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Cover Page Footnote

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Coats of Fire: Rhetorical Identity Negotiations of Feminist Evangelical Christians

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This paper examines the identity negotiations of undergraduate students who identify as both feminist and evangelical Christian. Studies of the negotiation of religious identities and social identities have primarily focused on contexts such as sexuality/religion, context/location, and culture/religion. This study, however, focuses on young adults attending private, religious universities while openly identifying as religious and feminist. This study uncovers an additional layer of tension by pinpointing Christian universities, since these schools arguably play an influential role in students' religious identities. From 14 interviews with feminist Christian-identifying students using Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory as a theoretical foundation, rhetorical performance and invitation were found existing as strategic methods students used to negotiate particular discursive tensions brought on by their dual identities on religious campuses.

Keywords: Identity Negotiation Theory, feminist identity, religious identity, religious universities, rhetorical performance, rhetorical invitation

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

Although Anderson's experience serves as one account, her story depicts a phenomenon many religious feminists experience. Within particular

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religious traditional teachings, women's voices are often missing (Evans, 2012; McKnight, 2008), lessons are masculine-dominated (Evans, 2003), and a heteronormative monosexual theology promotes male exclusivity within the Church and religious family structures (McKnight, 2008). To understand the tensions experienced and negotiated by Christian feminists, this qualitative study uses Identity Negotiation Theory as a theoretical framework to uncover how individuals with such a dual identity perform and invite others to understand their ideology and advocacy. Specifically, I interviewed self-identified Christian feminists attending evangelical Universities to analyze how such settings might impact their identity negotiations.

To understand Christian feminists' advocacy, their sense of feminism can be defined as identity agency and advocacy for women to "demand the full scope of authority she can, in personal relationships as well as in the full scope of place" (Wolf, 1993, p. xx). Wolf writes feminists claim, "power as [they] need it and as [they] define it." Individuals who identify as both feminist and religious may encounter discursive tensions resulting from their polysemic identity and agency. Such tensions arise out of what are often described as discursive contradictions. Wolf describes these identity contradictions as wearing a "coat of fire" as parts of one's identity are at "odds with each other" (p. 238). With their dual identities, religious feminists must often take part in acts of identity negotiation (Stacey, 1983). The discursive nature of such identity negotiations "connotes a dialogic exchange" (Friedman, 1998, p. 198), meaning the fluidity of two identities exists to strengthen the feminist and gender-equality discourse (Carr, 1982). Carr writes, "Religious feminists are united in the conviction that both feminism and religion are profoundly significant for the lives of women and for contemporary life generally" (p. 279). Religion and feminism move between "boundaries of difference and borderlands of liminality," therefore, a Christian feminist identity could be defined as "polyvocal" (Friedman, 1998, p. 19). The following section provides a framework for how identity negotiations occur and how such negotiations can be found in a context where religion meets social identity.

Negotiation Framework

By negotiating personal and cultural identities, individuals can navigate the tensions between their cultural and personal selves (Jackson, 2002; Ting-Toomey, 2005, 2015). Within its sociocultural tradition, Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) theorizes an individual will obtain their "composite identity through sociocultural conditioning processes, and the repeated intergroup and interpersonal interaction experiences" (2015, p. 419). Initially, INT focused on affirming sociocultural group memberships and identities in intergroup-interpersonal relationships. From interactions, individuals construct their identities to create salience based on their value judgments.

The construction of one's identity may be fostered through negotiation practices referred to as verbal and nonverbal messaging (Ting-Toomey, 2005, 2015). By understanding how individuals negotiate their identities, they can learn to balance their personal and cultural identities and gain intercultural competence. Intercultural competence consists of three categories: identity knowledge, mindfulness, and negotiation skill (Jackson II, 2002; Ting-Toomey, 2005, 2015). When individuals choose a specific identity discourse, they may consider social actions from their identity performance (Beale, 1978). Instead of a discourse centering its mission on a proposed action that has a chance of being correct or incorrect, performative rhetorical discourse engages in the action itself. Therefore, this discourse may be "appropriate or inappropriate, seemly or unseemly" (p. 225). Performative rhetoric creates the discourse by which rhetors are seen as active community members. Identity negotiation performs within two functions: as a carrier of mutual discussion and arrangement and as navigation of an obstacle. Negotiation acts as "negotiating a treaty [and] a mountain pass" (Friedman, 1998, p. 194).

Since identity negotiation practices involve language negotiations based on the interpersonal relationships at play, I argue these negotiations can be classified as performing one's identity in such a way to invite others to understand one's identity. These negotiation tactics can be understood theoretically through forms of performative (Beale, 1995) and invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995). Not only may individuals with dual identities perform aspects of their identity and advocacy, but they may choose specific performance tactics to invite others to understand their identity and advocacy. In order to understand how language construction during identity negotiations reflects performative and invitational rhetoric, I outline past research that examines religious identities being negotiated.

Religious Identity Negotiations

Negotiation practices within a religious environment have been studied in the past. Specifically, Deeb-Sossa and Kane (2007) look into how students resist and question the often religiously-based heterosexist culture. Gervais (2012) examines how Canadian women religiously negotiate their feminism and Catholicism. Coyle and Rafalin (2001) examine the negotiation of Jewish gay men's cultural, religious, and sexual identities. Several studies (Gardner, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016; Thumma, 1991) have researched the negotiations of various religious gay individuals' sexual and religious identities.

Studies of the negotiation of religious identities and social identities have primarily focused on contexts such as sexuality/religion, context/location, and culture/religion. However, the present study focuses on young adults attending private, religious universities while openly identifying as religious and feminist. This study uncovers an additional layer of tension

by pinpointing these Christian universities since these schools “arguably exert a stronger influence over their students than churches, religious denominations, or parachurch ministries” (Gardner, 2017, p. 33). While paying thousands of dollars to attend, students are also required to sign and live by community lifestyle membership contracts, or “covenant” forms. As Christian college students aged 18-25, these young adults face particular discursive tensions as subscribers to a Christian community and advocates for a liberal feminist agenda.

Christian Feminist Discourse

The discourse surrounding religious—specifically Christian—feminism serves as a catalyst for redefinition and reclamation of feminism in the Church. Evangelical Christian feminist literature establishes a drive to question the dominant practice through theological interpretive codes (Steiner, 1988; Bineham, 1993; Condit, 1989). *The Journal of Communication and Religion* featured forty-three articles from 1999 to 2009 with topics about faith communities being influenced by feminist ideology. These topics included feminist contributions, masculinity constructions and sexual identities within faith communities, intersectional gender discourse, hospitable and inclusive language, race, gender, and faith (Sterk, 2010).

However, the cultural divide between feminism and Christianity discursively exists. Feminists often expect Christian women to yield to their male counterparts as a form of submission to patriarchal religious belief systems (Winters, Stiehler, & Peuchaud, 2017). By doing so, Christian women may be seen as losing touch with the cornerstones of the feminist movement: self-governing of body and sexual freedom (Stacey, 1983). Interestingly, literature also provides examples of how Evangelical culture and feminist culture feed into each other. The reconstruction of biblical female representation can offer a bridge between feminist ideology and Christian ideology based on the deconstruction of the Gospel and women choosing to “submit” rather than following biblically-prescribed orders to “submit” to male leaders (Bessey, 2013; Winters, Stiehler, & Peuchaud, 2017). The question remains: How do Christian feminist students maintain their identities on evangelical campuses, where interactions based on perceptions or differing ideologies can cause social tension? To uncover this, it is necessary to evaluate evangelical culture and its patriarchal history.

Evangelical Culture

An individual described as an evangelical—or operating within evangelicalism—partakes in persuasive discourse that communicates a belief in the “Good News” or “Gospel” with the goal of conversion or rebirth. Because of its focus on rebirth or change to come, evangelical culture exists within the concept of liminality. Often examined in circumstances of identity ambiguity and identity shifting over time, liminality can serve as a space

of disruption and reconstruction of one's identity (Wu & Buzzanell, 2013). Gardner writes, "contrary to popular views regarding the intractability of conservative Christian subject positions, liminality is central to Christian ontology" (p. 35). As followers of the prophet Jeremiah, evangelical Christians are compelled to be "in the world but not of it." Following the lifestyle of exiled Jews in Babylon, evangelical Christians operate within a "now but not yet" perspective as they await salvation from Jesus Christ, take authority from the Christian Bible, and regard a relationship with God as a key ingredient to understanding life. This waiting for "a kingdom come" encourages evangelicals to teach others of their spiritual beliefs in personal reconciliation with God, self, and community and to focus on social justice, peace, and "freedom for the oppressed" (Harper, 2016, p. 6). By evangelizing, evangelicals strive to advocate for their beliefs.

Evangelical culture's natural liminality, or a state of in-betweenness (Beech, 2011), resembles a thinking process similar to feminism. Like the liberal feminist movement, evangelicalism strives to be visible and in constant transition. In her book *Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance*, Hunt describes both belief systems as "revolutions of consciousness" and as manifestations "of the desire and need for inclusion and connection" (p. 3). As a political movement, feminism operates from an ethos that strives to challenge social institutions. On the other hand, Evangelical Christianity seeks individual transformation, "which then results in a desire to work for the transformation of society" (p. 12). Not only does evangelicalism, like feminism, function in a state of liminality and constant cultural transition, but evangelicals also work on challenging social constructs. However, the chronicled evangelical Church is comprised of "too many examples of women's oppression and too few documenting support for women's rights" (p. 3). The Evangelical Church, throughout history, has operated as a patriarchal Church.

The Patriarchal Church

The evangelical belief of creational equality is often dismissed by the insistence on gender roles that situate women in a place of submission. Elizabeth Farian wrote in 1973 that "what Christian theology worships in God is its own phallus" (Raphael, 2014, p. 244). This argument can be attributed to the historically exclusive male priesthood and theological professoriate who teach male imagery for God. This monosexual theology thrives due to Christian congregations operating within hierarchies "with elite males dominating others" (Stenger, 1990, p. 294). For Christian feminists, who criticize the male-dominated space of the Church, the focus is not on men leading within the church, but the ideology that Christ only functions as a male for males (Stenger, 1990). Well-known teachings such as "submission" (Ephesians 5), the "patriarchs" (Genesis), and women's roles in the Church (1 Ephesians and 1 Timothy) often function as breeding grounds for patriarchally-interpreted teachings and discourse.

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

Daly (1973) criticized the “sexual caste system” that thrives on the Church’s use of male-only symbolism for Christ. Ruether (1983) wrote that the Church often leaves children and women as populations to be ruled over by the male ruling class. McFague (1987) criticized traditional metaphors used in the Church for Christ as discursive forms of patriarchy. These specific areas of theological feminist discourse are rich with criticism of patriarchal oppression experienced in evangelical systems (Carr, 1982; Christ, 1977; Hunt, 2004). These patriarchal ideologies can be found within evangelical (or Midwestern protestant) Christian university institutions that create a theologically-based curriculum. Such university-sanctioned teachings can be implemented in required school chapel services, highly encouraged and socially normalized dorm bible study groups, biblical general education courses, and syllabi structured to foreground Christian perspectives (Cesareo, 2007; Gardner, 2017; Shellnutt, 2018).

Methodology

From previous research (Gervais, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016; Thumma, 1991), identity negotiations are examined when contextual tensions arise for dual-identifying individuals. Within the context of a patriarchal church-based ideology, Christian feminist students offer unique narratives of identity negotiation. Due to the social support such universities may provide for Christian feminists’ religious identities, students may negotiate the feminist aspect of their identity to coincide with their Christianity. Therefore, by taking an interpretivist approach to interviewing particular students, I provide space for my participants and their narratives to be heard and further understood. To comprehend the negotiation practices of Christian feminists as they perform in order to invite fellow advocacy, I structure my research with the following research question:

RQ: How do Christian feminist students negotiate the identity-based tensions they experience on a Christian campus and in interpersonal settings?

In this paper, I argue that students at Christian universities (1) experience the negotiation of their feminist and Christian identities and (2) such

negotiations are manifested through the discursive strategies of Beale's (1978) rhetorical performance and Foss and Griffin's (1995) invitational rhetoric. My findings reveal that such discursive strategies and identity negotiations are used to support their feminist identity and their Christian identity.

Method

After receiving approval from the Ball State University Institutional Review Board and having each participant sign a consent form, I conducted a total of 14 interviews. Twelve of the interviews were with women, while two interviews were with men. Two participants disclosed they identified as queer, and one participant identified as Black American. These interviews lasted between 18 and 42 minutes and were recorded for transcript writing, resulting in 71 single-spaced pages of transcripts. Five interviews were conducted face-to-face in dorm lobbies and coffee shops. However, nine interviews were still conducted face-to-face through a technologically mediated context (video chat). The participants represented four different Midwest, private, Christian universities. Through social-media advertisement and snowball sampling, participants were asked to take part in an interview if they were (a) at least 18 years of age, (b) had attended a Christian college for at least one semester, and (c) openly identified as a Christian and a feminist.

To help unpack each participant's various narratives and intimate experiences, I conducted semi-structured interviews. This allowed me to ask each interviewee the same questions while also having the freedom to probe further when participants answered. The interview questions aimed to examine how students discursively identified as evangelical and feminist; how long they have identified as both; if they experience levels of negotiation between the two identities; if so, what did those negotiations look like; and if not, why did they believe the two identities combined well together. Participants were also asked to describe the evangelical characteristics of their campus culture. Some questions included: What aspects of the campus foster evangelical identities that many students/professors can take part in? How does your feminist identity influence your interactions on campus? Does being on an evangelical campus encourage this identity or push against it?

Data Analysis

Once interviews were conducted and data was collected, I analyzed participants' responses using Spiggle's (1994) categorization method of interpretation. I categorized the data by "identifying a chunk or unit of data as belonging to, representing, or being an example of some more general phenomenon" (p. 493). After conducting secondary, literature-based research, I analyzed the results from the interviews with concepts relating to discursive tensions and negotiation of identities. From those two themes, I categorized participants' answers and stories based on different types of phenomena being represented.

Results

After analyzing the participants' responses, it became apparent that Christian feminist students were experiencing identity-based tensions on campus and in interpersonal settings. The participants described various aspects of the environments and events in which they took part on campuses where they experienced several identity-based tensions.

Out of the 14 participants, 11 claimed they openly identified on campus as a feminist. The other three participants claimed they would choose to do so depending on the crowd they were interacting with at the moment. The 14 participants represented experiences from four different small, Midwest private Christian universities. Building from the work of Carr (1982) and Freidman (1998), this paper advances two claims: (1) feminist and Christian identities do not always exist in a rhetorical binary; and (2) the intersectional nature of these two identities can be attributed to forms of rhetorical agency. Specifically, this study explores the identity performance, discursive strategies, and invitational language Christian feminists used to negotiate their social and religious identities on Christian campuses.

According to all 14 participants, the four universities held several campus events that offered an opportunity for students to ask questions and explore their social responsibilities as Christians. Several participants commented that their university has been changing over time and evolving to create more options for student advocacy. These options included "International Women's Day panels," "women's history week seminars," "Bravespaces," "Safespaces," "Public Forums," "Chapel Chats," leadership programs, and other spaces for students to be openly curious.

When asked about conversations and other experiences taking place on campus having to do with political and evangelical agendas, whether patriarchal or not, participants brought up theological conversations with classmates and friends, the marketing and branding of "community" on campus, students and staffs' bumper stickers, the activity of signing the school's covenant or community law, professors' integration of spiritual issues within their lesson plans, the requirement of Bible classes, and chapel.

All four universities represented in this study required Bible classes and encouraged/required chapel attendance. One participant, Ophelia, stated:

[One day], in chapel, there was this guy talking, and he was using this really toxic language to talk about gender and stereotyping both men and women and so that whole thing, if I wasn't a feminist, I don't know if I would have realized that or caught on to that. Like, "Oh, what you're saying is really toxic."

Other areas where conversations about agendas took place were Bible studies, campus coffee shops, and classes. One participant told a story about how in her history class and in a "safe space," she felt frustrated by the lack of feminist knowledge and conversation. She said:

I remember comments from the trash history guys in the class who were like, “Oh, this is not really something mainstream. This is not really something we need to talk about. It’s just a women’s issue.” I remember looking back at them and wondering what they were talking about, and there were other girls in the class who were like, “Oh, just because this is women’s issues doesn’t mean men cannot hear about and think about it.”

One participant claimed:

I just think specifically a lot of guys on campus think they are superior to women, and I have definitely seen that in subtle ways. Whether it is in a group project and the guys in the group take everything over and don’t let the girls do anything. That kind of stuff, I definitely see it.

Ophelia brought up the phenomenon of “mansplaining” happening in the classroom:

Even in one of the classes today, there is a guy that is always out there trying to mansplain, and I ended up speaking, and I knew within five minutes of me saying something that he was going to try to mansplain what I said, and when he started to, I kind of laughed to myself but also didn’t want him to have the last word and said something again and then he didn’t say anything more.

In these instances where participants felt frustrated by the lack of knowledge, their feelings felt almost palatable.

Several participants brought up the geographic location of their university as playing a factor in the overwhelming presence of the evangelical agenda. All four universities were located on what is known as the Midwest “Bible Belt” and are all surrounded by various churches in their counties. One participant in particular, who identified as male, described hall and resident life as being a place where he has seen the objectification of women on his hall:

My freshman year [there was] a seminar on feminism. I had attended that, and I loved it. I thought it was really interesting because it’s such a controversial topic on [university A]’s campus. I don’t know why it is; it should not be. But after leaving [the] seminar, guys in my class asked [me] what seminar [I attended], and I said “feminism,” and they all laughed and like, called me a “pussy,” and I’m not trying to victimize myself but that is just the only attitude there is towards feminism and especially men trying to attach themselves to that ideal.

Beyond the environments and locations of the campuses, participants also relayed stories where individuals within the campus locations spread an anti-

feminist ideology. One participant, Phoebe, described how she felt lessened as a woman by a professor:

I was meeting [a professor], bless his heart; I had been really struggling with mental health issues and anxiety throughout my entire time at [university A]. He pulled me into his office one day and asked, “How are you doing? It seems like you are doing so much better. You’re not so on edge. You seem like you’re enjoying your life a little bit more.” And I said, “I started taking medication,” and the first thing that came out of his mouth was, “I wonder how that will affect your ability to bear children?” And he had this super concerned look on his face. Having that interaction, I instantly felt rage, like I didn’t know what to say. Because I was like, “Oh yeah, you know all I’m good for is bearing children. That’s my job as a woman.”

Phoebe also described the campus-wide known joke of women students only attending the university to attain their “MRS Degrees” (a play on the title of “Mrs.” for a married woman). This insinuated that women students were only working towards finding a husband or marriage partner during their studies.

Now married and graduated, Phoebe described her particular experience of walking towards marriage while attending the university:

When [my husband] and I were getting ready to move, the question was always, “Does [my husband] have a job?” I got asked that all the time, but I was never the one that was asked, “Do you have a job?” [even though] I was actually the one who had the job offer so that we could move down here.

Phoebe illustrates how these comments impacted her experiences on campus:

The comments about “what is your major? Oh, you’re just here to get your MRS degree.” Just micro-aggressive comments and behaviors that are perpetuated by a doctrine that is built on seeing women as less-than and as below, not as next-to.

From my categorical analysis, three phenomenological categories emerged: students’ performance of their identity knowledge, performance of their identity mindfulness, and their use of invitational language as a negotiation strategy.

Students’ Performance of Their Identity Knowledge

Although the instances the participants described on their campuses are seen as negative and toxic experiences within an evangelical campus, all 14 participants described ways in which they felt the freedom to perform their identity and the knowledge they had as Christian feminists. One participant

named Sarah discussed how being on campus introduced her to fellow Christian feminists with whom she could freely perform her identity. She stated they felt free to discuss the topic of “women pastors and the role of women biblically and [socially].” Sarah described the conversations as “developing my own view and hearing other people’s views without being attacked or attacking them.” In these conversations, Sarah felt that she could display her identity knowledge unreservedly with fellow Christian feminists.

Another participant, Jessie, spoke about how he felt he must publicly perform his identity knowledge since he felt his campus was “so wrapped up in these traditional values that devalue women,” and that “when we have a present inequality, the only thing to do is push back against that.” One participant named Oliver explained, “[Being a feminist] has encouraged me to speak up more because now people are just asking me, not to belittle me, but because they are curious of me.”

The category of public performance of identity and knowledge demonstrates how Christian feminist students felt a need to declare and situate their duality on campus. To navigate and perform their identities, Christian feminist students held knowledge of their dual identities and proposed actions and doings within the conventions of their communities. Beyond the performance of their identity knowledge on campus, Christian feminist students performed a sense of identity and interpersonal mindfulness to ease their negotiations.

Performance of Identity Mindfulness

Participants recounted experiences where they were emotionally charged to mindfully process, articulate, and perform their feminist agenda. Several participants described how they felt when being mindful of their duality within a campus and peer group that operated out of conservative values and conservative theology. Participants also recounted how mindfulness of their identities and others’ identities either allowed them to fit in or made them feel starkly different.

Three participants brought up how they were mindful of being white and how that characteristic allowed them to fit the campus identity. However, one participant opened up about being Black, saying, “Well, I don’t fit in with the color of my skin.” She described how she felt she had to be mindful of her race when she felt she did not always fit in. Max, a University B student, described his experiences of being a queer Christian feminist student. He spoke about the homophobic and sexist views he comes across and further described how he performs a sense of identity mindfulness by “show[ing] them how to treat others through my own interactions.” Rebecca, a former University-A student who grew up in a politically liberal home, described her shock when she moved onto campus. She quickly recognized how “intense... very conservative...weird, and cultish” the college felt. She described how

she had to perform a bit to fit in with the overall campus culture. She stated, “I learned how to be sweet and cute [laughs] the perfect [University A] girl...Not until I was on the evangelical campus did I realize it was such a problem. I didn’t notice there was such a gendered divide until I was in that [stricter] conservative Christian culture.”

A majority of the participants referenced their standing out from campus due to their differing socio-political beliefs. Three participants mentioned Donald Trump’s 2016 election in particular as being an emotionally charged experience for them on the campus and how they had to navigate conversations and be mindful of others. When asking the participants why standing out socio-politically was an important performance—whether as themselves or as a tainted version of their identity, several participants gave unique answers. Phoebe spoke of her paralyzing fear of being judged and how she felt she had to perform against her dual identity:

I was fearful in interactions. Not for my life or for whatever, but just fearful of judgment. Fearful of people’s biases. Interacting with men and professors on the campus, [takes a deep breath] I just found myself...not knowing what to say that would make them understand.

However, several participants discussed how they openly performed mindfulness of sexuality. Four participants spoke about their advocacy for the LGBTQ community on campus and in the Church. Oliver, a participant who openly identified as gay during our interview, claimed:

I don’t hide behind [my identity]. Like, I am who I am, and people have to just be uncomfortable about it because I’m not at the point where hiding is beneficial to me anymore, so, yes; I stick out like a sore thumb at [University A] ... Are people judgmental or are Christians judgmental? Not because I am fearful to be judged, [but] it still hurts me.

Beyond a queer or queer ally label, participants also discussed how appearing anywhere near “liberal” instigated moments of identity-based tension and the need to perform mindfulness of their identity.

Lydia, a student from university B, talked about her liberal Democrat label as a clash on campus. She stated, “There are people at [University B] who think you cannot be a liberal and be a Christian. You can’t swear and be a Christian.” However, she performed against this assumption and stated, “I swear, and I drink, and I have pretty liberal views, so I guess based on that interpretation, people would not really see me as a Christian.”

Ophelia, a graduating senior from University D, described how she sees her campus culture manipulating students to perform and identify as “pro-family” and “pro-marriage.” After talking about her own dating experiences, and the backlash of questions she received when she and her campus boyfriend broke up, she told me about the dating performances within dorm culture:

I think that in the dorm structures, [it] is really fascinating because you have a mix of grades. You have juniors that are super engaged or super dating, and then you have a freshman come in and say, “Oh, yeah, this is normal. This is normal to look up to this 20-year-old who is getting married,” so there is this established normalcy of coming in as an 18-year-old and seeing this is kind of [dating as] the way things work.

Participants described various situations in which they saw others perform a sense of heteronormative or homogenous identity.

However, these Christian feminist students felt a need to perform their mindfulness of Christian feminist identities for fellow college peers. This “performance” of mindfulness allowed the participants to display a “significant social action in itself” (Beale, 1978, p. 238). I argue not only were Christian feminist students performing mindfulness of others’ identities, but many of them disclosed they were also performing a sense of self-identity mindfulness. This performative space provided the participants with “points of articulation” (Gardner, 2017, p. 35) where they could process and understand identity mindfulness (Ting-Toomey, 2005, 2015).

In these points of articulation, many participants brought up instances where they chose to perform biblical mindfulness and challenge anti-feminist theology existing on campus. Rebecca talked about the biblical description of a “noble wife” in Proverbs 31 as a popular source that students use to describe gender roles. Oliver spoke about her knack for always asking people who challenged her beliefs with scripture or God-terms to back themselves up biblically. Phoebe described the tension she felt when classmates and professors would interpret missional verses in the Bible as only pertaining to men. Ruth and Katherine both brought up the internal tension they felt when they tried to interpret the Bible and were unsure if they were interpreting it from a feminist or Christian lens. Ruth stated:

I will always have the tension of wanting to read it in a feminist way rather than in a Christian way. But that is because I want the two to blend with each other, but sometimes I feel like they don’t always do. When it comes to the Bible, that is probably when I feel the most “Okay, am I going to be a Christian or a feminist?”

Katherine brought up the historical issue of masculine interpretation and being brought up in a way that used such interpretation consistently. She further explained how attending a school that tends to use male-dominated interpretations brought up disagreements on certain topics. She said she would perform mindfulness by consistently “asking about experiences and offering up what I have experienced. The scripture will pose topics and initiate something that is already going on.”

Christian feminist students experience many instances on their Christian evangelical campuses where they feel a tension to perform their identity—both in knowledge and mindfulness. Beyond their performance of identity, students also discursively used their identity label as a form of invitation to others.

Invitational Language as Negotiation Strategy

Alongside taking part in performative rhetorical discourse, participants' motives resembled those of invitational rhetors. Foss and Griffin (1995) define invitational rhetoric as “an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (p. 5). This discourse sets itself apart as an invitation to the perspective of the rhetor. By doing so, invitational rhetoric operates in two primary forms. Firstly, it serves as an offering of perspectives, “a mode by which rhetors put forward for consideration their perspectives” (p. 7). Secondly, it develops a discursive space, a “creation of external conditions that allow others to present their perspectives in an atmosphere of respect and equality” (p. 7). This specific rhetorical discourse is what Forget (1989) calls “a leap to the other side,” by which invitational rhetors purposefully “deploy another logic or system” (as cited in Foss & Griffin, p. 9).

The third category of discursive negotiation strategies relays how participants interacted on their campuses as feminists and Christians and used their identity label of “Christian feminist” as an invitation for Christians and feminists to understand their advocacy. This was displayed by how the participants felt that being a Christian and a feminist were more alike and vital to one another than not.

When interviewed, all 14 participants referenced their Christian identities as being integral to how they function as a feminist. Sarah unpacked her dual identity:

I was always just a Christian who also, you know, was a feminist. I think there were points where I had to challenge the feminist perspective from my Christian worldview. Because Christianity, I believe, is truth. So that would come first and would be the lens I would examine feminism through and process different aspects of it. It was never like I could either be a Christian or a feminist; I can only be one. No, I am going to be both. It just takes some reconciliation.

Participants spoke about their belief that as followers of Christ and believers, they should enact qualities of Christ-like characters, and they see feminists as acting in similar ways. Lucy described her perspective:

Yeah, I feel like feminism has to do with the equal worth of all people, and that...for me comes from my Christianity and the inherent value of people as being created in the image of God, and I don't think that extends to one sex or

gender and not the other. For me, I feel like a lot of ideals that I consider feminist line up with what my Christian ideals are. I have an understanding why people would disagree, but for me, I don't face conflict.

By relying on themselves to know and be mindful of their own identity, participants experienced a sense of empowerment.

Gardner (2017) claims that power and agency exist in the use and choice of labels. By using identity labels, Christian feminists may experience “a reinstatement of power with material consequences” since “power manifests itself in language” (p. 33). This concept of power was represented in the participants' answers. Julia, Lucy, Sarah, and Oliver all talked about how the label “feminist” might scare Christians. Lucy explained:

The word scares people in the Christian community because they associate it with things that are unbiblical. First off, you don't have to be pro-choice because you are a feminist. You don't have to be a stay-at-home mom because you are a Christian. It's an umbrella term, and people don't know how to ask the questions to get to “What does that mean for you?”

To combat this response, many participants discussed ways they openly used their labels to “invite” classmates to understand their duality. By enacting their feminist and Christian labels simultaneously, Christian feminists become rhetorical agents, redefining what their labels truly mean for them and inviting others to do so as well.

Julia described how she invokes an invitational feminist position by using Christian evangelical language of equality. This language felt “more acceptable” for her to “talk about ‘feminism’ within the evangelical culture like, ‘We are created in the Lord's image; we can all bear the identity of Christ.’” She claimed this might be the case since on her campus, from her perspective, the term “feminist” might be “too stigmatizing.” On the other hand, Max discussed how he unapologetically uses his identity label to invite others to see how a “Christian feminist” should act. Max stated, “I believe you should spend your whole life always learning and always educating yourself. I believe in educating myself. I don't think political labels have anything to do with kindness or respect. People do.” Participants viewed the performance and enactment of their identity as a way to invite others to redefine or educate themselves on feminist issues within Christendom.

Several participants described how they utilize Christian testimony and storytelling as an invitational strategy. After sharing a story from the Bible about Jesus' peaceful response to a law where a woman caught in adultery originally had to be stoned, Jessie stated, “People always ask me, ‘How can you be a feminist and still be a Christian?’ and I don't think there is a difference, because God calls us to love everybody and to treat everyone equal.” Lydia

explained how she does not see her dual identity as controversial since she “100% believe[s] that Jesus was a feminist and fighting for the rights of the oppressed is such a Christian value. That’s why I feel like those two identities can go hand-in-hand.” Ophelia described how since “identifying as a feminist,” her identity has led her to a sense of intersectional thinking. She claimed her identity “has changed the way I view systems especially.” Similarly, Ada claimed her feminism “is rooted in my Christian belief that...men and women are created equal and that we are equally made in the image of God.”

Within invitational rhetoric, Foss and Griffin (1995) warn of the discomfort that may arise in interactions when the rhetors and their audience members’ positions and beliefs are questioned. Jessie described the importance he sees in inviting others into a conversation even if their beliefs may differ:

I don’t think alienating myself from them is going to solve anything. I think being a good friend and also still being a feminist in their eyes is a good example for them. Given the Christian mindset on the campus, we all have in common a belief in God and a belief in Jesus. That is some of the best common ground. Trying to treat them as brother or sister in Christ, but also I try to put down conversation that is very negative towards women. I think most of it is just relational, getting to know your peers, hearing what they have to say, but also being able to speak the truth that is on my heart.

Before arguing with others who disagree with his dual identity, Jessie tries to focus on common ground they may have with him. This allows him to create a relationship in which he can value the other person first while simultaneously explaining how their language might be damaging towards women and other minorities.

Similar to Jessie, Katherine explained her philosophy on inviting others into conversation:

I feel like I have cultivated a stance or position in my relationships of, I want to learn from you, and I want to lean into what you know and what you experienced because it is very possible I am wrong. And while I mean to have my opinion and be where I am, I want to learn from what you’ve experienced. I think that that threatens a lot of evangelicals because they think that that stance is equated to relativity, and they’re not being true. And I don’t think that is true. I think we can listen to people’s experiences and still stick to what we know and what we believe, and be open-minded without abandoning that firm ground.

Several participants described how they ease into conversations in order to create space for others. However, this was not always the go-to tactic for other participants.

Both Rebecca and Oliver opened up about how their conversational nature might come across as harsh or blatant in contrast to their social situations. Oliver claimed:

With people who openly do not support women, I will wear my rainbow jacket and say things I wouldn't normally say because I want to spite them a little bit. Which is bad, I know. It's just they don't live in the real world. Like they don't, and they need a dose of it. So sometimes I just like to be a bitch [giggles].

Not only did Christian feminist students perform their identity, but they performed their identity in order to invite others to understand their identity and sense of advocacy. Through performances (Beale, 1978) of identity knowledge and mindfulness, participants felt called to negotiate using invitational language to reach salience and intercultural competence.

Discussion

In her exploration of feminist discourse, Wolf (1993) writes, "Part of what I wanted to be was a warrior for justice, and part of what I wanted from the world was connection and love. The two drives were at odds with each other...The tension generated by the two conflicting impulses felt like wearing a coat of fire" (p. 238). Like Wolf's coat of fire metaphor, students communicate their own polysemic empowerment. Their coats of fire act as their negotiation tactics which use the rhetoric of performance and invitation.

Students who openly identify as feminist and Christian while involved in an evangelical community may use rhetorically performative and invitational discursive strategies to create and live out a specific discourse, and through such acts, invite other perspectives and opinions. As Christians, these participants are already prompted to live out performative rhetoric as Christ-followers. However, participants connected the very notion of their feminism to their Christ-like behavior. Ophelia claimed, "My feminist identity informs my Christianity, and Christianity informs my feminist identity. I fully believe that Jesus was a feminist. For me, it's one and the same." Oliver discussed her confusion as to why being a Christian and feminist are socially seen as opposites:

As a feminist, people question it. They don't see how it correlates with Christianity. However, from my point of view, if you're not a feminist, but you say you love Jesus, I sense a disconnect. Feminism is literally the equality of men and women, and if that is not what you stand for, then I don't understand how being a Christian lines up with that.

From their negotiation strategies of performance and invitational rhetoric, Christian feminist students described how they aim to create environments where "others [can] present their perspectives in an atmosphere of respect

and equality” (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 7). By doing so, Christian feminist students “leap to the other side” and allow a new “logic or system” of understanding to emerge (p. 9) and a sense of intercultural competence to be met (Ting-Toomey, 2005, 2015).

Conclusion

The ways that these representatives of feminist Christian discourse choose to discuss and perform their identities on college campuses are subjective. However, Friedman writes that subjectivity means not only contradictory, “but also relational” (p. 22). From what is represented within these 14 narratives, I argue individuals who identify as Christian and feminist negotiate their discursive identities through performative and invitational rhetoric. By defining their feminist agenda through their Christian discourse, feminist Christians rhetorically perform in order to rhetorically invite.

In Communication Studies literature, there is a lack of research about religious—specifically Christian—feminists. I challenge us to see it as an area calling for further research and insight. Identities pertaining to feminism and religion are fraught with firsthand experiences and testimony. Such perspectives are rich in narrative and storytelling. By examining the fluidity between different identities (such as gender, sexuality, religion, and race), studies such as this strengthen gender equality discourse. In the subjectivity of dual identities, we uncover not only individuals’ multiplicity and contradictory tensions but also the relational push and pull dual-identified individuals experience.

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