Religious, spiritual, secular, or queer? An exploration of the experiences of LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners.

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Abstract

Inspired by the lack of research on specific spiritual practices, this thesis explores the experiences of LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners in Belgium. I investigate why LGBTQ+ individuals lean towards spiritualities, especially tarot as a boundary practice, through a literature review and interviews. Contrary to the belief that LGBTQ+ individuals turn to spirituality as a substitute for anti-LGBTQ+ religions, my results indicate that this assumption does not fit Belgium's secular, Christian context and research shows that religion can positively impact their mental health. Tarot's flexibility and openness make it a more accepting environment, attracting LGBTQ+ practitioners. Further, LGBTQ+ individuals can find empowerment in tarot practice through reclaiming marginal spaces and expressing otherness. Lastly, I argue that tarot has potential as a mental well-being tool because of its emphasis on meaning making and personal reflection. Nevertheless, more empirical research is necessary to situate (LGBTQ+) tarot practices and evaluate tarot's effects on mental well-being.

Geïnspireerd door het gebrek aan onderzoek naar specifieke spirituele praktijken, verkent deze thesis de ervaringen van LGBTQ+ tarotbeoefenaars in België. Ik onderzoek waarom LGBTQ+ individuen aangetrokken zijn tot spiritualiteiten, specifiek tarot als grenspraktijk, via literatuur onderzoek en interviews. Mijn resultaten suggereren dat de veronderstelling dat LGBTQ+ individuen zich tot spiritualiteit wenden als vervanging voor anti-LGBTQ+ religies niet past in de Belgische seculiere, Christelijke context. Onderzoek toont ook aan dat religie een positieve invloed kan hebben op hun mentale gezondheid. De flexibiliteit en openheid van tarot maken het een inclusieve praktijk voor LGBTQ+ beoefenaars. Daarnaast kunnen ze empowerment vinden in tarot door marginale ruimtes terug te eisen en andersheid te uiten. Tot slot beargumenteer ik dat tarot potentieel heeft als hulpmiddel voor mentaal welzijn vanwege de nadruk op betekenisgeving en persoonlijke reflectie. Empirisch onderzoek is echter nodig om (LGBTQ+) tarotpraktijken te situeren en de effecten ervan op mentaal welzijn te evalueren.

1. Introduction

In the last decades, there has been a surge in the number of people who self-identify as spiritual (Fedele & Knibbe, 2013; Houtman & Aupers, 2007). Alternative spiritual practices such as astrology, witchcraft, healing crystals, and tarot have been gaining mainstream popularity. This popularity has also improved the accessibility of these practices through discussions on social media, bookstores prominently displaying tarot decks or introductions to witchcraft, and an increasing number of smartphone applications digitalizing spiritual experiences. This growing interest in spiritual practices has been assigned to certain groups, such as women and LGBTQ+ individuals (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer, and other not both straight and cisgender sexual orientations and gender identities). Women are reported to be the main practitioners of spirituality (Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Sjöberg & Wåhlberg, 2002; Sointu & Woodhead, 2008; Zwissler, 2018) and LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to be affiliated with non-Christian faiths or hold spiritual beliefs compared to heterosexual individuals (Murphy, 2015; Remsburg et al., 2024). The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals with spiritual practices and investigate why they are drawn to them.

Overall, spirituality receives limited attention in academic research. The first hurdle to researching spirituality is the absence of academic consensus on how to define it (Oman, 2013). The distinction between spirituality and religion is arbitrary, as they often overlap in practice. Therefore, some scholars argue against the use of spirituality as a term in academic literature (Fedele & Knibbe, 2013). However, people differentiate between spirituality and religion when self-identifying (Anderton et al., 2011; Browne et al., 2010; Fedele & Knibbe, 2013). Some might identify as spiritual but not religious, the other way around, or both or neither. This indicates the need for the term spirituality in academic literature to accurately represent individuals' experiences. However, no formal definition of religion or spirituality is presented here, since Yinger's (1967) statement on definitions of religion is arguably also true for spirituality (Schofield et al., 2016):

'…any definition of religion is likely to be only satisfactory to its author – and often not to him.'

For the purpose of this study, religion and spirituality are constructed by opposition, where religion refers to traditional organisations and spirituality to personal practices, which is how the two are often understood in popular usage (Fedele & Knibbe, 2013; Oman, 2013). Sticking to a distinction that is recognisable to laypeople is relevant in this study as I focus on personal experiences. Traditional religious organisations, such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, are distinctive because of their long history of influence on societies all around the world. For example, in Western Europe, before the process of secularisation, Christian ethics inspired laws and the Church had authority over education and medicine, from which remnants are still present (Dobbelaere, 2008). Although organised spiritual groups exist, for instance Wicca, they do not have a similar influence on society and often do not share the same authority or hierarchical structure. Although there is no consensus on a definition of spirituality,

it is often characterised as practices in search of meaning, transcendence, or a personal relationship with the divine as well as personal growth. Cultivating a personal relationship with the divine is often also important to religious people. For this reason, religion and spirituality are often investigated together as they are assumed to be similar. However, building a relationship with the divine can mean something completely different to a spiritual person, who for example does not worship specific deities but finds the divine in nature around them. Further, spirituality is an idiosyncratic practice, meaning its practitioners typically choose to combine multiple traditions and ideas (Houtman & Aupers, 2008). This aspect is often criticized using terms such as 'pick-and-mix religion' and 'religious supermarket', considering this focus on personal growth and practitioners' freedom to choose practices as narcissistic, hedonistic, and consumerist (Carrette & King, 2004; Heelas, 2008). However, this idea of openness to diverse practices is another aspect of spirituality that opposes it to the dogmatic and authoritarian reputation of religion (Houtman & Aupers, 2007).

Further, some argue that spirituality has become increasingly mainstream and thus more secular, constructing a distinction between genuine spirituality, the search for transcendence or a relationship with the divine, and secular spiritualities, subjective well-being practices aimed at personal growth and self-development (Fuller, 2017; Heelas et al., 2005; Longman, 2020). However, Longman (2020) challenges this distinction arguing that in their study of women's spirituality even 'secular' practitioners show sacralization of the feminine. This indicates that spiritual and secular practices often overlap and that there is no strict distinction in such boundary practices. There are large differences between as well as within spiritual practices, because of the vague and broad characterisation of spirituality and their idiosyncrasy. However, in research there is often no differentiation between distinct spiritual practices. Therefore, this paper focusses on one specific boundary practice, namely tarot, to emphasise the differences within this practice and explore the personal experiences of its practitioners.

Tarot is a set of 78 unique cards each depicting scenes filled with symbolism, which are associated with divination, accessing hidden knowledge through occult means. Tarot was selected because it exists at the boundary between spiritual and secular. While some practitioners consider tarot a spiritual practice that has predictive powers or helps them access knowledge or advice from the invisible realm, others take a more secular approach and use the cards for introspection (Chamberlain, 2019; Dore, 2021; Nichols, 1980/2019; Rosengarten, 2000). Another argument for why tarot should be explored academically is the diversity of its practice (Rosengarten, 2000). Tarot practitioners are encouraged to take their own situation into account during readings and assess the 'spectrum of meaning' displayed by the cards (Dore, 2021; Rosengarten, 2000). Further variance exists in for whom the tarot reading is done, for oneself, for someone else or even for a group of people (Rosengarten, 2000). Additionally, there is not a single right way to perform a tarot reading. Dore (2021) likens it to an art rather than a technique. Cards can be selected at random or specifically chosen by practitioners (Hofer, 2009; Rosengarten, 2000). Simply one card can be drawn or one can choose from a variety of spreads

where the cards' positions affect their interpretation (Chamberlain, 2019; Dore, 2021; Nichols, 1980/2019; Rosengarten, 2000). This diverse practice and the absence of an institution confining tarot is part of its appeal, since this allows for extensive personalisation. In addition, there is room within the tarot community for subgroups like Black tarot or queer tarot practitioners, who choose to reframe and reinterpret tarot to fit their identities (Failla, 2021; Snow, 2019).

Before discussing why spiritual practices of LGBTQ+ individuals are of interest for academic research, the decision to use the term 'LGBTQ+' (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer and other not both straight and cisgender sexual orientations and gender identities) needs to be addressed. Often in academic contexts queer is used as an umbrella term to describe anyone in the LGBTQ+ community, for example in the field of Queer studies. However, the LGBTQ+ community regards queer as a divisive term, since it originated as a slur. Although, it was later reclaimed by parts of the community, it does not suit everyone, which makes it inappropriate as an umbrella term (Brown et al., 2010; Worthen, 2023). This study employs the term queer when participants identify themselves as queer or as an adjective to convey that something goes against the gender binary or heteronormativity. Although, the LGBTQ+ acronym is flawed and alternative terms were considered, LGBTQ+ is widely accepted by the community as a label, therefore it is used in this study.

Religion has a long history of prejudice towards LGBTQ+ individuals. Religious beliefs are often the motivation for harming LGBTQ+ individuals through shaming, discrimination, exclusion, persecution or conversion practices (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Jeffries et al., 2008; Liboro, 2014). Although, recently some denominations have adopted a more accepting position on same-sex attraction and gender identity and expression, research shows that religious individuals of any denomination are more likely to hold anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments compared to non-religious individuals (Chowdhury et al., 2023; Hoffarth et al., 2018; Janssen & Scheepers, 2019). Academic research into mental health outcomes for religious LGBTQ+ individuals reports that they could encounter religious trauma or struggle with reconciling their religious and LGBTQ+ identity (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; McCann et al., 2020). These studies note that some LGBTQ+ participants gravitate towards spirituality, but they do not elaborate on why LGBTQ+ individuals do this or how they experience these practices. This reflects the assumption that tired of 'praying the gay away', LGBTQ+ individuals turn to alternative spiritual practices that are presumed to be more open and accepting than religion (Browne et al., 2010; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989). In reality, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in specific contexts, both religious and spiritual, depends on social, cultural and geographical aspects, leading to the question of why certain religious or spiritual communities are experienced as heteronormative and others as explicitly queer (Browne et al., 2010). Since there is little research on the relationship between LGBTQ+ individuals and spirituality, I further explore this question here.

As mentioned previously, spirituality is often associated with women, since they are reported to be the majority of practitioners (Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Sjöberg & Wåhlberg, 2002; Sointu & Woodhead, 2008; Zwissler, 2018). This has been interpreted by Zwissler (2018) as a response to the historical androcentrism of organised religions. For instance, in Christianity women are often presented as lesser compared to men as punishment for Eve's actions in the Book of Genesis that caused the damnation of mankind. Further, heresy is given a female face in the form of witches. Zwissler (2018) argues that this androcentrism continues in the contemporary academic study of religion and women's religious contributions are implicitly devalued and interpreted as magic or superstition. Women and other groups that are marginalized by authoritative and patriarchal religions thus embrace spirituality in search of empowerment and a chance to create their own narratives, where they can be portrayed as full actors (Fedele & Knibbe, 2013; Longman, 2018; Zwissler, 2018). Further, spiritualities might have more fluid gender norms compared to religions, accepting both traditional and non-conforming expressions of femininity and masculinity, which might appeal to marginalized groups (Fedele & Knibbe, 2012; Sointu & Woodhead, 2008).

Besides Sweasey's (1997) collection of LGB testimonies on religion and spirituality and Browne et al.'s (2010) interdisciplinary exploration of queer spiritual spaces, the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals with spiritual practices are largely unexplored, although some aspects of spirituality are suspected to attract them. First, LGBTQ+ individuals might feel more accepted in spiritual communities because they allow for more fluid gender norms (Fedele & Knibbe, 2012; Sointu & Woodhead, 2008). Second, some spiritualities do not impose any sexual orientation, contrary to religions that only sacralise marriages between men and women. Third, some spiritual groups openly address LGBTQ+ issues, not only permitting LGBTQ+ individuals in their community but actively recognising and engaging them (Browne et al., 2010; Fedele & Knibbe, 2012). Fourth, spiritualities are characterised as focusing on personal growth and finding the divine within. Sacralising the self this way and validating the worth of every unique person might be healing for LGBTQ+ individuals, since their existence is not universally accepted (Sointu & Woodhead, 2008). Lastly, LGBTQ+ individuals might feel empowered and a sense of self-authority by resisting dominating religions and reclaiming their marginal space in society by practising spirituality (Brimacombe, 2024; Fedele & Knibbe, 2012; Heelas, 2008; Snow, 2019). However, framing queer spiritualities as disruptive might not reflect the lived experience of all LGBTQ+ individuals. Contrary to academic Queer theory, which often emphasises disruption and discomfort, LGBTQ+ individuals might practice spirituality in search of inner peace and belonging with like-minded individuals (Browne et al., 2010).

These interpretations theorise why LGBTQ+ individuals might be drawn to spirituality. Nevertheless, since there are significant differences between spiritualities, these arguments might not be applicable to all spiritualities. For example, Wicca, here categorised as an alternative spiritual practice, has been criticised for its perpetuation of strict gender binaries (Floyd, 2017; Lepage, 2017; Sloan,

2008). Thus, the degree of inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in religious or spiritual environments remains dependent on social, cultural and geographical aspects (Browne et al., 2010). These interpretations are primarily based on theory and therefore do not necessarily reflect the lived experience of LGBTQ+ individuals. In addition, distinguishing religion and spirituality in practice is not straightforward, since individuals sometimes identify as both religious and spiritual (Browne et al., 2010; Fedele & Knibbe, 2013).

The perceived general antagonism between religion and the LGBTQ+ community has inspired some research into the mental well-being of religious LGBTQ+ individuals. Mental well-being is of particular interest to LGBTQ+ individuals because multiple systematic reviews report elevated risk of mental health issues in this population, such as suicidality, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (King et al., 2008; Lucassen et al., 2017; Pinna et al., 2022). It is therefore important to assess which factors influence their mental well-being, including religion and spirituality. While in the general population religion affects mental well-being positively (Hamblin & Gross, 2011; Liboro, 2014; Park & Slattery, 2013; Ruini, 2017; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2019), the results for religious LGBTQ+ individuals are more mixed, depending on related factors such as the level of LGBTQ+ acceptance within their religious environment (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Hamblin & Gross, 2011; Jeffries et al, 2008; Liboro, 2014; McCann et al, 2020). This topic is discussed in more detail in the literature review.

Since the existing literature often looks at religion in general and does not make a distinction between religious/spiritual practices, it is unclear whether tarot or specific spiritual practices could be beneficial for (LGBTQ+) practitioners' well-being. There are several arguments for why tarot should be further investigated for its potential effects on well-being. First, tarot practitioners often describe tarot as healing and experience it as a valuable psychological practice (Dore, 2021; Hofer, 2009; Rosengarten, 2000; Snow, 2019). Second, although there is no empirical evidence of its efficacy, some scholars have proposed the use of tarot in therapeutic settings to aid taking perspective, emotional regulation and personal growth (Hofer, 2009; Rosengarten, 2000; Semetsky, 2011). Lastly, I propose that tarot is compatible with theories on the effects of religion and spirituality on mental health and evidence-based interventions in terms of meaning making, self-perception, and taking new perspectives. Providing empirical evidence of tarot's effects on mental health is beyond the scope of this study, instead I elaborate on the existing literature to emphasise the theoretical potential of tarot as a mental health practice to inspire future research.

1.1 Positionality Statement and Insider-Outsider Debate

Before discussing my research questions and approach, it is important to address my positionality. I am an outsider. I am a cis woman in a heterosexual relationship. Although I went to Catholic school, I am neither religious nor particularly spiritual and I would call myself an atheist. Further, although I was largely unaware of this, my education often centralized positivism, the idea that

science can objectively interpret and explain the world. During my time as a psychology student, I therefore preferred quantitative research over qualitative research. More recently I have started to adjust my perspective and to see the value in reporting on individual experiences. A certain scepticism toward religion, spirituality and divinatory practices remains from this positivistic point of view. Lastly, I disclose that I am White to acknowledge this as another axis of my privilege.

My personal experiences during this study prompted me to look into the insider-outsider debate in social science research. This debate discusses which position is theoretically more valid when executing social science research; an insider position, when the researcher shares characteristics that are being studied or other related characteristics, or an outsider position, when they do not share these characteristics (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Holmes, 2020). Both positions have advantages and disadvantages regarding insight on the topic, participant recruitment, and personal bias (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Holmes, 2020). Therefore, one position is not preferred over the other from a theoretical point of view. More so, recently scholars argue that there is no strict dichotomy between the insider and outsider positions (Holmes, 2020). Every person has multiple aspects to their identity and outsiders can connect to participants on aspects other than the one that is being studied. Further, one can never be a complete insider. Although the researcher might be part of the group being studied, there is always a certain power dynamic since they remain in their role of researcher. Specifically within the LGBTQ+ community, it is impossible to be a complete insider, because experiences differ significantly between sexual and gender identities (Sweasey, 1997). Therefore, an intersectional perspective is essential when discussing the LGBTQ+ community to articulate how distinct experiences are influenced by the intersection of multiple identities.

Although insider and outsider positions are just as valid in theory, it is important to take power dynamics into consideration. Historically, there has been an overrepresentation of White, cis, straight, wealthy, male scholars and LGBTQ+ individuals have been disadvantaged in academics (Duran & Miller, 2023). Therefore, outsider perspectives have often been overrepresented and it is important that insider voices receive equal opportunity and get represented in all domains. For an insider voice on the experience of LGBTQ+ individuals with spirituality in the Belgian context see LGBTQ+ tarot creator Emmanuel.le Fontaine (2023). However, as mentioned before, tarot has not gotten a lot of academic interest, especially when it comes to specific subgroups such as LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners. Therefore, the need for multiple perspectives remains, both insider and outsider perspectives. Keeping my position and perspective in mind, I set out to investigate, explore and describe the experiences of LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners.

1.2 Research Questions and Approach

Due to the lack of research literature on specific spiritual or boundary practices, tarot, and personal experiences with spirituality, this study takes an exploratory approach with consideration of

intersectionality and my own positionality. Further, the social, cultural, temporal, and geographical contexts are considered where possible, as advised by previous research (Fedele & Knibbe, 2012), taking into account that the Belgian context differs significantly from American contexts in which most previous research was conducted and that the LGBTQ+ community has encountered a recent backlash in Western countries.

This study aims to examine the following research questions: 1) How do LGBTQ+ individuals experience tarot? 2) Why are LGBTQ+ individuals drawn to spirituality or tarot? 3) Why is tarot perceived as a queer practice? And 4) Which psychological aspects of tarot could theoretically be beneficial for practitioners' mental well-being? As a result of the exploratory nature of this study, there are limited hypotheses proposed. As discussed previously, there are multiple theories about why LGBTQ+ individuals choose spiritual practices. For example, because they do not feel accepted by traditional religions and consider spirituality a more open and tolerant alternative (Browne et al., 2010; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989). This study examines whether these theories apply to tarot as a specific boundary practice between spiritual and secular. Because of the introspective applications of tarot, it is compelling to explore the psychological aspects of tarot through its history with the field of psychology and the lack of research on its therapeutic value.

To address these research questions, this study relies on a combination of a comprehensive literature review and several in-depth interviews. Although other ethnographic methods, as implemented by research that inspired this study (Browne et al., 2010; Longman, 2018; Sweasey, 1997), such as focus groups or observations, would be suitable to investigate this topic, these methods are not feasible within the scope of this study. The literature review offers a discussion on three broad topics, namely the relationship of LGBTQ+ individuals with religion situated in the Belgian context, tarot and queer tarot, and the psychological aspects of tarot. Further, a qualitative research approach was chosen since this best fits the research questions and quantitative approaches in this field of research are often plagued by inadequate measures of spirituality (de Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012; Koenig, 2008). Lastly, this study employs a grounded theory perspective, which allows for the data to adjust the course of the study and lead the formation of theory (Chun Tie et al., 2019). The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals with tarot and so inspire further in-depth research into specific spiritual practices.

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines three main themes: 1) the relationship between LGBTQ+ individuals and religion/spirituality, 2) tarot and queer tarot, and 3) a psychological perspective on tarot. The themes are chosen with the aim to provide a theoretical background for some of the topics that are discussed later in the qualitative analysis.

2.1 The Relationship Between LGBTQ+ Individuals and Religion/Spirituality

The following paragraphs discuss the religious/spiritual context and the LGBTQ+ context in Belgium and compare these to international contexts, especially the US, since most research in this field is performed there. The aim of this comparison is to examine to what degree international research results are applicable to the Belgian context. Next, I discuss the relationship between religion/spirituality (R/S) and mental health among LGBTQ+ individuals, outlining theories on this relationship in the general population, such as the causal pathway theory (Koenig et al., 2012), and proposed models on how this relationship might differ for LGBTQ+ individuals, such as identity conflict, minority stress, and structural stigma (Anderton et al. 2011; Lefevor et al., 2023; Liboro, 2014). The abbreviation R/S is used here for simplicity and because the majority of research does not differentiate between religion and spirituality. Whenever a distinction is made or when religion and spirituality are directly contrasted, they are written in full.

2.1.1 Belgian Religious/Spiritual Context

Sociology and anthropology scholars categorise current Western societies as post-secular, characterised by the co-existence of secularisation and a religious/spiritual revival (Heelas, 2008; Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Moberg et al., 2012). Many presumed that secularism and rationalism in modernity would eliminate people's need for religion (Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Houtman & Mascini, 2002; Josephson-Storm, 2017). However, it seems that religion did not disappear, rather it took on another form. Houtman and Aupers (2007) propose that there is a relocation of the sacred, people no longer look to organised religion to find meaning or a sense of identity giving them the opportunity to explore these things individually and look for the sacred within the self. Similarly, Heelas (2008) theorises that people not only turn away from religion, but also away from the restrictions of mainstream society and its narrow ideas of what it means to be successful.

Before addressing the specific situation of R/S in Belgium, it is important to note that assessing R/S at a national level is not an easy task. For one, studies measuring R/S often use a range of different measures, hindering analysis of temporal changes and comparisons between studies (Koenig, 2008). Further, an individual's religiousness can be expressed in different ways, requiring the distinction between religious identity -the degree to which the person identifies with the religious group- and religiosity -the personal salience of religion to their life and active participation in religious rituals (JOP, 2015; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2019).

According to van den Brandt (2014), the Flemish religious-secular landscape is characterised by increasing secularisation, increasing visibility of cultural-religious diversity and Muslims in socio-political contexts, and the continued the privileged relationship of Catholicism with the state. In general, both religious identity and religiosity have been declining over the last decades among Christians, the predominant religious affiliation in Belgium (Billiet et al., 2013; Bisschoppenconferentie, 2023; JOP,

2015). Belgian's relation with Christianity has grown more passive with many values, norms and traditions of the religion remaining, but religion itself has lost its salience and religious practices, such as church attendance, are limited (Billiet et al., 2013; JOP, 2015). In the last decade the distrust in the Catholic Church grew in Belgium due to a large public scandal involving child sexual abuse by clergymen, which was covered up by Church officials (Billiet et al., 2013). Although these accusations first came to light in 2010, a recent docuseries, *Godvergeten* (2023), which shows victims' testimonies and criticizes the lack of justice, brought the issue back into public discourse. This lack of justice demonstrates the still powerful position of the Catholic Church in Belgium.

Different patterns are found among Muslims in Belgium (JOP, 2015). Although Islam remains a minority religion in Belgium, religious identity and religiosity are rising in Muslim youths, contrary to other religious affiliations (JOP, 2015; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2019). The increased visibility of Muslims in socio-political settings has caused tensions in Belgium's Christian-secular environment, as exemplified by the headscarf debates, entangling the religious-secular contention with gender and ethnicity issues (van den Brandt, 2014). Houtman and Aupers (2007), who measured the prevalence of people who identify as spiritual, report that Belgium is among the fastest rising countries. However, this rise in spirituality is not reflected in the JOP data (2015). This disparity could be because of a difference in the ages of the research samples or because of different measurements of spirituality.

Since most of the research discussed in this literature review is based in the US, it is prudent to discuss how the religious context in the US differs from Belgium. Although direct comparisons are not feasible because of the obstacles to measuring religion mentioned previously, a description of the religious context in the US gives an idea of the similarities and differences between both contexts. The majority religion in the US is Christianity, similar to Belgium (Billiet et al., 2013; Bisschoppenconferentie, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2021). Even though the same religion is most prominent, cross-cultural research shows that religious experiences differ within the same denomination (Saroglou & Cohen, 2013). Additionally, there has been a similar decline in both religious identity and religious participation in the US (Pew Research Center, 2021; Twenge et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the percentage of the US population that identifies as religious is remarkably higher than in Belgium, with an estimated 63% of Americans identifying as Christian and 31% regularly attending religious services compared to 50% of Belgians identifying as Christian and 8.9% regularly attending religious services (Billiet et al., 2013; Bisschoppenconferentie, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2021). In their discussion of post-secularism, Habermas explicitly excludes the US because of religion's social and cultural relevance to US society (Habermas in Moberg et al., 2012), as can be observed in the prevalence of religious arguments in political debates, such as the abortion legislation (Deckman et al., 2023; Osborne et al., 2022; Skidmore, 2023). Similar to Belgium, Houtman and Aupers (2007) report that the US has one of the strongest increases in spirituality. However, the US baseline data are lower to begin with and therefore still lag behind compared to other Western countries where spirituality is becoming

increasingly common (Houtman & Aupers, 2007). In conclusion, although there are similar trends of declines in religiousness -specifically Christianity- and increases in spirituality, religion still plays a more active role in US society compared to Belgium. This difference should be kept in mind when relying on US research to discuss Belgian contexts.

2.1.2 Belgian LGBTQ+ Context

Overall, Belgium is a progressive country in terms of LGBTQ+ acceptance. It was one of the first countries to legalise same-sex marriage or civil unions in 2003. Later in 2006, adoption rights for same-sex couples were protected. More recently in 2023, conversion therapies were prohibited (Dekock, 2023). Also in 2023, Belgium placed second out of 49 countries on the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Index, which ranks European countries based on a legal index of LGBTQ+ equality and the social climate (Rainbow Europe, 2023).

Further, the European Union (EU) has taken positive actions by adopting measures to combat discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, such as the inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics in official school curricula (Committee of Ministers, 2010). Although protective measures are in place, this does not mean that LGBTQ+ equality has been achieved in all EU countries, as the Rainbow Index demonstrates (Rainbow Europe, 2023). Agreed-upon measures are not always implemented consistently and legal changes and the acquisition of rights do not necessarily lead to social change or increased acceptance (Scheingold, 2004; Slootmaekers, 2022).

Such a disparity between legal protection and personal experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals is also present in Belgium. Although Belgium rated high on their Rainbow Index, in their annual review ILGA-Europe (2023) highlighted the perpetuation of hateful speech by Flemish right-wing politicians and of hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals as some of the areas that still need improvement. Further, although the majority of Flemish youth who participated in the JOP-school monitor in 2018 indicated that they accept and respect the LGBTQ+ community, a minority reported homophobic views, (Willemsen et al., 2021). Additionally, çavaria, a Flemish LGBTQ+ rights organisation, reported on LGBTQ+ youth's school experiences (Volckaert et al., 2023). Findings show that 60.4% of participants feel unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation and 33.5% feel unsafe due to their gender identity and expression (Volckaert et al., 2023). These feelings of unsafety could lead to avoidant behaviour such as skipping school or having to change schools, therefore it remains important to improve acceptance in schools. Altogether, these reports show that although Belgium is doing well in terms of protecting LGBTQ+ rights at a legislative level, the social climate can still feel hostile.

Although the rise in equal rights, acceptance, and visibility of the LGBTQ+ community over the last decades is undeniable, there has recently been international backlash. In the EU, candidate member Serbia has been criticized for its lack of effective implementation of anti-discrimination laws protecting LGBTQ+ individuals (Slootmaekers, 2022). Further, in 2021 the EU launched two

infringement procedures due to violations of the EU law for non-discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, denouncing Poland's 'LGBT-ideology free zones' and Hungary's restriction of LGBTQ+ representation in content aimed at minors (European Commission, 2021). More recently, Russia imposed a ban on the 'international, extremist LGBT-movement', effectively prohibiting LGBTQ+ activities and organisations (UN Human Rights, 2023).

In the US, Taylor et al. (2018) report that Americans' attitudes towards trans*, lesbian, and gay individuals are fairly negative. In terms of policy, respondents endorse general non-discrimination policies, but supportiveness declines on specific issues, such as medical treatments and public restrooms (Taylor et al., 2018). However, the authors remain optimistic and applaud the increased salience of transgender issues in society (Taylor et al., 2018). Such optimism might have subsided more recently, since civil societies, scholars, and UN experts have expressed concern about the recent rise in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in the US, including bans on trans athletes and the infamous 'Don't say gay' bills, which limit the discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in classrooms (Goldberg, 2023; Human Rights Campaign, 2023; Thoreson, 2023; UN Human Rights, 2022). In conclusion, although acceptance and equality for LGBTQ+ individuals have increased in Western countries compared to last century, LGBTQ+ rights are still not safe on an international level.

2.1.3 Religion/Spirituality and Mental Health Among LGBTQ+ Individuals

In the general population religion and spirituality (R/S) seem to have a positive effect on mental health, improving substance abuse, affective disorders, suicidality, and mental well-being (Lefevor et al., 2021; Park & Slattery, 2013; Ruini, 2017). Research indicates that this effect of R/S on well-being is replicated in Belgium's more secular context (Huijs et al., 2024; Van Cappellen et al., 2016). However, Theuns et al. (2012) report that in a sample of Belgian students, R/S has less influence on subjective well-being compared to personal relationships and health. This contrast with more religious countries, such as Algeria, where R/S is most strongly related to subjective well-being (Theuns et al., 2012). These results indicate that the strength of the association between R/S and mental health might depend on the salience of R/S in a given context. The effects of R/S on physical health have been investigated, though the mechanisms of this relationship are often less clear (Masters & Hooker, 2013). For this reason, physical health is not further discussed here, unless both physical and mental health are operationalised as a single health variable in studies discussed (e.g. Lefevor et al., 2021).

Koenig et al. (2012) propose a framework for the pathways through which R/S can influence mental health, namely psychological, social, and behavioural pathways. The psychological pathway illustrates how R/S affect mental health by providing a way to cope with stress, emotional regulation, and a personal framework for meaning making (Koenig et al., 2012, Lefevor et al., 2021; Lefevor et al., 2023). The social pathway identifies social support and a sense of belonging as religious factors affecting mental health (Koenig et al., 2012, Lefevor et al., 2021; Lefevor et al., 2023). Last, guidelines for living,

such as moderating alcohol consumption, and the promotion of prosocial behaviour, such as forgiveness, are typical of many religious belief systems and are described in the behavioural pathway (Koenig et al., 2012, Lefevor et al., 2021; Lefevor et al., 2023). Other studies report similar processes through which R/S influence mental well-being such as social support, a concise social identity, guidelines for living through limiting uncertainty, a sense of purpose, and R/S as a personal resource or character strength (McCann et al., 2020; Park & Slattery, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Ruini, 2017). Nevertheless, these same pathways could negatively affect mental health, for example, through negative religious coping, adverse social interactions in religious settings, and paradoxically, by inspiring judgment and discrimination (Koenig et al., 2012, Lefevor et al., 2021; Lefevor et al., 2023). Although there seems to be an overall positive association between R/S and mental health, research sometimes presents mixed results, often depending on demographic characteristics (Park & Slattery, 2013).

Two demographic characteristics that are often ignored in these studies but have received considerable specific attention are sexual orientation and gender identity. Factors influencing mental well-being in LGBTQ+ individuals require investigation because multiple systematic reviews report increased risks of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidality in this population (King et al., 2008; Lucassen et al., 2017; Pinna et al., 2022). Due to religion's history of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments, it is often assumed that LGBTQ+ individuals do not experience similar benefits from R/S because they are likely to encounter prejudice and discrimination. Research shows that LGBTQ+ individuals might experience negative mental health effects related to religion, such as internalised homophobia and suicidal thoughts (Gibbs and Goldbach, 2015). However, paradoxically religion can also be a source of social support and a way of coping with minority stress for LGBTQ+ individuals (Lefevor et al., 2021; McCann et al., 2020). This suggests that the relationship between R/S and mental health in LGBTQ+ individuals is not straightforward and is likely influenced by multiple factors. The following paragraphs discuss several frameworks used to examine this relationship.

An aspect of religious LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences that has received significant academic interest is the identity conflict that might occur due to tension between their religious identity and their sexual or gender identities (Anderton et al., 2011; Dehlin et al., 2015a; Liboro, 2014). This idea of identity conflict is related to social identity theory which states that people's self-concept is partly derived from belonging to certain social groups (Hogg, 2016). Due to its dual significance as a social group and a belief system, religious identity is exceptionally central to someone's self-concept (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). I argue that sexual and gender identities are at least equally central to someone's self-concept because of their innateness and society's preoccupation with romance, sexuality, and gender dichotomies. The conflict between these two central identities is associated with negative mental health outcomes, such as depressive symptoms, anxiety, emotional distress, suicidal ideation, low self-esteem, and religion-related guilt (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Dehlin et al., 2015a; Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015; Hamblin & Gross, 2011).

Research on the identity conflict framework identifies four main strategies used by LGBTQ+ individuals to address the conflict: rejection of their religious identity, rejection of their LGBTQ+ identity, compartmentalisation and integration (Anderton et al., 2011; Avishai, 2020; Dehlin et al., 2015a; Liboro, 2014). The prevalence and mental health outcomes of these strategies have been compared in research. Researchers label integration, although less prevalent, as the optimal strategy, because this strategy does not require individuals to reject or hide any part of their identities (Dehlin et al., 2015a, Liboro, 2014). However, rejecting their religious identity, the most prevalent strategy, can also have positive effects (Dehlin et al., 2015a). Leaving a non-affirming religion is related to a decrease in internalized homophobia (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015), and joining a more affirming R/S environment can be a protective factor for discrimination and depressive symptoms and is associated with fewer health risk behaviours, and less identity conflict and more social support, self-esteem and overall psychological health (Anderton et al., 2011; Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Hamblin & Gross, 2011; McCann et al., 2020). However, rejecting their religious identity can also have negative effects, such as increased risk of suicidality, possibly due to the loss of social support (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015). Rejecting their LGBTQ+ identity and compartmentalisation are related to worse mental health outcomes, since research shows that concealment of one's LGBTQ+ identity is related to lower psychological well-being and more depressive symptoms, influenced by loneliness or a decreased sense of belonging (Huang & Chan, 2022; Leleux-Labarge et al., 2015; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014; Riggle et al., 2017).

Further, individuals who reject their LGBTQ+ identity are more likely to participate in sexual orientation and gender identity and expression change efforts (SOGIECE), including conversion therapy, compared to other identity conflict strategies (Anderton et al., 2011; Dehlin et al., 2015a). Religious beliefs are often the primary motivator for seeking SOGIECE and faith-based SOGIECE practices are more prevalent and seemingly more damaging to LGBTQ+ individuals compared to psychotherapy-based SOGIECE (Dehlin et al., 2015a; Dehlin et al., 2015b; Kinitz et al., 2021). Research shows that SOGIECE are rarely effective in the long term and are associated with internalized homophobia, depression, psychological distress, substance abuse and suicidality (Anderton et al., 2011; Forsyth et al., 2022; Venn-Brown, 2015). There has been a recent rise in national bans of SOGIECE, mainly conversion therapy, as is the case in Belgium (Dekock, 2023), and the practices are denounced by influential organisations such as the American Psychological Association (2009) (Kinitz et al., 2021; Venn-Brown, 2015). Nevertheless, the prevalence of SOGIECE among LGBTQ+ individuals remains alarming (with lifetime prevalence estimates between 2 and 35%), therefore, more research is required to assess the current status of SOGIECE and the efficacy of the bans put into place (Kinitz et al., 2021; Salway et al., 2023).

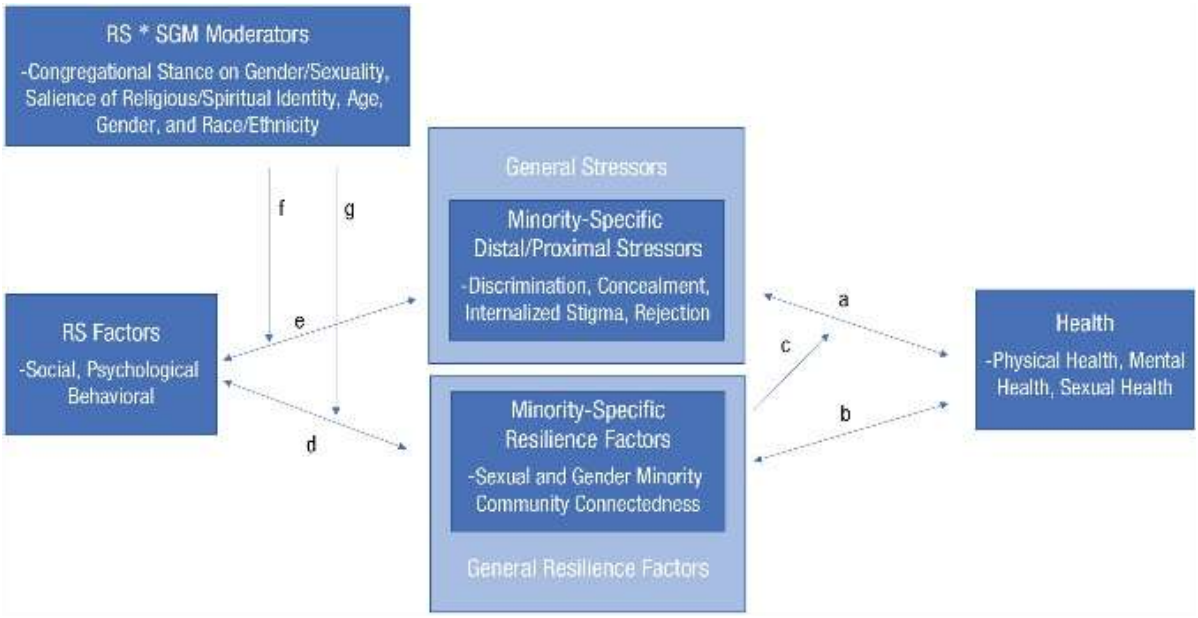
The identity conflict framework has its limitations. It is criticized for lacking a way to model fluidity and ambiguity of identities, since both religious and sexual and gender identities develop over time (Avishai, 2020). Additionally, by centring the framework around conflict, it is assumed that religion

negatively affects mental health among LGBTQ+ individuals, neglecting or minimizing any positive pathways and religious LGBTQ+ individuals who do not experience identity conflict (Lefevor et al., 2023). A recent meta-analysis demonstrates the inaccuracy of the emphasis on conflict, since they report a small but positive relationship between R/S and health among LGB individuals (Lefevor et al., 2021). However, the included studies present mixed results, reporting positive, negative, and neutral relationships (Lefevor et al., 2021). Therefore, the authors stress that there is no single LGBTQ+ experience with religion and that existing frameworks are insufficient to represent these diverse experiences and their related outcomes (Lefevor et al., 2021). As a result, Lefevor et al. (2023) propose the religious/spiritual stress and resilience model (RSSR) (Figure 1), describing the relationship between R/S and health among LGBTQ+ individuals, combining causal pathway theory, identity conflict theory, and theories on resilience, minority stress, and structural stigma. Minority stress is defined as excess stress, primarily interpersonal stressors, due to their stigmatized social status as LGBTQ+ (Meyer, 2003). Structural stigma can be defined as societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies that constrain the opportunities, resources, and well-being of the stigmatised (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014). With this model, Lefevor et al. (2023) aim to outline the circumstances through which R/S promotes or damages health among LGBTQ+ individuals, as they identify R/S as a simultaneous stressor and support factor.

The RSSR model adapts the causal pathway theory for LGBTQ+ individuals by adding general and minority-specific stressors and resilience factors as mediators (Lefevor et al., 2023). In other words, R/S pathways influence general and minority-specific stressors and resilience, which in turn influence health. Further, the relationships between R/S pathways and minority stress and resilience are moderated by variables unique to the R/S experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. These variables include, for example, the level of acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals in their R/S environment or the salience of R/S in their life. Additionally, the relationships can be either positive or negative, allowing the model to represent the mixed results reported in the previously discussed meta-analysis (Lefevor et al., 2021). Lastly, the relationships are presented as bidirectional. Although Lefevor et al. (2023) acknowledge that R/S predominantly affect health, they reiterate that health can also affect how individuals interact with R/S.

Figure 1.

The religious/spiritual stress and resilience model (Lefevor et al., 2023).



Note. The examples given in the figure are illustrative and non-exhaustive. From "Religion/Spirituality, Stress, and Resilience Among Sexual and Gender Minorities: The Religious/Spiritual Stress and Resilience Model" by G.T. Lefevor, C. Etengoff, E.B. Davis, S.J. Skidmore, E.M. Rodriguez, J.S. McGraw, and S.S. Rostosky, 2023, Perspectives on Psychological Science, 18(6), p. 1542 (https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916231179137). Copyright 2023 by the Authors.

Even though this model is a step in the right direction for accumulating the research on the relationship between R/S and health among LGBTQ+ individuals, as it is based on preceding research, the same limitations restrain the model. Much of the research is Western-centric, resulting in the average participant in Lefevor et al. (2021) being a 32-year-old, White, gay, or bisexual man from the US. There seems to be an overrepresentation of Christianity and LGB individuals and much remains unknown about other R/S and LGBTQ+ identities (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Lefevor et al., 2023). Further, due to the absence of longitudinal studies, the directionality of these relationships and how they evolve over time in relation to each other remain unclear. Lastly, in most cases research makes no distinction between religion and spirituality. This is problematic for multiple reasons. First, some individuals identify explicitly as spiritual and not religious, even using this as a strategy to address their identity conflict (Anderton et al., 2011; Browne et al., 2010; Fedele & Knibbe, 2013), and therefore they could be (self-)excluded from research samples if spirituality is not the main focus of the study. This is troublesome since this population is not well understood (Oman, 2013). Second, Lefevor et al. (2021) report in their meta-analysis that when R/S is operationalised as spirituality for LGBTQ+ individuals, it more closely resembles the relationship between religion and health found in the general population, compared to operationalisation as religion. This indicates that religion and spirituality differentially influence health

among LGBTQ+ individuals, potentially through the moderator variables unique to the R/S experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, as presented in the RSSR model (Lefevor et al., 2023). Therefore, future research should investigate how religious and spiritual experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals differ.

2.2 Tarot and Queer Tarot

To introduce this section, this paragraph reiterates the value of tarot as a topic of interest. As mentioned previously, research into R/S practices often disregards specific spiritual practices, preferring to investigate an overarching category. However, spiritualities differ significantly between and within practices and therefore research should be able to outline these differences. Tarot is an excellent example of such a diverse practice, due to its personal adaptability and its boundary position where spirituality and secularism overlap. Furthermore, tarot has been gaining popularity, making it more accessible. However, scientific literature on tarot is very limited, notably lacking empirical research describing tarot and its practitioners. Therefore, the following sections rely on a combination of works targeting the general public (e.g. Chamberlain, 2019; Dore, 2021; Snow, 2019) and theoretical scientific literature (e.g. Nichols, 1980/2019; Rosengarten, 2000; Semetsky, 2011; Wu, 2020). This section focuses on the characteristics and history of tarot followed by a discussion of queer tarot and its significance to the LGBTQ+ community. The section after that discusses tarot's potential as a mental well-being tool.

2.2.1 Characteristics and History of Tarot

A description of every standard tarot card goes beyond the scope and intention of this study. However, for the benefit of deeper comprehension, this section starts with an overview of the general structure of a tarot deck. Most decks are accompanied by a guidebook with interpretations of all the cards based on their symbolism. Although the precise expressions often differ between decks and guidebooks, in most cases specific cards do convey key ideas across different interpretations. However, interpretations are considered very personal, especially in introspective practices, therefore it should be acknowledged that tarot cards do not have single fixed interpretations, rather the interpretation depends on the practitioner and their circumstances (Rosengarten, 2000; Snow, 2019).

A standard contemporary tarot deck consists of 78 illustrated cards divided into two sections, the minor arcana and major arcana. The minor arcana most resemble a regular deck of playing cards, consisting of four different suits (wands, cups, swords, and pentacles) with 14 cards each, going from ace to ten followed by a page, knight, queen and king. The four suits are often linked to other classifications to aid interpretation, such as domains of human capacity, natural elements or the suits of regular playing cards (Table 1) (Dore, 2021; Snow, 2019). The major arcana, made up of 22 unique cards, are the section that structurally distinguishes tarot decks from regular playing cards. The major arcana are sometimes presented as the fifth element, spirit (Snow, 2019), and are thus interpreted as a spiritual journey towards healing and transcendence, also called the Fool's journey, referring to the Fool card, which is often imagined as outside of the sequence and given the number 0 (Dore, 2021). The rest

of the sequence includes the following: the Magician, the High Priestess, the Empress, the Emperor, the Hierophant, the Lovers, the Chariot, Strength, the Hermit, the Wheel of Fortune, Justice, the Hanged man, Death, Temperance, the Devil, the Tower, the Star, the Moon, the Sun, Judgment, and finally the World.

Table 1.

Interpretation parallels of the tarot suits.

Tarot suits	Human capacities	Natural elements	Playing card suits
Wands	Energy	Fire	Clubs
Cups	Emotion	Water	Hearts
Swords	Intellect	Air	Spades
Pentacles	Behaviour	Earth	Diamonds

The history of tarot is rather convoluted. Authors of tarot books often present mysterious legends as the origin of tarot. A popular legend claims that tarot originated in ancient Egypt and contains hidden knowledge on spiritual evolution, which was entrusted to gypsies for safekeeping (Dore, 2021; Farley, 2009; Nichols, 1980/2019; Sosteric, 2014). As Farley (2009) explains in their book, *A cultural history of tarot,* which guides the following discussion of tarot's history, an Egyptian origin of tarot is unlikely. Based on the context of the symbolism displayed on old tarot cards and documentary evidence, tarot cards likely originated in 15th century Italy as a card game for the elite (Farley, 2009). Tarot cards in this early iteration are presumed to symbolize an allegory of life or hierarchy in society. From there tarot evolved over time with the social and cultural context, the tarot card game spread with new decks being made and adjusted to new uses.

Nevertheless, the tarot card game went out of style and the rules were forgotten. However, tarot cards found a new use in 18th-century France. According to Farley (2009), in reaction to the Enlightenment, which fostered rationalism and scientific knowledge in society, Romanticism bloomed, which emphasised irrationality, emotionality and subjectivity and led to the rediscovery of occultism. During this period authors started defining interpretations of individual tarot cards and writing about tarot as a divinatory tool, able to access divine knowledge and predict the future. During this period tarot was integrated with other esoteric schemes, such as astrology, Kabbalah and ritual magic (Farley, 2009). A similar evolution transpired in 19th-century England, with the industrialization driving a sense of materialism and neglect of spirituality leading to backlash and a spiritual revival (Farley, 2009). The combination of these esoteric teachings is reflected in tarot's symbolism. The changes made by the Golden Dawn to the names and sequences of tarot cards remain the standard today. Additionally, the

most well-known tarot deck, the Rider-Waite-Smith deck created by members of the Golden Dawn, is the first deck to include imagery on the numbered cards of the minor arcana for ease of interpretation.

The final period in tarot's history discussed by Farley (2009) is modern New Age spirituality. Individuals are stepping away from traditional religious institutions and prefer to construct a more personal religiosity/spirituality, characterised by eclecticism and syncretism, combining Eastern and Western practices. Further, the use of tarot cards shifted again, this time from divination to self-development, introspection and healing. Although the meanings and symbolism of tarot cards developed by the Golden Dawn remain common, there is increased interest in new sources of imagery and re-imagining tarot decks. However, the legend of the Egyptian origin of tarot and its secrets is still perpetuated. From a tarot practitioners' standpoint, Dore (2021) illustrates why this might not be out of ignorance, but rather as a way to keep the magic alive. Dore (2021) presents tarot as a tool to reclaim imagination in our everyday rational lives. From this point of view a legend about the origin of the cards, which is ahistorical and unverifiable, is much more inspiring than factual history. Dore (2021) thus argues that tarot's origin does not need to be rational, just like the origins of religious texts do not need to be rational.

Throughout the discussion of tarot's history, a cycle of rationalism and spirituality presents itself. When society leans too much in one direction, there is a counter movement in the other direction. Farley (2009) describes one of these shifts in values as follows:

'- no longer able to accept the narrow constraints of Christianity, yet needing to believe in something beyond the mundane.'

A similar shift in values might be occurring in our post-secular society, exemplified by the rising popularity and accessibility of spiritual practices (Houtman & Auspers, 2007). In their discussion of tarot as a technology inspired by social justice activism, Wu (2020) describes such a shift in the refusal of the hegemonic ideas of science and technology, as they are rooted in oppression and struggle with diversity.

The historical overview touches on tarot's uses, evolving from a card game to divination to introspection. Although the rules to the card game are lost to history, both divination and introspection can be part of contemporary tarot practices. Further, other uses of tarot cards are being explored, such as adopting tarot as a creative storytelling device (Barrett, 2011). Whether tarot practice is experienced as spiritual or secular depends on the practitioners' beliefs about the origin of tarot's power. Some practitioners believe that their readings are guided by supernatural entities such as angels, spirits, their deceased ancestors, the universe, or energies, while others believe that the cards work as a mirror of their inner self or simply as a tool for self-reflection (Chamberlain, 2019; Failla, 2021; Rosengarten, 2000). Nevertheless, practitioners can have multiple beliefs in this regard, thus blurring the line between spiritual and secular.

As mentioned before, there is not one right way to interpret tarot cards (Dore, 2021; Rosengarten, 2000). Similarly, there is no right way to draw tarot cards, some practitioners draw random cards for their reading, others select specific cards because of their meaning (Hofer, 2009; Rosengarten, 2000). Practitioners can either ask specific questions they want the cards' input on or start without a question, remaining open to what the cards have to tell them (Dore, 2021; Rosengarten, 2000). Readings can be done individually, with or for another person, or even for multiple people or a community (Chamberlain, 2019; Rosengarten, 2000). Although tarot is often a completely individualised practice, there are certain standard practices known by most tarot practitioners. Drawing a card of the day is a popular practice, where practitioners draw a single card presenting them with an idea to keep in mind during the day, inspiring them, or prompting them to reflect on something that has been going on in their life (Dore, 2021). For more in-depth readings, spreads are used, where the tarot cards are placed in a specific formation and their relative position to each other influences their interpretation (Chamberlain, 2019; Dore, 2021; Nichols, 1980/2019; Rosengarten, 2000). Different kinds of questions ask for different spreads, for example the Celtic Cross aids in a comprehensive general reading, while a three-card spread represents the practitioner's past, present, and future (Chamberlain, 2019). Overall, there are many options available for how one can personalise their tarot readings, making it a deeply personal and creatively free practice.

In the mind of the general public tarot is strongly associated with fortune-telling, leading to negative stereotypes about tarot, while the introspective practices, which might seem more reasonable to non-believers, remain largely unknown. Due to the contemporary focus on rationalism and empirical science, tarot practitioners are perceived as either delusional for actually believing in fortune-telling or as frauds, who just want to extort people by telling them what they want to hear (Farley, 2009). Tarot's history most likely plays a role in how it is perceived now, since secret societies, such as the Golden Dawn, and its legend of hidden Egyptian knowledge reinforce the mysterious character of tarot. Further, the media perpetuates these negative stereotypes by using tarot as a story device to evoke bad omens or dark magic. For example, the villain in Disney's *The princess and the frog* (Musker & Clements, 2009) employs tarot cards to lure people into his trap. Even more dramatically, May 2024 saw the release of a horror movie titled *Tarot* (Cohen & Halberg, 2024), wherein archetypal figures haunt and kill those who had their fortunes read with a deck of tarot cards. Additionally, the concept of metaphysical chauvinism could provide an explanation for the negative reputation of tarot. Metaphysical chauvinism is defined as a biased attitude against quasi-empirical claims that are not consistent with one's own metaphysical assumptions despite holding beliefs that are equally unverifiable from an empirical point of view (Beck & Miller, 2001; Ladd & Borshuk, 2013). As a result, belief systems of minority metaphysical believers are stigmatized and perceived as deviant (Ladd & Borshuk, 2013). In other words, believing in God is more socially accepted than believing in the divinatory powers of tarot, even though both are equally unverifiable. Lastly, the perception of tarot as illegitimate might explain why tarot has received almost

no academic interest (Rosengarten, 2000; Wu, 2020). The influence of this negative perception of tarot by the general public on tarot practitioners is discussed in the qualitative analysis.

2.2.2 Queer Tarot

At first glance, it might seem contradictory that LGBTQ+ individuals are drawn to tarot, since traditional tarot decks often reproduce ideas of Whiteness, Eurocentrism, heteronormativity, binary gender perspectives, gender stereotypes, and religion (Failla, 2021; Snow, 2019). These ideas are most obvious in the iconography but are also mirrored in the card's interpretations. Traditionally all characters presented are White and the Lovers card depicts a heterosexual couple. Multiple cards come in male-female sets such as the kings and queens, the Emperor and the Empress, and the Hierophant and the High priestess, which are often interpreted in terms of gender stereotypes emphasising a gender binary. Furthermore, due to tarot's history in Europe, the cards sometimes present Christian symbolism, for instance the Lovers card in the classic Rider-Waite-Smith deck depicts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Figure 2) (Farley, 2009). Overall, traditional tarot fails to represent the diversity of its practitioners.

This lack of diversity spurs both a need and an opportunity for reimagining, reinterpretation and reclamation of the tarot practice, evolving into subgroups of tarot practitioners such as Black tarot and queer tarot (Failla, 2021; Snow, 2019). As the (academic) literature on tarot and queer tarot is limited, Failla's (2021) discussion of Black tarot from a decolonial perspective is referenced here for it parallels to queer tarot's need for reinterpretation and reimagining. Numerous LGBTQ+ artists work on creating more inclusive tarot decks, such as the Urban Tarot, the Numinous Tarot, and the Next World Tarot, and promote LGBTQ+ tarot platforms like Little Red Tarot (https://littleredtarot.com/). Figure 2 shows an example of such reinterpretation and reimagining by contrasting the Lovers cards from the Rider-Waite-Smith deck and the Numinous tarot. Reimaging tarot is a balancing act of representation while avoiding tokenism as well as adapting more than just the iconography of the cards, reframing the practice and interpretation to the context of the practitioner (Failla, 2021). The book *Queering the tarot* by Cassandra Snow (2019) puts this reimagining and reinterpretation into practice for LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners by discussing how tarot cards can relate differently to them and making space to explore and celebrate their differences. Snow (2019) presents queering as taking what society has given them and finding their own way, outside of society's limits, and erasing the narrowness of 'normal'. Tarot cards are then interpreted from a queer point of view. For example, the Fool's journey, traditionally interpreted as a quest for self-discovery, new possibilities and the risk of stepping into the unknown, could symbolise the queer journey of coming out and exploring one's LGBTQ+ identity (Head, 2012; Snow, 2019).

Figure 2.

Comparison of the Lovers Tarot Card in Traditional and Reimagined Decks.

Note. Left: The Lovers card from the Rider-Waite-Smith tarot presents Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, suggesting a romantic, heterosexual relationship with rigid gender norms. From Rider-Waite Tarot, A.E. Waite and P.C. Smith, 1909, Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rider%E2%80%93Waite_Tarot). In the public domain. Right: The Lovers card from the Numinous tarot shows multiple people and thus celebrates different kinds of relationships, both sexual and platonic, while diverting from heteronormativity. From The Numinous Tarot, by C.W. McCloud, 2017, Numinous Spirit Press (https://numinousspiritpress.com/numinoustarot). Copyright 2017 by the Author.

Tarot has also found its way into social justice activism. Not only can tarot be seen as a reclaiming of marginal spaces by groups that have been ostracised by society (Snow, 2019), tarot practice is interpreted by some as an actively refusal of the current epistemology of science and technology, which is rooted in oppression, as the only valid form of knowledge (Wu, 2020). By identifying tarot as a technology, Wu (2020), an education scholar who practices tarot, expresses that knowledge and progress do not only lie in digital technologies, which are privileged and often disregard minorities, but that accessible knowledge tools such as tarot carry immense value. Dore (2021) reiterates this idea, emphasising that there is more than one way to gather and study information. Science is a valuable way to do this, but it is not the only way. Further, social justice activists use tarot as a tool to envision the world that they are working towards, one of equality and acceptance, through enlarging imagination, reinterpretation and opening possibilities (Lustig & Wu, 2022; Wu, 2020).

Lastly, since tarot lends itself to queer reinterpretations, one could question whether there is something inherently queer about tarot. Although tarot can be interpreted as queer in the sense that it is outside the norm of traditional religion and as a way for LGBTQ+ individuals to reclaim the marginal spaces in society and embrace their differences (Snow, 2019), most would agree that it is not inherently queer. If there were inherent queerness in tarot then LGBTQ+ practitioners would likely not feel the need for reinterpretations and reimagining of the traditionally White, heteronormative, gender-binary tarot. Brown et al. (2010) express that to be queer, is to make queer, illustrating the integration of LGBTQ+ aspects in their engagement with spirituality and tarot. Nevertheless, authors on the topic emphasise that queer spirituality does not differ from any other spirituality, since everyone's spiritual experiences are informed by their own unique identity and experiences in life (Sweasey, 1997). In conclusion, tarot is not inherently queer, but lends itself for queer reinterpretation and reimagining, which leaves the question why some spiritual communities are perceived as heteronormative and some as explicitly queer (Browne et al., 2010).

This section aims to create a certain familiarity with tarot, its history and its reinterpretation and reimagination by LGBTQ+ individuals. This basic knowledge thus provides further context for the following sections that discuss the possibilities of tarot as a mental well-being tool and the experiences of LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners.

2.3 A Psychological Perspective on Tarot

Early 20th-century psychology is characterised by psychoanalysis and a fascination with the unconscious. Carl Jung, an influential psychoanalyst, focused on dreams, myths, legends, and fairytales as an expression of the unconscious. Although Jung introduced multiple new concepts in psychoanalytic theory, they rarely provided concise definitions for them, leading to continuous confusion about their meaning and scope (Saunders & Skar, 2001). Nevertheless, tarot practice has become infused with Jungian ideas, such as the collective unconscious, archetypes, synchronicity, and projection (Dore, 2021; Farley, 2009; Nichols, 1980/2019; Sargent, 1988; Semetsky, 2011). The following paragraphs elaborate on these concepts, often eluding concise definitions, and how they relate to tarot.

First, Jung proposed the collective unconscious in contrast with the personal unconscious, which is derived from personal experiences that were once conscious but are now forgotten or repressed (Jung, 1959/2014). Jung's collective unconscious is described as an innate and universal psychic undercurrent, since its contents are not derived from personal experiences but are present within all humans (Jung, 1959/2014). Second, archetypes are presented as the contents of the collective unconscious or the instincts of the psyche (Jung, 1959/2014; Nichols, 1980/2019). Jung envisions archetypes as primordial types or universal images, for example personified types such as the mother, the father, or the wise old man, which carry meanings that all humans understand (Jung, 1959/2014). Some tarot practitioners believe that tarot cards contain archetypal images (Fink, 2022; Nichols, 1980/2019). In their book *Tarot*

and the archetypal journey, Nichols (1980/2019), one of Jung's students, explores how the major arcana embody these archetypes and how to interact with archetypes during readings.

The third Jungian concept related to tarot is synchronicity, an acausal connecting principle. Synchronicity expresses that internal psychological events are linked to external world events by meaningful coincidences rather than causal chains (Cambray, n.d.). An example of synchronicity would be that a person has been thinking about an old friend they have not heard from in a long time (internal event) and later this friend suddenly calls them (external event) (Dore, 2021). Synchronicity translates easily into tarot practice, as tarot's magic lies in similar meaningful coincidences (Rosengarten, 2000). Lastly, projection refers to an unconscious, autonomous process where people see tendencies and characteristics in other things in their environment that really belong to themselves (Nichols, 1980/2019). When an individual becomes aware of this tendency, projection can be used as a tool towards gaining self-knowledge (Nichols, 1980/2019; Semetsky, 2006). A tarot practitioner's interpretation of a certain card thus provides insight into what is going on in their unconscious.

However, over the decades psychoanalysis lost its prominent position in the field of psychology, due to criticism of the vagueness of its theories and the lack of empirical evidence supporting those theories (Arkowitz & Messer, 1984). Psychoanalysis was no longer taken seriously and tarot lost its chance of psychological integration as scholars preferred a behaviourist view centring objectivity and experimental studies. Later interest in the integration of psychoanalysis into other theoretical frameworks resurged, although it remained a controversial topic (Arkowitz & Messer, 1984). Third wave behavioural therapies make room for aspects beyond visible behaviour and promote a holistic approach, for example through integration of scientific and spiritual technologies, such as introducing mindfulness into cognitive therapy (Dore, 2021; Hayes & Hoffman, 2017; Ruini, 2017).

Further, tarot practitioners have referred to tarot as informal therapy (Failla, 2021; Snow, 2019). It is thus worth exploring why this practice feels therapeutic. Psychological research has not given tarot much attention, besides some authors who have tried to legitimise tarot away from fortune-telling by discussing its possible mental health benefits (Coulter, 2004; Hofer, 2009; Rosengarten, 2000; Semetsky, 2006; Semetsky, 2011). Arthur Rosengarten is a clinical psychologist who integrates tarot readings into their therapeutic sessions. Rosengarten's book *Tarot and psychology* (2000), a theoretical and practical guide for psychologists and tarot practitioners, outlines how tarot can be a non-threatening way to explore personal issues and help clients articulate their feelings and experiences by bringing unconscious thoughts and feelings to the surface. Similarly, Semetsky (2011), presents tarot as a useful tool to facilitate self-reflection, transformation, exploration of the subconscious, and personal growth, based on Jungian psychology, educational philosophy and semiotics. Lastly, in their master's thesis in educational psychology, Hofer (2009) proposes that tarot promotes mental well-being, prompts practitioners to reflect on their current situation and to process courses of action, new perspectives, and emotional unrest.

In therapeutic settings they expect tarot to be useful for clients who struggle with coping, repetitive thinking patterns, difficult life transitions or as a grounding exercise for anxiety (Hofer, 2009).

The connection between tarot and psychology has also been pursued from a tarot perspective with Dore's book *Tarot for change* (2021), in which they present how to interpret tarot cards in terms of psychological theories. Nevertheless, these theories are based on anecdotal information, rely on vague Jungian ideas, and most importantly lack empirical evidence (Coulter, 2004; Hofer, 2009; Rosengarten, 2000; Semetsky, 2011). In the following paragraphs I aim to fit tarot into a theoretical framework beyond Jungian psychology by exemplifying the parallels between tarot and therapeutic practices to further elaborate on tarot's potential as a mental well-being tool. Nevertheless, for tarot to become a legitimate mental well-being tool, its efficacy needs to be established based on empirical evidence.

2.3.1 Tarot in the Causal Pathway Framework

I suggest using the causal pathway theory (Koenig et al., 2021), which describes how R/S relates to well-being through psychological, social and behavioural pathways, and positive psychology as a framework to formulate tarot as a mental well-being tool. Tarot is here presented as a specific instance of spirituality, which has not really been discussed in this research area. Several examples of psychological pathways and how they parallel tarot practice are discussed first, focusing on meaning making, journaling, mindfulness, and narrative strategies, followed by similar discussions for the social and behavioural pathways.

The first psychological pathway discussed here regards meaning making, which is a way people change their view of life in order to integrate events and give them an existential value in their life's framework (Ruini, 2017). Research shows that the presence of meaning in people's lives is associated with higher psychological well-being and better mental health, while the search for meaning is associated with poor psychological well-being and increased distress (Ruini, 2017). Similar to other R/S, I argue that tarot provides a framework that facilitates meaning making (Dore, 2021; Rosengarten, 2000). Tarot can be used as a tool for self-reflection and self-acceptance, prompting practitioners to assess what they value in life (Hofer, 2009; Rosengarten, 2000). Research indicates that journaling or expressive writing, popular practices that people use to reflect about their lives, positively affect mental well-being (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; MacIsaac et al., 2022; Mordechay et al., 2019; Sohal et al., 2022; Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002). I argue that tarot offers a similar opportunity to ritualize self-reflection and allows practitioners to sit with a certain experience while the cards' interpretations can help them frame the experience in the story of their life (Rosengarten, 2000).

Second, the popularity of mindfulness has increased significantly in recent decades, becoming a hot topic in psychological research. As defined by Kabat-Zinn and Santorelli (1999, in Ruini, 2017), mindfulness refers to an aware attention, which is intentional and non-judgmental towards the individual's current experience. Although mindfulness and meditation are part of numerous religious

traditions, they are a practice, not a doctrine endorsing certain beliefs or divine entities (Levenson & Aldwin, 2013). The practice of mindfulness is said to promote openness to new possibilities, transformation, and healing by influencing attentional processes and emotional regulation (Levenson & Aldwin, 2013; Ruini, 2017). Abundant research has provided significant evidence of the effectiveness of mindfulness practices and mindfulness-based therapeutic interventions for improving physical and mental health in diverse populations (e.g. Alvarez-Perez et al., 2022; Birtwell et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2023; Eichel et al., 2021; Hoffman et al., 2010; Ruini, 2017; Shankland et al., 2021). Tarot practice shows certain similarities to mindfulness, such as its approach without judgment. Rosengarten (2000) portrays tarot's form of communication as non-personal and non-threatening and thus free of judgement. Additionally, similar to mindfulness, I argue that tarot is more a practice than a doctrine, because of the freedom to individualise the practice and the emphasis on personal interpretation of the cards' themes rather than strict, universal interpretations. Furthermore, aspects of mindfulness and meditation are occasionally integrated into tarot practice (Dore, 2021; Farley, 2009; Rosengarten, 2000). Tarot readings can be accompanied by breathing exercises and an explicit focus on the present, reminding practitioners to live in the moment (Wu, 2020).

Narrative strategies, the third psychological pathway proposed here, exist in multiple forms, but they have in common that they rely on the power of personal narratives, which influence how people interpret their life and the world around them (Hutto & Gallagher, 2017; Ruini, 2017). First, Narrative therapy aims to transform deficiency-centred stories about the self that limit options for action (Hutto & Gallagher, 2017). It achieves this through externalization of these thought patterns and opening options for people to redefine and revise their relationship with the problem (Hutto & Gallagher, 2017). Although Narrative therapy has been around for some time, there is limited empirical evidence on its effectiveness (Hutto & Gallagher, 2017). Research shows that narrating emotional life events in more self-reflective ways is associated with higher well-being (Fivush et al., 2010). Some reviews confirm Narrative therapy's positive impact on mental health, however, this requires reworking and redefinition of the theory and additional empirical evidence (Ghavibazou et al., 2022; Hutto & Gallagher, 2017; Hawke et al., 2023). Next, a popular third wave behavioural therapy called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), similarly targets linguistic processes, such as thoughts, images and subjective evaluations, which are a form of personal narration (Dore, 2021; Ruini, 2017). Linguistic sets that are characterised by negativity and rigidity are associated with worse mental health, ACT therefore aims to modify these sets to redefine personal problems and solutions (Ruini, 2017).

Tarot shares the underlying philosophy of the power of thought patterns (Hofer, 2009). Practitioners report that tarot helps them confront their personal narratives, for example Lustig and Wu (2022) express that tarot is not about predicting the future but assessing their own narratives and feelings about the future. Further, tarot cards can give a physical form to practitioners' experiences, externalising them and creating room to explore new perspectives and reevaluate their personal narratives (Dore,

2021; Hofer, 2009; Lustig & Wu, 2022; Snow, 2019). Snow (2019) expresses that tarot is about finding a way through your past experiences and making sure you are not repeating negative cycles. Thus, in line with narrative therapy and ACT, I propose that tarot can help individuals address rigid thought patterns, take new perspectives on their experiences and reframe their relationship with their problems.

Another category of narrative strategies used in therapeutic contexts is Fairytale therapy. Similar to tarot, the use of fairytales is linked to Jungian ideas, such as archetypes, and the importance of imagination and creativity. Storytelling overall can be psychologically beneficial as it creates emotional distance from the events and facilitates problem solving and transforming destructive feelings (Ruini, 2017). Therapists make use of Fairytale therapy in different ways (Vachkov, 2016). They can select a specific fairytale based on its content or adapt a story dependent on their clients' needs. They can also guide their clients in creating their own fairytale. The value of fairytales in therapeutic settings lies in their metaphors and their psycho-educational content covering problem-solving approaches, personal growth and maturation (Ruini, 2017; Vachkov, 2016). Vachkov (2016) proposes a psychotechnical approach where fairytales fulfil two tasks; the task of a mirror, providing space to develop self-awareness, as well as the task of a crystal, providing new perspectives and new ways of seeing other people and the world (Vachkov, 2016). However, Fairytale therapy is not meticulously defined and robust empirical evidence of its efficacy is missing (Vachkov, 2016). In an empirical study, Ruini et al. (2014) developed a group intervention, where participants discuss several fairytales over multiple sessions, ending with a session wherein they write their own fairytale. The researchers report that the intervention on average increased personal growth, self-acceptance and appreciation of life and personal strengths and decreased feelings of anxiety in participants.

I argue that tarot is similar to fairytales in many ways. Besides their abundance of symbols and metaphors, tarot shares fairytales characteristics of creating distance from personal narratives, representing situations externally (Hofer, 2009; Rosengarten, 2000; Vachkov, 2016). Therefore, I propose that tarot fulfils the same tasks of mirror and crystal, encouraging self-awareness and new perspectives. Further, tarot provides a comparable flexibility and adaptability to clients' needs, different cards address different themes and interpretation can start from guidebooks or clients' intuition. Lastly, fairytales are not inherently therapeutic, rather they are a tool that can be tailored to the individual needs of the reader (Vachkov, 2016), which I argue, is also the case for tarot.

To conclude, tarot displays multiple similarities with known psychological pathways such as meaning making, mindfulness, and narrative strategies influencing problem solving skills, emotional regulation, and self-reflection. Although not all of the practices discussed here have the same robust empirical evidence (meaning making, mindfulness and ACT have been investigated more than narrative therapy and fairytale therapy), all of them show potential of improving mental well-being in certain contexts. Due to its similarities to these practices, I argue the same could be said about tarot.

The social pathways of the causal pathway theory (Koenig et al., 2012) consider social support and sense of belonging as key characteristics of R/S that influence well-being. Although the social aspects of tarot do not reach the scale of traditional religious services, that does not mean that they are non-existent. However, there is a lack of empirical research mapping tarot practices, thus the following statements on the social aspects of tarot are based on my own observations. Regardless of individualisation of tarot practices, practitioners can still experience a sense of community through in person readings together, the discussion of readings and interpretations, whether online or in person, or tarot events. The tarot community is somewhat informal in the sense that there is no official hierarchy or structure within, contrary to religious organisations. Additionally, this lack of formality allows for a more personal approach, both in finding people, who share their perspective on tarot as well as in the actual discussions and readings relating close to personal experiences. In this way practitioners are more likely to avoid negative social interactions, which can be reassuring for LGBTQ+ individuals who avoid other R/S for this reason. However, finding their tarot community takes more effort compared to other R/S communities, due to the comparatively small number of tarot practitioners. Altogether, I argue that tarot practice can be situated in a tarot community providing social support and a sense of belonging, which positively affects mental well-being (Koenig et al., 2012).

Lastly, behavioural pathways of R/S that improve mental well-being, include guidelines for living and the promotion of prosocial behaviour (Koenig et al., 2012). Similar to mindfulness, I argue that tarot is more a practice than a doctrine and therefore does not explicitly present guidelines for living. Nevertheless, tarot cards address specific themes in a non-judgmental way which target personal growth, self-actualization and emotional regulation (Dore, 2021; Hofer, 2009; Rosengarten, 2000). Personalised spiritualities are often criticized for this focus on the individual, calling it selfish and egocentric (Carrette & King, 2004; Heelas, 2008). However, working towards becoming a better version of themselves includes prosocial behaviour, such as forgiveness, interpersonal relationships and gratitude, which are represented in tarot (Dore, 2021). In conclusion, I argue that tarot potentially can influence mental well-being through the behavioural pathway, specifically through prosocial behaviour (Koenig et al., 2012).

As the previous paragraphs demonstrate, tarot has potential as a mental well-being tool based on its compatibility with causal pathway theory and established evidence-based therapies (Dore, 2021; Koenig et al., 2012; Ruini, 2017). However, the causal pathway framework describes the effects of R/S specifically (Koenig et al., 2012), while tarot can be a secular practice to some. Although most of the arguments made here are based on tarot's self-reflection and flexibility and not the transcendent or spiritual aspects of tarot, it should be further investigated how a boundary practice like tarot can fit into the causal pathway framework. Further, the majority of current positive psychology interventions rely on creativity, self-awareness, wisdom, and flexibility (Ruini, 2017), characteristics that also typify tarot. I argue that especially the flexibility of tarot allows for the realisation of therapeutic or healing practices, through adapting personal narratives, creating distance and meaning making. Nevertheless, the most

effective way to utilise tarot in this context needs to be identified through empirical studies, as the practice does not inherently increase mental well-being. Tarot might not be the right approach for all people in all circumstances, for example, it might be in conflict with client's religious beliefs or be counterproductive in case of certain mental health problems such as psychosis (Hofer, 2009; Rosengarten, 2000). Further, some studies have shown that R/S can reinforce rigid thinking and obsessive R/S practices, thus having a negative effect on mental health (Park & Slattery, 2013; Ruini, 2017). Therefore, the specific effects of tarot on practitioners' mental well-being should be evaluated before it can become a therapeutic tool.

Additionally, the implementation of tarot as a therapeutic tool has implications for the therapeutic setting and tarot practice itself. A holistic therapeutic approach aims to integrate clients' R/S, as this often plays a significant role in their life (Shafranske, 2013). However, in practice R/S are often avoided by therapists, since it is a sensitive topic and generally does not receive a lot of attention in psychologists' education (Shafranske, 2013). Introducing any kind of R/S intervention into therapeutic contexts involves several ethical considerations. Clients' preferences on R/S integration are the most important and imposing personal beliefs or values should be avoided (Shafranske, 2013). In this context, proposing to use tarot cards in therapeutic settings is therefore not straightforward, regardless of its potential benefits for mental health. For instance, the proportion of clients willing to try tarot as part of their psychological intervention might be small. On the one hand conservative religious individuals might see tarot as heresy and on the other hand, non-believers might not accept tarot as a valid therapeutic tool (Rosengarten, 2000). However, since tarot is a boundary practice, tarot could be integrated as an introspection practice in a relatively secular manner. Further, the use of tarot requires a significant amount of knowledge from the clinician or clients themselves, which could present a hurdle to actual integration into therapeutic use.

Most importantly, if tarot is used as a therapeutic tool, it should not lose its essence in the process (Rosengarten, 2000). Tarot should remain an accessible and personalised practice. I argue that it would be a disservice to the tarot community to turn their practice, which is celebrated for its magical character of meaningful coincidences and everyday enchantment into a clinical, analytical instrument. Rather, similar to mindfulness and fairytales, while useful tools in therapeutic settings, they exist outside of them and continue to embrace their spiritual and magical aspects.

2.4 Summary

In this literature review, three main themes are discussed. First, the strained relationship between LGBTQ+ individuals and R/S is elaborated on and situated in the Belgian context. Contrary to assumptions based on religion's negative stance on LGBTQ+, the relationship between R/S and health among LGBTQ+ individuals seems overall positive (Lefevor et al., 2023). However, research reports mixed results indicating that LGBTQ+ individuals have different experiences with R/S influenced by

factors such as acceptance within their R/S environment, minority stress, structural stigma, identity conflict, and resilience (Lefevor et al., 2023). This section describes the Belgian and US contexts to frame the research discussed here and the following qualitative analysis in the context of where they are conducted and to question the applicability of international research. Although religion is declining and spirituality is rising in Belgium and the US, religion has more influence over US society compared to Belgium (Billiet et al., 2013; Bisschoppenconferentie, 2023; Houtman & Aupers, 2007; JOP, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2021). In regard to the LGBTQ+ context, acceptance and equality is on an all time high in both regions, however, their rights and safety remain threatened (Human Rights Campaign, 2023; ILGA-Europe, 2023). The relationship between R/S and health among LGBTQ+ individuals in Belgium and the US likely share the same mechanisms, however the strength of the effects might differ due to differences in the salience of religion, minority stress and structural stigma (Huijs et al., 2024; Lefevor et al., 2023; Theuns et al., 2012; Van Cappellen et al., 2016).

The next section discusses tarot as a specific boundary practice, between spiritual and secular, because specific practices have not received ample academic interest. Tarot is chosen for its flexible and personalised practice, which embraces reinterpretation and reimagining by the LGBTQ+ community. The last section explores tarot's potential as a mental well-being tool by pointing out its compatibility with evidence-based therapies and theories on the relationship between R/S and well-being (Dore, 2021; Koenig et al., 2012; Lefevor et al., 2023; Ruini, 2017). Nevertheless, empirical evidence is needed to uncover the effects of tarot on mental well-being, which can only be accomplished by unravelling the scientific disregard towards tarot (Hofer, 2009; Lustig & Wu, 2022; Rosengarten, 2000). In conclusion, this literature review illustrates how spirituality, sexual and gender identities are continuously negotiated, challenged, reworked and re-created through their interaction (Browne et al., 2010).

3. Qualitative Analysis

I conducted five semi-structured interviews to document the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners in Flanders. The guideline for the interviews can be found in appendix 2, however follow-up questions were posed to elaborate on certain topics and to allow for a more natural conversation. Such conversational style is preferred since sexual and gender identity as well as spiritual experiences are very personal and sometimes hard to describe or label. The interviews are approximately an hour long (40-86 min) and conducted in Dutch. To begin, participants sign an informed consent form (example in appendix 3). The interview consists of two sections, one focusing on their experiences with tarot and the other on their LGBTQ+ identity and how it relates to their tarot practice. Participant information can be found in Table 2. All names are pseudonyms to ensure participant anonymity. Participants are not compensated for their participation. Recruitment methods include the snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019) as well as Facebook posts in tarot groups. I was only able to recruit a small sample of participants in this manner, because participants did not always refer other possible

participants, therefore the snowball sampling did not gain enough momentum. Further, there was little response to the Facebook posts, possibly because this approach requires initiative from the potential participants to reach out themselves. Due to the small sample size, there is a lot of variance in participants' ages. None of the participants does tarot readings professionally and only one of them has more than 10 years of experience. As this study is explorative, this small sample does not severely hinder the research goals, however, future research should aim at recruiting more diverse tarot practitioners and a larger sample. A thematic analysis is performed in line with the grounded theory approach (Chun Tie et al., 2019), using inductive, interpretative coding techniques, thus codes are constructed from the data during the coding process, allowing for further adjustment and revision, and interpretation of participants' accounts of their experiences (Adu, 2019).

Table 2.

Participant information.

Participants	Age	Sexual orientation	Gender identity	Tarot experience (years)
Eda	41	Bisexual/Lesbian/ Queer	Woman/genderqueer	Couple of years
Amity	22	Bisexual	Woman	3-4
Willow	23	Lesbian	Woman	Couple of years
Raine	51	Lesbian	Genderqueer	15-20
August	52	Bisexual	Queer	2.5-3

3.1 Results

The discussion of the results follows the structure of the research questions; 1) How do LGBTQ+ individuals experience tarot?, 2) Why are LGBTQ+ individuals drawn to spirituality or tarot? 3) Why is tarot perceived as a queer practice?, and 4) Which psychological aspects of tarot could theoretically be beneficial for practitioners' mental well-being? Although not every research question was explicitly addressed during the interviews, the interviews provide considerable insight into every research question.

3.1.1 LGBTQ+ Tarot Practitioners' Experiences

First, every participant mentions that they are interested in or engage with other spiritual practices or beliefs such as astrology, mindfulness, meditation, or supernatural beliefs. Witchcraft and related rituals are especially of interest to all participants. Some actively practise rituals, while others

have tried it in the past or are more generally curious about it. However, none of them are part of a coven, rather they prefer the individual practice of tarot. When asked if tarot is connected to these practices and beliefs, some participants describe them as inseparable. For instance, August expresses that they would not practice witchcraft without tarot or tarot without witchcraft. In a similar vein, Eda states that they view tarot as a practice within witchcraft, not as a separate practice. Beyond their 'normal' tarot readings, both of them incorporate tarot into their witchcraft. However, Amity views tarot as a completely separate practice, arguing that tarot is not inherently connected to any religion or belief system and thus to them it is a separate, secular practice. Further, some participants associate tarot with meditation. Amity refers to tarot practice as meditative, however, only August actively integrates meditation into their tarot practice. Although opinions about tarot's connection to other spiritual practices are divided, it is interesting to see that all participants show some affinity for spiritual practices beyond tarot.

Second, the flexibility of tarot practice becomes clear through participants' descriptions. Some participants try to draw a card everyday, while others read only from time to time. However, even those who do daily tarot readings are flexible about this. If they feel like in that moment they would not benefit from it, they do not pressure themselves to read. Overall, participants further find flexibility in whether they use spreads and in their personal interpretations of the cards. Most participants also mention that they enjoy the freedom to create their own practice. All participants are self-taught in tarot. Even when they know other tarot practitioners, they rely on (guide)books and online resources to learn tarot. This approach allows them to pick and choose the practices and interpretations that suit them and to avoid the ones that do not feel right. Further, participants show openness and interest in other people's practices, enjoying hearing how others implement tarot, even if they personally would not do it that way. Lastly, the freedom to create their own practice leaves room for a feeling of agency. Amity expresses how they like to have their own hand in things and that tarot gives them that option. Similarly, August mentions that tarot readings can give them advice on how to respond to certain situations, but it remains their own decision whether they act on this advice.

The interviews further give insight into what participants value about tarot. Not only do they find tarot useful and helpful as a way to make time for themselves and reflect about their lives, they also find joy in the practice. Eda describes tarot as a friendly tool that makes life a little more fun. According to Willow, tarot readings do not always need to be serious and it is okay to laugh at silly interpretations. Further, multiple participants mention how tarot can be an excellent expression of creativity and a way to engage their imagination. Not only is the art style of the cards often what draws them to a specific card or deck, they also actively create things related to tarot, going from designing their own tarot cards, to blog posts about their readings, to stories or songs written with the help of tarot:

One YouTube channel I follow, that person gives a lot of tips on how to use tarot to write a story or to write poetry and stuff. And me, I started making a small zine myself on how to write a song with dice and tarot cards. (Eda)

In general, creating their own tarot practice and rituals that accompany it is also a creative process. The options for practices and rituals are endless as long as they are meaningful to the person who is performing them.

Next, participants talk about what meaning they give to their tarot practices. Willow is the only participant who believes in the predictive powers of tarot and uses tarot primarily for fortune-telling. The other participants prefer to use tarot for introspection and self-exploration and stay away from fortune-telling. If not by any predictive powers, then how does tarot help them reflect on their lives? Both Willow and August say there are no coincidences, instead they believe that the energies surrounding them, including their own energy, guide them in drawing the right cards. Other participants think drawing tarot cards is a game of chance. However, occasionally readings are so accurate that it makes them wonder if there might be more going on. Nevertheless, these meaningful coincidences can be delightful, such as in this anecdote:

A couple days ago I went to pick apples here on the grounds and then the following day I got both in one tarot I used, a card that said something about apples as well as in the queer tarot, I also got an image with fruits, including apples. But that is not necessarily something about my life or something, but it was a funny coincidence. (Eda)

By embracing these coincidences, participants allow some mystery into their lives. Some participants mention that it is nice to believe that there might be something beyond what science can explain and that not everything needs a rational explanation. In this way they make room for the unknowable, mystery, and magic in their lives.

However, most participants agree that cards fit their personal situation because they interpret them in a way that is applicable to themselves. Tarot cards represent certain themes that leave room for personal interpretation and can thus be applied to the practitioner's situation. August expresses that interpretation is so important because cards' explanations in guidebooks are never enough, since they do not answer any question that is part of your reading. Amity further emphasises the importance of personal perspective, but also personal bias:

It is intended that you apply [the cards] yourself to your own situation, it is not like- Well, the same reading can be completely different for two people, because they just look at those cards from a different perspective. […] But because of my own biases I did not see at the time that it actually meant that. And this way I tried to kind of convince myself, like gaslighting myself, that it actually meant this, but in reality I should have done it like that.

This example also shows how tarot practitioners sometimes change their interpretation of a reading over time and how hindsight changes their perspective on readings. Because most participants are aware of the influence of their personal perspective on tarot readings, they perceive tarot as a personal practice. Raine describes reading tarot as a time to look inward and the cards bringing up things that are inside of them but that they are not yet aware of.

Although tarot is a personal practice to most of them, all participants have experience with reading tarot with someone else. Some even prefer it over reading alone, as it contributes to the energy around them or creates the right setting. As Amity put it:

> *Tarot is something you do together in a dark room.*

Interpreting tarot for others is complicated according to most participants, because you cannot know what is going on in someone else's inner life. Reading together thus becomes conversational:

> *Because I also think that, certainly when you read tarot for someone else, that it is actually a collaboration*, *because indeed the person for who the cards are meant, they are for that person, so they will also have a better sense [of the cards' meaning]. I think you are more, when you read for someone else, you are – Well, I have the feeling that I am more a guideline for the other person, that I really guide it like 'okay, this means this' and then you implement it for yourself. (Willow)*

Some participants mention that they prefer to do readings with people they know and trust and who have a similar view on tarot as them. August states that reading with someone who knows you well can be helpful because they can point out your blind spots.

Most participants talk about finding like-minded people to share their experiences with, not only reading together but also discussing personal readings and interpretations. Even though they perceive tarot as a personal practice, it is enjoyable to talk to someone with the same interest. August mentions how it feels reassuring to know that they are not alone in their practice and others share their views on tarot. Some participants form interpersonal connections online, through Facebook groups or forums. Further, tarot can be a way to reflect on relationships and connect with those around you, as Raine explains:

> *Such things often slip through the cracks of the conversation and by doing such a ritual you can give them shape, somewhat. Then you can actually more deeply consider your inner life, the connection between yourself and nature and each other. Those are really the things that are spirituality to me, those connections.*

Participants recognise a community aspect in tarot, as some of them talk about informal spiritual groups they participate in and activities they attend, such as conventions, retreats or public tarot readings. Thus,

participants seem to have found a balance between their personal tarot practice and engaging with a tarot community.

Every interview touches on the topic of the internet and social media in relation to tarot and spirituality. Participants make use of it as a learning tool, a resource and a way to connect with others. Raine even uses an app for their tarot readings. However, most participants also see a downside to the online popularity of tarot, as a lot of misinformation is spread and the content is often superficial, especially on short form social media such as TikTok. Most participants do not interact with online general tarot readings, because they lack the real-life energy and often do not leave room for personal interpretations.

The last theme related to the experience of LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners is how their environment perceives their tarot practice. Every participant says they are surrounded by supportive friends or family. Overall, none of the participants recall a truly negative reaction to their tarot practice and most find that people are generally open to learn about tarot. However, they do encounter people who are indifferent, do not understand, or do not take tarot seriously, typically because they assume tarot is solely used for fortune-telling. Eda and August mention how they too disregarded tarot in the beginning, but later decided to learn more about it:

> *I allowed myself to stop thinking 'oh there they go again, playing with their cards', but to just think about how it could be beneficial to me. (August)*

Additionally, participants report that tarot is not a part of the conversation in some environments for them. Eda talks about how they do not mention tarot at work because they do not feel like having to explain themselves or answer stupid questions. Further, it is noticeable in the interviews how most participants try to distance themselves from 'spiritual fanatics', as they are aware of the negative stereotypes. Participants, for example, emphasise how not all tarot practitioners are the same. Raine even speaks on their tendency to defend herself in this way:

> *I maybe sometimes tend to frame [my use of tarot]. Because maybe I don't want to be associated with people who- well, who are too deviant? Ehrm, how should I say this? Who believe too much in angels. I will say it like that. I don't really know, because I don't want to- I don't know how to phrase that without being negative and I don't want to do that. But sometimes I do think that I want to frame how I use tarot.*

Other participants show similar tendencies, like calling themselves sceptical and critical or pointing out that they value scientific knowledge. This might be their way of saying that they do not believe in anything and put thought and consideration into their practices.

3.1.2 Spirituality over Religion

The hypothesis that LGBTQ+ individuals choose spirituality because they do not feel accepted by religious organisations, was not clearly reflected by the analysis. Four out of five participants identify themselves as atheist or agnostic, regardless of their spiritual practices. While some are more indifferent to religion, other participants explicitly state they disapprove of the Catholic Church's history of oppression. Nevertheless, that does not mean they loathe all religion:

> *Instead of 'we are indeed against religion', so against every religion, that has gone away. But I think we have Muslims and such in the queer movement to thank for that. They are really queer, but they also don't renounce their religion. [I think] we learned that from them that both can be combined. (August)*

Similarly, Eda expresses that it depends on what people do with their religion, since they realise there are both progressive and conservative religious movements and everything in between. Some of the participants grew up in Catholic environments, however they do not feel connected to it. Therefore, we cannot assume that the participants turn to spirituality because they are pushed away or feel like they need to fill a void left by religion. Eda says in regard to this hypothesis that it does not feel like it fits with the Belgian context and is likely more applicable to other countries, such as the US or Italy, where religion plays a bigger part in society.

Another hypothesis proposes that LGBTQ+ individuals prefer spirituality over religion because spiritualities in general are more accepting and open in terms of gender norms and sexual orientation. In their interviews, participants discuss how they enjoy the openness of tarot to their own interpretations and practices, contrary to the strict rituals and dogma in some religions. For example, August emphasises that it is more meaningful to create their own personal ritual that actually means something to them, instead of reproducing rituals because they belong to a religion. This openness to personal input might make LGBTQ+ individuals feel more welcome, like Raine explained:

> *If you would become interested in Catholicism or something, then you would of course easily come into conflict with all their norms. While the moment that I became interested in tarot, I noticed that there was enough room for my queer identity within the practice.*

However, most participants point out that there are a lot of similarities between spirituality and religion. August expresses that just like Christians, witches also burn candles, thus rituals are just rituals. It should not be assumed that all spiritualities are LGBTQ+-friendly. Some participants were critical of Wicca because of its reproduction of stereotypical gender binaries, which is not inviting towards non-binary and genderqueer individuals. Overall, participants recognise that some spiritualities are more open and free and thus more welcoming to LGBTQ+ practitioners, however this is not the case for all spiritualities.

Lastly, LGBTQ+ individuals might choose spirituality over religion as a reclamation of marginal spaces and a form of empowerment. Some participants relate their spiritual practices to their activism, as they identify themselves as feminist, queer activist, or anarchist. Raine recounts how they view making room for the idea that everything is valuable and connected as activism. Similarly, August values witchcraft and tarot in the context of radical feminism, as they make sure that radical feminism stays radical by pushing the boundaries of what people perceive as normal. In conclusion, each of these hypotheses likely explain a part of why LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners are drawn to spirituality and tarot, however the most complete description is achieved by combining all hypotheses.

3.1.3 Tarot as a Queer Practice

Similar to the previous paragraphs, tarot might be perceived as a queer practice because it is associated with a critique on normativity or an expression of otherness. Amity posits that if people are more open-minded in regard to their sexual orientation and gender identity, that they are probably also more open-minded when it comes to alternative spiritual practices such as tarot. Eda recounts how activism and progressive ideas are reflected in queer tarot decks. They gave the example of the Six of Pentacles that traditionally represents charity, but was presented as mutual aid, which reflects more equality, in the queer deck they use.

Further, most participants know others LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners and thus might influence or be influenced by their friends. As Eda puts it:

> *Almost everyone I know that practices tarot is queer. That is just such a crazy overlap. And they are also often neurodivergent. It is all almost the same community that not 100%, but largely overlaps, so that is really fun.*

Participants point out that there are a lot of LGBTQ+ tarot creators, who bring their own identity into the practice, and therefore queer tarot representation has become more accessible. Raine and Eda both mention how it is fairly easy to find queer tarot decks that represent their identities and that offer alternative interpretations for LGBTQ+ individuals. It takes active intent to make tarot queer. For example, August explains that when they write about tarot, they use they/them pronouns when discussing gendered tarot cards, such as the kings and queens. Eda said that although you can do feminist things with tarot, that does not make it inherently feminist and I argue the same logic works for queer tarot.

The interviews touch on whether their LGBTQ+ identity influences their tarot practice and participants' answers are divided. Some participants can see a connection in terms of feeling that these parts of their identity are intertwined, because of how they first became interested in tarot or their personal interpretations of the cards.

> *The road I have travelled originates from my gender and sexual identity, that way led me [to spiritual practices]. Otherwise, I would have, well, I wouldn't know. Yes, I can't imagine how my life would be different. So, in that way there is a really strong connection. (Raine)*

However, others do not see any connection and perceive tarot and their LGBTQ+ identity as separate.

> *I have always thought of them as completely separate. […] yes, my sexuality and my interests don't really overlap in my eyes. (Amity)*

Further, almost none of the participants had gained any insight into their LGBTQ+ identity by practising tarot, as this is not a topic they address in their tarot readings. Participants' assurance in their LGBTQ+ identity and the acceptance of their family and friends likely fuel the feeling that they do not need to reflect on this in their tarot practices. However, some participants agree that tarot might be helpful for someone who is still figuring out their LGBTQ+ identity.

3.1.4 Tarot and Mental Well-Being

The psychological aspects that are most present in the participants' descriptions of their tarot practice are meaning making, reflection and introspection. Most participants discuss how tarot helps them take time to reflect on their life, work through challenges or take a new perspective on things, going from letting go of a past relationship to deciding to take a job offer.

> *And that moon cycle for my ex for example started with 'I want to talk about what happened and I still want them as my soulmate in life.' And then with rituals, because I really did write down 'these are the rituals, these are the tarots' that I will do the next two weeks. But then you are reflecting and thinking so much that those things change. And by the time the full moon arrived, I was at a point of 'yes, it is time to say goodbye.' (August)*

In this way they confront their personal narratives and start to change their mind or feel more reassured about their decision. Participants consciously choose tarot as a tool to help them when they feel stuck and to address questions such as 'what do I want to do with my life?'. For example, Eda recounts that tarot helps them diverge from their usual thought patterns and take other aspects into account that they might not have considered before. Some participants believe that tarot readings can provide some reassurance about the future by highlighting potential paths. Journaling is also a part of tarot practice for most participants, as they often write about their readings to share with others or to look back on their past mindsets.

A few participants talk about tarot in the context of emotional regulation, as they see tarot as a productive way to process their emotions. Both Raine and August mention that tarot helps them to let go of negative feelings and find joy or peace.

> *When such a card indeed tells me: 'let it go and go outside and work a little in your garden' and then that actually helps me to get my mind off what was bothering me and to just enjoy. That then really quickly summons joyous feelings once I actually start doing it. (Raine)*

However, tarot might also negatively affect practitioners' emotional life. Willow recounts a time when they did a reading for their best friend and the card that represented the future was Death. Although Willow knew that it should not be interpreted literally, they were very anxious the following days that something bad would happen to their best friend. Based on these accounts, it seems that tarot can affect emotional regulation both positively and negatively.

Lastly, when it comes to using tarot in a therapeutic way, the interviews did not provide a clear answer. Some participants perceive tarot as a self-care tool that can be applied in a therapeutic way, potentially even as an alternative to therapy when that does not fit their needs. They propose that tarot can be a conversation starter in therapeutic settings, even by just describing what you see in the image without checking any guidebooks. However, other participants explicitly separate tarot and therapy, as they have a different function to them, even if they find tarot helpful for their mental well-being.

3.2 Summary

The analysis gives a lot of insight into the experiences of LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners. Participants are often interested in other spiritual practices and use them in combination with tarot, especially witchcraft. They characterise tarot as a flexible and personal practice that connects them to others and themselves through introspection and reflection. Although their environment reacts positively to tarot, sometimes they tend to separate themselves from 'spiritual fanatics' and frame their own practice as valuable. Spirituality is chosen over religion by participants mostly because they prefer the openness and freedom of their practices over religious strictness and for some because it is in line with their activism. Since most participants identify as atheist and feel mostly indifferent toward religion, the hypothesis that they do not feel accepted by religion and choose spirituality as a replacement does not fit the experiences of these participants. Furthermore, the results show that tarot can be perceived as queer due to its openness to LGBTQ+ practitioners and as reclamation of marginal spaces. Tarot's openness and freedom likely attracts LGBTQ+ practitioners, who then create more queer tarot materials, which further attracts more LGBTQ+ individuals. It is unsure whether their LGBTQ+ identity influences tarot practice, since participants did not agree on this topic. All in all, participants did not present tarot as inherently queer, rather it depends on what you do with it. Lastly, the results present some psychological aspects of tarot, namely meaning making, reflection, introspection and emotional regulation, however its effects likely depend on the specific tarot practice.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has multiple limitations. First, the collected data is limited and future research should aim to include more participants and more different perspectives to further map the experiences of LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners. Some interesting perspectives that deserve attention in future research are other sexual and gender identities, professional tarot readers, individuals who are transitioning from non-affirming religious environments to affirming spiritualities, or individuals who are still exploring their LGBTQ+ identity. Second, these participants do not represent all perspectives within the population of LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners, because the snowball sampling method is used on a small scale. It is likely that participants mostly refer other participants who have a similar view on tarot as themselves and thus share similar experiences. Lastly, the qualitative analysis is performed by one person and therefore is most likely influenced by personal bias, which would be more balanced if codes had been discussed among multiple coders.

Nevertheless, this study is able to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners, which have not received scientific attention to such an extent. Some trends are clear from the participants' testimonies, such as that interpretations of tarot are influenced by personal perspectives and tarot allows practitioners the freedom to define their own practice. However, this freedom to personalise tarot is reflected in the diverse practices participants report. While some use tarot for divination or believe that ubiquitous energies guide their readings, others perceive tarot as a more secular practice that aids in making their inner life more tangible. Nevertheless, most participants do not explicitly address whether they consider tarot a spiritual or secular practice or identify themselves as spiritual. Most likely practitioners' personalised tarot practice can be placed on a spectrum from spiritual to secular. In conclusion, there is not one LGBTQ+ tarot experience, but experiences differ strongly, similar to overall R/S experiences (Lefevor et al., 2023).

The results give some insight into why LGBTQ+ individuals gravitate towards spirituality and tarot. To begin, the hypothesis that LGBTQ+ individuals do not feel accepted by religion and use spirituality to replace it seems unsuitable for these participants, since religion is not very salient in Belgian society (Billiet et al., 2013; Bisschoppenconferentie, 2023; JOP, 2015) and most participants identify as atheist. Generally, individuals are born into their religion, however since Belgium does not have a strong religious culture, especially compared to the US, individuals might feel more free to choose their own practice (Anderton et al., 2011). I argue that for these participants spirituality might feel more like an equally valid option, rather than a second choice because they feel unwelcome in religious settings. However, this most likely depends on the person's cultural and religious background. Contrary to the decrease in Christianity, religious identity and religiosity in Muslims is increasing in Belgium (JOP, 2015; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2019). Therefore, the hypothesis might be more relevant to LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners from Muslim backgrounds, especially if they are anti-LGBTQ+.

Furthermore, tarot's balance between secular and spiritual might also be attractive to some, because it does not require new practitioners to immediately overhaul their existing belief system but rather allows them to decide how tarot fits into it. Next, the results seem to align with the hypotheses that LGBTQ+ individuals prefer spirituality, particularly tarot, because it is more accepting and open and as a way to reclaim marginal spaces and express their otherness. Participants' descriptions of their tarot practices emphasise the flexibility and openness of tarot in creating their own practice and interpreting the cards. They also felt like tarot welcomes their LGBTQ+ identity and that there was room for its expression within tarot. Further, tarot easily aligns with activism for some of the participants by representing a break with normativity.

Another factor that potentially influences LGBTQ+ individuals' interest in tarot is creativity. Research offers no consensus on whether religion hinders or facilitates creativity (Liu et al., 2018). However, creativity is characterised by challenging tradition and rules, and tolerance for diversity, while religion is characterised by conservatism, tradition, and conformity, therefore appearing as opposing concepts (Liu et al., 2018). Acar et al. (2018) report that compared to people from less religious environments, people from more religious environments are more likely to have negative attitudes and values towards creativity and negative perceptions of creative environments. Contrarily, some participants in the current study express they deeply value creativity and appreciate tarot's creative and artistic side. Although the actual relationship between religion and creativity remains uncertain, if religion is perceived as an uncreative environment, I presume that people who value creativity prefer a more overt creative spiritual practice such as tarot. In conclusion, the results are more in favour of some hypotheses on why LGBTQ+ individuals choose tarot over religion than others, nevertheless more data needs to be collected to establish a more general understanding of this phenomenon.

Although tarot might be perceived by some as a queer practice, the participants agree that tarot is not inherently queer, rather it depends on what you do with it. To be queer is to make queer (Browne et al., 2010). However, tarot does leave space for LGBTQ+ identities and expressions of queerness. As mentioned previously, this might draw in LGBTQ+ individuals, who then make tarot explicitly queer for themselves by creating queer decks and guidebooks. Most participants know other LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners and are interested in queer tarot decks. As the availability of queer tarot materials rises, tarot's openness to LGBTQ+ identities becomes more visible and even more LGBTQ+ individuals might become interested in the practice. Nevertheless, a lot of cis-straight individuals also enjoy tarot, thus the practice is definitely not exclusively queer.

When it comes to tarot's effects on mental well-being, the analysis demonstrates how tarot fits into the religious/spiritual stress and resilience model (RSSR) (Lefevor et al., 2023) and the causal pathway framework (Koenig et al., 2012). Tarot seems to benefit mental well-being mostly through psychological pathways (Koenig et al., 2012), as participants talk extensively about its reflective uses

and how it helps them make meaning of life. Some participants point out that tarot helps them with emotional regulation. Further, in regard to social pathways (Koenig et al., 2012), participants report that their friends and family were supportive of their tarot practice and that they feel welcome in the tarot community, which implies a positive effect of tarot on mental well-being.

However, tarot is not always taken seriously, according to participants, making them feel like they need to explain or defend their practice. This can be understood as a social identity threat, meaning the perception that one's group is devalued and stigmatised (Hogg, 2016; Mackey & Rios, 2023; Steele et al., 2002). Research indicates that individuals conceal their religious/spiritual identity in contexts where social identity threat is high (Mackey & Rios, 2023; Mackey et al., 2023). This concealment is reflected in the results, as some participants mention not talking about tarot in certain contexts. Similarly, scholars practising tarot mention in their writings that they felt like tarot could not be discussed in academic contexts (Lustig & Wu, 2022; Semetsky, 2011; Wu, 2020). Further, participants tend to distance themselves from 'spiritual fanatics', which I interpret as an attempt to defend their social identity by defining their in- and out-groups to adjust other's perceptions of them. Future research should investigate how practitioners of spiritual practices that are not always taken seriously deal with social identity threat.

Lastly, behavioural pathways (Koenig et al., 2012) through which tarot might influence mental well-being are not discussed during the interviews. In general, I hypothesise that tarot influences mental well-being through psychological and social pathways (Koenig et al., 2012) and that tarot might aid practitioners in processing (minority-specific) stressors and enhancing resilience as modelled by the RSSR (Lefevor et al., 2023). Further, identity conflict, one of the most prominent theories on the relationship between religion and LGBTQ+ identities (Anderton et al., 2011; Dehlin et al., 2015a; Liboro, 2014), does not seem to occur in tarot practice, because of its acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities and personalised practice.

A lot has been written about tarot, however rarely in a scientific context outside of psychoanalysis, which often lacks empirical evidence (Hofer, 2009; Rosengarten, 2000; Semetsly, 2011). Therefore, the effects of tarot on mental well-being remain based on theory and speculation. Nevertheless, some participants see how tarot could be a mental health or self-care tool. To assess tarot's potential as such a tool, future research should investigate the effects of reading tarot on mental well-being, including meaning making, personal narratives, emotional regulation and anxiety and what manner of implementation is most beneficial, as tarot in itself is likely not therapeutic. This should be assessed both in individual and counselling settings. In individual settings, participants could use tarot over an extended period to reflect on their life or stressful events while focusing on cognitive processes and emotional expression, similar to Ullrich and Lutgendorf's (2002) study on journaling. In counselling settings, tarot could be introduced as a conversation starter, when regular attempts to address a problem

have been unsatisfactory, or progress has become stagnant (Rosengarten, 2000). However, standardisation of tarot as a mental well-being tool should remain limited as personalisation remains tarot's strength (Rosengarten, 2000). Although tarot is not always taken seriously, its potential should be assessed as a tarot intervention, similar to journaling (Sohal et al., 2022), would have low risk of adverse effects, require low resources and facilitate self-sufficiency.

4.1 Conclusion

This exploratory study presents tarot as a flexible and open practice that is situated at the boundary between secular and spiritual, between introspection and divination. The freedom to create one's own practice, the acceptance of different sexual and gender identities, and its expression of otherness are identified as aspects that make tarot more attractive to LGBTQ+ individuals than religion based on my analysis. Individuals can make their own tarot practice queer for example by using queer decks or interpreting cards from a queer point of view, however tarot is not inherently queer. Further, tarot practice is potentially beneficial for practitioners' mental well-being, through meaning making, self-reflection and emotional regulation. Nevertheless, tarot in itself is likely not therapeutic, rather it depends on how practitioners interact with it. More research is necessary to establish a more comprehensive understanding of LGBTQ+ tarot practitioners' experiences and to acquire empirical evidence of the effects of tarot on mental well-being.

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Appendix 1: Ethisch Reflectiedossier

1. Criteria

Verduidelijk per criteria of dit van toepassing is op jouw onderzoek.

Criteria	**Verduidelijking**
Er wordt met kwetsbare groepen gewerkt	Nee, LGBTQ+ individuen behoren niet tot deze categorie volgens de link.
Er wordt gevoelige info gevraagd	Ja, religieuze/spirituele voorkeuren, seksuele oriëntatie en genderidentiteit.
Er wordt persoonsgebonden informatie gevraagd en/of verwerkt	Ja
Er worden audio en/of video-opnames gemaakt	Ja
Er worden medische experimenten op mensen gedaan	Nee
Er wordt gewerkt met proefdieren	Nee
Militaire of terroristische toepassingen zijn mogelijk	Nee

2. Onderzoeksfasen

Verduidelijk via onderstaande richtvragen per onderzoeksfase (contactname, dataverzameling, opslag data, verwerking/rapportering en feedback/nazorg) hoe je rekening zal houden met de hierboven geïdentificeerde ethische bekommernissen.

2.1 Contactname

- Er wordt contact opgenomen met participanten via sociale media, namelijk Facebook, Messenger of WhatsApp.
- Participanten worden bij het eerste contact ingelicht over het onderzoeksonderwerp en worden aangemoedigd om vragen te stellen. Participanten worden niet misleid.
- Voor de start van het interview ondertekenen de participanten een informed consent formulier (voorbeeld in appendix 3). Daarnaast wordt er mondeling herhaalt dat participanten altijd vragen mogen overslaan indien ze deze niet willen beantwoorden en het interview op elk moment mogen stopzetten. Participanten worden niet beloond voor hun deelname.

2.2. Dataverzameling – en opslag

- Omdat het om exploratief onderzoek gaat en er naar de ervaringen van participanten wordt gekeken worden er brede, open vragen gesteld. De vragen zijn echter wel steeds gerelateerd aan het onderwerp en antwoorden die niet relevant zijn voor het onderzoek worden niet besproken.

- De data worden afgenomen via audio opnames. De participanten mochten zelf een rustige locatie voorstellen (bij hen thuis, op een openbare locatie, etc.) waar ze makkelijk konden geraken en waar ze zich op hun gemak zouden voelen.
- Ik heb de interviewleidraad zelf opgesteld om zo snel mogelijk de data verzameling te kunnen starten.

2.3 Opslag van data

- De data zijn lokaal opgeslagen op mijn persoonlijke laptop als ook op one drive for business. Ruwe data worden met niemand gedeeld. Na het slagen van de masterproef worden de ruwe data verwijderd.

2.4 Verwerking en rapportering van de data

- Alle participanten hebben een pseudoniem gekregen, waarbij enkel ik de sleutel heb op basis van de fysieke ingevulde informed consent formulieren. Bij quotes wordt vermeld wie het gezegd heeft, aangezien participanten verschillende ideeën hebben over tarot en het dus interessant is om te zien waar deze overlappen en waar juist niet. De quotes vermijden identificeerbare informatie zoals woonplaats, namen van vrienden/kennissen, etc.
- Omdat genderidentiteit een belangrijk onderdeel is van dit onderzoek, worden er consistent genderneutrale voornaamwoorden gebruikt.

2.5 Feedback en nazorg

- Als participanten dit wensen krijgen ze toegang tot de afgeronde thesis.
- Tijdens het interview wordt er persoonlijke informatie besproken die mogelijks voor licht emotioneel ongemak kan zorgen. Als participanten problemen ondervinden ten gevolge van de dataverzameling kunnen ze mij steeds contacteren en dan zoeken we samen naar een mogelijke oplossing.

Appendix 2: Interview Guideline

Could you introduce yourself?

Tarot

When did you start reading tarot? And why?

How often do you practice tarot?

> At what for moments do you reach for the cards?
>
> Do you have a certain ritual when you read tarot?

What is the meaning of tarot for you?

Do you mostly do tarot readings for yourself or also for others? Or do you sometimes seek out someone else to do a reading for you?

> Do you have a feeling of community surrounding tarot or is it a mostly personal practice to you?

Can you give a specific example of a personal experience with an enlightening reading?

Do you also practice other forms of spirituality or religion?

> How do these practices intersect with tarot?

LGBTQ+ identity

How do you experience your LGBTQ+ identity in general?

Do you think your LGBTQ+ identity influences your experience with tarot?

> Do you personally see a connection between these aspects of your life?

Did you ever learn something or get a certain insight about your LGBTQ+ identity during a tarot reading?

How does your environment react to these aspects of your life, both your LGBTQ+ identity and tarot?

Wrap up

Do you have a favourite tarot card? Which one and why is it your favourite?

Would you like to add something else that we haven't discussed yet?

Appendix 3: Example Informed Consent Form

Informed consent

Ik, ……(naam), neem vrijwillig deel aan het onderzoek van Liesbeth Carpentier in verband met LGBTQ+ identiteiten en tarot lezen.

- Ik begrijp dat ik tijdens dit interview gevraagd ga worden naar mijn LGBTQ+ identiteit en mijn ervaring met tarotkaarten. Er zijn geen foute antwoorden, de onderzoeker is geïnteresseerd in mijn persoonlijke ervaringen. Het interview zal ongeveer 45-60 minuten duren.

- Ik begrijp dat mijn deelname volledig vrijwillig is en ik hiervoor niet word gecompenseerd. Dit betekent dus ook dat ik ervoor kan kiezen om vragen die me ongemakkelijk maken niet te beantwoorden of om het interview stop te zetten op elk moment zonder enige gevolgen.

- Ik begrijp dat mijn deelname aan dit onderzoek volledig anoniem is. In eventuele beschrijvingen zal mijn naam worden veranderd en identificerende informatie zal worden vermeden of vermomd.

- Ik begrijp dat er een audio-opname wordt gemaakt van dit interview. De informatie die ik vertel tijdens het interview mag gebruikt worden om een masterproef en eventueel een wetenschappelijke publicatie op te stellen. Mogelijks kunnen vermomde fragmenten uit dit interview als citaat gebruikt worden in een masterproef of wetenschappelijke publicatie.

Ik heb de bovenstaande uitleg gelezen en begrepen en al mijn vragen zijn beantwoord door de onderzoeker.

Datum

Mijn handtekening Handtekening onderzoeker

Liesbeth Carpentier
liesbeth.carpentier@student.kuleuven.be
+32494852366
Als onderdeel van de Master in Gender en Diversiteit
Onder begeleiding van Prof. Dr. Chia Longman

Gelieve volgende informatie in te vullen:

Naam: Leeftijd:

Seksuele oriëntatie: Genderidentiteit:

Als u op de hoogte gehouden wilt worden van de resultaten van dit onderzoek laat dan hier uw email adres achter:

Ik mag gecontacteerd worden in verband met eventueel vervolgonderzoek:

☐ Ja ☐ Nee