# “A Tremendous Outpouring of Love and Affection”: A Template Analysis of Positive Experiences During a Major LGBTQ Rights Campaign

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# "A Tremendous Outpouring of Love and Affection": A Template Analysis of Positive Experiences During a Major LGBTQ Rights Campaign

Human rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) people have frequently been decided via popular vote. Australia conducted one such vote on the topic of marriage equality in 2017. Research has tended to focus on the negative experiences reported by LGBTQ people during such votes, with little attention paid to any positive experiences identified. This paper seeks to redress that imbalance, reporting the findings of two qualitative studies asking LGBTQ Australians about positive experiences during the marriage equality vote. The first study analyzed 673 typed responses collected during the two-month voting period, while the second analyzed interview data from 19 LGBTQ Australians collected two-and-a-half years after the vote. Both were analyzed using template analysis. Results identified sources of support, types of support, empowerment through activism, changes in general and LGBTQ communities, and positive personal changes. As public votes continue to be used to determine LGBTQ human rights, the findings may guide interventions to help LGBTQ people and their allies cope with such campaigns.

Keywords: direct democracy; lgbtq; marriage equality; minority stress; template analysis

The passage of marriage equality legislation has become a central goal of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) rights movement in the 21$^{st}$ century to date. Although this narrowed focus may minimize the attention given to other LGBTQ rights concerns (Gerber, Raj, Wilkinson, & Langlois, 2021), marriage equality is perceived as an important symbol of increasing respect for and acceptance of LGBTQ people (Drabble et al., 2020). Despite increasing public support for marriage equality in the global West (Perales & Campbell, 2018), the topic remains controversial. In response, large-scale public votes have sometimes been used as a mechanism to pass marriage equality or, more frequently, marriage denial

legislation (e.g., Taiwan [Ho, 2019] and Romania [Maftei & Holman, 2020]).

While many residents in the United States of America (USA) have voted on state-level constitutional amendments to enable or prohibit marriage equality (Kail, Acosta, & Wright, 2015), federal marriage equality was ultimately enabled by the Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015. In 2017, Australia became the second country to pass federal marriage equality legislation following a national vote on the topic (following the Republic of Ireland in 2015; Pew Research Center, 2019). The Australian Federal Government posted a survey form to each enrolled voter, asking "*Should the law be changed to allow same-sex couples to marry?*" The survey period last for 8 weeks (September 12 to November 7) and resulted in 61.6% of respondents voting "yes" (Gravelle & Carson, 2019). While peak mental health bodies supported the passage of marriage equality legislation, they opposed the conduct of the postal survey (e.g., the Australian Psychological Society, 2017). This opposition was grounded in research from state-level votes to enable or prohibit marriage equality in the USA, which suggested that events such as the postal survey may pose a risk to the wellbeing of LGBTQ people. Research supports the notion that LGBTQ people already contend with chronic social stress as they encounter prejudice, discrimination, rejection, and violence in response to their stigmatized minority identities (i.e., minority stress; V. R. Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 1995, 2003, 2007). While the passage of marriage equality legislation may reduce structural forms of stigma against LGBTQ people (Hatzenbuehler, 2016), large-scale public debates and votes on marriage equality or marriage denial may pose unique sources of additive stress for LGBTQ people (Herek, 2011).

### ***Negative Impacts of Marriage Campaigns***

Quantitative research has indicated that the Australian postal survey was a time of heightened psychological stress for LGBTQ people (Chonody, Mattiske, Godinez, Webb, & Jensen, 2020; Ecker, Riggle, Rostosky, & Byrnes, 2019; Verrelli, White, Harvey, & Pulciani, 2019), with LGBTQ Australians reporting greater symptoms of psychological distress during the postal survey than over the following 12 months (Casey, Wootton, & McAloon, 2020). More pertinent to the present study, qualitative research has also explored the experiences that LGBTQ people reported during the postal survey. For instance, LGBTQ Australians reported: feeling a range of emotions, such as anger, stress, frustration, anxiety, and sadness; experiencing a dehumanizing effect; being more aware of societal stigma; fearing for their personal safety; hiding their sexual and/or gender identity; friction within interpersonal relationships; and disappointment in and disconnection from broader Australian society (Anderson, Campbell, & Koc, 2020; Ecker, Rostosky, Riggle, Riley, & Byrnes, 2019; Casey, Bowman, Power, Wootton, & McAloon, 2021).

### ***Positive Impacts of Marriage Campaigns***

While the extant literature has tended to focus on negative experiences during large-scale LGBTQ rights campaigns, some studies have identified positive experiences during such past campaigns in the USA. Maisel and Fingerhut (2011), for instance, described several positive experiences reported by LGBTQ people during the campaign surrounding California’s Proposition 8, a 2008 ballot initiative which sought to deny marriage rights to same-sex couples. Participants reported: a greater perception of societal support and acceptance for LGBTQ rights; closer involvement with the LGBTQ community; feeling positive emotions such as pride or optimism; feeling closer with their partners, friends, families, and colleagues; and personal excitement about the prospect of marriage.

In the Australian context, the impact of the postal survey on relationships was mixed: while some participants reported exacerbated tensions in the context of the postal survey, others stated that they experienced increased appreciation and support (Anderson et al., 2020; Ecker, Rostosky, et al., 2019). While investigating the potential public health impacts of events like the postal survey is of great importance for LGBTQ health research, an overly narrow focus on the negative sequelae of such events does not provide a complete picture of these phenomena.

Previous research regarding marriage campaigns has largely positioned positive themes as exceptions or countertrends to the prevailing negative themes and may therefore bring bias to the growing body of literature. It is important to redress outdated views of the LGBTQ experience as predominantly negative (Horne, Puckett, Apter, & Levitt, 2014). In general, research has identified positive aspects associated with self-identifying as LGBTQ (Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011; Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Strong, 2008; Rostosky, Riggle, Pascale-Hague, & McCants, 2010) and explored how LGBTQ people respond creatively and capably to times of social and political stress (Gonzalez, Abreu, Arora, Lockett, & Sostre, 2021; Riggle, Rostosky, Drabble, Veldhuis, & Hughes, 2018). The present study seeks to identify the positive experiences reported by LGBTQ people during a significant event in Australia's LGBTQ history – namely, the Australian Marriage Law postal survey. More specifically, we asked the research question, "*what positive experiences relating to the Australian Marriage Law postal survey were described by LGBTQ people?*"

The present study is, therefore, the first qualitative study to exclusively consider the positive experiences reported by LGBTQ people during a major campaign and vote regarding their human rights. A greater understanding of these experiences will enrich the existing literature in two ways. First, it will allow for more nuanced understanding

of large-scale marriage campaigns. Although quantitative research has suggested an association between these campaigns and a range of negative mental health outcomes, qualitative research has also demonstrated that such campaigns are not universally experienced as damaging by LGBTQ people. Second, the findings may point to avenues through which to strengthen support for LGBTQ people during campaigns, debates, and votes regarding their human rights.

## Method

### *Research Design*

While quantitative research vitally informs policies and practice which impact LGBTQ individuals and communities (Browne, 2016; Doan, 2019), quantitative approaches have also historically been used to stigmatize, pathologize, and oppress LGBTQ people (Anderson & Holland, 2015; Minton, 2001). Qualitative approaches have an important role to play in LGBTQ research, as they arguably "have a better chance of accounting for queer experiences in the same terms as the actual people living these experiences" (Warner, 2004, pp. 334–335). As such, a qualitative approach was deemed to be appropriate for answering the research question. Specifically, we utilized template analysis (J. M. Brooks, McClusky, Turley, & King, 2015), which belongs to the thematic analysis family of methods (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Template analysis was selected because it is a flexible approach that can easily handle large amounts of data and produce an easily interpretable account of diverse responses (King & J. M. Brooks, 2017). In addition, its hierarchical coding structure allows researchers to capture diversity of meaning within a broader overarching theme (J. M. Brooks et al., 2015). The analysis was situated within a critical realist framework (Danermark, Ekström, & Karlsson, 2019), which is well-suited to empirical investigations of social events

(Fletcher, 2017).

The present study involved collection of data using two different samples, methods, and time points – during and subsequent to the postal survey – which are described below. We anticipated that this design would increase confidence in the results by maximizing data triangulation (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, Dicenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014) and provide opportunities to develop both breadth and depth of understanding, especially considering the cross-sectional nature of most studies regarding the impact of marriage campaigns on LGBTQ people (Drabble et al., 2021).

When making methodological decisions in the interest of improving the rigor of our research design (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017), we were particularly cognizant of procedures described by King (2012) specific to improving the trustworthiness of template analyses. Such features, described in greater detail below, included: prolonged engagement with the data; peer debriefing; reflexive discussion of the research process and the evolving analysis; independent coding and critical comparison between researchers; maintaining audit trails of subsequent iterations of the coding template; constant comparison between the evolving analysis and the raw data; and extensive description of the research context and process. In addition, this manuscript was prepared with reference to the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (O'Brien, 2014) to improve the transparency and completeness of the report "while preserving the requisite flexibility to accommodate various paradigms, approaches, and methods" (p. 1245).

### *Study 1*

#### *Participants*

Participants were all LGBTQ people over the age of 18 residing in Australia at

the time of the postal survey. Of the total sample of 2,200 participants, 722 responded to the optional open-ended qualitative question, representing a 33% completion rate. To improve analytic depth, single-word responses (*yes*, *no*, and *unsure*) were excluded, leaving 673 responses for analysis. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 66 ($M$ = 34.69, $SD$ = 10.89), with remaining demographic details reported in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

*Procedure*

*Recruitment and data collection.* Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Expedited Review Committee (approval number: 2015000482-63). Participants were recruited via advertisements posted on social media platforms and via flyers distributed at LGBTQ venues and events in Sydney between September 4 (one week prior to formal commencement of the postal survey) and November 7, 2017 (the closure of the postal survey one week prior to the announcement of results). The online advertisements and physical flyers directed participants to an online information and consent page. Consenting participants continued to an online survey, hosted by Qualtrics, consisting of demographic questions and quantitative measures (reported in Casey et al., 2020), and open-ended qualitative questions. Participants were asked to answer one question about negative impacts (reported in Casey et al., 2021) and one question about positive impacts. Responses to the latter question – *"Have you and/or your family noticed or experienced anything positive during the marriage equality postal survey?"* – are reported in the present study. Participants were provided with details of general and LGBTQ-specific counselling services at the beginning and end of the questionnaire.

*Data analysis.* Quantitative demographic data were entered into SPSS (version

25) to generate descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were managed using NVivo (version 12) and were analyzed using the template analysis approach detailed by J. M. Brooks et al. (2015). Responses ranged in length from two to 205 words ($M = 27.92$, $SD = 27.80$). Consistent with the process described by J. M. Brooks et al. (2015), the first author, LC, familiarized themself with the dataset by reading through it several times. LC then began sequentially breaking down each response into individual units of analysis. A unit of analysis was a data point that contained a discrete idea and could range in length from one word to several sentences (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). LC generated a code to describe each unit of analysis and continued this process until codes consistently reoccurred and few new codes were being generated, at which point 41% of responses ($n = 276$) had been coded. LC then organized the codes into meaningful clusters and developed an initial coding template. This template was hierarchical, with narrower codes clustered within broader ones. LC applied the initial coding template to the entire dataset. When existing codes failed to capture later responses, existing codes were refined or new codes created until all relevant concepts had been captured (i.e., a code had been applied to each unit of analysis). The second author, SB, then applied the refined coding template to a randomly selected sample of responses ($n = 169$, 25.11%). LC and SB reviewed discrepancies and discussed the coding template (King, 2012), which was revised based on these discussions, with some codes being combined, and others being renamed and redefined. XX then applied the final coding template to the entire dataset.

## *Study 2*

### *Participants*

Nineteen LGBTQ people responded to an invitation to participate in a

retrospective interview about their experiences during the postal survey. These individuals had not participated in Study 1. Participants reported their gender identity as cisgender female ($n = 8$), cisgender male ($n = 6$), nonbinary ($n = 4$), and agender ($n = 1$). They described their sexual identity as lesbian or gay ($n = 12$), bisexual ($n = 4$), and queer ($n = 3$). Participants came from New South Wales ($n = 7$), Queensland ($n = 6$), Victoria ($n = 4$), and South Australia ($n = 2$). They lived in areas that were classified as major cities ($n = 14$), inner regional ($n = 3$), and outer regional ($n = 2$) using the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). They were aged between 19 and 64, with a mean age of 39.87 ($SD = 11.12$).

*Procedure*

*Recruitment and data collection.* Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: ETH19-3899). Participants were recruited via advertisements placed on social media platforms and via email invitations through the authors' personal and professional networks. Social media and email invitations directed participants to an online information and consent page. Consenting participants continued to an online survey which was hosted on REDCap (Harris et al., 2009) and took approximately two minutes to complete. Participants were asked to provide basic demographic details to ensure they met the eligibility criteria, and to provide their contact details to arrange an interview time. To be eligible for the study, participants were required to 1) identify as LGBTQ; 2) reside in Australia at the time of the postal survey (12 September to 15 November 2017); 3) report that the postal survey had a subjective impact on their mental health; 4) be over the age of 18; and 5) be fluent in English.

Eligible participants were contacted and invited to participate in a semi-structured interview, conducted via the online teleconference platform Zoom in order to

comply with Government advice regarding social distancing measures to reduce transmission of the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). All interviews were conducted by LC, a psychologist experienced in working clinically with LGBTQ people. Participants provided written or, if they were unable to digitally sign and return the consent form, verbal consent prior to the start of the interview. Interviews were conducted between 11 March and 2 June 2020, approximately two-and-a-half years after the conclusion of the postal survey. Around this time, public debate continued on the topic of the Religious Freedom Bill. Introduced to Parliament in response to the passage of marriage equality legislation, this Bill sought to allow people to discriminate on the basis of characteristics such as race, sex, or gender, if it was consistent with their religious beliefs ("Religious discrimination bill retains fundamental flaw", 2020). As such, ongoing publicity regarding the Bill may have made particular experiences during the postal survey more salient to participants. Interviews ran for between 24 and 76 minutes, with a mean duration of 44 minutes. Participants were given a $25 gift card in appreciation of the time and energy spent participating in the interview as well as a list of general and LGBTQ-specific mental health services for post-interview support.

*Data analysis.* The de-identified interview recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service. LC checked these transcripts against the recordings for accuracy and, where necessary, corrected them. The final transcripts were then uploaded into NVivo (version 12) and participant responses to a question in the interview schedule which asked about positive experiences during the postal survey (e.g., "*Can you tell me about anything positive you experienced during the postal survey?"*) were extracted by LC. In addition, LC reread the transcripts several times and extracted any other descriptions of positive experiences. All extracts were coded by LC using the coding template described in Study 1. When an existing code failed to capture

a participant's words, a new code was created and applied, consistent with the template analysis approach (J. M. Brooks et al., 2015). LC discussed and refined the new codes with SB and compared them against the transcript before applying the coding template to the entire dataset.

### *Research Team*

Like many qualitative approaches, template analysis emphasizes the use of reflexivity, which is the consideration of the ways in which researchers influence their research (King & J. M. Brooks, 2017). The research team represented a cross-section of researchers from the disciplines of clinical psychology and speech pathology, including individuals who identify as gender diverse and/or same-sex attracted. All members of the research team are White and aged in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. The different identities and experiences of research team members was important for interrogating the continuing analysis, as discussing and questioning the codes helped challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about participants and their responses (Henrickson et al., 2020). An important element of these discussions was also considering the perspectives that were not represented in the research team (e.g., people of colour, people with disabilities). Differing opinions regarding the definition and application of codes were resolved via discussion until consensus was reached.

## Results

The 673 responses from Study 1 were broken down into 1358 individual meaning units, each of which was assigned a code from the coding template. Codes were applied to 128 units of analysis within the data extracts from Study 2. The final coding template is presented in Table 2, along with the frequency with which each code was applied. Codes unique to Study 2 are presented in italics.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

***Sources of Support***

Participants most frequently noted receiving support as a positive outcome of the postal survey, although these comments were often quite general (e.g., “strong support from friends and family” [36, cisgender woman, lesbian, White, in a relationship, regional QLD]). While friends and family were the most frequently cited sources of support, participants noted support coming from outside their immediate social circle as being highly impactful. Many reported receiving support through social media from acquaintances or online groups to which they belonged. They found it validating for their social media connections to make their support visible. For example: “It’s made a difference to see friends and family changing their Facebook profile pictures to include a marriage equality banner or clicking ‘like’ on my posts about remembering to vote ‘yes’” (27, cisgender woman, lesbian, white, single, suburban NSW). In addition, demonstrations of support from local businesses, multinational corporations, celebrities, and sporting teams resonated with participants. Many participants felt affirmed by these statements and what they represented: they saw them as “not something which would be done for popularity alone, [but] a sign of changing societal stance and standards” (26, non-binary, pansexual, White, in a relationship, suburban WA).

Expressions of support from unexpected sources appeared to be especially meaningful. These included people who participants perceived as being less likely to support marriage equality (e.g., relatives who were older, religious, or politically conservative) and people to whom they were not especially close (e.g., friends they hadn’t seen since graduating high school). Participants with a religious faith found statements of support from their local congregation or national church to be affirming, while participants without a religious faith also found pro-marriage equality statements

from churches and religious organisations to be powerful indicators of societal change and support. For example: “There are Christians out there who care deeply for the LGBTQIA+ community. I wouldn’t have known that if not for the publicity and debate” (32, transgender woman, bisexual, White, divorced, metropolitan NSW).

### *Types of Support*

Although many participants described the source of support they received during the postal survey, fewer described specific ways in which they were supported. Some described receiving emotional support via loved ones contacting them to check on their wellbeing – often via text message or social media – and participants consistently experienced this as supportive and affirming. For example: “Friends and family have made a real effort in checking in with me to see how I’m going and feeling. I’ve found that very positive and touching” (33, cisgender woman, lesbian, White, in a relationship, metropolitan VIC). A small subset described meaningful gestures that went beyond “checking in”. For instance, a participant in Study 2 described a long-term online acquaintance sending them a care package in the mail. They described this as “lovely” and interpreted the gesture as an example of “solidarity and people connecting with each other” (31, non-binary, queer, White, single, metropolitan QLD).

Reported types of support most frequently centered on the campaign itself. Participants found it especially powerful to witness friends, relatives, and allies making statements decrying stigma and supporting equality to others. For instance: “Our straight allies standing with us…so many of my good friends have posted over and over online and been extremely vocal about the need for equality” (28, cisgender woman, lesbian, White, in a relationship, metropolitan WA). Some described the impact of seeing friends, family, and allies participating in campaign-related activities such as door-knocking, phone-banking, and attending rallies. For example: “My mum made a

supportive banner and went to a marriage equality rally, on her own, in a different state. That meant a lot to my wife and I" (32, cisgender woman, queer, White, married, suburban ACT).

Some participants described supportive friends, family, and colleagues telling them they would be voting "yes" or sending them a picture of their completed survey form with the "yes" box ticked. For instance: "We had a number of people reach out and talk about how they valued our relationship and how they'd be voting 'yes'" (34, cisgender woman, bisexual, White, in a relationship, metropolitan NSW). While most participants experienced this as affirming, it is notable that sharing of "yes" votes was a double-edged sword for some participants: while they appreciated the support, they were reminded of the hurtfulness and injustice of the postal survey itself.

Symbols of support were noted and appreciated. These included signs supporting marriage equality and rainbow flags – a symbol of LGBTQ pride – displayed in local businesses and homes, and people wearing rainbow flag accessories (e.g., badges, lanyards, wristbands). Of this symbolic support, one participant said:

> When people do small things, like put an 'I'm voting yes' sign on their front fence, it's nice to know that you're supported, and that people are brave enough to stand up for you. Sometimes it's hard to stand up for yourself (44, cisgender woman, lesbian, White, married, metropolitan NSW).

### *Empowerment Through Activism*

Many participants reported gaining a sense of empowerment through LGBTQ activism. Formally engaging with the "yes" campaign was a positive experience for participants in this them, with attending a rally being the most commonly reported way of doing so. There were two key implications of attending rallies described: one was feeling closer to the LGBTQ community and experiencing a sense of solidarity; the

other was perceiving many non-LGBTQ to be in attendance and feeling validated and supported by the wider community. One participant described a rally in Sydney as "a really positive and uplifting experience, to know and be amongst all kinds of people that were supporting the LGBTIQA community" (27, genderqueer, asexual, Asian, single, metropolitan NSW). Another described how the same rally "made me understand how big and resilient the community can be" (30, transgender woman, queer, White, single, metropolitan NSW).

Other participants engaged with more localized campaigning activities (e.g., asking local businesses to display "yes" posters, writing letters about marriage equality to their neighbors) and feeling empowered and supported by the subsequent positive reception. When considering the impact of this campaigning, one participant said:

> For me, it was really important to not just be sitting at home advocating to the people I know, but to actually feel like I was getting out and having my voice heard. We can all be a bit of a keyboard warrior and just post to our Facebook and everything, but to get out and actually do it and to be part of a community – it felt good. (39, cisgender woman, bisexual, White, in a relationship, metropolitan NSW).

Other responses also described a less direct but still empowering response: instead of working directly on the "yes" campaign, they decided to give their time to other LGBTQ causes in their community and workplaces (e.g., mentoring a youth group, running an LGBTQ art show). Some participants found the actual act of voting – ticking "yes" on their survey form and posting it off – to be empowering. One participant said: "The actual act of receiving the forms at the same time as my family and all ticking 'yes' and then walking to the post box together was cute and nice" (19, transgender man, bisexual, White, single, metropolitan NSW).

***Changes in General Community***

Participants believed the postal survey had impacted the general community and described the greater visibility of LGBTQ allies as an important and positive development during the postal survey. A representative response read: “It’s great to see allies stepping up in support…I think it would be a lot harder on everyone without that” (53, transgender woman, asexual, in a relationship, metropolitan VIC). The postal survey also allowed for open discussion about marriage equality in the community and with their loved ones: for instance, some participants described being unaware of their family’s stance on marriage equality prior to the campaign. An interesting counterpoint to these themes was the way some participants described the bittersweet benefits of knowing who opposed equality as the campaign revealed those who opposed marriage equality: “I do feel like it’s good (if difficult) to have it all out in the open. People can’t hide how they feel any more” (41, cisgender woman, lesbian, White, separated, suburban VIC). Some participants ultimately used this information to end friendships with “the people in my life who are homophobic so I can stop wasting my time and love on them” (45, cisgender man, gay, single, regional NSW).

Participants also reported a perception that the campaign had raised awareness of more issues than just marriage equality and that the general community were now more aware of the challenges faced by LGBTQ Australians. For example:

> There were a lot more resources out there, easily accessible for [straight people], to better understand what it’s like just to be gay on any day: the idea of coming out, and how that never stops, and you’re doing it all the time to different people, every time you meet them. I think that was a positive insight. (33, cisgender woman, lesbian, White, in a relationship, metropolitan SA).

This code was more pronounced in Study 2 than in Study 1, suggesting that this is a change that became more apparent after the postal survey. A small number also

believed the postal survey had prompted people to become more engaged in politics generally (e.g., by well-publicized record numbers of voter enrolments) and were more aware of the impact of political processes and institutions on minority groups.

### *Changes in LGBTQ Community*

Unsurprisingly, participants believed an event like the postal survey prompted considerable changes within the LGBTQ community. The phrase used most frequently by participants to describe this was “coming together”. Though few participants described what constituted “coming together”, they appeared to perceive an “abundance of love and support for each other in the LGBTI [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex] community” (50, transgender man, heterosexual, White, in a relationship, metropolitan NSW). Many also appreciated the ways in which the LGBTQ community had organized, whether that was for activism, providing interpersonal emotional support, or arranging events focused on coping with the stress of the postal survey (e.g., “a yin yoga healing session to help people affected by the debate” [29, cisgender man, gay, single, mixed race, metropolitan VIC]).

Participants spoke emphatically of the power of seeing the commonalities in LGBTQ experiences. One participant evocatively described the postal survey as “a unifying trauma” (56, cisgender woman, lesbian, White, in a relationship, metropolitan VIC). The effect of this was that the sharing of personal narratives, both in person and online, showed participants that they were not alone in how they felt. For instance:

> The support of close friends was really integral for me. It was really about leaning on the friendship networks and I think a lot of it was about shared experience. There were a lot of people my age who had gone through similar kinds of things that we’d always played down, that suddenly we’d sit down and talk about, [and] then being able to support each other through the sharing of those stories of some

> of the quite horrible things that had come up (52, cisgender man, gay, Mediterranean, married, metropolitan NSW).

### *Personal Changes*

Participants described a range of changes in their personal lives which centered on their sexual and/or gender identity. These changes included deciding to come out because of the postal survey or developing greater pride in their LGBTQ identity. For instance:

> It has made me seek out more positive spaces where I can be myself and feel proud of who I am. I personally have made advances in my acceptance and pride in who I am, and my willingness to stand up and fight for who I am and want to be (21, cisgender man, gay, White, single, suburban NSW).

Other participants spoke about feeling more connected to other LGBTQ people and communities as a result of the postal survey. For example:

> It just made me feel like we were all going through it together. There was a moment when I was like, this feels like when I came out, but the difference is, when I did that, I was alone, and this time we're all being scrutinized together…It felt like redemption from my coming out process, and it made me feel a lot bolder, a lot more connected to people. It made me feel like I had a place. I went from feeling like an outsider or an imposter to feeling like, hey, we're all in this together…It made me feel like I belonged (33, cisgender man, gay, White, in a relationship, metropolitan NSW).

Some participants experienced a strengthening of existing support from their families and felt closer to them as a result. For others, the postal survey provided an opportunity for their previously unsupportive families to better understand and subsequently accept their identity. For example:

> My mother was not very supportive when I came out. One morning while she was visiting, she mentioned the survey over breakfast. [She] started counting on her

> fingers who in our family would vote “yes”, putting herself first. It was a massive impact on me…she said she wanted to me have someone to love, no matter who they are (30, cisgender woman, bisexual, White, in a relationship, suburban ACT).

Another effect of the postal survey and the previously described visibility of allies was a perception that Australian society was more supportive and accepting of LGBTQ people than they had realized.

**Discussion**

While the extant literature has consistently demonstrated that public votes and debates about marriage equality pose significant challenges for the wellbeing of LGBTQ individuals and communities (e.g., Casey et al., 2020; Ecker, Riggle, et al., 2019; Verrelli et al., 2019), the literature has also touched on the positive experiences reported by LGBTQ people during such events. Our findings help to provide a more comprehensive account of such experiences alongside past research (e.g., Anderson et al., 2020; Ecker, Rostosky, et al., 2019) which, consistent with models of minority stress and structural stigma, has tended to focus on the negative experiences reported by participants.

The present study speaks to the literature which challenges the notion that events such as the postal survey are universally experienced as negative and damaging. While we do not advocate the use of public votes as a mechanism to pursue legislative change due to the well-documented challenges described above, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of such events. The present study provides evidence of aspects of the postal survey that LGBTQ Australians found to be affirming, empowering, or supportive, in the hopes that such elements can be enhanced to support LGBTQ people and communities during comparable events in the future. While many of the findings will not be surprising to those who work with LGBTQ individuals and communities, we

hope that our results demonstrate the importance of a diverse range of supports and can inform the development of policies and programs to promote LGBTQ wellbeing during LGBTQ human rights campaigns. This may include public education campaigns to inform allies of how they can extend support to LGBTQ friends, family members, and colleagues, or individual or group interventions which take a strengths-based approach to identifying the opportunities for connection alongside the challenges of such campaigns.

The findings reflect research which has explored positive narratives associated with being LGBTQ, such as being connected to the LGBTQ community, developing empathy and compassion, experiencing personal growth, and engagement with social justice and activism (Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011; Riggle, Whitman, et al., 2008; Rostosky et al., 2010). It also echoes the findings of Maisel and Fingerhut (2011), whose participants – like ours – reported receiving a message of societal support and acceptance, developing closer relationships with family, friends, and partners, and experiencing a sense of belonging to the LGBTQ community, often through engaging with activism. The postal survey also appeared to offer opportunities for LGBTQ individuals to strengthen a sense of pride in their minority identity, reflecting findings from comparable campaigns in the USA (Gonzalez, Ramirez, & Galupo, 2018; Maisel & Fingerhut, 2011).

Unsurprisingly, LGBTQ friends and the broader LGBTQ community were consistently identified as sources of support. This echoes the findings of other qualitative investigations of the postal survey (Anderson, Campbell, & Koc, 2020; Ecker, Rostosky, et al., 2019), whose participants experienced a sense of solidarity with the broader LGBTQ community. Providing opportunities for increased engagement with other LGBTQ people may be especially important in the face of campaigns about

marriage equality and other LGBTQ human rights. A small but notable finding in the present study was the notion that opponents of marriage equality and LGBTQ rights more broadly couldn't hide their beliefs in a campaign of this magnitude. Although such opposition can be hurtful when encountered (Casey et al., 2021), some participants saw a benefit in being able to withdraw energy from relationships with unsupportive friends and family members.

As social support is a notable protective factor in mental health (Verrelli et al., 2019), LGBTQ allies should be made aware of the importance of their actions in helping LGBTQ people cope with events such as the postal survey. While friends and family may feel powerless, our findings suggest that they should be encouraged to regularly check in with their LGBTQ friends and families, as participants found these gestures encouraging and supportive. Making their support for LGBTQ people and equality known is also important: participants found unequivocal statements of support, whether in person or online, to be empowering and affirming. Gestures of support from unexpected sources – people or organisations who are religious, older, politically conservative, and so on – were particularly impactful. Allies from these demographic sectors should be educated about the power of their support and encouraged to voice it within their communities and to LGBTQ people. The importance of rainbow iconography in communicating social acceptance and support should be highlighted. While noted in passing in comparable research (e.g., Rostosky, Ecker, et al., 2021), seeing rainbow flags was the most frequently reported type of support, pointing to the large impact of the simple act of displaying symbols of pride.

Outside of the LGBTQ community, our findings highlight the importance of allies in supporting LGBTQ people during LGBTQ human rights campaigns (Fingerhut, 2011). Participants reported that the postal survey offered an opportunity for allies to

become more visible, whether by attending rallies supporting marriage equality or posting positively about the topic on social media. For several participants, this contributed to a change in their perception of Australian society in general, describing a sense that the wider community was more supportive of LGBTQ rights than they previously believed.

The impact of media messages on LGBTQ wellbeing has increasingly been considered in the context of marriage campaigns (e.g., Bartos, Noon, & Frost, 2020; Frost & Fingerhut, 2016). In our sample, participants described the impact of encountering supportive messages in both news and social media, with social media being more frequently noted. When considering Chen's (2019) finding that opponents of marriage equality were more highly mobilized on social media than supporters, it suggests that our sample were adept at seeking supportive online spaces. The provision of such spaces may be especially impactful for those who do not perceive a great deal of support in their personal circle (Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Verrelli et al., 2019).

Although a relatively small proportion of our samples described engaging in campaigning, those that did spoke emphatically of feeling supported or empowered by the experience. Considering recent findings indicating that collective action may moderate the relationship between discrimination and depressive symptoms for LGBTQ people (Chan & Mak, 2021), research which more specifically considers the experience of activism in the context of marriage campaigns would be highly instructive.

These findings highlight an often-overlooked component of Meyer's (2003) minority stress model: that of coping and resilience. Meyer (2003) emphasizes that LGBTQ people are not powerless victims but resilient actors. While LGBTQ people are at greater risk of experiencing mental ill health than the general population and research evidence should be used to prevent stressful events such as the postal survey, it should

also be remembered that LGBTQ individuals and communities have always found ways to live and thrive in the face of adversity.

### ***Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions***

This is the first qualitative study with a research question exclusively considering the positive experiences reported by LGBTQ people during a major public campaign and vote regarding their human rights. The trustworthiness of the results has been strengthened by several features of the research design; namely, the large sample and the ability to triangulate between data collected using multiple samples, methods, and timepoints. However, the usual caveats of convenience samples apply. Our samples were recruited through LGBTQ events and online spaces, suggesting participants may have been highly engaged with the postal survey. Although the samples contained a great deal of sexual and gender diversity, they were largely White, and may not reflect the cultural diversity of Australia's LGBTQ population (Hill, Bourne, McNair, Carman, & Lyons, 2020). Only a third of participants in Study 1 responded to the optional open-ended prompt, which is notably lower than those who answered a similarly worded question about negative experiences (96%; Casey et al., 2021), meaning data may not reflect the experiences of the entire sample. The previously noted makeup of the research team as White, able-bodied, and highly educated should also be borne in mind, as our analysis is ultimately limited by our own identities, experiences, and perspectives.

The selected analytic approach also has strengths and weaknesses. While using template analysis enabled the creation of a comprehensive descriptive account of the positive experiences reported by our sample, this breadth provides opportunity for future research to create greater analytic depth. This research may take a more interpretive approach (e.g., social constructionist, feminist) to explore the meanings

LGBTQ people ascribe to these experiences. Quantitative research which explores the relationship between the constructs identified by this research (e.g., family relationship quality, engagement with activism) and mental health outcomes during comparable debates would also be instructive. So, too, would applied research into individual or community level interventions during marriage campaigns. Finally, participants perceived that the postal survey made changes in the wider community. While the evidence base regarding the impact of marriage campaigns on LGBTQ people has grown considerably, little is known about how such campaigns may affect the general population. Future research considering this question would be valuable.

### *Conclusion*

Although public votes on LGBTQ human rights pose a unique source of stress for LGBTQ people, such campaigns are not universally experienced as negative. During the Australian Marriage Law postal survey, LGBTQ people reported a strengthening of the social support they received from friends, family, colleagues, employees, and local and religious communities. For some, the postal survey offered a means by which their family could better understand and support them. Many also perceived that Australian society better understood the needs of LGBTQ people and that allies had become more active in demonstrating their support. Participants described developing greater pride in their LGBTQ identity and a deeper connection to the LGBTQ community. They found symbols of support such as rainbow flags to be affirming and found engaging with the "yes" campaign to be empowering. The findings can be used by allies, community organisations, mental health professionals, workplaces, and others invested in the wellbeing of LGBTQ people to support them in the face of campaigns regarding their human rights.

***Disclosure Statement***

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Table 1. Demographic details for Study 1.

| | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|
| State | | |
| ACT | 22 | 3.3 |
| NSW | 278 | 41.3 |
| NT | 2 | 0.3 |
| QLD | 72 | 10.7 |
| SA | 28 | 4.2 |
| TAS | 37 | 5.5 |
| VIC | 195 | 29.0 |
| WA | 39 | 5.8 |
| Area | | |
| Metropolitan | 334 | 49.6 |
| Suburban | 244 | 36.3 |
| Regional/rural | 95 | 14.1 |
| Ethnic background | | |
| Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander | 8 | 1.2 |
| African | 1 | 0.1 |
| Asian | 14 | 2.1 |
| Caucasian | 603 | 89.6 |
| Mediterranean | 2 | 0.3 |
| Middle Eastern | 4 | 0.6 |
| South American | 3 | 0.4 |
| Mixed | 36 | 5.3 |
| Other | 2 | 0.3 |
| Intersex | | |
| Yes | 2 | 0.3 |
| Prefer not to say | 8 | 1.2 |
| No | 663 | 98.5 |
| Gender identity | | |
| Cisgender woman | 332 | 49.3 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Cisgender man | 243 | 36.1 |
| Transgender woman | 33 | 4.9 |
| Transgender man | 16 | 2.4 |
| Non-binary | 40 | 5.9 |
| Genderqueer | 2 | 0.3 |
| Questioning | 2 | 0.3 |
| Other | 5 | 0.7 |
| Sexual identity | | |
| Homosexual | 476 | 70.7 |
| Bisexual | 112 | 16.6 |
| Asexual | 13 | 1.9 |
| Heterosexual | 5 | 0.7 |
| Pansexual | 22 | 3.3 |
| Queer | 33 | 4.9 |
| Questioning | 1 | 0.1 |
| Other | 11 | 1.6 |
| Relationship status | | |
| Married | 53 | 7.9 |
| Civil union/registered partnership | 2 | 0.3 |
| Engaged | 3 | 0.4 |
| In a relationship | 358 | 53.2 |
| In several relationships | 12 | 108 |
| Single | 233 | 34.6 |
| Separated/divorced | 9 | 1.3 |
| Widowed | 1 | 0.1 |
| Other | 2 | 0.3 |
| Have children | | |
| Yes | 142 | 21.1 |
| No | 531 | 78.9 |

*Note.* ACT = Australian Capital Territory; NSW = New South Wales; NT = Northern Territory; QLD = Queensland; SA = South Australia; TAS = Tasmania; VIC = Victoria; WA = Western Australia.

Table 2. Final coding template for Studies 1 and 2.

| Code | Study 1 | | Study 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| 1.0 Sources of support | | | | |
| 1.1 Friends | 133 | 9.79 | 5 | 3.91 |
| 1.2 Family | 103 | 7.58 | 4 | 3.13 |
| 1.3 Businesses and organizations | 68 | 5.01 | 3 | 2.34 |
| 1.4 Workplace | 48 | 3.53 | 2 | 1.56 |
| 1.5 Prominent individuals | 32 | 2.36 | 2 | 1.56 |
| 1.6 Neighbors | 29 | 2.14 | 1 | 0.78 |
| 1.7 Faith community | 8 | 0.59 | 1 | 0.78 |
| 1.8 School or university | 4 | 0.29 | 1 | 0.78 |
| 1.9 Unexpected sources of support | | | | |
| 1.9.1 Strangers | 20 | 1.47 | 1 | 0.78 |
| 1.9.2 Religious people | 13 | 0.96 | 4 | 3.13 |
| 1.9.3 Rural areas | 11 | 0.81 | 1 | 0.78 |
| 1.9.4 Older people | 9 | 0.66 | 3 | 2.34 |
| 1.9.5 Conservative people | 8 | 0.59 | 2 | 1.56 |
| 1.9.6 Acquaintances | 7 | 0.52 | - | - |
| *1.9.7 Suburban areas* | - | - | *1* | *0.78* |
| 1.9.8 Unspecified other | 21 | 1.55 | 1 | 0.78 |
| 1.10 Media | | | | |
| 1.10.1 Social media | 61 | 4.49 | 1 | 0.78 |
| 1.10.2 “Yes” campaign | 19 | 1.40 | 1 | 0.78 |
| 1.10.3 News media | 18 | 1.33 | 1 | 0.78 |
| 1.11 Unspecified sources of support | 24 | 1.77 | 1 | 0.78 |
| 2.0 Types of support | | | | |
| 2.1 Emotional support | | | | |
| 2.1.1 Reaching out and checking in | 30 | 2.21 | 5 | 3.91 |
| 2.1.2 Making meaningful gestures | 15 | 1.10 | 1 | 0.78 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2.2 Campaign support | | | | |
| 2.2.1 Supportive others speaking out for equality or against discrimination | 45 | 3.31 | 5 | 3.91 |
| 2.2.2 Supportive others sharing their "yes" vote | 42 | 3.09 | 5 | 3.91 |
| 2.2.3 Supportive others joining campaign activities (e.g., doorknocking) | 13 | 0.96 | - | - |
| 2.3 Seeing symbols of support (e.g., rainbow flags) | 63 | 4.64 | 3 | 2.34 |
| 3.0 Empowerment through activism | | | | |
| 3.1 Attending rally | 40 | 2.95 | 2 | 1.56 |
| 3.2 Campaigning (e.g., doorknocking) | 14 | 1.03 | 3 | 2.34 |
| 3.3 Posting "yes" vote | 3 | 0.22 | - | - |
| 3.4 Taking on LGBTQ role in community or workplace | 3 | 0.22 | 6 | 4.69 |
| 4.0 Changes in general community | | | | |
| 4.1 Greater visibility of allies | 93 | 6.85 | 2 | 1.56 |
| 4.2 Greater understanding of LGBTQ issues | 20 | 1.47 | 10 | 7.81 |
| 4.3 Creating open discussion | 17 | 1.25 | 5 | 3.91 |
| 4.4 Opponents can't hide any more | 12 | 0.88 | - | - |
| 4.3 Greater engagement with politics in general | 12 | 0.88 | 2 | 1.56 |
| 5.0 Changes in LGBTQ community | | | | |
| 5.1 Coming together and supporting each other | 130 | 9.57 | 11 | 8.59 |
| 5.2 Increased activism | 40 | 2.95 | - | - |
| 5.3 Visibility of shared experiences | 14 | 1.03 | 7 | 5.47 |
| 6.0 Personal changes | | | | |
| 6.1 Closer to LGBTQ friends or community | 26 | 1.91 | 10 | 7.81 |
| 6.1.1 Spending more time in LGBTQ spaces | 9 | 0.66 | 6 | 4.69 |
| *6.1.2 Greater understanding of LGBTQ history* | - | - | *2* | *1.56* |
| 6.2 Perceiving greater community support for | 43 | 3.17 | 1 | 0.78 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| LGBTQ people than before | | | | |
| 6.3 Closer to family | 12 | 0.88 | 1 | 0.78 |
| 6.3.1 Greater family acceptance of LGBTQ identity | 10 | 0.74 | - | - |
| 6.4 Greater pride in LGBTQ identity | 9 | 0.66 | 2 | 1.56 |
| 6.5 Coming out | 7 | 0.52 | 1 | 0.78 |
| *6.6 Closer to partner* | - | - | *2* | 1.56 |
| Total | 1358 | 100.00 | 128 | 100.00 |

*Note.* Frequencies and percentages refer to the total number of times each code was assigned, not the total number of participants whose response indicated any particular code.