“Hard to find”: information barriers among LGBT college students

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine collegiate information barriers and perceptions of academic library climate among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) college students in the USA.

Design/methodology/approach – The primary method used for this investigation was an online crowdsourced survey of 105 participants who attended two and four-year colleges in the USA. The questionnaire used free word association where participants shared information barriers encountered on colleges’ campuses. Responses from each questionnaire were interpreted using open coding.

Findings – Information barriers around sexuality continue to be a challenge for non-heteronormative information seekers on college campuses. One-third of students had distinctive information needs around their sexuality and experienced information barriers from both the institution and social stigma. The study reveals an evolution in sexual minority students’ sense of self, which has moved beyond the binary identity of gay/lesbian explored in previous studies; students identified bisexuality as a salient information need, and described a campus environment that often erased bisexuality. The academic library was described as an information barrier due to inadequate sexual minority-related resources.

Practical implications – Academic librarians as well as higher education professionals, such as recruitment/admissions officers, student counseling services, student health and student affairs, can leverage the results of this study to help establish a more inclusive and welcoming information environment that empowers students for academic and personal success.

Originality/value – A limited number of studies in information science have focused on sexual minority college students’ information behaviors and even fewer on information barriers. This study presents new insight and deeper understanding of the collegiate information environment of LGBT identified students in the USA.

Keywords Information seeking, Academic libraries, Microaggressions, Campus climate, LGBTQ+, Information barriers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Despite recent advances in the USA around lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, GLAAD (2018)[1] which examines Americans’ perceptions of sexual minority communities, suggests a regressive nation, rapidly retreating in its acceptance. For the first time in four years, overall acceptance of Americans has declined, while anti-gay discrimination and assaults have rapidly increased. Beyond this recent decline in acceptance, LGBT college students have long endured hostile and unwelcoming campus environments, even though the nation has experienced much social progress over the last decade (Rankin et al., 2010; Seelman et al., 2017). Since 2007, new tools and resources have emerged: the Campus Pride Index and the groundbreaking 2010 report State of Higher Education for LGBT People provide queer students and ally a snapshot of campus climate at institutions across the USA. Yet, both of these resources ignore the role of academic libraries as distinctive places on college campuses that
may contribute to students’ perceptions of welcomeness and inclusion. Additionally, they are silent on the role of campus information diffusion and visibility around LGBT students’ issues. We suggest that college campuses are distinctive spatial information environments, with their own social norms and mores; within these spaces students often seek information comprised of and intersecting with a ternary of needs including academic, personal and employment (Head and Eisenberg, 2011). However, a limited number of studies in information science have focused on LGBT college students’ information behaviors and even fewer on information barriers.

Information barriers are hindrances or impediments to seeking and/or using information and manifest as a disruption in the information seeking process (Wilson, 1981, 1997, 1999; Świgoń, 2011a, b, c; Savolainen, 2016). Barriers can exist as something that is tangible or incorporeal, such as library anxiety (Świgoń, 2011b) or twentieth century segregation laws (Knott, 2015). Researchers have created typologies on information barriers in an attempt to make sense of the vast array of terminology and nuance in research literature (Świgoń, 2011a, b, c; Savolainen, 2016). We adopt Savolainen’s typology, limited to socio-cultural barriers, as a framework to help interrupt the information barriers identified in this study. Socio-cultural information barriers encompass: language, social stigma and cultural taboo, small world-related barriers, institutional and organizational barriers, and barriers resulting from a lack of social and economic capital. Savolainen (2016) underscores that socio-cultural barriers are “human-made constructs mainly stemming from social norms and normative expectations, as well as cultural values” of privileged communities with the power to erect barriers, whether intentional or otherwise.

Savolainen (2016) developed the typology to better understand the effects of “cultural values” and “social norms” on an individual’s information access. However, it appears that very few studies were consulted on LGBT information behaviors in the typology’s development. One study (Veinot, 2009) focused on “health information seeking” of HIV/AIDS patients, although it was not entirely clear if these individuals were also sexual minorities, leaving only Hamer’s (2003) study as the only obvious example of gay men’s information behaviors cited in the typology. Therefore, we suggest more empirical studies are needed to deepen our understanding of socio-cultural barriers encountered by LGBT individuals. In this study, we seek to better understand the information environment in colleges and universities by examining LGBT students’ perceptions of campus information barriers. The results of this study will be of interest to academic librarians and also a broad constituency of professionals in higher education including recruitment or admissions officers, student counseling services, student health and student affairs.

Literature review

For nearly 40 years, research pertaining to the information needs and behaviors of LGBT information seekers has circulated, albeit irregularly, in library and information science (LIS) journals. Since Sanford Berman’s groundbreaking The Joy of Cataloging, in the early 1980s, this research thread has primarily emphasized everyday information needs of the general public and manifest in public libraries. Other studies have focused on subject analysis and library catalogs (Olson, 1998; Bates and Rowley, 2011; Adler, 2009, 2017), health information needs (Fikar and Latrina, 2004; Morris and Roberto, 2016), everyday life (Yeh, 2008) and collection development and reference (Ciszek, 2011; Mehra and Braquet, 2011). The following discussion presents a literature review on LGBTQ+ college students and their information needs.

Wexelbaum (2018) presented a critique of the historic ideal type that “libraries save [LGBT] lives” with a literature review on LGBT undergraduates and information needs. Wexelbaum’s analysis posits this outmoded belief is based on pre-internet era data, and not applicable to today’s web- and mobile-oriented information environment. Additionally, Wexelbaum suggests that much of the labor in establishing a safe space environment is likely performed by LGBT resource centers (where available), and not academic libraries.
Schaller (2011) examined information behavior on a southern campus lacking a LGBT resource center. Data were collected via a focus group and interviews of five sexual minority students attending a North Carolina university. Students needed more information on LGBT library materials while simultaneously expressing a “need for privacy and confidentiality.” This work was particularly noteworthy for its discussion of campus information barriers. Results also noted a heightened need for privacy, the experience of general library anxiety, and a lack of information on community-related events and social gatherings, with students citing the lack of spaces to advertise on campus.

Adopting a broader approach, Lupien (2007) examined students enrolled in “GLBT/Sexuality Diversity” programs, encompassing various sexual orientations, at three Canadian universities. Survey data were collected from 148 individuals including undergraduates, graduates, faculty and staff. While Lupien’s analysis centered on a particular course of study, and not specifically LGBT students, it does provide a perspective on library holdings and atmosphere, which may also intersect with the everyday information seeking activities of LGBT identified students. Participants were moderately satisfied with resources and services; the biggest issue here was outdated printed materials and collection invisibility – users were often unaware of relevant resources and services. Regarding social climate, a quarter of participants avoided the reference desk out of fear of asking questions related to sexual identity, and also suggested libraries work to create a more welcoming environment.

The most in-depth treatments on information behavior and sexual minority college students appear in two unpublished LIS master’s theses. Kingston found the internet was the predominating information resource among queer students at Indiana University, who leveraged the technology to satisfy both academic and everyday life information needs (Keithly, 2010[2]. Curiously, 44 percent out of 18 participants did not use either the on-campus LGBT Library or the main library for information seeking, and over half did not use the local public library. Keithly (2007) also found the internet was a critical resource for undergraduate and graduate students at University of California Los Angeles, and noted the role of race and ethnicity in LGBT information seeking.

Information barriers among non-heteronormative populations

Jardine (2013) identified information barriers encountered by transmen and transwomen using academic and public libraries. These included: library censorship, manifest as collection and policy bias, and personal prejudices of librarians and staff. Location was identified as another barrier, as rural libraries are more likely to have limited funding and are staffed by conservative librarians. Additionally, Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSHs) and the library catalog may also hinder information access due to misclassification of resources; Jardine notes that “transgenderism” and “transpeople” became official LCSHs in 2007. Access to credible and relevant information are also identified as possible barriers, this is especially a concern with internet resources.

Few studies have focused directly on information barriers encountered by non-heteronormative information seekers. However, several have explored barriers, in public libraries, as a subset of larger information behaviors. Whitt (1993) and Stenback and Schrader (1999) investigated information needs of lesbian women in North Carolina and Edmonton, Canada and had similar findings that the library itself functioned as a barrier to information around sexuality. Participants indicated overall dissatisfaction with resources, which were described as “dated,” “judgmental” and “meager,” and inadequate service from homophobic librarians (Whitt, 1993). Additionally, library users in Stenback and Schrader (1999) cited “difficulty in locating materials [in the library]” as a barrier. Norman (1999) also addressed the issue of retrieval, positing the physical arrangement of collection materials may “act as a barrier to information access” because users may not have the necessary skills to find, locate, and select items dispersed throughout the larger collection. Participants in
Norman’s (1999) study at a joint-use academic and public library in the UK felt it was easier to access LGBT materials if they were “placed in one location.”

Research questions

Previous studies provided the foundation for understanding the diverse information worlds of LGBT students; however, most were limited by small sample sizes and reflected a single geographic location and did not emphasis information barriers. The current study advances this sphere of knowledge by examining LGBT students’ on-campus information barriers and their perceptions of academic library atmosphere. Specifically, our study is oriented around the following research questions:

RQ1. What campus information barriers exist for LGBT students when accessing information on sexual orientation?

RQ2. Do LGBT students view academic libraries as places to satisfy their information needs on sexual orientation?

RQ3. How do LGBT students perceive academic library atmosphere?

Methods

In order to obtain a keen understanding of contemporary information behaviors among LGBT college students, a national sample was deemed more advantageous than reliance on a student body from a single localized sample. Because we were only interested in LGBT identified students, we leveraged a crowdsourcing service to recruit our targeted population. Crowdsourcing is a growing mechanism in social science research where participants are recruited online to complete specific research-oriented tasks or activities (Schutt, 2014; Gosling and Winter, 2015; Kittur et al., 2008). One of the benefits of crowdsourcing is its “efficient allocation of labor to generate, collect, clean, and transform data” (Chandler and Shapiro, 2016, p. 53). Behrend et al. (2011), for example, found that in contrast to a “traditional university participant pool” the crowdsourced sample was “more ethnically diverse” and “was as good as or better than the corresponding university sample.” The participants in the current study were solicited online through Qualtrics, a third-party online survey software and research firm. Qualtrics contacted potential participants using a selection procedure, provided by the authors, which ensured participants’ demographic profiles matched the authors’ selection criteria. Participants were required to identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, currently enrolled in college, and at least 18 years of age; additionally, participants were asked to confirm the aforementioned demographics before beginning of the survey. The population for this study comprised 105 individuals who attended two- and four-year colleges in 33 states. The present study only considers the experiences of undergraduate students. However, this targeted focus is not to suggest that LGBT graduate and doctoral students do not experience information barriers. However, these two populations have distinct experiences that we suggest should be considered independently (Moore and Singley, 2019; Gibbs et al., 2012).

This study adopts a cross-sectional approach to identify information barriers among LGBT college students. Data were collected in November of 2017. Our survey instrument was adapted from Ju and Gluck’s (2011) study on information uses, which utilized a free word association method for data collection. The questionnaire comprised six sections: conformation of study parameters, demographic information, information needs related to sexual orientation, campus information barriers related to sexual orientation, library use related to sexual orientation and perceptions of academic library atmosphere (see Appendix.). Questions on information needs, campus information barriers and library usage were adapted from Schaller’s (2011) study. In the question on information needs where participants selected “agree” or “strongly agree,” they received a supplemental question asking them to provide additional information and
context to their response. Similarly, for the question on library usage where participants selected “disagree” or “strongly disagree,” they received a supplemental question asking them to provide additional information and context to their response.

Survey questions on perceptions of academic library atmosphere were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). These questions were formulated based on the prior findings of related studies (Alabi, 2015; Croghan et al., 2015; Elteto et al., 2008; Sherman et al., 2014; Whitmire, 2004). Table I shows a list of measures and sources investigated in this study.

Completed questionnaires were downloaded from the Qualtrics module and imported into Microsoft Excel. Responses to questions on information needs, campus information barriers and library usage were interpreted using the open coding method (Creswell, 2014). Other researchers when investigating information behaviors have used this technique; additionally, the technique provided the researchers a strategy to later identify themes and categories reflected in the aforementioned elements that emerged from data. Because the questionnaire was limited in scope, restricted to students’ on campus information environment, this method was rather efficient in producing analyzable corpus of data.

Results
Sociodemographic characteristics of population
The population for this study comprised 105 individuals who attended two- and four-year colleges in 33 states. We used the US Census Bureau’s statistical regions to record the geographical distribution of respondents in Table II. The states with the highest number of respondents were California (11), New York (9), Pennsylvania (8) and Ohio (7). Table III presents overall demographic information of study participants. People of color comprised 38 percent of participants, with the remainder identifying as white (62 percent). Most participants were between the ages 22 and 25 (43 percent); 20 percent were 20 and 21, while the smallest populations were 18–19 at (17 percent) and 26 or older (19 percent), respectively. Transgender and gender variant/non-conforming individuals formed the smallest identity demographic (5 percent), men-identified individuals comprised the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Sources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information needs relating to sexual orientation</td>
<td>Schaller (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student has special or distinctive information needs related to sexual orientation or sexual identity?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information barriers relating to sexual orientation</td>
<td>Schaller (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What obstacles or hindrances has student encountered ON CAMPUS (e.g. in the library or the campus at large) while seeking information related to sexual orientation or sexual identity?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Student uses college library to satisfy information needs around my sexuality/sexual identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of academic library atmosphere</td>
<td>Solorzano et al. (2000), Elteto et al. (2008), Sherman et al. (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student views college library, as welcoming/friendly to LGBT students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s college library’s marketing and outreach materials reflect LGBT students</td>
<td>Croghan et al. (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s library recognizes LGBT oriented events and activities</td>
<td>Sherman et al. (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student has encountered homophobic graffiti in my college library</td>
<td>Elteto et al. (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT identified people hold positions in student’s college library</td>
<td>Elteto et al. (2008), Sherman et al. (2014), Alabi (2015)</td>
</tr>
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Table I.
largest study population (58 percent). Class rank was represented across four levels at a low of 20 percent for juniors and a high of 30 percent for seniors. Over 70 percent of participants were majoring in Arts and Humanities, Science or Social Science disciplines (Table IV).

Campus information barriers on sexual orientation
Participants were asked to identify information barriers or hindrances they encountered while searching for information related their sexuality while on campus. A summary of their information barriers is shown in Table V. Students identified a wide spectrum of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table II.</th>
<th>Geographic distribution of respondents</th>
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<tr>
<td>Census regions in USA</td>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeastern</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<th>Table III.</th>
<th>Demographics of study participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographics of survey participants</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender variant/Non-conforming</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Race/Ethnicity
- American Indian/Alaska Native | 2 | 2 |
- Asian | 7 | 7 |
- African American/Black | 15 | 14 |
- Hispanic/Latinx | 10 | 10 |
- Multiracial | 3 | 3 |
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander | 2 | 2 |
- White | 66 | 62 |

Age
- 18–19 | 18 | 17 |
- 20–21 | 22 | 21 |
- 22–25 | 45 | 43 |
- 26+ | 20 | 19 |

Status
- Freshman | 23 | 22 |
- Sophomore | 30 | 28 |
- Junior | 21 | 20 |
- Senior | 31 | 30 |
- Total | 105 | 100 |

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table IV.</th>
<th>Academic disciplines of study participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disciplines</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and humanities</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sciences</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
information barriers; however, the most salient are clustered around three themes: information vacuum, stigma and the college library among students who had encountered on campus information hindrances around their sexuality.

Most participants (30 percent) described a campus social-cultural environment where information around LGBT life was non-existent or, at best, obscure. This sentiment was most frequently expressed as "lack of information" or "lack of resources." This perceived vacuum was manifested in limited channels for information seeking: within this theme students also noted difficulties in finding information; moreover, barely locatable information was insufficient. Students also shared that information was often too "hard to find" and "when found it is lacking." This theme also revealed the intriguing notion that sexual minority students consider identity-groups an avenue for closing their information gap; however, participants noted "there isn’t an LGBT club on campus [and] there are no safe places on my campus either."

LGBT stigma was another information barrier cited among 28 percent of participants who identified barriers. Students described manifold anti-gay behaviors including epithets, and hostile nonverbal and verbal behaviors such as "being called a f*****", "homophobia," and being subject to "stares" and "whispers." Sexual minority students appear to occupy a peculiar space where they are simultaneously invisible, in a barren information climate, yet highly conspicuous and subject to assault. Participants also identified the college library as a barrier (16 percent) and this finding is consistent with previous studies examining academic and public libraries (Jardine, 2013; Hamer, 2003; Whitt, 1993; Stenback and Schrader, 1999). Our finding is particularly noteworthy because previous studies on LGBT collegiate information behavior found that students rarely leveraged campus libraries around this information need (Keithly, 2010). The current study suggests that some students initially viewed the library as an information destination, but ultimately viewed it as a barrier to information seeking. These students perceived their library either contained limited LGBT-related materials or that academic library collections are not inclusive; one participant shared, for example, “there is almost no LGBT literature in my library” and “there are no resources in the library in this subject.” Other students shared their trepidation or inability to navigate library space in order to find resources. This included being “unsure where to start” not only an information search but also an inability to physically locate materials on LGBT content. In particular, students mentioned there was “no identifiable section in library” or that “the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of information barriers</th>
<th>Examples (excerpts from participants’ questionnaire answers)</th>
<th>No. of participants (out of 69)</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information vacuum</td>
<td>Not much information to find</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT/Queer stigma</td>
<td>People just see you (as a) different being entirely</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You try to be yourself but all others see is the sin of you being gay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Verbal violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The library</td>
<td>There is almost no LGBT literature in my library</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not enough sources, sources outdated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual erasure</td>
<td>Bisexual erasure</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bisexuality tends to get ignored</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spaces (bathrooms, dormitories, etc.)</td>
<td>Bathroom bans</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I lost my roommate because I am gay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: bullying, isolation, trust and</td>
<td>Finding other queer women to talk to</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sexual assault</td>
<td>Being bullied</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Table V. Campus information barriers of LGBT college students
library does not have an LGBT section.” Here, it appears that students were unfamiliar with library classification systems, and were looking for signage that one would encounter in a bookstore.

As previously mentioned, participants often imagined the library as containing just “books” and appeared unaware of additional formats in the collection. Here, participants noted a “lack of books relating [to sexuality]” or “not many books in library on bisexuality.” Another student shared “I didn’t think books would give me the information I would want when there is the internet” apparently not recognizing the library as a likely destination for internet resources.

Somewhat unexpectedly bisexual erasure (Yoshino, 2000) was identified as an information barrier among some participants and was often manifested as invisibility across the campus environment via denial of the existence of bisexual orientation, lack of print items or hostile learning environments. One participant described “Sexist or reductive philosophical explanations for bisexuality in my courses, often equating it to a weakness or psychological illusion, also including flawed and bigoted prescriptive definitions of gender.” Issues around a lack of diversity within LGBT communities reveal that information barriers are not only solely a manifestation of sexuality, but also include intersections of additional identities. Participants shared that student organizations were “non-inclusive,” one student, for example, noted there were “few black lesbian representatives, few Black Lesbian classmates [and] no Black LGBT instructors.”

Perceptions of information needs on sexual orientation. Participants were asked if they had “special or distinctive information needs related to their sexuality or sexual identity.” Responses were split on this particular information need; 34 out of 105 participants (33 percent) felt they had distinctive information needs, either agreeing or strongly agreeing. In contrast, 39 of 105 (37 percent) did not perceive specific information needs around sexual identity.

Individuals who indicated distinctive information needs around their sexuality were asked to provide examples of this particular information need. Two main information needs emerged: non-heteronormative sexualities and identity. Within the former need, students’ concerns reflected fundamental concerns about sexual orientation and societal approval, with participants sharing “sexual orientation” (e.g. bisexuality), and wanting to know that their sexual orientation “is okay.” This information need also included a desire for authoritative materials – several participants expressly mentioned a need for “accuracy” and “unbiased” information. Within the latter concern (identity), participants sought clarity, acceptance and a desire to understand how they belong, sharing “I need to be understood, I don’t want to be excluded” and “how do I fit into LGBT?” It is also important to recognize that rather than something that is static, information needs are fluid and evolve over space and time. This was evident in the response of a senior male student, who identified his distinctive needs as “deciding on what career move I wanted to make […] I needed to know how successful openly gay people were in those careers and whether or not they were treated differently than others.” Research by Harris (2014) and Schaller (2011) found similar concerns among LGBT job seekers.

While this study grouped several disparate identities into a single analysis, in our attempt to broadly understand identified college students’ information barriers, we make clear that each identity has its own distinctive information characteristics. For example, two of the three transgender participants indicated information needs around physiology, medical procedures and psychological concerns: their short commentary in this area mentioned a need for information on gender reassignment “surgery” and “hormone replacement therapy,” as well as information to help cultivate a “new identity.”

Academic library as information resource on sexual orientation. RQ2 examined the academic library as a place to satisfy information needs around sexuality. The majority of
participants (43 percent or \( n = 46 \) participants) indicated the college library was not an information resource around this particular set of information needs. However, 34 percent \( (n = 36) \) did leverage their library in this way. Participants who indicated non-usage were asked to share additional details on their decision. Emergent themes coalesced around the internet and personal information communication devices (e.g. mobile devices and laptop computers), privacy and perceptions of academic libraries as lacking or having inadequate resources. Some students also shared that the academic library was simply not needed in this way.

Students overwhelmingly leveraged the internet for information seeking around their sexuality. Specifically, it was selected for its perceived speed and ease of use, especially when compared to the library. Comments suggest that students often constructed the library as solely a brick and mortar edifice, while ignoring electronic holdings, ebooks and databases, for example. Students who cited privacy as a reason for non-library use were keenly aware of the library as a non-private space, which would hinder their comfortability in seeking information privately. Participants used the “public place,” to describe the library in this context. Students also shared how they protected their privacy and increased their sense of personal security in performing sexuality-centered information seeking by choosing where and on which devices they performed their queries. “LGBT research” was information seeking that some students regulated to “home” spaces or restricted to the privacy of a “personal laptop.” The most poignant example of this was a student who shared; I “feel safer finding information online.” Here, internet space provides a level of security and protection that the publicness of the academic library jeopardizes. Additionally, echoing the aforementioned information barriers, students had a negative perception of academic library holdings, citing an overall dearth of helpful materials or inability to compete with internet resources. Participants described a “lack of available materials” or “nothing there to help me”; another student shared “I have tried before, but my college library did not have the resources available.” Echoing the information barriers that were identified earlier, other students perceived the library’s collection as solely comprised of “books” that not only failed to provide “information I would want when there is the internet.”

**Perceptions of the academic library atmosphere.** In our effort to construct a holistic perspective of the campus information environment of LGBT college students, we asked participants about their perceptions of the academic library’s atmosphere. As previously mentioned, academic library space is generally absent from collegiate climate assessment reports; as such it is important to assess this space as a vital hub of on-campus student activity. This construct was measured with five questions that participants were asked to rate using one of five scales.

Among the 105 survey participants, nearly 70 percent \( (n = 70) \) felt their academic libraries were welcoming as a physical place or destination on campus \( (\text{mean} = 3.79, \text{SD} = 0.87) \). This result is similar to previous studies on underrepresented populations of color which found that academic libraries were generally welcoming to students (Stewart *et al.*, 2019; Whitmire, 2004). However, this may also be a result of nothing overtly negative occurring in the space, as compared to other spatial interactions on campus, and therefore construed as neutral positive – similar to Evans and Broido’s (2002) findings. Additional results under this construct reveal that 35 percent \( (n = 36) \) observed LGBTQ+ specific marketing and outreach library materials \( (\text{mean} = 3.10, \text{SD} = 0.96) \); and half \( (n = 53) \) agreed or strongly agreed that their college library recognized LGBTQ+ oriented events and activities \( (\text{mean} = 3.37, \text{SD} = 1.04) \). Previous studies have demonstrated that inclusive service interactions involving LGBT adults were characterized by visual markers, such as “rainbow flags” and inclusive language on signage and documents, as
well as LGBT identified employees (Croghan et al., 2015). While it is encouraging that half of the participants encountered community specific events and activities in the library, this also suggests there is much room for improvement in LGBT marketing, outreach and activities.

Somewhat surprisingly, 43 percent \((n = 46)\) indicated that LGBTQ+ individuals held positions in the library \((\text{mean} = 3.27, \text{SD} = 1.10)\); and 29 percent \((n = 30)\) have seen homophobic graffiti in the library \((\text{mean} = 2.46, \text{SD} = 1.33)\). Hiring and maintaining a diverse library staff is one strategy that academic libraries can implement to help individuals from underrepresented populations “will feel more comfortable” interacting with employees (Elteto et al., 2008). Additionally, the current study echoes Elteto et al. (2008) findings that identify library bathrooms as areas prone to homophobic “graffiti” and serves as an alert to monitoring these spaces, which may otherwise be overlooked.

**Discussion**

This study investigated information barriers encountered by LGBT identified college students in the USA. We leveraged a typology of socio-cultural barriers devised by Savolainen (2016) as a framework to help explain information barriers identified in the study. Earlier we mentioned that few studies on LGBT information behaviors were cited in the typology’s development. One of the theoretical contributions of the present study is a more nuanced understanding of information barriers encountered by LGBT college students. First, we identified an information vacuum for some LGBT students seeking information on college campuses related to sexual orientation. In these instances, information is sought but is subsequently judged inadequate or the student perceives the desired information is non-existent. Second, LGBT/Queer stigma is a distinctive barrier which manifest as an intrusion into LGBT student’s personal and psychological space with acts of verbal abuse from students that further hinders information seeking. Our findings also provide further evidence that social-cultural barriers are indeed “man-made constructs” which also means that it is in our capacity to dismantle them (Savolainen, 2016).

Our findings demonstrate the information barriers identified by non-heteronormative college students are manifestations of barriers related to both social stigma and institutions. Savolainen (2016) describes barriers related to social stigma as characterizing a “sense of being an outsider, lack of social support, and mistrust of others.” Here, we adopt Chatman’s (1996) language to describe this atmosphere and perception of information vacuum among some participants as a “barren information climate,” in which students not only feel invisible, but are also perceived as outsiders within the collegiate environment. According to Chatman (1996), insiders “share a common cultural, social, [and] religious perspective” which is used to justify and enforce “expected norms and behavior.” Outsiders by contrast are individuals who are regarded by the majority as “deviating from the collective standards.”

This was evident by the barren information climate described earlier where on campus information around one’s sexuality was perceived non-existent. This bereft landscape aligns with Chapman’s theory of information poverty, which describes a “world […] in which a person is […] unable to solve a critical worry or concern.” This condition is produced by a heteronormative campus ethos that results in the erasure of non-heteronormative sexualities. Some participants in this study demonstrated \(P1\) in the theory of information poverty as a population who “perceive[s] themselves to be devoid of any sources that might help them.” Additionally, students in this study appeared to seek information on their own and were not actively asking others for assistance. This may be related to an overall lack of trust in insiders, magnified by the hostile campus climates students described; and relates to
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P3 (information poverty is determined by self-protective behaviors which are used in response to social norms); P5 (a decision to risk exposure about true problems is often not taken due to a perception that negative consequences outweigh benefits) and P4 (both secrecy and deception are self-protecting mechanisms due to a sense of mistrust). P2 and P6 were not observed in data[3].

While Chatman (1996) deployed the theory of information poverty to help understand the entire everyday lifeworlds of diverse populations of outsiders, we restrict the framework here to the on campus environment and are not necessarily suggesting that study participants’ entire life-world is characterized by information poverty. Furthermore, we recognize that information poverty and economic poverty are not mutually exclusive and echo Savolainen’s (2016) assertion that barriers around stigma and social taboo “can concern people across social strata.”

Institutional barriers also played a role in the hindrances identified by study participants. “Institutional barriers to information seeking come into existence when organizations such as government offices and libraries consciously or unconsciously prevent individuals from obtaining the information that is needed” (Savolainen, 2016). Our findings indicate two distinct institutional barriers: the first reflected the larger campus community and manifested as unwelcomeness instigated primarily by students including homophobia, aggressive verbal and nonverbal communication/body language and assault. Other studies have also found that “unfair treatment [of LGBT students was] more likely to come from other students (65%), rather than from faculty (14%)” (Tetreault et al., 2013). These comments reflect Sue et al.’s (2007) microaggression category of microinsults, which include “behavioral/verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity.” A quantitative study on Black students’ perceptions of racial climate in American academic libraries also revealed a significant relationship between other students’ actions and behaviors and subsequent perceptions of welcomeness (Stewart et al., 2019). Therefore, the current study’s findings magnify the role that the general student body plays as important actors in constructing the overall social climate on college campuses and as barriers to information seeking for LGBT students. This study reveals that access to campus based LGBT organizations is critical as an information resource for sexual minority students. Colleges and universities must not only promote these student organizations, but also help students and faculty charter new groups where none exist. Additionally, institutions should develop and enforce non-discrimination policies, which include lesbian, gay and bisexual, transgender, questioning and intersex (LGBTQI) students, and designate gender-neutral bathroom facilities across the campus community (Jardine, 2013; Taylor et al., 2018). Second, offices of Student Affairs/ Dean of Students could create an information resources webpage on LGBTQI campus events, community activities, as well as health resources for students.

The second institutional barrier was the academic library. This analysis shows that academic libraries may likely never serve as the primary information destinations for LGBT and questioning students looking for resources around the sexuality because of an overall perception that the internet is both faster and more conducive to personal privacy. However, our results also demonstrate that some students do seek out academic libraries for their personal information needs; furthermore, in some instances, we must emphasize the college library may serve as students’ only access to quality information resources. Our results validate 25 years of previous research which demonstrates that library access to LGBT information resources continues to be an obstacle for many library users (Whitt, 1993; Hamer, 2003; Stenback and Schrader, 1999; Schaller, 2011). It is important to emphasize here that participants’ concerns regarding academic libraries coalesce around their perceptions of the library’s collection, rather than the library as physical space.
Participants noted inadequate access to LGBT reading materials and held the perception of a heteronormative-centered collection that brings into relief micro-invalidation, characterized by “behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality” of individuals (Sue et al., 2007). The behavior – in these instances, being LGBT erasure – is instigated by academic librarians via collection maintenance and development.

Access to LGBT resources such as books and films is critical in helping students’ overall sense of self and identity (Jardine, 2013). The absence of these materials is also a disservice to heteronormative students by denying them access to information resources that reflect diverse human experiences and lifeworlds. Therefore, academic libraries may want to increase their marketing of LGBTQI holdings with a particular emphasis on digital holdings, as many of the students in the present study held the impression that the library’s holdings were comprised solely of monographs; LibGuides including library and campus resources, as well as off-campus resources would also be helpful to LGBT students. Furthermore, libraries should create and enforce non-discrimination policies with respect to services and collection development, designate gender-neutral bathrooms and if possible acquire self-check-out kiosks to help protect patron privacy (Jardine, 2013).

We posit that information barriers on college campuses identified in this study are instrumental in producing feelings of isolation among LGBT students. The hostile environments that many students described result in isolation from peers as they move throughout the campus community; furthermore, dealing with unmet information needs divorces students from resources or information they may need to survive on American college campuses – spaces that are generally still considered hostile or challenging environments for many sexual minority students (Rankin et al., 2010; Seelman et al., 2017). The sense of isolation that is produced by microinsults and micro-invalidations also leads to a perception of invisibility and mental health issues, which, in turn, have a detrimental effect on academic performance (Evans et al., 2017; Oswalt and Wyatt, 2011).

Limitations and future research
This analysis has some limitations, which we must address. We do not expect that researchers will necessarily be able to identically reproduce our emergent themes as they are based on our data interpretations. Additionally, we did not collect data by institutional type (two-year vs four-year institutions), as such it is possible that our data set may skew more toward one institutional type than the other. However, despite these limitations, this study gives a contemporary voice to LGBT student’s information barriers on twenty-first century college campuses in diverse geographies across the USA.

Future research on information barriers and LGBT students may consider the following: the current study collected data from a single moment in students’ academic lives; therefore, a longitudinal study may be fruitful in uncovering how information barriers and needs evolve throughout one’s college years. Future studies may also want to limit their analysis to two-year institutions, in order to explore the particular nuances at community and junior colleges. While we recruited study participants from the USA, future research should consider other national geographies. Additionally, there is a great need to better understand the information environments of LGBT students of color, with particular emphasis on transgender students, which is grossly understudied.

Conclusion
This is one of the few studies that have explored information barriers among LGBT college students on a national scale. The study reveals that information barriers around one’s sexuality continue to be a challenge for non-heteronormative information seekers.
Many students in this analysis have distinctive information needs around their sexuality and experience barriers to information seeking, instigated primarily by unwelcoming students. Participants described a barren information climate, where information around LGBT identity was at best, hard to find and at worst non-existent. Additionally, the study revealed an evolution in sexual minority students’ sense of self, which has moved well beyond the binary identity of gay and lesbian explored in previous studies; students mentioned bisexuality as a salient information need, and described a campus environment that erased bisexuality. While most students had a positive view of their academic library as a distinctive physical destination, the critical information barrier was inadequate availability of resources on LGBTI communities. As previously mentioned, information barriers and LGBT students are an issue affecting broad constituencies in higher education. The entire campus community must actively work to produce an inclusive and welcoming information environment that empowers students for academic and personal success.

Notes
1. GLAAD was formally known as the “Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.” In March of 2013, they adopted the acronym GLAAD as their official name.
2. The authors were unable to obtain a copy of Kingston’s master’s thesis.
3. P2 (information poverty is partially associated with class) we did not ask questions about economic status; P6 (new knowledge will be selectively introduced into the information world of poor people).

References


Further reading


Dervin, B. (1992), “From the mind’s eye of the ‘user’: the sense-making qualitative-quantitative methodology”, in Glazer, J.D. and Powell, R.R. (Eds), Qualitative Research in Information Management, Libraries Unlimited, Englewood, CO, pp. 61-84.


Appendix. Questionnaire instrument

Conformation of Study Parameters
I am currently enrolled in a college or university.

I identify as an LGBT individual.

Demographics
What is your age?

What is your academic discipline?

What is your racial/ethnic identity?

Information needs relating to sexual orientation
I have special or distinctive information needs related to my sexual orientation or sexual identity.

You indicated that you have special information needs related to your sexual orientation/identity. Provide two examples of information needs connected to your sexual orientation.

Information barriers relating to sexual orientation
What obstacles or hindrances have you encountered ON CAMPUS while seeking information related to your sexual orientation or sexual identity? List three (3) examples that come to mind (in any order).

Academic library use for information seeking on relating to sexual orientation
I use my college library to satisfy information needs around my sexuality/sexual identity.

You indicated that you DO NOT use your college library to satisfy information needs around your sexuality/sexual identity. Why have you chosen to not use your college library to satisfy information needs around your sexuality/identity?
Perceptions of academic library atmosphere

Please rate the following statements: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree or strongly agree:

- I feel my college library, as a whole, is welcoming/friendly to LGBT students.
- My college library’s marketing and outreach materials reflect LGBT students.
- My college library recognizes LGBT oriented events and activities.
- I have encountered homophobic graffiti in my college library.
- LGBT identified people hold positions in my college library.

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