

Transgenderism and Pronouns: Assessing the Communication Practices of Christian College
Students

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Abstract

The issue of transgenderism has been part of prominent public and academic discussions in recent years, and ought to be addressed by communication scholars. One area of communication research that is missing from the current body of literature is the use of preferred pronoun usage among religious groups, particularly Christians. This study offers insight into this issue through a qualitative survey of the perspectives of Generation Z college students attending a Christian university. This survey was then analyzed via thematic coding through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory. Results indicate these students have varying approaches to communicating with and about those who identify as transgender, with some gravitating toward the use of accommodating language and some gravitating toward nonaccommodation.

Transgenderism and Pronouns: Assessing the Communication Practices of Christian College Students

A cultural issue that has become dominant in recent years is that of transgenderism. Discussions surrounding this issue cover a variety of disciplines including but not limited to the healthcare industry, public policy, and education. Because the topic of transgenderism is so connected to language, pronouns, and how people relate to one another, it is crucial for communication scholars to explore the topic in detail. There is a need to provide insight into these discussions around transgenderism, particularly the use of preferred pronouns. Studies that have touched on that aspect of the issue before have neglected to fully assess the communication practices of Christians to see how their religious beliefs and motivations influence their decisions in conversations with and about those who identify as transgender. It is necessary to evaluate the perspectives of Christian college students in Generation Z to look for both commonalities and diversity in their approaches to communicating with transgender-identifying individuals. This discussion is useful for scholars, policy makers, spiritual leaders, and the general public alike as they work toward policy and interpersonal communication solutions. This study's research questions are followed by an evaluation of the current literature, a description of the qualitative survey used to answer the research questions, detailed analysis of respondents' answers, and a discussion and conclusion that shed light on the pertinence of preferred pronoun usage in communication studies.

Transgenderism and Communication Studies

Media Representation Of Transgenderism

One prominent area of communication research pertaining to the issue of transgenderism has focused on the representation of these individuals in the media, including both the news

media and the entertainment industry. Researchers have sought to bring understanding to how transgender individuals have been portrayed in the media and more specifically, how those individuals feel regarding the news coverage about them. Whether through more traditional interviews with subjects chosen by the journalists or through man-on-the-street style content, there has been concern that ordinary individuals not representing themselves as public figures carry too much responsibility in representing to the general public whatever social group or identity to which they belong. On the other hand, there is also the sentiment among these individuals that any news coverage that sheds light on them or their cause is better than no coverage at all. It has also been noted that there is little media representation of transgender-identifying individuals and even less of other gender non-conforming individuals who do not identify specifically as transgender, or trans. These factors, along with the frustrations from those in this community that they are only highlighted in the news for their trans identity and not much else, were taken into consideration as Fink and Palmer (2020) sought to understand how transgender-identifying individuals feel about their encounters with journalists, their inevitable *coming out* in the stories, and their responsibility to represent their entire community. Findings from the study indicated that the transgender subjects of these news stories were generally content with the way they were portrayed by the journalists, although there were instances of dissatisfaction. For example, journalists would sometimes ask about the individual's dead name, which is a name that the individual previously identified with, or would use direct quotes from other people that included pronouns that the transgender-identifying individual found offensive. With regard to *coming out* to friends and family via these news stories, one individual found validation in the report that included that individual's preferred pronouns. The interviewees also

reported their responsibility to represent their entire community as both a burden and a positive opportunity to share information about their experiences with the general public.

Studies have also focused specifically on how an audience perceives this community in light of journalists' use of various pronouns and names. For example, Minjie (2019) conducted experiments to test how an audience perceives an individual who identifies as a transgender woman. The same news article was presented but with various combinations of male and female names and pronouns. Researchers have additionally been interested in the perceived credibility of journalists who either deadname or use pronouns that do not match an individual's preferred pronouns. This has been particularly relevant as some news media companies have altered guidelines for their journalists so that those identifying as transgender are better accommodated in their reporting. Results from these experiments indicated that pronoun usage does affect an audience's attitudes toward transgenderism and that journalists are perceived as more credible when using an individual's preferred pronouns and name. An acknowledged issue with this study, however, is that the participants consisted of only college students, a portion of the population that is known for being more accepting of current societal movements.

Researchers have also examined the representation of transgender-identifying individuals in popular TV series with the goal of figuring out how future productions can more accurately represent these individuals. McLaren et al. (2021) demonstrated bias in one study in that gender and sex are assumed to be two different concepts, an idea that is academically accepted in the field but perhaps not characteristic of the United States population at large. Because of that, the study's definition of what is an accurate representation of these individuals is somewhat subjective. Regardless, the researchers acknowledge that cultural acceptance of social issues such as transgenderism influence media productions and media productions influence how

willing a culture is to accept a concept such as transgenderism. Riggs and McIntyre (2022) have compiled and assessed these portrayals and become somewhat dissatisfied. They note that while representation is generally positive so as to give these young people ways to describe and express themselves, it still limits their ability to break out of cisgender ways of communicating. Mocarski et al. (2019) noted that some individuals identifying as transgender or gender-nonconforming agree with this conclusion and feel as though representations of them in entertainment media are merely negative stereotypes, particularly if the performers themselves are not part of the community and thus lack the lived experiences that might result from being part of that community.

Public Opinion Regarding Transgenderism

Beyond the study of the media in relation to transgenderism, there is also literature featuring public opinion on this topic. Researchers have noted that previous studies have been conducted to assess how contact with and interpersonal relationships with gay men and lesbians are related to feelings toward those individuals and opinions on gay and lesbian rights. Recognizing a gap in the literature, however, when it comes to transgender-identifying individuals and the public's attitudes toward and perceptions of their rights, Tadlock et al. (2017), conducted two national surveys to determine public opinion on these issues. They expected that, as has been the case with regard to studies involving contact with gay men and lesbians, that interaction with transgender-identifying individuals would be positively correlated with positive perceptions of that community as well as support for transgender rights. Additionally, they expected those positive perceptions to be greater when the contact was with a closer family member or friend rather than an acquaintance. Overall, results indicated that those participants who attended religious services less often were more supportive of the transgender

community and policies that would support it. Furthermore, participants who were female and politically liberal held those same supportive opinions.

One noticeable limitation to the study of Tadlock et al. (2017) and others like it is that the survey questions seemed to be largely policy related. For example, one statement on the survey was “Allowing transgender people to adopt children,” and participants were asked to what extent they agree with such a statement (p. 969). That could, however, disregard the participants’ motivations behind their agreement or disagreement. What each participant considers supportive could vary. Other survey studies have similarly focused on policy issues such as access to bathrooms and involvement in sports, as well as the influence of a close interpersonal relationship with a transgender-identifying person on another’s attitudes (Lewis et al., 2022).

Jones et al. (2018) conducted a study with results that are similar but not equal, drawing a distinction between the public’s view of transgender-identifying people and the public’s view of transgender-affirming policies or candidates themselves who are part of this community. While people’s religious and political views shaped their opinion toward policies and candidates as expected, they did not play such a role with regard to views of these individuals themselves. Additionally, this particular study did not support the idea that interpersonal contact with those in the transgender community is positively correlated with positive views of those individuals (Jones et al., 2018). Thus, studies are inconclusive on these matters. While these researchers have produced extensive results that provide insight into public opinion on this topic, there still seems to be a lack of research that probes into the public’s deeper motivations for holding the opinions that they do.

Pronouns and Use of Language

Another prominent area of communication research pertaining to transgenderism and

gender identity at large is that of pronouns and the use of language that is considered trans-affirming. A study of college students conducted at one Southern university by Patev et al. (2019) provided participants with a quantitative assessment to explore their opinions of gender-inclusive language and to see whether or not they feel comfortable using it. The assessment also asked participants about their interpersonal encounters with transgender-identifying individuals in order to draw any potential connections between the presence of those encounters and comfortability with gender-inclusive language. Results were as expected; those with negative views of transgenderism found gender-inclusive language to be somewhat burdensome. A limitation to this study, however, is that the quantitative nature of the questions or Likert scale items perhaps prevented participants from elaborating upon their answers. For example, one of the statements on the Likert scale was “Gender-inclusive language is difficult for me to use,” (Patev et al., 2019, para. 29). While responses were likely sufficient for the purposes of this study, there is the possibility that respondents’ definitions of *difficult* varied from that of the researchers. A qualitative study would allow respondents to clarify the meaning of statements such as that one.

Another key finding of this study was that participants did not see the issue of whether to use gender-inclusive language playing out in their day-to-day lives. Even participants who did not hold negative views of such language or of transgenderism did not see the practical applications of this topic in their daily conversations. The study was conducted, however, at the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 (Patev et al., 2019). The issues of transgenderism, gender identity, and preferred pronoun usage have grown in relevance over the last few years. Because of this, it is more likely that respondents now would have had more interactions with transgender-identifying or gender-nonconforming individuals than they did just a few years

prior. It is necessary, then, to continue to build upon research such as this as social trends, as well as the public's knowledge of and perception of these issues, change.

Religion and Transgenderism

Additional prior research has revolved around the influence of religion on gender and the influence of gender on religion. Darwin (2020) interviewed individuals who consider themselves religious or formerly religious, as well as non-binary, to address the challenges that perhaps arise when their religious identity and gender identity do not align entirely. Interviewees cited the traditional binary view of gender held by Abrahamic religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam as being hinderances to their ability to fully integrate with the faith, depending on the ideological, liturgical, or ritual practices emphasized in each religion. Regardless of their specific experiences, these individuals indicated that accommodation would be necessary if they were to continue to hold on to both their religious and gender identities. Either their religious identity or gender identity would have to give way somehow. The researcher noted that "Leaving the religion behind only [appeared] to be a feasible option for those who were raised Christian," (Darwin, 2020, p. 201). This observation indicates that further research ought to shed light on the characteristics of specific religions such as Christianity that prevent an individual's gender identity from remaining intact alongside the practice of that religion.

Christians and Transgenderism

While some view Christianity and transgenderism as being in opposition to each other, other researchers have attempted to explain the varying opinions Christians today hold on this topic. Timbers and Yancy (2021) examined the possible perspectives that Christians may have on the issue of gender and whether it is binary or if it is possible for one to transition at any given stage of life. They explained commentaries that rethink the traditional understanding of biblical

accounts such as that of creation and gender in Genesis and acknowledge that some who consider themselves Christians in recent years resonate with this new understanding. More specifically, these researchers were interested in assessing how Christians with differing opinions on this issue should approach changes to Section 1157 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, particularly with regard to the definition of sex in the section. Timbers and Yancy (2021) concluded that social workers have an ethical obligation to serve others in a way that affirms transgenderism rather than looking to their own interests. This research makes it clear that the issue of transgenderism is worth careful consideration among scholars and the public at large as it does and will likely continue to influence the communication of individuals across multiple industries.

Researchers have previously conducted an exploratory study to determine how individuals who identify as both transgender, or otherwise gender diverse, as well as Christian, view their multiple social identities. Yarhouse et al. (2021) gathered participants from Christian universities for an online survey. The survey included questions pertaining to the support or lack thereof from campus resources as well as the role that support from friends and churches have played in their lives. Participants were also asked to consider how microaggressions, such as negative jokes or comments, and microaffirmations, such as using one's preferred pronouns, impacted their experiences on campus. Mental health and psychological distress and well-being were also assessed. Results from the study indicated that the participants' Christian identities were more significant to them than their particular gender identities. Further, there was variation in how students perceived the concept of gender diversity, for example, in terms of whether it is morally acceptable in the eyes of Christians, is an intentional part of God's plan, is a personal choice, or is an identity that should be celebrated and supported. Overall, they agreed that the

attitudes toward transgenderism on their Christian campus were generally negative. While this exploratory study provided some insight into the perspectives of college students who identify with various places on a gender spectrum and also as Christians, its sample size was a limitation as acknowledged by the researchers (Yarhouse et al., 2021). Future studies could also expand the field of knowledge by considering the perspective of the non-gender diverse students at a Christian university.

Another area of research relating to sexuality and gender identity, particularly on Christian college campuses, has focused on the perspectives of the institutions as a whole as explained by Student Affairs leaders. Glanzer et al. (2022) collected data from 301 of these leaders via qualitative surveys. An additional 70 interviews were held with some of these leaders. The specific Christian universities represented in these samples were described by the researchers as being either *orthodox*, meaning students and faculty alike are expected to adhere to a Christian lifestyle and manner of conduct with a statement of belief, or *critical mass*, meaning there is more leeway in the convictions of these individuals so long as some tradition is upheld among leadership. Researchers were particularly interested in understanding how these Student Affairs leaders interact with LGBTQ+ students while maintaining the Christian focus of their institutions.

Results indicated that leaders wanted to communicate the values of love and care to these students. There was an emphasis on making sure those students feel welcome at the college regardless of their sexual or gender identity, and the belief that every person is made in God's image and has value underscored the motive for those messages of love and care. With regard to behavior, many of the Student Affairs leaders acknowledged that while students with varying sexual identities would be accepted at their institutions, varying sexual behaviors would not be

tolerated. In general, leaders either stated that both heterosexual and homosexual students would be expected to remain abstinent before marriage, thus desiring to make the rules of conduct the same for both groups of students, or that outward homosexual expression in a dating relationship would not be permissible. Furthermore, Student Affairs leaders did not indicate whether individuals identifying with the LGBTQ+ community would be able to hold student leadership positions. Only one of the interviewees was explicitly unsupportive of such a policy. It can be concluded, then, that the other leaders either did not think to bring this topic up during the interview, or they would be at least theoretically supportive of that policy (Glanzer et al., 2022).

Christians' Communication with Secularists

In order to have a more well-rounded understanding of the discourse between Christians and secularists, it is helpful to know how the latter views the communicative tactics or habits of the former. Sierra (2021) engaged with 10 secularists belonging to Generation Z and attending college to gain insight into their prior experiences with Christians. Of those interviewed, four were gay or lesbian. One had identified as pansexual at some point but not at the time of the interview. Their backgrounds and upbringings with regard to religion varied. Common issues that the interviewees seemed to have with their conversations with Christians included use of the Bible which the secularists viewed as unreliable, fear that their Christian friends or families would be shocked or misunderstand them upon finding out they did not share in the same beliefs, and the assumptions that Christians had about those who did not believe. Interviewees also seemed to desire more genuine interactions with Christians that allowed for deeper conversation and not pre-planned questions and answers limited to a short time frame. Sierra (2021) suggested that future studies identify how Christians view their conversations with secularists. The current study seeks to fill that gap in a small way by combining the issues of transgenderism and

pronoun usage with a deeper understanding of how Christians choose to communicate with those who most likely do not align with their worldview.

Pronoun Hospitality

Another important aspect of this discussion of Christians and their varying perspectives on communicating with transgender-identifying issues is that of the influence Christian public figures might possibly have on their audiences. Although there is no final conclusion whether these public figures have a significant influence on these audiences, the varying opinions of these authors, pastors, and speakers can be addressed to provide greater context for the current Christian trains of thought on transgenderism and preferred pronoun usage. One side of this issue can be referred to as *pronoun hospitality*, which is a term coined by Greg Coles, promoted by Preston Sprinkle, and adopted by other Christian leaders as well. Sprinkle is a bestselling author and was a professor of biblical studies before beginning his nonprofit, The Center for Faith, Sexuality, & Gender (About, 2018). As an expert and scholar in the area of gender and gender confusion, Sprinkle has been asked in multiple interviews about the issue of transgenderism and pronoun usage. In one interview, Sprinkle explained his reason for supporting pronoun hospitality, namely that “language is a shared social space” (THINQ Media, 2022, 1:43). He explained that since individuals have their own unique worldviews but must still communicate with one another, there must be some collaboration in their choice of words if they are going to coexist and function together in society and in conversation. He noted the flexibility of language and the necessity of bridging the gap between one’s worldview and another’s without completely getting rid of one’s values and beliefs. Sprinkle clarified that with regard to children asking to be referred to with pronouns that differ from their biological sex, parents ought to be extremely loving while also rejecting such a request. He cited social pressure from peers as a potential

explanation for why these children feel transgender and warned parents that acceptance of different pronouns could lead to the desire for cross-sex hormones or transgender surgeries among their children (THINQ Media, 2022). In a separate interview with podcasters Preston and Jackie Hill Perry, Sprinkle further explained that it is morally acceptable for a Christian to use an adult's preferred pronouns in order to maintain a relationship with that individual because the "desire for relationship supersedes whether [he agrees] with them on this point or not" (With The Perrys, 2022, 38:56). In short, Sprinkle separated his opinion on transgenderism and pronoun usage from the way he communicates with these individuals. He advocated for the use of their preferred language with the motivation to hold on to a relationship with them, presumably for the purpose of having opportunity to influence their lives.

Another faith leader whose communicative approach to transgenderism draws similarities to that of Sprinkle is J.D. Greear. He leads a congregation of thousands at The Summit Church in addition to writing books and hosting a radio show. Greear was also a recent president of the Southern Baptist Convention (Meet J.D. Greear, 2021). In a podcast series in which he answers questions believers have about various topics, Greear was presented with the topic of transgenderism and how to refer to people within that community. This topic first came up in 2019, and his response echoed the sentiments of Sprinkle. In instances of casual interactions with transgender-identifying individuals, Greear stated that he would use whichever pronouns they preferred and reserve his critique of that ideology for a time when he could sit down and have a full conversation about gender with those individuals (Greear, 2019; Greear 2022). His advice for Christians finding themselves in these interactions was to avoid the use of pronouns completely and use someone's given name. He also referenced pronoun hospitality and overall highlighted the importance of having a "generosity of spirit" in addition to speaking the truth to

transgender-identifying individuals (Greear, 2019, 4:05). His argument for this approach to communication was that the Bible uses *accommodating language* when speaking on cultural issues that are understood in a particular way by unbelievers as seen in Acts 17 (Greear, 2019). Overall, Greear's opinions on this matter as expressed in this particular podcast episode lean on the side of adopting transgender-identifying individuals' preferences.

Sam Allberry is another Christian pastor and author who, like Sprinkle, does not see the question of pronoun usage as a black-and-white issue (About, n.d.). When asked in a question-and-answer interview about the potential compromise a Christian could be engaging in by using someone's preferred pronouns, Allberry emphasized the necessity of evaluating each specific situation in order to know the right way to communicate. He suggested that if someone already has foundational knowledge about the faith and biblical views on gender, then it would be fitting to refrain from using pronouns that do not match that person's biological sex (RZIM HQ, 2019). In other words, someone who is already aware of the biblical definition of gender ought to be held to those standards and not expect believers to alter their language to accommodate their preferences. Allberry also explained that using someone's preferred pronouns could be necessary for building a relationship and having an open dialogue about the Gospel with that person, especially if they are not familiar with the Bible (RZIM HQ, 2019). The emphasis here is still on showing hospitality to and establishing relationships with transgender individuals before divulging the details of a biblical worldview on gender so as to keep conversations open and inviting.

Mark Ashton of Christ Community Church Omaha holds a similar view as the aforementioned pastors and authors. In a question-and-answer format speaking to congregants at his church in a video which now has over two thousand views, Ashton explained that Christians

are primarily responsible for introducing people to Jesus. He stated that the Christian is not to focus on attempting to get unbelievers to behave like Christians but rather to be a conduit to their new relationship with Jesus through which the Holy Spirit will convict them of sin. Ashton noted that the job of a Christian is not to point out what an unbeliever is doing wrong but instead to bring them to Christ to accomplish that (Christ Community Church, 2022).

Preferred Pronouns as Lies

Another predominant Christian thought leader in the public eye is Rosaria Butterfield, and her perspectives differ from that of Sprinkle and others agreeing with him. Before becoming a Christian, Butterfield was a self-proclaimed lesbian, feminist professor of English and women's studies, and an advocate of LGBTQ+ groups and beliefs. Since becoming a Christian, Butterfield has rejected homosexuality and written multiple books on her conversion and perspective on sharing the Gospel (Biography, n.d.). In a recent article, Butterfield addressed the issue of transgenderism and pronoun hospitality by saying that she needed to repent of her previous acceptance of such hospitality. She apologized for having used preferred pronouns that do not match people's biological sex in her writings and for encouraging other Christians to do the same as a way to love transgender-identifying individuals. In this way, Butterfield drew a distinction between herself and other Christian leaders. She not only rejected their interpretation of loving one's neighbor but articulated that it is sin of which true believers ought to repent. Furthermore, Butterfield explained that using someone's preferred pronouns leads them away from beginning a relationship with Jesus. The relationship between the Christian and the transgender-identifying individual is consequently built on lies, according to this author (Butterfield, 2023).

Famous pastor and author, John Piper, holds to a similar position as Butterfield on this topic. In a podcast episode in which listeners could receive answers to their theological and cultural questions, Piper was asked to speak on this issue, particularly whether he would use someone's given pronouns or given name if they contradicted that person's biological sex. After describing his interpretation of the biblical definition of gender, Piper clarified that he would be willing to use a transgender-identifying person's preferred name because of "the arbitrary nature of names" that are a result of cultural tradition rather than biological reality (Desiring God, 2017, 7:08). He went on to explain that he would not use a transgender-identifying individual's preferred pronouns because pronouns are not arbitrary but instead reflect biology. Piper agreed with Butterfield by saying it would constitute lying for a Christian to refer to someone with pronouns that do not match their biological makeup (Desiring God, 2017).

Yet another Christian thought leader and founder of Answers in Genesis, Ken Ham, has spoken similarly to Butterfield and Piper on the topic. He emphasized the binary nature of gender as determined by one's DNA and argued that using a transgender-identifying person's preferred pronouns is trying to love that person with lies. In short, he stated that Christians "should not contribute to [Satan's] deception by lying to others" (Ham, 2023, para. 15).

Jordan Easley, author and pastor of a congregation of thousands at First Baptist Cleveland, preached a sermon addressing transgenderism and Christians' responses to it as well (First Baptist Cleveland, 2023). Outlining a secular point of view, he stated "The world says your psychology determines your sexual identity, how you think, how you feel, and what you prefer" (First Baptist Cleveland, 2023, 6:51). He then directed his audience to adhere to the Bible's authority on the topic rather than his or the church's. Additionally, he noted that he believes pride is at the center of this issue as people do what is right to them instead of what is right to

God, and he made it clear that his heart is broken and saddened when he sees people living in a sexual sin such as transgenderism (First Baptist Cleveland, 2023). Based on these statements, it is evident that Easley seeks to communicate both compassion and black-and-white truth to the congregation through his choice of words.

Communication Accommodation Theory

These varying perspectives on Christians' usage of preferred pronouns can be viewed through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). This theory was established by Howard Giles in the 1970s as a way to understand the adaptation of one's language in an intercultural environment and has since been applied by researchers to many different social contexts. It has been used, for example, to study intergenerational interactions and how communicators do or do not change their natural way of speaking. There are two tenets of the theory: accommodation and nonaccommodation (Griffin et al., 2022). If two people in a conversation want to emphasize their differences, they will practice divergence and communicate verbally and nonverbally in a way that draws greater attention to those differences. This practice is known as nonaccommodation. Counteraccommodation occurs when divergence is practiced more directly and aggressively. If, however, those two communicators prefer to focus on their similarities rather than their differences, they will practice convergence and seek to accommodate one another verbally and nonverbally (Griffin et al., 2022). A key component of this theory is the social categorization among communicators. The differences between two speakers in a conversation or a speaker and an audience are not limited to those people as individuals but instead are connected to the social groups to which they belong and the historical context of those social groups (Giles & Ogay, 2007). In essence, the interaction is not an isolated event that is uninfluenced by one's social identity and the implications of that identity.

Accommodation via convergence tries to diminish the distinctiveness of those social identities, while nonaccommodation or counteraccommodation via divergence tries to magnify the distinctiveness of those social identities.

Accommodation

Through this theoretical lens, the two schools of thought regarding preferred pronoun usage among Christians lie on the spectrum between accommodation and nonaccommodation. Sprinkle, Greear, Allberry, and Ashton evidently advocate for Christians to use more accommodating language in their interactions with transgender-identifying individuals. More specifically, they suggest diminishing the distinctiveness of their unique social identities with a “desire for relationship [that] supersedes whether [they agree] with them on this point or not” (THINQ Media, 2022, 38:56). Christians and transgender-identifying individuals are commonly thought of as two separate groups in society, existing on two separate sides of the issue of preferred pronouns. By suggesting that Christians use a transgender-identifying individual’s preferred pronouns, however, these faith leaders are suggesting accommodation of language so as to reduce the social distance between themselves and the transgender-identifying community. As stated by Sprinkle above, the expressed purpose or motivation for this accommodation is to evangelize by drawing on similarities between two communicators. In other words, the end goal of creating a convert to Christianity is accomplished through this reduced social distance brought about by CAT’s convergence.

Nonaccommodation

The alternative school of thought with regard to preferred pronoun usage is exemplified through Butterfield, Easley, Ham, and Piper. Their rejection of the idea of pronoun hospitality suggests nonaccommodation with statements such as “[Christians] should not contribute to

[Satan's] deception by lying to others" (Ham, 2023, para. 15). Advocates of this position are less concerned with the minimizing the distinctiveness of social groups. According to CAT, this way of communicating actually emphasizes these differences through divergence. The expressed motivation for this divergence, as evident in the statement above, is to communicate truth to a transgender-identifying individual even if that truth might make that individual notice what they do not have in common with their Christian conversation partner, namely their views of religion and gender.

Research Questions

The current study proposes and answers the following research questions:

RQ1: How do members of Generation Z attending a Christian university adapt or not adapt their communication to accommodate individuals who identify as transgender?

RQ2: What motivates members of Generation Z attending a Christian university to adapt or not adapt their communication to accommodate individuals who identify as transgender?

Method

Participants

Participants were anonymous. Thus, demographical information was obtained via preliminary questions on the survey. These questions asked participants to agree that they were aged 18 to 26 and residential students at Liberty University. Participants were also required to agree that they identified as Christians.

Procedure

Participants in the survey were found via convenience sampling at Liberty University. This university was not only the most convenient for the researcher to access, but it also was useful for this study as it is a well-known Christian academic institution with thousands of self-

professed Christian members of Generation Z. Participants were contacted through word-of-mouth, social media posts on the researcher's personal Instagram and GroupMe accounts, and flyers handed out around the university's campus.

Materials

The survey was conducted online through Qualtrics with the first page including participant requirement and consent information. Participants were required to state that they were between 18 and 26 years of age, identified as Christian, and were residential students at Liberty University. Responses were anonymous and collected between October and December 2023.

The survey was primarily qualitative and open-ended so as to allow participants to fully express their ideas and opinions with as little bias from the researcher as possible. The questions are listed in the following Results section.

Results

The researcher set a goal of thirty total responses before bringing the survey to a close. This was deemed an appropriate sample size for the qualitative nature of the study and in-depth analysis of each long-answer response that would occur. A total of thirty-five responses was collected by the end of the survey period. Those responses were then viewed one by one and assessed via thematic coding. The researcher looked for commonalities in the responses to each question to see both the consensus and diversity that could exist. Those commonalities were then compiled to attempt to answer the research questions.

The results of the survey indicate a variety of opinions exist among Christian college students in this current generation. Despite the diversity of those opinions, there are common themes among responses that allow for subsequent interpretation of those opinions. Those

themes listed in full are provided in tables that include the number of times they are mentioned in participants’ responses. Each participant might have mentioned several themes in a single response. The following sections present the most common themes to responses to each question of the study’s survey.

Survey Question One

The first survey question was “What do you believe about transgenderism?” Most respondents answered this question with one of, or a combination of, the following beliefs about transgenderism: it is *opposition of Creator God*, a *mental illness*, *sin*, an *identity struggle*, and an *attention-seeking trend* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Results of Question 1: What do you believe about transgenderism?

Response Theme	Number of Times Mentioned in Responses
Opposition to Creator God/the Bible	23
Mental illness	12
Sin	8
Identity struggle	6
Treat them with respect/love	5
Attention seeking trend	3
Used by perverted individuals	1
Result of free choice but not ideal	1
Choice	1
Result of spiritual/outside forces	1
Morally wrong	1

Respondents often indicated their acceptance of the Bible and the creation account within it as a guiding principle in their approach to this issue. God’s design for creation, gender, and sex was mentioned frequently with the articulation that transgenderism rejects that design. One response encapsulates the general sentiment expressed by many: “[Transgenderism] is a movement that celebrates living a life different from the gender God created someone as.”

Another idea presented by respondents was that transgenderism is a mental illness recognized as gender dysphoria. When respondents mentioned this idea, they also frequently added that such illness could either be medically treated or that it would naturally subside.

Still some respondents indicated a belief that transgenderism can lead to *sin*. In other words, feelings of being transgender are not believed to be a sin. Acting upon those feelings, however, whether by medical treatments or mere acceptance of the feelings, is believed to be a sin that rejects God's creation.

Some respondents indicated transgenderism is a matter of *identity struggle* or an *attention-seeking trend*, particularly among younger people. They believe those who identify as transgender have confusing feelings and try to fix those feelings through a change in their identity. The emphasis in these responses was less so on a diagnosable mental condition.

Survey Question Two

The second survey question was "In general, how would you refer to a transgender woman (biological man)? For example, would you use he/him, she/her, they/them, or other pronouns? Please explain." There were three dominating trains of thought in responses to this question including *priority of biological sex*, *avoidance*, and *priority of relationship* (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Results of Question 2: In general, how would you refer to a transgender woman (biological man)? For example, would you use he/him, she/her, they/them, or other pronouns? Please explain.

Response Theme	Number of Times Mentioned in Responses
Priority of truth/biological sex	13
Avoidance of pronouns	11
Use they/them	5
Use preferred pronouns for relationship building/respect	4
Biological pronouns to avoid harm	2
Use preferred pronouns to love	2
Use they/them if personal connection	1
Use he/him if person looks masculine	1
Never use preferred pronouns	1
Depends on tone of transgender person	1
Maybe preferred pronouns	1
Use preferred pronouns	1

First, most respondents noted their desire to use he/him pronouns for the transgender woman to be in accordance with that individual's *biological sex*. Explanations for this communication strategy were similar with answers such as "I'd say he/him. That is their biological gender that is coded in all of their chromosomes," and "I would address a biological man as he/him because reaffirming his belief that people can change their biological gender does more harm than good..."

Second, many respondents stated they would do whatever they could to not use pronouns at all when referring to or conversing with someone who identifies as transgender. They used the verb *avoid* quite often and indicated that they would much prefer to use the individual's first name over another word. The use of pronouns, (whether feminine, masculine, or nongendered), would be a last resort, according to these respondents. Among this *avoidance* communication strategy, some respondents stated they would default to pronouns that match the individual's biological sex if pronouns were certainly necessary, while other respondents stated they would potentially use the individual's preferred pronouns.

Third, another common theme in responses was *priority of relationship* with participants explaining their willingness to use they/them or she/her pronouns to refer to a transgender woman. One respondent summed up the general sentiment expressed in this category of opinions by saying “I would use she/her if that was their preferred pronouns. I believe that in order to show love to that person it is best to respect them in this way. I don’t think one will be able to effectively create a relationship with them with the possibility of sharing the gospel in the future if they are not using their preferred pronouns...” The reference to *relationship* was used multiple times in responses such as this one, and those who did use that word or sentiment most often acknowledged that they would use pronouns that differ from the transgender woman’s biological sex.

Survey Question Three

The next question in the survey was simply the inverse of the previous one: “In general, how would you refer to a transgender man, (biological woman)? For example, would you use he/him, she/her, they/them, or other pronouns? Please explain.” Responses to this question reflected those of the previous question (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Results of Question 3: In general, how would you refer to a transgender man, (biological woman)? For example, would you use he/him, she/her, they/them, or other pronouns? Please explain.

Response Theme	Number of Times Mentioned in Responses
Avoidance of pronouns	16
Priority of truth/biological sex	16
Use preferred pronouns for relationship building/love/respect	5
Use they/them pronouns	4
Use preferred pronouns	2
Use she/her to love	1
Use she/her if person looks feminine	1
Unsure	1
Depends on tone of transgender person	1
Maybe preferred pronouns	1
Use preferred pronouns to avoid argument	1

Some participants copied and pasted the same answer they had written before, while others indicated they would not change their answer. Still, others further elaborated upon their positions. No new common themes emerged; most participants' responses still fell into the categories of *priority of biological sex*, *avoidance*, or *priority of relationship*. One respondent in particular expressed struggling with knowing what the right choice is and “what is genuinely the best way to serve [those who identify as transgender].”

Survey Question Four

The fourth question of the survey asked “In a face-to-face interaction with someone who identifies as transgender and whose preferred pronouns differ from that person’s biological sex, would you intentionally use the preferred pronouns? Why or why not?” This question was asked with the assumption that perhaps at times digital communication channels, such as texting or writing a comment on social media, can alter the way a person interacts with another. What someone is willing to say to someone’s face could perhaps differ from what they are willing to type and post. This question was also asked to eliminate the possibility of *misgendering* someone. In the specific hypothetical situation of talking directly to an individual who identifies

as transgender but whose biological sex is known by the other conversation partner, participants shared a variety of communicative approaches (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Results of Question 4: In a face-to-face interaction with someone who identifies as transgender and whose preferred pronouns differ from that person's biological sex, would you intentionally use the preferred pronouns? Why or why not?

Response Theme	Number of Times Mentioned in Responses
No, priority of truth	11
Avoidance of pronouns	9
Use they/them pronouns	3
Yes, to avoid argument	3
Yes, if absolutely necessary	3
No, they are unnecessarily offended	2
Yes, for relationship building	2
Yes	2
No, because of disagreement	2
Not intentionally	2
Yes, to show love	2
Not necessary to use pronouns	1
Yes, if I knew them	1

An approach that was identical to previous answers was that of *avoidance*. Once again, participants explained that they would do what was possible to avoid using any pronouns at all in the interaction. They expressed a desire to avoid using any pronouns to refer to the transgender-identifying person and viewed that as a last resort option. Some participants noted that if it was absolutely necessary to use the individual's pronouns, they would use that person's preferred pronouns. Others noted that they would use the pronouns associated with the person's biological sex. A few respondents indicated they would use they/them pronouns to refer to all transgender-identifying people.

Another common theme in responses to this hypothetical situation was a *priority of truth*. Some participants stated they would not use the individual's preferred pronouns because they believe such usage would constitute lying to that person and contribute to their "delusion." These responses indicated that participants view using someone's preferred pronouns as actually harming that person by encouraging them to live in opposition to the truth of how God created them and of what Jesus wants for them.

A third recurrent theme in responses was a *priority of positive conversation*, primarily for the purposes of building relationship and sharing love. Participants noted that they would want to have eventual conversations with the transgender-identifying individual about the gospel and using that person's preferred pronouns initially would give them opportunities for those conversations. Participants mentioned wanting to honor and respect the other person but would be willing to explain their Christian perspective if the transgender-identifying person specifically asked them to share that perspective.

Survey Question Five

The fifth question was slightly different than the last and asked "In a face-to-face interaction with someone who identifies as transgender and who goes by a new name that corresponds with that transgender identity, would you use the new name? Why or why not?"

The responses to this question indicate that participants view *names as subjective*. Unlike the question regarding pronouns in which participants had varied responses with some pointing out the gendered restrictions traditionally placed on pronouns, this question received a considerable amount of agreement among participants (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Results of Question 5: In a face-to-face interaction with someone who identifies as transgender and who goes by a new name that corresponds with that transgender identity, would you use the new name? Why or why not?

Response Theme	Number of Times Mentioned in Responses
Yes, names are subjective	5
Yes, people change names	4
Yes for relationship building	3
Yes, for conversation sake	2
Yes, if name is gender neutral	2
Yes	1
Ideally no	1

There was some variety in explanations for their willingness to use someone's new name. Some clarified that names can be gender neutral; others pointed out that people can legally change their names at any point and that it would not be all that unusual for an individual, even if they identify as transgender, to change their name. Many participants, even those that did not mention it as a factor in their decision before, specified that it would be difficult to build a relationship or hold a conversation with a transgender-identifying individual without using the new given name. Others said they would use a new name, particularly if they did not know the person's old name. While one participant still said they would not use the individual's new name, most participants viewed names as subjective and stated they would be willing to respect the wishes of the transgender-identifying individual by using a new name.

Survey Question Six

This question stated, "If a friend came out to you as transgender, how would that affect the way in which you communicate with that friend?" There were once again three dominating themes in these responses (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Results of Question 6: If a friend came out to you as transgender, how would that affect the way in which you communicate with that friend?

Response Theme	Number of Times Mentioned in Responses
Communicate love	9
Seek out conversation	6
Communicate disagreement	6
Increase distance	5
Use preferred name	4
Discuss God	4
Reject preferred pronouns	3
Use preferred pronouns	3
Pray for them more	3
No/limited change in communication	3
Not applicable (no trans friend)	2
Communicate indifference to decision	1
Express concern	1

No response: 7

First, most respondents described the desire to *communicate love*. Answers such as “I would do my best to show love. They are obviously incredibly hurt to do something so drastic,” illustrated participants’ wish to express love to the transgender-identifying friend, even if their differences in religious belief are discussed.

Second, other respondents discussed how they would wish to have a conversation with the friend about God and *communicate differences* of opinion they have with that friend. Even among those who said they would be willing to use someone’s preferred pronouns or name, participants explained they would want to share with the friend why they disagree with their choices. More specifically, they indicated articulating their disagreements as Christians. Some participants stated this would still not change their communication with that friend very much while others acknowledged the dynamics of the friendship would change: “It would affect the friendship greatly. Especially with a friend, someone I already had a relationship with, I would

sit them down, ask them hard questions, share with them truth, and not shy away from the great pain it would give me to hear this from them. I would try everything in my power to save them from themselves while not pushing them away at the same time. Lots of prayer would happen behind the scenes.” In these statements of wanting to express the incongruity of Christianity and this friend’s new transgender identity, the majority of participants also stated how they would not want to end the friendship.

Third, a different sentiment in these responses shows that participants would seek to *increase distance* between themselves and the transgender-identifying friend. While only one participant stated an unwillingness to remain friends with the individual, others stated that the friendship would be somewhat awkward, they might not be as close to the friend as before even if they hoped to be, and boundaries of self-disclosure would likely shift.

Survey Question Seven

This question asked, “Have you ever intentionally or unintentionally referred to a transgender-identifying individual with pronouns and/or a name that differs from that individual’s preferred pronouns and/or name? How did you feel about the incident(s)” (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Results of Question 7: Have you ever intentionally or unintentionally referred to a transgender-identifying individual with pronouns and/or a name that differs from that individual’s preferred pronouns and/or name? How did you feel about the incident(s)?

Response Theme	Number of Times Mentioned in Responses
Yes	19
No	9
Feelings of limited speech	5
Feelings of indifference	4
Feelings of exclusion	3
Feelings of worry	2
Feelings of justified conviction	2
Feelings of satisfaction	1
Desire to explain oneself/feelings of remorse	1

No response: 7

Of those participants who had previously been in the described situation, responses indicated feelings of *limited speech*, as well as feelings of *indifference and exclusion*. Some respondents stated they did not feel bad for using pronouns or a name different from what the transgender-identifying individual preferred and that they intentionally communicate in this way regularly. They then expressed feelings of justification because they believe that transgenderism is neither helpful to the person or a biological reality. Other participants expressed feelings of *worry* when in these situations, either because they felt their opinions were not respected and instead met with hostility or because they felt remorse and wanted to apologize to the individual.

Survey Question Eight

The next question on the survey was “How do you want to be perceived by the transgender community?” Similar sentiments were expressed in these responses with a few outliers (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Results of Question 8: How do you want to be perceived by the transgender community?

Response Theme	Number of Times Mentioned in Responses
Loving	13
Disagreeing	8
Open/free of judgement	8
Christian	7
Firm in truth	7
No unique perception desired	6
Respectful	6
Kind and considerate	4

No responses: 6

There were a few participants who stated that they are not concerned with how the transgender community views them; a couple explained this is due to their identity not being founded in what people think of them. Beyond that handful of responses, most described wanting to be perceived as both *truthful and loving*. There were additionally several responses that mentioned wanting to be someone with whom a transgender-identifying individual would feel comfortable talking and sharing their experiences. Examples of these responses include the following: “I want to be perceived as someone who loves people because Jesus loves them, but does not condone their lifestyles” and “As someone who responds in love and grace, but does not discredit the truth. Someone who is able to confidently assert my own beliefs and values and hold fast to them without judging or harming the other person.”

Survey Question Nine

The ninth question of the survey asked, “In what ways, if any, do you adjust your language when talking about those who identify as transgender” (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

Results of Question 9: In what ways, if any, do you adjust your language when talking about those who identify as transgender?

Response Theme	Number of Times Mentioned in Responses
Do not adjust	17
Softer language	4
Use of neutral pronouns	4
Negative tone	3
Avoidance of pronouns	3
Use of biological pronouns	2
Emotional language	1
Unsure	1

No response: 6

The majority of participants claimed that they *do not adjust* their language in any way. This does not necessarily mean those participants are unwilling to use someone's preferred pronouns or name. In fact, some responses reinforced previously mentioned positions on that particular issue, stating they would be willing to use those preferences. From the participants' viewpoint, however, they do not change their language or way of communicating when talking about those who identify as transgender.

Other responses indicate participants' adjustment of their language with statements such as "I do not unless I am in an environment with others who I disagree with and do not want to unnecessarily offend." Some answers suggest using they/them pronouns once again to refer to those identifying as transgender, and others mention wanting to be especially careful about the words they use in these types of conversations.

Overall, then, most participants do not think they adjust their language while others exhibit a willingness to do so for the sake of being unoffensive in a conversation.

Survey Question Ten

The last question in the survey asked, “How does your religious affiliation or lack thereof shape the way you communicate with or about individuals who identify as transgender?” Two overarching themes came out of responses to this question: the *superiority of God* and participants’ desire to *communicate love* (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

Results of Question 10: How does your religious affiliation or lack thereof shape the way you communicate with or about individuals who identify as transgender?

Response Theme	Number of Times Mentioned in Responses
Communicate love/respect	20
Superiority of God/the Bible	16
No connection to religious affiliation	1
Religious affiliation complicates	1

No response: 6

With the exception of one response, every participant indicated that their religious affiliation does affect the way they communicate with regard to this issue. Many participants described how they would want to explain to those who identify as transgender that they cannot affirm their choices or transgender identity precisely because God and the Bible were in opposition to those choices and identities. Some explained this concisely with statements such as “It changes everything. I know that God is against it all, therefore, so am I.” Other participants elaborated on this perspective further by citing Genesis 1 as the guiding principle behind their approach to communicating on this subject. Yet some specified further what they believe God’s approach to this issue to be: “My Christian upbringing and beliefs shape the way I communicate with or about transgender individuals because since I don’t agree with their lifestyles, I don’t necessarily have positive things to say about their beliefs. I try to see it from God’s perspective,

which is very hard to do, and know that He is also hurting because of their choices but He still loves them. I am called to do that as well.”

Many of the responses that explicitly mentioned God or the Bible as the origin to their communicative approach, as well as responses that did not mention either God or the Bible, also described a desire to *communicate love* to those who identify as transgender. Responses spoke of love, kindness, openness in conversation, sharing the gospel, “tenderness,” balance of truth and love, and compassion, even if they disagree with the choices of the transgender-identifying individual and hope to persuade them against that identity.

Discussion

The results of this survey provide a snapshot of the attitudes toward transgenderism among Christian college students in Generation Z, particularly indicating their approach to communicating about this topic. Two dominant themes emerge from these results that can assist in answering this study’s research questions: accommodation with the motivation of love and nonaccommodation with the motivation of love.

CAT not only articulates the difference between accommodating and nonaccommodating language, but it also explains how one’s motivations play a role in the communication approach taken. Those who want to emphasize their own personal identity as they seek to be liked, respected, or appreciated by a conversation partner are more likely to draw on convergence and use accommodating language. They try to highlight the similarities between themselves and the conversation partner. Scholars have also articulated how motivation influences nonaccommodating language. For those who want to emphasize their group identity more than their individual personality, divergence will occur as nonaccommodating language is used to

highlight the differences between themselves and a conversation partner. This particularly occurs when regarding oneself as a representative of their certain social group (Griffin et al., 2022).

This study's survey responses indicate that Christian college students in Generation Z have wide-ranging opinions on what approach Christians ought to take when communicating with those who identify as transgender, that is whether accommodating or nonaccommodating language should be used.

There appears to be quite a consensus on the issue of transgenderism. Participants did not diverge much when it came to opinions on the morality of transgenderism. They each indicated—whether by describing it as opposition to Creator God, a mental illness, an identity struggle, an attention-seeking trend, or a sin—that identifying as transgender is a negative concept that should be avoided and/or opposed for the good of the individual and for the good of the society. Thus, these participants all belong to the same Christian setting and share that sense of identity in the Christian religion and its apparent teachings.

Where participants differ is in the decision to utilize convergence or divergence in conversations with or about transgender-identifying individuals. More specifically, some advocate for using someone's preferred pronouns, even if they differ from that person's biological sex and contradict the participant's view of gender as informed by Christianity. Others advocate against using someone's preferred pronouns, particularly because they differ from that person's biological sex, with the participants citing biblical truth as their reason for such advocacy. On the question of whether one would use a first name that corresponds with a transgender identity, participants are more aligned and agree that gendered names are subjective and not as crucial to this discussion.

Although at first there seems to be two clear sides of this issue for participants—one that advocates for accommodation, seeking to emphasize similarities between themselves and the transgender community and one that advocates for nonaccommodation, seeking to emphasize the differences between themselves and the transgender community, the results are not quite that simple. Perception plays a part in CAT because the theory is concerned with how someone wants a conversation partner to view them and uses that to formulate the likelihood of either accommodation or nonaccommodation (Griffen et al., 2022). Beyond a handful of participants that stated they did not care how the transgender community perceived them, however, most indicated that they wanted to be viewed as both loving and faithful to what they believe to be true about gender. Thus, these participants are concerned with both their personal identities and their social group identities, illustrating that they communicate with a tension of both diminishing and emphasizing their differences with another. The two sides, convergence and divergence, therefore become blurred. Of course, the degree to which someone associates with their social identity in conversation is a spectrum according to CAT, which means that participants simply fall further to one side over another.

Overall, participants reflected the two sides of this issue articulated by many Christian public figures, one that views using preferred pronouns as lying and causing spiritual harm to another and one that views pronoun hospitality as the best method for demonstrating love to that person. Those who advocate for the latter seem to see time and the building of a relationship through communication that accommodates another as the answer to this issue and the way to eventually share what they believe with those who identify as transgender. Those who advocate for using pronouns that align with one's biological sex seem to see biblical truth as the priority and vital tool by which to measure what is a loving way to communicate with another. Another

sector of participants seem more indifferent to this issue than their peers and stated they are not very concerned with how they are perceived. Most of these Christian college students reported being concerned with both love and truth.

Thus, to answer the research questions, members of Generation Z attending a Christian university both adapt and do not adapt their communication to accommodate individuals who identify as transgender. Some use preferred pronouns, while others do not. Most are willing to use someone's preferred name. These students are reportedly motivated for this adaptation or nonadaptation by a desire to communicate love for the transgender-identifying individual and a desire to share their own Christian beliefs and not be dismissed for them.

Limitations

While the researcher believes this study reached data saturation, further research could be conducted to confirm the results described in this study and to expand the body of knowledge in the topic area of communication among Christians and the transgender community. Convenience sampling and a time restraint of just over two months of data collection perhaps limited the results of this study. Furthermore, some participants provided lengthy responses while other responses were quite short. Although this is to be expected, interviews rather than a survey as a means of data collection could be beneficial in the future to give participants the opportunity to further elaborate upon their answers and provide even greater insight into their own experiences and communication tendencies. One other limitation is that while the researcher attempted to remain objective in the formation of the survey questions, their presentation to potential participants, and the analysis of responses, there is the possibility that the researcher's own bias regarding this topic unknowingly influenced any one of those factors.

Suggested Research and Conclusion

This study fills a gap in the current communication literature regarding transgenderism and pronoun usage. While previous studies addressed this topic in terms of media representation, healthcare settings, and the workplace, adequate scholarly attention was not given to the motivation behind particular pronoun usage and the role that religion, particularly Christianity, plays in those motivations (Borba, 2019; Eger, 2018; Fink & Palmer, 2020; Friley & Venetis, 2021; McLaren, 2021; Mocarski, 2019). Therefore, this study provides insight into that research area and gives policy makers, pastors, political candidates, media outlets, and the public at large a glimpse into the accommodating language or lack thereof that Christian college students in Generation Z used when communicating with those who identify as transgender.

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