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Contention One is Our Identity: An Exploration of Queerness in the Collegiate Debate Sphere

Douglas Roberts
Minnesota State University, Mankato

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By

Douglas Roberts

15507624

Douglas.Roberts@mnsu.edu

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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Dr. Justin J. Rudnick, Advisor

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Prof. Katie Brunner, Committee Member

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Dr. Aaron Hoy, Committee Member

Abstract

This thesis explores the experiences of queer individuals and how they navigate identity within the collegiate debate space. Queer debaters, unlike their cisgender, and heterosexual counterparts face struggle in being able to truly be free to present themselves naturally in debate. Utilizing qualitative interviews to examine the full picture of being queer in collegiate forensics, this project details three major themes: Queer Communication Style, Queer Presentations of Self, and Acceptance in Debate. The conclusion discusses implications of these findings, limitations, and future directions for future research.

Keywords: Debate, Queer Identity, Disclosure, Communication

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Chapter One: Introduction

I have always felt like my queer identity has been a contentious topic, especially within the sphere of collegiate debate. For the longest time I chose to hide within myself and my close friend circle, refusing to even venture outside my little bubble of existence. I excluded my queer identity from the majority of my participation in debate, and large parts of the greater world out of fear of isolation and reprisal. As time went on, I observed hatred directed toward queer individuals within the collegiate debate space, including strategies directed at eradicating the queer voice in the round. In my college career as a debater, I remember vividly during a national round of IPDA (International Public Debate Association) debate that an opponent advocated for conversion therapy as a good thing, and that beat me down, both immediately in the round and also after. I argued against the stance, but with the national tournament being in Tennessee, there was little hope of winning. I lost the round, and the judge cheered for conversion therapy as a brilliant argument both on the ballot and after the round. At the time, this experience made me wonder if there was a space for my queer identity in the debate activity if I ever decided to come out, but I also considered quitting debate altogether.

Years later, when I did come out in terms of my own sexuality, I saw support in some contexts – but when it came to debate, that support faded. I found myself hiding, once again in the closet when it came to debate. It did not help that the queer community was virtually unfindable in debate. As my queer identity continues to evolve, I really do believe debate influenced some of the personal struggles I continue to live with, much like the larger queer community is influenced and impacted by issues of discrimination and hate in the activity. However, the continued growth of specialized argumentation styles – such as Theory and Kritiks – have contributed to building a culture that would include debaters who fall outside the

normative culture of debate (i.e., white, straight, male, able-bodied, and so on; see Johnson & Lane, 2018).

When I was in my last year of collegiate competition, I observed my teammates who were more comfortable with their queer identities get discriminated against by their judges, opponents, and by the debate community at large – just as I was. However, these elements of discrimination in many ways were far more obvious than mine were in most cases. I may have been the target of microaggressions, but I tried hiding and ignored the pain every day. I wanted to look strong for them even when horrifying things happened in the rounds where there was a bit of a forced disclosure. In a round at a tournament in my last year of competition, my opponent ran a Kritik and claimed that I was their link in the first affirmative speech that I was the "white, heterosexual, cisgender oppressor." They never asked what pronouns I used or what identities I am associated with, so when I made that first ever disclosure within the debate space, I was really uncomfortable – uncomfortable feeling like I have to disclose for competitive reasons, but also disclose for personal reasons because my identity was not as straightforward as it was assumed. The response was by a debater who said they were not queer, but they were an activist for those who cannot speak their word said, "no you are not, you would have disclosed at the beginning if you really cared about your identity." The judge left the round as my opponent got quite aggressive towards me and denying that I really could be anything else, interrupting me, calling me an oppressor opportunist, and other attacks to the level where the judge left the round mid-way through the negative rebuttal. Honestly, that was the hard part because I was trying to give this speech and my judge just left when I needed the most support. I had disclosed my identity for the first time within competitive debate and now it was me and this debater who had launched a full assault on my identity and had suggested it was not real. When I later read

the ballot, I received a nice note from the judge, but I would have preferred any kind of support in the moment. If that meant stopping the round instead of leaving me defenseless, it would have made a bigger difference for the potential of further disclosures for that year.

My teammates did not hide their identities, and it had severe implications for their willingness to participate in an activity I love dearly but simultaneously hate the pain it causes in the process. Now, as a coach, I continue to see these aggressions towards myself and others, and it is painful to watch. I even wonder to this day: if I had just not hidden, could I have made the activity better by joining the fight that I see so many debaters from marginalized backgrounds fight for?

In this chapter I introduce some of the literature related to the barriers that exist between the average debater and the queer debater, and our need to explore and examine the argumentation, experiences, and identity negotiation faced by queer debaters within intercollegiate debate. I also outline the content of this thesis project.

Purpose of Study

The queer experience in forensics has largely been unexplored. While there have been preliminary studies exploring the speech side of forensics for queer individuals, there has yet to be a formal study examining the queer experiences that debaters have in debate. Thus, there is a critical need to be able to understand what is happening in debate for queer individuals because the stories and experiences of the queer community in debate is left entirely untold beyond individual understandings and observations. For the forensics community to be able to discuss best practices, or even pedagogy for marginalized communities such as the queer community, we have to understand what the community even looks like. Is it stable? Do they feel safe? How do they present their identities? Do they present their identities? What exactly is the experiences of

the many? These basic understandings of the queer experience in debate are not available at a stage where we can fix the issues occurring in forensics.

To engage with this issue, while there is no formal research connecting directly on this topic, there is a major understanding in forensics of socially constructed norms that have built the foundation of what is and is not acceptable to do in the activity, which has built dominant forces. Theorists like Berger and Luckman (1966) explain the social construction of identity which leads to identity classes and norms which society has built. Goffman (1973) builds into this that our identity, but really our cultures have been institutionalized with this control, but while we perform something acceptable to society, we have access to our real identity in our private life, even as we have to consider the power dynamics when revealing identity. As a result, the question extends to power and the constraints to being able to reveal oneself. Foucault (1977) tells us we can overcome the power of society really at any time, but we can face consequences to those actions.

These theorists set up the world of forensics which has its own constructions of norms with identity as there are dominant structures that favor the masculine (Johnson & Lane, 2018). Forensics, but narrowly debate, has followed a similar path where there are socially accepted identities and expectations for those performances in debate. While certainly other identities may be able to exist. Debate does not always allow them to get the recognition they deserve. Johnson and Lane (2018) tell us that women in debate have struggled and are forced into double binds daily of being told to present in their style, but competitive success is only available only if they transition to the true dominant style of debate of masculine stylistic traits. To understand and engage with this problem, the queer experience must be understood through the queering of identity and the resulting disconnects they may exist within the debate realm of forensics.

Problem Statement and Research Question

Participation in the debate sphere has been historically rooted in inaccessibility. The activity of Speech and Debate has, whether intentionally or unconsciously, maintained a continuous set of barriers favoring those who fit within certain criteria of identity (Johnson & Lane, 2018). While there have been improvements in terms of access, major communicative barriers remain related to how marginalized debaters – including queer debaters – must communicate to be considered effective in debate. Several studies have explored how female debaters have had to communicate differently to gain access, as well as students of color, but when it comes to non-binary, transgender, and queer sexualities representation there seems to be an extra hurdle that has not really been explored in the debate space (Johnson & Lane, 2018). In order to address that need for more research, this thesis seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ 1: How do debaters navigate presenting or concealing their queer identity within the activity?

Preview of Chapters

Having introduced the inspiration and goals of the project, this thesis proceeds with a review of the literature. Chapter 2 reviews the scholarly sources that inform my understanding of queer identity and its negotiation and mobilization within the debate activity. Chapter 3 reviews my methodological choices to execute this study. I discuss my rationale and justification for a qualitative interview-based study, and my approach to recruiting participants and conducting interviews. I then conclude by documenting my coding and analysis process.

In Chapter 4, I present the findings of my research. I present my thematic analysis of the interviews alongside representative excerpts from my interview transcripts in order to respond to my research question. I then conclude the thesis in Chapter 5, where I offer commentary on the significance of my findings and propose avenues for subsequent research based on the results from this thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In my last year of debate, I began to really explore my gender, but I found myself having to keep it under wraps because it was the pandemic, and I did not want my family to know. The COVID year brought a strange digital format to debate that provided me an opportunity to be myself on the screen. Debating through a computer allowed me to briefly be the queer I wanted to be. I did not have to listen to judge criticism of queerness in RFDs (Reasons for Decision), and if my opponent ranted about something anti-queer, I did not necessarily need to listen to it – because it was online debate, I could mute them and read their debate document myself. It was some of the few times I revealed my queer identity within the debate space. In some ways it felt extremely liberating, and at the same time it was awful. I could hypothetically be queer in this virtual space, but I knew it was always going to spit me out – debate felt like a place I was never truly welcomed in. I found myself questioning whether I should disclose my queer identity or not, if I should use a different pronoun, or if I could allude to queer emotions and the struggle that was built up inside of me.

In my last ever competitive round of debate, I decided to run a queer argument. This argument involved a Queer Rage Kritik, drawing on my emotional experiences as a queer individual. I began that round with a segment of poetry I had written titled *What is Wrong with Me*. The part of the poem I used is as follows:

> It took me years for me to face my fears to realize that it is okay to be bisexual and nonbinary,
> it took you a second,
> to spit out words of blame,
> now all I hear is,

the ringing of "wrong,"

and the beat of "stupid,"

a string of sharp knives coming right at my heart,

I'm starting to cry,

I am beginning to ask myself why,

Why is it so wrong to be me?

This segment of the poem represented my struggle and frustration with both the larger queer community and the debate community specifically. Every experience I have observed in debate, both through research and beyond, has been one of endless shame and rejection. This one round, I accepted that my queerness was not without shame, but I felt I had nothing to lose. My final tournament was over, and I was not going to see another competitive round of debate as a competitor ever again – so why not go out with a bang? Why not express how I had felt for my entire experience in debate as an observer, a hider, as a queer individual with fear? What can they do to me now? Make me lose one last time? The judge did make me lose for the last time, with a beautiful *blank ballot* finale to my debate career. They didn't bother to say anything at all.

Despite this, for the grand finale, I was able to speak my word one time. I was able to call out the community for telling me to present in a different way. In that one moment, my rejection and resistance to the norms of debate was one of the most liberating moments of my life. The Kritik's finale was as follows:

> Rage is especially key to break down the academy's heteronormative standards---queer debaters are denied spaces to interrogate power relations from their social location, which matters because power not only works onto us but also through us. We're even expected to surveil each other under normative modes of debate through running framework, since

> it lets teams police the conversation instead of actually participating in meaningful discussions. By engaging in acts of rage, we reject the cycle of respectability that tells queer bodies to either defend the state or be criminalized as narcissistic cheaters who ruin the activity for everyone else. Our rage is an act of queer love that says we are here, we are unapologetically ourselves, and we are enough. Since queer debaters aren't given any option to unpack all of that bullshit in the debate space the impact is violent hegemonic heteronormativity propped up by forced adherence to debate norms---if we give into the pressure to conform to those norms then we become part of the cycle of heteronormativity---since the only time we're really given a voice in this debate space is when we're too damn loud to ignore that's exactly what we're going to do---only our queer rage breaks through the cycle of forced assimilation to eliminate the suffering caused by having no choice but to abandon our queerness to maintain the status quo.

Unfortunately, my opponent did not really engage with the Kritik or really anything in the debate. I just celebrated my liberation from the competitive chains I had felt so trapped by because debate had done me a disservice for my queerness. I did not feel comfortable with my own body because I had feared the repercussions of expressing myself during my entire time in the activity. In my view, debate was not a welcome space for my queer individuality even if I had a true coming out within the debate space beyond a handful of acknowledgements of my identity. That moment of arguing queer rage and liberation from the norms was a freeing moment, even though it complicated my perspective on competitive debate even further.

* * *

In this chapter I outline the social construction of identity with constrictions of identity, connect it queer identity, before tying these ideas with the dominant structures which exist within

debate. After exploring these elements, the reader should have context on the limited research surrounding forensics and the queer community.

Identity Construction Through Social Constructionism

Identity is a construction of the self and develops through the lens of society. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued "the self cannot be adequately understood apart from the particular social context in which they were shaped" (p. 50). That is, identity is constructed within society instead of being just individually constructed. This identity, while often seen as stable, is really a shifting phenomenon depending on social processes. Berger and Luckmann (1966) furthered that once we develop our identity, "it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations" (p. 173). Through communication and engagement with others, we begin to form our identities, and these identities shift over time. Berger and Luckmann (1966) expanded by stating the "formation and maintenance of identity are determined by the social structure" (p. 173). Thus, identity and its stability (if it has any) are based on the interplay between one's internal experience of self and one's external experience with society.

The influence of this social structure is what contributes to identity being socially constructed. Berger and Luckmann (1966) elaborated that the social construction of identity results in identity types that are "observable and verifiable" (p. 174). These identity types serve as categories or groupings – schema, if you will – that help us make sense of identities and subsets of those identities we encounter throughout our social exchanges. Our sensemaking process in regards to identity includes associating common attributes or likeminded behaviors with the identity group(s) within a given culture. As a result, our cultures play a pivotal role in the recognition of ourselves and others. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued identity types are "relatively stable elements" (p. 174), meaning these groupings and social orders tend to be more

stable or at least appear stable or "normal" to lay observers. We each individually internalize our own identities "as an objective reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 129). To ourselves, our own identity is stable, but as identity is informed by both ourselves and society, it shifts based on the information received and the context in which it is deployed.

Our identities manifest through different forms of performance, both outward and internalized. Goffman (1973) argued that we engage in ongoing performative acts constantly in our daily lives. Performance involves a number of connotations, one of which includes the presentation of our identity in the public sphere. Specifically, our performances of identity can be representations we are pressured into because the "social front tends to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations" (Goffman, 1973, p. 27). Because of this tendency for our various social fronts to be institutionalized (or habituated and then perpetuated), the front becomes the identity we are recognized for but also acts as the vehicle through which our socially constructed identity is presented. Goffman (1973) uses the term "front" to represent the identity we perform for the public, and the "back" is reserved for our repressed identities that we cannot perform in public. Goffman (1973) argued it is only in our private spaces where our true identities can exist freely and where we can drop the performance. Private spaces provide us with an opportunity to enact our identity absent of any social pressures or expectations to perform in a particular way. However, this dichotomy between private performances and public performances of identity highlights the difference between performed identity and the identity of self, and inspires questions about whether our personal identity *can* be performed or presented without experiencing barriers.

Identity performances that fall outside of the accepted norms put forth by society face limitations and constriction. Goffman (1973) argued that we become "institutionalized" because

of the identity types society has expected us to fall under when it comes to expected presentations of ourselves (p. 27). Kumba (2001) links these institutional norms to gender identity, arguing "we are constantly 'doing gender'… creating, recreating, and reinforcing norms and behaviors" (p. 11). These reinforced norms and behaviors build a hierarchy and social structures that place expectations and limits on our identity. Foucault (1977) explored some of the more sinister repercussions of these social structures, noting how the individual might have the power to do as they please with or through their body, but doing so will likely find the subject "itself exposed to counterattack" (p. 56). Although individuals are technically free to be themselves, they are not free from the consequences of that freedom even if that is their true identity. Waltman and Haas (2011) discussed how hatred is a tool utilized by dominant identity groups to oppress the identities that fall outside the norm. These dominant groups see their own identity as "invisible," but recognize the difference of those falling outside of the norm (Waltman & Haas, 2011, p. 12). Through those means of discipline and punishment, dominant society forces the individual to conform to expected ways of being or face the consequences of their transgressions, which may result in death for just presenting yourself contrary to the greater dominant social structures that have been put in place. The fear of these repercussions may result in the individual constraining or reworking their identity to something more socially acceptable.

Navigating Queer Identity

Because society may discipline, punish, and even kill subjects and co-cultures that exist outside the norm, cultures such as the queer community face an ongoing need to navigate complex social forces in order to survive or thrive. Jagose (1993) explained that "queer" as a label or descriptor functions "as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual

self-identifications" (p. 1). Despite that easy description, queerness is not so simple; Jagose noted that its "definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics" (Jagose, 1993, p. 1). It is the ability to decide for oneself their own version of queerness that makes the queer individual queer. As Butler (2004) asserts, it is up to the individual queer body to determine what is and is not livable. We have the ability to manage our own queer identity in any shape or form as we please, but this is not without constriction from larger social forces.

The queer subject seeks a place to exist freely and unapologetically. Butler (2004) argued that that without the "I" (the individual's queer body) being able to exist freely, then we cannot live (p. 4). When it comes to the queer subject, the individual must be able to exist as their true self – otherwise, what is the point of living? If the individual must experience life without ever revealing their true queer self, then is that identity truly there in the social order of the world? For queer individuals, their identity "is dependent on this 'outside' to lay claim to what is one's own" (Butler, 2004, p. 7). If society will not allow for queer individuals to have freedom, there is need for resistance to be one's true queer self. Butler (2016) explained resistance is not a free act, but it is through our vulnerabilities that movements are born to bring forth change:

> It is already clear to resist various forms of state and economic power are taking a risk with their own bodies, exposing themselves to possible harm. That formulation seems true enough: vulnerability is enhanced by assembling. But perhaps we need to rethink this sequence that gives narrative structure to our understanding of the relationship between vulnerability and resistance. First you resist, and then you are confronted with vulnerability… to those who show up to oppose your political stance. Yet vulnerability emerges earlier, prior to any gathering, and this becomes especially true when people demonstrate to oppose the precarious conditions in which they live. That condition of

> precarity indexes a vulnerability that precedes the one that people encounter quite graphically on the street. If we also say that the vulnerability… constitutes a precarious situation in the world itself leads to resistance, then it seems we reverse the sequence; we are first vulnerable and then overcome that vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance (p. 12).

For the queer body, we exist in a state where society limits our existence, and we must make the choice of whether one can live with that choice. Butler (2016) tells us that the condition of not being able to live life at a comfortable level with basic needs can lead to this resistance. In turn, this generates a commitment to presenting and performing queerness no matter the consequence.

While the ability to be able to outwardly present as queer is important, withholding or concealing one's queer individuality from society remains a viable, and perhaps necessary, strategy as well. According to Orne (2013), the act of being in "the line of fire" is sometimes just not worth the risk or cost for queer persons. Copeland (2021) illustrated how queer individuals' disclosure or their withholding of their own identity is based on the experiences they have around them, such that if the circumstances or environment were negative, they were less likely to disclose or feel safe to reveal their queer identity within or outside of an activity. Concerns around safety, comfort, or stage of one's coming out process all determine whether the queer subject will reveal or conceal their identity, and how.

For queer individuals, there are still norms and constructions of how queer individuals may present and perform identity. Butler (2004) noted that queer individuals think our identity and performances of our queer identity is wholly our own, "but the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author" (p. 1). While queer individuals seek to break the norms associated cisgender and

heterosexual identity, queer individuals end up finding themselves in a place where they need and want to be read as a certain identity. Butler (2004) stated recognition "is engaged when subject and Other understand themselves to be reflected in one another, but where this reflection does not result in a collapse of the one into the Other (through an incorporative identification, for instance) or a projection that annihilates the alterity of the Other" (p. 131-132). Butler (2004) elaborated "recognition implies that we see the Other as separate, but as structured psychically in ways that are shared" (p. 132). Meaning that queer bodies want to be seen for who they are at least when they are trying to present it. Being recognized as queer which sometimes results in presentations of self that rhyme with other identities on the queer spectrum allowing for individuality of being an "Other."

For the queer individual what tends to happen because constructs of gender and sexuality in the forms of heterosexuality and cisgender identity is that we reproduce the normative cultural constructions of heterosexuality and cisgender performances inside our queer spaces. Butler (1990) explains in *Gender Trouble* that a common occurrence is recreations of gender and sexuality through parody of what came before (p. 42-43). While queer identity is certainly not cisgender or heterosexual in proper performance, the performative natures of gender and sexuality that exist within heterosexuality and cisgender identity influence and factor into how queer individuals might make their performative choices about their identity.

Dominant Structures in Debate

Collegiate debate has historically restricted access to anyone not white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, or able-bodied, and that limited access still prevails today (Bonne, 2007; Fiebrantz, 2013; Furgerson & Rudnick, 2014; Johnson & Lane, 2018, Mazur, 2001, Vigorito et al., 2016). There exists within the activity a *debate paradigm,* or some foundational structure of debate

consisting of the beliefs the debate community has about how debate should operate. This paradigm is rooted in traditionally masculine traits of "independence, rationality, assertiveness, autonomy, hierarchy, competition, task-orientation, and attention to status" (Johnson & Lane, 2018, p. 2-3). These masculine philosophical elements seek to control how the “other” is “included within the inner circles of forensic leadership and competition” (Bartanen & Littlefield, 2014, p. 273; Johnson & Lane, 2018). It is through this paradigm that dominant structures form pertaining to how debaters are told to debate, which ultimately manifests in expectations and norms surrounding those ideas.

For forensics (speech and debate), these dominant structures and norms come together in several ways. Paine (2005) explains in forensics “the rules which govern the activity are comparatively few—but the norms which operate on the competitive circuit are legion” (p. 80). These norms then act as rules in the activity as the “habits and patterns… become so entrenched that they operate as if they were rules” (Paine, 2005, p. 80). Meaning competitors feel pressured or are even forced to conform to these norms to be able to see success in the activity. Epping and Labrie (2005) explain “performers who fail to comply with the norm… will probably be given lower ranks and possibly even made fun of” (p. 18). These norms as a result have the potential to severely limit competitors’ autonomy and creativity. Furthermore, these norms exist across many different aspects of competition ranging from delivery, dress, performance standards, to even the very content of the speech (Epping & Labrie, 2005).

Over time, the expectations and norms that arose within debate produced two predominant styles of debating: a masculine and a feminine style. The masculine style is associated with “aggression, ambition, dominance, self-confidence, and forcefulness” (Johnson & Lane, 2018, p. 3). In contrast, the feminine style is associated with “friendliness, kindness,

helpfulness, and sensitivity" (Johnson & Lane, 2018, p. 3). Although these two styles coexist in debate, "community norms encourage debaters to adopt a masculine communication style, yet simultaneously penalize women who adopt a masculine style" (Mathews, 2016, p. 39). Debate norms have put women debaters in a bind because they do not have full or equal access to the debate style that has been regarded as better by the community. Creating endless double standards forcing competitors who are not male and/or masculine enough to find alternatives in order to transcend these struggles.

The prevalence of these dominant styles leads to challenges for any debaters who fall outside of those styles to be seen as credible. Johnson and Lane (2018) argued that credibility is lost when presenting in any other style, with the exception of the masculine style. Furthermore, bias in favor of dominant styles and upholding of the dominant approach is often propagated by judges. Kuster (2003) established that judges dishonor the activity of debate if they are "judging… on prejudice involving irrelevant factors such as the race, gender, or the personal appearance of participants" (p. 57). Kuster's (2003) article served as a warning to debate culture that bias would certainly devalue the educational qualities that forensics was built upon. Rogers (1997) furthered this critique of the bias judges propagate, arguing marginalized debaters have an uphill battle when it comes to credibility with white male judges who are likely to react negativity toward those who are not within their in-group identity. Similarly, Vigorito et al. (2016) asserted that judges express a wide range of bias, whether that is seeing the credibility of women as lesser, considering race, or using a competitor's reputation as a factor in their decision. While winning really is not everything in Debate, losing because someone dismisses you due to your identity is a different story entirely.

For marginalized debaters, access to debate – in the form of both success and acceptance – is significantly less than the dominant cisgender white male community in debate. Hecht's (1998) work on identity and group affiliations offered insight on this, explaining that "intergroup discrimination develops out of a universal desire to form and preserve intergroup status differences within hierarchies" (p. 6). When applied to debate, credibility is more accepted, and more often awarded, by the masculine model, but anywhere else credibility is less easily achieved or granted for those who are from marginalized communities. For example, Johnson and Lane (2018) argued women and students of color in debate are met with disdain for their identities. Johnson and Lane (2018) further speculated the experiences of other genders may experience similar issues as women have in debate, particularly in terms of trying to overcome the masculine governance and communicative format upheld by the activity (p. 2).

These barriers faced by marginalized or non-dominant members in debate directly influence one's disclosure within forensics. Copeland (2021) explained that competitors are more likely to self-disclose in forensics primarily due to the idea that the community feels more like a home. However, competitors from marginalized backgrounds tend to have different experiences depending on whether they are in debate or in speech. Copeland (2021) elaborated that forensics competitors who choose to hide their identity or seek to withhold disclosure do so because of negative reactions, or as a result of cultural norms within forensics (p. 9). Of course, these forces do not prevent all disclosures from taking place, but rather produce situations in which some competitors are more likely to withhold disclosure to protect themselves (Copeland, 2021; Petronio, 2013). As Orne (2013) explained, individuals from marginalized backgrounds – such as queer debaters – may withhold their identity because of negative or concerning trends within or around debate.

Although some members of marginalized groups may withhold disclosure, others do find themselves disclosing their marginalized identity – and receiving benefits as a result of that disclosure (Copeland, 2021). These disclosures typically manifest through two forms: explicit and implicit disclosure. Implicit disclosures involve *implying* one's identity or membership to a cultural group, whereas explicit is a more *overt,* declarative statement about their identity. As Copeland (2021) explained, one's topic selection and more gentle approaches give the impression that someone is of that identity, mostly through *association*. For example, choosing poetry that is queer or mentioning queer themes in a program can hint at the existence of queerness, but are ultimately ambiguous when it comes to claiming a queer identity outright. In contrast, explicit disclosures are more overt and declarative and directly mention that the competitor has a particular identity (Copeland, 2021). For example, queer debaters may choose to reveal their identity in the debate and even place their identity on the table for argumentation, claiming their membership in queer culture and drawing from their personal experiences as evidence or support for their arguments. Competitors in forensics who self-disclosed in an explicit manner typically revealed that they did so because explicit disclosure "drives authenticity and relatability and educates others" (Copeland, 2021, p. 8). Copeland (2021) also noted that explicit disclosures of marginalized identity were seen as more credible than those who did not explicitly disclose their identity and also allowed competitors to "affirm their identity, educate others on topics that are deemed important by the competitor, and aid an authentic performance from a competitors' perception" (p. 12). That is, the observable identity is the key toward being recognized.

Problem Statement

Unfortunately, there is little to no formal research on queerness and the debate experience. Johnson and Lane (2018) noted that other genders certainly experience similar aspects as women when it comes to the acceptance or rejection of their speaking styles and identity. However, the performance of queerness certainly plays into the debate experience in unique ways. Butler (2004) asserted that queer subjects negotiate the dynamics of "what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, [and] what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death" (p. 8). Queer debaters must negotiate on their own terms what they are willing to live with or without as they navigate the dynamics of their identity performance within the context of competitive debate. This certainly may make a queer debater consider whether they wish to remain in the activity. Vigorito et al. (2016) demonstrated that acts of prejudice and behaviors that disparage women or minority cultures result in marginalized participants quitting Debate frequently, as they do not see a place for them in the activity. For queer individuals like me, Debate has represented a good and bad place for us. We know that the queer community is marginalized, just as many other communities are, in debate. This thesis seeks to bridge that gap and understand what is really happening within the realm of competitive debate.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter, I review the methods I used for this project. The qualitative approach I employed allowed for in-depth accounts of the experiences of the queer debate community and enabled me to generate insight on how queer debaters navigate the collegiate debate circuit. In this chapter, I detail the utilization of qualitative interviews for this project, review my participant pool, describe the protocols I used for interviewing participants, and discuss my data analysis procedures.

Qualitative Interviews

Interviews serve a valuable role in the collection of qualitative data. An interview is a "guided question-answer conversation" (Tracy, 2020, p. 78). Qualitative interviews allow participants to tell their stories, opinions, views, and experiences on a particular event or events in their lives (Tracy, 2020). Lindlof and Taylor (2019) explained that qualitative interviews enable researchers to gain insights on the social construction of the self (p. 219). This is because interviews are a great tool to solicit stories and experiences pertaining to identity and events that might not always be the most observable in society (Tracy, 2020, p. 79).

Qualitative interview methodology also allows for a greater ability to examine participant experiences on a particular topic or subject in more depth and detail than other data collection methods (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Tracy, 2020; Turner, 2010). Qualitative interviews allow the field worker to "get to the heart of the matter" (Tracy, 2020, p. 79). Tracy (2020) explained how interviews enable researchers to examine *why* something is the way it is, in contrast to more quantitative tools that reduce everything to numerical data and exclude opportunities to capture self-reflexivity, context, and the thick description of a particular experience (pp. 2-5).

Interviews also provide researchers with insight that extends beyond the immediate conversation, or the communication that takes place within the interview. Interviews allow participants to *rationalize* their experiences and "reveal their specific vocabulary and language and explain why they employ certain cliches, jargon, or slang (Tracy, 2020, pp. 78-79). Pink (2019) elaborated by explaining how qualitative interviews enable researchers to examine sensory level information that also is generated within the interview itself, including non-verbal communication, gestures, facial expressions, emotional responses, and even other forms of physical data such as pictures, written stories, and so on.

These characteristics of qualitative interview are what made the method appropriate for this project. In the case of this study, interviews with queer individuals allowed me to capture stories about in-round experiences and participants' thoughts on how they processed those experiences that occurred in round as competitors and as queer individuals. Through these methods, I was able to capture the reflections and feelings of how the debater felt in intense rounds and how that affected them after the round and beyond.

Participants

Following IRB-approved protocols, I recruited participants for this study who self-identified somewhere on the queer spectrum. For the purpose of this study, I defined the boundaries of queerness as either a sexual minority (gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, etc.) or gender minority (transgender, genderqueer, nonbinary, etc.), only excluding those who self-identified as cisgender *and* heterosexual. My participants also had to have participated in intercollegiate debate competitions on at least one occasion within the past five years, but they all had a wide variety of experiences within the sphere of competitive debate.

Due to limited size of the queer debate community – and, as I will discuss later in this thesis, fear over a lack of support for queer debaters in the activity – I had to rely on a convenience sample when recruiting queer debaters. Convenience sampling is a model of sampling that pulls traditionally from an individual's network and captures the experiences of that network (Tracy, 2020, p. 83). Convenience sampling was required for this project due to limited nature of queer debaters in the activity. Alongside my convenience sampling methods, I made use of snowball sampling to reach "difficult-to-access or hidden populations," which involves the researcher gaining access to a colleague or a gatekeeper and then tapping into that gatekeeper's network to reach more members of the target demographic (Tracy, 2020, p. 84). Considering how my target demographic was incredibly specific and also subject to marginalization within and beyond my context of interest (collegiate debate), this combination of convenience and snowball sampling improved the range or scope of my recruitment from a limited population.

I sent recruitment calls through major lines of forensic communication networks, such as the Forensics IE-L, NFA-LD Community and Coaches Discussion page on Facebook, NPDA/NPTE Facebook discussion page, direct communication to a number of debate coaches' emails to pass along to their students, and solicitations of queer debaters in person at tournaments throughout the season. Additionally, I sought queer debaters through public debate wiki pages if they self-disclosed argumentation related to their queer identity in debate.

These recruitment strategies ultimately connected me with 7 participants. Those participants represented a varied demographic makeup. Participants were between 18 and 22 years of age. Participants were from a number of racial breakdowns based on participants self-description of their race: 1 Middle-Eastern, 2 Bi-racial (1 half-white and black, and 1 half-white

and Mexican), and 4 White or Caucasian. Participants self-identified their gender in the following ways: 6 Non-Binary (1 participant noted they specified as masculine non-binary, or sometimes defined themselves as male), and 1 Genderqueer. Some participants also reported their sexuality: 1 Pansexual, 2 Bisexuals, 1 Lesbian, and 1 Aromantic Asexual (someone who experiences little to no romantic attraction and no sexual attraction). Participants reported being active in a number of debate categories within the collegiate circuit, including Policy (CEDA), NFA-LD (National Forensics Association Lincoln Douglas Debate), IPDA (International Public Debate Association), NPDA (National Parliamentary Debate Association), and BP (British Parliamentary). Participants ranged significantly in how long they participated in debate, from 3 months in the activity all the way up 8 years of debate participation. All participants in this study noted they were fully out, meaning they are open about their queer identities publicly.

Interviewing Procedures

Once participants agreed to be interviewed, I made use of semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow for a more organic experience with the participant, more adaptability and flexibility during the interview, more ability to adapt to the participant's performance of their identity, and greater in-depth discussion of ideas that may not develop in a more rigid or fully structured interview (Tracy, 2020, p. 158). Additionally, the benefit of a less structured interview model was the ability to build a better connection with the subject, which plays a role in obtaining "unprompted, lively, and unexpected answers" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 157). My interviews were akin to respondent interviews, which typically focus on the participant's individual experience (Lindlof & Taylor 2019; Tracy, 2020). Lindlof and Taylor (2019) explained that respondent interviews "reveal how people express their emotions and thoughts, how they construe their actions, how they conceptualize their roles" (p. 229).

Respondent interviews were an appropriate approach to take for this project because they are well-suited to uncovering the individual experiences and nuances of my participants' experiences of their queerness in the context of forensic culture.

Once participants provided their informed consent, I asked a variety of questions in the above-mentioned semi-structured format. These questions included demographic information, experience in debate, how identity was being performed/presented in or around the debate space, and queer communication styles within debate itself. These questions enabled participants to explain their own reality as queer subjects within the debate space, and to reflect and react upon those experiences. For demographic questions, I asked general questions on age, race, gender, LGBTQ+ identification, participation length in debate, types of formats of debate that the participant engages in, and if the participant was publicly out with their queer identity. Participants were then asked questions in reference to their experience in debate, which generally pertained to their comfort or acceptance in debate. For example, participants were asked to "describe your experience in debate as a queer individual." After gaining some insight on experience and any follow-ups as needed, participants explored their queer performance and how they present in debate. For example, participants were asked "how do you perform your queer identity in debate?" Then participants explored the potential of queer communication styles within debate to determine if there was the possibility of another stylistic approach in debate (beyond the traditional masculine and feminine styles discussed in Chapter 2). For example, participants were asked "as a result of your queer identity, how have you changed or adjusted your communication style to fit your identity?" Participants were offered several follow-up questions to obtain clarification and further depth into all of these topic areas and other facets they wished to explore.

My interview questions included a combination of generative and directive questions. Generative questions are open-ended questions that allow participants to control the direction of their responses (Tracy, 2020). These questions permitted participants to control the "pace and exact topic of the answer" (Tracy, 2020, p. 166). Directive questions seek for a specific set of information such as closed-ended questions (Tracy, 2020, p. 168). These types of questions are used to capture and limit the data into a narrower subset (Tracy, 2020). Additionally, one of the most common questions I applied in my interview guide was the "why" question. Why questions serve to capture "the rhetoric of personal and institutional accountability; the intentions, motives, justifications, speculations, lay theories, philosophies, and so forth" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 260). In other words, asking "why" questions created opportunities for participants to generate rationalizations of their own behaviors and experiences in a deeper way. Finally, I concluded every interview with a catch-all question: "is there anything that we have not discussed you wish to mention at this point in the interview?" This question helped me capture anything that I might have missed or failed to consider in the interview process (Tracy, 2020). If the participant noted something new, the catch-all question would be restated again at the end of that segment after any follow-ups I had on the material they discussed.

Data Analysis

I audio-recorded all of the interviews via Zoom and had an automatic transcription tool pre-transcribe the interview. I then cleaned up the pre-transcribed material by listening to the interview recording and cleaning up minor errors in the transcription, such as spellings and confusion on who said what. I then re-listened to the recording to further clean up the final transcription of the interviews. The interviews averaged approximately one-hour in length, producing approximately seven hours of recordings and 103 pages of interview transcripts.

Once my interviews were transcribed, I engaged in a qualitative thematic analysis of those transcripts. Thematic analysis is a "method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis allows for in-depth qualitative data to be categorized and broken down into manageable and meaningful constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to conduct a thematic analysis, I reviewed my interview transcripts and assigned codes to interview excerpts using Saldaña's (2016) coding methods. A code is "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language or visual data (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). In assigning these codes, I looked for what Charmaz (2006) called "incidents," or "anecdotes, conversations, and observations" (p. 53). I assigned each incident in my interview transcripts an initial code, and then compared those codes to seek patterns or similarities from which I generated categories, themes, and subthemes (Saldaña, 2016).

I coded my transcripts until there was some sense of stability or cohesion among my codes as they condensed into categories and sub-categories (Saldaña, 2016, p. 10). Specifically, knowing that there would be contrasting views as the queer community itself is giant in terms of differing views, perspectives, and experiences, I coded each participant's data set independently, but sought out early connections with other participants in developing more standardized categories. These categories were analyzed for themes and subthemes, which ultimately provided answers to my research question (Saldaña, 2016; Tracy, 2020). These methods resulted in the emergence of three different themes. The first theme is a queer communication style, which examines how queer debaters communicate in rounds. The second theme is queer presentations, which are how debaters navigated the debate space in their willingness to present themselves or not presenting themselves. The final theme is acceptance in debate, which examines the

experiences that queer debaters have had both positive and negative in their placemaking in debate. In the following chapter, I present these themes with the experiences and stories from my participants and my own insights into the meaning of these experiences in the context of the research question.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of this study. After reviewing the interview transcripts, I was able to analyze the responses of competitors across the competitive field of debate who currently identify as members of the greater queer community. Through the analysis, three core themes emerged: Queer Communication Style, Queer Presentations of Self, and Acceptance in Debate.

Theme 1: Queer Communication Style

During the interview process, participants mentioned and explored what appears to be a unique style of communication within the debate space utilized by queer participants. These participants reported that they felt they communicated differently, and their style was distinct from both the masculine and feminine styles of communication within debate. The masculine tends to be aggressive, lacking emotion, serious in nature, and brought forth with self-confidence and a forceful attitude. The feminine is still serious, but prioritizes kindness, perceived softer tones, friendly, and sensitive, typically being more seen as emotional. In contrast to both of these styles, the queer communication style described by my participants was *a breaking away from normative standards that have been established with styles of communication*. Participants noted their style is seen as more casual, more communicative on emotional scales, satirical of debate with humoristic but a real tone of value, even flexible by design incorporating and rejecting components of both binary styles.

Throughout these interviews, participants described the characteristics of their Queer Communication Style. First, participants noted several aspects of what their queer communication style looked like. Students mentioned that their communication style involved communicating in a more casual way, adjusting vocal qualities, intentionally coming across as

less serious to such a degree that they might even consider it humorous. They noted they sought to find something in between the mainstream binary styles by finding and constructing a flexible medium of communication. This flexible medium adopted elements of both, but also rejected components of style that felt limiting to the debater in terms of stylistic choice within the round. For example, Lake, a competitor who is Caucasian, nonbinary, and identifies as a lesbian, had participated in debate in the formats of IPDA and NFA-LD for now eight years and said, "I felt a lot more free to be able to find that communication style, and I settled [on] very casual, kind of conversational, flexible-ish." Likewise, Bee, a biracial, trans, nonbinary, and bisexual Policy debater for eight years, also agreed that the style they used was "Very casual, very laid back."

Tae, a Caucasian, non-binary, pansexual competitor who has competed in BP debate for four and half years, noted that they are trying to shift their style from what it used to be as it did not feel right for them anymore. They were seeking to present their style as more relaxed, and trying to reject typical masculine stylistic choices of aggressive debating toward a more relaxed middle ground that also felt more like them. As they explained,

> My style was definitely a little too aggressive for my own taste. Like I would record myself and listen back and I'd go, I don't want to talk like that in the debate room because I did. I didn't yell, but I projected, and I talked fast, and I talked with a relatively higher pitch. That was something that for a while was pretty off putting to me that I think I have mostly gotten past at this point. And a lot of that has just been working on like my… I guess rhetorical strategies within speaking. I don't really know what I would classify my current presentation style as I try to be a little relaxed.

Tae expanded that they found discomfort in the style they had used in the past. They perceived their style as bad practice for debate. They decided upon a transition to be able to remove this discomfort they had been feeling with the traditional masculine mode of delivery, but they also saw the style to be more persuasive for their circuit:

> Obviously, there was some discomfort with my previous style, but I also just think the other one is more persuasive and I want to be a better debater, especially in the BP circuit where persuasiveness is key. It's pretty important for me to make that switch.

Other competitors in debate, like Ring – a Middle Eastern, and genderqueer competitor who has competed in high school LD, NFA-LD, and college Policy debate for five years – noted that they observed other queer debaters utilizing humor and bringing the debate to a different level when it came to their stylistic choices. According to Ring, this style felt *less* serious, yet it was serious. They are just bringing forth a different and unique style to the debate space:

> I've seen a lot more queer people being willing to just take a more humorous approach to argumentation. Satire, making fun of things. [Having] less serious debate, not in the sense of less serious[ness]. Not that they care less about the activity, but treating it like certain things are a joke in a good way, in a way that is an argument about the ways in which we think about things and debate.

Other debaters noted that there was a different kind of emotional basis for the style. That emotional basis was not baseline reading of debate cards or scripts, but instead was more personable and filled with meaning of every word that is spoken into the round. This emotion can be described as more than just another speech with pathos appeals; rather, it extends a status of a full body emotional experience. That is, this emotion is beyond just facial or vocal in nature; it is felt from inside to out as an experience where the entirety of self is brought across. For

example, Liberation – a Caucasian, non-binary, bisexual competitor of six years who competes in Policy debate – stated their style included a "heightened level of, maybe it's not necessarily passion, but heightened emotion pertaining to that identity." Similarly, Bee explained:

> There are times that I choose to slow down, I have a lot more inflection, I think, than the average debater. Just like during cross-x, during speeches, I feel like I have just like way more intonation. A lot of debaters come across very flat and monotone, which might just be a speed thing, which I get it. I'm also trying to be quick, but I do think that there's less focused on like, almost having a personality. I feel like my personality comes out when I talk.

Debaters furthered that the style would change based on stylistic presentations such as how they would speak in a round. This would lead to shifts in pitch, rejection of traditional modes of gesture, and the utilization of a legato delivery as opposed to staccato in this queer style. Some of these adjustments were primarily small to be seen as neither masculine or feminine or likewise seen outside of heteronormativity. For example, Tae described their style as "having decent rhythm and more of like a legato, smooth connected style of speaking, which is what I'm aiming towards." And Ring explained: "sometimes there'll be a difference in my hand movements, a difference in my voice." Ring elaborated they "change[d] our voice a little bit and [their] demeanor a little bit in order to not seem as traditionally masculine and heterotypical."

Finally, participants stated they would adjust to a more slang-based approach to their delivery. Bee noted that while it was not as accepted by their judges even sometimes even fully invalidated based on how they introduced the topic, they utilized some slang terms to describe aspects of the debate:

> I've been told like, a link has been like zeroed (invalidated) by the way that I described it. And I was like, I don't think that they were like, well you used all this slang to describe it and so it wasn't quite that persuasive. . . . . This is a horrible example, but this is, obviously, this is not happening around, I changed it over the summer. We were talking about how the reason China behaves the way that they do is because they're terrified of the U.S., and I think a lot of people would just say that as it is. And oh, China is afraid of the U.S. military. However, I said China's "sister scared."

Overall, participants reported how they found a way to represent their queer identities through a style of communication that does not follow the mainstream styles that men and women are typically conditioned to use. This style is a unique non-normative style which on the large scale may appear to some as a style that is seen as purely casual, relaxed, and is seen as a style that has little meaning in the end, but these decisions with style are very intentionally built around falling outside of the field of normative constructions of the gendered styles which have been constructed into debate. These presentations produce these casual presenting styles because these debaters are seeking to resist heteronormative and cis-normative expectations which are occurring within debate. Thus, debaters resist through by presenting a style that appears casual, but has adjustments in demeanor, a prioritization for emotional delivery, acts as a reworking of our understanding of language that it appears to the traditionalist or the lay evaluator as humorous. While the debater may also consider it humorous in approach, it is serious about the experiences that are happening in front of them in the round. The queering of style appears through transition as both ends noted just like Tae feeling discomfort from their original style of masculine stylistic expectations to shifting into styles that other more established debaters can speak too.

Theme 2: Queer Presentations of Self

Throughout the interview process participants noted that they generally present or disclose their identity in or around the debate in a variety of ways. Even simple disclosures varied greatly, but tended to be based upon whether the participant used their queer identity in competition for competitive purpose (i.e., they wanted to present as queer and not use it competitively), or the hiding of their own queerness. For some, these presentations included simple acts of disclosure; for others, it presented in dress and visual components to reveal their queer identity and to be seen as queer within the round. Those who displayed their queer identity within debate saw it as an opportunity to argue for their identity, and their presentation of self came more from the argumentation. This argumentation served as the highest level of performance of self as their identity was fully out, and it was at a stage where it could be attacked, dismantled, and targeted all for the sake of debate. Most participants, while noting they generally disclosed or presented their identity inside and outside of debate, also noted they occasionally will hide their identity in or outside of debate rounds when it is a concern of safety or even exhaustion of presenting their queer identity in highly performative ways that are expected in argumentative debate. In order to illustrate the nuance of my participants' choices to subtly disclose or conceal their queer identity, I divided this theme into three sub-themes: Queer Argumentation, Gentle Unveilings of Queer Identity, and Hiding of Queerness.

Queer Argumentation

Some participants noted that their presentation of self was through the formation of argumentation in the debate space. In other words, some queer debaters utilized their own identities as grounds for their argumentation and placed themselves in the round. According to my participants, this took the form of exemplifying their identity through examples, using queer

Kritik debate, or even full performative displays of identity to build a space for them in the round.

Every participant had a unique spin on how they built or engaged with queerness itself through their arguments. Most participants noted that they ran some form of Kritik. A Kritik is an argument typically coming from a more philosophical grounding. Kritiks generally fall into several different buckets, such as Kritiks of Case (Kritik that points out the problems within the systems of the affirmative's "world"), Performance Kritiks (Kritiks call out opponents for problematic language, their performance, sometimes also the authors they use in the debate), Kritiks of Debate (Kritiks that point out problems in the debate space, and sometimes identity-based issues), and so on. For queer debaters, they utilized several of these modes to bring forth their queer-based argumentation. Many do not use a single approach but multiple to bring forth their queer experiences and issues of the debate space, or their issues with their opponents' language, or the systems that the affirmative might uphold through their actions.

Kritiks generally include a link to the resolution, the affirmative case if negative, or even actions taken by the debater in round based on actions they committed in the round. For queer debaters, an example of a link might be how the resolution is inherently anti-queer. Kritiks then generally have some form of impact. An example of this might be the death of queer people, some form of dehumanization, or even structural violence against the queer community. Lastly, the Kritik will have some form of alternative (the action we should take instead). For example, queer debaters might say the alternative is to dismantle the system, they might advocate for rage, or some other alternative that builds for a better world for the queer individual. Some important additions to the Kritik when using a traditionalist model of construction is the use of alt-solvency, which explains how the alternative solves and even prevents the earlier impacts that

occur. Examples of this may include in the case where the advocacy is to collapse the current existing societal system. Evidence in a Kritik may claim that the advocacy solves because it reorients the societal control of things such as identity to produce more queer spaces creating more liberatory practices when it comes to queer identity. Maybe constraints do not have to exist anymore as a result of the ending of the system as we know it for queer bodies. Furthermore, Kritiks generally include frameworks and framing: framing to explain how to evaluate impacts, and frameworks to explain to a judge how they should orient their thinking around the Kritik. For queer-oriented Kritiks in debate, framing generally is used to allow the prioritization of arguments that are lower-level than terminal-level impacts (highest-level impact, for example nuclear war, climate extinction, and events that lead to the total extinction of the human race) such as violence against the queer community, and concepts like dehumanization and structural violence. All of these components build and make up a Kritik and generally function as a part of a queer Kritik in debate.

Some participants noted that sometimes they used more traditional modes of debate, using their queerness as an example to prove their general argumentation, but this level is not argumentation at the highest level. Instead, it just contextualizes their traditionally rooted arguments with advantages, disadvantages, and/or contentions (main argument). For example, Tae noted that they utilize their own queer identity and individual experiences to build upon their argument primarily through using “just personal examples” of their queer identity to help support their arguments.

Other participants noted that their queer argumentation was rooted in the Kritik. One of the major aspects that a debater works with in engaging and producing the Kritik is the building of their script and argument and story they will tell. These debaters sought to link their queerness

to the topic that was being debated. Doing so allowed queer debaters to present themselves similarly to a lot of other debaters who bring identity into the debate round through the argument in round and the way they have built the case they read into the round. For example, Liberation explained:

> I took an approach this year mostly about international relations Kritik. I've mostly arguments centered around queer pessimism and reproductive futurism. Mostly based off Edelman's book, No Future, and some other arguments that secondary sources after that. More specific to our topic, I've also run an argument once or twice is Joseon's book, but for the most part that's how it's been expressed in the terms of IR, specifically international relations because that's where our topic has been pushed this year.

These participants noted that some years, the ability to inject a Queer Kritik was severely limited based on the topic. Bee, primarily a traditionalist in the policy debate realm, noted this limitation was topic-based:

> I think it depends on the topic too. Because my freshman year it was like the alliances topic. That topic had a lot of queer theory and a lot of people reading queer theory. And I feel like it would have happened way more, but like the antitrust topic, people didn't really read queer theory, so I feel like it didn't happen that often. And now we're on another IR [international relations] topic.

Some participants noted a different kind of approach through their Queer Argumentation through performance of literature. Green, a biracial, non-binary debater who has competed in IPDA and Policy for four years, noted they utilize poetry to make their arguments in the debate:

> I always say that as far as being a debater, I feel like I'm a storyteller before anything else. I'm a storyteller and an educator and I also debate, like that's my relationship to

> debate. I will write Kritiks where it's just an original poetry. Because I read the papers, I read the cards, I read the journals. I'm creating my organic intellectual based off of the stuff that I read. And just putting theory in the context of my daily life that I think is a very queer performance in the sense that it's, there will be times where I'm just like, no, no cards won't be like, what's the alternative? And I'm like, it's right there. Like did you listen to the poem? It was pretty sick. Things like that where I get to just be, like, bringing my own sense of performance into it.

While Green utilized poetry as a vehicle to incorporate their queerness into their argumentation, they did note that it did not have to be the only mode in which their story was told through the Kritik, explaining: “I know some people will do like speculative fiction or they'll just do like, portions of interviews from certain people in different ways.”

Regardless of how the queer debaters presented their argumentation, they all felt it was an integral component towards their presentation as queer individuals in the debate. Green explained:

> I think that I'm able to be pretty like, outwardly expressive of it. I think that has a big part to do with the way that I have been coached, and the coaching that I've been exposed to has been a lot of people that are fully embracing of my queer identity. And also teaching me how to not compromise or not trade off to match up with all the other traditional policy white debaters. And figuring out how to create that space for me. Also because of my major and learning how to combine my interest area there to debate, which is all because of the coaching exposure that I've gotten. Being able to take my interest in queer trans theory and put it into debate means that my identity is pretty much always on blast, which is something that was a decision that I like. Like, I made those decisions

> consciously to be vocal about those things because I feel like they are things that are important to me to be in discussion. And I feel like there's always a way to make like, queerness and transness a topical discussion. So, my thing has been finding a way to discuss it in that sense.

Similarly, Ring explained: “A lot of the times my arguments, I started really reading queerness literature as arguments around the end of my senior year, start of my college year. Identity has always been my main focus in K (Kritik) debates, debates period.” For competitors like Ring, the Kritik has been the best place for them to express their identity and fight for their identity within the sphere of debate.

Queer argumentation really manifests itself in two ways, the first being a reference point of queer experience to develop other arguments. Then, second, it is a tool of a higher realization of self through the Kritik. The Kritik has different performative levels requiring different levels of presentations of someone’s queer identity. For my participants, these levels varied greatly as some of these debaters came from more traditional schools of thought with the Kritik. Others built in their own theory and experience through their own form of storytelling and presentations of their queer identity in new ways yet to be fully explored in the debate community at large. It is these experiences the represent the greatest disclosure but also the biggest performances of queer identity within and even outside of debate rounds, as this enacts a level of true advocacy of self for those who are queer in debate and for those who cannot speak up because they are queer.

Gentle Unveilings of Queer Identity

Next, some participants noted that the way they disclosed and presented their queer identity was less overt than the more direct presentations of self through Queer Argumentation. These “gentle unveilings” act as a *middle ground representing queer debaters who want it known*

that they are queer, but also do not want to be placed in the space where they are arguing or justifying their own existence in debate. In this case, the gentle unveiling serves as mostly a place of disclosure such as revealing pronouns in round and could include physical presentations to show their queer identity.

For example, some participants noted that they may write their name with pronouns on the board. Tree, a first-year Caucasian, non-binary, aromatic sexual debater who competes in IPDA, NPDA, and NFA-LD, noted they would put their pronouns on the board when they "checked into" the round:

> It's weird being the only person to write their pronouns on the board when nobody else does it. Sometimes, people look at it for a second, they're like, why are they doing that? I'm doing that because otherwise you won't respect my pronouns.

Similarly, Lake noted their disclosure generally came in the form of a button they wore in the round, in addition to disclosing pronouns on the board. This button included the pronouns they wished to be identified in the round:

> I usually write my pronouns on the board with my name. I'm always wearing a pronoun pin. I'm asked about it, like I'm very vocal about it. I usually don't give a *vocal* disclosure just because I figured that it's written on the board.

In contrast to these visual / non-vocal disclosures of queer identity, other participants noted they might disclose verbally or kindly remind their opponents of their identity in the round through a verbal disclosure. For example, Ring noted they were encouraged by their coaches to verbally provide some information pertaining to their queerness in the form of an ethos statement in order to build credibility that they really were queer:

> We were encouraged to drop the fact that you would have a boyfriend, or like, make sure that you state your pronouns in front of the judges. They are like extra aware. It forms a weird, I wouldn't even say Oppression Olympics because you're not comparing oppression but rather maximizing the way in which you present to get a little bit more of like, an ethos push with the judge.

Where some participants directly disclosed their identity, others noted that in some cases their identity or disclosure was digitally revealed through systems like Tabroom. They would also sometimes disclose their identity publicly on digital platforms for the debate community. Some participants noted this was beyond their choice at times. For example, Bee explained:

> No, I don't think I could [pass as not queer] anyway, because my pronouns are in the Tabroom blast and in my Wiki. So even if I tried, I think they would be like, you're lying. Which, like… fair enough… I did put them everywhere.

Similarly, Tae – who competed in British Parliamentary debate – noted that in their region, participants are obliged to reveal their pronouns at the start of every round. In other words, they face a forced disclosure in every round they compete in: "There's a whole tradition of every round you're supposed to disclose your pronouns off the start, which is something that I hadn't experienced in other circuits, that was just at the high school level."

An important feature of some participants' decisions to embrace these gentle disclosures was to avoid the perception of using their identity to win rounds. These queer debaters seek to be read as queer, but not using themselves for competitive advantage in the debate. For example, Lake stated "I didn't want to win the round just because I'm trans." Tree agreed with Lake but noted that, generally speaking, they did not run queer argumentation because they wanted fair debates, and they wanted to avoid any potential competitive advantage because of their identity:

> It gives me more of an advantage to debate a sensitive topic that I'm a part of, and know a lot about when debating against other people who don't have firsthand experience with that topic. It's more difficult for them to argue against it and come up with stuff against it when they haven't experienced it firsthand. Which can make the argument more persuasive to a judge when they can't come up with stuff against it.

While there is disclosure on multiple fronts, several participants noted other ways they would seek to reveal their identity on a physical presentation level. These participants noted that they engaged in many behaviors to be read as queer through their physical display of identity. Tree noted:

> I usually make a note to wear my binder and to dress in a way that I feel comfortable. Also, like to pass as a more masculine looking individual, because that makes me more comfortable, and it allows me to pass as someone who tries to present themselves more androgynous.

Similarly, Lake added that they have put together their look to have people see their non-binary identity:

> I feel like I look pretty queer, which not all trans people look a certain way. Right. And I don't think that people should have to pass in order to be valid in their like identity and also like be correctly gendered. But I also do feel like I look very nonbinary. I have like the shaved side of my head and like I dress very queer.

Green expanded on this idea of physicality in presentation of queerness by wearing wings in their round. They did this to shatter normative expectations of queer presentation of self.

> We wore butterfly wings. That was really fun. That's where that started, I think for me as far as like changing, because in my head one was on the more serious note of like

> embodying like a queer practice and just kind of like, you know, changing normative standards of competition.

These gentle presentations and acts of disclosure serve as a medium where queer identity exists and is represented around the debate round. However, the queer identity is not the central focus of the round. Despite it not being a central focus there are major representations of queer identity with disclosures of identity which predominantly center around a reveal of pronouns and gender representation. Though these representations of identity do expand into physical displays and efforts to show the individuals identities to be read as queer in the round even if they are not always seeking to bring queer focused argumentation into the round.

Hiding of Queerness

Many participants noted that when it came to their identity, there were times where they sought to hide their queer identity in debate. While all of my participants generally disclosed their identity, there were times when they made exceptions in order to pass as straight or cisgender. The biggest factor that participants noted here was when there was a concern for safety, but some participants noted they would try to hide their queerness when they felt uncomfortable in the space, or did not have the energy to perform outwardly queer.

Although many participants noted that they did feel safe in most rounds, there were occasions where participants would hide as they worried about potential consequences with their identity, both in some rounds and outside of them. For example, Liberation noted that sometimes their decisions on whether to hide pertained to how they were feeling about opponents or judges that were going to be in the round:

> Absolutely, but a lot of that comes out in the pre round in deciding what arguments to run, right? It's like whether or not I chose to express the queerness at all in the round

> when I'm debating in that more evidentiary style comparison and with a much more consequentialist focus.

Other participants concurred, but it was more of a safety concern for them. Green noted that travel and the surrounding community were bigger concerns than the tournament site itself:

> Now that we're able to travel, it's always a concern of mine, what state we're going to and how much of myself do I have to compromise for my safety? So, it's like always like oversized hoodies for me at tournaments because I don't know what the environment of the town that we're in is going to be like. I don't know how people are going to perceive me. I don't know what that's going to look like. We take Ubers everywhere. That's not like, you know, anyone can do anything. And I don't trust that. Like, you know, can safety be assured?

Similarly, Liberation went into detail with a couple of reasons why they might seek to hide or repress some or most of their queer performance in a round, including considering the judge's perception and their own personal mental well-being:

> For the most part, it has to do with who the judge is and whether or not they are more or less persuaded by critical argumentation. I think it goes without saying that running and expressing these arguments can oftentimes bring up a lot of past experiences and personal growths or traumas. And I think that there are some days where I have the mental capacity to channel that into a speech, and some where I don't have as much of that energy, either because debate is draining or because there have been other factors in my life that just put me in that spot at that point in time. And I love talking to people about these arguments, but channeling it in a debate space is a little different because that forces me to use these in a more offensive manner for the use of the ballot. Which means I'm

> oftentimes accepting this pessimistic view always to move forward and structuring element that is very difficult to escape, which can sometimes put a lot of pressure on my brain. But at the same time, it's a very good thing because that means it forces me to look at how the world interacts with me and interacts with intersecting marginal identities and shows me the privileges that I have as bisexual. Those privileges that might not necessarily come to other identities… that identity can oftentimes be draining and bring up past experiences that I try to channel into positivity, but can sometimes be draining on my mentals.

The holding back of queer identity can be a difficult hit to the individual in order to keep themselves safe, but it can also be the relief from the intensity that some queer performances in debate require to be seen and read correctly in the round. Queer argumentation does take a lot of energy and can include a lot of pressure on an individual as it did on Liberation to keep certain performance expectations up. However, just as the performative nature of competitive debate performance is taxing on the mental wellbeing of a competitor, there is also potential danger to exhibiting these performances. While participants had noted that tournament location and schools tend to be safe, the surrounding community at tournaments are where these competitors largely have had to make major steps back to hide. All in order to protect themselves from the dangers of being queer in areas that are not safe.

This theme of queer presentations of self explored the different dimensions of queer performance and the respective discussion surrounding disclosure in the debate space. These presentations include the high performative acts of the several versions of queer Kritiks in debate through multiple acts of queer argumentative approaches within debate. Queer debaters have to decide whether they are based in the queer argumentative field or the field of being a queer

individual existing within debate who avoids making those arguments but seeks to be seen as queer. Just like all discussions of queer identity in life there is an ultimate discussion of the decision to come out and reveal that identity. These elements represent the navigation of choices that a queer individual within debate has to decide for themselves. Queer debaters have to decide what type of presentation of self they wish to have in the debate space and existing sometimes under multiple categories represent the reality of queer presentations within debate.

Theme 3: Acceptance in Debate

All of the participants noted feeling some level of acceptance within the debate activity. For my participants, acceptance referred to *a place of feeling where the queer competitor feels a sense of belonging, or that lack of belonging*. Participants noted that there were many things within the community that were positive and fostered their acceptance into the activity. However, many also noted concerns they had felt pertaining to their acceptance in the activity, and almost all participants noted that the activity can be quite harmful for them at times. These rejections of acceptance include rejection of the queer style, rejections of queer argumentation, and misgendering. Even if queer debaters find a place in the activity, such negative behaviors create situations where those debaters want to dissociate for their own wellbeing.

One of these first major struggles in the domain of acceptance is the struggle to see their style legitimized. As mentioned earlier by Bee, their evidence was “zeroed” by judges just because of the way they communicated their ideas. Likewise, most participants noted that there can be a struggle for their communication style to be accepted in the debate round. For example, Green noted that they received mixed messages with their queer communication style with other debaters in the round:

> On a competitor level, it’s pretty mixed. I think that sometimes we'll have a team who will just look at us and be like, I don't know what happened and I don't know how I feel about it. So, I'm just going to look at you and I'm like, cool. Okay, we're in the middle ground. And then some teams who just get upset because we didn't do the thing right, which is really interesting.

Similarly, Bee also pointed to their struggle with the acceptance of their queer communication style, but this issue existed primarily with the judges. Their words would be minimalized, and they would receive penalties to their speaker points for just utilizing this style of communication:

> Douglas: Do you ever find that style just doesn't get accepted?
>
> Bee: Yeah, I would say it's more like judges in the back more than anybody else. Like, you know, I might get lower speaker points in the round because of like a stylistic thing that they don't like. Which, you know, okay, I think sometimes people will think that certain aspects of the debate are almost like, minimized.

Bee expanded on this idea that it is not always an acceptance issue, but sometimes it really is an element of not understanding queer individuals and their identities and how they bring that queer identity into their communication. Queer debaters encode their messages in a unique way, and the decoding of those stylized messages makes it quite difficult for some judges to understand the concepts being argued. This makes it harder for the queer debater to feel that they have equal access, because masculine and feminine communication styles are far more common and understandable as opposed to a queer message traveling between the sender and the receivers. Bee further explains:

> I think a lot of times people will hear me say something and it won't necessarily click in their brain exactly what I'm going for, what I'm trying to say. And it might be because they're just not hip with the lingo or whatever, which fine, if you're an old man in the back, it's going to be rough. I think sometimes people will hear something and trying to translate that into like, how they think about debate in terms of weighing and probability and whatever. It doesn't necessarily easily translate as much as saying, like, oh, there's 100% probability. That's like very obvious to people, but other ways that I would describe stuff maybe don't necessarily translate to that right away in your area.

In addition to this ignorance of their communication style, other participants noted a general disdain toward queer argumentation itself. Several participants explained there were significant issues when it came to opponents actually engaging with the debater and their respective queer argumentation. Competitors just would not fully engage with their queerness the way debaters wanted. For example, Liberation explained:

> I would say that a majority of the time, by the end of the debate, there is an aspect of engagement with the Kritik. Like, it's never fully ignored. But also, I don't think it's ever been necessarily explored to the fullest extent in a round I've been in.

Liberation expanded on this that when it comes to their specific argumentation in the round, they saw their opponent being uncomfortable with queer Kritiks. To an extent, their opponents were running arguments of disengagement to avoid the actual debating of the material of the Kritik:

> I think there might be a level of discomfort with it. I think that the way policy debate pushes them to try and present that argument with the running of a framework that says you should prioritize a plan and the consequences of it, as opposed to this Kritik that I've presented. Because of that, it is a decentering [of] queerness that I've put forward in the

> epistemology I'm trying to present in the space, which means there's always going to be an element of that. But that is, I think, less [an] individual piece of how debate has functioned, more of a procedural, like, this is how debate has pushed a lot of teams, which has its own bases in… forms of discrimination. But again, yeah, those structural backdrops as opposed to something I think individuals are always responsible for.

Through delegitimization and the rejection of debaters utilizing queer forms of argumentation, participants also noted several times in the interview process that they experienced the rejection of their own identity through a high level of misgendering. This misgendering caused varying levels of harm for participants. Some participants discussed misgendering as a form of discrimination against them, and some said they saw it as no different from the usual challenges and difficulties that they experience as a queer person on a daily basis. A majority of my participants were non-binary, and one of the biggest struggles with misgendering was their opponents and judges not recognizing their pronouns. For example, Lake noted that they would wear a pin in the hope that their pronouns would be recognized, but despite that they were still heavily misgendered:

> I will usually just call it out and be like, oh, during their speech, it's usually fifty-fifty on whether or not they correct themselves or just continue to. Usually, when I call it out, the judge will back me up probably sixty percent of the time.

Likewise, almost every competitor noted that at some stage of their competitive career, whether they were just beginning or were in the activity for years, they have been misgendered. Some of these instances resulted in continuous misgendering, which sometimes felt like competitors and judges just do not care. For example, Lake explained:

> I know PKD (Pi Kappa Delta) a couple of years ago, [we] all had name tags with our pronouns on them. Even with all of that, I still get called the wrong pronouns most of the time, even though I only use "them." Sometimes I correct it during the round. Sometimes I just have a little bit too much social anxiety to be able to correct it during the other person's speech. I usually bring it up in my own speeches. I usually have judges who back me up on that. But other competitors, it seems like they don't care enough to change it. I've had a round specifically where they continued to use it, even though the judge and I were both correcting it, and I almost felt like it was intentional.

Participants noted that these experiences felt like an erasure of their gender in debate as a result of assumptions of gender in debate. Ring explained, "We would pretty regularly experience a pretty large erasure of people's recognition of our gender as more than just, like, male or male presenting."

Interestingly, my participants recognized misgendering as a common occurrence, but were extremely divided on whether misgendering should be constituted as discrimination or not. Ring noted "If things like the pronouns and stuff count, then yeah, I would say so." Tae furthered, "I have not been witness for any discrimination that I could think of. I think other than like, obviously every once in a while, people get misgendered and that's unfortunate, but that's about the extent of anything I've seen." Green on the other hand, disagreed and believes its bad and harmful, but the act of misgendering is not discrimination, but a form of bias and is associated with transphobia. "That, to me just proves that it's an internalized bias, or not bias, but internalized misogyny and anti-trans sentiment. I would say probably not discrimination."

The impact of feeling a lack of acceptance as a result of misgendering, rejection of argumentation, or communication styles leads these debaters to consider whether they should run

from debate altogether. For example, Lake noted that they do not really feel accepted in the activity as a result of these negative behaviors that have been directed towards them in the activity, and they feel reluctant to participate in debate. They explained how they only continue because their coaches need them to participate in debate; otherwise, they probably would have fully quit debating by now:

> I don't think that the debate community is fully accepting of us. I have taken a big step back from debate. I've been focusing a lot more on speech events. I don't enjoy debate as much as I used to. [I] refuse to do it unless I have to have another event, or… my [coaches] will sit down and be like, no, we need you to debate. Like we need someone in debate here. But other than that, if I don't have to, I don't do debate.

Other participants noted that while acceptance does exist, they had a serious worry about the performative nature of this acceptance. Ring elaborated that there are questions between fake and genuine acceptance within the debate activity, which had a major impact on their willingness and desire to participate:

> I found myself the past couple of months drawing back, [not] interacting with nearly as many people in debate, even a little bit of participation within the activity. It hasn't made me quit or anything. But it does definitely make you, like, skeptical of how valid some of the things are, how much acceptance is performative, how much acceptance is a genuine result of change and difference and thought, stuff like that. When you're skeptical of that stuff, sometimes you just want to reel back and engage in other things that you care about.

Liberation explained how they feel there is a place for them in debate, despite being from not the greatest region to be queer. However, they noted that it is extremely easy to leave the

activity. Through non-acceptance and harm, competitors who are queer or from other marginalized groups could quickly disappear. Despite these concerns, Liberation explained there is a place to be successful in debate; otherwise, in their view, queer debaters would simply not exist:

> The nice part about debate is that it's a very optional place. If you don't feel that kind of acceptance, it's possible to leave it fairly easily. But even despite that, we still see a lot of queerness in this space, very openly talked about, which I think is a signifier that it does have at least somewhat of an accepting or at least willingness to discuss these kinds of issues and Kritiks, and ideas around queerness. Because if it wasn't, then they [queer debaters] would probably all be pushed out of it.

Despite all of these negative occurrences, participants noted repeatedly that they felt they have a place in debate and at least some degree of acceptance in this activity even if their experiences have been largely negative from the greater community of collegiate debate. Liberation explained,

> I think my experience in debate has been fairly, I think it's been positive overall for the most part. Created a space that I can be healthy. And when it comes to my queerness specifically, it's not typically targeted or brought up in a lot of areas, which can be both positive and negative because sometimes that does lead to those feelings of repression. But overall, I think that experience has been a positive one, especially being here in [redacted school name and town]. I think the team is one of the more inclusive spaces that I can be in, which feels that's good.

Similarly, Tree elaborated, “Overall, it's been pretty positive, especially among the forensics community. They have always been pretty accepting. I've always been able to be myself no

matter whether it was in high school or in college now." Tae echoed these sentiments, stating "It's been a pretty positive experience in terms of any aspect surrounding my queer identity," and Lake agreed: "I feel like debate is a lot more accepting of my identities than other areas that I could be in." Ring also shared these thoughts:

> In terms of the general experience and debate as a queer individual, I've always really enjoyed my time in the activity. A lot of it coming from like a program that used to be big, but like right around its death point, I took on a lot of work. So, it was stressful, but overall, I'm still here.

Finally, Green highlighted the importance of the relationships they formed through the activity, primarily through – and because of – their queer identity:

> I have found a lot of good friendships and relationships with other queer people in debate because of my queer identity, which is also a very affirming and assuring kind of space to be in as well. Because knowing that, like, through coaches or other judges or other debaters, sometimes I can still have a queer community even within this hypercompetitive space that will be there for me.

Overall, queer debaters have felt like there is a place they belong and therefore have this acceptance in the activity. This acceptance is tied to sometimes their team environment, or the community making that exists across the activity to build a feeling of acceptance. However, this acceptance comes with major roadblocks or feelings of a lack of belonging. These stories of rejection of the style of communication to a level where speaking points or the arguments which have nothing to do with queer argumentation are rejected just because of stylistic presentations that fall outside of the realm of normative presentations act as a layer of unfairness. The rejection of the queer argumentation such as the Kritik as a model of queer argumentative practice and

performance disenfranchises the individual queer debaters and harms their ability to be seen. The misgendering and the oppressive forces that hold queer individuals back is affecting this feeling of acceptance. While these competitors feel accepted, some of these competitors are experiencing things that make them question their participation in the activity. Despite these harms and abuses, the participants feel so hopeful in a place that is so harmful.

Revisiting the Research Question

Earlier in this thesis, I posed the research question "How do debaters navigate presenting or concealing their queer identity within the activity?" As evidenced by the analysis presented in this chapter, queer debaters find themselves presenting their queer identity in a variety of ways – some more uniform, and some less so. The first theme of queer communication style shows that participants have found a communication style that is non-normative when compared to the activity broadly, but widely accepted by the greater queer community. This style tends to manifest in ways that we perceive and can explain it as a casual approach to delivery. However, this style as explained by participants creates separation between heteronormative and cisgender narratives built into the dominant styles of debate. Participants largely focused on the escapism from the true dominant style of the masculine expectation of style and delivery in all the speeches they give in debate. The goal for many of these participants was to find a style that falls outside of those central narratives, which they do as these participants find a place where they change their voice, language, and/or the narrative of debate to fit their communicative style that feels comfortable for themselves. While it does get misunderstood as purely humorous or ridiculous, the presentation is overwhelmingly the only real way to explain the queer body in debate when no one listens. We remember the weird things in debate; it is through the othering of

this style we find and understand the queer place of debate. Overall, this queer communication style is a rejection of the dominant binary of communication styles within debate.

The second theme of queer presentations and its sub-themes recognize a number of different presentations of self that queer debaters engage in, such as queer argumentation, gentle unveilings of queer identity, and the hiding of queerness. In this theme there were two core components coming out of the theme and sub-themes. This being the presentations of their identity, but also whether disclosure of the identity was explicitly given with their identity. Queer argumentation represented the highest level of performance as there is nothing more intense then debating queerness itself, it acts as a state of high vulnerability. While some do not wish to place their identity at the forefront of the debate stage that does not mean they seek to reject or minimize their queer identity. These gentle presentations serve as a stage for a reveal of the identity without it being the centrality of the debate round, but also give space for queer individuals to also give physical representations of their identity to present the way they wish to be seen in a public light in debate spaces. However, while queer debaters generally choose to reveal their queer identity into the round this did not stop moments where they needed to hide and times, they needed the ability to be seen as not queer for their own safety or mental wellbeing.

The third theme examined the queer individual's acceptance, and lack of acceptance, in debate. This theme ties into the presentation styles and the ability to truly be able to present in the way the participants wanted to. Despite general agreement on some degree of acceptance in debate, participants identified major barriers to being able to exist freely without some sort of tax on the queer body. These barriers to acceptance generally included misgendering, rejections of

the queer argumentation, and rejection of the distinct queer communication style that built a degree of comfort for queer debaters in the activity.

Overall, my participants overwhelmingly chose to present and perform their queerness despite the risk of non-acceptance or hostility. Even through a lot of acts which occur that should make queer debaters feel not accepted by the community at large, queer debaters still manage to create a place for themselves in the activity. Most importantly, queerness has not been pushed out of debate; instead, queer debaters continue to foster an ever-growing and expanding space for queer presentation of self within collegiate debate.

Chapter 5: Discussion

When I started this project, I was really worried about what I might find. I only had my experience and some slight expectations of what I might see when it comes to the queer experience in debate. The lack of exploration of the topic in existing research only exacerbated my worry. I never could have imagined the results that emerged from my interviews with my participants. While some participants noted things I expected to see, many of them referenced a world of queerness within debate I wish I had the opportunity to have experienced. The work they've done to create a space for themselves, and their hope for the future, is inspiring. However, they also addressed numerous issues within the activity, and the pressures they face as queer individuals in debate. My results illustrate a need for serious conversations and resolution to the issues faced by queer individuals in debate. The responses I received from the participants in this research provide a glimpse into the overarching queer experience that exists in debate. These findings contribute to our understanding of how queer debate has developed, how it transcends the traditional barriers of debate, and how it can be used to pave a positive pathway forward for all queer debaters. After presenting my findings, it is time to examine how this research can inform the queer world within debate. In this chapter, I discuss the implications of this research, examine the limitations of my research, and explore opportunities for further research.

Implications

The results of my analysis inspire several implications for research examining the experiences of queer individuals in debate. Thus, in this section I propose three areas of consideration inspired by my research findings. First, I question the relationship between queer bodies / identities and argumentation within the debate sphere. Second, I critique the traditions of

debate based on stylistic expectations and cisgender normativity that is expected and constructed and how they interact with queerness. Finally, I explore the future of our work toward building equity for the queer community in debate.

The Relationship Between Identities and Argumentation

First, many of the participants discussed an interesting link between their own identity and the argumentation they were running in their debate cases. A majority of the participants noted they run queer-specific argumentation that in some way or capacity ties into how they identify, how they present, or how they even see queerness affecting the debate. Their use of their own queerness in their argumentation – or, in some cases, their deliberate avoidance of doing so – invites the question: what role does, or should, queerness play in competitive debate?

My results chapter illustrated the presence of some kind of unique communication style used by queer debaters within the debate itself that queer individuals recognized as queer. Although style alone is not argumentation *per se*, participants noted that in some cases there were consequences to their argumentation as a result of stylistic choices they made with that queer style. For debate coaches and judges, this would be incredibly unusual. At most, what should occur is penalization of speaker points, which does not really decide the winner of the debate. Some participants were lucky to *only* lose speaker points, but some competitors explained how their queer style was conflated for argumentation, and their *rank* suffered for it. Such experiences reinforce the perception among queer debaters that they need to suppress their queerness in the round, or otherwise alter their argumentation to buffer their queer style.

Such cultural impositions undermine the agency of queer students. It is one thing if the performance of queerness (or the avoidance of it) is the choice of the individual, but another when it is forced upon the debater out of fear of repercussion – which is even more ironic in an

activity that prides itself on championing advocacy and changemaking. Although many debaters noted they chose how and what they presented, it did not line up with the reactions to style used in debate: some would be rejected even if the style was not necessarily about the argumentation they read in round, but the place where they can feel queer as opposed to styles that had generated which were creating discomfort in terms of their own identity when speaking their argumentation into the round whether it was queer or not. Where it got more interesting was how they embodied a queer praxis by subjecting their identity to the stage of debate by performing queerness and arguing their queerness in the same space. In the results chapter, one participant noted that they go beyond what a normal queer debater used when queering their argumentation through the Kritik. They brought their full identity and performed it through storytelling by reading poetry to tell their story. This allowed them to present every bit of their identity without consideration of the limitations of norms or standards generally used in the debate space. While each debater felt it was their choice to make the decision, they had all reported that showing up as queer tied their identity to their arguments because queer argumentation was how they presented as queer in a debate.

This in turn explains why many queer debaters have turned towards identity-based argumentation. Whenever I felt my identity was attacked in debate (and most of the time my opponent had no idea of my queer identity), I really wanted to respond in queer ways that I knew existed. In that respect, this experience only calls for queer debaters to use the Kritik or to use other tools of queer performance and argumentation into the debate space. Such connections between identity and argumentation function to build space and legitimacy for their identities and create a larger cultural impact within debate through queer styles and queer argumentation.

Managing and Resisting Normative Traditions

Second, participants discussed ways they pushed against cis-normative norms and traditional models in debate, both consciously and unconsciously. For a long time, the only accepted style in debate was a more masculine style, which – when used by debaters who were not male-presenting – was typically viewed as aggressive. A contrasting, more tentative style was also used, though it was less accepted than the typical masculine style. Interestingly, participants documented a queer style now available to queer debaters that both draws from and resists both of these traditionally gendered styles. However, despite the appeal of this style for queer debaters as a means of representing an important aspect of their queerness or queer identity in the debate, it seems to face some of the same backlash as the tentative style often associated with female debaters. This backlash, as discussed by my participants, seems to point to the effect of implicit bias and the speaking traditions that are entrenched within the debate activity, which make it hard for new or untraditional styles that do not represent the majority to gain traction in the activity. Furthermore, with queer debaters running queer argumentation and engaging with K debate results in departures from the more traditionalist approach of stock issues debate (a grounding in debate that a case must include five core components, these being significance, harms, inherency, topicality, and solvency). Those not engaging with that traditionalist stock issues model tend to face backlash and marginalization of their argumentation as a result of that presentation choice.

However, these traditions and the management of stylistic and competitive choices in debate are major factors in whether a queer individual will likely be accepted or feel accepted in the activity. Some of the participants reported difficulty with expressing their queerness or breaking tradition without being potentially voted down or experiencing some form of rejection, competitive or otherwise. I think this tradition of masculine speaking style and normative construction of debate limits debaters from being able to express themselves how they want to.

Challenging those traditions illustrates the scope of such normative constructs built in debate, and the need for rejection of those norms in order to build independent spaces. This is the prerequisite for queer debaters' ability to make their own place for them within the debate circuit.

As is true of any established institution, the traditions of debate are difficult to break. If we are committed to goals of inclusivity and accessibility, the debate community must consider why are we still utilizing traditions that make the activity inaccessible or inhospitable to marginalized students. Why do queer debaters need to conform to a masculine style in order to succeed? This is not to say that tradition is bad, but my participants shed light on why we need to look at the traditions we are utilizing in debate with a more critical lens. Deviation from normative expectations in the activity has led to major discourse on how we should engage with one another. For example, we saw this when the Kritik in debate was introduced and received heavy criticism. Today it is largely accepted in multiple debate forms as a legitimate approach to debate. So, why should queerness stylistically and argumentatively be any different?

Building Equity in Debate

Finally, and unsurprisingly, the results of this study illustrate a need for deeper conversations about how to pursue equity in collegiate debate. As noted in detail in the findings chapter, my participants experienced and expressed several issues pertaining to their queer identity within the debate space. These issues largely center around issues of equity and inclusion within debate for queer individuals. Interestingly, my participants voiced some exciting possibilities to be explored in order to build more equity in debate for the queer debater community.

One of these suggestions is something already being utilized by at least a portion of the British Parliamentary debaters through a practice called the Point of Equity. A participant who

competed in British Parliamentary explained it as a tool to handle issues where discrimination or marginalization occur in the round:

> Tae: In most of the tournaments that my team participates in, there's a second type of point and they're called points of equity. And they allow individuals who feel like someone has said something that could marginalize someone or who feel like they have been marginalized to put out a point of equity. If someone calls a point of equity, it has to be adhered to. The debate pauses for a moment until it's addressed. And generally, the resolution, it comes with understanding rather than like this is something you did horribly wrong. It's not a punishment thing. It's a here's something that you did, and we think it probably serves you best, or serves other people best to correct that action, to address it.

Unfortunately, conceptualizations of such a point of equity do not exist on a national or international scale and appear to be localized, with only certain tournaments experimenting with the procedure to protect equity for competitors of marginalized identities. What makes this really interesting is the BP point of equity acts very similar to the National Parliamentary Debate Association's point of order for when rules are violated in the debate space. The point of order is the calling out of a perceived rules violation that occurred in a debate, and the judge may then potentially make a ruling on the alleged violation. However, what is very unique is this point of equity allows for the issue that occurred in the round to be taken care of in a more respectful and interpersonal way. The conversation involved in a point of equity discusses the issue that occurred and then resolves it in some way that is more respectful than being forced to debate the issue that occurred in a round. For example, when being misgendered in a round, a competitor would no longer be forced to run misgendering theory (an argument that the opponent should respect their pronouns or lose the round) for the legitimization of their pronouns in the debate,

which often leads to the opponent attacking the legitimacy of the queer identity and even sometimes telling the queer debater that they should have performed their queerness differently to have been read correctly. If a point of equity would have been called, the round could be stopped, and the issue be resolved by correcting the behavior and even having a discussion where all parties feel comfortable proceeding or finding a reasonable resolution. In this way, a point of equity would allow queer debaters who do not want to be forced to use their queer identities in debate to find equity for themselves. This point of equity therefore creates an opportunity to resolve equity issues without always deciding the ballot in favor of one side or the other in the debate, but also prevent identity-based debates that occur and inflict emotional damage on marginalized debaters who end up having to debate *who they are* instead of their arguments.

There is a real need for other debate formats, such as National Forensics Association Lincoln Douglas, Public Forum, International Public Debate Association, and others, to adopt a point of equity procedure that stops the clock and allows for resolution of equity when someone is misgendered, for example, or faces racism or other forms of discrimination in the round. Such a procedure could be used as a tool of education illuminating how issues of equity extend much further than just the competition spaces itself.

A second suggestion came after the interview concluded from a participant mentioning a need for a better way for the activity to handle dead names. While many tournament software programs handle this well, other programs do not always link names from the student side to the judge side, which has led some students to be called by their dead name multiple times at multiple tournaments. Avoiding mechanisms that perpetuate dead-naming is essential if we are committed to expanding equity and not inflicting emotional distress upon queer debaters at the start of rounds, which very well could have an impact on their ability to succeed in the round.

Therefore, efforts should be taken to prevent issues of rejection of the names of transgender, non-binary, and gender queer individuals who have a particular name they prefer in the debate space or otherwise.

Third, coaches, judges, and other competitors need to engage in more self-reflexivity. Organizations like the National Speech and Debate Association (NSDA) issue frequent communication about issues such as implicit bias, but I believe more of our organizations could engage in similar, and perhaps also deeper, work – in particular surrounding queer identity in debate. My participants noted a pressure within the activity to disclose or otherwise represent their queer identities in perhaps exaggerated ways – and this pressure was a direct result of social forces and competitive expectations within the activity. Thus, we as coaches, judges, and other participants need to consider how we engage with those we oversee, and consider our role in protecting marginalized members of our community in the round with us. We need to consider our comments with more scrutiny, and perhaps avoid encouraging competitors to mobilize their identities in particular ways – because how a person chooses to incorporate (or not) their identity into their performance should always be up to them. However, we should also consider how to support the queer debater whenever they wish to perform their queerness more overtly. We should be there to be their support network anytime they face harm from others. Individual coaches, judges, and students should seek resources to accomplish these goals, but our parent organizations should also consider trainings and professional development / mentorship opportunities to assist us in doing so.

Limitations

Despite the contributions of this thesis, the research was subject to several research limitations that do temper the force and transferability of my findings. There were two major

limitations to this study, including the sample size and demographics of the participants, and the willingness of participants to come forward and share their perspectives about being queer in debate.

First, the participant pool was very small in this study, which also limited the demographics represented. Qualitative research is inherently less concerned than quantitative methods with issues of generalization, instead privileging depth and thick description. However, the gender demographic of my sample was solely made up of non-binary and genderqueer individuals. This is not inherently bad in any way, but in effect this makeup means there were sections of the LGBTQ+ community that are not represented in my exploration of queerness in debate. The cisgender but still queer community did not get represented in this study, which does limit the transferability of these findings to other communities.

Second, and more concerning, was the lack of willingness of participants to participate. Over a span of months, I issued multiple calls for participants across multiple channels and through multiple gatekeepers / network insiders, to not get a single participant. I worried throughout the project what would occur if there were no participants willing to participate in this research, and I questioned whether my difficulty in soliciting participants was because the queer community is just in a place safety wise to feel like they can come forward to tell their story and therefore didn't feel the need to contribute to research about the topic. I eventually secured enough participants to complete this project, but virtually all of those more publicly out participants noted they were quite proud of their identities, and all were out in some way or another. This created a major limitation as the views collected are only from those who are openly queer. This itself is not inherently bad, but it skips over a community of queer debaters who may participate in some or all queer debate practices in this study, but have obligations to

hide it due to public and external pressures. It is quite possible that as a result of a lack of willingness within the queer debate community that entire sections of data were not available because of safety concerns, which lead to difficulties applying the results on queer individuals who may be part of the community, but do not present it on a public level.

Future Directions

In many ways, this thesis serves as a preliminary analysis of the queer experience within debate. As a result, the project has inspired lot of subsequent avenues to explore to better understand the queer experience within debate. Thus, I propose four potential directions to expand upon exploring the queer experience, culture, and argumentation within debate.

First, this study sought out a broader examination of debate as a whole within the collegiate circuit. I interviewed participants from a wide variety of debate formats. However, most formats only had one or two representatives in my sample who represented the experiences from that format. Although all competitors in my sample who had experience with CEDA (Cross-Examination Debate Association) noted positive experiences, there were many perspectives that were left out in this research that could have been captured if there were targeted studies that captured more experiences in NPDA (National Parliamentary Debate Association) or other debate formats. Therefore, there is a real need for more in-depth research exploring the different experiences that are likely to exist across the different debate formats and organizations, especially since some participants noted there were unique experiences that did not exist in other formats. Exploring the differences in debate formats and how they support (or don't) queer competitors could possibly shed light on issues occurring within these formats, or identify more solutions to problems facing debate elsewhere when it comes to the queer experience within debate.

Second, there is a need to explore the "fully queered" round of debate. What occurs in a debate round when two fully queer teams commit to queering the space entirely? I only discovered preliminary insight from one participant that the entire queer experience changes radically in such rounds. I myself have never experienced or observed this, as I have only seen rounds where only one debater or team utilizes queer argumentation and performance. I also chose to largely hide my queerness in debate, so even when going against other queer debaters I did not contribute to a queering of the round. In contrast, some of my participants had experienced a version or made an effort to fully queer a round, and the dynamics of such a round should be explored in order to capture a fuller picture of the queer experience in debate, and the possibilities presented to participants when their marginalized social position is shared with all other participants in the round.

Third, there is a need to capture *coach* perspectives and experiences, both from queer debate coaches and those outside the queer community. In particular, this research gives rise to the question of what the responsibility of the coach is and what their role is in the identity and culture that queer debaters make for themselves in debate? This is important as some participants noted they are to some degree coaching high school debate while also participating in collegiate debate themselves. Some had noted that their coach limited or encouraged certain performances of queerness in their rounds. This experience did not present itself forcefully enough to feature in the analysis of this thesis due to lack of qualitative data being collected around coaching choices. However, the role coaches play in a queer debater being able to navigate debate spaces with safety in mind should be explored in subsequent research.

Fourth, there is a need to explore the perspectives of *judges* who adjudicate rounds with queer debaters. One concern that repeatedly occurred in my interviews was that participants

noted how judge perspectives at were not always positive when it came to queer identity, culture, presentation and argumentation within debate. How should judges navigate identity dynamics within the round? How do judges navigate the need to balance debate with student wellness? And how do we equip judges to navigate these dynamics successfully?

Conclusion

As a queer debater, I questioned if I would ever come out of hiding. Near the end of my career as a debater I poked my head out a few times, but I never truly went out of my way to show or present my identity. I tried a few queer argumentative tools but refused to fully commit to my queerness inside of debate until it was too late. The thing I still consistently struggle with is why was I more comfortable presenting my queer identity more in IEs (Individual Events / speech) than I was in debate? I suspect the reason was: I did not feel accepted in the debate community for my real identity. I was accepted because I conformed to the normative expectations that every other debater had conformed to. My time in debate was not a pressure to perform my queerness a certain way; instead, it was to perform stylistic expectations that reinforced a heteronormative, cisgender performance I felt was forced upon me to gain access to competitive success in debate.

This research has given me hope that queer debaters and the queer community within the Speech and Debate activity has hope for finding a place. However, to reach this future, the community must invest more time addressing and removing bias and discriminatory actions from our structures. The community must see the place that the queer debater has in the activity, but also seek to allow those who present their queerness differently the right to win rounds without feeling like they must utilize their queerness to win rounds. My hope is that queer debaters will

feel like there is a place for them, safety for their identities, and a sense of belonging in the debate community.

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