# Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity

## Qualitative Exploration of Perceptions of Sexual Assault and Associated Consequences Among LGBTQ+ College Students

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Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) individuals face numerous challenges related to minority stress, among them sexual assault victimization. Yet, research on actual and perceived consequences of sexual assault victimization in LGBTQ+ communities is limited. The purposes of this qualitative study were to better understand the perceptions of social norms about the negative consequences of sexual assault and to propose interpersonal recommendations and policy changes to improve mental and physical health support and reporting procedures to better serve LGBTQ+ college student sexual assault survivors. We used thematic analysis of 12 individual and group interviews of LGBTQ+ college students ($N = 20$; median age $= 20$) representing a range of gender identities (i.e., cisgender men, cisgender, and transgender women) and sexual orientations (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, and homoflexible cupiosexual people) to identify six major themes and 14 subthemes. The major themes included: (a) Interpersonal Concerns About Disclosure, (b) Consequences of Sexual Assault, (c) Hesitance to Engage with Institutions Following Sexual Assault, (d) Sense of LGBTQ+ Community, (e) Cisheteronormativity, and (f) Changes to Improve Institutional Support. Participants perceived both experiences common to greater college populations as well as unique consequences LGBTQ+ students face, coupled with a widespread distrust of the institutions tasked with providing survivors mental and physical health treatment and criminal justice. Study findings corroborate previous research that underscores the necessity of increased funding for, and tailoring reporting procedures and support services to, the needs of LGBTQ+ college students.

*Public Significance Statement*
This study suggests that it is important to reevaluate structural barriers to access to services and support for LGBTQ+ survivors of sexual assault. Further, tailor educational programming and response services are needed to better support LGBTQ+ sexual assault survivors on college campuses.

Sexual assault is a major public health issue in the United States (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2019), and the rise of the #MeToo movement has fueled increased public discourse on widespread experiences of sexual assault victimization and associated mental, social, physical, academic, and economic consequences (Khomami, 2017). Still, less is known about the unique social norms about experiences, associated consequences, and barriers to reporting sexual assault for college students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or hold other sexual (i.e., nonheterosexual) or gender (i.e., noncisgender) identities (LGBTQ+).

Rates of sexual assault victimization are particularly high among young adults including college students (Sinozich & Langton, 2014), with female college students facing rates of victimization at 25% (Cantor et al., 2017). LGBTQ+ college students also experience an elevated risk of sexual assault in relation to their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Cantor et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2016). Students who identify as sexual minority men are over nine times as likely to have experienced sexual assault as heterosexual male students, and students who identify as sexual minority women are over twice as likely as heterosexual female students to have been sexually assaulted in the past year (Beaulieu et al., 2017). Identifying as a gay man, bisexual, or questioning is associated with greater sexual assault victimization odds (Coulter et al.,

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2017; Johnson et al., 2016). Transgender college students also face higher rates of sexual assault victimization than cisgender students (Beaulieu et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2017; Coulter et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2016). Further, racial and ethnic identity is a risk factor for some groups of LGBTQ+ people of color, notably for men students of color (Beaulieu et al., 2017) and Black transgender students (Coulter et al., 2017).

College student survivors frequently confront numerous long-term consequences following the initial victimization event beyond acute physical and psychological injuries of a sexual assault. Research has linked college sexual assault victimization to several physical health issues (Potter et al., 2018), emotional injury or acute emotional distress (Lindquist et al., 2013), and symptoms of depression and anxiety (Carey et al., 2018; Lindquist et al., 2013; Potter et al., 2018). Further, when survivors disclose (i.e., discuss an experience of sexual assault victimization with someone in an official or unofficial capacity), social reactions to the disclosure can vary greatly in the amount of support offered and the degree to which they attribute blame to the perpetrator and the survivor (Fisher et al., 2003). Thus, the uncertainty of social and emotional outcomes and a desire to avoid negative reactions to disclosure from service providers often influence the decision of whether to disclose (Campbell et al., 2001). Yet, victimization and recovery of LGBTQ+ college students remain understudied (Balsam et al., 2005), and much of the recent research on sexual assault has focused exclusively on undergraduate White and heterosexual women (Sabina & Ho, 2014).

In addition to the many consequences that sexual assault survivors may face, the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 1995, 2003) posits that individuals holding stigmatized identities, including LGBTQ+ people, face chronic stress as a result of both proximal stressors (i.e., concealment and self-stigma) and distal stressors (i.e., stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination). Beyond the impacts of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional minority stressors on the mental health of LGBTQ+ college students, students often perceive institutional betrayal, which contributes to more severe sexual assault consequences (Smith et al., 2016). Prior research has connected distrust in a college's center for serving sexual assault survivors and Title IX Office's handling of reporting sexual assault to lower help-seeking intentions in sexual minority college students (Holland, 2020).

Further, cisheteronormativity, or the assumption that cisgender and heterosexual identities are "normal" and, by extension, LGBTQ+ identities and experiences are "abnormal," functions as systemic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal barriers to understanding sexual assault victimization within LGBTQ+ communities (Eaton & Matamala, 2014). Traditional gender roles and heteronormative sexual scripts reify and maintain the narrative that sexual coercion is simply a normal part of masculine sexuality (i.e., dominant, active, persistent, and goal directed; Eaton & Matamala, 2014; Hird & Jackson, 2001). The heteronormative cultural narratives for sexual assault predominantly include a cisgender man perpetrator and a cisgender woman victim, a schema that ignores men victims, woman perpetrators, and transgender people in ways that stifle queer and transgender communities from recognizing and understanding sexual assault within their own sexual relationships (intrapersonal), and prevent others outside of LGBTQ+ communities from viewing same-gender assault as real or valid (interpersonal).

The increased risks of sexual assault victimization and consequences among LGBTQ+ college students highlight the imperative to better understand the beliefs and norms about sexual assault victimization among LGBTQ+ college students. Further, such disparities in light of structural minority stressors, including institutional betrayal, and systemic cisheteronormativity underscore the need to explore LGBTQ+ college students' beliefs about the relations among LGBTQ+ survivors and the institutions tasked with serving them. In this study we used a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine two primary research questions: (1) How do LGBTQ+ college students perceive the unique physical and psychosocial consequences that LGBTQ+ college student sexual assault survivors may face? and (2) What institutional changes are needed from mental and physical support service providers, college administrations, and law enforcement agencies to better support LGBTQ+ college student sexual assault survivors?

## Method

### Participants

Participants included 20 college students between the ages of 18 to 25 years or older who mostly self-identified as bisexual ($n = 5$; 25%), gay ($n = 5$; 25%), queer ($n = 3$; 15%), or lesbian ($n = 3$; 15%). A majority of participants identified as women ($n = 11$; 55%), approximately one third identified as men ($n = 7$; 35%), and two participants identified specifically as transgender women (10%). Most participants identified as White, non-Hispanic ($n = 14$; 70%), 10% ($n = 2$) identified as Hispanic, 10% ($n = 2$) as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 10% ($n = 2$) identified as biracial, multiracial, or more than one racial and ethnic identity. Detailed demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

### Procedure

The California Polytechnic State University's institutional review board approved the study before participant recruitment. The authors and student researchers implemented participant recruitment across the university's (midsize public) campus, which included delivering recruitment scripts to general education and women and gender studies courses, posting flyers around campus, and sending targeted emails to LGBTQ+ related university clubs during the Fall, 2017 quarter. Criteria for inclusion was for the participant to be a currently enrolled undergraduate student who self-identifies as LGBTQ+. We did not specifically recruit sexual assault survivors because mandated reporter policies would have required us to report disclosure of victimization regardless of the participant's wishes. While sexual assault survivors were neither barred nor discouraged from participating, the researchers informed participants before participation that the interviewers would report any disclosure of a victimization that occurred while the participant was enrolled at the university to the university's Title IX Office in compliance with mandated reporting policies.

We conducted one individual and 11 group interviews during the 2017–2018 school year (i.e., 12 interviews in total). If participants felt comfortable in a group setting, they were scheduled for a group interview if allowed by participant availability. If participants felt uncomfortable in a group setting, or if their availability conflicted

**Table 1**
*Demographic Characteristics of Enrolled Participants*

| Variable | % | Number of |
|---|---|---|
| Age | | |
| 18 | 10 | 2 |
| 19 | 5 | 1 |
| 20 | 40 | 8 |
| 21 | 30 | 6 |
| 22 | 5 | 1 |
| 23 | 5 | 1 |
| 25 or older | 5 | 1 |
| Year in school | | |
| Freshman | 15 | 3 |
| Sophomore | 20 | 4 |
| Junior | 25 | 5 |
| Senior | 30 | 6 |
| Fifth year or more | 5 | 1 |
| Graduate or professional student | 5 | 1 |
| Racial/ethnic identity | | |
| White, non-Hispanic | 70 | 14 |
| Hispanic | 10 | 2 |
| Asian or Pacific Islander | 10 | 2 |
| Biracial or Multiracial | 5 | 1 |
| Asian or Pacific Islander and Sicilian-Italian | 5 | 1 |
| Gender | | |
| Woman | 55 | 11 |
| Man | 35 | 7 |
| Trans woman | 5 | 1 |
| Woman and trans woman | 5 | 1 |
| Sexual orientation | | |
| Gay | 25 | 5 |
| Bisexual | 25 | 5 |
| Lesbian | 15 | 3 |
| Queer | 15 | 3 |
| Pansexual | 5 | 1 |
| Asexual and bisexual | 5 | 1 |
| Homoflexible cupiosexual | 5 | 1 |
| Parent/guardian's estimated annual household income | | |
| $15,000 to $24,999 | 5 | 1 |
| $35,000 to $49,999 | 5 | 1 |
| $50,000 to $74,000 | 15 | 3 |
| $75,000 to $99,999 | 15 | 3 |
| $100,000 to $149,999 | 30 | 6 |
| ≥$150,000 | 20 | 4 |

with other participants, they were scheduled for an individual interview. Researchers facilitated the interviews, trained student assistants took notes, and each interview was audio recorded with participant consent.

Participants completed an informed consent and brief demographic questionnaire before beginning the interview. The semistructured interview guide contained questions that prompted participants to discuss their perceptions of sexual assault victimization consequences among LGBTQ+ college students (see online supplemental materials). Participants responded to questions including, "What is your understanding of sexual assault among the LGBT community here at [the university]," and "How do you think a member of the LGBT community at [the university] who was sexually assaulted might feel about telling a friend or loved one about the assault?" Interview questions asked participants to discuss their perceptions of the social norms among LGBTQ+ students at the university as a whole. Researchers provided each participant with a $10 gift card for their time. We continued recruitment and data collection until we had reached data saturation.

## Data Analysis

The research team (including six research assistants) coded the transcripts from audio-recorded interviews using thematic analysis in accordance with the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and managed via NVivo 12 qualitative software program (QSR International, 2015). Thematic analysis consisted of five primary phases involving two rounds of coding in which one assigned research assistant conducted the primary coding of a transcript and another subsequently audited the coding.

The team began by reviewing the content of the transcripts to develop an intimate familiarity with the data, brainstorm potential themes, and code the transcripts according to initial themes. To audit the initial round of coding, pairs of research assistants evaluated each other's initial themes and coding, a process which often included suggesting additions, deletions, rewording, and restructuring to each transcript's individual hierarchy of themes and changes to the excerpts coded under a given theme. The pairs of research assistants then met to discuss the auditing changes to consensus.

The third and fourth authors then examined the themes that emerged from the 12 transcripts and consolidated the most prominent, recurring, and descriptive themes into a single codebook consisting of six major themes and multiple levels of subthemes. The authors and research assistants discussed revisions to the semifinalized codebook to consensus during several meetings. The second round of coding followed a similar procedure to the initial coding. The authors implemented final suggested edits to the codebook when the second round of coding and auditing was complete, culminating in the results. The interview excerpts presented were edited lightly for clarity. For example, filler words such as "like" and "um" were removed, and longer quotes were condensed.

## Trustworthiness and Positionality

We took several steps to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Morrow, 2005). To address and enhance credibility, note takers scribed field observations during all interviews, research assistants consulted with each other often about the coding structure, and the authors and research assistants audited the development of the themes, subthemes, and codes. We addressed dependability by keeping research memos about the data and emergent themes.

With regard to our positionality as authors (Bourke, 2014), two authors are professors at a state university in a semirural community, and the two other authors are recent college graduates of the same university. One of the author's scholarship focuses on sexual assault victimization and another author's scholarship focuses on LGBTQ+ mental health and wellness; our collaboration was purposeful given the intersections of this qualitative study. The research team also included additional student researchers who helped with coding. Across the research team, two identify as queer and nonbinary, two identify as cisgender, pansexual women, and two identify as cisgender and heterosexual women. The research team discussed positionality often as we considered our various intersecting identities as well as the identities, cultures, and contexts of the participants (Bourke, 2014). Our reflexivity included various conversations about our own positionality as we sought to interpret statements in the context of LGBTQ+ cultures,

campus climate and culture, social norms about assault, and the intersections of these topics. We also noted the status differences between student researchers and professors and intentionally made space for student voices as we discussed various codes, argued to consensus, and made meaning from the group interviews.

## Results

Analysis resulted in the identification of six major themes and 14 subthemes related to perceptions of social norms about sexual assault and associated consequences in LGBTQ+ college students. These themes were: (a) Interpersonal Concerns About Disclosure, (b) Consequences of Sexual Assault, (c) Hesitance to Engage with Institutions Following Sexual Assault, (d) Sense of LGBTQ+ Community, (e) Cisheteronormativity, and (f) Changes to Improve Institutional Support. Table 2 shows the organization of the themes and their associated subthemes. Cisheteronormativity is a powerful concept woven throughout the data, and it has been included as an entire thematic category but it is important to note that the effects of cisheteronormativity can be seen in each of the major themes, given how pervasive and ingrained heterosexism and cissexism are in beliefs and social structures.

### Theme 1–Interpersonal Concerns About Disclosure

Participants viewed disclosure as a difficult and personal endeavor for all sexual assault survivors; however, participants emphasized that LGBTQ+ survivors would face unique barriers to disclosure and be more hesitant than non-LGBTQ+ survivors to disclose through formal channels such as the university or local police department. An LGBTQ+ survivor would have a *greater willingness to disclose to people who are LGBTQ+ affirming*, and reporting was complicated by *fear of outing oneself* through disclosure.

### Subtheme: Greater Willingness to Disclose to People Who Are LGBTQ+ Affirming

Most participants believed that close, strong relationships facilitated disclosure. Further, several participants spoke about survivors feeling safer to disclose to their peers, friends, and family who affirm and support the survivors' LGBTQ+ iden-

tities. Conversely, survivors would be less likely to disclose to people who did not provide support for their LGBTQ+ identities. Some participants specifically described that they were not accepted as LGBTQ+ by their families and discussed how nonaffirmation would negatively influence their potential willingness to disclose an assault to loved ones. One participant stated,

> Not all of my queer friends but a lot of my queer friends are either not very close with their families, or not supported by their families, or just completely, their families cut them out of their lives. So—that probably would not be a safe place for them to go to.

Further, participants reported that disclosing to another LGBTQ+ student would be preferable to disclosing to someone who is not part of any LGBTQ+ community. As one participant noted, "If . . . the person is LGBT and disclosing to someone who's not in the community, I really don't know. I would think it would be a little more difficult."

### Subtheme: Fear of Outing Oneself

There was an overall concern for negative public reaction from the university community for being out, regardless of sexual assault victimization. Participants described instances of "public backlash" for being out and proud, for example hearing comments from others that LGBTQ+ students ". . . better watch it ∴ there are a lot of young men here who don't really like who [they] are and what [they] represent." Regarding victimization, participants discussed a perception that disclosing the details, such as the identity of the perpetrator or the circumstances of the assault, may unintentionally out or expose the survivor to questions about their identities. This outcome could affect an LGBTQ+ survivor's decision to seek out support after an assault, as described by one participant, "you also have to out yourself to even tell someone that you're this victim of assault." Facing the potential of outing oneself to others may further strip any feelings of safety and control in an already devastating situation. Several participants cited this fear as a complicating factor in both formal (i.e., to friends or family) and informal disclosure (i.e., to the Title IX Office or police).

**Table 2**
*LGBTQ+ Perceptions of Sexual Assault Themes and Subthemes*

| Themes | Subthemes |
| --- | --- |
| Interpersonal concerns about disclosure | 1. Greater willingness to disclose to people who are LGBTQ+ affirming |
| | 2. Fear of outing oneself |
| Consequences of sexual assault | 3. Mental or emotional |
| | 4. Social |
| Hesitance to engage with institutions following sexual assault | 5. Barriers to utilizing services |
| | 6. Expectations and prior negative experiences |
| Sense of LGBTQ+ community | 7. Community solidarity |
| | 8. Lack of supportive or cohesive queer community |
| | 9. Normalized nonconsent in queer community |
| Cisheteronormativity | 10. As a barrier to services being tailored to LGBTQ+ communities |
| | 11. As a barrier to understanding sexual assault within LGBTQ+ communities |
| Changes to improve institutional support | 12. Increased support for survivors |
| | 13. Need for LGBTQ+ affirming spaces |
| | 14. Need for increased education |

## Theme 2–Consequences of Sexual Assault

Participants agreed that sexual assault victimization may incur a variety of consequences, specifically focusing on the *mental or emotional* and *social* consequences for LGBTQ+ survivors.

### Subtheme: Mental or Emotional

Participants made strong statements about potential psychological consequences for LGBTQ+ survivors. Additionally, participants expressed concern that survivors would believe that the assault invalidated their identities or the legitimacy of the victimization experiences. Some participants also believed that survivors may question their identities after an assault or feel as though the assault invalidated their identity. Conversely, survivors may believe that they "deserved" the assault because of how they identify.

### Subtheme: Social

Participants reported mixed perspectives on the social consequences of victimization for LGBTQ+ students. Although participants commonly expressed the beliefs that sexual assault perpetrators and survivors alike could include people of any sexual orientation and gender identity, participants repeatedly discussed scenarios in which both perpetrators and survivors identified as LGBTQ+. Similarly, participants generally described social consequences of sexual assault victimization from within LGBTQ+ student communities. Some believed that LGBTQ+ community members would be ready sources of support and solidarity to survivors, and a few stated that if they personally were victimized, they would be tentatively hopeful about receiving support from LGBTQ+ students. On the one hand, one participant noted that "[the] social consequences [to the perpetrator] would be probably pretty significant . . . pretty immediate and pretty unilateral—almost excommunication." On the other hand, others believed that there would be a lack of social support even to the point of the community ostracizing and isolating survivors, with one participant stating, "I have a close friend . . . who had to stop hanging out with her particular group of friends because she was sexually assaulted by one of them and they wouldn't stop inviting him to things." Further, a few participants felt that survivors would simply be "not believed," and that their peers would engage in victim-blaming discourse.

## Theme 3–Hesitance to Engage With Institutions After Sexual Assault

Participants believed that survivors would view potential formal engagement with the university, police, and health agencies with fear and feelings of mistrust. Participants reported several *barriers to utilizing services*, including hesitance to report sexual assault or receive support services. Some of these barriers were related to preconceived *expectations and prior negative experiences* engaging with institutions.

### Subtheme: Barriers to Utilizing Services

Participants discussed several barriers to reporting victimization or utilizing resources. Participants described a general lack of knowledge or understanding of the services offered to survivors of sexual assault as a major barrier to utilizing available resources, with one participant noting, "if a situation like that happened to me and I felt like I needed to go report it somewhere, I wouldn't know who to talk to." Many participants expressed unease about the probability that LGBTQ+ survivors would receive services that were mindful of, and tailored to, the queer community. "From my own personal experience, the [University] Health Center staff, as a whole, is really ignorant of queer issues and, just, realities." Without having a supportive, culturally competent place to go, many LGBTQ+ survivors would simply not seek out resources. A few participants elaborated that even if resources were tailored, most campus resources were simply understaffed and unavailable to most students. These participants were skeptical about the prospect of LGBTQ+ survivors being able to receive the support they needed from these services. As one participant noted, "I've heard that [University Counseling Services are] pretty terrible and they pretty much only take you if you're suicidal." Overall, there was a sense of distrust in campus and community resources, such as local police, university police, campus administrators, the Title IX Office, and the university in general, which was often cited as a barrier to reporting or accessing services.

### Subtheme: Expectations and Prior Negative Experiences

Many participants expressed the belief that LGBTQ+ survivors would be fearful of engaging with institutions about their victimization. Participants offered anecdotes from other members of LGBTQ+ communities that emphasized negative and inhospitable interactions that bolstered their low expectations of receiving support from formal institutions. One participant summed up the negative expectations, "I think, as kind of a minority group on campus, feeling, even further down the line, like, 'If I tell somebody, these [cisgender and heterosexual] people won't get help, so why am I gonna get help?'" They reiterated that reporting sexual assault is difficult for any survivor, and that institutions' staff and administrators' negative views of their gender or sexual identities would further complicate the reporting process. As one participant stated, ". . . non-members of the LGBTQ [community] don't always get justice for what happens to them, so I think you kind of—feeling even less hopeful."

Other participants also noted fear of judgment because of either their LGBTQ+ identities or because of their victimization. Participants expressed particularly strong negative reactions to the prospect of engaging with university or local police departments. They described the dread that LGBTQ+ survivors would experience when deciding to report their victimization to police. Some cited histories and current patterns of police brutality against LGBTQ+ communities and people of color in describing survivors' reluctance to expose themselves to secondary victimization in the form of harassment and humiliation at the hands of law enforcement personnel. As one participant stated,

> Do you think just, the general vibe of police, in general, and hypermasculinity that they represent and—uniforms and the weaponization makes it [a] really scary situation to walk into? To have to tell your really intimate, traumatizing story to some burly, huge man who you are probably assuming is, very heterosexual.

## Theme 4: Sense of LGBTQ+ Community

Participants spoke about the role of community in the lives of LGBTQ+ sexual assault survivors and the sense of community that exists, or fails to exist, for LGBTQ+ students in the broader

campus community and the local off-campus community. Though some perceived positive sources of support and *community solidarity*, others described feeling unwelcome in their communities, including the *lack of a supportive or cohesive LGBTQ+ community*. Participants also noted the norms in LGBTQ+ communities that negatively impact victimization, including the *normalization of nonconsent within the LGBTQ+ community*.

### Subtheme: Community Solidarity

Some participants spoke about having access to a supportive LGBTQ+ community via friend groups, gender-inclusive housing, campus clubs, and campus resources centers such as an LGBTQ+ pride center or cross-cultural center. Participants noted that access to LGBTQ+ affirming spaces, friends, and groups helped them feel a greater sense of belonging. Participants also talked about the roles of their supportive communities in helping them or others open up about topics such as mental health and sexual assault victimization. Inclusive housing in particular was a source of LGBTQ+ community support where people made friends, found community, and felt that they could open up about experiences of sexual assault.

### Subtheme: Lack of Supportive or Cohesive Queer Community

Though some participants reported having found or created their own supportive communities, many reported that the LGBTQ+ campus community was incohesive and could seem "cliquey," and stated that some held stereotypes about and self-segregated from marginalized segments within the community such as bisexual people, transgender individuals, and people of color. Participants explained that there are very few hangout spaces or central meeting spaces for LGBTQ+ students, and those that exist are not always welcoming, depending on the social hierarchical status of the crowd.

Students also talked about perceptions of sexual assault within LGBTQ+ communities as they relate to specific identity groups. According to participants, the stereotype that "bisexual people are more promiscuous" is prevalent within the LGBTQ+ community and people might dismiss an assault in saying that the survivor "obviously wanted it." Participants also reported that the community might support the perpetrator and ostracize the survivor depending on the perpetrator's popularity. Because of the small nature of the LGBTQ+ campus social circles, participants noted that survivors may face pressure to not disrupt the community by disclosing about the assault in cases which the perpetrator also identifies as LGBTQ+.

### Subtheme: Normalized Nonconsent in Queer Community

Participants noted some problematic norms within segments of LGBTQ+ communities that perpetuate a culture of nonconsensual activity and sexual assault. Several participants discussed the roles of misogyny and rape culture in perpetuating nonconsensual groping in bars, stigma against saying "no" to sexual activity, pushing of physical boundaries, and coercive language in LGBTQ+ communities. A more subtle manifestation of this culture of nonconsent included experiences of LGBTQ+ people invading the personal spaces of other community members. Additionally, some talked about feeling emotionally coerced into sexual activity, and described patterns in which "tops" may treat "bottoms" (or those perceived as typically engaging in receptive sexual activity) poorly, resulting in people feeling unable to say no to a sexual encounter. Others believed that women act with more leniency to push sexual boundaries as they are not generally "expected to be the ones who are sexually assaulting someone else" and people might not perceive a nonconsensual encounter perpetrated by a woman as sexual assault. However, others believed that sexual assault might be more prevalent in gay men communities compared with lesbian women communities in which sexual assault victimization "happens way less."

Some participants noted that these norms prevent LGBTQ+ college students from understanding the distinction between consensual and nonconsensual activity, especially if either party was drinking or lacking affirmative consent (i.e., offering unambiguous and voluntary agreement at each stage of sexual activity). However, it is important to note that some participants reported that sexual assault might happen less among LGBTQ+ students "because LGBT culture has a culture of consent around it."

## Theme 5: Cisheteronormativity

A transgender woman participant initially used the term "cisheteronormativity" in describing the restricting impact of cisheteronormative environments on LGBTQ+ students' comfort in discussing gender identity and sexual orientation even in classes in which identity is relevant to the course content. Cisheteronormativity was also discussed as a structural barrier that impedes understanding of LGBTQ+ people and communities, including how sexual and gender minorities may perpetrate or experience sexual assault victimization. There were various conversations about the roles of heterosexist and cissexist expectations about sexual assault across interviews, including beliefs about who can be a perpetrator, and how these beliefs and expectations inform norms within LGBTQ+ communities. Specifically, cisheteronormativity was seen as a *barrier to services being tailored to LGBTQ+ communities* and *as a barrier to understanding sexual assault within LGBTQ+ communities*.

### Subtheme: As a Barrier to Services Being Tailored to LGBTQ+ Communities

The role of cisheteronormativity was prominent in exploring beliefs about how LGBTQ+ sexual assault survivors might approach the decision of whether to formally report a sexual assault to the police, the Title IX Office, or to other staff or faculty at the university. Students noted that the public might be confused about same-sex sexual assault or any assault in which the gender identities of the perpetrator and victim transgress societal expectations. One participant noted that sexual assault is "definitely looked at as a male preying on a female, but if it's two males, I feel like a lot of men out there would just be confused." Some noted that reporting procedures would likely not be tailored to LGBTQ+ students and that the police department or reporting agency might not be approving of the "LGBT lifestyle," barriers that likely prevent sexual minority and transgender students from reporting sexual assault. Others reported that Title IX workers or police might not take sexual assault within LGBTQ+ communities seriously, particularly if the perpetrator was a woman, explaining that

sexual assault is "especially a problem for lesbian women. Rape in the lesbian community is just not taken seriously."

Participants also explained their hesitance to believe that survivors would seek support services because participants were uncertain that doctors and therapists would understand survivors' experiences and LGBTQ+ identities. Students noted that it would be "nerve-racking" to seek support about issues of sexual assault because of the fear that the provider might not be LGBTQ+ friendly or knowledgeable. Specifically, students were worried that survivors' identities and experiences would not be understood because providers may use cisheterosexist norms as reference points to try to understand LGBTQ+ survivors' experiences. For transgender sexual assault survivors, gender dysphoria about parts of their body violated during the assault would pose exceptional challenges to "physically let[ting] [physicians] touch you, and look you over, and take evidence."

### Subtheme: As a Barrier to Understanding Sexual Assault Within LGBTQ+ Communities

Participants discussed heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions both within and outside of LGBTQ+ communities about sexual assault as barriers to understanding the full variation of sexual assault experiences. One participant noted that ". . . if [an LGBTQ+ student] were assaulted by somebody of the same sex . . . nobody would take it as seriously as somebody from a different sex assaulting them . . . 'Oh, how can a girl actually sexual assault a man?'" Participants stated that most people do not consider sexual assault between people of the same sex or gender. According to the participants, this lack of understanding is most prevalent among straight and cisgender people; however, participants also believed that these false assumptions about sexual assault also permeate LGBTQ+ communities. Given the systemic nature of cisheteronormativity in society, it is unsurprising that these pervasive, inaccurate beliefs about which experiences "count" as sexual assault also infiltrate the beliefs within LGBTQ+ communities. Some explained that LGBTQ+ students do not see themselves represented in prevention efforts, educational materials, or presentations at their university, an absence of visibility that may pose a challenge to identifying sexual assault or coercion when they have occurred. The lack of representation may also obscure information about how to process the experience and seek criminal justice or any support services.

### Theme 6: Changes to Improve Institutional Support

Participants discussed the changes they hoped to see to better support LGBTQ+ college students, specifically sexual assault survivors. Participants put forward several recommendations to help better support students, including *increased support for survivors*, more *LGBTQ+ affirming spaces*, and *increased education*.

### Subtheme: Increased Support for Survivors

Participants noted a need for more support across campus for survivors in general, and LGBTQ+ survivors specifically. Participants reported that "campus resources are tailored toward one specific type of experience with sexual assault," that is, a cisheteronormative experience, and believed that if the sexual assault did not fit this mold that the support services would not be nuanced to ostensibly nonnormative experiences. Participants explained that

campus police, university administrators, and others on campus need to reach out to build relationships with LGBTQ+ students, and to help LGBTQ+ campus communities gain trust in the institutions as a first step. Students talked about the lack of trust with institutions and emphasized that the institutions need to function effectively; otherwise, students will opt not to report their assault or seek services. One participant noted that helping LGBTQ+ survivors trust the reporting process and seek support involves institutions "actually doing outreach, in an earnest way— that's the first step." Additionally, students stressed that support services for survivors and LGBTQ+ students need increased funding and consistent staffing to accommodate all who need support services.

### Subtheme: Need for LGBTQ+ Affirming Spaces

Participants spoke about believing that both the campus communities and local communities can be inhospitable to members of LGBTQ+ communities. One transgender woman participant reported that she was postponing her gender transition because of the lack of safety on campus and in the community. Therefore, participants reported a need for more LGBTQ+ affirming spaces on campus to help students find accepting communities. They noted that having more organizations for LGBTQ+ students and increasing the physical size of the campus LGBTQ+ pride center might make the social environment on campus feel less "cliquey." Participants reported that having affirming spaces on college campuses can be particularly impactful for LGBTQ+ students who are estranged from relatives or friends who are unsupportive or unaware of their sexual orientation or gender identities, have a hard time talking about their assault, or simply need access to a welcoming community of people who understand and accept their identities.

### Subtheme: Need for Increased Education

Participants explained that prevention efforts and education about bystander intervention are in place on campus; however, many did not know the options available to survivors after experiencing an assault. Participants wanted to know more about how to support friends who have experienced sexual assault and noted that some people do not know what to say to provide informational or emotional support and might say something insensitive to the survivor. They also wanted more education about the services available to sexual assault survivors and how to access those services. Some noted that having resource guides and access to reporting protocols online might help survivors what to expect when reporting an assault and decide whether to report. In addition to wanting more education for LGBTQ+ students to better support their peers, participants wanted others on campus—including staff, faculty, and administrators—to receive more education about how to support survivors and LGBTQ+ students. Participants also stressed that the education the university disseminates to students about how to protect oneself from sexual assault should shift to focusing on the imperative to receive affirmative consent from sexual partners so that the education is no longer "super victim-blamey."

The desire for education tailored to LGBTQ+ communities about sexual assault, affirmative consent, and healthy boundaries was also prominent in the focus groups. Participants reported that

cisheteronormative narratives about college sexual assault victimization can pose challenges for LGBTQ+ people to know what "counts" as sexual assault and how to ensure that all parties in a sexual encounter are freely giving affirmative consent. One student noted that "people, depending on the circumstances, aren't necessarily sure whether or not what happened to them is sexual assault." The student went on to explain that the "lack of education or lack of clarity prevents a lot of sexual assaults from ever being reported." The student talked about being "emotionally coerced" and socially conditioned to go along with sexual acts he was uncomfortable with. Students believed that sexual assault education and prevention efforts must provide college students with adequate information to identify sexually victimizing behavior in scenarios involving perpetrators and victims of all gender identities and sexual orientations.

## Discussion

The present study was an initial effort to address the need for exploratory research into the intensified burden of victimization and consequences in LGBTQ+ college students through perceptions of social norms of LGBTQ+ students. Participants reported both optimistic (i.e., support from LGBTQ+ communities, tentative hopefulness about being able to access services) and pessimistic opinions (i.e., institutional and cultural barriers to tailored reporting procedures and resources) regarding the prospect of LGBTQ+ survivors seeking out and receiving support and services following victimization, an ambivalence that is seen in both general populations (Orchowski et al., 2012; Sabina & Ho, 2014) as well as LGBTQ+ populations (Jackson et al., 2017). Most participants expressed doubt that LGBTQ+ survivors would receive the support and services they need. The poor relationships between formal institutions and LGBTQ+ communities facilitate intense distrust in the university and local police. Participants perceived that the formal systems in place to address and adjudicate sexual assault systematically promote inadequate responses from these systems and compound negative survivor outcomes (Smidt et al., 2019; Smith & Freyd, 2013). The institutional betrayal LGBTQ+ students experience and learn about through their communities reinforces LGBTQ+ communities' distrust of the institutions that are supposed to serve them.

Many participants reported anecdotes about LGBTQ+ community members receiving inadequate or poor treatment when seeking and receiving both sexual assault related as well as general services from formal institutions, a finding that is supported by recent literature (Bradford et al., 2013; Hood et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2015; Serpe & Nadal, 2017). Participants referred to many instances of heterosexual and cisgender survivors receiving inadequate resources as strong indications that LGBTQ+ survivors would be even less likely to receive helpful resources than survivors who do not face cisheterosexist barriers to accessing support. Indeed, samples of largely heterosexual female survivors in college report primarily choosing not to seek campus or police services after a sexual assault (Sabina & Ho, 2014). Our results suggest that LGBTQ+ survivors may also be less likely to seek out services because of fear of not being believed, as Richardson and colleagues (2015) similarly reported.

Participants believed that their university does not prioritize the needs of LGBTQ+ students, and referred to a lack of space,

training, and funding dedicated to this population as evidence. Most spaces on campus are not mindful or intentionally inclusive of LGBTQ+ students, which limits the accessibility of campus services offered in those spaces to this population. Recent research has found that institutional policies and programs (i.e., student clubs, resource centers) that recognize and protect LGBTQ+ students can foster a reduction of cisheterosexism and discrimination, an increase in self-acceptance, and a decrease in mental distress in LGBTQ+ students (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Hong et al., 2016; Woodford et al., 2018). Even if survivors are able to access services, the lack of training for staff regarding LGBTQ+ specific identities, experiences, and needs decreases the likelihood of tailoring services to be supportive for these students. Inadequate funding for spaces and training signals to students that universities and other formal services providers (i.e., police departments) do not value LGBTQ+ communities.

Major mental and social consequences such as distress, poor mental health, negative coping, and self-blame are well-documented in college student sexual assault survivors (Carey et al., 2018; Lindquist et al., 2013; Sigurvinsdottir & Ullman, 2015; Stappenbeck et al., 2015). Overall, survivors may dismiss their own sexual assault as "not that bad" to cope with the victimization (Relyea et al., 2015; Spencer et al., 2017). LGBTQ+ survivors may also experience unique negative consequences related to their identities and minority status. For example, victimization may make the survivor question their sexual or gender identity, and survivors may blame their identities for their victimization. These consequences could further bolster the myriad mental and emotional stressors that survivors often experience and lead to higher likelihood of poor coping and negative academic and health outcomes in LGBTQ+ survivors.

Preferred recipients of disclosure were close peers (Dworkin et al., 2016; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012, 2015; Sabina & Ho, 2014) who were knowledgeable and supportive of a survivor's identities. Participants saw these people as the most likely to provide positive social reactions and support after disclosure of sexual assault. As little research has examined issues of disclosure in LGBTQ+ survivors, it is important to note that this population warrants special consideration regarding disclosure in future research. Fear of being outed during disclosure was a major point of concern, as was disclosure to family members who do not accept the survivor's sexual and/or gender identities. Coupled with institutional betrayal and minority stress, consequences to LGBTQ+ survivors may be more pervasive and severe than to the general survivor population (Smith et al., 2016).

With regard to cisheteronormativity, participants reported that the heteronormative assumptions about sexual assault would make it difficult to know when, and if, verbal coercion in an LGBTQ+ relationship or sexual encounter might be considered sexual assault. Research suggests that endorsement of gender norms and heteronormative beliefs are positively correlated with accepting verbal sexual coercion strategies (Eaton & Matamala, 2014). Some participants noted that the lines between consensual and nonconsensual sexual activities can seem unclear, and the lack of LGBTQ+ representation in prevention efforts does nothing to clarify this issue. Further, participants believed that cisheteronormative assumptions about sexual assault also present difficulties to survivors in seeking support or reporting their assault given the fear and trepida-

tion that others would not understand their LGBTQ+ identities or invalidate their experiences as sexual assault.

The results of this study underscore the power with which cisheteronormativity drives the narrative about sexual assault in ways that limit LGBTQ+ people's access to education, resources, and reporting procedures that are accepting, affirming, and tailored to the needs of sexual minority and transgender people. Given its societal pervasiveness, cisheteronormativity also stifles LGBTQ+ peoples' understanding of sexual assault, coercion, and nonconsent. Cisheteronormative assumptions, biases, and systemic oppression can inhibit LGBTQ+ survivors from seeking support, reporting, or even understanding their victimization as such.

## Limitations

Several limitations should be considered in light of the results of this study. First, it is possible that only participants who were comfortable engaging in discussions related to sexual assault within LGBTQ+ communities chose to participate. It is important to note that limited transferability based on participant selection (and self-selection) is an inherent function of qualitative research (Patton, 1999). Another important limitation is that, per university IRB requirements, the interviewers (researchers) were mandated reporters. This circumstance may have influenced the content that participants were willing to share about their specific experiences, feelings, and beliefs. Because of this unfortunate institutional constraint, we cannot know if these data are the actual perceptions of victims of sexual assault because we did not collect this data. Therefore, the data may not necessarily represent the lived experiences, views, opinions, or voices of victims and, therefore, results and interpretation must be treated with caution. However, we find immense value in understanding the perceived norms about sexual assault victimization in LGBTQ+ communities, as perceptions influence psychosocial factors and behavior. Lastly, we collected data using audio instead of video recordings to further protect participant confidentiality. As a result, we were generally unable to connect quotes to specific participants.

## Future Directions for Services

It is evident that cisheteronormativity plays a major role in social norm perceptions about sexual assault. The influence of cisheteronormativity on sexual assault beliefs is particularly problematic for those who do not fit into the cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions about identities and relationships, namely LGBTQ+ people. More education is needed for university staff to understand the LGBTQ+ students' experiences and sexual assault within the context of sexual orientation and gender diversity. Education is crucial to ensuring that support and reporting staff who encounter sexual assault survivors will, at the very least, be aware that sexual assault occurs in the context of LGBTQ+ relationships and same-sex or same-gender sexual activity. Beyond awareness, resources and support staff should be knowledgeable about terminology and provide support services that are tailored to the needs of LGBTQ+ students.

Tailored education is also needed for students regarding sexual assault in LGBTQ+ communities. The prevailing cisheteronormative narrative of cisgender men exclusively as perpetrators and cisgender women exclusively as victims prevents people from

understanding men as victims, women and perpetrators, or sexual assault in the context of queer and transgender peoples' lives. Increased awareness regarding the roles that traditional gender norms and heteronormativity play in perpetuating a culture of sexual assault among LGBTQ+ college students would be beneficial for all students given the role that patriarchal structures and systems play in maintaining rape culture. Finally, promoting awareness about resources, services, and reporting procedures are needed to help survivors access services.

## Future Directions for Research

This study provides an in-depth understanding about sexual assault victimization norms among LGBTQ+ college students; however, more research is needed to further understand the unique experiences of sexual assault in LGBTQ+ communities, both during college and beyond. The impacts of sexual assault and the myriad negative residual effects have been studied extensively, yet relatively fewer studies focus on LGBTQ+ college students and their perceptions and lived experiences about issues of sexual assault, consent, cisheterosexist norms, and barriers to reporting or seeking services. More research is needed to understand the perceptions and social norms of sexual minorities and gender diverse people, and also to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ people who have experienced sexual assault victimization.

As LGBTQ+ communities are not monolithic and likely hold different beliefs, norms, and perceptions of sexual assault, future research should consider the unique experiences of lesbian women, gay men, bisexual and pansexual people, as well as transgender and gender diverse people to identify the common and unique experiences within LGBTQ+ communities. Research examining the experiences of people with multiple marginalized identities (e.g., LGBTQ+ students of color, LGBTQ+ people with different abilities) is also needed. For example, transgender women of color face some of the highest rates of sexual violence (James et al., 2015), and research is needed to understand the unique factors at play for those with multiple marginalized identities. Overall, more qualitative and quantitative studies are necessary to better target prevention efforts for LGBTQ+ communities, support the common and unique needs of LGBTQ+ survivors, and combat the cisheteronormative norms and structures that perpetuate sexual assault both within and outside of LGBTQ+ communities.

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