



# “I Come Out Because I Love You”: Positive Coming Out Experiences Among Latter-day Saint Sexual and Gender Minorities

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## Abstract

**Background** Coming out conversations are pivotal and stressful experiences for sexual and gender minorities (SGMs). Coming out can lead to more affirmation, safety, confidence, and improved relationships. However, adverse coming out experiences can lead to damaged relationships and ostracization, which may be more likely in conservative religious contexts.

**Purpose** The purpose of the current study was to explore what leads to positive coming out experiences for SGM members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

**Method** A sample of 25 current or former Latter-day Saint (LDS) SGMs participated in semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed using thematic analysis.

**Results** Participants reported five actions they did that contributed to a beneficial coming out experience: being selective, increasing self-understanding and acceptance, preparing before, decreasing pressure on self, and validating the relationship with the person they came out to. Participants further reported six responses from others that contributed to a beneficial coming out experience: showing loving acceptance, utilizing empathic listening skills, offering and expressing support, celebrating, affirming that the relationship is not changed, and advocating.

**Conclusions and Implications** The present study extends current knowledge on coming out experiences by demonstrating specific beneficial approaches and responses to coming out. Given participants’ lack of focus on religiousness in their reports, these findings may be applicable to both religious and nonreligious SGMs. Our findings extend current knowledge on coming out experiences by demonstrating that both SGM approaches and others’ responses are critical to creating a more positive coming out conversation. Future research is needed to understand the efficacy and effects of these coming out approaches and responses.

**Keywords** Coming out · LGBTQ+ · LDS · Concealment · Development · Thematic analysis

## Introduction

Sexual minorities (individuals who experience some degree of same-gender attraction, behavior, or identity; Lefevor, Park et al., 2022) and gender minorities (individuals who identify with a gender different than that expected for assigned birth sex; Stryker 2008) are consistently faced with pressures to fit heterosexual and binary gender roles. Sexual and gender minorities (SGM)s consequently *come out* (i.e., the ongoing act of disclosing one's sexual and/or gender identity to others; Guittar 2013; Orne 2012) as a means of expressing their internal experiences of sexuality and gender to others. Coming out can be a pivotal and stressful experience faced by SGMs (Cass 1979), often accompanied by concerns of minority stressors such as rejection, judgment, or violence (Meyer 2003). However, through coming out experiences, SGMs may learn to cope with and overcome the adverse effects of stress (Morris et al. 2001). For SGMs, coming out may be a frightening prospect that nevertheless boasts potential benefits.

SGMs' experiences with coming out may vary based on how SGMs approach such conversations and how others respond. Given that coming out is often a personal and impactful process, there are myriad ways for SGMs to approach coming out conversations and equally myriad ways that others respond to coming out conversations. Research has demonstrated that many respond to coming out with distancing or rejecting reactions, which can adversely affect relationships (e.g., Willoughby et al. 2008; van Bergen et al. 2020). Conversely, some respond with affirmation and understanding, often strengthening relationships and helping SGMs experience an increased sense of safety and confidence (Perrin-Wallqvist and Lindblom 2015; van Bergen et al. 2020). Perhaps because of the dominant narrative of languishing minority stress within the study of the psychology of sexual orientation and gender diversity (Meyer 2003), few have examined what constitutes responses of affirmation and understanding and how SGMs and those they come out to may work together to have a more positive coming out experience.

Understanding how to come out “well” may be particularly critical for SGMs in conservative religious contexts. Coming out may be particularly stressful for SGMs raised in religious traditions that discourage same-sex sexual behaviors or gender expansive expressions. SGMs raised in conservative religions may be more likely to receive negative reactions to the coming out process than those outside of conservative religions (Dahl and Galliher 2012). Indeed, coming out may be particularly harmful when negatively received by close ones, such as friends and family (Baiocco et al. 2020; Rosati et al. 2020). Religious parents of SGMs may also be more likely to respond to their children's coming out with distancing and rejecting behaviors (Baiocco et al. 2015; Snapp et al. 2015).

## Difficulties and Benefits of Coming Out to Religious Others

Over half of conservatively religious SGMs conceal their sexual and/or gender identities from their religious community (Jeffries et al. 2014; Shilo et al. 2016; Suen and Chan 2020). Most often, SGMs conceal their sexual and/or gender

identities due to concerns about rejection from others, which are fueled by hetero- and cis-normative messaging in religious spaces (Lassiter et al. 2019). Concealment may lead SGMs to have less intimacy in relationships (Itzhaky and Kissil 2015) and may make it more difficult for SGMs to feel comfortable in religious spaces or with religious people because they continue to wonder if they would be rejected if their sexual orientation or gender identity were known. Ultimately, this religiously motivated concealment may lead to greater loneliness, depression, substance abuse, and general emotional turmoil (Corbin et al. 2020; Escher et al. 2018; Itzhaky and Kissil 2015; Shilo et al. 2016). Coming out to others is linked to an increase in minority stressors such as discrimination and internalized stigma (e.g., Russell and Fish 2016), particularly when coming out to individuals in religions that do not affirm same-gender sexuality or gender expression outside of assigned birth sex (Rosati et al. 2020). It is therefore unsurprising that SGMs are much more likely to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity if they are religious or spiritual (Kubicek et al. 2009; Lefevor, McGraw et al., 2022; Shilo and Savaya 2012; Woodyard et al. 2000).

Coming out may be particularly challenging for SGM members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (CJCLDS). The CJCLDS is a theologically conservative Christian religion with doctrinal prohibitions of same-sex sexual relationships and gender expression that differs from that expected from assigned birth sex (CJCLDS 2005). Latter-day Saint (LDS) SGMs are taught that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and essential for achieving the highest degree of salvation in the afterlife. As such, LDS SGMs, alongside other church members, are expected to abstain from any sexual practices outside of marriage between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman. The CJCLDS further espouses that gender is a divine characteristic of eternal identity and purpose (CJCLDS 2005). Resulting from these beliefs, the CJCLDS discourages gender transitions, seeing them as in opposition to God's plan. Given the CJCLDS's beliefs on sexuality and gender, LDS SGMs may face unique challenges to coming out.

Coming out may still be beneficial for LDS SGMs. Generally, disclosure of personal information can improve well-being and feelings of social support and connection (e.g., Ho et al. 2018). Coming out can also improve SGMs' self-acceptance and ability to cope in times of stress (Vaughn and Waehler 2010). Additionally, coming out has been linked with a variety of social benefits, including social support and feeling a sense of belongingness with other SGMs (Vaughn and Waehler 2010). Despite these potential benefits, relatively few studies have examined what coming out looks like for SGMs in religious contexts or how SGMs may navigate coming out successfully. The present study fills this gap by focusing on understanding what happens when coming out goes well in a sample of LDS SGMs. More specifically, this study seeks to answer two related questions, "What can LDS SGMs do to facilitate more positive coming out experiences?" and "What can those they come out to do to facilitate more positive coming out experiences?" Findings have the potential to inform religious SGMs and those they come out to of beneficial ways to approach coming out conversations.

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

In order to help manage potential biases regarding coming out experiences and religiousness, the research team consisted of three intentionally-diverse people who represent a range of identities across gender identity (cisgender man, poly-gender), sexual identity (gay, queer, bisexual), racial identity (White, Latinx) and religious affiliation (Catholic, Agnostic, LDS). Such intentional diversity was particularly important to help check team members' initial assumptions regarding positive coming out experiences among LDS SGMs, which included assumptions that coming out experiences would be reported as positive when the topic of religion was avoided and when SGMs and those they come out to focused instead on affirmation and love. Additionally, all members of the research team determined to uphold the American Psychological Association's (APA) stance of working with and respecting the experiences of SGMs (APA 2009).

The current study was part of a larger study that investigated LDS SGMs' experiences talking with LDS clergy about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. The present study is unique in purpose from other investigations and analyzes data not analyzed in other publications from this dataset (Levitt et al. 2018). All study procedures were approved by the MASKED FOR REVIEW internal review board before data collection and analysis. Participants were primarily solicited through a comprehensive community sampling approach. Solicitations were posted in relevant social media groups (see Appendix A), and additional participants were recruited from a list of individuals who indicated that they would like to be kept apprised of the research team's continued efforts. Participants were asked to complete a survey screener requesting demographic information and informing interested individuals that participants selected would be part of a 30-min interview. Over 500 individuals filled out this initial screener survey; of these, 25 participants were purposefully selected that represented a diverse range of identities including gender (man, woman, transman/woman, gender nonbinary), age (18–30, 31–50, 51+) race/ethnicity (White, People of Color), and sexual orientation (gay/lesbian, bisexual/pansexual, asexual). We selected participants in order to have at least three individuals holding each identity within the parentheses above in our final sample. We further attempted to select participants so that roughly half of our sample reported continued engagement with the CJCLDS and half of our sample reported disengagement with the CJCLDS in order to more accurately get reports of coming out experiences within the religion from those who continue to practice and those who do not. Despite these efforts, our sample remained predominantly White (80%) and young ( $M = 36.12$ ,  $SD = 12.95$ ,  $Range = 21–67$ ), reflecting the larger (predominantly White) racial/ethnic distribution of LDS individuals. Participants completed the 30–60 min-long interview and were compensated for their time (\$25/participant). Participant demographics for the final sample are presented in Table 1.

All interviews were conducted using a 2-question semi-structured interview guide while allowing for follow-up questions: (1) Can you describe a positive

experience you had with friends or family in the CJCLDS when you came out to them? and (2) Was there anything that helped make your coming out experience more positive? If so, could you tell me more about it? Due to COVID-19 concerns and to allow for a more geographically diverse sample, all interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. Interviews were conducted following suggested best practices for phenomenological data collection, with an emphasis on maintaining an open attitude and evoking detailed descriptions of experiences that capture the complexity of participants' lived experiences (Wertz 2005). Following completion of the interviews, a member of the research team transcribed and input each interview into NVivo electronic software for data analysis.

**Table 1** Participant demographics

Participant	Age	Gender identity	Sexual identity	Church status	Race/ethnicity
Brenda	34	Ciswoman	Lesbian	Less Active	Hispanic/Latinx
Brian	32	Transman	Heterosexual	Excommunicated	White
Chelsea	31	Ciswoman	Pansexual	Less Active	White
Colleen	48	Ciswoman	Pansexual	Inactive	White
Collin	40	Cisman	Gay	Less Active	Hispanic/Latinx, Native Hawaiian
Dave	26	Cisman	Gay	Active	White
Eric	24	Cisman	Asexual	Less Active	White
Heather	31	Ciswoman	Lesbian	Less Active	White
Helen	21	Ciswoman	Lesbian	Inactive	White
James B	48	Cisman	Gay	Active	White
James W	24	Cisman	Gay	Active	White
Jerry C	59	Cisman	Gay	Active	Asian American
Jerry P	67	Cisman	Gay	Resigned	White
Kam	22	Cisman	Gay	Less Active	White
Kate	35	Gender Nonbinary	Queer	Less Active	White
Keaton	25	Cisman	Gay	Active	White
Kristen	47	Ciswoman	Bisexual	Excommunicated	White
Kuhaupio	56	Cisman	Bisexual	Active	Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Black/African American, Asian
Legrande	24	Cisman	Gay	Active	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
Linnea	29	Genderqueer	Pansexual/Queer	Less Active	White
Philippa	30	Ciswoman	Bisexual	Less Active	White
Randall	31	Cisman	Pansexual	Excommunicated	White
Sara	34	Ciswoman	SSA	Active	White
Stanley	56	Cisman	SSA	Active	White
Tyler	29	Cisman	Gay	Less Active	White

Participants were given the option between creating a pseudonym and using their real name; for the sake of protecting the privacy of participants who chose a pseudonym we do not differentiate between these two groups; SSA = Same-sex attracted

## Analysis Plan

We utilized a six-step approach to analyzing qualitative data described by Braun and Clark (2006). These six steps include becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up the report. To improve the trustworthiness of findings, two independent coders, one auditor, and a systematic consensus-building process of analysis were used (Hill 2012). The primary coders consisted of one graduate student and one post-bachelor researcher who received training from faculty members in the analytic tasks before beginning the coding process. Coders reviewed various relevant literature and qualitative analysis guides prior to data analysis. The external auditor was a faculty member from a clinical/counseling psychology program who supervised the project and analysis. Feedback was provided from the auditor at each stage of analysis to ensure and enhance reliability of findings.

The authors identified the main research question that guided the analysis. The two independent coders began data analysis by reading the interview transcripts and making notes of initial analytic observations. Following this, the two coders engaged in an independent process of systematic data coding, identifying features of the data relevant to the broad research questions. The coders took an inductive approach that incorporated empirical observations, seeking patterns, and drawing conclusions. The coders determined to take an essentialist approach to the data by focusing analysis on elucidating individuals' experiences through semantic reports to honor the experiences of participants (e.g., Braun and Clark 2006; Burr 2003).

Coders met weekly during the coding process to discuss potential meaningful differences in their interpretation of the data. Each coder was encouraged to take notes on their reactions to the data as they coded, as well as to note any moments in which they felt that their potential biases may have influenced coding. During these meetings, subthemes were ultimately identified and named. The coders re-coded the data with the newly made subthemes to enhance inter-rater reliability. Data saturation occurred after the first 10 interviews, when less than five new codes emerged per interview. All interviews were nonetheless coded, and at the completion of coding, the coders recoded the first ten interviews following to ensure that codes added later were captured in earlier interviews. In a final meeting, the auditor and coders finalized overarching themes and sub-themes as well as identified frequencies of each theme. Following this process of review and refinement, five themes and 20 subthemes were identified as approaches to coming out experiences, and six themes and 21 subthemes were identified as responses of beneficial coming out experiences. Finally, the auditor and coders wrote the manuscript, which included selective data extracts to highlight definitions of themes.

## Results

### What Can SGMs do to Facilitate a Positive Coming Out Experience?

We found five main themes related to actions that SGMs took that positively influenced their coming out experience with members of the CJCLDS: being selective, increasing self-understanding and acceptance, preparing before, decreasing pressure on self, and validating their relationship with the person they came out to. These approaches are presented in Table 2.

#### Being Selective

Participants frequently related that their coming out experiences were most positive when they were selective of who they came out to. Many participants spoke about being selective more generally, with many describing centering themselves in not “owing” coming out to anyone. For example, Kuhaupio said, “I don’t come out to everyone, I don’t think everyone needs to hear it.” Randall said, “[It’s been positive] realizing that you don’t owe it to everybody to have a one-on-one conversation with them about your sex life or your sexual relationships. It doesn’t have to mean telling

**Table 2** Main themes, frequencies, and subthemes of personal factors

Main themes (frequencies)	Subthemes
Being selective (15)	Selective coming out Choose trustworthy people Come out when others are ready
Increasing self-understanding & acceptance (15)	Sort out feelings See self, not orientation Self-acceptance Unapologetic authenticity Be honest with yourself
Preparing before (15)	Gauge potential reaction Get support from therapy Rehearse the conversation Expect the best, prepare for the worst
Decreasing pressure on self (12)	Choose setting Come out in steps Come out in own way Well-being separate from reaction
Validating the relationship (12)	Give benefit of the doubt Express love and trust Physical affection Give time to process

*n* = 25

everybody, it's just being you." In addition to being selective more generally, some participants mentioned that they found it helpful to come out to people who they saw as trustworthy and safe. For example, Colleen said, "You do not need to be vulnerable with people who have not earned your trust. If people haven't earned your trust, there's a reason you're not being vulnerable." Further, James B. reported, "The fact that there had been a relationship established where we could talk openly about issues in general, that helped create an environment where I felt like I could come out." Some participants reported that choosing trustworthy people was necessary for them in order to maintain a sense of safety. Brian illustrated this idea by saying, "I could find out who's going to be supportive of me and who's not. Who do I need to avoid for my own mental health safety?" Finally, participants noted that it was helpful to choose to come out to people when they were prepared to listen. For example, Jerry C. said, "In all my cases, I knew when someone was ready to listen—when people were ready to hear me come out to them." Further, Stanley reported, "I usually just wait until [my children] start bringing up some conversations where they are trying to wonder about the homosexual community, [and then] I share with them."

### Increasing Self-Understanding and Acceptance

Participants also reported that they found it beneficial to increase their self-understanding and accept themselves before coming out to others. This theme was manifest in different ways; most commonly, participants shared that they found their coming out experiences to be more positive when they first sorted out their own feelings toward their sexual and/or gender identities. For example, Dave said, "What helped me to feel more comfortable in coming out was having more of my own personal experiences in terms of recognizing how embracing my sexuality actually brought good things into my life." Some participants also reported that seeing themselves as people and not just their sexual and/or gender identities was beneficial for them in navigating their coming out experiences, as demonstrated by Randall, who said, "Realistically, [my sexual identity] is not that big a part of my life. It's not like I talk about it in every conversation." Participants also noted that accepting themselves was a positive precursor to coming out, such as with Brian: "I think the most positive coming out experience I've had is just learning to be ok with myself." Other participants felt that being unapologetically authentic about who they are was helpful. Philippa demonstrated this by saying, "If you want me to [be the image of a queer person] in your head, I am going to force you to live in the truth of it. If you want me to be a model to you, you're going to get me and not your idea of me." Collin further illustrated this idea by saying, "If you don't like me, I don't care. I'm happy I have this off my shoulders." Finally, participants reported that being honest with themselves helped increase their self-acceptance and made coming out more positive. Some participants found that it took time to be able to be honest with themselves, such as with Eric: "It took me a bit to get to the point where I admitted, 'Okay, I'm asexual.' However, once participants were honest with themselves, they found coming out to be more positive, such as with Kam, who said, "Once I started being more honest, I realized I am living who I want to be."



## Preparing Before

In addition to increasing self-understanding and self-acceptance, participants frequently reported that it was helpful for them to prepare before they came out to others. These preparations included a variety of tactics, such as gauging others' potential reactions to their coming out. Chelsea demonstrated preparing before by sharing, "I was anticipating what [my parents] might ask me, or what they might say and how I wanted to react or respond to that. It was really helpful for me to be able to just anticipate those kinds of things. It helped me find my own voice and learn more about myself in that process." Some participants also prepared to come out by getting support from therapy, such as with Helen, who said, "I was in residential therapy, and we did exposure therapy. For me, that was essentially the building up to coming out to somebody in the church." Linnea also noted, "Therapy has been one of the most helpful things I've done." Other participants reported that rehearsing the potential coming out conversation helped make the actual conversations go better. For example, Philippa shared, "For me, trying to have staged conversations is really helpful." Preparing before having the coming out conversation also entailed expecting the best out of people while also preparing for the worst outcome. James W. demonstrated this tactic by saying, "One thing I've learned in coming out is it's emotionally a lot safer to prepare for the worst." Further, Colleen shared, "The worries and concerns that are going on in your head are likely heavier than what it will actually be like to come out." Finally, some participants prepared for a coming out conversation by selecting an appropriate setting, as illustrated by Keaton: "I think it depends on the person. For my parents, it was important that I did it in person. But I know that it was really good for me to send an email to my grandparents because I don't see them as often as my parents."

## Decreasing Pressure on Self

Some participants reported that their coming out experiences were more positive when they were able to decrease pressure on themselves before coming out to others. For many participants, pressure was decreased by coming out to others in steps. Colleen illustrated this by saying, "I have tried to keep it to condensed little things. Don't dump all of it in their laps all at once." Other participants shared that they came out in their own way, which often entailed not coming out to everybody all at once, casually mentioning their sexual and/or gender identities, or controlling the pace of their coming out. For example, Kristen reported, "It somehow just followed the conversation: 'My ex-girlfriend and I did this.' It wasn't a formal coming out, but just by things I would say, people would know, and it was never a big deal." Further, Chelsea shared, "I think the important thing is, as much as you can, [come out] on your own terms." Finally, some participants reported that they felt less pressure on themselves when they realized that their well-being was separate from other people's reactions. For example, Heather said, "Before you tell someone, make sure that your sense of well-being and mental health and safety don't depend on their reaction." Eric also shared, "Since I've been publicly out, I feel a lot less scared of any sort of repercussion." Other participants realized that their well-being was separate

from others' reactions by understanding that many people they came out to did not care about their sexual and/or gender identities. Jerry P. illustrated this understanding when he said, "Most people I don't think really care if you're gay or not."

### Validating the Relationship

Finally, some participants shared that they found their coming out experiences to be more positive when they validated their relationship with the person or people to whom they came out. Sometimes this validation was expressed by the participant giving others the benefit of the doubt. For example, James W. said, "I think it's important for the person coming out to plan to give people the benefit of the doubt." Eric similarly reported, "It really gave me some hope that people individually are less judgmental than the church often seems to be collectively." Other participants validated their relationships by expressing love and trust to the people they came out to, such as with James B., who said, "The fact that I would trust and confide in them and express that I could share, I think that helps. It goes over better." Jerry C. also demonstrated this love and trust by sharing, "I come out because I love you. I come out because I trust you. I come out so I can be my real self with you, which means I don't have to pretend to be something that I'm not." Finally, participants shared that they validated their relationship with others by giving them adequate time to process the coming out. Keaton demonstrated giving others time to process by saying, "We can't expect someone in our family to be accepting of everything that's going on in our lives right off the bat, right? It took us a long time to understand where we're going, and how to move forward. We need to give people in our lives at least that much time to understand and be ok with where we're at." Further, Kate shared how they gave others time to process their gender identity: "My mom had a decade's worth of time to figure it out because I came out to her when I was 19. So, by the time I'm really in the trenches and 32, she had been prepared for all that time for that." These various approaches were all shared as methods participants used to validate their relationships with others.

### What Can Others do to Facilitate a Positive Coming Out Experience?

We found six main themes related to actions others took that positively influenced an SGM person's coming out experience in context of the CJCLDS: showing loving acceptance, using empathic listening skills, offering and expressing support, celebrating, affirming that the relationship is not changed, and advocating. These factors are presented in Table 3.

#### Showing Loving Acceptance

Participants most frequently reported that they had a positive experience when the people to whom they came out would respond with loving acceptance. Many participants reported instances in which people responded with love to their coming out. For example, Legrande shared a loving response from one of his

**Table 3** Main themes, frequencies, and subthemes of others' factors

Main themes (frequencies)	Subthemes
Showing loving acceptance (23)	Loving response Acceptance Care and concern
Using empathic listening skills (21)	Ask questions to understand Listen Thank for trusting Validation Affirm Focus on person, not self
Demonstrating support (20)	Be supportive Offer and express support Allyship
Celebrating (13)	Express happiness or joy Be welcoming Connect them with other SGMs Physical affection
Affirming the relationship is not changed (13)	No change in relationship "Not a big deal" Normalize
Advocating (6)	Learn or educate before Advocate

*n* = 25

friends: "[It was positive] having that, 'We love you and all that you are as a person.'" Dave also shared a loving response he received when he first came out to his friend: "He said, 'No matter what you do, no matter what you decide to do, I love you so much.'" Participants also highlighted the importance of others expressing unconditional love. For example, Brian shared, "There are some people that express love and then there are people that express love, but their love is conditional." In addition to these loving responses, participants reported that they found it positive when they were responded to with acceptance. Sara shared, "If I'm going to [give advice] to somebody, I'd say, 'By the way, just accept me!'" Similarly, Randall said, "My only advice is let them talk. Let them talk about whatever they need to talk about and accept them and give them a hug." Another way that participants reported being responded to with loving acceptance was when others demonstrated their care and concern. Brian illustrated this by saying, "They would constantly check on me. They would text me every day saying, 'How are you doing?'" Heather also said, "And when I would tell someone, it'd be nice when they would say they still care about me."

## Using Empathic Listening Skills

Empathic listening responses were reported as the second most frequent positive form of responses. Primary among these responses were others asking questions to better understand the participants' sexual and/or gender identities, as demonstrated by Helen: "I think there are people that know the right kinds of questions to ask. It's helpful when they are asking in order to understand." Further, Sara shared, "I feel like if they don't understand or haven't talked to anybody about [sexual identities], asking questions helps. Just ask instead of assuming." In addition to questions that help others better understand, participants reported that they found it positive when people were willing to listen to them. For example, Tyler said, "Just listening to stories and experiences...that more than anything is helpful." Chelsea further reported, "Listen to what these people are going through and understand that. Listen to the person; that's the best thing you can do." Some participants included that they found it helpful when others would thank them for their trust and openness, as demonstrated by Keaton, who said, "They said, 'Thank you for feeling brave enough to share your feelings with me and to confide in me and that you would trust me to share your feelings.'" Validation and affirmation were also included as empathic listening skills that improve coming out experiences. Kate shared, "If somebody's asking what my pronouns are, I immediately know you know something about gender. I immediately feel more comfortable with you." Legrande reported, "I think the most wonderful thing about [my coming out] was she just listened and validated." Finally, participants shared that it was positive when others focused on the person coming out and not on themselves, such as with the following story by Chelsea: "She just said, 'This is not about my feelings. This is about you. We're talking about you right now, it's about your feelings.'" Participants noted that empathic listening helped them feel loved and cared for, leading to a more positive coming out experience.

## Demonstrating Support

LDS SGMs also reported that they found it beneficial when other people demonstrated and offered support. Most frequently, this theme was told as others showing general support, such as with Eric, who said, "My family has been incredibly supportive of me and now also my little brother." Additionally, Stanley shared, "She was very supportive. I told her in the middle of church discipline, and she was just really supportive." In addition to general support, some participants noted that it was specifically positive when people expressed their support or offered to support them. For example, Helen shared, "She said, 'Look, I'm there for you. I appreciate you telling me and I'm there for you no matter what.'" Linnea also shared, "My main experience with the first bishop after I came out to my whole ward, there wasn't anything beyond we love and support you, which was great." Finally, participants noted that they felt support from others when they expressed or demonstrated their allyship. For example, Kate shared, "She spent a lot of time learning how to be an ally. She provided me with the resources that I needed as an ally in the church." Further, Jerry P. said, "[My kids] are big proponents of the [LGBTQ+] community. They

take my grandkids to the pride parades and make them participate so that they grow up with acceptance and love.”

### **Celebrating**

Participants further reported that they found it positive when others would celebrate with them. Sometimes such celebration was reported as the people they came out to expressing happiness or joy, such as with Legrande, who came out to his church congregation and reported, “I was just crowded by [church] members telling me, ‘That was so beautiful, that was so amazing, that was wonderful, thank you for sharing.’” Chelsea also said, “She was the first person whose eyes lit up and she said, ‘Oh my gosh, that is so great. I’m so excited for you!’ You figure it was just the sort of love and support that went without saying...I didn’t realize how much I really appreciated and wanted that until she reacted that way.” In addition to expressing happiness or joy, others celebrated the coming out by being welcoming. For example, James W. reported, “It was very, ‘You’re loved, you’re welcomed, you’re affirmed.’” People were also welcoming of participants’ partners, such as with Tyler, who said, “With my family this last Thanksgiving, they let me bring my boyfriend.” Some participants reported that others connected them with SGMs, which was a positive experience with them. Brian shared such an experience: “There are people that are super helpful. I actually had a cousin who I didn’t know had a transgender sister until I came out.” Finally, participants reported that others celebrated the coming out experience by showing physical affection. For example, Kam said, “She just kept hugging me. I knew she wasn’t being fake, and I could tell she was genuinely happy for me.” Collin also said, “All she did is she said she loved me. She hugged me and held me, and we cried.”

### **Affirming that the Relationship Is Not Changed**

Several participants reported that they found their coming out experiences to be more positive when their relationship with the people they came out to was not changed by coming out. Heather demonstrated this theme by saying, “When I would tell someone, it’d be nice when they would say they still care about [me] and nothing has changed.” Helen shared similar sentiments: “He said, ‘Look, I’m there for you. I appreciate you telling me. And I’m there for you no matter what.’ I had made it very clear I wasn’t planning to leave the church at that point, but she said, ‘Whatever you decide, I’m there.’” Some participants were more specific in saying that they appreciated when others ensured them that their sexual and/or gender identities were not a big deal to them. For example, Sara said, “You say something, and they say, ‘Okay, well let’s carry on.’ They don’t look at me differently.” James W. also shared how his coming out was not a big deal to his family: “She said, I want to make certain he knows that we love him and that we don’t care.” Finally, some participants reported that it was helpful when others would normalize the coming out experience. Tyler shared that he found it helpful when others were “treating [the coming out conversation] as normally as possible.” Stanley also shared his friend’s response to his coming out: “He said, ‘Well, you can tell me anything. You know, lots of people feel

attraction to different things.’ So, he created this environment where [my sexual orientation] was normal.”

### **Advocating**

Finally, some participants reported that when people to whom they came out advocated for them or the LGBTQ+ community at large, they had particularly positive experiences. Sometimes such advocacy was manifested as others learning or educating themselves before the coming out experience. For example, Tyler reported, “I gave my family [an LGBTQ+ book] and said, ‘Hey, can you guys please read this.’ ...I think the book actually helped a ton because of having them see examples and stories. It all went a lot better than I anticipated.” Kate further shared, “What has helped are people who have been engaged with gender and talking about gender and knowing the differences between gender and sex.” Other times, participants reported that advocacy more generally made the coming out experience more positive. For example, Colleen shared, “My sister made sure to put my transgender son’s name on the program and not their dead name.” Further, Brenda reported that her friend told her, “I know somebody, maybe you can go on a date with them. That kind of thing [was positive].”

### **Discussion**

Through interviews with 25 LDS SGMs, we identified several actions and approaches LDS SGMs took that led to beneficial coming out experiences. We further identified actions and approaches taken by people who were come out to that led to beneficial coming out experiences for LDS SGMs. Given the CJCLDS’s doctrines discouraging same-sex sexual behaviors and altering gender expression, LDS SGMs likely face additional hurdles and concerns when approaching coming out conversations with other Latter-day Saints. Although we explicitly asked participants about their experiences related to coming out in the context of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, none of the actions and approaches reported by participants focused explicitly on religiousness. It may be that the concerns and preparations for coming out conversations look different for LDS SGMs than SGMs more generally, but it may also be that coming out looks more similar than different for religious and nonreligious SGMs. Given the lack of responses regarding religion, we suggest that our reported approaches to coming out experiences may be applicable to SGMs more generally as well as to LDS SGMs specifically.

### **SGM Approaches Relating to Positive Coming Out Experiences**

We found that LDS SGMs reported a variety of approaches they took when choosing to come out to other people within the CJCLDS. In particular, we noticed that LDS SGMs found it particularly helpful to be selective with who they come out to. For example, many LDS SGMs reported only coming out to people with whom they

had a preexisting close relationship grounded in trust. This finding mirrors previous findings, suggesting that SGMs more generally report benefitting from coming out in autonomy-supportive contexts (Legate et al. 2012). This may be particularly true for LDS SGMs, who are often aware that individuals within the CJCLDS may not respond well to their coming out due to doctrinal beliefs that restrict same-sex sexuality and gender expression (CJCLDS 2005; Dahl and Galliher 2012). For both LDS SGMs and SGMs more broadly, coming out experiences may be more positive when selecting people to come out to who are more likely to positively respond.

We further found that LDS SGMs reported coming out experiences were beneficial when they focused on self-understanding and self-acceptance. Self-understanding and acceptance are helpful for SGMs more generally in navigating their sexual and/or gender identities (Camp et al. 2020b). It may be that increasing self-understanding and self-acceptance allows SGMs to approach coming out conversations with greater knowledge of who they are and how to vocalize that to others. It may also be that increasing self-understanding and self-acceptance protects against negative coming out reactions (e.g., Camp et al. 2020a). SGMs may feel better equipped to come out to and explain their identities to others when they first increase their self-understanding and self-acceptance.

LDS SGMs reported that preparing for coming out experiences beforehand and decreasing pressure on themselves made coming out more positive. Preparing for coming out experiences appears to mirror preparation for other important conversations; the more an individual feels that they understand what the conversation may look like and questions that may be asked, the more confident they feel in approaching the conversation. Such preparation may serve to decrease the pressure SGMs experience in initiating coming out conversations with others. Additionally, decreasing pressure on oneself when coming out to others may include shedding the pressure to come out in a specific way. Given that coming out experiences are becoming more public via outlets such as social media, SGMs may experience pressure to come out in similar ways as other people (e.g., creating a social media post). Empowering SGMs to come out in whatever way they find most comfortable and safe may be a powerful method of decreasing pressure on SGMs. This pressure also likely decreases naturally the more that SGMs come out to others (Vaughan and Waehler 2010). Taken together, SGMs may benefit from preparing for what coming out conversations may look like, and from allowing themselves to come out in whatever way feels best for them.

Finally, LDS SGMs found that validating their relationship with those they have come out to helped make the coming out experience more beneficial. Coming out is often a frightening endeavor for SGMs, with concerns that others will reject them for their sexual and/or gender identities (e.g., Baiocco et al. 2015). It appears that LDS SGMs who focus part of their coming out conversations with others on validating the relationship may help decrease some of these concerns. Similarly, validating the relationship was reported as a beneficial factor when done by individuals who SGMs come out to. This parallelism suggests that vocalizing how relationships will not be adversely affected by SGMs' coming out can help alleviate SGMs' coming out concerns in addition to strengthen relationships (e.g., Legate et al. 2012; Vaughan and Waehler 2010).

## Other Person Factors Relating to Positive Coming Out Experiences

LDS SGMs further reported a variety of actions or approaches that other people took when LDS SGMs came out to them. It appears that both what SGMs do and what other people do are important in coming out experiences that are perceived as beneficial.

LDS SGMs almost univocally reported that receiving a loving and accepting response from others made their coming out experiences more positive. Loving responses are often seen as the hallmark of positive coming out responses (Rothman et al. 2012). Additionally, religious individuals are taught that loving others is foundational (*English Standard Version Bible* 2001, John 13:34–35, Holy Bible). Coming out has also consistently been associated with more positive well-being when it occurred in supportive contexts (e.g., Legate et al. 2012; Rosati et al. 2020); it is unsurprising that SGMs who receive supportive responses to their coming out conversations report more positive overall coming out experiences. Therefore, one takeaway for religious individuals is that responding with love to an SGM's coming out is a clear method of making the coming out experience more positive.

We observed that LDS SGMs found it beneficial when those they came out to utilized empathic listening skills in their responses (e.g., Davis 2020; Parks 2015). Empathic listening skills include actively listening, validating, and demonstrating compassion and understanding. Such skills are foundational to helping others feel heard, seen, and valid (Jones et al. 2016). Using an empathic listening approach to respond to an SGM's coming out may be particularly helpful, as empathic listening utilizes concrete skills that improve the coming out experience for SGMs. These skills may be particularly helpful takeaways for religious individuals who may not know how to respond positively to or affirm an SGM's coming out.

Finally, we found that LDS SGMs found it beneficial when others celebrated their sexual and/or gender identities and advocated for them. Celebration and advocacy appear to be coming out responses that go a step beyond acceptance and support. These approaches denote active involvement in SGMs' coming out experiences and helping them to accept themselves and find community (Garcia Johnson and Otto 2019). Celebration and advocacy regarding one's coming out are associated with a stronger sense of social connection and belonging (Moagi et al. 2021). Although not as frequently expressed among our sample, celebration and advocacy are exceptional ways of improving the coming out experience, validating relationships, and making systemic changes.

## Limitations

The present study was limited by several factors. First, we only focused on differences in overall coming out experiences and did not specifically ask for variation between sexual and gender minorities. Thus, we cannot be certain that the reported positive coming out factors apply equally for sexual and gender minorities. Additionally, given the qualitative nature of semi-structured questions asked during



interviews, it is possible that participants varied in their understanding of what constitutes a “positive coming out experience.” Replication of this study among other religious SGMs may help validate our findings.

## Conclusion and Implications

In addition to informing SGMs and religious communities about positive ways to approach coming out experiences, our findings have implications for furthering research. First, our findings coincide with existing research suggesting that coming out experiences are impactful events in the lives of SGMs that are often the subject of much thought and planning. Given that coming out in a religious context has the potential to increase minority stressors, it may be that SGMs who take the approaches reported by our participants (e.g., being selective, preparing beforehand, etc.) see these approaches as beneficial because they can decrease subsequent minority stressors. Future research efforts aimed toward understanding how these coming out approaches relate to minority stressors would help elucidate these potential associations. Second, this study is the first known study to specifically look at what responses to coming out conversations are seen as beneficial. Thus, these findings add to and expound on previous research suggesting that “affirming” responses were the sole indicator of beneficial coming out conversations. Finally, given the novel nature of our findings, replication of this study among other religious SGMs may help validate our findings. Given that this is the first study to identify the specific approaches and responses that LDS SGMs find most beneficial, future research efforts geared toward elucidating the efficacy and mental health outcomes of these factors can also help to validate our findings.

LDS SGMs reported that coming out experiences were more beneficial when they were selective in who they came out to, increased their self-understanding and acceptance, prepared before coming out, decreased pressure on themselves, and validated their relationships with those they came out to. We further found that LDS SGMs found coming out experiences more positive when those they came out to responded with loving acceptance, empathic listening, support, celebration, affirming that the relationship had not changed, and advocacy. The present study extends current knowledge on coming out experiences by demonstrating that both SGM approaches and others’ responses are critical to creating a more positive coming out conversation.

## Appendix A

Online groups participants were recruited from.

Affirmation millennials group.

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/affirmationmillennials>
- Private Facebook group
- Moderator: Kyle Ashworth

Affirmation mixed orientation families group.

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/718251581557428>
- Private Facebook group
- Moderator: Kyle Ashworth

Active LDS Affirmation group “Prepare”.

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/TheLordWillPrepare>
- Private Facebook group
- Moderator: John Gustav-Wrathall

Mormons Building Bridges.

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/mormonsbuildingbridges>
- Public Facebook group
- Moderator: Kendall Wilcox

Affirmation Community Conversations.

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1944097702543519>
- Private Facebook group
- Moderator: Augustus Crosby

USGA at BYU Facebook.

- <https://www.facebook.com/UsgaAtByu>
- Private Facebook group
- Moderator: no clear moderator indicated (will send a private Facebook message to the group to ask permission to post)

JIM alumni.

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/jimalumni>
- Private Facebook group
- Moderator: Rich Wyler

North Star main group.

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/NorthStarMembership>
- Private Facebook group
- Moderator: Julio Ospina

ALL Arizona LDS LGBT & Friends & Family.

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ArizonaLDSLGBT/>

- Private Facebook group
- Moderator: Trevor Cook or Anthony Yang

LDS family fellowship.

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/134605330021674/>
- Private Facebook group
- Moderator: Wendy Reynolds

Ex-Mormon Reddit.

- <https://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon>
- Public Reddit forum
- Moderator: no clear moderator indicated (will send a private Facebook message to the group to ask permission to post)

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors do not have any financial or non-financial interests to disclose for the present study.

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