

**“JESUS MADE A FEMINIST OUT OF ME”:
COMMUNICATION OF DUAL
EVANGELICAL AND FEMINIST IDENTITIES**

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ABSTRACT

THESIS: “Jesus Made a Feminist Out of Me”: Communication of Dual Evangelical and Feminist Identities

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The number of Christians who identify as evangelical has been on a decline over the past decade. Formal evangelicals may be dropping their religious label in part to fight the nuanced stigma surrounding an evangelical ideology. This phenomenon leaves religious advocates for gender reform caught between two historical and ongoing movements: the feminist movement and the evangelical movement. Often religious advocacy and socio-political advocacy are seen as opposing movements with differing goals that drive a wedge between them. Since social perceptions of faith—specifically Evangelical or Midwest Protestantism—and feminism have a tendency to be viewed as oppositional, I argue that evangelical Christian feminists must communicate their identities in a strategic manner to avoid interpersonal tensions. By doing so, Christian feminists can articulate their advocacy and beliefs in ways that invite both faith-based and liberal-based audiences. With a focus in religious and gender equality identities and using the Communication Theory of Identity as a theoretical lens, I uncover how these spiritual and social identities are communicated in various spaces. Conducted from an interpretivist approach, this study displays how Christian feminists operate on a spectrum of liminality, within aspects of evangelical culture, and the discursive tensions Christian feminists experience as they communicate their identity.

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I hold your story in my hand
the palm arching up
the same direction you tried to voice
the fingers stretching out
in ways your story has moved.
I hold your story in my hand
close to my chest
furnished in my writing
I write what I hold
and I hold what you whisper
scream and shout.

Your vulnerability, hope, anger, and drive were contagious. Each story was intricate and insightful. Enjoy this identity “process.” I know I do.

And thank you to each reader. I am excited for whatever insight may come from this thesis. Whether you personally identify as Christian, feminist, or Christian feminist, may this identity work provide representation and understanding. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to read what follows the phrase “Jesus Made a Feminist Out of Me.”

Sincerely and with great humility,

Karly Poyner

Chapter One: Introduction

Evangelical Christianity has been on a decline over the past decade. According to a 2019 Pew Research Religious Landscape study, only 43% of Americans identify as protestant compared to 51% in 2009 (Pew Research, 2019). In 2006, 23% of Americans identified as white evangelical protestant. However, in 2017, that percentage dropped to 17% (Cox & Jones, 2017). These declining numbers display not only the idea that the “U.S. is steadily becoming less Christian and less religiously observant” (Pew Research, para. 12), but that the U.S. may be going through an evangelical transformation.

In the face of a religious movement and ideology, there exists several prominent evangelical leaders molding their evangelical response to social issues seemingly as a means to gain political control. Such examples include Liberty University’s president Jerry Falwell Jr. and what has been referred to as his “dominating and manipulative leadership” (Ambrosino, 2019) and Franklin Graham’s outspoken support for conversion therapy and anti-Islamic rhetoric (Picheta, 2020). Both evangelical leaders have also been supporters of Pres. Donald Trump and have endorsed his campaigns using their religious platform to do so.

To fight this nuanced stigma surrounding a conservative and evangelical ideology caused in part by the 2016 presidential election of Pres. Donald Trump and the evangelical Right movement, former evangelicals have started to redefine their religious purpose. Boz Tchividjian, evangelical forefather Reverend Billy Graham’s grandson, stated that the term “evangelical” can no longer be defined (Hesse, 2017). In the fall of 2017, long-running Ivy League student ministry, the Princeton Christian Fellowship, dropped the term “evangelical” from their purpose statement. The organization’s director, Bill Boyce, stated the term has become “increasingly either confusing, or unknown, or misunderstood by students” (Shellnut, 2017, para 4).

Episcopal priest Rev. Janet Fuller wonders what college students' church experiences will be in the near future. Fuller states, "I worry[,] and I think that my students are worried about this: that the evangelical political movement in this country seems to me unmoored from any theological positioning." With the present values leaning more towards morality and exclusivity being displayed by the white evangelical political movement, Fuller wonders if what is being modeled is "on a collision course with the values that [her students] want to identify for themselves" (Hesse, 2017, para 11). This study, in search of how individuals with an evangelical and protestant identity come to understand their religious identity, explores how their feminism ideology may be incongruous to the larger social evangelical movement in which they take part.

Research exploring the rise of a newly defined "exvangelical" movement has examined whether the extreme political faith of the Christian Right has impacted the evangelical exodus and declining levels of religiosity (Djupe, Neiheisel, & Sokhey, 2017) and caused lowering levels of religious preferences between individuals with moderate and liberal political views (Baker & Smith, 2009; Hout & Fischer, 2002; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Djupe, Neileisel, and Sokhey (2017) suggest this decline in evangelical spaces displays the willingness that individuals have to withdraw from their religious organization because of an undesirable political presence within the church environment.

Religious advocates for gender reform are caught between two historical and ongoing movements: the feminist movement and the evangelical movement. Often religious advocacy and socio-political advocacy are seen as opposing movements with differing and incompatible goals. However, a variety of feminist theologians and critics engage in both ideologies simultaneously. Two such theologians are Rachel Koehler and Gwen Calais-Haase (2018), who classify leading women of faith and feminism into four categories: (a) shaping and elevating

feminist theology, (b) holding leadership positions in faith communities, (c) fighting against sexual harassment in religious communities, and (d) serving in public offices as a member of an underrepresented religion.

Examples of both Christian and non-Christian faith feminists shaping, and elevating, feminist theology are many. As a Native American feminist, Renya Ramirez (2007) challenges traditional gender-discriminatory practices of indigenous nations. The Sisters in Islam organization's founding member and director, Zainah Anwar, utilizes the Islamic framework to teach gender equality concepts (Sisters, n.d.). Within the Sikh community, the Sikh Feminist Research Institute pursues research on gender-based oppression. The institute's mission is not only to recognize "the emancipatory nature of Sikhi" but the mission also "uncovers and challenges what causes and sustains oppression in all its form" and "strives to create social equity through individual and collective efforts" (SAFAR, para. 2). The social justice group Ezrat Nashim (Hyman, 2009) provides individuals within the Jewish community equal access to leadership roles. In her book titled *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (1992), author María Pilar Aquino examines faith and illiteracy history from Latin American women's perspectives along with the methodological premises for, and contributions to, theology from Latin American women. From her Buddhist Christian perspective, bell hooks analyzes how spirituality, racism, and sexism affects Black women within feminist movements (Yancy, 2015). Such examples of religious feminists reclaiming their religious history challenge preexisting religious texts and practices, such as only heteronormative men speaking in church or the teaching of male-dominated gender norms. These practices are often used to segregate, essentialize, and oppress individuals (e.g., women, LGBTQA persons) in the religious setting.

When feminists reclaim traditional practice and texts, they focus more on the equality of religion rather than suppression and law.

Beginning in the 1950s, more feminists also are holding positions of power in faith communities that range from female pastors to rabbis. The first ordained woman minister was appointed in 1956 by the United Methodist Church. Several years later, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Reform Judaism, and the Episcopal Church all ordained their first female religious leaders (Pew Research Center, 2014). More and more women are stepping into ordained positions and other leadership roles within various religious organizations. For example, Bishop Vashti McKenzie became the first female head of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and the first female ordained rabbi. Additionally, Sally Jane Priesand took part in the Central Conference of American Rabbis' Task Force on Women. What started as a strategy meeting at Wake Forest University School of Divinity in late 2013 transformed into Equity for Women in the Church, an organization with a vision to "facilitate equal representation of clergywomen as pastors of multicultural churches in order to transform church and society" (Aldredge-Clanton, 2017, para. 2). Not only are women in religious-sanctioned positions of leadership, but their work often includes empowering and uplifting suppressed identities, oppressed groups, and fighting against patriarchal ideologies.

Given this work, it is not surprising that female religious leaders are fighting against sexual harassment in religious communities. Koehler and Calais-Haase (2018) pinpoint several instances where women leaders stood up to represent others within faith communities. From the #MeToo movement, Hannah Paasch and Emily Joy started the #ChurchToo twitter movement which has helped launched many church investigations of sexual misconduct within their leadership (Andrews, 2018). #ChurchToo aims to focus specifically on sexual abuse taking place

within religious spaces (Segura, 2017). The response to #ChurchToo led to its sister campaign #SilenceIsNotSpiritual (Shellnutt, n.d.). Both twitter movements take the principles of #MeToo and apply them to religious settings where clergy robes and powerful positions can often protect abusive behaviors.

Outside of religious settings and faith communities, various men and women who hold political office publicly identify as practicing religious individuals. Among the male and female members of the 115th Congress, 90.7% identify as Christian, 5.6% as Jewish, 0.6% as Buddhist, 0.6% as Hindu, 0.4% as Muslim, and 0.2% as unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2017). In 2013, Mazie Hirono was sworn in as the first Asian American and Buddhist woman as the Senator for Hawaii (Lion's Roar, 2012). In 2018, Congresswomen Ilhan Omar (D-MN) and Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) became the first two Muslim-American women elected to Congress. Neither has shied away from publicly expressing their faith. For example, in her victory speech on Election Night, Representative Omar used the phrase "alhamdulillah"—an Arabic term meaning "all praise to God" (Boorstein, Iati, & Zauzmer, 2019). The above examples of women using their religious identities and communities to advocate for better representation, equity, and opportunities defy a societal and historical ideology that religion does not quickly embrace or is antithetical to progressive ideals.

In Sterk's (2010) "Faith, Feminism and Scholarship," communication scholars are encouraged to support and produce feminist scholarship within *The Journal of Communication and Religion*. This call is crafted to encourage communication scholars to engage professional and personal passions along with "well-informed wisdoms...based on solid grounding in the disciplines of communication and feminism, as well as knowledge of faith and its traditions" (p. 207). I argue such a context is rather large if various layers of identity, and how they are

communicated, are taken into account. Because faith—any faith—and feminism are both intricate and intimate to the individual, such identities are communicated amongst one’s environment.

Since social perceptions of faith—specifically Evangelical or Midwest Protestant—and feminism have a tendency to be viewed as oppositional, I argue that evangelical “Faith Feminists” must communicate their identities in a strategic manner to avoid interpersonal tensions. Unlike prior examples, many Christian feminists may not exercise their public advocacy and religious platform in the public’s eye. Therefore, many may not feel as comfortable communicating the duality of their identity and must consistently navigate how to communicate in their daily lives. By doing so, evangelical feminists can articulate their advocacy and beliefs in ways that invite both faith-based and liberal-based audiences. From previous work¹, I recognized the scholarly significance of this context with its intersections of gender, communication and religion.² Scholarship that grows organically from a foundational understanding derived from the discipline of communication “combined with wise understanding of faith and religious traditions” showcase scholars who can “synthesize and analyze communication meaningfully” (Sterk, 2010, p. 207). My thesis will be grounded in three main tenets of this context which Sterk (2010) urges communication scholars to evaluate: gender, communication, and religion.

Sterk ends her essay by articulating how such matters and conversations are important:

Being involved in these matters and these conversations matter because if we care about human beings and their flourishing and God’s presence and love as shown in the whole

¹ For credit during a Qualitative Methods graduate course, I conducted a study titled *Coats of Fire: Rhetorical Identity Negotiations of Evangelical Feminists* in the Spring of 2019.

² Sterk writes “One area that remains relatively undeveloped in the Journal of Communication and Religion is the intersection of gender, communication and religion” (p. 207).

panoply of religions, we will care about how individuals flourish spiritually due to the communication they create and experience. (p. 213)

Sterk justifies a growing need for scholarship examining how spirituality, religion, and matters of faith orchestrate different understandings of gendered human relationships.

What is often assumed about religious thought and practice is that there exists an absence of social challenge and advocacy. Despite such an assumption, in his critique of Hegel's *Social Ethics*, Stern (2017) urges his readers to freely protest and take part in social discourse within the walls of religious settings. However, this form of protest—a marriage of social change and religious calling—must be channeled with a sense of maturity. Stern (2017) defines this maturity as a realization by which:

if we are to get anywhere in our voyage, we must learn to co-operate and work together, and find ways to manage our differences regarding where and how to venture forth; thus, out of our initial abandonment, a richer human dialogue can emerge. (p. 1230)

This protest operates as a process with continuous internal development and structural direction. As such, social activism within religious settings can create discursive tension. Navigation of these discursive tensions relies on the unique sense of maturity needed to claim and negotiate dual identities (Anderson & Hopkins, 1992; Stern, 2017). Such maturity can become “the greatest gift” for “the potential it offers [of] recognizing, reclaiming, and valuing our feminine nature” (Anderson & Hopkins, 1992, p. 16). A religious study can offer insight into forms of identity maturity.

The religious maturity that aids individuals with dual identities to navigate discursive tensions is found in the ways by which specific religious figures develop a unique sense of self to enlighten their feminist activism. For example, within the specific walls of evangelical

Christendom, female activists exist and prosper. These feminists display a unique sense of maturity as they navigate the discursive tensions between holding evangelical values in one hand and gender and sexuality advocacy in the other. As Carr (1982) states, “religious feminists are united in the conviction that both feminism and religion are profoundly significant for the lives of women and for contemporary life generally” (p. 279). Sarah Bessey (2013), a self-proclaimed “Jesus Feminist,” writes, “In some circles, using the word ‘feminist’ is the equivalent of an f-bomb dropped in church—outrageous, offensive... The word ‘feminist’ does not frighten or offend me: in fact, I’d like to see the Church (re)claim it” (p. 12). Rachel Held Evans (2012), a prominent theologian and Christian author, chronicled her life as she underwent a year of “Biblical womanhood.” This included not sitting on any furniture, lest it be destroyed while menstruating; wearing a head covering when praying; pursuing what it meant to be a “Woman of Valor”; and praising her husband. From this experience, Held Evans deconstructed social knowledge of Old Testament laws regarding Women and displayed the hidden virtue and contextual meaning behind such biblical passages. She ended her book by stating:

My advice to women is this: If a man ever tries to use the Bible as a weapon against you to keep you from seeking the truth, just throw on a head covering and tell him you’re prophesying instead. To those who will not accept us as preachers, we will have to become prophets. (p. 281)

The discourse surrounding religious—specifically Christian—feminists serves as a catalyst for redefinition and reclamation of feminism in the Church. However, the cultural divide between feminists and Christians exists discursively as well. Feminists often expect Christian women to give way to their male counterparts in various contexts as a form of submission to patriarchal religious belief systems (Winters, Stiehler, & Peuchaud, 2017). By doing so,

Christian women may be seen as losing touch with the cornerstones of the feminist movement: self-governing of body and sexual freedom (Stacey, 1983). Despite this, literature also provides examples of how evangelical culture and feminist culture can reinforce and support each other. The reconstruction of Biblical female representation can offer a bridge between feminist ideology and Christian ideology based on the deconstruction of the Gospel and its representation of women choosing to “submit” (Bessey, 2013; Winters, Stiehler, & Peuchaud, 2017). Such choice in submission displays spiritual liberation and humility (Bessey, 2013; Evans, 2012). Therefore, the question still remains: How do Christian feminists communicate and maintain their identities in evangelical spaces where interactions based on perceptions or differing ideologies can cause social tension? To uncover the answer, it is necessary to evaluate evangelical culture and its patriarchal history, acts of evangelical feminism, and lastly how communication of identity illustrates intrapersonal and interpersonal discursive patterns specifically when a religious identity is formed. These areas will be examined in the literature review.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In order to understand how evangelical feminists communicate and maintain their identities, I first examine how faith feminists' construct their identities and navigate the social tensions that arise due to their advocacy for gender and sexuality representations. In doing so, I hope to uncover how socially constructed meanings of identity for evangelical feminists often fail to include opportunities for those feminists to reclaim and redefine their identity—both religious and feminist components of their identity. It often is assumed that evangelical Christianity promotes anti-feminist beliefs (Hobbs, 2015), patriarchal oppression (Pevey, Williams, & Ellison, 1996), and strict and firm biblical interpretive codes (Kassian, 2005; Schaeffer, 1984). However, the relationship between feminism and evangelicalism in the United States is complex. Both reformation-driven movements encompass broad ideologies “covering a multitude of voices” (Hobbs, 2015, p. 212). Within this complexity, hegemonic and dominant authorities create “cultural common sense” and maintain a status quo. The marriage of the two identities strives to pay homage to Biblical authority while Biblically sanctioning women as active agents (Gayle & Lattin, 1997) in the feminist movement and in their day-to-day experiences.

Evangelical Christian feminist literature urges readers to question the dominant evangelical practice through a redefinition of masculine theological interpretive codes (Bineham, 1993; Condit, 1989; Gallagher, 2004; Steiner, 1988). The result is a feminist theological system of criticism and deeper understanding of Biblical code, law, and spirituality. Starting during the 1960s within the liberation movement (Peters & Kao, 2019), feminist theology deconstructs hierarchical and traditional approaches to spirituality. This form of theological liberation affirms “the practical wisdom and knowledge of God that grows out of people’s lived experiences” (p.

3). Under feminist theological teachings, every individual—regardless of gender, marginalized or nonmarginalized—has agency in their spiritual formation and value. Feminist ideology, by knowing women’s ways in the world, allows individuals to theologically explore issues of sin, justice, and divine relationship differently (Peters & Kao, 2019). To illustrate, *The Journal of Communication and Religion* featured forty-three articles from 1999 to 2009³ that addressed the intersection of faith communities and feminist ideology (Sterk, 2010). These topics included feminist contributions to religious identity construction, masculinity constructions, and sexual identities within faith communities; intersectional gender discourse; hospitable and inclusive language; and race, gender, and faith.

Evangelical feminist work outlined by Sterk (2010) tackles issues related to organizational structuring and meaning making. One structural criticism focuses on the ecological value and silencing of creational care. Much of this critical work is derived from the social concept of Judeo-Christian’s compulsion with creational and societal dominance (Curry & Groenendyk, 2006; White, 1967). Curry and Groenendyk (2006) surveyed male and female seminarians and their attitudes toward nature. Their results portrayed religious views of female-based stewardship as caretakers with ethical responsibilities toward nature. Another structural critique focuses on women’s role in faith building and maintaining communities against a homogenous history of male community-keepers (Hoffman, 2007). Other scholarship utilizes feminist theory to examine gendered aspects of religious spaces. Whether it be political-religious media portrayals (Abbott; 2011; Leland & Barnett, 2013), hidden church-goer resistance (Johns, 2008), public monumental work (McLaughlin, 2004), or religious-feminist text (Woodyard, 2008), examining specific contextual elements of religious spaces can uncover the ways in which

³ Compared to fourteen articles from 2010 to 2020

power and gender can influence women and men of faith. Within the following sections, I expand upon the literature surrounding the context of evangelical culture and its home within the patriarchal church.

Evangelical Culture

Evangelicalism is the largest religious group in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2015) and encompasses various Christian church denominations, institutions, organizations, writers, teachers, and leaders (Gallagher, 2004). According to a Pew Research Center study published in 2015, about 25% of U.S. adults self-identify as evangelical. An evangelical—or an individual operating within evangelicalism—partakes in persuasive discourse that communicates a belief in the “Good News” or “Gospel” with the goal of conversion or rebirth. Because of the focus on rebirth, or change to come, evangelicals experience liminality, a state of in-betweenness (Beech, 2011). Often examined in circumstances of identity ambiguity and identity shifting over time, liminality can both serve as a space of disruption but also of reconstruction of one’s identity (Wu & Buzzanell, 2013). Gardner (2017) writes, “contrary to popular views regarding the intractability of conservative Christian subject positions, liminality is central to Christian ontology” (p. 35). As followers of the prophet Jeremiah, evangelical Christians are compelled to (a) be “in the world but not of it,” (b) believe salvation comes from Jesus Christ, (c) take authority from the Bible, and (d) regard a “personal walk with God” as a key ingredient to understanding life (Gallagher, 2017, p. 217). Following the lifestyle of exiled Jews in Babylon, evangelical Christians operate within a ‘now, but not yet’ perspective.

The natural liminality of the evangelical culture is similar to feminism. Comparable to the liberal feminist movement, evangelicalism strives to be visible and in constant transition. In her book *Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance*, Hunt (2004) describes both belief systems as

“revolutions of consciousness” and as manifestations “of the desire and need for inclusion and connection” (p. 3). As a political movement, feminism operates from an agenda that strives to challenge social institutions. Evangelical Christianity, on the other hand, seeks individual transformation, “which then results in a desire to work for the transformation of society” (p. 12). Not only does evangelicalism, like feminism, function in a state of liminality, but evangelicals also work to challenge social construct, much like feminists. However, the chronicled evangelical Church is comprised of “too many examples of women’s oppression and too few documenting support for women’s rights” (p. 3). The omission and silencing of female-driven stories and ideologies from the pulpit begins in the Sunday school classroom.

Within the evangelical church’s tradition, biblical stories are utilized as catalyst for metaphor and for teaching even its youngest members. However, women’s voices are often missing. Evans (2012) and McKnight (2008) uncover often overshadowed stories of female heroines (e.g., Priscilla⁴, a church planter and teacher), hidden female protagonists (e.g., Phoebe⁵, a deacon), female-driven parables (e.g., the story of Tabitha⁶), and how these stories are left untold. The lessons, composed of “narratives of Scripture that included a triumphant climax—a battle won, a giant slain, chariots swallowed by the sea” arguably leave women on the sidelines (Evans, 2012, p. 62). However, McKnight (2008) warns against this cultural manipulation of biblical teaching. By leaving out the stories of women’s work in evangelical storytelling and teaching, church ministries fail to divulge the wholistic story of the Scriptures. McKnight (2008), while discussing the role and biblical meaning of Pentecost, claims evangelical Christianity needs to think of women’s capabilities to minister as increasing with

⁴ Referenced in Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19

⁵ Referenced in Romans 16:1

⁶ A female disciple brought back to life after prayer. Written in Acts 9

time, not decreasing. He writes of historical evangelicalism having “shrunk the role of women in ministries; this flat-out contradicts the direction of the Bible’s plot” (p. 191). Similarly, Evans (2012) writes “for all of its glory and grandeur, the Bible contains a darkness you will only notice if you pay attention, for it is hidden in the details, whispered in the stories of women” (p. 62). The culture of teaching and storytelling within evangelicalism has a history of failing to include, and misrepresenting the power of, the female role in Scripture. This is one example of how the Evangelical Church, throughout history, has operated as a patriarchal Church.

The Patriarchal Church

Mary J. Evans (2003) examined each Old Testament Biblical reference to women to determine if the Old Testament Israeli culture was a masculine-dominated one by which the world of the Pentateuch⁷ was patriarchal. This argument can be attributed to the historically exclusive male priesthood and theological professoriate who teach of male imagery for God. Elizabeth Farian wrote in 1973 that “what Christian theology worships in God is its own phallus” (quoted in Raphael, 2014, p. 244). This monosexual theology thrives due to Christian congregations operating within hierarchies “with elite males dominating others” (Stenger, 1990, p. 294). Catherine Clark Kroeger (2000), in her article published in the *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, states that “the main, history is written by, for and about men” (quoted in McKnight, 2008, p. 157). The Christian Bible can be examined in the same limited manner. McKnight (2008) urges Christian readers to be aware of this monosexual theology since pretending male exclusivity does not exist can lead Christians “to an ironic commitment to our faith and into hidden secrets and despair” (p. 157). For Christian feminists who criticize the male-dominated space of the Church, the focus is not on men leading within the church, but the

⁷ “Five words,” Greek reference to the first five books of the Bible

ideology that Christ only functions as a male for males (Casey, 2000; Stenger, 1990). Well known teachings such as “submission” (Ephesians 5), the “patriarchs” (Genesis), and women’s roles in the Church (1 Ephesians and 1 Timothy), often function as breeding grounds for patriarchally-interpreted teachings, discourse, and structured policies.

In a typical male-dominated church culture, religious themes and practices related to gender roles and attainment of “Biblical womanhood” are often used to silence women. The infamous Danvers Statement from the *Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* claims that the acceptance of a feminist ideology among Christians threatens “Biblical authority as the clarity of Scripture is jeopardized and the accessibility of its meaning to ordinary people is withdrawn into the restricted realm of technical ingenuity” (Evans, 2012, p. xix). In essence, the statement urges women of God to pursue “biblical womanhood” instead of following a feminist culture. The Council’s mission statement reads:

Both Adam and Eve were created in God’s image, equal before God as persons and distinct in their manhood and womanhood. Adam’s headship in marriage was established by God before the Fall and was not a result of sin. The Fall introduced distortions into the relationship between men and women but redemption in Christ restores this relationship. In the home[,] husbands are lovingly to lead their wives and wives should intelligently and willingly submit to their husbands. In the church, some governing and teaching roles are restricted to men. (Council, para. 4)

As this passage suggests, the evangelical belief of creational equality is often dismissed by the insistence on gender roles that situate women in a place of submission.

The debate over gender roles has generated various opinions on the matter since the Protestant Reformation (Padgett, 2008). In response to a conservative evangelical ideology of feminine submission, Rachel Held Evans (2016) states:

What makes the New Testament household codes radical is that they take a step toward mutuality by directing all members of the household—those with power and those who are powerless—to emulate the humility of Jesus Christ in their relationships. Directing a “how to submit” list to women alone perpetuates the mistaken notion that the deference and humility celebrated in the New Testament household codes are exclusively feminine virtues. (para. 5)

Such contradictory rhetoric derives from the diverse array of sexuality and gender beliefs within evangelical teachings. Various traditions for interpreting scripture have historically shaped evangelical ideologies and practices (McKnight, 2008). Such interpretive traditions challenge the assumption of religious—specifically evangelical—gender-role beliefs and attitudes existing as a homogenized ideology. Individuals existing with the same denomination, even congregation, may hold diverse and varying views of gender roles (Bartkowski & Read, 2003). Theologian Scot McKnight categorizes these three groups of ideology as hard patriarchy, soft patriarchy, and mutuality.

Hard-Patriarchal Evangelicalism

Hard-patriarchal views of Biblical interpretation traditionally advocate for Biblical context and teachings to be centered on the belief of God’s design as permanent and original. Within this tradition, a women’s responsibility is solely focused on “[glorifying] God, [loving] God, [loving] others, and [loving] her husband and her children” (McKnight, 2008, p. 159).

To explain this perspective, Stacey McDonald, author of *Passionate Housewives Desperate for God* (2007), writes, “Quite simply, there is no such thing as ‘Christian feminism. We either embrace the biblical model...or we reject it and plummet over the cliff with the rest of the passengers on the railcar” (as quoted in Evans, 2012, p. 24). Similarly, Sarah Schlissel of the Chalcedon Foundation, in an essay titled “Daddy’s Girl: Courtship and a Father’s Rights” (1998) states:

I am owned by my father. If someone is interested in me, he should see him... No man can approach me as an independent agent because I am not my own, but belong, until marriage, to my father. At the time of my marriage, my father gives me away to my husband, and there is a lawful change in ownership. At this point, and at that point only, I am no longer bound to do my father’s will. Instead, I must answer to my husband. (para. 3 & 18)

Raymond Ortlund, an assistant professor of Old Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and ordained minister within the Presbyterian Church in America, expressed similar views. In *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (2006), he writes: “A man, by virtue of his manhood, is called to lead for God” and from this concludes that a woman “as just by virtue of her womanhood is called to help for God” (Ortlund, 2006, p. 102). Similarly, John Piper, a senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, describes the spirit of submission as “a disposition to yield” (Piper, 2006, p. 61) and perceives biblical femininity as “a freeing disposition to affirm, receive, and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men” (Piper, 2006, p. 48). Such “thought-leaders” in the hard-patriarchal tradition view women’s liberation as a product of submission and service to family and the church.

Soft-Patriarchal Evangelicalism

According to this orientation, Christians are called to understand and simulate the teachings of the Bible within the context of twenty-first century Western culture. While the soft-patriarchal tradition still upholds a woman's responsibility to glorify God, love God, and to love others, the traditional notion of a woman needing to be married and/or having children is challenged. If a woman chooses to be married, she must also love her husband and any children that might be part of the familial relationship. Like hard-patriarchy, the soft-patriarchal tradition still affirms submission and gender roles, but extends the woman's role. She need not only be a wife and mother, but also can have roles outside of the home if she is deemed competent by self and family. In this tradition, the woman "can participate in an appropriate female manner at church, but this would not include being senior pastor or teaching or leading men in any way" (McKnight, 2008 p. 160). Both hard and soft-patriarchal traditions limit female leadership and autonomy. However, McKnight (2008) writes of the third tradition, mutuality evangelicalism, as being one of feminine liberation.

Mutuality Evangelicalism

Mutuality—or the mutual tradition—conducts its doctrine as just that—emphasizes mutuality and equality between the sexes. The mutual "renew-and-renewing" mindset (McKnight, 2008) still calls for a woman to glorify God, to love God, to love others, and to love her family. However, what sets the mutual tradition apart from hard and soft-patriarchal traditions is the degree of women's liberation. Within this tradition, the context and teachings of the Bible are perceived as cultural rather than inerrant and long-established church traditions. In fact, it suggests a need to dismantle and challenge those traditions. Bessey (2013) summarizes the mutuality tradition by claiming the Scriptures are a "rainbow arch across a stormy sky" but

“people want black-and-white answers” (p. 56). The mutuality view works to refrain from indulging “in semantics and slippery-slope rhetoric to excuse injustice” (Bessey, 2013, p. 58) and refuses “to oppress women or refuse opportunity or give place to patriarchy” (Bessey, 2013, p. 63). This view allows women the freedom to move in whatever capacity they discern God calls them to—including any form of teaching, leading, or preaching in a church.

A mutuality-regarded mindset places individuality and mission before sex or gender. In pondering whether the “gifts of the Spirit” are sex-based, Bessey (2013) writes “it [is] not about your sex; it [is] about how God had gifted you” (p. 40). Scholars using a mutuality-based focus examine hierarchical forms of family, church, and relational practices made in the name of God. Deconstructing the misguided hierarchies and inequalities re-examines “God’s Shalom” (Bessey, 2013, p. 174) and places individuals on a mutual scale of relationship and worship.

Acts of Evangelical Feminism

Rhetoric surrounding teachings of gender roles and Biblical womanhood has created space for feminist theologians to criticize evangelical rhetorical commissions. Prior to the development of the western feminist movement, early thought-leaders of women’s religious liberation criticized and fought for better representation of women in the church. Hailed as a “feminist pioneer” (Broad, 2012, p. 1), Margaret Fell argued for spiritual equality between the sexes during the late 1600s and early 1700s. In her pamphlet, *Women Speaking Justified*, Fell provided context for biblical passages often used as rationale for the silencing of women. Focusing on Corinthians, Fell wrote, “Here the Man is Commanded to keep Silence, as well as the Woman, when in Confusion and out of order” (Fell, 2018, p. 5). In her pamphlets and speeches, Fell reinterpreted scripture to offer a perspective illuminating feminine attributes of Christ and women figures in the passages prophesying.

During the 1840s, Phoebe Palmer published three separate books pertaining to biography, poetry, and theological discussion. In *The Promise of the Father*, Palmer argued for churches to recognize ways women have unfairly been shunned from ministering and speaking. She wrote:

We feel that there is a wrong, a serious wrong, affectingly cruel in its influences, which has long been depressing the hearts of the most devotedly pious women. And this wrong is inflicted by pious men, many of whom, we presume, imagine that they are doing God service in putting a seal upon lips which God has commanded to speak (Palmer, 2015, p. 13).

Physician, theologian, and Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) evangelist, Katharine Bushnell (1923)—arguably overshadowed in her religious and feminist activism—critiqued several components of the Western, patriarchal society she perceived in the early 20th century. This included the sexual double standard, the religious patriarchy, and the insistence on women's submission to men present within Western Christianity. She fought the public's perceptions of prostitution as iniquity from several angles. She argued prostitution existed as a sex industry that only celebrates male liberty at the expense of women. She challenged the condescending discourse surrounding Victorian elites' outlook on so-called fallen women who worked as prostitutes. She lobbied against laws that tested and disciplined only women for the spreading of sexually transmitted diseases. And, she examined the oppression women in Asia experienced through the gender norms propagated through Western Christianity.

Daly (1973, 1975) criticized the “sexual caste system” that thrives off of the Church's use of male-only symbolism for Christ. Christian music artist and *The Liturgists Podcast* host, David Gungor (2017), alongside Christena Cleveland, hosted a podcast titled “God Our Mother.” In this podcast, they perform liturgical prayers and songs with God being referenced only using female

or non-gender binary pronouns. Ruether (1983) wrote of how the Church often leaves children and women as populations to be ruled over by the male ruling class. McFague (1987) criticized traditional metaphors used in the Church for Christ as discursive forms of patriarchy. These specific areas of theological feminist discourse are rich with criticism of patriarchal oppression experienced in evangelical systems (Carr, 1982; Christ, 1977; Hunt, 2004). These patriarchal ideologies also can be found within theologically grounded university curriculum.

However, theologically grounded ideologies may also offer new insight into women's liberation as well. With the post-secular turn in the feminist movement, agency and political subjectivity of feminists can be supported by, and even involve elements of, spirituality (Braidotti, 2008). If feminists are advocates for human rights, gender equality, and representation of marginalized groups, the movement can be argued as implicitly religious. Rebecca Todd Peters and Grace Y. Kao (2019) write:

To be a Christian feminist is to have one's feminism infused with the radical justice-love that reflects the best part of the Christian tradition and to embody a religious faith that expresses an unwavering commitment to the inclusion and care of the world's most marginalized people and other parts of creation. It is to recognize and name the patriarchy and misogyny that is embedded in the Christian tradition while actively seeking the life-giving power of the sacred that has also always been present in it as well. (pp. 2-3)

Similarly, Peters and Kao (2019) state: "The DNA of feminism and feminist theology, in sum, is its pursuit of social change and its making way for new structures and new modes of being" (p. 8). In recognition of how feminist theology liberates women within religious structures, Christian feminists are redefining "roles" and altering social-religious stigmas surrounding sex and gender.

In the fall of 2014, writer Dianna Anderson posted an article titled “What Losing My Virginity Taught Me About My Faith.” The article focused on Anderson’s experience of premarital sex and its ability to be “holy,” a contrasting perspective from the purity culture of the Evangelical Christian community. As a self-identifying evangelical Christian and feminist, Anderson’s writing has been criticized by both evangelicals and feminists: too introductory and simple to be social feminist rhetoric and too brazen to be evangelically based. However, in response to comments calling her the “temple prostitute” (Green, 2015, para. 1), Anderson doubled down and wrote more. In her writings, viewers follow how she regards feminism and Christianity as equally foundational parts of her identity, rather than irreconcilable ideologies. As such, Anderson sees sexuality and faith as shared means for self-understanding.

Although Anderson’s experience serves as only one account, her story depicts a phenomenon many religious feminists experience. Individuals who identify as both feminist and religious may encounter discursive tensions resulting from their polysemic identity. Such tensions arise out of what is often defined as discursive contradictions. However, Friedman (1998) writes of these contradictions as “fundamental to the structure of subjectivity and the phenomenological experience of identity” (p. 21). With what could be seen as dual identities, religious feminists must often take part in acts of identity negotiation (Stacey, 1983). The discursive nature of such identity negotiations “connotes a dialogic exchange” (Friedman, 1998, p. 198), meaning the fluidity of two identities exists to strengthen the feminist and gender-equality discourse. The following section provides a framework for understanding how communication of identity takes place and how such conveyance can be found in a context where religion and gender intersect with social identity.

Communication Theory of Identity

With its theoretical foundation within the sociocultural tradition (Craig, 1999), Communication Theory of Identity (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004) can broaden the ways in which scholars examine individuals' sense of self as a product of their social life.

Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) explores how an individual's interactions and communication with others often influences his/her sense of identity. Using CTI as a lens to investigate identity work is powerful since the theoretical usage is "not unnecessarily limiting, essentializing, or suggestive of a permanent and enduring identity politic" (Wagner, 2017, p. 585). Because of a flexible approach to understanding personal identity and how said identity is performed in various settings, CTI "recognizes that identity elements may include both enduring and shifting properties, each of which manifest different among varying frames of performativity" (Wagner, 2017, p. 585). With its open approach to varying levels of identity, CTI recognizes four layers of identity: (a) the personal layer, (b) the layer portraying enactment of identity, (c) an individual's sense of identity through relational contexts, and (d) the larger, communal gathering of identity.

Personal Layer

How an individual perceives his or herself and their identity forms their personal layer (Jung & Hecht, 2004). In essence, one's self-concept or self-image and his/her internal feelings and beliefs about who they are as an individual are often influenced by social norms (Hecht, 1993). An evangelical feminist may perceive oneself as both evangelical and feminist due to his/her internal values and beliefs. One's values and beliefs may be influenced by social norms within different contexts they exist and interact within (e.g., religious universities, equalitarian families, feminist churches).

Enactment Layer

When an individual performs or projects their identity in response to others' insights about said individual's actions, their identity is now being enacted. Evangelical feminists may perform, or project, aspects of their identity in response to surrounding insights or actions. For example, when evangelical feminists enter a largely feminist space; they may enact more of their feminist identity based off of other individuals' understanding of evangelical beliefs. By contrast, evangelical feminists operating within an evangelical space may enact their feminist identity to a lesser degree to be less identifiable as feminists.

Relational Layer

When an individual thinks about who they are in relation to others, they are processing their identity relationally. This part of identity is constructed from one's interactions with others. This relational layer of identity operates within four levels: a) How individuals internalize how others may view them, b) how individuals identify themselves through relationships with others, c) how individuals' identities coexist with other peoples' identities, and d) how relationships themselves can become an identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Therefore, one's way of constructing their identity and image of self are directly impacted by the nature of their relationships with others.

Evangelical feminists may construct their identity and self-image to relate accordingly to strong-feminist individuals or strong-evangelical individuals. They may internalize how the strong-identity individual (i.e., a feminist or an evangelical) might view their duality. Evangelical feminists may even construct their identities based on the level of the relationship they might have with feminists, evangelicals, and other evangelical feminists. Based in the identity spectrum of evangelicals and feminists, an evangelical feminist may perform and better understand their own identity in relation to other evangelical feminists with whom they interact.

Communal Layer

The fourth layer is similar to relational in that identity is constructed via relationship with others; however, this relationship can be with a larger group or culture. Through the communal layer, individuals step into a cultured image and identity which the group either constructed or continues to construct (Beckner & Record, 2016). An individual's sense of identity will predominantly be established within their larger community, rather than by individual differences between acting members of the community, as a result of social and cultural expectations. While interacting within religious institutions, an evangelical feminist may construct their own cultured image to fit in with the overlapping evangelical identity. In contrast, when constructing their identity in a largely feminist culture, an evangelical feminist may emphasize their feminist identity. One key factor of CTI's recognition of four identity-based layers is their characteristic of overlapping or coinciding among each other.

Identity Gaps

Because these identity layers reflect various personal, interpersonal, and cultural settings, the potential exists for identity gaps to occur between the layers. Using CTI as a theoretical base allows the researcher to acknowledge, "that identity layers can also be in conflict with another" (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014, p. 473). Identity gaps occur when there are differences among some, or all, of the four layers of identity (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008). One's way of communicating their identity to themselves and to others may differ when they enter different social situations. The existence of identity gaps is inherent to the process of social interactions (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Because of this inherency, individuals will monitor themselves in their communication with others as they display an image that might be different from what they consider their "true selves" (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014, p. 473). In their study of

adoptive identity and how it is influenced by the relational layer of adoptive and birth family relationships, Colaner, Halliwell, and Guignon (2014) write of the importance for scholars to consider “the extent to which identity layers contradict each other and what the implications of such contradictions are for the self” (p. 473). From these identity layer contradictions, there is the possibility for eleven identity gaps to take form.

According to Hecht, Warren, Jung, and Krieger (2005), six of the eleven identity gaps exist within just two layers of identity, four exist within three layers, and one involves all four layers of identity. Ample empirical research has been conducted to examine two of these gaps: the personal-relational identity gap and the personal-enacted identity gap. Gaps thrive within contexts where individuals must alter the degree to which they enact features or characteristics of their identity based on levels of social appropriateness and trust with whom they are interacting (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005). Identity gaps can become problematic for individuals’ sense of self or interpersonal relationships when individuals perceive the gaps as large and/or frequent (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014). CTI theorizes increased gaps are related to decreases in communication satisfaction, feelings of being understood and acknowledged, and perceptions of conversational appropriateness and effectiveness (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014; Jung & Hecht, 2004). With its rich and empirically tested theoretical framework, CTI can be utilized to explore varying layers of identity and identity enactment within a variety of contexts.

As a theory, CTI has been incorporated by scholars to examine identity communication within individual, communal, and societal cultural contexts (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005). CTI also has been used to examine and explore questions surrounding race, ethnicity, sex, and gender identities (Drummond & Orbe, 2009; Hecht, Faulkner, Meyer, Niles, Golden, &

Cutler, 2002; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Nuru, 2014; Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008; Wagner, Kunkel, & Compton, 2016), familial relational identities (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014; Kam & Hecht, 2009; Pettigrew, 2013), and gendered fitness identities (Beckner & Record, 2016; Wagner, 2017). From its original intergroup communicative context to its application in contexts such as family research, relational identities, and group identities, the CTI framework has proven itself useful in examining “identity work as an inherently communicative process, defined by individual, interpersonal, and communal negotiations of enacted identity performance” (Wagner, 2017, p. 585). From the rich background of scholarship utilizing the theory, CTI can be used as a lens to examine identity negotiation, development, and communication within specific contexts.

The specific context of religious spaces, and the formations of identities within those spaces, have been studied in the past. However, most studies have primarily focused on contexts such as sexuality/religion, context/location, and culture/religion. For example, Deeb-Sossa and Kane (2007) examined how religious students resisted and questioned the often religiously based heterosexism culture. Gervais (2012) and Pauly (2018) both examined how Canadian women religiously negotiate their feminism and Catholicism. Other literature pertaining to religious identity negotiation (Aeschbach, 2017; Coyle & Rafalin, 2001; Desmazières, 2012; Noble, 2006; Ojong, 2012; Pohl, 2011) examines the negotiations of identity and cultural values. Several studies (Gardner, 2017; Faulkner & Hecht, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016; Thumma, 1991) have researched the negotiations of various religious LGBTQA individuals’ sexual and religious identities.

Communication of Evangelical Feminist Identity

Evangelical feminists exist in natural liminality due to their dual identities. Therefore, depending with whom they are interacting, evangelical feminists may be compelled to regularly

communicate the duality of their identities because of the liminal spectrum in which they are situated. In this act of communicating the contradictory identities of feminism and evangelicalism, evangelical feminists may experience identity gaps. The feminist ideology can provide the opportunity for further discourse in religious settings. Whereas, an evangelical ideology within a liberal setting may provide personal and spiritual connections. In their day-to-day experiences, faith feminists must reconcile both sets of ideologies to function with an integrated, or whole, identity.

Peters and Kao (2019) write of the struggle by which feminist advocacy exists as an earthly issue containing “sexual and economic exploitation, racism, violence, and misogyny” (p. 11). To combat these perceived “earthly inequities,” faith feminists must “daily choose to be a feminist and to continue to struggle for justice” (p. 11). Peters and Kao (2019) write of how leaning on their sense of advocate identity—both religious and feminist—ultimately can aid faith feminists’ agenda for equality and representation. They call upon weary faith feminists to “lean on one another and on God for [their] support in that struggle” (p. 11).

From the literature I have examined, little is known about the discursive tension faith—specifically evangelical—feminists experience with their dual identities. In this study, I use CTI as a theoretical lens to illuminate how these individuals negotiate and communicate their relational identities when interacting in various contexts. This study focuses on young adults attending, having attended, or working within private, religious universities while openly identifying as both religious and feminist. By pinpointing Christian universities (Cesareo, 2007; Frye, 2007; Longman, Daniels, O’Connor, Wikkerink, Dahvig, & Harden Dritz, 2015; Wells, 2010; Woodford, Leavy, & Walls, 2013), this study uncovers an additional layer of tension, since these schools “arguably exert a stronger influence over their students than churches,

religious denominations, or parachurch ministries” (Gardner, 2017, p. 33). While paying thousands of dollars to attend, students typically are also required to sign and live by community lifestyle membership contracts, or “covenant” forms. As Christian college students aged 18-25, these young adults face particular discursive tensions as subscribers to a Christian community who also advocate for a liberal feminist agenda. Based on the literature reviewed, my analysis, therefore, is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Christian feminists communicate their identities on the personal layer, enactment layer, relational layer, and communal layer?

RQ2: What identity gaps do Christian feminists experience?

RQ3: How do Christian feminists discursively bridge the identity gaps they experience?

Chapter Three: Methodology

With a focus in religious and gender equality identities, I uncover how these spiritual and social identities are communicated in various spaces. I take an interpretivist approach (Putnam & Banghart, 2017) to further understand how Christian feminists operate on a spectrum of liminality (Beech, 2011; Friedman, 1998; Wu & Buzzanell, 2013), within aspects of evangelical culture, and the discursive tensions Christian feminists experience as they communicate their identity. This research aims to answer how Christian feminists communicate their identities within CTI's layers, what identity gaps they may experience between these layers, and how Christian feminists discursively bridge the identity gaps they may experience.

From a past project⁸, I learned Christian feminists do not always simply negotiate one identity over the other. Rather, they perceive their identities, negotiate levels of performing their identities, and participate in various communities with their identities. As a feminist interpretive scholar, my priority is to provide space for my participants and their narratives to be heard and further understood. To understand how they perceive, negotiate, and perform their dual identities, an interpretivist perspective is needed to better understand how Christian feminists construct their identities and navigate the complexities surrounding their day-to-day encounters.

In the following section, I describe my method for gathering data from qualitative interviews and analyzing the participants' narratives to discover themes in the communication of their identities. Beyond their identity labels, the participants chosen for the study also attended or worked within an Undergraduate Christian University (UCU) and have had experience with the religious academic culture of such institutions.

⁸ In my 2019 project and 2020 CSCA's Intercultural Division Top Student Paper, *Coats of Fire: Rhetorical Identity Negotiations of Evangelical Feminists*, I interviewed 14 Christian feminists using Ting-Toomey's (2005) IDT as a theoretical lens.

Context

The context of college campus and religious culture can impact how evangelical feminists consistently communicate their identity. College campuses with religion-based curriculum and culture exist as frameworks of rhetorical power. How these schools market their theological mission to students (Cesareo, 2007), integrate faith into general education courses (Shellnut, 2018), and treat discourses of morality (Wells, 2010; Woodford, Levy, & Walls, 2013) impacts students' perception of their own identity. Several communication scholars have also examined discursive tensions within religious campus culture (Frye, 2007; Gardner, 2017; Leland & Barnett, 2013; Longman, Daniels, O'Connor, Wikkerink, Dahvig, & Harden Dritz, 2015). Shellnut (2018) describes this discursive nexus as potentially precarious since "slippery application of teachings on male headship, female submission, or gender roles—say, applying marital submission to dating relationships or male leadership to class projects—can create dangerous environments at Christian colleges" (p. 20, para. 16).

Universities and colleges with Christian-based curriculum have higher rates of gender-based discrimination than public or private U.S. colleges (Shellnut, 2018), more men in academic leadership roles than women (Longman et al., 2015), and hegemonic doctrinal teachings that have a tendency to overpower and disjoint one's personal religious and ethical beliefs (Woodford, Leavy, & Walls, 2013). With this discursive and rhetorical energy surrounding Christian—specifically evangelical—based education and culture, my research and analysis are focused on identity communication within UCU and church environments.

Participants

After receiving approval from the Ball State University Institutional Review Board, I conducted semi-structured and exploratory interviews with fifteen participants. Through social-

media advertisement and snowball sampling, participants were asked to take part in an interview if they were (a) at least 18 years of age, (b) have either attended or been employed by a Christian college for at least one semester, and (c) openly identify as a Christian and a feminist. For this project I did not focus on gender or sex as criterion for my participants, but rather I chose to focus on how participants defined their feminist advocacy and evangelical/midwestern protestant label. By narrowing my concern to their dual labels, I was able to open the study up to anyone who identified as “Christian feminist” and used their narrative to further understand the nuance of feminist Christian identity and advocacy.

Procedures

Once I received direct messages from interested participants via social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram), I acquired their email addresses. I sent an email which introduced myself as a researcher, and explained what this research project examined, how their narratives would aid in the process, and how I planned to conduct the interviews (see Appendix A). By emailing the potential participants first, they were given the freedom to decide whether to take part in the study before I sat down with them and walked them through the consent form (see Appendix B). After setting up face-to-face communication meetings (whether in-person or through video conference call), I conducted fifteen face-to-face interviews. Before the interviews started, I had the participants sign the consent form and choose their pseudonym.

To help unpack the various narratives and intimate experiences of each participant, I conducted semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C) with fifteen individuals who identified as Christian feminists. The participants’ ages ranged from 20-57 years old and most of the participants (thirteen) had graduated from a UCU or were working at a UCU. Two of the participants were attending a UCU during the data-collection period. Interviews lasted anywhere

from 30-60 minutes and were audio recorded for transcribing purposes. I used a modified version of interview protocol established by Colaner, Halliwell, and Guignon (2014). In their communication study of adoption identities, Colaner, Halliwell, and Guignon (2014) examined how adoptees communicate their various layers of identity within intrapersonal, interpersonal, and in group settings. By adapting and modifying their interview questions, I generated questions about a range of communication phenomena, from participants' self-talk and self-efficacy (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005) to their interpersonal communicative experiences. Questions asked participants to recall specific memories or scenarios in which they communicated their identity within different interpersonal settings and asked them to reflect on the communicative meaning and impact on their sense of identity. I developed questions to determine participants' four layers of identity (i.e. How does the fact that you are Christian and feminist affect how you think about yourself?; Do you think people see you different than you want them to see you because of your dual identity?)

By using a semi-structured interview to collect data, I was able to ask each interviewee the same questions while also having the freedom to probe further when participants answered (e.g., I want you to think of a time when you talked to your family, friends, or colleagues about your feminist and Christian identity. What did they tell you about your identity?). The participants represented four different Midwest, private, Christian universities and one Mid-Atlantic, private, Christian university. Participants were assured throughout the interview process that all identifying information they may provide during the interview process would be kept confidential and no identifying information aside from their chosen pseudonym would appear in any publication or presentation. Consent forms were kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office within a secure building on the researcher's University's campus or in a locked desk in the

researcher's personal residence. All computerized data (e.g., audio files, typed interview transcripts, or virtually signed consent forms) were kept on a password encrypted computer. Once interviews were finished being conducted, the audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher.

Data Analysis

To analyze the participants' narratives as data, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedure. By using this step-by-step thematic analytical process, I conducted the analysis portion in phases. During phase one, I read the transcripts while listening to the audio from each interview multiple times. This allowed me, as the researcher, to collect my initial thoughts and ideas of what is deemed interesting or significant from the data. I noted my impressions and reflections within the margins of the transcripts. Once this phase was complete, I moved into phase two. Phase two consisted of analyzing the data with specific coding in mind. I identified textual segments that have a direct relationship to the specific phenomenon I am studying. In doing so, I was able to analyze and code the data in order to categorize responses within the four layers of CTI. This data categorization process was based on Braun and Clarke's criterion of *keyness*. The themes that emerged and upon which I categorized my data were "not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures—but on whether [they] capture something important in relation to the research question[s]" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Thereby, when analyzing the data, premises were set and used to assign specific data points to a coding category. This phase was repeated by the researcher until the point of saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). By the end of phase two, all categories were defined, and no new categories were identified.

In phase three of the analysis, I separated my coded data and examined participant answers for specific identity gaps. Whenever I experienced uncertainty or had questions about my coding categories or possible identity gaps, I revisited my data in consultation with my thesis advisor. This allowed us to discuss and question the data to come to an agreement about how to categorize the identity gap(s). After all interviews were coded, I returned to the data, refined its themes, and made certain that the coded data resembled a coherent pattern and represented an “accurate” (Braun & Clarke, 2006) account of the participants’ narratives. Additionally, I conducted member checks (Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell, 1996) by randomly selecting and contacting one third of the participants. During these conversations, I explained how I coded their interview, how their narrative exemplified layers of identity communication, identity gaps, and discursive strategies used to bridge the gaps. Through one-on-one meetings, both in person and via teleconference calls, I showed each of the chosen participants their own coded transcription and explained how I coded their interviews and what themes were represented in their stories. I then asked each member-check participant two questions: 1) “From what they can remember of the interview, was there anything they said that I did not code that feels vital to their identity and experiences of communicating their identity,” and 2) “Did they feel I represented their narrative through my coding?” Each participant chosen as a member check answered “no” to the first question and “yes” to the second question.

The fourth and final phase of Braun and Clark’s approach involves writing an analysis which details the characteristics of each theme and set of subthemes. Exemplars from the data were chosen to help capture the nature and quality of each theme. From discussions with my thesis advisor, I ensured each theme and subtheme was adequately and fully described and that they answered each research question. To complete my analysis, I met with my thesis advisor

after both of us had time to read through the analysis and discuss ways to sharpen the writing portion of the analysis. These checkpoints during the analysis process were conducted in order to help me understand and capture the discursive spaces in which my participants live.

Gardner (2017) writes of power existing in two discursive spaces: the choice of an identity label and the label itself. They claim that the power of identity labels can manifest within “the religious context that calls them into being, reproducing sexual oppression and marginality” (p. 33). Taking into account the previous literature describing the identity and communicative phenomenon Christian feminists take part in, I conducted this research to uncover hidden narratives and give voice to what is often socially silenced.

Chapter Four: Communication Layers

The fifteen individuals who identified as “Christian” (Evangelical and/or Midwestern Protestant) and “feminist” used other labels as well. Fourteen individuals identified as “female” while one individual identified as “male.” Sexuality became a component of their identity as six of the fifteen individuals identified as “LGBTQ allies” and two of the six “LGBTQ allies” openly identified as “queer.” These supplementary labels orchestrated how these Christian feminists described their own identity and how they communicated it in various settings.

From the coding process, I identified communicative structures surrounding the four layers of identity communication, subthemes within each layer, identity gaps experienced, and lastly how Christian feminists attempt to discursively bridge such gaps. In the following section, I expand on how Christian feminists communicate their identities with the four layers theorized in Hecht’s (1993) CTI, consisting of the personal, enactment, relational, and communal layer.

Personal

In the personal layer, individuals communicate their identities in an intrapersonal and self-persuasive fashion (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014; Hecht, 1993). Three ‘personal’ themes were coded from the narratives of the fifteen Christian feminists. They described how they define their advocacy identity; how they redefine stereotypical “roles”—whether it be their own role or others’ roles; and how they perceive their identity as a “journey.”

Personal Definition of Advocacy Identity

When asked about their sense of their dual identity and what it means to them, many participants described how they use their identity as a reminder to advocate for their beliefs. Barbara, Marsha, Sally, Tokyo, Jackie, and Shae all described their identity as a reminder to advocate for marginalized individuals. Tokyo stated, “[my identity] it just means to me that I am

for women and that I support women.” Shae described how when she sees situations in the Christian church “that [are] minimizing women or people of color, it doesn’t sit well with me.”

Jackie and Sally described how their identity helps them advocate and empower LGBTQ identities. When describing her involvement at her UCU’s theatre program, Jackie stated:

I feel like everything that I was involved in, even with roles in the theater program, I always pushed the gender. I was always a little, there was always something just different, like me being androgynous *Cat in the Hat* or me literally playing a man married to a woman and being so comfortable like I think it’s always been a little obvious that I’m very passionate about, you know, feminist beliefs and ideas and equality for people that are queer.

Many participants discussed how their advocacy identity comes naturally from what they believe spiritually. Irene talked about how everything she does in life comes out of both aspects of her identity: “I believe if you’re a Christian and you truly say you’re a Christian, everything has to come out from it.” Jessie referenced the famous Christian “calling” as part of his advocacy when he stated:

As a Christ follower, I am called to love everybody, and I think most people can agree that the suppression of women and even just the suppression of any minority is not equivalent to love... what my calling is within this faith and I think feminism has everything to do with that. Because really, you [are] trying to restore equality to God’s creation.

Along with his belief in a calling to love everyone, Jessie also commented on his need to address the patriarchy as a male. He reasoned, “It would be silly for me to deny that there is a patriarchy. There obviously is one and knowing that there is one, it would be sinful for me to ignore that.”

With their spiritual feminist identity, several participants described how their sense of Christianity enhances and strengthens their sense of feminism. Nicole described how her Christian religious beliefs “gives a lot of compassion” to her feminist advocacy, and how each side of her identity aids her:

I think the Christianity helmet helps it become more of a softer feminism that allows me to be more understanding and forgiving. And vice versa, when I see Christians who hold their anti-feminism values, my feminism gives me language to say why that’s problematic.

When describing her pursuit of her dream job of working to parole underage sexual crimes and pornography, Rebecca recounted a story where she spoke with several community members and told them:

That I wanted to do that because God teaches us about our worth and about like how we should treat others and just kind of talking about my reasons for leaning to God behind why I wanted to do that.

Several of the participants saw their personal identity as a means for standing up for themselves. Ada stated her realization that she could “stand up for myself and I have value and it, being a feminist, makes me question things.” Jackie described her identity as “an opportunity to not be so close minded” and as “exciting” when she stated:

It excites me that there’s so much going on in a good way. That there’s so many different ways that I view the world and like view the fact that I’m a Christian, but also that I identify as feminist and that I identify as a queer person, it’s exciting because it changes the way that I interact with everything.

In addition to using their personal identity to advocate for themselves, they also see themselves as advocating for their identity in and of itself. Barbara described using her voice and:

Wanting to show my friends and my peers and whoever else who didn't necessarily identify or didn't at all identify with being a Christian or a feminist. And I line my approach along that and to—again—be like a voice of love and understanding regardless of religious background or Christian background because there's a lot of preconceived thoughts about that as well.

Julia also stated, "it makes me want to share [my identity] with other people." Interestingly, one participant used evangelical-based language to describe her identity advocacy. Arielle stated she likes "to evangelize feminism to other people" because she wants "to convert people or bring them a better understanding of what it means," and as a Christian, she stated she wants "to do that in love."

Redefining of "Roles"

Beyond how the participants define their advocacy identities, Christian feminists also spoke about the typical personal "roles" that individuals are prescribed to take on in the religious sector. However, by acknowledging these "roles" and thinking about their advocacy and dual identities, Christian feminists help redefine these stereotypical "roles." For example, Nicole stated that by "understanding I don't have to fit into this role, [it] has given me so much more freedom."

Participants described how they redefine roles that are typically placed on the distinctions between men and women. Jessie stated that his "role" as a male is "to serve our fellow humanity" which positions the male in the often patriarchal women's "role." Within the church

specifically, Marsha explained how she is currently running for elder board as a female. She described her choice to run by saying:

I met with the elders to discuss um running for elder for our church for next year... I have been processing such as, is it time for me to step into that role? God has given me a voice and given me a vision. I feel that our Trinitarian God does not have a sex.

Irene also brought up women “roles” in the church when she discussed how her identity pushes her to “approach how I walk as a woman in the world” because “even [in] a lot of churches, women don’t hold leadership positions.” After attending a mutually-based church during her years at a UCU, Irene realized “that a lot of the beliefs that I held were just cultural, they weren’t necessarily scripture-based.” The patriarchal Church’s rhetoric of feminine and masculine “roles” were often discussed by the participants. Eli opened up by saying, “there’s a lot of um damaging rhetoric in Christian circles about what it means to be a woman and what it does not mean to be a woman.” Eli further described how the feminine “role” prescribed by the church is like a “cookie-cutter” by stating:

Like you’re either that type of woman like the picture in my head that is in a jean jumper at the church potluck who brings the perfect casserole. Like she was the kind of woman that every woman should want to be, and if you weren’t, you weren’t a good enough woman. Unless you’re the kind [of woman] who can bring a casserole, stay before and after to clean up and tear down, like your femininity is not acceptable. But there are so many different ways of expressing femininity. It’s chaotic. It’s messy. It’s powerful. It’s beautiful. It’s sensual. None of that is acceptable. That’s all vixen or witch material and completely off the table for most evangelicals.

Even outside of the church, participants explained how they redefined “roles” in their day-to-day work. Rebecca described how her criminal justice job positions her to hold men accountable for their mistakes. When describing how she feels as a female paroling men’s sex-based crimes, she stated:

I primarily work with people who have offenses for child pornography and believe it or not, that’s a lot of pastors and men in the church who have that. So now, like in my convicting them of their sins, but I’m also a woman trying to talk to them about their sexual sins and getting them charged with things.

Not only does Rebecca’s job provide her agency to parole men, but many of the men she ends up fining are men of faith in her community not being able to hide behind their gender and religious stature. Tokyo explained how she perceives her personal identity as redefining the “roles” of stay-at-home parents. As an ‘American housewife with two kids’ she stated she doesn’t feel that her image “hurts or hinders” her but rather, “it opens the conversation to other moms how their feminism plays into their roles as wives and mothers.”

Interestingly, Christian feminists’ redefining of “roles” did not only pertain to their own roles in life. Four of the participants redefined Jesus’ role in the Holy Bible as that of a feminist. Arielle, Nicole, Phoebe, and Tokyo all claimed that he was “countercultural.” Phoebe described:

Jesus radically went against what was happening in the context of biblical times and the trajectory that he was pushing the culture towards was a very radical one that was very empowering to women. And kind of like goes against the cultural grain of like this is how women should be treated and we see that throughout the Bible and how he treats women.

Tokyo justified Jesus' role as a feminist by explaining how "he hung out with like prostitutes and he supported women and like um the woman at the well."⁹ Arielle posed the question, "Jesus was a feminist. Why aren't we all feminists in the church?" These participants discussed the ways in which they interpreted Jesus Christ's role in biblical passages as one of a social justice advocate.

Marsha and Ada discussed how pronouns for God are often masculine. Marsha stated, "There are over 150 names for God in the Bible. We tend to land on ['father'] a lot. And none of them ever give the full picture of God." Ada opened up the interview by describing how her feminism has allowed her to question the often-used male pronouns for God and "what does that mean for me as a woman in light of having a divine figure that is viewed as male or supposedly male?" Ada went on to say, "I refer to God as a 'She' a lot of times now."

Identity is a "Journey"

Lastly, Christian feminists communicated their dual identity to themselves as a "journey." Many participants described the journey of coming to know themselves in their dual identity as a "process of understanding" as well. Viewing their identity as a process or journey to a common goal displays the similar rhetorical ambitions of both the feminist movement and the gospel coalition (Hunt, 2004). Eli, Irene, Nicole, and Tokyo all discussed the process of coming into their own identity, which Tokyo described as "not this linear progression of like this is how my feminist Christianity looks forever." She continued by stating, "you could ask me the same question in a year, and it could look totally different with how it impacts me." Phoebe compared the journey and process of understanding her own identity and sense of advocacy as a "roller coaster" and Nicole stated the process is "more difficult in some circles but easier in other

⁹ The book of John, chapter 4 of the Bible tells a story of Jesus having a conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well even though "Jews do not associate with Samaritans" (New International Version, para 4).

circles,” hinting towards the ease of accepting the process in some social settings but harder in others.

Many participants described the journey as self-empowering. Marsha described how her anxious energy within the church resulted from being a woman. She stated:

“I had sort of an agenda and was a little militant maybe... [laughs]... God gave me a picture in my mind that allows me to embrace the path and relax. Feminism is right! Christian feminism is right! But I feel like my thrust is gentler and different and it’s like, instead of coming in with [slams hand] my prepared speech and my bullet points and my scriptures to support. I feel like, now I’m coming in as this gentle illumination that’s gonna be like the dawn. I feel like God has slowly revealed to me over across time. This is what he has built me for. This is what he has designed me for. This is the path I’m to walk. And he just shows me one step at a time, and I feel like now I’m ready to take the next step.

Barbara also commented on how her identity has made her bolder in who she is. She stated she can now walk into a room instead of “shying away” and claimed, “No, this is me, this is who I am, and I can fit under like Christian and feminist. It doesn’t have to be mutually exclusive.”

Arielle described her identity process as one of growth where she can, “view myself as a more courageous person than I was definitely at the beginning of coming into college.”

Important to note, many of the participants described their current state of identity as still on a “journey.” Barbara, Eli, Irene, Nicole, and Tokyo explicitly discussed how they are “smackdab in the middle of it right now,” as Eli put it. Nicole described herself at a “crossroads” and Irene said she was not sure if she has “everything super clear.” Barbara stated that the uncertainty of her current dual identity “challeng[es] me to dive further into [the process].”

With their identities being thought of as a sense of advocacy, as “role” redefining, and as a “journey,” Christian feminists communicate their identities on an intrapersonal and self-communicative level. However, the personal layer does not account for how these participants thought of others’ perceptions of them and how they will initiate their identity in a social setting.

Enactment

In the enactment layer, participants disclosed how they present or perform their identity in social situations (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014; Hecht, 1993). The sub themes for enactment encompass their description of the performance of their identity, how they think others view them, and their discernment of others’ comfort levels when performing their identity.

Performance of Identity

In participants’ enactments of their identities, there was a focus on both their language and non-verbal behaviors and the conversations in which they performed their identities. Tokyo described how, as a stay-at-home partner, she doesn’t “necessarily have a platform of...being an activist” but she does feel as if she “can use [her] Christian platform more to say, ‘this is why I believe in feminism.’” Shae described how—when entering conversations with other people—she never desires to be “a polarizing force” while Arielle stated, “I’ve learned to go into a conversation not like trying to argue with people or convince them, but just to listen and have the conversation.”

Within their conversations with others, the participants discussed how they determined both their language and their nonverbals as they presented themselves to others. When thinking about potential conversations—whether in person or via social media—Eli stated, “I have to decide how much of which identity to show when I’m speaking with them because it will affect

how well they will be able to hear what I am saying.” Similarly, Jackie described her conversational experiences while attending a UCU:

If I had known they were cool with feminism, I would let that part of myself shine through. If I knew they were not cool with feminism, I would not let that part be used, language that would be used, I pretended like I didn’t know what was going on. Just because I didn’t know how to deal with people being uncomfortable. But around people that I knew, who were feminists and happy to talk about those things, I was gung-ho, but around people who are not so comfortable, I would stifle it. Which they wouldn’t ask me to do that, I just kind of did that kind of subconsciously but also willingly.

Jessie described his prerogative during conversations was to choose language that would “[create] a safe space.” Tokyo stated her language regarding feminism was “a little bit softer of the more harsh protesting feminism, even though I feel that deeply.” In a different way, feminism had given Nicole “language for social justice.” She further stated, “feminism gave me that language to shift how I described my faith because my faith became so much more about social justice and equality.” Beyond the language used by these Christian feminists, several participants spoke of how they perform their identity with their actions. Arielle talked about how she is asked several times a week about her feminist identity while on a UCU campus. She stated this might be due to the fact that she carries “feminist” symbols everywhere. She stated:

I have like a feminist pin and an “Elect Women” pin on my backpack and I have my stickers here [held up phone case with two stickers. One said “Warren” and the other one said, “Women belong in the Senate and the House.”]. And [laughs] people are like “oh!” and then that opens up a conversation. So, I think I put it out there in like a physical way—my identity as a feminist. Which opens the conversation with people.

Marsha described how she longs for her non-verbal communication of her identity to be visible to others but does not intentionally proclaim that identity. She described her longing for her identity to “leak out of me as I live my life. I want people to know me first rather than my labels.”

However, there were several participants who experienced the performance of their identity somewhat negatively. For example, when describing her interactions with religious/complementarian individuals, Shae stated, “I kind of copped an attitude that communicated I didn’t want to be involved with those Christians.” When describing a similar situation of performance, Nicole said, “I’ve started avoiding them a little bit because [the conversations are] getting exhausting.” The enactment of their identity as either a Christian or a feminist was avoided due to the uncomfortable nature of and the work it took to navigate certain interactions.

The participants’ enactment of their identity was also influenced by how they perceived others view of them.

How Others View Them

When enacting their identity, the participants described how the other person in the conversation communicated their identity back to them. This involved two different types of perceptions: how Christians may view them and how feminists may view them. One main description for how Christians may view these feminist participants was “angry.” As Arielle recounted, ““Oh, you’re a feminist? You’re so angry.”” Irene described how she often hears ““feminists are just out to tear down men and society’ and were just ‘angry’ and ‘burning things all the time.’” Eli stated she thinks her family views feminists as “a bunch of selfish bitches who choose to do whatever they want.” Quite a few participants described a common Christian

perspective of feminism as women trying to overpower men. As Marsha stated, “a lot of people misunderstand feminism. A lot of them think it is militant or aggressive or ‘we need to get rid of men.’” Julia listed off attributes of what her Christian friends might think of feminists as “angry,” “crazy,” “abortion-loving,” and “[man-hating].” Seven other participants used these terms as well.

By contrast, these Christian feminists also indicated that feminists might also see the Christian side of their identity negatively. When interacting with non-religious feminists, Julia stated they, “see the identity of Christian and assume it’s like old fashioned and kind of like the *Little House on the Prairie* type of, you know, women should be good housewives and mothers.” Nicole described her fear of being taken less seriously as an academic or as a “less serious, thoughtful person because of my faith identity.” She said this might be “because...not everyone, but a lot of people would have this assumption if you believe in that, like what kind of intellectual thinker are you if you believe in this invisible god or whatever?” Rebecca described how she fears others’ judgement of her advocating for what she believes in by asking, “do they see me as less? Do they view me as a little girl playing dress up?”

Many of the participants commented on how others view their dual identity as non-functional. Tokyo stated this happens quite often since “both Christianity and feminism have good and bad reputations.” Nicole said many people have questioned her dual identity saying to her, “You can’t be both. If you wanna be Christian, you have to follow these tenets.” She said she keeps being told she is “not Christian enough.” Barbara called the query “How can you be feminist if you’re Christian?” a classic question followed by, “How can there be middle ground? Where is that?” Irene claimed many people ask these types of questions because, “they think feminism is a dirty word that they can’t be... they just are so scared of appearing like un-

Christian or like they just haven't ever had the chance to view those two things as going together." Julia said she struggles with constantly being asked such questions. She stated:

It's hard because something that I see as something that can make my faith deeper and positively influence my relationship with God and interact with my faith and the Bible, they see it as two things that cannot coexist in any form. Two things that are so opposite of each other that they completely cancel each other out.

The participants shared stories of how they experienced identity-based tensions because of how others may perceive them and view their dual identity. These specific stories will be covered in Identity Gaps. Beyond how they believed others viewed them, these Christian feminists also discussed ways in which they think about others' comfort levels prior to an interaction.

Comfort Levels of Others

When enacting their identity while talking to others, many of the participants indicated that they think of others' comfort before interacting and engaging their dual identity. Barbara described the comfort zone many individuals she interacts with have. She stated their goal is to "keep their norm and stay in their comfort zone and their bubble." Therefore, by performing her dual identity, she would "make waves, even if it was just little ripples." However, she stated, they may not "want to be pushed out of their comfort zone."

Most participants discussed how they engaged with others based on preconceived comfort levels to avoid conflict. In situations where she needs to be cognizant of both identities, Phoebe stated she remains more "quiet because I was not wanting to offend someone." Sally stated she is "more cautious of what I say to people who I know believe the opposite of what I

believe in just because I don't want to step over my boundary." Ada indicated that she self-monitors when using female pronouns for "God":

I have to be careful who I say "She" when I'm referring to God around because it will definitely rub people the wrong way and even still some people, when I say it, kind of the first time or even not the first time around them, they kind of recoil or raise their eyebrow, you know, kind of give me a weird look.

Irene stated that talking about these two aspects of her identity "just creates conflict and tension." Both she and Jackie called themselves "people pleasers" and "peacemakers," so to pointedly discuss their identities would be uncomfortable for both themselves and other people. Ada and Barbara described their analysis of others' comfort levels to be born from wanting to have relationship with others. Barbara stated she presents herself with a "softer approach" in order to "invite them into conversation and invite them into relationship, to participate in that, before having anything begin too brash that someone wouldn't want to engage in relationship with me." Ada indicates that she thinks of her students and their comfort levels in order to foster "a safe place for students who would identify as feminist and students who don't."

Before stepping into face-to-face interactions with others, the participants all recounted how they think about how they may perform their dual identity, how others might view them based on conceptions and stereotypes, and how comfortable they perceive others will be if they fully engage their own identity with them. Once these Christian feminists enacted their identity, they chose to move into various interpersonal contexts to try and relate to others.

Relational

In the relational layer, one's identity is constructed through negotiation during interactions with others. Through relational interaction, one's identity construction is impacted.

(Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014; Hecht, 1993) The participants experienced the construction of their relational identity in two primary ways: relational liberation and relational thwarting. When asked questions about conversations they have had with individuals such as family, friends, classmates, professors, and coworkers, participants recounted two types of narratives. In the first, they felt liberated in these relational settings to perform their identity freely and interact with the other's identity.

Relational Liberation

When recounting conversations participants had where their duality came into question, every participant recounted at least one conversation that fell within one category: liberation. Moments of liberation occurred when others were curious about the participants' identity, challenged them to grow in their identity, encouraged them to accept their identity, taught them of their identity, and were curious about them in conversations. Arielle spoke about her father who told her he didn't agree with her advocacy but said to her, "I can see your strength in this and your belief in justice and quality coming out and I'm proud of you." Julia explained that when she had first started her job, many of her coworkers knew she was a Christian, but during a lunch break, she also spoke freely about her social advocacy and feminist beliefs. She recounted how coworkers started asking questions such as "aren't Christians pretty strict and they don't let women preach and they're more archaic in their gender roles and stuff?" She described how their questions freed her up to share her advocacy identity with her coworkers. She told her coworkers about:

"How feminism can positively interact with my faith and allowing myself to be characterized as a daughter of God, child of God. Someone who is called up and called out and not just someone who's just gonna go to the side and always be silent."

Shae shared about the counseling she and her partner chose to go through after having their first child. She described how they used to not know quite how to support each other equally before counseling. But since, they have “talked a lot and renegotiated how to support each other’s passions but still prioritize our kids... So, we are trying to be more of partners than husband and wife.” Barbara explained how the people she surrounds herself with are “the people that want to walk with me and challenge me in both identities in the middle ground... whether they would agree with it or not, asking intentional questions, choosing to live life together.” Similarly, Irene described how such conversations with individuals who are curious and challenge her have “forced me to sit down and think about what do I believe?, and how do I move through the world?, and how do I relate to God and other people?” By understanding their passion and asking questions to challenge them with how they approach their advocacy, these Christian feminists felt encouraged in their relationships.

Another nuance of participants’ dual identity also was apparent. Many of the participants talked about individuals who let them be honest with where they are at in their identity “journey.” Sally told a story about her going to her religious boss when she was doubting her Christian identity and beliefs. After telling him about a turning point in her faith and her spiritual doubts, her boss responded with, “Yeah! I would question that too!” She described how others—like her boss—who knew of her struggles would “check up on” her and “invite me to their church...they like ask[ed] to hang out.” She said being with “people who are stronger in their faith” was beneficial to her. She described how she could “learn and grow and figure out exactly what I’m thinking instead of just being stagnant and just being like I don’t know.” Tokyo shared similar thoughts about surrounding herself with others who she can be vulnerable around

because they are supportive of her “journey.” Barbara described how conversations such as these support and encourage her. She stated:

When I’m mentally or verbally processing thoughts with them, that they draw me back to truth and to moment and to my beliefs and our shared beliefs of holding me accountable and reminding me of who I am and my values in a way that is not belittling or negating who I’ve grown into as the woman that I am today.

When thinking of how these relational moments of liberation arise, several participants described the positions of others as simply understanding. Marsha talked about several conversations with others she has had where they simply “have a dialogue about what’s good for the community or the university or a project in the community or for the poor.” In other conversations with several women of various faiths, Marsha stated she feels “a greater sense of peace when I talk. I don’t feel a need to defend.”

Nicole, Jackie, and Phoebe all described having roommates and friends while at their UCU who helped them engage with their dual identity. Nicole stated:

My best friend from college took the time to talk to me about things and she did so in such a loving way and in such a gentle way that it helped me be like, “huh, okay.” This idea of what feminisms is and all of that, like it was a big shift in my identity, but it happened so progressively.

Phoebe described how the relationship was natural between her and her friend saying, “we listen a lot to each other because she was definitely passionate about women being allowed a space on the evangelical campus.” During our interview, Jackie said one of the best things a friend from her UCU told her when she was struggling with reconciling the aspects of her identity was “living a life that’s not your life is one of the saddest things a person can do.” She told me her

friend's response was one of the "best things that anyone has ever told me when it comes to who I identify as."

Relational Thwarting

While all the participants had encouraging stories that indicated liberating relationships with others, many participants also included narratives describing how their interactions with others thwarted their relational growth and identity understanding. The relational inhibitions were caused by conversations being shut down or avoided, the participants' character being doubted, bad advice being given to the participants, and stereotyping.

Jessie stated how he finds religious individuals "push against feminism." In the conversations he has attempted with them, he said, "they definitely push back in those conversations and they're really short conversations." Tokyo also described trying to engage in conversations where the other people "push back." She described their defensiveness if they disagree or they think it's wrong or flat-out wrong" as "abrasive" and causing "me to shut down in conversations." Nicole stated she has experienced similar conversations so often that she "avoid[s] conversations with Christians who aren't feminists." After this statement, Nicole added, "That's probably bad of me, but I found myself removing myself more from that realm. I think because I don't feel as heard on that side of things. People are very defensive of their faith and their Bible." Ada described how in such instances where her relational partner is not being supportive, she feels others "not giving me space to explain or not giving the space to say, "yeah I don't actually know what I think about that right now."" She guessed that others' move to shut down such conversations is born from a myriad of reasons. She stated:

[They're] just assuming that all people who use the feminist [label] are using it in the same way and that it means the same thing for everybody and then [they are] not . . .

willing to sit through the conversation of nuance or maybe the uncomfortability of having your mind change or just being like slightly corrected in what their assumptions were.

Arielle shared an instance where her professional relationship with a professor was thwarted. After she mentioned the importance of the women's movement in the 60s, he sent her an email with links to conservative commentaries on women's liberation with a response, "I think you'd be wise to read these' and then signed his name." Arielle described how his email made her feel that he was "just saying like 'nope, you're wrong. Submit to your husband.' And there was no room for nuance or discussion just saying you can only be a Christian..."

Beyond conversations being shut down or avoided, participants also shared insight as to how others had communicated doubt in response to their advocacy identities. Julia and Barbara both recounted that when talking to their parents, they each felt their parents pushed back, Barbara's father believed that she was "probably just going off of something you heard someone say because that's not your voice essentially." Julia's mother expressed that Julia didn't fully understand what "feminism" truly means.

Sally described an upsetting encounter. She was questioning her faith after a hard experience, and then visited her parents and tried to explain to them what she felt after everything that had happened. She said her mom asked:

"Well, like what do you believe?" and I was like "I don't know if there is a God. I don't know what to believe." And she was like "How do you not believe? How dare you?" And I was completely turned off of ever talking to my parents or anyone in my family about that.

Eli described how her father-in-law started communicating that he doubted her character when she decided to go back to school. She stated:

I started going to grad school and he stopped speaking to me. The only thing he has said to me is “I have a friend who got his PhD and regretted it because he couldn’t spend time with his family.” And he said, “women should be at home with their kids.”

While some participants had others question their character and choice of advocacy for self and others, several of the participants told stories of relationships where the other attempted to share advice to help them. However, the advice turned sour and resulted in relational turmoil. During our interview, Eli discussed her divorce and how she and her husband’s marriage had started to deteriorate. She described how their sexual relationship as a married couple was thwarted when they both started to recognize the trauma that their complementarian pre-marital counseling had caused them. Eli stated that right before the wedding, she was questioning her decision to go through with it. She sought advice from a book in which the author’s primary premise “was ‘have sex with your husband and give him whatever he wants, and you’ll be a happy wife.’” Eli chuckled in disbelief and then stated:

I took her advice and wondered why I had so much trauma five years later from sex with my husband. Because I had literally accepted and enabled him to use my body instead of engaging with me in an intimate way and a loving way. I had essentially said, “Here’s my body. You can do whatever the fuck you want with it.” Then yeah. I dealt with a lot of trauma.

She went on to describe how her ex-husband has also had to deal with the consequences of the advice they were both given. She said, “if he would have had different advice, or a wife that was not so intent on doing it that way, it just [created] so much damage on a relational level.”

Another story was shared about bad advice being given to a participant. When Jackie was an undergraduate at her UCU, she met with one of the school’s alumni award recipients. They

were discussing identity labels such as “feminist” and “queer” when Jackie said the alumni asked:

Why tell everybody you’re a feminist? You don’t need to tell people you’re gay, you don’t need to tell anyone you’re a feminist. Like just keep it to yourself. Because the risk is that you make everyone around you uncomfortable and it’s no reason to make people uncomfortable.

Jackie explained how their conversation baffled her. Jackie described how she tries to stand up for herself and explain why she wears her labels with pride, but then most of the older alumni from her UCU respond with “Why bring it up? Why make people uncomfy? Just be who you are and that’s fine, but you don’t have to celebrate it.” Later in the interview, Jackie said it took some time during undergrad to find friends who could openly celebrate her labels alongside her, but for a while, she felt she had to hide herself.

Lastly, many participants recounted stories where—while trying to live, work, and communicate with others—their relationships “hit a wall” when the other person responded to them with female-stereotyping. Phoebe shared a story about mentioning to a Bible professor that she was feeling better due to starting anxiety medication. She said his immediate response was ““Oh? I wonder how that will affect your ability to bare children?”” She described how she didn’t know how to respond since his question was “very subtle and very micro-aggressive.”

Rebecca said she remembered telling a friend that she did not know if she ever wanted to have children of her own. Her friend asked her, ““Well, have you prayed to the Lord that He would give you the desire?”” Rebecca laughed and said, ““No, because I don’t want [that desire].”” Rebecca said this type of relational communication has happened more than once. She paused and said:

Why would I pray for that if I don't want that desire? Usually people just think it's funny when guys don't know what to do with babies, but then with a girl, they're like praying the demon out of me when I don't want to hold a baby.

Marsha indicated that she had felt relationally frustrated with an older man in her church. The two of them had decided to co-lead the adult Sunday school. However, she had realized she was double booked Sunday mornings and had to lead a section of the children's Sunday school at the same time. She told him, "Well, I have to teach Sunday school, so for the next four months I'm gonna be back in the hall doing Sunday school." Marsha further explained that he responded by saying they could prepare together, but then he would lead the adult service while she would be in back with the kids during their own service. She suggested they switch roles every other week, so that they could both lead the adult service and help with the children's service. However, he said he would ask his wife to step in for him with the children's service. Marsha stated:

I'm like, okay we still have this mental attitude with some of the member, the male members of our congregation and have some kind of role and gender identity. He called it "co-leading" up until the point where we were gonna switch roles and actually be equal and then there was a boundary suddenly.

Within the participants' stories of how various relationships impacted the communication of their identity, it is easy to see how the relationships either thrived in a liberating sense, or ultimately faced obstruction. In these interpersonal layers of communication, the participants were able to describe how their dual identity was communicated on the relational layer.

Communal

In the fourth and final layer of identity communication, one's identity is constructed via relationship with larger groups or cultures. In this layer, individuals must interact in a larger

context with a constructed culture (Beckner & Record, 2016). Three main communities or cultural groups were derived from the data: the nonreligious/feminist culture, the religious/complementarian (soft-patriarchal or hard patriarchal) culture, and the Christian feminist community.

Nonreligious/Feminist

When participants were asked how they engage in larger groups and the impact of those groups on their sense of self, five of them discussed how they communicate their identity in a larger nonreligious feminist environment. For example, Rebecca mentioned interacting with her aunt and her aunt's friends. Rebecca stated it is hard to bring up her faith within her feminism with them because there is "so much emotion behind the impression that Christianity causes." Rebecca's narrative displays the common component within religious identities and the positive and negative emotional weight they carry. With the emotions that a Christian identity can cause in group communication, Jackie and Phoebe both described how they feel more comfortable communicating their dual identity with nonreligious feminists than Christians who are non-feminist. Jackie stated:

The amount of feminists that I feel more comfortable around [is] so much greater than the list of Christians that I feel comfortable around. Which is very sad. One. But two, very interesting. I wonder why that is? Why do I feel more comfortable knowing that someone is a feminist? I just feel like there's a greater chance that they won't judge me.

Phoebe also commented on how she feels different in a non-religious feminist setting. Phoebe described her non-religious feminist friends as "understanding" since "a lot of those people have been religious at one point or another in their lives, so I think they understand there is a journey and there's more nuance to it than what a lot of people realize."

Beyond feeling more comfortable in a non-religious feminist environment when compared to a religious/complementarian environment, several of the participants also described how they enjoy being an individual who can bring their faith into the conversation. Nicole and Julia both stated they like being able to talk about their dual identity. Nicole explained, “I’m able to approach with “I’m a feminist too, but I still believe in the Bible.” Julia discussed how she chooses to walk into conversation with nonreligious feminists and taking a more “active roll rather than what they kind of assume that women in Christian circles are taking...the passive roll.” These two participants described how they choose to step into the non-religious feminist community with their dual identity motivations.

During her interview, Phoebe described her struggles with communicating her dual identity in a non-religious feminist space. She explained how she does not quite understand the disconnect many religious individuals have with feminism and many feminists have with religion. She stated it is hard for her to understand how individuals without religious faith “would operate.” She explained this further by saying:

I think of even like Muslim feminists in my community and how it’s important to them to cling to their faith in order to get through hardship and get through trials. And so, it’s hard for me to...see how people could go through...that type of like those struggles and not have something to cling to...

Within the non-religious feminist communities, these five participants disclosed the various ways they choose to communicate their dual identity and the ways they may also question a community that does not always view the duality of their identities as fluid.

Religious/Complementarian

In all fifteen interviews, participant discussed how they view their interactions within a religious and complementarian environment. From the interviews, I coded three main environments: Church, UCU Campus, and religious ideology. Seven of the interviewees spoke about their church experiences, another set of seven interviewees referred to their experiences on a UCU campus, and six of the interviewees described the religious and group ideology they grew up, and continue to interact, within.

When thinking about her religious and complementarian exposure, Arielle described how her church experiences have been one of the reasons why she keeps choosing to engage her feminist identity. She explained how in church, “we always talked about ‘oh you know you’re valued because you’re a child of god,’ uh ‘you’re valuable because Jesus died for your sins.’” This group talk was confusing, she said, when paired with how the church functions since “at the same time, in the church—especially in the church that I grew up in—like women aren’t even allowed to pass the offering or be ushers.” Jackie described the church she grew up in similarly, a place “where the women don’t speak up.” She further explained, “the only thing [women] did was play the organ or play the piano or like sing. But we weren’t involved in anything else at all. We weren’t allowed to be. We couldn’t teach. We couldn’t lead.” She said this led her to grow up within a cultural assumption that “you’re supposed to just accept what the church men tell you.” Sally described how her ideology was shaped by her conservative church: “women in the church belong in the pews and not like on stage and leading or anything like that.” Rebecca and Eli both described how growing up in a conservative church caused them to strive to be what Rebecca called “the ideal and perfect church girl.” Eli described her old church-member habits

as “a complementarian apologist.” She proceeded to list her identity markers saying, “I was a “waiting-not-dating¹⁰.” I wore t-shirts. I was the A+ purity girl with a purity ring.”

However, from growing up in a complementarian church culture and now pursuing churches they feel they can attend, several of the participants described ways in which they choose to communicate their dual identity and advocacy within the church walls. Jackie spoke of a church she had attended in which some members asked her to lead their worship band. However, the church leaders told her not to lead since she had come out as queer. Jackie stated she met with them and asked:

“So, you would rather have a man on the worship team that struggles with pornography lead worship than have a woman who’s having same-sex feelings but hasn’t acted on them? You would rather the man lead who’s addicted to porn, then have an honest person, an honest woman not lead?” and I said, “Do you think that’s fair?” and they said, “No, it’s not fair but it’s the way it is.”

In response to their judgement, Jackie said she stopped attending the church altogether. Not only did Jackie have to step down from the worship band, but also from the church community due to her identity not being accepted within the congregation.

Phoebe described how her dual identity has aided her in speaking up in her church. She said she grew up in a church culture where women were perceived to be equal to men and that has impacted how she and her husband find a church. After starting his MDiv¹¹, Phoebe’s husband had to think about the type of church he would be ordained into and if the congregation allows women to lead. Phoebe stated he transferred to a different program since “he would have

¹⁰ “Waiting-not-dating” in reference to Harris’ book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, which had become a purity “relationship Bible” (Martin, 2016). Harris coined the term to further his argument that couples should not date unless they aim to be married—by which they must court.

¹¹ Master of Divinity, a seminary graduate degree most denominations require of a speaker and/or pastor.

[had] to be accountable to the people in that denomination and I would have [had] to be too even though they are not allowing me that leadership title.” Phoebe said that initial process in their church search and his studies has allowed her to start larger conversations with people within the current denomination they serve. She discussed how she meets with the leaders of the church to talk “about whether our church is going to be quiet... or is our church basically going to speak about larger issues of #metoo and #churchtoo.”

Outside of the church and specifically within UCU campuses, several of the participants recounted instances where they attempted to communicate their dual identity. Ada and Shae, UCU graduates and now employees within other UCUs, both discussed how their dual identity comes into play when interacting with coworkers or students on campus. Ada described how she has to watch her language when she talks about feminist advocacy while Shae stated she speaks freely about her feminist beliefs but consequently feels “like an outsider in the more conservative church groups surrounding UCU where I attended school and then now working there, I think I’ve always just felt like not part of the club necessarily.” She also described the tension she feels working for a Christian organization that she assumed would be “family-focused,” but in which she struggles to find agency as a “young mother in the workforce” who is “trying to balance family and being a working woman and working mother.” For example, right after Shae gave birth, a female coworker shut down her conversation regarding female agency and empowerment in the office:

I would be talking to another coworker who was a mother. And we talk about the reproductive system and we work in a science building so the talk is often about the reproductive system in that context, reproduction, and birth and all that kind of stuff and being chewed out by this other girl who didn’t like us talking about birth because it’s a

sexual thing for her and it's shameful and so we can't talk about it in the office...Because of all that and how frustrating it was for me to see someone who's a Christian and is supposed to be this loving person, making birth a shameful thing when it's how God made us reproduce. It's not shameful, it's not dirty, it's beautiful.

From all her past work experiences, Shae stated she feels “a lot more judgement and disdain coming from the Christian group than I ever had from another group.”

Nicole described how she had to change her language on a UCU campus. She claimed that underclassman on the campus would not be receptive unless she framed her feminist identity “as testimony like, ‘this is my testimony and I think this is how God has shown me love’ or whatever.” Tokyo and Arielle also stated that the language of feminism and the term “feminist” were often dismissed. For example, she attended a UCU during the 2019-2020 Democratic primary campaigns. At this time Elizabeth Warren and Amy Klobuchar were given the debate question, “Can a woman beat Donald Trump?” (Stewart, 2020). Arielle said that the questions permeating campus tended to be “Should a woman be president? Should women be in politics? Should women have a place inside the church?” When classmates of hers think through these questions, she says they often say, “Oh, I think men and women should be equal, but I don't believe in feminism.” In response to classmates and professors' attitudes on feminism, Arielle says she chooses to “scale back the feminism a little bit more than I would normally” depending on her interactions. Jessie described similar tensions when interacting on his UCU campus since “being on a conservative campus, there's a lot of clashing with beliefs.”

Several participants discussed how individuals who influenced and shaped campus attitudes impacted how they communicated their identity and beliefs. Phoebe recalled a Bible class she took where she brought up feminism and its spiritual roots. The professor reacted

saying, “This is the world taking over. That they think that women should have the right to kill a baby?” Phoebe stated how silenced she felt in the class as the professor’s approach and lecture “felt very impersonal and it was all, like everyone that carried this identity was lumped into one category.”

Marsha told a story of when she ran for vice president of student government. She stated no one was on the ticket for president meaning by the end of the voting process, she would be president of her UCU’s student government. However, campus reacted when they discovered this. She recounted:

The day of the vote, people were panicking and freaking out because that meant that there was no president—meaning I would be president. And they couldn’t have a woman be the president of a student government! They were so riled that they went around campus, this particular posse of, I’m gonna say guys, to find a man to take that role. And literally, at the place where we were to cast our ballots right before the voting opened, they brought him in and introduced him to everybody and put him on the ballot as president. And he won. He was president, I was vice president.

Irene also described a campus academic climate that stilled any opportunities for students to witness the empowerment of women’s liberation and leadership. When she was in a history class and learning about the 1960s, the students read from text that highlighted Phyllis Schlafly¹² as being “held up as this hero and just this kind of crusader as this dark force that like the feminist movement was and held up as literally a hero of the faith.” Irene stated after graduating she watched a documentary about the women’s liberation movement realized how the curriculum has presented only one side. She said Schlafly “was just held up as this hero and [we] didn’t really

¹² Phyllis Schlafly was a founder of the pro-family movement and the organization Eagle Forum and was known as an “opponent of the radical feminist movement” (Eagle Forum, para 1).

discuss the legitimacy about the fact that there were terrible things going on in the 60s for women.” Irene described how being at a UCU placed her under “pressure that the ‘other side’ is so bad.” She stated how the feminist movement was “demonized” and she rarely felt classmates would “even stop to listen. They just shut down and silence it.”

Beyond the physical settings of church and UCU campuses, Participants also recounted ways they tried to communicate their identity while interacting within religious settings in general. Barbara described these groups as “Christian bubble[s]” where “it can feel as though if you don’t fit the Christian mold, then you’re not wanted in the community.” Eli said within these groups she performed her dual identity and made “more people mad because my circle was mostly Christian.” Jessie described how he feels frustrated interacting with Christians who hold the Bible to such a high standard when “it’s written from like the perspective of the patriarchy of their cultures... There’s a lot of exclusion of women especially in the Old Testament.” He also described how many religious individuals have communicated to him:

“We’re not called to be feminist as Christians because the role [doesn’t align]”... and then they will go into the role of the wife and that the wife is supposed to be a servant to the husband and then they will validate that by saying the husband is supposed to be a servant to the wife.

Instead of recognizing how feminism could strengthen religious calling and relationships, Jessie discussed others’ argument for antifeminism as describing men already serving their wives through being leaders of the house. Julia, when describing similar reoccurrences within religious groups, claimed this ideology thrives due to “a lot of the thinkers and the preachers and the writers that we read are men and they kind of give that male-centric perspective.”

Shae shared how Christian rhetoric was manipulated to silence her agency. She stated:

I had an abusive boyfriend in high school who was a super-duper Christian and would use Bible verses to justify his behavior. So that was a situation where I was confronted with how wrong that can be and how poisonous Christianity can be to anyone but in particular women in situations where you are weaker physically.

Although many participants shared negative experiences in a religious environment, two participants shared positive attributes to growing in their dual identity while attending a UCU. Irene explained how, after hearing classmates and hallmates talk about their various religious and social beliefs, she realized “a lot of the views that I held currently did align with feminism.” Arielle described how she is grateful for the duality of her identity because “when people ask me about [feminism], they have a level of trust because we come from the same school and we come from the same faith. They are sort of open about it.”

Christian Feminist Community

The last subtheme from the participants’ interviews in which they discussed their communal communication of their dual identity focused on how they described their experiences in Christian feminist communities. Several of the participants described the Christian feminist community as a space for them to fully perform their dual identity. Ada and Jessie both called the community a “safe space” during our interviews. Jessie described when she is with other Christian feminists, “I do feel this sense of relief that it’s a safe space, that they’re friendly, and that they love unconditionally.” Nicole described the communal space with Christian feminists allowing her “to process” her advocacy and identity-based questions as a “breath of fresh air.”

With the larger context of Christian feminism allowing participants to experience a safe space, other participants described how they feel connected to and can trust others within the

community. Jackie stated she feels connected and non-judged. Julia described how she feels uplifted:

To be able to like come together as you know people who love Jesus and also want to give that agency and active role to women at the same time...but to be able to interact with other people, other Christian feminists who are living this out in their life is like a very powerful feeling. It makes you feel more connected and like you're part of a community. You're not the only one who thinks this way.

Marsha described being able to participate in a mutuality-based church with other Christian feminists. She stated, "I can trust the people in [the] church because they have good hearts. I can trust the men on the elder board that were advocating."

Phoebe stated she feels "hopeful" in these communities because "I feel very known and like heard when I'm in a room with someone else who understands that struggle...I'm not so hesitant to actually speak my mind because I feel like I can say something and not be judged."

Sally described the groups as "relatable" and then added "not perfection in the slightest but definitely relatable for sure."

Beyond feeling safe, connected to, and able to trust others, a significant theme derived from the participants' thoughts on their interactions within the Christian feminist community was the ability to speak freely. Ada stated, "having other women friends who have the same dual identity sharing like where they're at and what they believe and how they navigate those conversations and navigate those two identities and hold them both together" helps everyone in the community "understand why story is important." She said being able to talk about her experiences with gendered bias does not have to be defended with "why or how it relates or what's relevant about it." With Christian feminists, Ada stated, "they get it."

Eli said having conversations within the Christian feminist community have kept her “sane.” She explained:

We can talk to each other about the absolute nutso things that we have to encounter on a regular basis from Christians who think they got it together...we can come to each other with our questions about faith. We can keep each other hoping that the Creator is a dynamic being that doesn't fit in a box of maleness or logic.

Eli then added, “Honestly, I think the Christian feminists that I am friends with have kept me Christian.” Alongside Eli's experiences of redeeming her Christian aspect of her dual identity, Sally also commented on how conversations within the Christian feminist community have revived how she views her religious identity. From their “critical conversations,” they discuss the need for “women [of] faith who...want equality because, even in the Bible, the women are badass!” Rebecca described how she feels freer to question her faith and not feel as if “people are writing me off.” Tokyo discussed how she had never experienced such conversations growing up until she started taking part in Christian feminist communities. She explained how she never had “women to like converse with, in safe ways. So just that alone has been such a huge impact to me and like growing as a woman—not even just a feminist Christian, but as a woman in general.”

When asked what it feels like to meet fellow Christian feminists, Jackie compared it to how horses are stationed before a horse race. She explained:

All the horses have their own little gates. So, if I meet someone—whether I kind of know them or meeting them for the first time—it's kind of like the same track, like all the horses are on the same track there are just seven different lanes because there are seven different horses. But it's all the same track. If I meet somebody and they say “yeah, I

identify as feminist!” or “yeah, I identify as queer!”, “yeah, I identify as a Christian!”, every time you can like bullseye one of those identities where you share an identify, one of the horse gates opens and like then there’s so much more room to talk and enjoy each other.

Within the communal layer, these Christian feminists described the ways in which they may feel restricted or even free to communicate their dual identity.

In response to RQ1 (How do Christian feminists communicate their identities on the personal layer, enactment layer, relational layer, and communal layer?), we see Christian feminists define their advocacy identity to themselves, redefine “roles,” and describe their dual identity as a “journey” within the personal layer. We understand more of how they aim to perform their identity, how they perceive others to view them, and their ways of thinking through the comfort levels of others before interacting during their enactment layer. On the relational layer, we see how Christian feminists’ identities impact their relationships where they can either feel liberated or thwarted. And lastly, we understand more of how they communicate their identity in a communal layer when interacting with individuals who identify as either non-religious feminist or religious/complementarian. We also see how they freely communicate their identity within a Christian feminist community. After coding how the participants communicate their dual identities on the personal, enactment, relational, and communal layer, I also coded their interviews to examine what types of identity gaps they experienced. In the next chapter of results, I uncover identity gaps and how the participants discursively bridge the identity gaps that they experience.

Chapter Five: Gaps and Bridges

Although participants were not asked for specific gaps they may have experienced between the various layers through which they communicate their identity, many of their stories reveal that identity gaps were being experienced. To fully understand what identity gaps within CTI display, a perspective into how gaps exist and may persist must be provided. From CTI literature, it can be understood from a visual perspective. If CTI layers display a continuous communication of identity in various settings, it might look like an ongoing staircase where each step leads to a different layer. With our constant communication of our identities, we may not always notice our stepping from one layer to the next. However, when we experience a moment of doubt, tension, or discomfort forcing us to reevaluate how to communicate our identities, we experience a theorized gap (Hecht, 1993).

When one's way of communicating their identity on one layer cannot be used similarly on another layer—whether needing to use new language or description—their step from one layer to the next is not as flawless. In order to cross the gap between the layers (staircase steps), one must build a bridge to easily cross. The building of the bridge is an act of discursively negotiating in order to cross the gap. Once all interviews were coded for themes resulting within the four layers of communicating one's identity following Hecht's (1993) CTI, the participants' interviews were coded once again to identify any gaps they may experience between the different layers and how they choose to discursively bridge those gaps.

Identity Gaps

From the identity gap coding, I discovered the participants experienced three different types of identity gaps. All three gaps resulted from how these Christian feminists communicated their identity to themselves on the personal layer. The gaps existed between their personal and

communal layers; their personal and relational layers; and between their personal, enactment, and relational layers.

Personal/Communal Gap

Of the fifteen interviews, eleven of the participants experienced a gap between how they communicated their identity to themselves and then how they communicated their identity within a larger community or environment. Ada explained how she sees a communal gap with religious non-feminists when they communicate their belief that “men and women are equal in God’s eyes and we’re all made in God’s image” while also not proclaiming themselves “feminist or promoting feminism.” Ada described the tension she experiences when interacting with groups who cannot resolve the two types of advocacy and how “my internal world has dissonance.”

Arielle described how the rhetoric of the church she grew up in “was so subtly anti-feminist that for a while it was seeming like I cannot be a feminist and cannot be a Christian at the same time.” By not outright stating they believe in an anti-feminist doctrine, Arielle was unable to detect the inequality within her church for a while. She stated that anytime she visits her old church, she starts to experience a similar gap. Nicole also stated she feels a gap when she visits her parents’ church. She thinks to herself, “Wow, I’ve come so far away from that understanding of Christianity, but I still am a Christian and what does that mean?” Nicole explained she still struggles to find a church community into which she can bring her dual identity. Similarly, Eli also described her identity gap as “cognitive dissonance” that is experienced when she recognized how much she has “internalized” the belief that “feminism and Christianity were fundamentally opposed.” She illustrated this gap by describing her efforts as a “detangle[ing]” of competing ideologies. In order to detangle, Eli stated:

I've had to process a lot of visceral anger for the ways I realized I have been jipped. And not just jipped, but damaged and harmed. Some of these very anti-woman [ideologies] disguised as doctrine but what amounts to be anti-woman ideas and practices [takes a deep breath] ...it has been affecting me and other women.

Irene discussed how hard it is for her to perform one part of her identity in a specific environment when people in religious/complementarian environments or non-religious feminist environments "only [see] the wild crazy version that's on the media." She stated, "It's hard to look at feminism and explain how that can align...because the truth of it is sometimes misconstrued." Julia claimed this group ideology is caused by "people just overgeneraliz[ing] things or paint[ing] too broad of a brush."

Within the rigid spectrum of religious doctrine, Marsha described how hard it is for her sometimes to forgive Christians for their anti-feminism when a major tenet of her own dual identity is that of forgiveness. She explained, "Christians are harder to work with because they are so black and white in their thinking and very narrow-minded. And so, it is very difficult to forgive a Christian over forgiving people in the community that are not Christian." Julia discussed how reading the Bible or listening to sermons causes her to disconnect because of the overuse of male pronouns. Rebecca described how every time she goes to a new church, hoping to find one that will let her have agency as a single female, they welcome her with "'Oh, you're a single girl! Do you want to help in the nursery or like children's ministries?'" and those are the only two options I feel like I have." Rebecca disclosed how often she struggles to perform her identity on both layers. She stated, "I would [communicate] my true self outside of church but then on Sundays I still feel like the need to look pretty and look perfect and act all polite and everything at church and stuff like that."

Within a UCU environment, several participants also brought up how they disconnected their personal communication from their communal communication. Nicole described how she is told she is not “Christian enough” when she advocates for “people of other identities” and cares “that women...and people of color are heard.” Shae described how she internally shut down her advocacy when the UCU classes would discuss “subjects such as abortion or even just like waiting before you’re married to have sex.” She explained she did so because “It’s a lot of shame that ends up being on females in particular in those kinds of situations.” Shae further indicated she feels “uncomfortable” in her role as a working mother at the UCU she once attended:

It’s an uncomfortable place to sit in. Motherhood: working as a mother is an uncomfortable place to sit in because you don’t really have a category to sit in... it’s an uncomfortable place to be. I feel like kinda in-between these two worlds and I think a lot of things in life as I get older, I feel like there is always this nebulous in-between. Things are rarely black and white.

Tokyo discussed how it took her awhile to be able to communicate her two identities in both settings since “they felt very separate.”

While interacting in a non-religious feminist environment, several participants described their inability to successfully communicate their dual identities between themselves and the larger context and group. Nicole described how being in graduate studies made her tone down her religious identity:

I don’t want to be taken as a less serious academic or a less serious thoughtful person because of my faith identity because I feel like, not everyone, but a lot of people would have this assumption if you believe in that, like what kind of intellectual thinker are you if you believe in this invisible god or whatever.

Phoebe told a story of being at a Women's March and being surrounded by feminists who were "largely pissed off at religious institutions." Phoebe described how she agreed with them initially: "I completely agree with all of this. I agree that religious institutions should not be trying to take our freedom." However, she stayed silent. Phoebe expressed, "my silence in that moment was me suppressing my identity as a Christian because I could have said, "I think there's a better way the Church needs to be talking about this." But I was quiet." Shae described how hard it is to engage a Christian identity in this specific secular environment because "there's a whole spectrum of opinions."

Whether participating in a strictly religious/complementarian community or a non-religious feminist community, these Christian feminists did experience a gap in which their communication of their identity to themselves was different than how they communicate in a larger environment or community.

Personal/Relational Gap

The second identity gap identified was a gap between the participants' communication on a personal level to the communication of their identity within a relationship or interpersonal setting. Six of the fifteen participants' narratives reflected this particular personal/relational gap.

Marsha, after telling the story of the man in her church who refused to help serve in the children's Sunday school, stated he had told her he was both egalitarian and complementarian. Marsha said she communicated understanding but internally thought, "He's complementarian!" She described how she wanted to tell him, "No, you're not egalitarian if you're complementarian" and that he was acting in a "patriarchal" way.

Nicole described how she would have to change her language from her internal belief that she was fighting for "social justice" to a relational language of God's testimonial work in her life

in order to be received. Phoebe stated she feels she has to consistently suppress one part of her dual identity when interacting one-on-one with either religious individuals while attending a UCU or with feminist individuals in her graduate program. Sally described her frustration with herself for having “different personas.” She continued to say, “I hate it about myself, but I can like fake my religion.... when I’m like struggling I can still be like “Well, God loves you!” Even though that is something I’m struggling to believe myself.” Irene explained how she is often silent with her friends who are religious and non-feminist. She stated:

I look at the world differently than they do and it’s kind of hard to explain to them just because I think they are like me—they’ve had in their minds that the two could not coexist and that if you are a Christian, you have to look at verse like in Ephesians where it talks about a wife being submissive or whatever as proof that like [Christian feminism] isn’t true.

Arielle told a story that illustrated a visible struggle between her internal dual identity and that happened in a UCU classroom. She was in a Spanish class and was partners with a male classmate who had not studied his vocabulary. When she would remind him of a mistake he made, she stated he kept saying, “Oh you’re so much smarter than me. I’m so stupid” and “I shouldn’t have to do this part because you’re so much smarter than me.” Arielle explained how she would always respond with “Oh no, it’s okay. We are the same level of smartness,” even amongst varying levels of responsibility and motivation. However, her internal self-agency kept wanting to communicate to the male student, ““Thank you. You’re right’ and I can acknowledge my intelligence and hard work.” But Arielle did not communicate such since “what Christianity would say is, like build up the other person, but feminism tells me I have value and I was just not sure how to do both things.” These six participants all described situations where their self-

communication of their dual identity on their personal layer did not match their interpersonal communication on their relational layer.

Personal/Enactment/Relational Gap

In the third identity gap, four of the participants described situations where they experienced a gap in communicating their dual identity between three layers. First, they had to re-evaluate how they would normally communicate their personal identity to others through the enactment layer, which ended up being communicated different within the relational layer.

Nicole described how her dual identity and sense of advocacy would not always end up being communicated in her relationships because she would perceive the conversation as a difficult performance and start thinking of the (dis)comfort levels involved. She stated, “I’ve started avoiding them [these conversations] because they’re getting exhausting.” Ada described how before she has conversations, she asks herself, “Is this what I actually believe?” and finds ways to articulate her beliefs about her identity. Once she has the words to describe her own belief for herself, she thinks about how to communicate her identity to others by asking, “How can [we] hold these [two identities]? How can I hold being a Christian and being a feminist?” but when she enters the conversation, the other person immediately communicates, “those [identities] are mutually exclusive.”

Barbara described how she thinks of her Christian feminist identity but then perceives other individuals to attack her feminist ideology saying, “You’re not feminist enough.” However, when interacting with fellow Christians, she says they, instead of pinpointing her feminism, pick at her faith claiming, “You’re not biblically-based enough.” Barbara cannot quite trust how either her feminist or Christian friends will interact with her since they argue with “whatever tastes good to them.”

Much of Sally's communicative tension occurred within the gaps between her personal layer, enactment layer, and relational layer. She described how she personally does not always know how to communicate her spiritual beliefs—even to herself—but when she thinks of her family and religious friends, she knows they perceive her as “this huge Christian because one, I worked at a church camp, [and two,] I went to a Christian university. They think I'm a Jesus freak.” But when she tries to communicate her attempt to grow in her faith and feminism to her family, she “couldn't voice my opinions back at them.” The inability to express her confusion and the identity process she is currently on has “made my Christianity faith weaker.”

Identity gaps are more likely to occur when communication satisfaction, feelings of being understood and acknowledged, and perceptions of conversational appropriateness and effectiveness decrease (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon; Jung and Hecht, 2004). The examination of the tension between the different parts of Christian-Feminist identity allows us to answer RQ2 (What identity gaps do Christian feminists experience?). From the narratives of these fifteen Christian feminists, three main identity gaps persisted between their layers of identity communication: Personal/Communal, Personal/Relational, and Personal/Enactment/Relational. However, though the participants experienced these gaps, they also engaged in discursive strategies to “bridge” the gaps they experience.

Bridging the Gaps

From the data set, I coded ways by which the participants discursively attempted to bridge the identity gaps they experience when communicating their identities between the four layers. The bridges consisted of three different types of strategies: Acceptance of nuance, pursuance of conversation, and negotiation of identity.

Acceptance of Nuance

In this discursive strategy, the participants described how they continuously communicate to themselves that they are okay with taking on a nuanced identity. Ada described herself as being “okay” with how she chooses to “hold both” identities. She tells herself “I can live in the middle and live in the gray area and hold things that are sometimes seen to be opposites.” Arielle described how when she argued with her father, she explained to him:

There are parts of Christianity that you do agree with and theologies that you don’t agree [with]. And the same could be said with feminism. You don’t have to throw away all of Christianity because there are things you disagree with and you don’t have to throw away all of feminism because there are things you don’t agree with.

Irene explained how she does not let biblical interpretations tell her who she should be. She stated, “There are a lot of gray areas in the Bible. The Bible doesn’t say, ‘you should belong to a certain group.’ It’s not clear about a lot of things.” Rebecca and Julia both commented on how they choose to be okay with the nuances of “both identities and how they strengthen each other.”

Phoebe described how being okay with the nuance of her dual identity allowed her to not “being so afraid of offending people.” Tokyo stated how growing up in a conservative church and now attending a mutuality-based church has shown her “it doesn’t have to look a certain way.” She stated:

I think...the most important and best advice I’ve ever gotten is “take your time.” It doesn’t have to be so black and white in the beginning... I may not know the brand of what I am, but I know that I am a Christian feminist.

These particular participants relied on themselves to personally communicate in an intrapersonal and self-persuasive way that the nuance of their identity is okay.

Pursuance of Conversation

Another discursive bridge that the participants utilized to facilitate between the layers of identity, was pursuing conversation with others. Ada, during the interview, even stated the most helpful tactic she employs is having conversation that “centers around like bridging that gap.” Arielle stated her conversations with others often involved discussions and debates about biblical passages that are often used in anti-feminist ways. She stated, we have like delved into what would that look like in the current day? What was [the Bible] saying then?” Irene also discussed how pursuing conversations related to what the Bible says about women has helped her “figure out what I believe.” She described how sitting down with other Christians and hearing about how they view Christian feminism has “helped me to realize like that was also kind of my view.”

Barbara explained why she pursues conversations as they make “me dive further into myself and my belief system and overall it made me point back to the way I navigate relationships.” Nicole described how conversations with other Christian feminists help since “I feel like I can connect easier.” Shae, in contrast, said conversations with non-feminist Christians or non-religious feminists allow her to use more “empathy.” She stated, “I don’t ever have to be right; I just want to have a discussion about how does this work? How does this look in society? What are the benefits?”

Further, Marsha called forth a “bridge” when she described why she was stepping down as a speaker and into the role of an elder role. She said “I’d much rather dialogue. Let’s think through this all together. Let’s throw this idea out and talk about [biblical equality] together.” Tokyo stated that her biggest bridge is “continuously being willing to have conversations.” Christian feminists—in order to bridge the gap between different layers—used the discursive tactic of pursuing conversations in order to gain other perspectives, categories, and definitions.

Negotiation of Identity

The last discursive tactic used by Christian feminists to bridge the identity-based gaps was negotiating their identity to reach understanding. There were two main types of negotiating: negotiating the identities as separable and negotiating the identities as inseparable.

Separable. Arielle described how she does negotiate her identities as two separate parts depending on whom she is interacting with. She described the process as “negotiating those two identities apart from each other and then bringing them together to be one whole identity... and trying to reconcile those two identities.” Nicole described her negotiations as “code-switching.” She stated, “when I’m in the office I code switch to just make myself a lot more palatable to both sides.”

Shae described negotiating as happening in a relationship and as a “dance... to prove that I’m not the Christian who they hate.” Tokyo also explained how she feels she must walk “a fine line.” She explained how she once received advice from her husband about sharing one’s intimate beliefs as “the wisdom of sharing your vulnerability.” This consists of “half...timing and half is actually wording.” She described how she thinks of his advice while asking herself, “Would disclosing this hinder the relationship I had with this person?” These participants described how their negotiating tactics involved separating the two parts of their identity and thinking of how they communication of the dual identities may impact potential relationships.

Inseparable. In a different negotiation tactic, several participants described how they view their identities as mutual and congruent and choose to negotiate them as inseparable from each other. Barbara stated she walks into any conversation or debate with her beliefs ready to be communicated as to how she holds “both—Christianity and being a feminist—and how they do go hand-in-hand.”

Nicole indicated that she continuously perceives that her two identities “fit together so well.” She described how she enjoys entering different situations ready to communicate her dual identity and does not mind others’ perceptions of her identity. She states:

As long as my identity allows me to be thoughtful about equality and to use my privilege in a way that is useful while also understanding that I fall short and I need that love and grace and then I can offer it to other people.

After coding the participants’ narratives and how they discursively bridge the gaps they may experience in communication of their dual identities, RQ3 (How do Christian feminists discursively bridge the identity gaps they experience?) can also be answered. To facilitate the gaps they experience between the layered communication that represents their dual identity, Christian feminists discursively bridge their identity communication through an acceptance of nuance, pursuance of conversation, and negotiation of their identities as both separable and inseparable.

Chapter Six: Discussion

When created and used to understand subjectivity of religious beliefs, theology relies upon and affirms human experiences (Ruether, 1987; Thomas, 1985). From the literature, we can see a productive history of feminist critiques (Bineham, 1993; Condit, 1989; Curry & Groenendyk, 2006; Gallagher, 2004; Steiner, 1988; White, 1967) deconstructing the ways that theological structures and means of understanding have been “identified with and defined by men” and their own experiences (Trible, 1983, para. 2). In response to theologian’s historical preoccupation with male-led stories (Evans, 2012), over generalized gender roles (Evans, 2016), purity sexuality (Green, 2015; Leland & Barnett, 2013), and male headship (McKnight, 2008), feminist theology opts to transform structures of power in both the church and in the day-to-day lives of individuals.

However, the awareness and understanding provided by feminist theologians, according to Peters and Kao (2019), “have been stuck in classrooms, disseminated only in specialized conferences, lost in obscure journals, or buried in libraries” (p. 8). The fifteen narratives provided by these Christian feminists offer feminist theological insight regarding their day-to-day lives. From this research, we see that feminist theology is not only contained within specific spaces but is part of Christian feminists’ daily lives.

With constant feminist criticism of religious doctrines, Christian feminists do exist on a spectrum of liminality where their identities are in a state of transformation and ambiguity. Therefore, these individuals must theoretically communicate their identity while simultaneously and strategically concentrating on particular language to use in certain settings. From this research, we see that Christian feminists’ sense of self are products of their social selves. Their

understanding of their own identity is influenced by their interactions and communication with others (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004).

Summary of Findings

From the results of this particular study, Christian feminists, with their dual identities, process their identities on the four levels outlined by Hecht's CTI (Hecht, 1993; Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005). Christian feminists initially construct and perform their identity to themselves on the personal layer. They think about how they may perform their identity based on others' perceptions of them on the enactment layer. Once interacting with others, Christian feminists must negotiate and further construct their identity within the social interactions in which they engage. Often times, their sense of identity impacts the relational conversation they take part in. This happens in the relational layer. Lastly, Christian feminists' identities are further constructed when they enter a larger space or community in the communal layer.

When Christian feminists communicate their identity to themselves, these individuals often use their own words to define their sense of advocacy or social justice identity. Many participants focused on their identity as an advocate for marginalized individuals. Their identity as advocates comes naturally from how they describe their spiritual beliefs and their sense of how their Christianity benefits their sense of feminism. To them, Christian feminists do not always see their identity as binary, a state where they must consistently choose one side over the other. Rather, their dual identity allows both "sides" of their identity to feed into each other and strengthen their core beliefs. For many of the participants, a core belief was to reclaim feminine power in religious spaces. By having an identity that "seeks [spiritual] truth" and reinstates value as a human, Christian feminists use their duality to advocate (or evangelize) their feminist theological beliefs.

To share their identity-based beliefs, Christian feminists outwardly redefine their “roles.” In religious and familial spaces, historical “roles” have been created, conditioned, and used to connect current contexts to biblical contexts (Evans, 2012; Evans, 2016; Gungor, 2017; McKnight, 2008; Padgett, 2008; Ruether, 1983). In essence, when encountering problematic passages that may contradict their means of understanding, many thought leaders will attempt to apply such passages to their own experiences and “force the biblical meaning of a passage to accommodate [their] perspectives” (Esqueda, 2018, para. 18). Christian feminists spoke of this tendency in their churches, families, and religious schools to hyper-separate male and females and use scripture to back their claims. With their advocacy beliefs, Christian feminists directly contradict such rhetorical actions by moving in freedom with their families, churches, or schools as they feel “led” to and “called.” Instead of succumbing to strictly defined societal and religious roles, Christian feminists work to understand themselves and then move into their worlds with a greater self-understanding.

To come to a stronger sense of self, Christian feminists recognize the liminality they exist in and define their identity understanding as being a “journey” or “process of understanding.” Their identity is not fixed or stagnant, but always changing and cognizant of social justice changes. When illustrate this kind of identity action, Christian feminists often use the stories and biblical passages of Jesus. Many participants went so far as to call or equate Jesus’ character to that of a “feminist.” By redefining “roles,” Christian feminists deconstruct social religious roles often placed on men and women and used to suppress women and marginalized individuals within religious spaces.

Not only do Christian feminists think deeply about their identity on a personal level, but they also process how others might perceive them. This processing of perceived identity allows

Christian feminists to think about the ways they might enact or perform their identity when in the presence of others. When thinking of others' perceptions, Christian feminists often focused on their verbal and nonverbal behavior during interaction. Christian feminists are very aware of the language they may use, the way they may dress or present themselves, and how their actions speak for them. Many Christian feminists in the study used this enactment layer of self-understanding to outwardly perform their ideologies in the face of other ideologies. From their perspectives, this enactment could either positively (i.e., being known for their passions instead of just their label) or negatively (i.e., avoiding certain interactions) impact their relational outcomes. By taking into account the ways they may perform their identity, how others may view them, and what comfort levels are for individuals before the interaction, Christian feminists prepare to communicate their identity in actual interactions with others.

When interacting with others in an interpersonal setting, Christian feminists often feel that their identity impacts the relationship they have with the other. By entering a conversation with other individuals, Christian feminists' dual identity and passionate advocacy will either liberate the relationship (i.e., others' understanding or curiosity even amongst differences) or thwart the relationship from growing further (i.e., others shutting down conversations or using stigmatizing language).

Because one-on-one relationships are impacted by Christian feminists' communication of their dual identity, these individuals are mindful of how they communicate their identity within larger group settings or communities. In this communal layer, Christian feminists experience push and pull when communicating their identity in identifiable cultures such as nonreligious/feminist spaces, religious/complementarian spaces, and Christian feminist spaces. When interacting in nonreligious/feminist communities, Christian feminists felt the weight of

their Christian identity and the accompanying stigma. This led some participants to fear they would not be seen as “feminist enough” or intellectually rigorous. Many Christian feminists commented on how they feel more comfortable interacting with nonreligious feminists than when interacting with religious anti-feminists. This might be triggered by several factors. Christian feminists understand the struggle of understanding and accepting spiritual beliefs, redeeming a religious identity if one has been hurt in the past, or does not have conceptualizing for feminist theology and contextual awareness of biblical passages.

In a religious/complementarian community, however, Christian feminists experience different types of identity-based tensions. Whether interacting with others in churches, UCUs, or those with an overarching religious ideology, Christian feminists recognize inequalities and misinterpretations. While attempting to communicate their identities and sense of advocacy, Christian feminists encounter traditional religious ideologies. When interacting with those with different beliefs, Christian feminists often see how their fellow coworkers, colleagues, professors, or family members work to separate the term “feminist” from their beliefs of gender equality. In these moments of reckoning, Christian feminists perceive that their Christian identity is useful to help them discursively enter the space and engage their feminist beliefs. Many participants discussed how they gain trust with those with similar religious identities but can then challenge the social attitudes with their feminist language. Many Christian feminists feel more oppression when interacting in religious spaces. By operating from a dual identity, Christian feminists often feel they are not “Christian enough”—a direct comparison to their experiences in nonreligious/feminist spaces.

One communal space Christian feminists discussed as being rewarding and inviting was the Christian feminist community. Christian feminists recognize and feel recognized for their

polysemic identities and are able to identify with others who also experience dialogic exchanges (Friedman, 1998) when interacting with others. The acts of recognition and identification happening within Christian feminist spaces allowed the participants to feel safe and able to fully perform their dual identity. Several participants described how they may not always agree with every viewpoint in Christian feminist communities, but they feel at ease and hopeful due to the lessened amount of judgement.

When communicating their identities within Hecht's (1993) layers, Christian feminists experience moments where their self-understanding of their identity does not translate to the actual performance of their identity. In these moments, Christian feminists experience a gap in the communication of their identity. These identity gaps (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008) are felt within three different pairs of layers.

Christian feminists experience identity contradiction when attempting to translate their personal identity into an identity they perform in larger communities. The gap between their personal and communal layer of communicating demonstrates the power of cultural identities and how dissonant their dual identities are in contrast. Specifically, many Christian feminists experience tension and disconnect between the two layers when interacting on UCU campuses. Ironically, Christian feminists also described a similar identity-based tension when performing on a nonreligious campus or rally. Whether as a student, alumni, or employee, Christian feminists experience dissonance with the homogenous understanding of feminist identities on UCU campuses and the stigma surrounding religious identities on nonreligious universities and organized marches.

Along with feeling lost in translation when communicating their identity in larger gatherings, Christian feminists experience disconnect when segueing from their personal

understanding of their identity to how they communicate their identity in interpersonal, one-on-one settings. The identity gap between their personal and relational layers illustrated moments where the calculated impact of their dual identity would impact a relationship in an undesirable manner. When Christian feminists predetermine what the relational outcome might be if they communicate both sides of their identity, there is a process of distinguishing which “side” of their identity should be more prominently displayed. This might have looked like Christian feminists displaying only their Christian identity or their feminist identity, using particular language to make their sense of advocacy more agreeable, or experiencing an elongated internal battle of what “persona” to perform in a relationship.

Christian feminists also experienced a third, and more complex, identity gap. Prior to interacting with others, Christian feminists often felt frustrated when their self-understanding of their dual identity had to be repositioned as they thought about future interactions with others. But when in an actual interaction with another, Christian feminists felt that their preconceived idea of performance had to be readjusted while interacting. In this gap, not only was there a chasm between their personal layer and enactment layer, but also between their enactment layer and relational layer. These gaps often looked like Christian feminists had to readjust their identity language to fit another individual they knew they would be interacting with; however, when in the presence of the other, Christian feminists had to quickly move in a different direction. Often Christian feminists feel they cannot trust the enactment layer of their communicative process since the people they interact with charge the labels “Christian” and “feminist” as loaded terms needing to be categorized as separate.

During all three identity gaps, Christian feminists often felt that their social experiences impacted the gaps themselves (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Because of these felt gaps, Christian

feminists often feel they must monitor how they interact with others, perform their identities, and communicate their sense of advocacy. In some ways, their monitoring prevents them from displaying what they truly feel about themselves (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014).

However, identity gaps do not always inhibit or prevent Christian feminists from exercising their voice and advocacy. Many Christian feminists find ways to discursively bridge the gaps.

To bridge the identity gaps felt by Christian feminists, many of them strategically find ways to navigate within the polysemic tensions. By continuously reminding themselves and others that they live with a mentality where nuance of identity is okay, Christian feminists are able to remain calm as they juggle their two identities and others' attempts to constantly separate the two parts. Second, Christian feminists persistently pursued conversation with others. Whether other individuals agree with their advocacy identity or not, Christian feminists engage them in discussions and debates surrounding beliefs and issues. Beyond recognizing the nuance of their duality and pursuing conversation with others, Christian feminists also negotiated the duality by differentiating whether to separate their identity or communicate to others that their dual identity is inseparable. Often Christian feminists acquire the ability to code switch to establish a relationship first before engaging wholeheartedly with their advocacy identity. Negotiating their identity as separable helps Christian feminists live out the evangelical agenda of building community through relationships while negotiating their identity as inseparable helps Christian feminists live out their feminist agenda in spreading awareness for biblical equality. By recognizing the gaps they experience in the communication of their identity, Christian feminists discursively bridge the gaps by accepting the nuance of their polysemic identities, seek conversations in which they dialogue about their various beliefs, and negotiate their identity as both separable and inseparable depending on relationships at stake.

This research displays an agenda that members of the two ideologies have where, first and foremost, equality is sought after in both nonreligious and religious structures. Not only are Christian feminists pursuing equality in a social aspect, but they are also pursuing equality in a religious aspect within their churches, UCUs, and homes. Their use of their duality shows how Christian feminists do not always separate their identity to “work” within specific settings, but that they combine the two to work together and strengthen one another in various contexts. This research shows why Christian feminists engage both sides of their identity simultaneously and why they continue to do so while experiencing communicative tensions.

In regard to CTI, this study displays the breadth and depth of CTI as a theoretical approach to understanding human communication of identity. Not only was CTI used to help understand how Christian feminists communicate their identity throughout the various layers, but also the theory was used to understand a deeper problem of identity gaps and how they bridge the felt gaps. Because of its structure, CTI, in future studies, may need to be approached from a two-part methodological stance. Meaning, future studies may have to break down the components of CTI in order to understand its multiple purposes similar to RDT (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008).

Beyond contributions to CTI and recognition of a layered agenda Christian feminists are motivated by, this research works to further deconstruct the binary sense of self. This research helps us understand more of the nuance behind identity labels that exist in religious/moral beliefs and gender/sexuality. In its pursuance of understanding human communication, the research offers a spectrum where readers—whether they identify with the participants or not—can still identify with resisting a categorizing binary. From the narratives of these fifteen Christian feminists, we are invited to witness individuals defying a binary and fighting for inclusivity and

community by consistently attempting to communicate their beliefs and identities to others who may or may not agree with them.

Limitations

It is important to note the limitations to this study. To further understand the nuances of narrative inquiry, various coding process should be employed by multiple coders. Providing for internal and external coding checks may have allowed other coders and research members to discuss themes they found from the participants' narratives. Although checking with the thesis advisor and conducting member checks with one third of the participants helped achieve accurate representation of their experiences, developing and implementing a research team of coders would help in future projects examining the rich nuance of religious and gender/sexuality dual identities.

Along with coding teams and exercising internal and external coding checks, it would be helpful for future research teams examining this identity construct to define their own sense of "saturation" (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). In this particular study, "saturation" was met when I perceived that the seventy-eight single spaced pages of transcriptions would provide plenty of codable data. In essence, once I felt that the interviews from my memory started to display similar layered communication patterns, gaps, and discursive strategies, I stopped scheduling new interviews. At one point, I felt that I might have been near saturation when I was telling a colleague about my research thus far, and themes started to form in my conversation prior to actually coding of themes.

Future Research

Although this study provided various perspectives and themes relating to Christian feminists' communication of identity and the tensions they experience, several themes outside of

CTI constructs were displayed in several participant narratives. Future studies could further examine how the marriages and relational communication evolve and shift as one or both partners start to form a feminist approach to their marital relationship. One theme that came from a portion of the data was how purity culture infiltrated participants' sense of sexuality and their marriage. Four of the participants are currently, or had been, married. All four participants discussed how their feminist identity helped them pursue their partner with a more mutual mindset. In some cases, the couples realized their marriage would not work for their growing identities, and other cases, when both partners recognized their growing feminist identities, they sought counseling and other couples to help them readjust how they approached their marriage from a complementarian perspective. In essence, when one or both partners started to form and grow their feminist ideology and advocacy, they experienced a sense of liberation within their marriage as well as other spaces in their lives.

Another future study might examine Black evangelical feminist, black feminist, or womanist perspective. Since the number of non-white affiliated evangelicals is growing (Masci & Smith, 2018), it would be enlightening to further understand how an evangelical and feminist identity mirror social and spiritual experience (Anderson & Hopkins, 1992) of Black and other non-white women. Another population within this duality construct worth researching would be male feminists in the church and their communication of their own identity. Although this study was open to any gender or sex, only one participant identified as male. This demographic would highlight more of the male feminist deconstruction of hierarchical roles and its impact on their self-understanding and relationships. In following Sterk's (2010) call for communication research to examine constructs consisting of gender and religious components, such research would help to further understand human religious identity communication.

Concluding Thoughts

Along with past research findings (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014; Jung & Hecht, 2004), the presence of these specific identity gaps felt by, and discursively bridged, by Christian feminists support the notion that identity gaps are often related to levels of communication satisfaction, an individual's feelings of being understood or seen by others, and how Christian feminists perceive conversational appropriateness and effectiveness. With this communicative experience of identity communication, Christian feminists are often aware of their individual self, communal surroundings, and the cultural contexts in which they take part. These felt gaps display failed opportunities where Christian feminists can reclaim and redefine both religious and feminist components of their identity.

Moreover, the reoccurrences of such identity gaps may uncover reasons why evangelical label-taking is in decline and the exvangelical movement has started to form. President Trump's election and reelection campaign has made it more difficult for Christian feminists to separate their evangelical identity from Trump's administration and campaign (Gjelten, 2020). Christian feminists' identity may not be in decline essentially; however, the need for them to discursively position and communicate their dual identity is vital to how they advocate for their beliefs both within and outside of religious spaces.

Of most importance, this research echoes Sterk's (2010) call to advance research that explores the intersection of communication and faith. Not only does research surrounding religious identities and gender and sexuality identities work to articulate the importance of identity conversation, but research surrounding the communication of such layers helps to orchestrate various understandings of human relationship. From this research, we learn how

individuals with a dual identity of Christian feminist, strive to advocate their identity, beliefs, and build relationship through their choice of language and communication practices.

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Appendix A

Hello!

My name is Karly Poyner and I am a graduate student at Ball State University who is currently researching Identity theories within religious and feminist contexts. I am interviewing students (male and female) who either have or are currently attending or working within an evangelically based university who identify as Feminist and Christian.

Through this interview, I am hoping to hear of how you have experienced your dual identity on a campus with a distinct cultural identity. I will be asking you questions pertaining to your experiences, how you dealt or deal with such situations, and how your feminist identity impacts your interactions. Your information will be maintained as confidential, and no identifying information such as names or institutions will appear in any publication or presentation of the data.

If this description fits you and you would be willing to take part in a 30-60-minute interview with me, please respond to this email.

If you have any questions about this study or the interview process, feel free to email me.

Thank you,

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Appendix B

[1522220-1] “Jesus Made Me a Feminist”: Communication of Dual Evangelical Feminist Identities

Study Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this study is to understand how participants who identify as evangelical and feminist negotiate their personal and cultural identities while interacting within an evangelical university campus. This study will add to the foundation of Communication Theory of Identity in the communication field and will use experiences of feminists to aid feminist scholarship.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Participants include anyone over 18 years of age who identify as “Feminist” and “Evangelical” and have attended or worked within an evangelical university for at least one semester.

Participation Procedures and Duration

This study will involve semi-structured interviews that are projected to last anywhere from thirty to sixty minutes (30-60 minutes). I will be asking about your experiences as a self-identifying feminist while attending or working within an evangelical university, particularly about how your experiences and discourse have impacted the ways you might negotiate your identity. Interviews will be recorded on an audio recording device and then transcribed by me. I will use a pseudonym instead of your real name when transcribing, and your name and your institution’s name will not appear on any publications.

Data Confidentiality or Anonymity

All data will be maintained as confidential, and no identifying information such as names will appear in any publication or presentation of the data.

Storage of Data and Data Retention Period

Consent forms will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office in a secure building on Ball State’s campus or in a locked desk in the researcher’s personal residence. All computerized data (audio files, typed interview transcripts, or virtually signed consent forms) will be kept on a password encrypted computer. These will be retained indefinitely.

Risks or Discomforts

There are no perceived risks for participating in this study.

Study Benefits

There are no perceived benefits for participating in this study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your permission at any time for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing this form and at any time during the study.

IRB Contact Information

For questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Director, Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070 or at orihelp@bsu.edu.

[1522220-1] “Jesus Made Me a Feminist”: Communication of Dual Evangelical Feminist Identities

Consent

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project entitled, **Communication of Evangelical Feminist Identity**. I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described on the previous page) in this study.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher Contact Information

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Appendix C

1. How does the fact that you are Christian and feminist affect how you think about yourself?
 - a. Is your faith important to how you understand your experience as a feminist? Vice versa?
 - b. Have you had conversations with religious individuals who are anti-feminist or feminists who are non-religious?
 - i. How has that changed your understanding of yourself?
 - ii. How has that changed your understanding of your relationships with individuals who do not align with your beliefs?
 - c. Do you think about your dual identity a lot?
 - d. How would you describe your feelings about your dual identity?
2. Now I want you to think of a time when the fact that you are adopted impacted how you talked about yourself and your beliefs to other people. What was that experience?
 - a. Do you think people see you different than you want them to see you because of your dual identity?
 - b. Do your thoughts about yourself as a Christian feminist differ from the way that you present yourself to others?
3. I want you to think of a time when you talked to your family, friends, or colleagues about your feminist and Christian identity. What did they tell you about your identity?
 - a. How would you describe the communication about Christian feminism in these groups?
 - b. What was the most helpful thing that your family, friends, or colleagues did to help you understand your dual identity? What was the least helpful thing your family, friends, or colleagues did?
4. How would you describe your interactions with other Christian feminists?
 - a. Are your interactions with other Christian feminists different from your interactions with either anti-feminist Christians or non-Christian feminists?
 - b. Do you feel as though you identify with other Christian feminists?