



“I don’t want the Church if the Church doesn’t want me”

Mormonism’s impact on LGBTQ+ people: A case study of LGBTQ+ ExMormons

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Abstract

This study aims to find out ‘Mormonism’s impact on the lives of LGBTQ+ people’ and explore ‘the reasons why LGBTQ+ Mormons choose to leave the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church).’ LDS Church has a long history of discrimination against its queer members and also notoriously campaigned to support Proposition 8 which was a California ballot proposition to define marriage between a man and a woman in 2008. The Church’s current rhetoric on LGBTQ+ people is “it is not a sin to have same-sex attraction but it is a sin to act on it.” The Church also announced its support for the Respect for Marriage Act at the end of 2022. While the previous studies usually include both queer Mormons and queer ExMormons, this study involves only ExMormons and takes its departure from a human rights perspective. Two important dimensions in the human rights field such as discrimination and freedom have been utilised to analyse the data and discuss the research questions. Semi-structured interviews with nine LGBTQ+ ExMormons from the USA were carried out. A qualitative content analysis has been adopted to analyse the data through theories of discrimination and freedom. The study focuses on results that impact the lives of LGBTQ+ Mormons such as reinforced gender roles, the Church’s lagging behind the US society, feelings of shame and denial of sexuality, celibacy and depression. Additionally, the levels of discrimination queer ExMormons have been exposed to and how they have chosen to leave the discriminatory environment have been discussed by operationalising discrimination and freedom.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ rights and Mormonism, LDS Church and queer ExMormons, Discrimination, Religious Freedom

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List of abbreviations

BYU – Brigham Young University

CDC – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

FoRB – Freedom of Religion and Belief

HRC – Human Rights Committee

ICCPR – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

ILGA – International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association

LDS Church – The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

LGBTQ+ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning

OHCHR – Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Prop 8 – Proposition 8

SOGI – Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

UDHR – Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UN – United Nations

US/USA – United States of America

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1.Introduction

Religion has played an important role in history and sometimes challenged specific human rights such as women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights (Witte, Green and Witte, 2011; Freeman, 2017). In some contexts, it also needed protection for the believers, which led to the international emergence of the right to religion (United Nations, 1948; ECHR, 1953). LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning) rights have gained importance and are protected in many countries recently. However, it is still a big issue, especially in communities where religion plays an important role (Carbonaro, 2022). The struggle for religion to be accepted as a human right was easier compared to the efforts to introduce LGBTQ+ rights as human rights (Baisley, 2016). Since culture is affected and shaped by religion, culture is used as an excuse to deny the rights of LGBTQ+ people (UN News, 2013). Until the 1980s LGBTQ+ rights were not discussed at the UN level but the UN is known to have drawn attention to the killings of LGBTQ+ people since 2003 (*OHCHR and the human rights of LGBTI people*, 2023). In addition, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has had a public information campaign “UN Free & Equal” to “promote equal rights and fair treatment of LGBTQ+ people” (United Nations, 2013). When it comes to the USA, there were many difficulties and discrimination until the period when LGBTQ+ rights improved (Morgan and Rodriguez, 2020). One of the biggest improvements was the Supreme Court's decision on legalizing same-sex marriage in 2015 (‘Us: supreme court upholds same-sex marriage’, 2015). As for LGBTQ+ people and the LDS Church, there is a similar timeline from the condemnation of homosexuality starting in the 1960s (Cook, 2017) to the Church’s support for the Respect for Marriage Act in 2022 (*Statement on the signing of the us respect for marriage act*, 2022). Despite this support, LGBTQ+ people who try to remain in the Church have difficulty fitting in and the ones who leave the Church acknowledge the distress caused by the Church’s doctrines and policies.

This thesis focuses on the relationship between LGBTQ+ rights and Mormonism based on the experiences of LGBTQ+ ExMormons. Two important dimensions of human rights are utilised in this thesis to understand this relationship: Discrimination and freedom. The academic field offers the discussions around LGBTQ+ rights and freedom of religion (Whitley, 2009; Endsjø, 2020; Bielefeldt, Pinto and Petersen, 2022). While there is a perception that freedom of religion is violated when LGBTQ+ rights are promoted, Endsjø (2020) draws attention to LGBTQ+

people's freedom of religion since they have the right to participate and/or not participate in religion. Denying services to same-sex couples based on freedom of religion is another discussion especially due to the *Masterpiece Cakeshop* case where a same-sex couple was denied a wedding cake because it does not align with the values of the baker (Dent, 2006; Wilson, 2016; Eskridge Jr and Wilson, 2018; Small, 2018). As for LGBTQ+ rights and Mormonism, the academic field also presents a wide range of mental health studies regarding queer Mormons (Dehlin *et al.*, 2014; Grigoriou, 2014; Lefevor *et al.*, 2020). There is also academic discussion around the theoretical discussion of gender and LGBTQ+ people's place in Mormon theology (Payne, 2010). While there is research on gay rights and Mormonism, it cannot be categorised as an academic source due to not having ethics and methods of interviews with Mormons and ExMormons (Prince, 2019). Academic research on exclusively ExMormons almost does not exist. Looking at LGBTQ+ ExMormons' experience from human rights perspective presents a unique ground.

1.1 Aim and research questions

This thesis aims to analyse discrimination against LGBTQ+ ExMormons and the outcome of the discrimination in their lives. The aim is to explore LGBTQ+ ExMormons' perspectives on the policies of the LDS Church and their choice for freedom to leave Mormonism. The concepts such as "Human Rights", "LGBTQ+ Rights" and "Freedom of Religion" are discussed and drawn on throughout the research.

For the thesis, the research questions are as follows:

- 1) How does Mormonism impact the lives of LGBTQ+ people?
- 2) Why do LGBTQ+ ExMormons choose to leave the LDS Church?

1.2 Definition of the terms used

LGBTQ+ is the general term that is used when referring to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer people, but there are many other terms to identify different sexual attractions such as asexuality, pansexuality and gender identities such as non-binary (Stonewall, 2020). Despite being a pejorative term in the past, the term queer is used as an umbrella term now (Morgan and Rodriguez, 2020, p. 6). Throughout this thesis, the LGBTQ+ is used to be inclusive but other sexual orientations will be emphasized specifically when they

come up in the research and data sections. That is why it is important to highlight that the term LGBTQ+ might add up to the problem of trans invisibility since gay and lesbian rights are more visible compared to those of bisexuals (Movement Advancement Project, 2016) and transgenders (*Trans day of visibility*, 2023). I made an extra effort to include transgender ExMormons in my interviews. Detailed information on this can be found in the methods chapter.

The term Mormon is used for a person who believes in Mormonism and is a member of the LDS Church. The church prefers to avoid the terms ‘Mormon Church’ for itself and ‘Mormon’ for its members. The abbreviation LDS Church and Latter-day Saints are the preferred terms by the Church and are used interchangeably in this thesis. This is because this preference was introduced in 2018 (Weaver, 2018), and language in research, academia, and general all include the term Mormon. ExMormon is someone who has left Mormonism. This could simply mean a person who no longer believes and participates in Mormonism or has been excommunicated by the Church. The definition of ExMormon is specified elaborately in the methods chapter.

1.3 Delimitations of study

This research includes LGBTQ+ people and uses the term ‘LGBTQ+’ to be inclusive, but some groups such as non-binary people, transgenders, genderfluid people, and asexual people have lower-level visibility than other groups in the community. This is why the categories of gender identities to which interviewees belong are explicitly mentioned in the analysis chapter in detail. I am aware that the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community are not completely the same, and some of the members of the community face more discrimination than others (American Progress, 2020). Another aspect is related to race and ethnicity. As could be explained with intersectionality it could be assumed that immigrants, black people, and ethnic minorities in the LGBTQ+ face more discrimination. The Mormon community in the USA is highly white and the interviewees in this research are conducted mainly with white persons. It is open to further study whether the discrimination these people face would be at a different level if they were not white.

Mormonism has been chosen since it could be a good example to show the difficulties of being an LGBTQ+ person in a binary world even if you live in a ‘Western and developed’ country.

There is ‘continuing revelation’¹ in Mormonism which enables the Church to change policies and opinions on many topics including LGBTQ+ matters. This opens space for future research as well since this system of belief gives the power to Church change any doctrine.

Another reason for choosing Mormonism is indirectly connected to the rights of LGBTQ+ people. Even though LGBTQ+ rights have improved throughout the years in the US, this has not stopped LGBTQ+ people from taking their own lives due to their Mormon upbringing, especially in the state of Utah. Additionally, antidepressant use (Cart, 2002) and suicide rates (University of Utah Health, no date) are high in Utah, which is considered to be the centre of Mormonism. The impact of this religion on LGBTQ+ people is an important factor that has driven this research idea. Unfortunately, suicide is not only a Mormon case in the LGBTQ+ community (Haas *et al.*, 2011). This topic has been chosen with the assumption that being an LGBTQ+ person in religious contexts is be difficult. I have chosen a religion that does not influence my life so as to stay objective when researching this topic.

Although theories such as queer theory (De Lauretis, 1991; Butler, 2011) or intersections between feminist and queer theory (Richardson, McLaughlin and Casey, 2006) can be used to research this topic, the thesis focuses on freedom and discrimination with regard to freedom of religion at a collective level and freedom from religion at an individual level.

Data have been collected through semi-structured interviews. Data could have been collected through documents and online surveys as well. However, I preferred to gain an insight into the lives of queer ExMormons while researching this topic. The data has been analysed through qualitative content analysis. Even though critical discourse analysis or narrative analysis methods could have been used to analyse the data, I have chosen qualitative content analysis to better engage with the text produced as a result of the interviews.

¹ In Mormonism, it is believed that the Church officials can receive revelations from God “to get answers to the questions that matter most in life.” For more information you can visit <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2014/10/continuing-revelation>

1.4 Content structure

The thesis starts with an introduction that details the research aim and questions along with background information in the field of LGBTQ+ rights, freedom of religion and Mormonism. The previous research chapter provides a view of the research on the right to religion and sexuality, LGBTQ+ rights' relationship with religion, and Mormonism. The theory chapter presents the definitions and theories of discrimination and freedom and explains how these two dimensions are used through the operationalisation of theory. In the method chapter, selected data collection and analysis methods are discussed. The ways to reach participants and ethics regarding the data collection are also detailed. The analysis chapter presents findings and discussions regarding them. The final chapter provides concluding remarks and recommendations.

1.5 Background Information

This section provides background information on human rights and LGBTQ+ rights, freedom of religion, LGBTQ+ rights and freedom of religion in the USA, LGBTQ+ rights and the LDS Church respectively. This aims to help the reader better understand the topic and relate to the research aim.

1.5.1 Human rights and LGBTQ+ rights

The 'human rights' concept has arisen as an outcome of "struggles for freedom" and it now can be defined as a process that includes "continuity, diversity, and change." The history of human rights does not receive much attention from people in the human rights field (Freeman, 2017, p. 48). There is more to human rights than the United Nations (UN). However, due to the limitation of space and scope, information regarding human rights will be provided based on the version that arose with the UN. How human rights have evolved (US Institute of Diplomacy and Human Rights, 2021) deserves valuable attention and improvement since the UN is one of the most important aspects of it. The UN was founded as a response to the atrocities that occurred during the Second World War and developed the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights² (UDHR) in 1948 to guarantee the human rights of everyone internationally. Later on, many conventions and treaties have been prepared to protect different types of vulnerable groups throughout the time (*Human Rights Instruments*, no date).

Although a specific convention on LGBTQ+ does not exist and LGBTQ+ rights were not discussed until the 1980s at the UN level, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)³ was used to address Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) issues (Baisley, 2016, p. 140). *Hertzberg v. Finland*⁴ in 1982 was a case where sexual orientation was officially addressed at the UN level for the first time. The case was related to homosexuality being discussed on radio and TV in Finland that banned it. The Human Rights Council (HRC) supported Finland's decision which was not in favour of LGBTQ+ rights (Baisley, 2016, p. 140). However, in 1994 there was more progress with HRC deciding that Tasmania's sodomy law violates the right to privacy. The decision was interpreted to mean favourable move for LGBTQ+ rights. In 1993, 1994, and 1995 SOGI issues and relevant civil society activities were visible. International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA)⁵ became the first organization with consultative status on SOGI issues even though some states voted against it (Baisley, 2016, p. 144). The Vienna Declaration and Program of Action in 1993 had references to sexual violence and this was considered a breakthrough for the right to sexuality. Despite being progressive, many religious groups including Mormons opposed this discussion. Since sexual orientation was not mentioned in any UN treaty, some states opposed the idea of including sexual orientation in the human rights frame. However, in 2011 the "Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity" resolution was adopted by HRC (United Nations, 2011). This was the first resolution by the UN on this matter. Baisley (2016, p. 145) also draws attention to that the UN and civil society's work supported each other on LGBTQ+ issues.

² Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an important international document proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, see more on: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

³ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was adopted by Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and entered into force in 1976, see more on: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/ccpr.pdf>

⁴ Leo Hertzberg *et al.* v. Finland, Communication No. 61/1979, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/OP/1 at 124 (1985), see more on: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-114486%22%5D%7D>

⁵ ILGA, currently ILGA World – the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, is a federation that has been campaigning for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex human rights since its establishment in 1978.

1.5.2. Freedom of religion

Freedom of religion is an important concept and topic for this thesis, and this section provides information on it. Religion and sexuality have existed for a very long time. Both concepts led to discrimination and persecution. The protection for religion and believers has been discussed long before compared to LGBTQ+ people and their rights (Baisley, 2016). Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) explicitly refers to religion. Article 2 and Article 16 indirectly protect people against discrimination based on religion, but Article 18 is specifically used to protect religious freedom. Additionally, the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief⁶ (OHCHR, 1981) and Article 18 of ICCPR and protect religious freedom elaborately. This points out that a declaration on protecting religion exists while SOGI issues are not even considered human rights.

The importance of religious freedom is in line with the reason why the UN was founded. It was aimed to respond to the atrocities, especially the Holocaust which caused 6 million Jews to be massacred. However, believers of different religions also do not directly support each other. Madan (2003) mentions that Roman Catholic Church was silent during the Holocaust and claims that anti-semitism has its roots in the time when Jews crucified Jesus. Freedom of religion plays an important role not only for believers since it also entails the right not to believe anything (Dickson, 1995; Richmond, 2017). International covenants and declarations protect the people who do not believe or choose not to practice any religion as well.

1.5.3. LGBTQ+ rights and freedom of religion in the USA

The right to religious freedom has been a very important part of history in the USA. The First Amendment⁷ specifically protects this right, and it is thought that this freedom is older in the USA than in many parts of the world. However, it “is not appreciably older than the law of religious freedom in many other parts of the world” (Durham, 1994, p. 620). *Reynolds v. United*

⁶ The Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief is a UN resolution adopted in 1981, see the full document on: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-all-forms-intolerance-and-discrimination>

⁷ “The First Amendment provides that Congress make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting its free exercise. It protects freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and the right to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” See the US Constitution in full: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/our-government/the-constitution/>

States was the first case where religious freedom was examined. This case is important in US history but also very relevant in this thesis since George Reynold was a Latter-day Saint who wanted to practice polygamy freely based on his religion's requirements (Durham, 1994). The decision was that polygamy cannot be practised based on freedom of religion. The First Amendment also serves the purpose of limiting the state to establish or restrict a religion. Therefore, it also protects believers as much as non-believers and prevents the state from imposing a religious belief in state affairs (American Civil Liberties Union, no date). Religious freedom should not be confused with receiving funding from the government to manage houses of worship or similar activities. In the US, no government funding is provided for any religious activity regardless of what religion it is. Therefore, religion in the US is easily considered self-funding (Rogers, 2004, p. 906).

When it comes to LGBTQ+ rights, there is a different picture. In the 1920s, people resorted to hiding their sexual orientation and same-sex partnerships so as not to get targeted or lose their jobs. In the 1950s, there are organizations that go through different phases from discussions of gay marriage to the importance of transgender visibility, which started after the 2010s. In 1952, homosexuality was listed as a mental disorder and remained as such until 1974. The AIDS epidemic was and still is a big part of gay rights history because a new type of discrimination started against gay men regardless of their HIV status (Morgan and Rodriguez, 2020).

In 1958 the Supreme Court made a landmark decision on the *One, Inc. v. Olesen* case. The court reversed a lower court's decision which ruled that *ONE Magazine* violated obscenity laws through its content on homosexuality. This was the first decision which was in favour of LGBTQ+ people in the Supreme Court. In the 1960s, the police used to raid the bars that LGBTQ+ people frequented. On 28 June 1969, New York City police raided the Stonewall Inn bar, which led to protests that became a symbol for the "gay liberation movement." This event is also the reason why LGBTQ+ Pride is celebrated every June in most countries (Morgan and Rodriguez, 2020, p. 40).

Same-sex marriage was legal in many US states, but it became legal across all states in June 2015 after the case *Obergefell v. Hodges*⁸. The critical point is that the Respect for Marriage

⁸ *Obergefell v. Hodges* is a landmark case where US Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples can marry in June 2015. See the detailed fact regarding the case: <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2014/14-556>

Act⁹ was introduced in July 2022 to protect this decision after the Supreme Court in June 2022 overturned *Roe v. Wade*, which guaranteed the constitutional right to abortion since 1973 (Hurley and Chung, 2022).

1.5.4 LGBTQ+ rights and the LDS Church

The church was founded in New York, USA by Joseph Smith in 1830 (*About us: the church of jesus christ of latter-day saints*, no date) and has almost 17 million members around the world with almost 7 millions of whom live in the USA (*Statistics and church facts | total church membership*, 2023). While there is a debate about whether Mormons are Christians or not (Jackson, 2000; Kerns, 2018), the Church and its members identify themselves as Christian with additional scriptures to the Bible, such as The Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price (*Scriptures*, no date). Despite being considered non-Christian by some mainstream Christian denominations, it is the 3rd largest Christian denomination in the USA (America Demografia, 2022). Utah has a peculiar place for the Church because the Mormon pioneers immigrated there to start a new life after the discrimination and difficulties due to polygamy and having different beliefs. With the leadership of Brigham Young who was the second president of the Church, Mormons built a new life in today's Salt Lake City, Utah. Mormons (Latter-day Saints) are the reason why Utah is called the Beehive State and a beehive symbol exists on its flag since it is derived from the Book of Mormon (*Utah History Encyclopedia*, 1994).

The name Mormon Church is more known by people in general but it has not been preferred by the Church since 2018 (Weaver, 2018). For the members, 'Latter-day Saints' is preferred instead of 'Mormons'. The Church has a university that was founded by and named after Brigham Young. Despite removing the policy regarding same-sex behaviour in its Honour Code, Brigham Young University issued a letter confirming that same-sex romantic behaviour is still not compatible with the Church's principles (*Same-sex romantic behaviour*, 2020). However, the university has openly LGBTQ+ students (The Daily Universe, 2016) and allowed an LGBTQ+ demonstration for the first time in 2022 (Park, 2022).

⁹ Respect for Marriage Act is a US federal law that enables recognition of same-sex and interracial marriages in all US states and territories. It was passed by 117th United States Congress and signed in December 2022. Details of the law can be reached on <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/8404>

The Church has professional publications in many matters. While these matters are similar to other religions in the way of life before and after death, the Church has a section on quite diverse matters including gardening, peer pressure, same-sex attraction, and transgender people (*Gospel topics*, no date). Through this, it could be observed easily that gender roles, marriage, and having kids are so important in Mormonism. There are three levels of heaven in Mormonism. These are Celestial Kingdom, Terrestrial Kingdom and Telestial Kingdom respectively from the highest-degree to the lowest-degree (*Kingdoms of Glory*, no date). However, the Celestial Kingdom has tiers within as well. Since heterosexual marriage is almost a must to enter the Celestial Kingdom, it is almost impossible for LGBTQ+ people to reach the “highest degree of glory” in the Celestial Kingdom even if an LGBTQ+ person can enter the Celestial Kingdom (*Doctrine and covenants 131*, 1843). Marriages in Mormonism are between a man and a woman and are believed to be eternal and valid in the after-life (*Marriage*, no date). Regarding the marriage concept, polygamy was always practised but “only made public in 1852” (Payne, 2010) within the Church until Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act of 1882 was adopted to declare polygamy a felony in the federal territories of the USA. Even some years after the Act, Church members still practised polygamy (*The manifesto and the end of plural marriage*, 1890). The Church issued a statement that defines its stance on family, marriage, and gender roles that would be used for referring to situations regarding same-sex marriage (*The family: a proclamation to the world*, 1995). This was after the Church used its power to protect “traditional marriage” between a man and woman in the case of *Baehr v. Lewin* which was to legalize same-sex marriage in Hawaii in 1993 (Prince, 2019, p. 11). One of the important aspects to observe gender roles in Mormonism is the Church’s missionary program where single men go on a mission for two years while this period is 18 months for single women (*Latter-day saint missionary program*, 2021). Although both men and women can go on a mission, going on a mission for males means “full adult participation” in the Church and a sign of maturity (Cornwall, Heaton and Young, 2001, p. 183). The Church has more than 53,000 missionaries in 407 missions in the world. Missionaries do not get paid and pay for their mission by themselves except for transportation.

Similar to many religions, the relationship between LGBTQ+ rights and LDS Church has not been very progressive and positive. Even though there are many events that happened throughout the history of the church, this part details some parts that demonstrate the shift and important facts. LGBTQ+ rights were not a matter for the Church until the 1960s (Prince, 2019, p. 22) and homosexuality was mostly referred to as something “ugly,” “repugnant,” “ever-

deepening degeneracy,” “evil,” “pervert,” deviant,” and “weaklings” by Church officials who voiced their opinion on the matter in 1970s and 1980s (Cook, 2017). As mentioned before, the Church is notorious for Mormon LGBTQ+ suicides and even made a financial donation in 2018 to prevent the suicides (Browning, 2018). However, the Church made a distinction between “homosexual practice” and “homosexual desire” in its LDS handbook on homosexuality in 1992 (Cragun, Williams and Sumerau, 2015, p. 303). In 2012, the Church announced that it launched the website “mormonsandgays.org” to “encourage understanding” LGBTQ+ community (Mach, 2012). The website emphasises that “having same-sex attraction is not a sin but acting on it is.” In 2016, the Church announced that it updated the website to include more encouraging messages for LGBTQ+ people and highlighted the “We love you” message (*Mormonandgay.lds.org provides ministerial materials for members and families*, 2016). Currently, the website is part of the Church’s official website and is entitled “Same-Sex Attraction” (*Same-sex attraction – church of jesus christ of latter-day saints*, no date). It provides information on ‘same-sex attraction’ and uses a non-judgemental tone. A similar change also occurred when it comes to black people’s place in the Church. Black men were not allowed to hold priesthood¹⁰ from 1852 until 1978 after a ‘revelation’ (*Race and the priesthood*, no date). This ‘revelation’ occurred 14 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed and became effective in the USA. The Act was considered a landmark law for ending “segregation in public places and banning employment discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, sex or national origin” (*Civil rights act of 1964 - definition, summary & significance*, 2023).

An event that affected the Church’s image was the campaign for Proposition 8 (Prop 8) in 2008. Prop 8 was a California ballot proposition to define marriage between a man and a woman and the Church declared to have made in-kind donations equal to 189,903.58 USD dollars (*Church clarifies proposition 8 filing, corrects erroneous news reports*, 2009) to support Prop 8. Another one was in November 2015 when the Church introduced a policy ruling that children with LGBTQ+ parents cannot become a member of the church unless they go through a process that gives them approval upon honestly showing that they do not support same-sex relationships. The policy also applied to members who were in same-sex marriages and targeted them as apostates (Goodstein, 2015). It is worth noting that this ‘continuing revelation’ came from God four months after the Supreme Court decided to allow same-sex marriage

¹⁰ “The priesthood is the authority of God delegated to men on earth to act in His name.” For more information you can visit <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/friend/2015/05/what-does-it-mean-to-hold-the-priesthood> and <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/priesthood>

across all the states in June 2015. The Church received much backlash even from its own community and this policy was reversed in April 2019 with a new revelation from God. As mentioned in the previous section, the Church's attitude towards LGBTQ+ people has come to a point where it has given support for the Respect For Marriage Act that protects the Supreme Court's same-sex marriage decision in 2015 as well as the tax-exempt status of religious organization (*Statement on the signing of the us respect for marriage act, 2022*). It is also important to note that one of the Church officials, Dallin Harris Oaks, announced that the Church has decided to support the bill due to including amendments that protect religious organisations' right not to get harmed by federal and state laws, and that maintain the tax-exempt status for religious organisations as well (*President oaks clarifies the lds church's position on the respect for marriage act, 2023*).

2. Previous Research

The first section of this part details the tension between LGBTQ+ rights and freedom of religion and belief. However, it also emphasizes the right not to believe in a religion in the case of discrimination against LGBTQ+ people. Information on the US context is provided as well. The second section shows the previous research on the relationship between LGBTQ+ people and LDS Church.

2.1 LGBTQ+ rights and freedom of religion and belief

The dynamics of human rights are complex despite positive improvements, and they are particularly problematic in respect of the freedom of religion of belief. Due to the obscurity and conflicts associated with religion, there has been criticism against it, especially when considering patriarchy and how women and LGBTQ+ are oppressed in the name of religion (Bielefeldt, Pinto and Petersen, 2022). Freedom of religion is also an important part of human rights theories and conventions, and is used to protect believers as well as non-believers. Younger generation LGBTQ+ people, who claim their sexual identities, draw on freedom by saying "I was made by God this way" (Bielefeldt, Pinto and Petersen, 2022).

Endsjø (2020) contributes to the discussion of freedom of religion by providing the option not to follow or believe in any religion from the perspective of LGBTQ+ rights. As there are many diverse religions (Pew Research Center, 2012), freedom of religion should be limited to some extent. According to Endsjø (2020, p. 1687) LGBTQ+ rights conflict with the freedom of religion which is usually (along with culture) used to limit the rights of the LGBTQ+ community and define marriage between a man and a woman. Endsjø further points out the fact that LGBTQ+ people's freedom of religion is violated when they are denied goods or services or when they cannot benefit from the advantages of being in a relationship even if the relationship is recognized by the state. This leads to a comparison of "freedom of religion v. freedom of religion" with the former referring to the people's right to practice a religion and the latter referring to the people's right not to practice a religion (Endsjø, 2020, p. 1686). According to him, there is a group that feels uncomfortable providing services to people that do not share the same beliefs and another group that live their lives being at the edge when the potential for discrimination against them, such as being denied services or goods is ever present in their lives. When discussing LGBTQ+ rights, the right to sexuality, and freedom of religion, the universality of human rights and non-discrimination requirements in international human rights law should be considered.

Religion has an important place in US American society, where people are known to be religious. This brings out good things such as volunteering and being kind. Yet, people are not very tolerant of the LGBTQ+ community. Some studies show how religious beliefs impact people's political attitudes (Harrison and Michelson, 2017, p. 68). There are religions that favour tolerance of LGBTQ+ people but, many religions in the world are more inclined to condemn homosexuality. These religions may forbid discrimination based on race or ethnicity but at the same time exhibit prejudice against LGBTQ+ people simply because their existence offends the people who believe in these religions (Whitley, 2009; Harrison and Michelson, 2017). For example, to some Christians, same-sex relationships are wrong, and not speaking against them is a sin. This perspective places people in a dilemma between the right to religion and the right to privacy. There is a variety within different denominations in the US and some churches support same-sex relationships and marriage (Pew Research Center, 2015). A few religions respected, at least tolerated, homosexuality and many more condemned it (Dent, 2006, p. 555). In the West, LGBTQ+ rights started emerging as step towards ending violence against the LGBTQ+ community and their right to life. The rights movement later evolved into aiming to equalize LGBTQ+ people to straight people. Through

Lawrence v. Texas case, sodomy laws were ruled to be unconstitutional. In response to this judgement, the Defense of Marriage Act was introduced and this contest does not seem to cease any time soon (Dent, 2006, p. 557).

There are many different religions and diverse Christian denominations in the USA (Pew Research Center, 2023). Based on research conducted in the US (Pew Research Center, 2015), 72% of white Evangelical Protestants stated to see a conflict between LGBTQ+ rights and freedom of religion. While there are churches in the US that support same-sex marriage (Masci and Lipka, 2015), 57% of Mormons said that homosexuality should be discouraged (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Most discussions in the field mention the reality that religious people might ignore the anti-discrimination laws and deny services or goods to LGBTQ+ people (Dent, 2006; Wilson, 2016; Eskridge Jr and Wilson, 2018; Small, 2018; Koppelman, 2020). Irrespective of the law, *The Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* case exemplifies the LGBTQ+ reality when a baker turned down making a cake for a gay couple because the baker's religious beliefs do not support such marriage. The couple files a complaint to the Colorado Civil Rights Commission which found that the baker discriminated against the couple despite the anti-discrimination act in Colorado. The case went to the US Supreme Court, which rules in favour of the baker because according to the Court, the Colorado Civil Rights Commission had ignored the religious freedom of the baker based on the First Amendment while handling the case (Vile, 2018). Even though the Supreme Court asserted that the couple cannot be discriminated against based on their sexual orientation, it still ruled that the baker's freedom of religion was violated. The case negatively became prominent because discrimination against LGBTQ+ people was not ruled out and the decision came three years after same-sex marriage was legalized. This gave a clear message on the rights of LGBTQ+ people being at risk despite their ability to marry legally (Alexander, 2018; Feldman, 2018; Miller, 2018).

2.2 LGBTQ+ rights and Mormonism

As mentioned in the background section previously, the LDS Church does not have a very friendly history and relationship with homosexuality and LGBTQ+ rights. However, Quinn (1996) claims that there were times when Mormons were more tolerant of same-sex relationships than the rest of the population in the US. His publication on same-sex dynamics among Mormons in the 19th century provides insight into the way Mormon culture perceives same-sex relations.

There is research on mental health problems LGBTQ+ Mormons face and the research suggests that sexual minorities belonging to a religious group could benefit from mental health support (Dehlin *et al.*, 2014; Grigoriou, 2014; Dehlin, 2015; Lefevor *et al.*, 2020, 2022; Skidmore, Lefevor and Dillon, 2022). Some of the research includes ExMormons as well. Mental health problems experienced by LGBTQ+ Mormons are one side of the picture. It is known that LGBTQ+ people are more likely to commit suicide than the general population (Haas *et al.*, 2011). Research on suicide among LGBTQ+ Mormons exists (Fellingham *et al.*, 2000; Fletcher Stack, 2014; Barker, Parkinson and Knoll, 2016; Knoll, 2016) and LGBTQ+ students at Brigham Young University are at a high-risk (Olsen, 2017). However, the research has difficulty in linking the suicides directly to the Church policies. Despite the lack of data due to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) not classifying suicides based on sexual orientation, Utah's suicide rate received attention in 2015 which is the year when the Church's LGBTQ+ policy changed to target LGBTQ+ members (Hatch, 2016).

Theoretical discussions of gender (Payne, 2010), post-heterosexuality (Petrey, 2011), and LGBTQ+ people (Hite, 2013) exist based on Mormon theology. Ideas and discussions about why Mormon theology would make it difficult for LGBTQ+ to fit in the Church start this conversation. It focuses on how Mormonism preaches heterosexuality, traditional marriage between a man and a woman, and giving birth. Counter-ideas are created based on the actual experiences of churchgoer LGBTQ+ Mormons to defend that being LGBTQ+ and Mormon can work together. All these academic discussions admit the fact that "continuing revelation", which is the belief that God is still in touch with the Prophets, can be a tool to change doctrines at any time within Mormonism. This discussion in the literature is important because it confirms that LGBTQ+ people cannot be exalted in the highest tier of the Celestial

Kingdom (*Doctrine and covenants 131*, 1843), which proves that LGBTQ+ people are not equally worthy as heterosexual people in Mormonism. As mentioned before, the policy change regarding LGBTQ+ people between 2015 and 2019 received criticism. This could be seen in the research field as well. It is also one of the reasons why Prince (2019) wrote a book on the relationship between the LDS Church and Gay Rights. This source provides detailed information on many topics ranging from the Church's historical stance on homosexuality, Prop 8, the policy to suicides, transgender and intersex people. Despite including interviews with active Mormons and ExMormons, the non-academic source does not detail ethics and methods regarding these interviews. However, this is one of the unique sources which mention the words "gay rights" directly.

There is more research related to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ Mormons in the Church after 2015 (Cragun, Williams and Sumerau, 2015; Nielson, 2016; Cook, 2017; Riess, 2019; Brandley, 2022). This could be considered an academic reaction to the policy change. We can see there is a spectrum of LGBTQ+ people being included or excluded in the Church (Nielson, 2016). Some might feel excluded, and some can feel at peace by being active members. The research shows 40% of Millennials support same-sex marriage while 20% of Boomer/Silent respondents do. The research (Cragun, Williams and Sumerau, 2015; Cook, 2017) analysing the doctrines, leaders' speeches and publications are useful and related to the purpose of this research. Since the field does not provide much research on the experiences of ExMormons, their opinions through in-depth interviews would contribute to the literature.

3. Theory

The theory chapter of the thesis focuses on two dimensions of human rights to answer the research questions. These dimensions are discrimination and freedom. I presented theoretical discussions around discrimination and freedom to operationalise the theory. At the end of the chapter, I explained how the operationalisation of theory will help me analyse the data I collected.

3.1 Discrimination

3.1.1 What is discrimination?

Discrimination has been defined by many scholars with many different perspectives depending on whether it is anchored in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and age. Fibbi, Midtbøen and Simon (2021, p. 13) define discrimination as a concept where similar individuals in the same situations are treated unequally. However, these individuals are supposed to be different due to some characteristics such as “race, ethnicity, gender, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, or other categorical statuses.” Exclusion due to the said characteristics or similar ones might lead to discrimination. They also consider discrimination based on two elements such as comparison and ascribed membership. The former refers to an individual or a group being “treated unfavourably compared to others” while the latter is related to being a member of a certain category that one cannot choose or change even if they want to.

Gardner (2018, p. 4) suggests that a comparator is not needed for discrimination to occur. Based on the example of Equality Act 2010 in the UK, “A person (A) discriminates against another (B) if, because of a protected characteristic, A treats B less favourably than A treats or would treat others.” He asserts that there is no mention of person C even though it could be argued that this extract from law subtly suggests comparison because the way A treats B differently is measured based on “others”.

(Antonovsky, 1960, p. 81) theorises that discrimination might be defined as treating individuals adversely regardless of the situation. Anticipated rewards or opportunities are not offered to the individuals due to their membership in a certain group. While comparing it to a caste system, he points out that individuals who are discriminated against outside a caste system do not accept equality and demand equal opportunities. Antonovsky mentions three conditions for discrimination to “emerge and persists”: The first is “scarcity of rewards and opportunities”; the second is the scarcity concept should be agreed upon by “both insiders and outsiders”; and the third is related to “unequal distribution of power, which enables the insiders to impose their monopoly and perpetuate it” (Antonovsky, 1960, p. 82). To him, discrimination occurs outside “conscious decisions and freedom of choice” (Antonovsky, 1960, p. 83).

Vandenhole (2005, cited in (Altman, 2020, p. 2) asserts that discrimination does not have a universal definition. Altman gives an example of core human rights documents not being able to define discrimination either. He refers to Article 26 of ICCPR and Article 14 of the European Convention of Human Rights¹¹ (ECHR) which both prohibit discrimination but points out that a definition of discrimination is not presented. Discrimination might revolve around actions and policies that are “socially salient” groups (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2006, and Holroyd 2018 cited in Altman, 2020). Altman highlights that discriminatory behaviours should cause “disadvantage, harm or wrong” for the discriminated individuals. Another important point he makes is that discrimination should not be mentioned as a different treatment but a disadvantageous treatment (Altman, 2020, p. 4). Diverse definitions from scholars might support the process of better understanding what discrimination is. However, for a wider definition and understanding, it is essential to look into direct and indirect discrimination.

3.1.2 Direct and indirect discrimination

There are three types of anti-discrimination laws that are commonly recognized in the USA and the UK (Moreau, 2010, p. 154). The first one is prohibitions for ‘direct discrimination’ which is the phrase used in the UK. It is called ‘disparate treatment’ in the USA. The second, is the prohibitions on ‘indirect discrimination’ and ‘disparate impact’ used in the UK and USA respectively. The third is unique adjustment obligations for individuals with certain characteristics such as disability. Direct discrimination happens when someone is discriminated against explicitly due to their particular traits. However, indirect discrimination does not have the intention to exclude anyone and seems neutral but includes a disproportionate effect on the person being discriminated against. Third, special requirements are needed to eliminate the trait causing potential discrimination. Doyle (2007, p. 537) states that direct discrimination is when a measure “distinguishes between class A and class B.” If the ground AB is prohibited, it is direct discrimination based on AB difference. Indirect discrimination happens when a measure does not distinguish between class A and class B but is still problematic.

¹¹ The European Convention on Human Rights entered into force in 1953 to protect and promote human rights and political freedoms in Europe. See the convention in full on https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/convention_eng.pdf

When defining direct discrimination, (Altman, 2020, p. 6) uses an example of a bar explicitly stating that it does not serve Roma. Therefore, in this definition, explicitness and intention are two important elements. The discriminator is supposed to have the “aim of imposing a disadvantage” on individuals due to their membership in a socially salient group. However, interestingly, he also mentions that direct discrimination can also be unconscious, and the discriminator might not realize their discriminatory acts. As for the definition of indirect discrimination, the intention is mentioned again. In indirect discrimination, the discriminator does not have the intention to discriminate but the discriminatory act still has a “disproportionately disadvantageous impact” on individuals who belong to a socially salient group. The important element of this concept is that the discriminatory act should be justified to eliminate indirect discrimination.

3.1.3 Discrimination by religious organizations

There are discussions about whether anti-discrimination laws in the USA can apply to religious organizations (McDougal, Lasswell and Chen, 1975; Bagni, 1979; Minow, 2007). The first part of these discussions is usually related to the religious organizations’ request for tax-exempt status. Secondly, it is the question of whether it is discrimination when a religious organisation looks for an employee and demands this employee be a member of the organisation. While a religious organisation’s tax-exempt status could be argued based on the US Supreme Court’s definition of religion, there are decisions which allow a religious organisation to demand membership in that religion when looking for an employee. Even though this research is not related to these two topics, it might give an idea to mention how religious organisations and anti-discrimination laws are discussed in the USA.

Bagni (1979, p. 1515) makes an important point and discusses a religious institution’s demand for exemption from secular law. He argues that any adopted policy of the said religion should not be directly considered justified by the court. Otherwise, this would be disrespectful to the opinions of church members who hold minority religious beliefs. The number of members who think that a policy is discriminatory, and has religious origin should not matter but it can still affect the court when deciding whether this policy is extremely important to practice the religion. If the views regarding this religion are more accepted or more central, a free-exercise claim can be stronger.

Bagni asserts that government should not intervene in spiritual activities and relationships within a church. Defining epicentre as “the purely spiritual life of a church”, he emphasizes that membership policies, bible study and Sunday school all belong to the scope of this epicentre. To him, epicentre has three circles with the innermost representing church-related activities and the outermost one representing a “totally secular world.” If a church acts closer to the outermost circle, it still can benefit from first amendment protection. However, moving closer to the outermost circle (secular world) will place responsibility on the church to act in line with the principles of the secular world. While the discrimination arising from Mormon theology cannot be challenged due to the free-exercise claim, LDS Church’s support to campaign against same-sex marriage could be challenged since it moves closer to outermost circles with the opinions and beliefs that should remain in the spiritual epicentre.

Minow (2007, p. 786) mentions problems emerging when religious groups try to get exempted from civil rights laws. According to Minow, the exemption covers not only tax-exempt status or licensing requirements but also antidiscrimination norms which could be used to defend religious freedom as well. She discusses how the scope of civil rights could be defined because civil rights include both sexual orientation-based discrimination and the protection of religious freedom. Drawing attention to the importance of plurality in the US, she asserts that “plural goods can and do clash” since providing protection based on race, sex and sexual orientation might conflict with religious freedom. Furthermore, she highlights that the situation might get more challenging when it is not an individual but a religious group demanding exemption (Minow, 2007, p. 789). While she believes that this tension will not resolve quickly, she states that it is important to realise that negotiation plays a significant role here. Instead of trying to find one side absolutely right, she suggests a balance between conflicts and accommodation (Minow, 2007, p. 849).

To conclude, it is important to note that discrimination could be related to one belonging to a group they might not want or cannot change. The unequal distribution of power and persistence of it also plays an important role when discussing discrimination. Causing “disadvantage, harm or wrong” for the discriminated individuals or groups is another important factor to understand discrimination. When it comes to discrimination types such as direct and indirect discrimination, intention is an important factor, but discrimination can still occur without the intention to discriminate. For the last part, if religious organisations request not to be subjected to discrimination laws as part of their spiritual activities, such activities

should not mix with the activities in the secular world and a balance should be sought for between religious organizations and non-discrimination laws.

3.2 Freedom

3.2.1 What is freedom?

Freedom has two concepts, such as Lockean freedom and Reidian freedom (Rowe, 1987). Lockean freedom consists of free action and voluntary action. Voluntary action requires the willingness to do the action. However, willingness is only sufficient if the person truly has the right not to do the action. William considers Lockean freedom to be inadequate because only the will to do something is not enough. One also should have the “power to will” truly. Reidian freedom concept, which belongs to Thomas Reid, suggests that one’s free act of will does not arise from prior events (Rowe, 1987, p. 51). Thomas Reid defends and believes in the existence of the free will.

When discussing different versions of freedom defined by others, McGill (1960, p. 452) draws attention to ‘the will’ and states that accepting “an ideal must be admittedly exempt from coercion and duress.” Additionally, he highlights the idea of a ‘real’ and ‘conscious’ choice. If a choice is made based on “gaining access on a job, security, approval, affection or tolerance in a given social formation”, it would be difficult to call this ‘a free choice.’ McGill further mentions that leaving “a settled ideal preference” due to gains or discontentment might not be a completely free choice. Even if physical restrictions do not exist, being deprived of something and being promised tolerance still removes the possibility of “full freedom of choice” (McGill, 1960, p. 452).

Thalos (2013) presents different theories of freedom. Freedom does not mean that there are no other powers. Freedom, actually, exists if there are powers intervening. Therefore, freedom is not the opposite of “causal necessity.” Thalos refers to freedom as “Power over Oneself” and states that it requires “demands of authenticity.” Without it, one may be just another animal in a herd. Providing the profile of a Mexican immigrant girl’s struggles of trying to be recognized by her teachers in the US context, Thalos shows us how the girl chooses freedom by resisting the groundless comments about her. This also underlines that “personal power” is related to one’s knowledge of their capabilities. She further mentions the

exercise of freedom by stating that freedom is also about “accepting or rejecting judgements about oneself.” She concludes the freedom concept with the definition of exercising judgment regarding one’s qualities especially when the judgement is imposed by powerful others who “exercise their powers of judgement against” that person.

3.3 Operationalisation of theory

The thesis aims to find answers to the questions regarding “Mormonism’s impact on the lives of LGBTQ+ people” and “the reason for LGBTQ+ ExMormons to leave the church”. The empirical data will be analysed by drawing on the theories of discrimination and freedom (O’Brien, 2001, p. 360). The discrimination they have been exposed to and their decision to choose freedom will help to answer the questions. While I aim to answer the first question based on the empirical data collected from the interviews, the second question regarding their choice of freedom will be a theoretical discussion exploring their “Power over Oneself.”

4. Research Methods

This chapter explains the qualitative research design, sampling, ethics, and data collection method and finally data analysis. I followed a qualitative research design where I drew on primary data from interviews which were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

4.1 Qualitative case study

Because this study aims to find answers to Mormonism’s impact on the lives of LGBTQ+ people and why ExMormons choose to leave the Church, I decided on qualitative research which will be more helpful to find answers to my research question. This is because quantitative research is numerical and draws on statistics and it is mostly used for the deductive approach and deals with known facts and theories (Bazen, Barg and Takeshita, 2021). Additionally, findings obtained through quantitative research are useful to explore actions and trends but might not help researchers find the reason “why people think, feel or act in certain ways.” Qualitative research supports researchers to find “the motivation behind observed behaviours” (Goertzen, 2017). As my research questions concentrate on “how” and

“why”, I have decided to select a qualitative method analysis instead of a quantitative one. Personal experiences of LGBTQ+ ExMormons could be useful to analyse and explore the dynamics of their journey which includes discrimination and freedom.

4.2 Ethics, sampling and data collection

4.2.1 Ethics

Ethics is an inseparable part of the research process. There are four areas when it comes to ethics (Diener and Crandall, 1978, cited in Bryman, 2012, p. 135). These are about informing and protecting participants, respecting their privacy and being honest with them. As I collected my data through in-depth interviews, I followed a procedure to comply with ethics regarding the interview process. Bryman (2012) states that qualitative research “can be less predictable” compared to quantitative research but he still suggests including general information about the research in the informed consent form. Since the University of Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway is responsible for the research project, I prepared the informed consent form¹² based on the university’s draft form. The form explicitly stated the purpose of the project, the institution, and people responsible for the project, the criteria for participation and that it is voluntary, and the way data is recorded, collected, secured, and kept until the end of the project. The rights of the participant and contact information of the people responsible for the project were also provided. Norway is not a European Union member state, but it is in the European Economic Area (EEA). General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) under the European Union law applies to states in EEA as well (EFTA, 2018). Sexual orientation and religious beliefs are in a special category of personal data as per sub-paragraph 2(a) of Article 9 and cannot be collected with an individual’s explicit consent. Because the informed consent form states that all the data will be anonymised after collection, the form clearly explains that participants could contact the data protection officer at the University of Tromsø and also send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority in case of being identified in the collected data. They were also informed that they can leave the interview at any time without any consequences and have the option to have their data deleted or modified after the interview.

¹² Appendix 1

4.2.2 Sampling

For the purpose of this study, participants must be ExMormon and must identify themselves as LGBTQ+. A person believing in Mormonism could be excommunicated by the church or can remove their records from the church voluntarily by “giving their bishop a written signed request” (32. *repentance and church membership councils*, 2021). “Sending a signed, notarised request to the Church” is also an option to resign officially. Additionally, a person can also identify themselves as ExMormon by simply not believing in Mormonism and not participating in the Church activities. In this study, I did not distinguish between ExMormon who removed their record officially or not. It is sufficient for people to not believe in Mormonism anymore. The participants both included ExMormons who resigned and have not resigned.

As the Church is headquartered in Utah and most prevalent in the USA, I have decided to follow the convenience sampling type where a researcher chooses the participants that can be reached (Bryman, 2012, p. 201). For this, I filled out surveys to become a member of many ExMormon groups on Facebook by using my personal account. In these surveys, I shared my intention and stated my reason to be in the group. In the groups, I shared a message which is a summary of the consent form so people were able to comment under the post or reach me by direct messages. In addition to Facebook, I posted a similar message in the ExMormon group on Reddit as well. I contacted some NGOs working in the field of LGBTQ+ rights in the USA to connect with LGBTQ+ ExMormons who could be interested in participating in the research. I also messaged ExMormons who produce videos on YouTube and shows on podcast platforms. Because there were not many trans people among the participants, at some points I directly messaged some trans people but, in the end, only one of the participants was a trans woman. Trying to access ExMormons through online channels created an immediate limitation that people who do not use these online platforms. Another limitation was about the ExMormons who experienced the Church outside the USA. Since the thesis mostly focuses on the practices and actions of the Church in the USA, non-US ExMormons had to be eliminated.

4.2.3 Data collection

To collect primary data, I have decided to conduct semi-instructed interviews. I have chosen this type of data collection method because I intended to develop my theories while having in-depth conversations with participants (Bryman, 2012, p. 12). Another reason for me to conduct in-depth conversation is that they allow me to ask questions back. Because Mormonism is a very unique denomination of Christianity with very diverse rules and doctrines, I planned that participants can lead me if a topic comes up about which I have not learned through reading sources.

I specifically planned interviews on different days and also tried not to hold interviews two days in a row to better engage with the participants and think over the data I collected from a recent interview. Even though semi-structured interviews can be more stressful than collecting data through qualitative online surveys, this stress wears off after the initial interviews (Buys *et al.*, 2022, p. 2034). I conducted the interviews online and used the Jitsi¹³ platform since it is a safe platform.

4.3 Data analysis

To analyse the data I collected, I have decided to use qualitative content analysis. Content analysis helps researchers analyse documents and texts (Bryman, 2012, p. 291). Even though it could be mainly considered a common data analysis method in quantitative studies, types of content analysis vary (Forman and Damschroder, 2007, p. 39). Researchers can create themes after close reading and coding by using qualitative content analysis. Themes could be created inductively as long as interviews are conducted and also could be combined as both inductive and deductive approaches (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). During the research process, I was open to combining these approaches as I was eager to find data that I have not encountered while researching for background information and previous research chapters. I avoided including questions regarding suicide because it is a sensitive and triggering topic. However, I expected that it would come up as a theme from the data collected.

¹³ Jitsi: Video Conferencing Software <https://meet.jit.si/>

I used Microsoft Word dictation feature to transcribe the interviews. Later, I reviewed the data to correct the typos and the parts the dictation system could not catch. After the transcripts were ready, I read all transcripts a few times to understand the context and relate to the participants (Mazaheri *et al.*, 2013, p. 3034). While I was reading the content, I made notes of words and events. After I saw the repetition of the events, I started developing themes. Every time I wrote down an event or theme, I also noted down from which participant it came considering the background of the participant as well. Even though I first focused on seeing similar content (Mazaheri *et al.*, 2013, p. 3035) from the participants that share the same sexual orientation, I realized I was wrong and acted biased.

5. Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, I present and analyse the findings collected through the interviews. The first five sections (6.1 Reinforced gender roles and heterosexual marriage in Mormonism, 6.2 The Church is behind the US context, 6.3 Feelings of shame and exclusion - denial of sexuality, 6.4 Indirect discrimination: Celibacy, 6.5 Depression and suicide) of this chapter are related to my first research question: “How does Mormonism impact the lives of LGBTQ+ people?” I answer this question by drawing on empirical data I collected. The other two sections (6.6 Discrimination in the Church context and 6.7 Freedom to choose to leave the Church and the reactions received) of this chapter aim to answer the second research question: “Why do LGBTQ+ Mormons choose to leave the LDS Church?” I answer the second question based on the data with the support of my operationalization of concepts which are discrimination and freedom.

While analysing the data, I preferred to use detailed quotes for the reader to better understand the concepts of being a queer Mormon and ExMormon. The table (**Table 1**) in the next page presents the sampling profile of participants so that the reader can follow the analysis easily and relate to the participants and their experiences. Since their profile is anonymised to avoid identification, only the data that is related to this thesis such as age, origin, and sexual orientation has been shared. Because I have not preferred to include their ages and locations directly to maintain anonymisation, I showed their ages only within an age range and locations only within the USA.

Participants	Age: 23 - 60	Origin	Sex	Sexual orientation	Gender identity	Church affiliation
P1	x	USA	Female	Bisexual	Cisgender	Born into Mormonism – Records not removed
P2	x	USA	Female	Pansexual	Transgender	Born into Mormonism – Records removed
P3	x	USA	Female	Bisexual	Cisgender	Born into Mormonism – Records removed
P4	x	USA	Female	Bisexual	Cisgender	Converted as an adult – Records removed
P5	x	USA	Male	Gay	Cisgender	Born into Mormonism – Records not removed
P6	x	USA	Male	Gay	Cisgender	Born into Mormonism – Records removed
P7	x	USA	Female	Lesbian/Queer	Cisgender	Born into Mormonism – Records not removed
P8	x	USA	Male	Gay	Cisgender	Born into Mormonism – Records removed
P9	x	USA	Male	Birromantic/Bisexual	Cisgender	Born into Mormonism – Records not removed

Table 1: Sample profile of participants by anonymised names, age range, origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, church affiliation (n = 9).

5.1 Reinforced gender roles and heterosexual marriage in Mormonism

Gender roles and traditional marriage play a very important role in Mormonism and scholars such as (Petrey, 2011) and (Hite, 2013) even discussed where LGBTQ+ stand in the Church since Mormonism does not offer a same-sex plan for LGBTQ+ people in this life or in the after-life. This might push LGBTQ+ Mormons to marry someone from the opposite-sex despite being bisexual or lesbian/gay. In addition to Mormonism itself, the way Mormonism is practised in some specific US states also contributes to this reality. P1 talks about her observation regarding this during her Mormon upbringing in [US state name removed]:

“There are different expectations from males and females. So for females basically if you do any schooling that's going to be just a backup education for if like your future spouse gets laid off work, you guys have something to fall back on. But females are primarily pushed to marry and have children. The males are pushed to go on that mission to mature a bit because they're sent out at 18 years old, go on that mission, mature a bit and come home and then marry right away.” (P1)

She also adds about the marriage perception by saying:

“[US state name removed] Mormon culture pushes on the female side very very very quickly. When I met my returned missionary [ex-husband], even though my personality was like you don't want to get married until 25, or like make any crazy decisions. My religious upbringing had conditioned me to think ‘well.. if they're returned missionary and they want to attend BYU¹⁴ and they want a family. This is where you get your true happiness so you should do it. So at 18 years old I was engaged, in six months later, I went like a month after I turned 19, we were married. So we met and married in six months.” [P1]

P2 recalls experiences on gender roles and marriage from her time in the Church before she came out as a pansexual transgender:

“They teach that Satan is attacking the family unit and they teach the family unit being a cis-gender man, and cis-gender woman having children together in the Church. So they're saying that Satan is attacking the family unit, and one of the ways he's doing it is through tempting. Tempting meaning giving evil connotation to these things, people with homosexuality and being transgender. That we need to protect the family unit. So honestly, and it hurts me to say this now when I was in the church, I did not support LGBTQ+ rights, but I was also ignorant and didn't know any better. It was how I was grown up, that's what I was taught. So even though I had friends in the LGBTQ+ community I honestly believe that it would have been better for them to live life according to the path Mormonism teaches, so that later on in the afterlife they would be happy forever after.” [P2]

While being a single Mormon might start becoming an issue when someone is in their 20s, being a single woman over 30 exacerbates this situation. Lived experiences of a woman trying to stay in the Church as a single person who is a queer in the closet might be even more challenging considering that this person cannot get married according to her religion. P3 mentions her struggles when she was in the Church as a female bisexual who is in the closet:

“I believe that in general, women are not given the same privileges and those they are given pale in comparison. I believe women are taught to minimize themselves and their needs in favour of husbands and children. I experienced extreme discrimination from family members and ward members and even leadership given the fact that I was a single woman with no children. It was as if I had no value and like my input couldn't even be considered because I had no children and no husband. It was honestly extremely painful to be single and attend family

¹⁴ Brigham Young University that is founded by the LDS Church. For more information, you can visit <https://www.byu.edu/about>

wards¹⁵ since most topics were family-centred and everyone surrounding you had children with them. I was an older single (30+) lady so it was painful to attend singles wards also (I was officially over the official age limit). Nothing says ‘loser’ like being too old for the singles ward but too single for the family ward. Overall, it became too painful to even attend church honestly.” [P3]

5.2 The Church is behind the US context

As discussed in previous sections¹⁶, the Church’s history of polygamy and discriminatory practises against black people have been mentioned to show how ‘revelations’ work to soften discourses on some issues. However, changed discourse have occurred late compared to the general context in the US society. It seems to demonstrate a similar case when it comes to rhetoric on LGBTQ+ people and their rights. Even though it is considered to be late according to the participants, the Church softened its discourse on homosexuality and LGBTQ+ people considering the statements before 1990s. Participants talked about the reality of the Church lagging behind and whether the changed narrative of policies and doctrines could exist also for the LGBTQ+ people in the future. P6 says:

“I definitely think Utah lags behind much of the rest of this country except the South. The church changes much more slowly. I feel like the reason the church changes on these issues is because members start to become disaffected with respect to uhm.. you know rights for LGBT people. A very good example is the Church's treatment of African-Americans. People of African descent.. when I was a child if you are black you can't go to the temple, black males could not hold the priesthood. That was changed in 1978 because the old guys championed that died off and the Church was under a lot of pressure.” [P6]

When talking about this topic, P6 refers to “religious freedom” as “the right to discriminate”.

[...] one of the most predictable responses to anything is cognitive dissonance and when the church is attacked for its positions it complains that it is discriminated against. It has spun things in the name of religious freedom which basically means the right to discriminate. You know there will certainly be tendencies to want to resist changing in response to social pressure. [P6]

The struggle of defining the limits of religious freedom and non-discrimination laws (McDougal, Lasswell and Chen, 1975) emerges here due to P6’s comment. As mentioned in the Theory chapter, Bagni (1979) talked about the government not intervening in dynamics in

¹⁵ “Congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are organized geographically and members attend worship services near their home. Each member belongs to a ward or branch.” For more information, you can visit <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/ward>

¹⁶ See the section 1.5.4 LGBTQ+ rights and the LDS Church

a church even if there is discrimination while Minow (2007) emphasised the importance of a balance to allow religious freedom as much as civil rights that might conflict with it. The experiences of a gay ExMormon who was in the closet in the Church for almost 30 years bring a new dimension and real-life context to these discussions. Now an ExMormon, this participant cannot be discriminated against for his sexual orientation by the Church anymore. However, LGBTQ+ people believing in Mormonism or any other religion which discriminates against sexual orientation might not be protected from discrimination if the balance between conflict and accommodation suggested by Minow cannot be found, especially if religious organizations try to avoid finding this balance.

P9 referred to Civil Rights Act, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Church's changed policy on black people holding the priesthood¹⁷ when he mentions that the Church usually follows the society behind:

“Uhm.. you look at Martin Luther King Jr. I think he was killed in 1968 I could be wrong on the exact year but in the 60s he was killed. That same decade.. you know the Civil Rights Act was passed so the whole country was going you know towards equality between the races. It wasn't until 1980-something [1978] that the Church finally gave black people the priesthood and allowed them to get married in the temple. So you know we're doing the same thing with gay marriage [...] it was finally legalized in June 2015 and here we are in 2023. After the Church has made several changes to policy and done several things, you still can't get married in the Church. It's probably gonna be until 2030 - 2040 before that actually happens. [...] always 20 to 30 years behind the time on pretty much all the social issues.” [P9]

It might be inferred that the Church's lagging behind society makes it difficult for LGBTQ+ ExMormons to adapt to their environment since the society that they live in was relevantly tolerant of their sexual orientation while the situation is not the same for the closer community they belong to. However, the interviews have not directly led to such data.

¹⁷ “The priesthood is the authority of God delegated to men on earth to act in His name.” For more information, you can visit <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/friend/2015/05/what-does-it-mean-to-hold-the-priesthood> and <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/priesthood>

5.3 Feelings of shame and exclusion, denial of sexuality

This theme that arose from the interviews demonstrates the trauma and hardships the LDS Church caused the participants. P3's opinion on masturbation can be approached critically since the LDS Church does not allow masturbation for its straight members as well. However, it might be suggested that this finding still affects LGBTQ+ people more because P3 cannot get married and have 'Church-approved' sex even if she meets a potential partner. She says:

“Honestly, I felt so tired of feeling ashamed of myself for things such as masturbation and wanting sex. I felt very frustrated. I actually had been told in a blessing¹⁸ that I would find someone to marry sooner the more I went to the temple...and due to the weakness of masturbation, I was unable to attend the temple as often as I wanted..i was constantly repenting and fasting to try to overcome this but rejection over and over and over would cause me to fall and then boom...I'd have to start all over again with the repentance process so I blamed myself for my own singleness while also feeling out of place for my singleness at my age.” [P3]

“They were pretty clear on the matter¹⁹, and it was just so uncomfortable for me to think about how somebody who loved another person could be restricted, you know? It made me sad, and it took a while for me to come to terms with my own sexuality about that. Because I kept pushing it away, thinking like everyone else did that. It was a sin.” [P4]

P2 and P7 stated that they heard harmful comments about LGBTQ+ people by people who do not know that they were LGBTQ+. The ripple effect regarding discriminatory and bullying comments around LGBTQ+ affects LGBTQ+ psychologically (Willis, 2012, p. 1604). Noelle's research (2002, p. 31) on the ripple effect of Matthew Shepard's murder was significant in order to demonstrate the effects on LGBTQ+ community.

P2:

“I heard people talk about how bad and messed up and unintelligent LGBTQ+ people are, and I think that caused me to just push those feelings down. When I acted a little bit more feminine, I was criticized for it. For as long as I can remember.. since I've had access to money, I would buy feminine clothes in secret and wear them and wish that they would fit, but I would end up throwing it out because I was so terrified of being discovered. I didn't want anyone to see me as feminine. I wanted people to see me as a perfect little Mormon boy even though you know, I had all these feelings that I was suppressing.” [P2]

¹⁸ “Priesthood blessings are given by the authority of the priesthood for healing, comfort, and encouragement.” For more information, you can visit <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/family-guidebook/priesthood-ordinances-and-blessings>

¹⁹ Having 'same-sex attraction' and not acting on it

P7:

“[...] I left the church before I.. like was living openly as a queer person. In the sense that I have certainly like heard a lot of direct discrimination of other people. I have certainly heard family members say really harmful things about queer populations not knowing they were talking about me. [...] I never tried to be openly queer in the Church so I never had to experience that²⁰. I have heard these things personally but I have never heard them directed at me. They were saying things generally about queer people without knowing what they were saying was applying to me.” [P7]

In addition to P2 and P7’s comments, P5 shared the story of his bishop²¹ talking badly about Matthew Shepard in the Church.

“[...] I feel like after Matthew Shepard²² who was brutalized and murdered a young gay man in the US, I feel like that actually garnered some public sympathy. Uhm I remember at Church and this isn't coming from the general authority of the Church but like in my congregation the bishop you know speaking in a way that was just disrespectful. Not saying you know ‘he deserved it’ but in roundabout ways like speaking as if like you know ‘when you stray from the path, this is what happens.’ You know that really sticking with me.” [P5]

P5 also shared the details of his memory from conversion therapy and the comments he had to endure during the conversion therapy²³:

“[...] that therapist saying like.. you know you're never going to understand love, or feel love, or be loved if you don't fix this problem. You have a psychological issue and it's called same-sex attraction. It's curable so long as you put in the effort and if you're not being cured then you're not putting in enough effort. At [the age of] 16 at that point, those are reformatory years and that like really affected me on a subconscious level. Because consciously I'm thinking you know I myself have questions like ‘is this gonna work is it not gonna work?’ Eventually, I was thinking you know I can't be reprogrammed maybe no one can be reprogrammed. But I still had this.. like person of authority telling me that I was unlovable and that sits somewhere and it's really difficult to entangle. Because I was unsuccessful with her, she had my parents send me to a clinic in [location removed] which was a conversion therapy clinic.” [P5]

²⁰ Direct harmful comments

²¹ “A bishop is a man who has been ordained and set apart as the presiding high priest for a ward, or congregation. He has overall responsibility for ministering the temporal and spiritual affairs of the congregation.” <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/bishop>

²² Matthew Shepard was tortured and killed by two men in Wyoming, US in 1998. He was 21 at the time and his murder caused outrage in the country and led to protests demanding laws for protection based on sexual orientation. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-victim-of-an-anti-gay-assault-dies>

²³ Even though the Church was not inclined to support a ban on conversion therapy for some time in Utah, it announced its support for the ban on conversion therapy in 2019. However, the Church was encouraging conversion therapy during the time this participant was a member of the Church. For detailed information, please visit <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/statement-proposed-rule-sexual-orientation-gender-identity-change> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/22/us/utah-conversion-therapy-ban.html>

5.4 Indirect discrimination: Celibacy

“They sell the idea that you can be happy without ever having an intimate sexual relationship with another person, and you know ‘Jesus will take care of that for you’. That's just wrong.” [P6]

The theme of celibacy is one of the themes that demonstrates the huge gap between straight members and LGBTQ+ members of the Church. LGBTQ+ people in the Church know that they will never be able to experience sex in their life. A possibility of exception could be mentioned for bisexual members since they might prefer to get married to a person from the opposite sex. Due to the difference between straight members and LGBTQ+, indirect discrimination could be a valuable tool to analyse this context. Even if we can assume that the Church does not aim to discriminate against its LGBTQ+ members, the Church policy still has a “disproportionately disadvantageous impact” on LGBTQ+ members (Altman, 2020, p. 6). The celibacy problem for LGBTQ+ people would only be resolved by eliminating the trait that causes discrimination as Moreau (2010, p. 154) suggested defining indirect discrimination. As long as the “acting on same-sex attraction is a sin” policy remains, the indirect discrimination will not be compensated.

P8 explicitly calls this discourse ‘discriminatory’:

“They say we don't care if you're gay or straight it's just it's the same with every other member. As long as you follow the rules of the church, as long as you're celibate as long as you don't break the ‘the law of chastity’, you know what they call ‘law of chastity’ is you know no having sex before marriage. But gay people can't get married in the church. It's discouraged and if you do, that's considered a sin. On the surface it seems like ‘oh, no the same standards apply to all members’ but it's still discriminatory.” [P8]

P9 defines it as a double-standard:

“It's a double standard because all the straight members of the church can have sexual relations that they find fulfilling. The way they were born they can feel fulfilled in exactly that way and for gay members of the church they can't. So it doesn't work. I think that eventually the church will back off on that and we'll have to maybe they'll come up with some new apologetic way to make it work. But I think eventually they're gonna retreat to the point where they have to give gay people the full rights of you know getting married. I don't know exactly what that'll look like. I don't know how it will happen and I don't even know if it will happen.” [P9]

P7 brings a critical perspective into the Church's opinion on portraying single straight members and single queer members as the same:

"I've heard Church always said like it's the same thing as like.. single members of the Church. We ask them to be celibate until marriage and but the difference is that like a single straight member of the church gets to go to bed and pray they fall in love tomorrow. And queer members of the Church go to bed praying they never ever fall in love. And like what kind of existence is that? Leading to people to be told like 'you may never ever fall in love and if you do, you may never ever do anything with that love.'" [P7]

5.5 Depression and suicide

Mental health struggles of LGBTQ+ people in general are considered an issue known well and also discussed in this thesis under Chapter 2²⁴ (Haas *et al.*, 2011). Because CDC does not keep track of suicides based on the person's religion and sexual orientation, it is difficult to demonstrate a direct correlation between Mormonism and queer suicides (Knoll, 2016). However, mental health struggles and suicide cases of LGBTQ+ Mormons are at a level that published articles on this issue are not scarce (Fellingham *et al.*, 2000; Fletcher Stack, 2014; Barker, Parkinson and Knoll, 2016). No question regarding this theme has been included in the interview guide²⁵ because the topic is very sensitive and might be triggering. However, I, as a researcher, expected that this theme would still come up due to the severity of the situation in LGBTQ+ Mormon and ExMormon community. P7 talks about herself as being a depressed child and thinking of suicide:

"When I was 16, trying to be Mormon knowing that I was queer I was a really depressed kid and I definitely thought of suicide. Because at least according to Mormonism dying by suicide is better than being gay. So like, I and which is why I stopped going to the Church before college. I stopped going to the Church before I stopped believing in the Church. But it was so bad for my own personal mental health to be in that situation, to be in high school in Southern [US state name removed] where everyone I knew was Mormon and just to know that like it is better for me to be dead than to be gay." [P7]

²⁴ See Chapter 2. Previous Research

²⁵ See Appendix 2

P8 mentions his memory of struggles and suicidal thoughts:

“The Mormon Church has a very puritanical view on sexuality and sex and all of that and not only that. They say and they still teach that, that ‘breaking the law of chastity’ is what they call it. When you, you know you have sex out of marriage or even masturbation. They say that it's the sin next to murder. That's what they, how they they compare it and. So you know as I was getting older, as I discovered masturbation and was, you know, became more aware of my feelings that I had my attraction towards guys. Uhm because of the things that they taught, I felt an intense amount of shame and anxiety and uh it really created a lot of turmoil in my life. I ended up dropping out of high school for a while. I wanted to die, I attempted suicide multiple times because of that too. And and so.. yeah just it was not a fun period of time.” [P8]

P5 refers to queer youth suicides when he talks about the church officials:

“All these people [First Presidency²⁶ and The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles²⁷] speak eloquently at the pulpit but like have very, in my opinion, differing views and they have to appear unified between uh for all congregants. But I.. I think that these policies are confusing because I think the Church itself is confused. Uh, I think that they are worried and affected by queer youth suicide. Uhm, I think that they are worried and affected by diminishing attendance in more liberal areas.” (P5)

P5 again talks about queer LDS suicides at another point during the interview:

“I think that there's still feeding into that²⁸ cognitive dissonance that I think it is so disruptive and destructive that leads to people attempting to take their own lives. You know.. that that it's so common with queer LDS people and I think it comes from that sort of like root idea. That you're living you're always in the sort of half-life. You're never like a full whole person member of the Church. You're always this person with this disability where a spiritual disability, where you don't get to experience life the way that all its other members do.” [P5]

P9 mentions the people he personally knows and their suicide attempts. He also states that someone he knows died by suicide:

“[...] um so if I'm going to talk about the trans people specifically, I know uhm personally I.. close personal basis two people who were trans in the church both attempted suicide. One succeeded, the other survived but with severe brain damage.”
“[...] another gay person I know in the church, he attempted suicide. He's thankfully not dead.” [P9]

²⁶ “Jesus Christ leads His Church through a prophet, who acts as the President of the Church, and two Apostles who are called to be the prophet’s counsellors. This group is known as the First Presidency, and it is the highest governing body of the Church.” For more information please see <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/first-presidency?lang=eng>

²⁷ “The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles is the second-highest leadership body of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the First Presidency being the highest). The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles includes twelve everyday men with the same divine responsibility as Peter, James, John, and the other early Apostles.” For more information, you can visit <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/quorum-of-the-twelve-apostles?lang=eng>

²⁸ The person refers to the Church rhetoric on “Being gay is not a sin but acting on is.”

5.6 Discrimination in the Church context

This section and the next section together aim to provide support in understanding and discussing the reasons why some LGBTQ+ Mormons choose to leave the Church. As mentioned before, I draw on discrimination and freedom theories to find theoretical answers for the reasons.

P2 shares the story of a trans person getting discriminated against directly by her gender and transitioning process.

“[...] I know other trans people who umm.. so there are adult classes like Sunday school classes that you go to at church that are separated by.. men go to this class, women go to this class. And those are called priesthood for the men and relief society for the women. And I know someone who is transitioning male to female who started wearing feminine clothes and started attending relief society and have had bishops and other leadership tell them ‘You know you cannot go to relief society, right? And you cannot use the women's restroom.’ And.. I I've even heard stories of people like ‘You're not allowed in this building if you're wearing a dress’ to someone who is transitioning from male to female. Most of the friends I know that are not straight, of other some sort of sexual orientation they have left the church before really experiencing too much discrimination around that. But I have seen it a looot with trans people. [P2]

However, P5 mentioned a transgender person attending the Church in [a liberal US state]. Based on the background research and literature review I conducted, this type of data was very unexpected. However, P5 also adds that this situation might not be the same if this person wanted to attend the church in Utah.

“I know a trans person here in [the liberal US state name removed] who goes to Church regularly and wears piercings and makeup and like.. dressed in female traditionally female clothing. And I don't understand how they fit the Church and I try not to criticize them because if that's what spiritually fulfils them and they're having that at that congregation is fine. But I highly doubt they would feel welcome presenting themselves as female uhm and affirming their gender in Utah and going to Church in Utah. I don't think that they would have the same experience. So I think that there's a sort of evolution happening in different congregations, which is not a Mormon concept at all. It's supposed to be very copy-paste-repeat. Every single congregation, every church house looks almost the same like everything is supposed to be very simulated and aligned. So I think that they're [the LDS Church] kind of in a crisis.. right now.” [P5]

P1 shares her memory regarding a lesbian girl being discriminated against based on her sexual orientation at a camp P1 went to as part of a church activity:

“[...] One of the youth leaders was a 19-year-old uhm and well.. she didn't openly say she was lesbian. Word somehow gets around. You could tell the leaders were kind of weirded out by it even though she was absolutely 100% professional about being a youth leader, interacting with the girls like there was nothing she did inherently wrong. But one of the other 17-year-old girls was crushing on her hard and being kind of disrespectful to the professional dynamic they currently have even though they were two years apart in age. If they were in a real-world setting, it would still be you are 17 and you need to wait. Uhm.. so instead of the leaders kind of enforcing the 17-year-old to back off, they were they internally was kind of ignored the situation, and kind of wanted to just shadow blame the 19-year-old for being lesbian. Like none of this would have happened if she wasn't lesbian. No you could put this in check if you just tell us to calm down. That trickled later into church activities. If there was stuff going on this 19-year-old wasn't invited because of her gender preferences. They assumed that just because oh she likes females, suddenly every female is a target.” [P1]

P5 mentions his bishop outing him to people who are his community and says he felt discriminated against:

“When I came out to my parents, they told my bishop so I had to meet with my Bishop and so I came out to my bishop who referred me to go see a counsellor for conversion therapy. He also outed me to his wife who told the entire congregation which led to all my friends no longer speaking to me. So I don't necessarily think that there was like someone behind the curtain saying ‘No one talk to P5 anymore’ but he.. that bishop broke an oath basically. His position in the Church he's not supposed to share personal information like that ever. It's like confessional and uhm he can share it with your parents and to a higher position than himself. But he shouldn't be gossiping about it and he essentially gossiped. So within the Church's parameters I was discriminated against. Like their own rules were broken and then in a larger way, in a personal way I felt discriminated against cause I lost all my friends I didn't get to have conversations with them. I was outed without the opportunity to do it on my own terms.” [P5]

Based on the data I collected, it could be said that there are different levels of discrimination at the LDS Church and the way Fibbi, Midtbøen and Simon (2021) defined discrimination matches the stories mentioned above since they specified that a certain category is required for discrimination to occur and the people belonging to this category cannot choose or change it. For discrimination to occur, Antonovsky (1960) suggested three conditions which clearly match the situation of LGBTQ+ people in the LDS Church. He mentioned the scarcity of opportunities, acknowledgement of this situation and unequal distribution of power. While opportunities are scarcer for queer LDS members compared to straight members, the Church acknowledges this through its officials who remain in senior positions for many years.

The Church's discriminatory behaviours and acts could be justified based on religious freedom as it is protected under civil rights but it also challenges anti-discrimination laws (Endsjø, 2020). As mentioned before, Minow (2007, p. 789) highlighted a bigger challenge when religious freedom is demanded by a religious group rather than a person. LDS Church is a religious group only exercising its right to religious freedom collectively while LGBTQ+ ExMormons want and try to remain in the Church and in their community individually. Even if they can be taken as a group, they are individuals who choose to leave the discriminatory setting. The next section details their individual decisions and their freedom to choose to leave the Church.

5.7 Freedom to choose to leave the Church

In this section, theories of freedom are operationalised to demonstrate how LGBTQ+ ExMormons make decisions that lead them to leave the church which could also be interpreted as choosing freedom over discrimination. Even though some of the participants state the reasons why they chose to leave the Church, their choice for freedom from discrimination is more significant to find in-depth answers to the second research question. Firstly, P2 and P7 explain why the Church is important for its members and why it is difficult to leave even if you are discriminated against by it.

P2 who is a transgender person talks about what the Church meant to her. This is important to show Mormonism has a bigger role than just being a religion in one's life and how difficult it would be to leave the Church for someone who is especially born into it. P2 says:

“So when you're in the Mormon church, it is like it is your world. My families were all, all my siblings and parents to this day are still very Mormon and follow that. All of my friends, close friends, best friends were in the church. I'd go to church every Sunday. I'd go to activities every Wednesday. When I went on camp, on vacations and that sort of thing. It was always with members of the Church and other people and those sorts of things. Uhm.. always, always, always, always, always.. My world was the Church and so the people that I trusted and knew of to talk to were the very same people who were teaching me all this Mormonism stuff. They teach you that if you're struggling with these sorts of things you go to your bishop, who's the leader of local congregation as a bishop in the Mormonism structure of things. I would go to my bishop about different things I was struggling with, whether it was like uhm anxiety or depression or those sorts of things. But I was terrified to go to my bishop, I never mentioned to a bishop my struggle with my gender identity or, you know, attraction to other genders other than the opposite. I was terrified. I didn't know how they would react. I didn't know if they would laugh at me. I didn't know anything and any other version of help. So if there was a system in place to support me I was not aware of any because my world was the Church.” [P2]

P7 who was also born into Mormonism shares the meaning and importance of the Church for its members and the local Mormon communities. She says:

“Mormonism is a high-demand religion in the sense that when you grow up Mormon, like your entire world is Mormon. I grew up in a very Mormon part of the world. Everyone I knew was Mormon, I spent a lot of time in Church every week like Church on Sunday and youth group on Tuesday and like service projects. All of these things and like it becomes, it's not just like a thing that you do once a week. It is such a huge part of everything in your life and so because of that I think that's why it was so incredibly hard for me as a kid, as a teenager to step away because it wasn't just like a thing I stopped doing on Sunday. It was like turning my back on the entire world and so I think that's why. In addition to that, the LDS Church is exceptionally anti-gay compared to a lot of churches in this country. They are exceptionally anti-gay and it's an incredibly hard church to walk away from because it does become your entire world. I was able to escape that when I was 18 and build a whole other world but also I think it's so hard it's one of the reasons why it's so hard for queer members of the church because the LDS church is such a high-demand religion that walking away from it is like basically walking away from everything.” [P7]

The second section of the theory chapter focuses on theories of freedom. Lockean freedom and Reidian freedom are two concepts of freedom and Lockean freedom mentions willingness and asserts that having a will is enough to carry out an action (Rowe, 1987). However, according to Reidian one should have the “power to will.” McGill (1960) states that a free choice could be reached as long as people can give up on rewards and opportunities. While being a high-demand religion, LDS Church also offers the comfort zone of a community that brings along responsibilities that LGBTQ+ people cannot meet even if they want to due to the discrimination. P6 and P9 specifically say that community is something they miss about the church.

P6 says:

“I missed the sense of community I have in the church. I was a Boy Scout leader for [number of years removed] years and was able to do a lot to help a lot of young men. I really enjoyed the outdoors and we had experiences they just never would have, have I not volunteered and served that way. There's nothing like that in my life right now and that's something I'm you know wrestling with and trying to figure out what could I do like that.” [P6]

P9 says:

“Part of me wants to say I would stay just for the community, just for the all the good things of the Church has to offer. Uhm honestly if the Church did become more progressive, become more accepting of LGBTQ+ people across the board overall, I would consider going back I would consider just maybe not like every Sunday, but just to have a community just to be part of something.” [P9]

As long as they are ready to give up on the community, they are ready to make a free choice over their remaining or leaving the church. P1 mentions that the lesbian girl, who got discriminated and was not invited to further activities, looked for a new community instead of trying to remain in the community discriminating her. In practice, she made the free choice McGill theorised.

P1 talks about the discriminated girl's story as follows:

“It²⁹ was still very much a ‘keep it under the rug, don't talk about it’ uhm she³⁰ because you know the community portion of the church stepped away from her, stopped inviting her. She took that as an opportunity to find a new community. However, that looked like so I know that in a weird sense then stepping away allowed her to be brave enough to look elsewhere versus trying to keep on, keep that, hold of that child you know that like upbringing of staying, staying with the religion, staying with the community.”

P1 provided another story of freedom while talking about a memory when she overheard someone coming out. She was a child at that time and her parents and adults around did not realise that she was overhearing this coming out story:

“I overheard a conversation when I was [age number removed]. There was a guy in his 20s who was raised Mormon. He left [location removed] and went to [location removed] for a while and came back. He finally got the courage to say ‘I'm gay’ and they thought I was not listening to the conversation but I was listening to the conversation and what that meant. It really did not bother me. The adults were processing. So he left the church at that point and wanted to step away from his church upbringing and explore more of himself and came back and he was brave enough to say who he was to his close friends.” [P1]

The freedom section of the theory also included theories of freedom presented by Thalos (2013). She highlighted that freedom exists if there are powers restricting someone. With those external powers, we cannot talk about being free. When referring to “Power over Oneself”, she presented the story of Lisa whose parents are Mexican in the US context. Even though she is successful and tries to do everything perfectly in her studies, Lisa faces direct and indirect discrimination from her teachers. No matter how hard she tries, even the teacher she values most does not believe in her due to her background and immigrant position she cannot change. However, instead of accepting groundless comments about her, she chooses to resist them and

²⁹ Being queer

³⁰ The lesbian girl who got discriminated against her sexual orientation

uses her “personal power” which Thalos defines as someone’s knowledge of their capabilities. Thalos also contributes that freedom is about “accepting or rejecting judgments about oneself.” Through Lisa’s story, Thalos demonstrates how freedom is about “Power over Oneself” because the person has the power to choose it or not.

The following excerpts from interviews present some of the participants’ freedom stories and their decision to reject judgements about themselves.

Freedom of P2

“Even though I had these personal experiences that contradicted what I had been taught, I’d kind of suppressed it. I’d kind of ignored it. Just said, you know, ‘oh God will explain it to me later.’ All of these experiences just kind of boiled up together till one day I was like ‘I can’t do this anymore. I can’t live this lie. I can’t. I gotta be true to myself and I went out and actually came to the [NGO name removed] and was like ‘I need help understanding what’s happening right now. I know I can’t stay in Mormonism. I know who I am and I need help.’ It wasn’t any one thing that was like ‘that’s the last straw.’ It was more like an accumulation of a bunch of things that had just been simmering over time until it just exploded and I was like, I can’t do it anymore. I’m done. Matter of fact, when you go through Mormon temple, you end up getting things known as garments, which are special underclothing that have different religious meanings and stuff. I ended and you’re supposed to wear them every day as often as you can. When you take them off, you don’t set them on the floor because they’re considered so holy and sacred. That day when I was done, I cut up all my garments and donated a bunch of my masculine clothing and went out and bought feminine clothing and just like I was just done. I can’t live this way anymore. I gotta be true to myself.”

Freedom of P8

“I remember one time I was at my house and it just hit me. I realized I’m like ‘wait a minute I didn’t choose this shit.’ That’s what I thought and I realized I did not choose to be gay. It’s part of me.. feels almost like I let myself down that I could not see that so you know earlier. But when it hit you once, once that hit me then I was very open to other things that the Church was wrong about. [...] When I got to that point where I realized that this is who I am, I was ready to cut off my family. I was ready to say ‘Okay this is who I am and if you don’t accept who this is, then I just can’t be around you. I’m not going to pretend, I’ve already done that enough.” [P8]

Freedom of P7

“I was a child and the record at least that I remember was very much like that being gay was a choice, that like it was an absolute sin whatever else. So it was a really hard time for me to like sit in.. the primary singing that ‘Jesus said love everyone’ but that definition of everyone did not include me. So then as I got older basically when I got into high school I kind of came to this decision that like ‘I don’t want the Church if the Church doesn’t want me.’ It was like sort of that question, that made me start questioning the church as a whole. Then I stopped attending church when I graduated from high school when I moved out of my parents’ house.”

6. Conclusion

6.1 Concluding remarks

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

- 1) How does Mormonism impact the lives of LGBTQ+ people?
- 2) Why do LGBTQ+ ExMormons choose to leave the LDS Church?

I intended to find out the types of effects Mormonism has on LDS Church's LGBTQ+ members and the reasons for them to leave the Church. A significant point to draw attention to is that interviews conducted with ExMormons presented their current perspectives as ExMormons and previous opinions on the Church when they were members of the Church. Because discrimination against sexual orientation and gender is sensitive in the context of the LDS Church, I took my departure from the theories regarding discrimination. I also utilised theories of freedom since this topic is related to religious freedom and ExMormon's choice for freedom from a discriminating authority. One of the findings I found was the reinforcement of gender roles in the LDS Church strictly and LGBTQ+ members being affected by it when they cannot fit into these roles. Findings showed that the Church follows improvements in human rights fields late compared to the rest of the USA. While its direct impact on queer ExMormons was not achieved through the data I collected and this finding might be found without needing interviews, it is still important to demonstrate it due to LGBTQ+ rights gaining more and more importance in the USA and in developed countries of the world. Data also showed how the harmful remarks ExMormons were exposed to make them push their feelings and queer identities for many years. An important finding which could be connected to the human rights field is that Church's current policy on celibacy indirectly discriminates against its queer members. This is because straight members of the Church do not have to be celibate after they get married, but queer members of the Church are not allowed to marry so they can never have sex. Interviews with ExMormons demonstrate that the Church prefers to ignore this indirect discrimination and tries to find roundabouts to justify it such as comparing the single straight members of the Church to queer members. The research found that the experiences of queer ExMormons when they were in the Church caused them to feel depressed and think of or attempt suicide.

While the findings above could be used to answer the second question on the reasons for ExMormons to leave the Church, I tried to find a deeper meaning behind their reason through the outcome of discrimination and the decision to choose freedom from that discrimination. Some of the participants described the moments in their life when they decided to cut their ties with the Church completely and how they came to the realisation. In the last two sections of the previous chapter, I still included stories of discrimination from empirical data to relate to their choice for freedom. While I presented direct discrimination participants or people they know faced in the Church context, the reason for the participants was not mostly one specific incident, but an accumulation of discrimination and exclusion they had to endure.

6.2 Recommendations and suggestions for further research

During my research process, through the materials I engaged with I realized that a correlation between LDS Church and queer Mormon suicides or queer Utah suicides could be shown if Centers for Disease Control and Prevention includes the details regarding sexual orientation and religion of people who committed suicide. While this might conflict with some of the privacy laws in the US and might require additional consent from family members of the deceased person, it could help to demonstrate the correlation in hard data.

The Church officials can take extensive measures to prevent discrimination against its queer members within the Church contexts and encourage an effective system to address discrimination against its members who belong to vulnerable groups.

Through this study, I tried to provide an extensive background information and academic literature review on religious freedom and the right to sexuality from a human rights perspective. I connected these themes to Mormonism in order to involve human rights dynamics into the discussion. However, further studies could be improved to find a correlation between the timeline when some church policies changed and how it affected specific laws in Utah to analyse the impact of Mormonism on LGBTQ+ people living in Utah through hard law.

While I provided direct discrimination examples within the Church context in the previous chapter, I also mentioned that one of the participants knows a transgender person attending the Church in a liberal US state. The participant thinks that this might not be possible to do for a

transgender person in Utah and Mormonism should be the same in every part of the world. A further research could be done to compare the lives of queer Mormons or Exmormon of the Church in specific conservative states and liberal states. Another research topic could be on ExMormons living in different part of the world. I limited my research to ExMormons in the USA, but some ExMormons who are not US residents or citizens wanted to take part in the research. Therefore, it demonstrated that field research in other parts of the world on ExMormons could be carried out. Such research could use the theories of Universalism and Cultural Relativism considering that there are differences even within the USA.

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Appendix 1

Information letter and consent form

Research Project for Master's Thesis in

“Religion’s Impact on LGBTQ Rights Based on Mormonism”

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to see if religion has an impact on LGBTQ rights based on Mormonism. In this letter, you can find information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

The purpose of the research project is to look into if religion impacts LGBTQ rights based on Mormonism. The project will focus on how the LGBTQ rights movements improved the perspective of the religion considering the policies, decisions, and speeches made by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church).

- Can religion have an impact on the LGBTQ rights movement or vice versa?
- Can LGBTQ rights movements in a society (USA) impact the perspective of people believing in a religion — Mormonism?
- Is it possible to see patterns and strict rules in Mormonism preventing the fight against discrimination against LGBTQ? If it is, can these rules be bent?
- What are queer ex-Mormons’ thoughts on the Church’s changing stance on LGBTQ rights? (For example, the Church’s support for anti-gay marriage acts in the past and current support for pro-gay marriage acts. The Church’s previous homophobic policies and changing policies to include LGBTQ people.)

This is a master’s thesis. The collected data will not be used for any other purpose.

Who is responsible for the research project?

This thesis is for a joint-degree master’s program (www.emhrpp.com) that is a cooperation among the following universities:

- University of Gothenburg (Sweden)
- University of Deusto (Spain)
- University of Roehampton (the UK)
- Arctic University of Norway (Norway)

UiT - the Arctic University of Norway has responsibility for the thesis and my advisor at UiT is Jennifer Hays [E-mail address removed].

My thesis supervisor is Hauwa Mahdi at the University of Gothenburg [E-mail address removed].

Neither of these supervisors will have access to the data collected for this project, only the anonymized data in the thesis. I (Erçan Koç) am the only person that will have access to the personal information collected for this project.

Why are you being asked to participate?

You are being asked to participate because you identify yourself as LGBTQ person who has left the LDS Church. I contact you because you have consented to share your contact details with me to reach you for research purposes.

What does participation involve for you?

If you chose to take part in the project, this will involve that I interview you. It will take approx. 45 minutes (depending on your answers). Please note that there is no time limit, so you do not have to limit yourself about time and content. The survey includes questions about your experience as a person who has left the church (Ex-Mormon) or is thinking about leaving the church. Your opinions on LGBTQ rights and LDS Church will be also collected. Your answers will be recorded electronically.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the research project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

- The Arctic University of Norway is the institution responsible for the project. No one apart from me will have access to the personal data.
- I will replace your nickname and contact details with a code. The list of nicknames, contact details and respective codes will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data in a password protected computer.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The research project is scheduled to end on 30 June 2023. The collected data will be anonymized and published as anonymous data in a way that will not identify you. The data will be stored in a password protected computer and the anonymization will happen by 30 June 2023.

Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data be deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you be corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with the Arctic University of Norway, Data Protection Services has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- Ercan Koç - Master's student at the University of Gothenburg [E-mail address removed]
- Jennifer Hays – Professor at The Arctic University of Norway [E-mail address removed] Data Protection Officer - Sølvi Brendeford Anderssen [E-mail address removed]
- Data Protection Services - [E-mail address removed] Telephone: +47 XX XX XX XX

Yours sincerely,

Project Leader
Hauwa Mahdi

Student
Ercan Koç

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project “Religion’s Impact on LGBTQ Rights Based on Mormonism” and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- to be interviewed and recorded electronically
- for my personal data to be stored and processed until the end of the project for the master’s thesis

I consent for my personal data to be processed until the project's end date, approx. 30 June 2023

(Signed by participant, date)

Appendix 2

Interview guide

Questions

- 1) How is your life right now such as the place you live and the job/studies you are involved in?
- 2) How did you become a Mormon? (Born into a Mormon family or converted as an adult)
- 3) Do you know anyone who left the church when you were in the church? How did their departure affect you?
- 4) Does the church have a position on LGBTQ rights? If you think they do, can you tell me the main focus of the church on the matter?
- 5) What did you think about LGBTQ people and their rights when you were in the church?
- 6) Have you encountered any discrimination in the church due to your gender or sexual orientation?
Answer: 1. Yes 2. No 3. Uncertain (if uncertain, explain what you mean)
If yes, is it something you'd like to share?
Was there an effective system for you to be protected from discrimination?
If no, would you know if there would be an effective system for you to be protected from discrimination?
- 7) Do you know anyone who has encountered any discrimination in the church due to their gender or sexual orientation?
Answer: 1. Yes 2. No 3. Uncertain (if uncertain, explain what you mean)
If yes, is it something you'd like to share?
- 8) What is your opinion on the church's discourse "Being gay is not a sin but acting on is"?
- 9) What do you think about same-sex attraction section of the church's website which provides information on different topics regarding LGBTQ people?

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/same-sex-attraction?lang=eng>

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/same-sex-marriage?lang=eng>

10) What do you think about the church's changing policies and opinions regarding LGBTQ people?

(For example, the policy that started in Nov 2015 policy changed in Apr 2019. The church supported and campaigned to promote Proposition 22 in 2000 and Prop 8 in 2008 but now it gives support for the Respect for Marriage Act in 2022)

11) What do you think about improvements in LGBTQ rights in the USA and the church's policies?

12) Do you think that there will be changes in church policies in the future?

Sub-question: Are there any patterns in Mormonism that would prevent that?

13) Do you think that you would stay in the church if you knew that 'you are accepted and would not get discriminated against' based on your sexual orientation?

14) Was there a specific reason or incident that made you leave the church?

15) Was there any reaction when you decided to leave the church?

16) Have you contacted any support group when you thought about leaving the church? (For example, Any Mormon-affiliated support group or non-religious support group)

Answer: 1. Yes 2. No 3. Uncertain (if uncertain, explain what you mean)

If yes, how was your experience if you'd like to share?

17) Do you believe in any religion right now?

Answer: 1. Yes 2. No 3. Uncertain (if uncertain, explain what you mean)

If yes, how do you feel about your current religion as an LGBTQ person?

18) How did you choose your current religion? (If answered yes)

19) Do you think religion and LGBTQ rights could exist in the same setting?

20) Do you think Mormonism and LGBTQ rights could exist in the same setting?

21) Is there anything you'd like to add about religions, LGBTQ rights, and Mormonism?