



Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists

Dedication.

For P and C.
I miss you every day.

Dr Stephen Kerry

© 2020

Charles Darwin University

Recommended citation:

Kerry, S. (2020). *Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists*. Darwin: Charles Darwin University.

Dr Kerry is a lecturer in sociology and they identify as genderqueer, non-binary and use the pronouns they/them/their. Their areas of research speciality are sex, gender, and sexuality, especially the lived experiences of intersex, transgender, and sex/gender diverse people. Dr Kerry's research also explores the intersection of sex, gender, and sexuality with health and wellbeing as well as religion. They are a Zen Buddhist and, in 2019, Dr Kerry underwent their Jukai ceremony and was assigned the Dharma name Cool Monkey. They live in Darwin with two cats.

08 89466956

Stephen.kerry@cdu.edu.au

Dr Kerry acknowledges that this research was conducted on the traditional lands of the Larrakia people, and they pay their respects to elders both past and present.

Dr Kerry would like to thank Nicole Garraway, Bhante Akālika Bhikkhu, Rainbodhi, and Michelle McNamara for their contributions and support of this research.



Contents

Contents	3
Overview	4
Methodology	4
Who are LGBTQIA+ Buddhists?	5
LGBTQIA+ Buddhists' Health.....	8
LGBTQIA+ Buddhists' Identities	9
LGBTQIA+ Buddhists' Practices	11
Buddhism and Being LGBTQIA+	12
Conclusions.....	16
Appendix A.....	17
Index	18

Overview

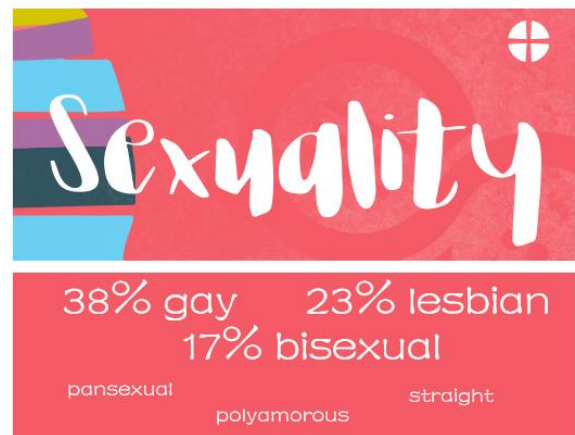
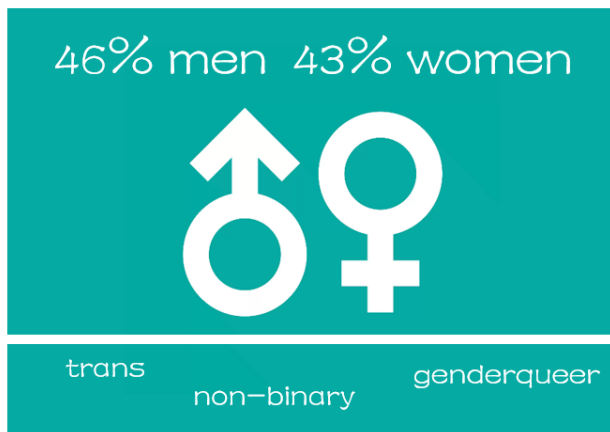
One could be forgiven for thinking that Buddhism is accepting of LGBTQIA+¹ people, especially when compared to the homophobic and transphobic attitudes often associated with other religions. However, Buddhism, like all religions, is very complex and diverse. There is no one way of being a Buddhist and indeed many people who follow Buddhist practices neither identify as Buddhist nor see Buddhism as a religion. This is the case for many Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists. They are drawn to Buddhism for many different reasons and their experiences within Buddhism are similarly diverse. Often, their Buddhism has nothing or very little to do with their LGBTQIA+ identities or lived experiences. Having said that, for some LGBTQIA+ Australians their practice of Buddhism and their involvement in Buddhist communities is disrupted by negative attitudes and discrimination because of their LGBTQIA+ identities and lived experiences. More than half of Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists are reluctant to reveal their LGBTQIA+ identities to their Buddhist communities. More than half have witnessed sexism within their Buddhist communities, and one third have witnessed homophobia. And 16% have been told that their LGBTQIA+ identity is not in keeping with the Buddha's teachings.

Methodology

Ethics clearance was obtained from the Charles Darwin University ethics committee (Number: H20014). The research began in February 2020 when Dr Kerry invited members of the LGBTQIA+ Buddhist community to join them in forming an advisory group. The advisory group consisted of Dr Kerry, Bhante Akālika Bhikkhu (a gay ordained Buddhist monk in the Theravada forest tradition who runs a Sydney-based LGBTQIA+ Buddhist group known as Rainbodhi), and Michelle McNamara (a Melbourne-based transgender woman in the Triratna tradition who published a chapter in *Transcending: Trans Buddhist Voices*). The advisory group met online and discussed a set of questions compiled by Dr Kerry. Online conversations and subsequent emails resulted in a total of 68 questions categorised within five broad themes: demographic information, Buddhist identity, Buddhist practice, health, and Buddhism and LGBTQIA+ People. The design of the online survey was completed in mid-March 2020, by which time Australia was implementing significant lock-down measures in response to COVID-19. In discussion with the advisory group it was agreed that the survey would go ahead. An additional question about the impact of COVID-19 was added to the online survey. Participant recruitment consisted of two methods: first, informal and formal networks known to the author and other advisory group members and second, email recruitment to known Buddhist groups, centres, and temples across Australia. Dr Kerry employed a research assistant to review the website Buddhnet.com and she compiled a contact list for 453 Australian Buddhist groups, centres, and temples. The online survey was hosted by Survey Monkey and remained open between April and October 2020. Participants provided information regarding informed consent and proceeding with the survey was taken as 'informed consent'. At the completion of the online survey, participants were assigned an alpha-numerical designation from P1 to P82 and all identifying information de-identified. 111 people began the survey, 20 of these were ineligible because they were not Australian citizens or permanent residents. A further nine respondents were discarded as they didn't complete enough of the questions to be analysed. As a result, a total of 82 participants' responses were analysed, however, as the online survey progressed there was a slight drop-out rate.

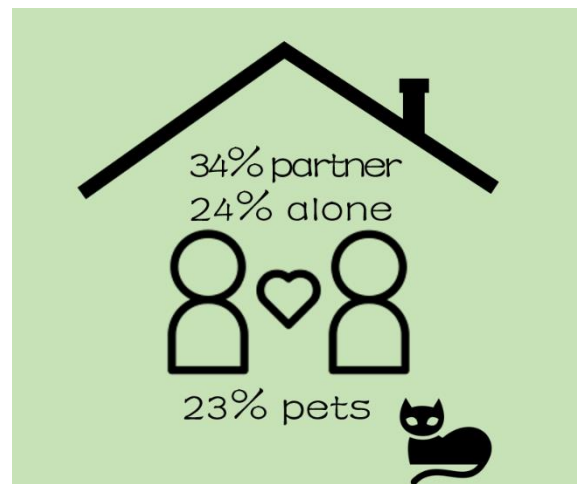
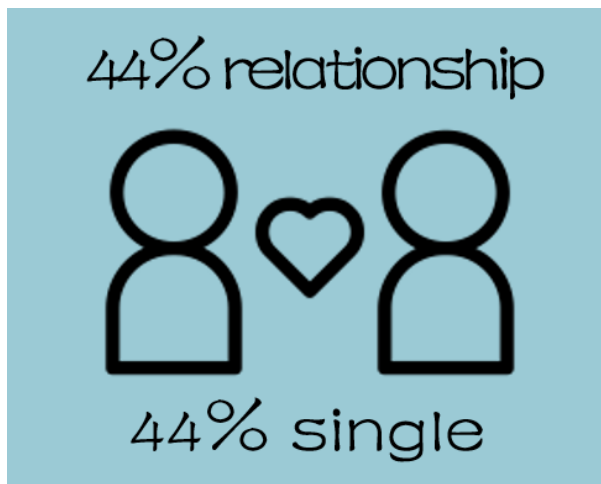
¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual.

Who are LGBTQIA+ Buddhists?



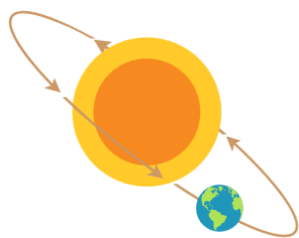
Most participants identify their gender as either woman (35, 43%) or man (38, 46%), several use multiple terms. A few people use the terms trans* (6)², non-binary (5), and genderqueer (4). Some participants identify as gay (31, 38%), while fewer identify as lesbian (19, 23%), bisexual (14, 17%), and either pansexual or polyamorous (13, 16%). Fewer still are those who identify as straight (8), queer (3), and asexual (3).

An equal number of participants (36, 44%) say they are single and in some form of relationship. Relationship forms include a relationship with one person (12, 15%), de facto (12, 15%), or married³ (11, 13%). One-third of participants (28, 34%) live with partner(s), fewer live alone (20, 24%), and with pets (19, 23%). Eight participants live with family of origin, seven live with children, and six live with either chosen family or unrelated friends. Five participants live in a monastic community.



² Participant numbers of 10 or below will not be calculated as a percentage.

³ Australia passed marriage equality legislation in 2017, three years before the survey.



48% 35–54

37% 55 or older

16% 18–34

The age range of participants is skewed toward the over 35s. Thirteen participants (16%) are under the age of 35, almost half (39, 48%) are aged between 35 and 55, and 30 (37%) are aged 55 or over.



73% Caucasian/European

South Asian

East Asian

South-East Asian

Hispanic/Latinx

The ethnicity of participants is skewed also, participants are predominantly Caucasian/European (59, 73%). Other ethnicities include South-East Asian (10), East Asian (4), South Asian (4), Hispanic/Latinx (3), and one mixed-race Indigenous Australian.



55% Born in Australia

73% English only

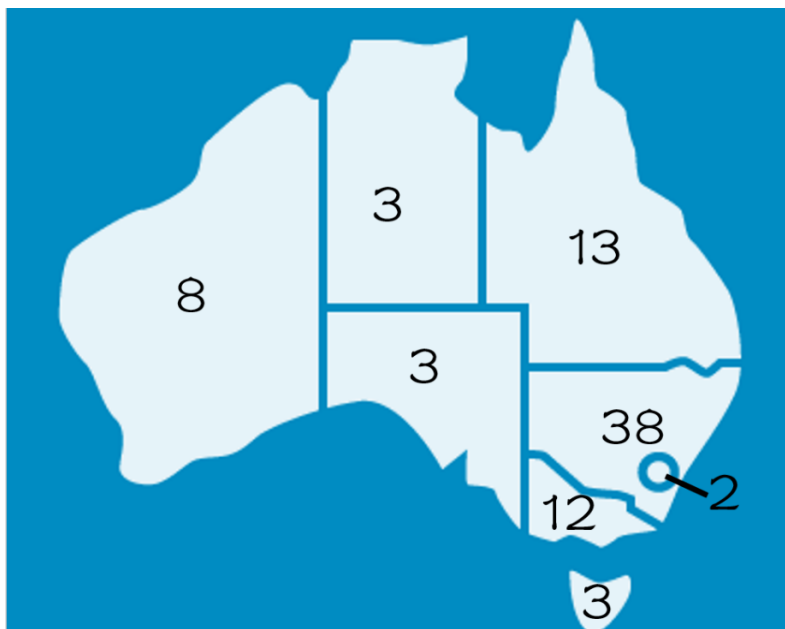
Mandarin

Vietnamese

Spanish

French

More than half (45, 55%) state they were born in Australia, 12 (15%) were born in the United Kingdom or Europe, 12 (15%) were born in Asia, five in North America, and four in Africa/Middle East. Most participants (60, 73%) speak only English at home, 14 (17%) speak an Asian language (e.g. Mandarin, Vietnamese), six speak a European language (e.g. French, Spanish), one person speaks Afrikaans.



 68%
capital city

The state or territory of residence is another skewed result, with almost half of participants (38, 46%) living in New South Wales. Thirteen (16%) live in Queensland, 12 (15%) in Victoria, eight in Western Australia, two in the Australian Capital Territory and three each in South Australia, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory. As is expected, almost three-quarters (56, 68%) of participants live in a capital city, 10 live in a remote area (with fewer than 10,000 people), eight live in a non-capital city (with more than 100,00 people) and seven live in a regional town (of between 10,000 and 100,000 people).

82% 
university education
(65% postgraduate qualification)

Most participants (67, 82%) possess a university education and, of these, more than half (43, 65%) have a postgraduate qualification (e.g. graduate certificate, masters, PhD).

Of all participants, 12 (15%) have a TAFE/College qualification (e.g. certificate, diploma), two have completed Senior Secondary (years 11-12) and one has completed Junior Secondary (years 7-10).

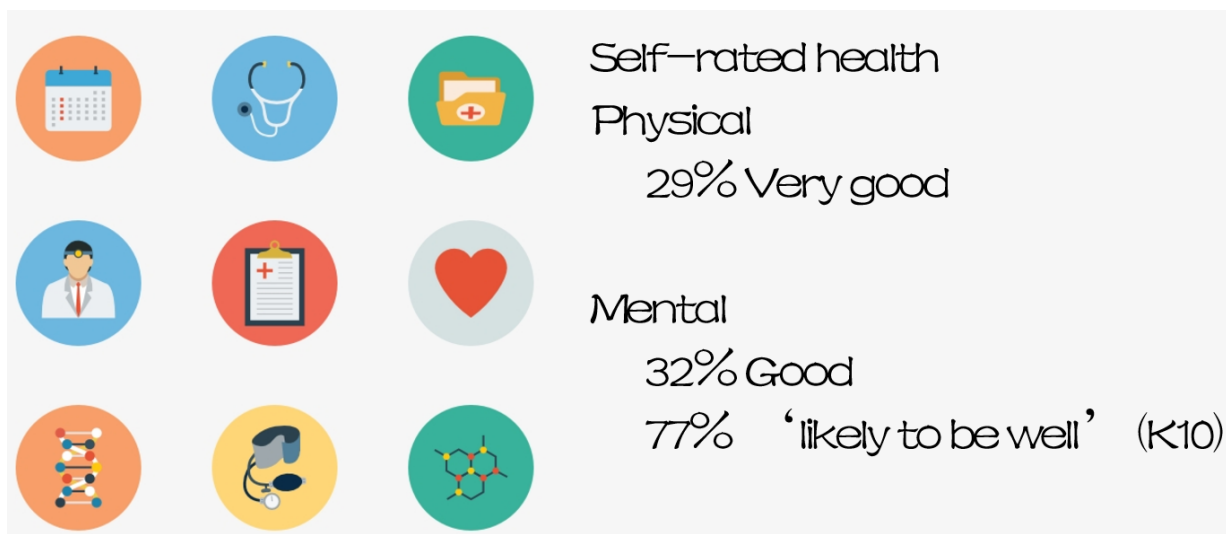
Slightly more participants are employed (45, 55%) than are out of the work force (37, 45%).

Most of the participants who are employed work full-time (31, 69%), eight are casual or freelance, and six work part-time.

Of those out of the work force 17 (21%) are retired, nine are unemployed, three are monastics, and two are on a disability pension.

 
 
55% employed
(69% full-time)

LGBTQIA+ Buddhists' Health



Participants were asked to self-rate their own physical and mental health. Of the 73 responses to these questions, 21 (29%) rate their physical health as 'very good', 20 (27%) 'good', 15 (21%) as 'excellent', 13 (18%) as 'fair', and four as 'poor'. Similarly, 23 (32%) rate their mental health as 'good', 19 (26%) as 'very good', 15 (21%) each rate their mental health as 'excellent' and 'fair' and one rates it as 'poor'. The participants were invited to undertake the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) test. Of the 73 responses, 56 (77%) 'are likely to be well', seven each are 'likely to have a mild mental disorder' and are 'likely to have moderate mental disorder', and six are 'likely to have a severe mental disorder'.

Impact on mental health ...

marriage equality debates – negative impact

religious freedoms debates – negative impact



Participants were asked: 'What impact did the public debates surrounding marriage equality (aka gay marriage) have on your mental health?' Participants were provided a sliding scale to indicate this impact, zero being negative impact, 50 being neutral, and 100 being positive impact. The average score for this question is 37, that is, a negative impact. At the time of the online survey, Australia's Federal Liberal/National Coalition Government was planning on making changes to the law to allow religious organisations greater freedoms when it comes to discrimination (especially against LGBTQIA+ people). Thus, a similar scale was provided for participants to indicate what impact this debate is having on them. The average score this question is 33, that is, a negative impact.

LGBTQIA+ Buddhists' Identities

The image shows a section of the ABS 2016 Census form titled '19 What is the person's religion?'. It includes instructions: 'Answering this question is OPTIONAL.', 'Examples of 'Other - please specify' are: SALVATION ARMY, HINDUISM, JUDAISM, HUMANISM.', 'If no religion, mark the 'No religion' box.', and 'Remember to mark box like this: []'. A list of religions is provided with checkboxes: Catholic, Anglican (Church of England), Uniting Church, Presbyterian, Greek Orthodox, Buddhism (checked with a red mark), Baptist, Islam, and Lutheran.

ABS 2016 Census

19 What is the person's religion?

- Answering this question is **OPTIONAL**.
- Examples of 'Other - please specify' are: SALVATION ARMY, HINDUISM, JUDAISM, HUMANISM.
- If no religion, mark the 'No religion' box.
- Remember to mark box like this: ☐

<input type="checkbox"/>	Catholic
<input type="checkbox"/>	Anglican (Church of England)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Uniting Church
<input type="checkbox"/>	Presbyterian
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Greek Orthodox
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Buddhism
<input type="checkbox"/>	Baptist
<input type="checkbox"/>	Islam
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lutheran

74% Buddhist
(86% same answer today)

Participants were asked to recall their response to the 'religion' question in the 2016 Australian Census.

Most participants (60, 74%) stated Buddhism as their 'religion', 15 (19%) indicate they have 'no religion', and three people do not remember.

Other religions participants list are Catholicism, Judaism, and shamanic/New Age.

Participants were also invited to reflect on their response if they were asked the same question at the time of completing the online survey. The majority (70, 86%) state that their response would be the same. Of the 12 (15%) who would now give a different answer, six would state Buddhism.

I'm a Buddhist as moral choice
but not religious choice.

P24 (straight woman)

Half (40, 49%) of participants self-describe themselves as 'religious', whereas 23 (28%) say they do not and 18 (22%) are unsure.

I don't see Buddhism as a religion

P69 (gay man)

While half of the participants follow the Theravada tradition (37, 46%), there are almost equal number who follow Tibetan/Himalayan/Vajrayana (22, 27%), Mahayana (21, 26%), Vipassana/Insight (20, 25%), and Zen/Chan (18, 22%).



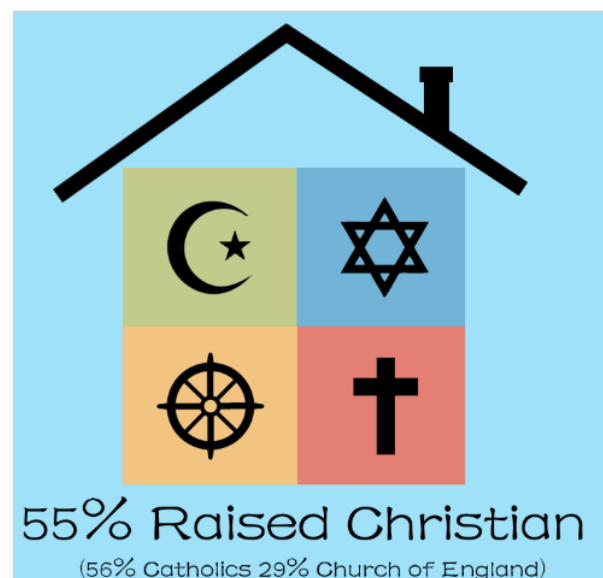
The Buddha is in my heart, and that's the way I will live until I die.

P62 (pansexual woman/transwoman)

When asked what religion participants were raised, half (45, 55%) indicate some form of Christianity.

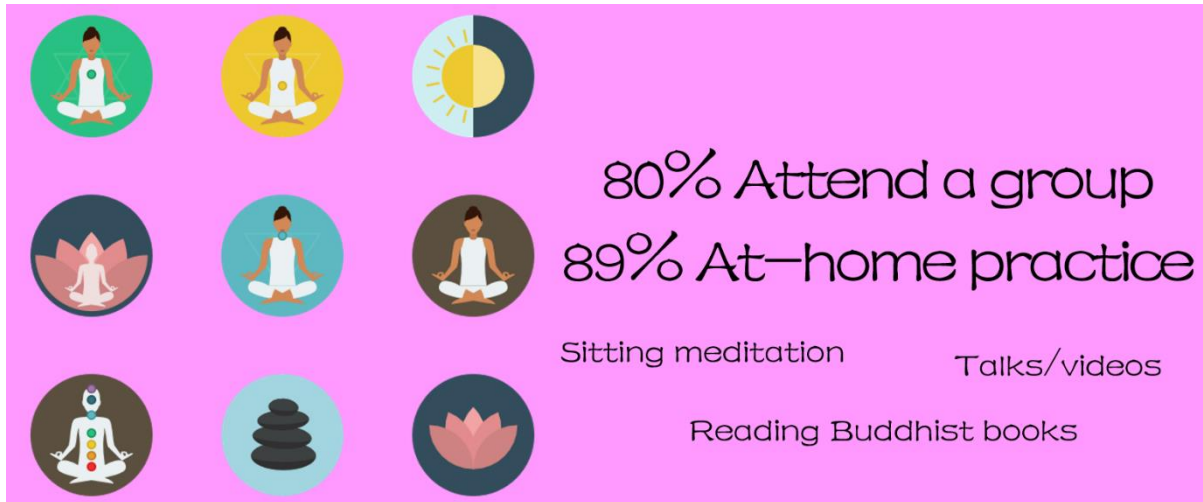
Of those, 25 (56%) were raised as Catholics, 13 (29%) Church of England, and six were raised Uniting Church/Presbyterian/Methodist. Other religions mentioned include Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Quaker.

A few participants indicate they were raised in mixed religion households.



LGBTQIA+ Buddhists' Practices

Most participants (65, 80%) currently attend or engage with a Buddhist group, centre or temple (GCT). Those participants who didn't attend or engage with a Buddhist GCT were invited to say why and 14 of the 16 responded. Three say there is no opportunity where they live. Two participants don't feel welcome in their local Buddhist GCT. Two others don't need a public space to practice Buddhism.



Although I don't identify as a Buddhist, I practice Buddhist meditation every day and find Buddhist philosophy to significantly resonate with me.

P20 (gay man)

Most (66, 89%) participants who responded to the question about whether they have an at-home Buddhist practice said yes. The most practiced are sitting meditation (62, 94%), listening to talks/watching videos (57, 86%), and reading Buddhist books (56, 85%).



Many (60, 77%) participants have attended a Buddhist retreat. Those participants who haven't attended a Buddhist retreat were invited to say why and 17 of the 18 responded, seven were 'not interested', two people cite financial reasons, and three cite family commitments.

Buddhism and Being LGBTQIA+

Why Buddhism?

spirituality

compassion love

improve oneself

Sixty-nine participants describe what is was that drew them to Buddhism. Responses include a range of reasons, largely to do with spirituality, compassion, love, a desire to improve oneself.

The teachings ... all pointed towards an accurate description of the human condition which resonated very strongly with me as I was searching for the truth.

P59 (lesbian woman)

A few participants spoke specifically about the intersection of sex, gender, sexuality and Buddhism.

Gender neutral mostly

P17 (straight/pansexual woman)

Neutrality towards gays

P30 (gay man)

Others write of the attraction of Buddhism when coming from a Christian background.

Being a gay Catholic and feeling rejected.

Wanted to walk my spiritual talk

P71 (gay man)

Buddhist view of LGBTQIA+ People – neutral Being LGBTQIA+ & Buddhism – positive



Participants reflected on Buddhism's attitude toward LGBTQIA+ people and on a slide scale they indicate whether it is negative (0), neutral (50), or positive (100). On average they rate this attitude as neutral (57). Using a similar scale, participants described the relationship between being an LGBTQIA+ person and being Buddhist, on average this is viewed a positive (68).



59% are 'out' in their Buddhist groups etc.
41% view being 'out' as 'very important'

A little over half (41, 59%) say that they are 'out' within their Buddhism groups etc., 15 (22%) are 'unsure', and 13 (19%) say they are not. For some, the issue of being 'out' is complicated by their identity and lived experiences as an LGBTQIA+ person.

I am currently still presenting male and
am 'out' only to a handful of friends.

P11 (asexual transwoman)

It's hard to be 'out' as a bisexual person
when you're married to someone of the
opposite sex I try not to be 'in the
closet' ... if anyone assumes I am
heterosexual I correct that assumption I
do that for young people who need to
know they're not alone.

P23 (bisexual woman)

The importance of being 'out' to their Buddhist identity and practice is rated by a little under half (28, 41%) as 'very important', 19 rate it as (28%) 'not too important', 11 (16%), 'not at all important', nine see it as 'somewhat important', and two are 'unsure'.



Just over half (38, 55%) state they have felt reluctant to disclose their LGBTQIA+ identity within Buddhist GCT, 21 (55%) of these felt reluctant 'sometimes', nine 'often', and eight 'all the time' (Table 19).

Over half (41, 60%) of participants felt that LGBTQIA+ issues and people were silence or ignored by their Buddhist groups etc., of these, 23 (56%) felt it 'sometimes', 14 (34%) 'often', and four 'all of the time'.

Several participants add comments regarding the failure to acknowledge sex, gender, and sexuality issues, such as the sex/gender segregation at Buddhist retreats.

They only had two separate shared
bedrooms (male vs female),
which to me, was rather limiting.

P31 (gay/polyamorous man)

They segregated sexes and put me in a
dorm room with other guys
and it was really hard.

P6 (gay/queer man)



16% told that their LGBTQIA+ identity is not in keeping with the Buddha's teachings

Eleven (16%) participants have been told that their LGBTQIA+ identity is not in keeping with the Buddha's teachings. Some state who have said this to them, such as monastics, Buddhist texts, Buddhist teachers, family members, and lay members of the sangha.

Told by some people that it's
wrong sex conduct.

P6 (gay/queer man)

When asked if participants had witnessed discrimination within Buddhist groups etc., half (37, 54%) state 'sexism', 25 (36%) 'homophobia', and 18 (26%) each for 'misgendering' and 'racism'. Conversely, 26 (38%) say they have not witnessed any.



Witnessing discrimination

54% sexism

36% homophobia

26% misgendering

26% racism

[Monasteries are] a 'male' institution. A
typical structure that permits
homophobia and transphobia ... The
judgements and phobias do not
disappear because of ordination, they
only do because he or she sees the need
to change.

P62 (pansexual woman/transwoman)

Conclusions

Research has provided some information regarding the overall appearance of Australia's LGBTQIA+ communities. Data collected by projects such as *Private Lives*⁴ enables insight into how Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists are faring (see Appendix A for details). Overall, the LGBTQIA+ people who participated in this research are similar to LGBTQIA+ Australians in terms of gender, sexuality, relationship status, household configurations, ethnicity, capital city residence, employment, and mental health. However, LGBTQIA+ Buddhists tend to be older and more likely to be born overseas, live in NSW, and to have not just a university education, but also a post-graduate education.

LGBTQIA+ Buddhists who participated in this research do not suggest that they were attracted to Buddhism because of issues related to sex, gender, and sexuality. Primarily, they wanted to explore spirituality, compassion, love, and a desire to improve oneself; issues that can largely be described as the human condition. Having said that, a few say that they are attracted to Buddhism's 'neutrality' toward to sex, gender, and sexuality. Several spoke of how sex, gender, and sexuality has very little or nothing to do with Buddhism, and a few were antagonist about this.

For some LGBTQIA+ Australians their practice of Buddhism and their involvement in Buddhist communities is disrupted by negative attitudes and discrimination because of their LGBTQIA+ identities and lived experiences. More than half of Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists are reluctant to reveal their LGBTQIA+ identities to their Buddhist communities. More than half have witnessed sexism within their Buddhist communities, and one third have witnessed homophobia. And 16% have been told that their LGBTQIA+ identity is not in keeping with the Buddha's teachings.

⁴ Pitts, M., Smith, A., Mitchell, A., & Patel, S. (2006). *Private lives: A report on the health and wellbeing of GLBTI Australians*. Melbourne: Australian Research centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

Leonard, W., Pitts, M., Mitchell, A., Lyons, A., Smith, A., Patel, S., . . . Barrat, A. (2012). *Private lives 2. The second national survey on the health and wellbeing of GLBT Australians*. La Trobe University: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society.

Appendix A

		This Cohort ⁵	PL1	PL2
Gender	Men	46	63	44
	Women	43	35	48
Sexuality	Gay	38	57	42
	Lesbian	23	18	30
	Bisexual	17	10	11
Relationships	Relationship	44	-	55
	Single	44	-	45
Household	Partner	34	40	40
	Alone	24	25	23
	Pet	23	55	-
Age	18-34	16	20-29, 32	26
	35-54	48	-	20-49, 74
	55+	37	-	60+, 7
Ethnicity	Caucasian	73	78	-
Country of Birth	Australia	55	81	82
Language	English only	73	-	-
State/Territory	NSW	46	34	28
	Qld	16	17	17
	Vic	15	26	34
	WA	10	6	7
	Tas	4	2	2
	SA	4	8	7
	NT	4	1	1
	ACT	3	5	5
Residence	Capital	68	77	
Education	University	82	31	52
	Post-graduate only	52	19	23
	TAFE	15	22	-
	Secondary	3	27	-
Employment	Full time	55	-	48
	Out of work force	45	-	-
Health	K10	18.54	-	19.59

⁵ All figures expressed as %, except for the K10 results.

Index

Age, 8, 20
Bhikkhu, Bhante Akāliko, 2, 5
Birth Country, 8
Buddhist Identity, 12
Buddhist retreats, 15, 17
Buddhists' Practices, 14
Christianity, 12, 13, 15
COVID-19, 5
Discrimination, 18
Education, 9, 20
Employment, 9, 20
Ethnicity, 8, 20
Gender, 2, 7, 15, 17, 20

Health, 10, 20
Homophobia, 5, 18
Kerry, Stephen, 2, 5
Language, 8
Marriage Equality Debate, 10
McNamara, Michelle, 2, 5
Private Lives, 20
Rainbodhi, 2, 5
Relationships, 7, 20
Residence, 9, 20
Sexism, 5, 18
Sexuality, 7, 20
Transphobia, 5, 18