*The interview is **100% CONFIDENTIAL**.

***Project approved by the University of Central Florida.**



Please contact:

Gabriela Mansour

E-mail: gmansour@knights.ucf.edu

Phone: (407) 353-8792 (Text preferred)

APPENDIX D: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS TABLE

Participant #	Ethnicity	Pronouns	Age	Sexuality*	Gender Identity*	State
1	Egyptian & Puerto Rican	She/her (Okay with "they")	24	Queer, "lesbian as I've gotten older"	Woman	Florida
2	Lebanese & Honduran	She/they	20	Queer but also bisexual or pansexual	Woman	N. Carolina
3	Egyptian	She/her	23	Lesbian	Cisgender female	California
4	Tunisian & Moroccan	He/they	20	Queer	Nonbinary, transmasculine	Florida
5	Saudi and White American	She/her	35	Queer/Lesbian	Woman	D.C.
6	Egyptian, Saudi, Syrian, Turkish	I don't care about pronouns, "born he/him"	27	Gay/Queer	No data	Missouri
7	Lebanese Druze	They/them or She/her	25	Gay and Queer	Complicated/n-b/third gender	Virginia
8	Egyptian & White American	She/her	19	Don't like labels; lesbian	Female or woman	New Hampshire
9	Lebanese	They/them	20	Asexual	Gender non-conforming	Connecticut
10	Lebanese	He/him	22	Between bisexual & gay; gay is easier	Cisgender male	Massachusetts
11	Palestinian & White American	Any pronoun said with respect (he, she, they)	27	Queer	Queer	Nevada
12	Palestinian	She/her	21	Bisexual	Female	California
13	Egyptian & Puerto Rican	He/him	25	Gay	Male/man	Maryland
14	Lebanese	She/her	22	Lesbian	Female	Massachusetts
15	Palestinian	She/her	19	Bisexual	Female	New York
16	Lebanese and Syrian	She/her	24	Bisexual	Cisgender female	Connecticut
				*As self-described	*As self-described	

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