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PERCEPTIONS OF ACCEPTANCE AND INCLUSION: THE INFLUENCE OF LEGISLATION AND MEDIA ON LGBT STUDENT IDENTITY

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students are at heightened risk of suicide ideation and attempts at suicide and are disproportionately affected by negative health outcomes associated with social exclusion. Despite the problematic integration of LGBT legitimacy and rights into mainstream discourse, this community group, itself formed of multiple sub-groups (Pew Research Center 2013), has long been targeted by commercial marketers who have recognised that LGBT groups typically have high levels of disposable income and an above-average level of education (Green 2016; Witeck 2016). Recent trends by suicide prevention organisations to capitalise on the success of LGBT commercial marketing have led to a series of international prevention efforts; and these are typified by inclusion-based digital media campaigns focused on building cohesion between disparate communities in college environments. Concurrently, a portfolio of legislative changes in the US and the UK has given LGBT people new ground in equality and civil rights. The primary focus of this research is such perceived influence of the programmes described by LGBT students.

Introduction

LGBT youth in the United States are more than twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to attempt suicide in grades 7 -12 (Russell & Joyner 2001), with further elevated suicide risks identified for transgender youth (Grossman & D'Augelli 2007). The social environment inhabited by LGBT young people has been identified as a key component of their feelings of exclusion/inclusion and associated suicide risk in a study of 11th grade students (Hatzenbuehler 2011). This underlies the advice from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that LGBT youth require a safe, supportive and inclusive environment in which it is critical they are protected from harm.

Aside from general CDC advice regarding inclusivity programmes (CDC 2014), the principal response of community-leading organisations has been to harness the use of digital communication media to 'speak' directly to LGBT youth with the intent of promoting inclusion in their environmental spheres. Three high-visibility digital media campaigns, *Straight But Not Narrow; Give A Damn!; It Gets Better*, were launched in the US in 2010. All three campaigns use online media channels as their mode of access and delivery, generated international discursive online communities and had elements of celebrity representation. *Straight But Not Narrow* (SBNN) and *Give A Damn!* intentionally sought overt representation from heterosexual celebrities as their spokespeople, particularly individuals who would be easily identifiable from entertainment media by young people.

The use of heterosexual spokespeople in high-profile campaigns aimed at improving social inclusion for LGBT youth and reducing isolation and suicide risk is reflected in the proliferation of 'gay-straight alliances' in US educational settings. Such

clubs are intended to foster a safe and inclusive environment for students with different sexual identities and to provide a framework from which to reduce social exclusion (GSA Network 2009; St. John et al 2014). Whereas public health campaigns aimed at improving the health of LGBT people typically present an exclusive visualisation of the target group, gay-straight alliances, the SBNN and *Give a Damn!* campaigns instead shift focus to the acts and responsibilities of heterosexual 'allies' who are presented as community gatekeepers with the ability to reduce homophobia amongst male-dominated heteronormative community groups.

Such alliances in the United Kingdom have less of a traceable history, with localized groups forming sporadically in response to specific problems with homophobia, such as the formation of a gay-straight alliance at a school in Wembley, London in 2012 (Vasagar 2012). Such alliances, when led effectively, can reduce homophobia and promote inclusion and empowerment amongst the wider community of the educational institution in which they exist (Russell et al 2009; St. John 2014).

The representation of gay men in mass advertising media has been shown to contribute significantly to their sense of self-empowerment and self-identity despite the overwhelmingly heteronormative environment in which such media exists (Searle 1995; Tsai 2011). Whether such media contributes meaningfully to concepts of inclusivity, or whether it serves to reinforce cultural stereotypes and constructs is of on-going concern (Aldoory & Parry-Giles 2005; Allen 2007). There are precedents for understanding the perception of branding and representation of targeted media by specific socio-cultural groups (Martens 2010) and for judging the level of embeddedness a media campaign has had on its intended audience (Hartley 2002; Farvid and Braun 2006). Such research, particularly with an audience selected for their self-declared sexual identity, has indicated that audience perception is often more easily

influenced by imagery than by text (Kates 1999; Trussler & Marchand 2005; Oakenfull et al 2008; Oakenfull 2013).

Conversely, Oakenfull et al (2013) found evidence that LGBT people respond more positively to media materials that are not visually representative of their identity, as they prefer not to be singled out in the media landscape. This has myriad implications for understanding media influence on LGBT identity as it suggests that not all students wish to have visual representations of their identity promoted in the public sphere, a concern substantiated by Campbell (2005), who found that media explicitly targeting LGBT people serves only to 'other' them. Nevertheless, the homonormatization of LGBT environmental spheres by media campaigns can often repair the sociological damage caused by experiential discrimination (Goltz 2013). Aguilar (2014) cites Heineken, Lucky Charms and Marriott as three notable brands whose media campaigns have worked to improve the lived environment and societal conditions for LGBT people. For example, Heineken cancelled sponsorship of a major public event in Boston when organisers refused to allow LGBT groups to openly participate. Instead the company launched a media-based equality campaign. Similarly, Rogers (2016) highlights Aviva insurance and Barclays Bank as organisations that actively embed a positive environment for LGBT employees and consumers based on date from a professional LGBT network that indicates 37% of consumers prefer to do business with organisations who have an overt positivity about LGBT people.

There is substantial evidence supporting the use of targeted media campaigns to reach LGBT people for commercial purposes but there is little such research to indicate the effectiveness of such techniques in health promotion, non-commercial settings. Researchers have been vocally critical of the *It Gets Better* campaign, citing the overgeneralization of LGBT post-education experience (Sanchez 2010) and the

potential to give gay youth false hope regarding the stability of their future (Tseng 2010). Despite this, little work has been completed to understand the perception of students, LGBT and otherwise, of such work. This indicates a significant gap in research-generated knowledge.

The existence of targeted, structured campaigns takes place within the political climate of the locale in which they exist, blurred by changing concepts of citizenship and human relationships (Hermes 2006; Saucier & Caron 2008). LGBT young peoples' perceptions of empowerment and the methods they use to manifest this to enact social change are strongly linked to the existence of gay-straight alliances and the local and national political climate (Russell et al 2009), particularly when considered alongside public perception of LGBT identities and the homophobia associated with this (Dworkin & Yi 2003). The adults who represent majority views in the ostensibly democratic societies of the US and the UK typically set dominant political frames and discourse. This acts as a powerful influencing factor in the environmental and social experiences of LGBT youth in educational settings (Talburt 2010). The political structure of both countries is therefore a critical influencing factor of how LGBT students interpret and engage with campaigns aimed at them, their social communities and their environmental sphere. However, the 'normalizing logic' that suggests LGBT people and heterosexuals in developed countries are inherently the same largely fails to result in permanent, embedded political change (University of Michigan 2016).

The Defence of Marriage Act (DOMA), enacted in 1996, was passed by the US Congress as a political strategy from which to socially engineer the relegation of marital partnerships exclusively to heterosexual couples. From its inception, DOMA was criticised as restrictive and an indication that the US government was overreaching its authority (Ruskay-Kidd 1997) and that US Congress had failed to present its case that

same-sex relationships are morally undesirable compared to opposite-sex relationships (Butler 1998; Adam 2003). The Act was found to significantly undermine social cohesion outside of mainstream educational establishments when the Center for American Progress found it to negatively impact US military personnel of all ages and ranks (Miller & McKean 2013). The significant negative outcomes for LGBT citizens directly impacted by the Act (Koppelman 1998) lasted until 2011 when the Obama administration found the Act to be unconstitutional. Localised counter-arguments to this view continue and the impact on LGBT youth who are unsure if they represent a full, contributory citizen of their country has not yet been assessed or understood. The impact can be estimated with current understanding of the impact of negative and exclusory social environments (Hatzenbuehler 2011).

Social cohesion and LGBT representation in the US military were improved significantly in September 2010 with the enactment of the 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' Repeal Act. This Act removed the need for serving LGBT military personnel to operate under secrecy (Miller & McKean 2013) and fostered large-scale discourse over the ability of LGBT individuals to effectively serve their country. This Act brought US military policy in line with the UK, which has allowed LGBT personnel to serve openly since 2000 (Frank et al 2000). The UK has a lower LGBT suicide rate than the US (Stonewall 2012) and its various military branches actively recruit without prejudice to LGBT citizens, appealing for recruits from gay community events such as annual pride parades.

In the UK, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act (2013) enshrined in law the right of same-sex couples to marry and receive the same state benefits and recognition as heterosexual couples. The Equality Act (2010) added 'sexual orientation' to the list of bases on which it is illegal for a company, organisation or individual to behave in a

discriminatory manner (The National Archives 2014). Such Acts are assessed by the UK government's 2010 Equality Strategy, which aims to place the UK as a leader in social equality amongst its allies (Department for Education 2014). The extent to which this structurally embedded inclusion impacts LGBT students in the UK may well be represented by the comparatively (to the US) low suicide rate, low number of gay-straight alliances and significantly lower rate of homophobic hate crime (Stonewall 2013). The relationships indicated here however are lacking exploration with LGBT youth themselves and thus the structural political differences between the two countries provides the opportunity to solicit experiential discourse and social inclusion perceptions from LGBT youth, framed by their understanding of sociocultural identity. This represents a strategy to address the gap in research.

Watney (1994) identified an emerging queer epistemology in the 1990s in the US and UK, typified by LGBT's lack of civil rights, political legitimacy and frequent subjection to violent attack. This combination led to the creation of multiple national organisations, representing a mobilisation of gay men and women who were well-organised, well-educated and collectively powerful, reflective of the AIDS movements of the 1980s (Highleyman 2002). Despite the lack of high-profile successes made by the LGBT rights movement, howsoever conceptualised, by 2000 there was little evidence that long-term, LGBT-specific activism would be a prominent feature of activist movements in the US (Highleyman 2002). Efforts by individual organisations focused on specific areas of change and typified LGBT social change efforts during the 1990s and 2000s, such as the US-based Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), which spearheaded efforts involving mass media channels to reduce homophobia in sports and popular media (GLAAD 2014). This work was reflected in

the UK by Stonewall, a gay rights organisation that launched a campaign in 2014 to tackle sports-related homophobia (Stonewall 2014).

The lack of coherent, organized LGBT-rights movements has been attributed to the complacency of gay men by popular social commentators and opinion-leaders (Robotti 2008; Davis 2014; O'Keeffe 2014). Similar to the cited complacency of gay men towards the on-going threat of HIV (Halkitis & Parsons 2003; Davies et al 2013), the social and political landscapes in which such attitudes exist are of critical importance to equality work in this context. By utilising a small-scale sample and interrogating the individual experiences of participants, this research can further attempt to fill research gaps that exist in relation to LGBT communities, their interaction with the media and the subsequent impact.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of the effectiveness of LGBT-focused social media campaigns in fostering inclusiveness on higher education campuses. The study also examined student awareness of government legislation relating to LGBT issues.

Research Questions

The following central research questions guided the data collection process:

(i) How do college/university students perceive their academic environment in regards to LGBT inclusiveness?

(ii) Are students aware of LGBT-focused social media programs and have they made an impact on their campus?

(iii) Are LGBT suicide-prevention campaigns embedded effectively in education environments?

(iv) Is LGBT-driven representation important in LGBT student engagement with suicide-prevention campaigns?

Because a non-experimental, random sample is being used with a goal of understanding the characteristics of a population, survey research is an optimal way to collect data (Johnson and Christensen 2008). This study employs a self-report survey as a method to collect data. The researchers modified a survey instrument previously used and tested by the researchers to gather student perceptions of academic programs. Many of the same demographic questions asked in their study remained a part of the instrument for this research project; other questions were modified to address the focus and population of this research study.

The settings in the study were institutions of higher learning in the state of Pennsylvania (USA) and throughout the United Kingdom. Institutions were selected that had a Gay/Straight Alliance or other diversity-related clubs on an HEI campus. Random sampling was used to collect data from the sample in a short period of time.

The population of the study is students at randomly selected institutions that participate in a Gay/Straight Alliance or a diversity-related club on campus. Simple random sampling (SRS), the simplest way to select a sample was accomplished by assigning a number to each individual in a spreadsheet and using a random number generator. The probability of selecting any potential respondent is equal to the chance of selecting anyone else (Kalton, 1993). The students were selected as the sample group because they chose to join a diversity-related organization on their campus. Students completed the survey exclusively through the online SurveyMonkey® tool.

A total of 30 (34%) of respondents were male, 58 (66%) were female (see Table 1). Of the 88 respondents the majority were of ages 20-30 (74%), with (40%) identified as from the US and (60%) from the UK (see Table 2). While the gender proportionality

of the student clubs targeted with the survey tool was not captured, the significant majority of respondents were female. This is reflective of the literature findings that gay men are broadly disengaged from undertakings they perceive to be related to activism or overt social change. Additionally, previous large-scale demographic analyses of the demographics of educationally based Gay/Straight Alliances have indicated that females disproportionately represent group membership (Toomey et al 2011).

Table #1

Gender

	n	%
Male	30	34
Female	58	66
Total	88	100

Table #2

Age Distribution

	n	%
Less than 20	5	6
20-25	52	58
26-30	14	16
31-35	8	9
36-40	2	2
41-45	4	4
46-50	2	3
More than 50	3	3
Total	90	100

A total of 50 (56%) of students identified themselves as straight, 20 (22%) as gay, 11 (12%) as bisexual, 4 (4%) as lesbian, and 4 (4%) did not list their sexual identity (see Table 3).

The fact that there is a diverse sexual identity among respondents follows trends that show a widening acceptance of LGBT citizens and more discussion of LGBT issues in the public lexicon.

Table #3

Sexual Identity

	n	%
Straight	50	56
Gay	20	22
Bisexual	11	12
Lesbian	4	5
Transgender	0	0
Other	4	5
	89	100

Research Results

The purpose of the study was to identify perceptions of acceptance and inclusion on LGBT study identity student in regards to legislation, media campaigns and student support services. The survey instrument provided quantitative data on these perceptions as well as open-ended qualitative data to support the statistics.

Legislative Awareness

Questions were asked regarding timely, broad-based national legislative items in both the US and UK. While legislation in the UK is mostly national in nature, in the US there is a spate of confusing and contradictory legislation on the state and local level. Legislation reviewed in this research study concern DOMA, DADT, the Marriage Act and the Equality Act all of which are national in nature.

Overall awareness of legislation was relatively low (Table 4) with an average of 38.5% of respondents recognising any of the four legislative items. Awareness of legislation in the USA was particularly low, with no more than 31% recognising DOMA or DADT. Awareness of UK legislation was slightly higher and above 50% in the case of the Marriage Act.

Table ♯4

Awareness	*n*	*%*
DOMA	20	31
DADT	17	27
Marriage Act	33	52
Equality Act	28	44
Average	24.5	38.5

Legislative Impact

Respondents reported low levels of experiential impact (Table 5) from legislation with only 11% reporting any impact on their own life. Of this figure respondents were able to identify either negative or positive impact, with 40% indicating legislation had a negative impact on them. Several students noted that the listed legislation made them more interested in becoming involved in supporting LGBT issues.

Table ♯5

Legislative Impact	*n*	*%*
Overall impact	7	11
Positive impact	31	60
Important to education	18	29
Peer impact	15	25
Average	17.8	31.2

Respondents noted that they felt legislation is changing legal support for homophobia and that more acceptance means more dialogue and societal change.

A total of 3 respondents noted that DOMA, DADT, the Marriage Act and the Equality Act had an impact on how they feel they are perceived as an LGBT person on their campus and 51 noted no impact. Two respondents noted that national views reflected in legislation have changed prejudices toward their sexual orientation.

Social Media Campaign Awareness

Students were asked about their perceptions of high profile, web-based social media campaigns that include It Gets Better, Give a Damn, and Straight But Not Narrow. There is evidence that LGBT people respond more positively to media materials that are not visually representative of their identity, as they prefer not to be singled out in the media landscape (Oakenfull et al 2013). In addition, there is a dialogue within the LGBT community about conforming to straight culture and traditions. Students were asked questions about the role of these campaigns on LGBT inclusiveness.

Campaign Awareness

A total of 28 participants' were aware of 'It Gets Better', 6 were aware of 'Give a Damn!' and 20 were aware of the 'Straight But Not Narrow' campaigns. A total of 18 said they are most familiar with It Gets Better, 1 said Give a Damn, and 7 said none of the campaigns. There was low recognition of the campaigns on university sites, with 4 (10%) of respondents said these campaigns were advertised on their campus, 38

(90%) said they were not. All respondents who filled in the open-ended question asking which campaign was advertised noted It Gets Better.

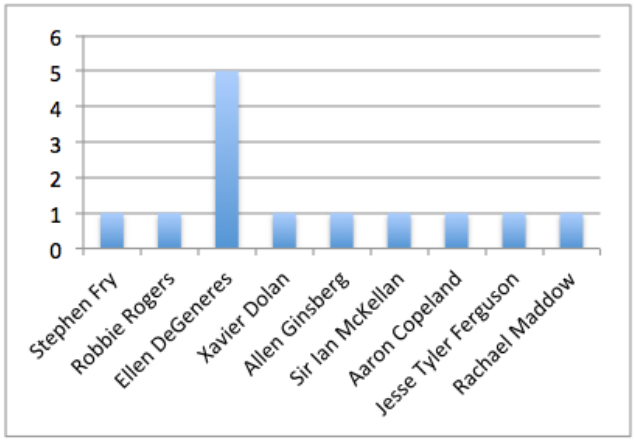
Personal Impact

A total of 13 (30%) of respondents said they had discussed these campaigns with friends on campus, 32 (70%) said they had not. Students who responded to an open-ended question asking for comments noted that friendships were not affected but the campaigns have fostered debate and dialogue among friends. In addition 4 (9%) respondents said these campaigns had an impact on their campus friendships, 39 (91%) said they have not. Impact on relationships was also low, with only 4 (9%) respondents indicating these campaigns had an impact on relationships with peers who had a sexual identity other than their own. Two respondents noted a positive impact on their relationships with peers of different sexual identity.

Role Models and Representation

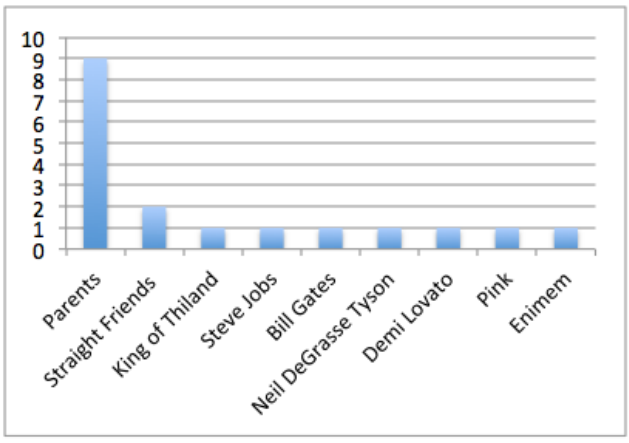
Participants were able to name role models and a total of 23 (51%) respondents said they have a gay role model and 22 (49%) said they do not. Respondents identified numerous gay role models, but only Ellen DeGeneres was noted more than once (see Figure 1).

Figue 1 - Gay Role Model



Slightly more respondents (57%) said they have a straight role model and 19 (43%) said they do not. Respondents identified numerous straight role models, however, parents and straight friends were the only responses noted more than once (see Figure 2).

Figue 2 - Straight Role Model



A total of 34 (76%) of respondents said that it is extremely important to include gay, bisexual, and straight spokespersons at the forefront of media campaigns; 8 (18%) said it has not impact and 3 (7%) said it's not important. Respondents noted that support from outside communities, awareness of all sexualities, and inclusive representation is important.

A total of 5 (12%) of respondents said that the Trevor Project's spokesperson, Daniel Radcliffe, a heterosexual celebrity, is a good appointment, 33 (81%) said an okay choice, and 3 (7%) said they would prefer a gay spokesperson. Most respondents noted that it should not matter if the spokesperson is gay as long as they are committed to the cause.

Participants were more positive about Josh Hutcherson, a heterosexual celebrity, heading the Straight But Narrow campaign and 11 (28%) respondents said he is a good appointment and 29 (72%) said an okay choice. None of the respondents said they would prefer a gay spokesperson for this campaign. Most respondents noted that it should not matter if the spokesperson is gay as long as they are committed to the cause.

Campus Safety

Most respondents (88%) said they consider their campus a safe place for LGBT students and5 (12%) said they do not. Most respondents identified a feeling of safety but noted that they had had negative experiences on their campus.

A total of 14 (34%) of respondents said they have been bullied as an LGBT student or witnessed bullying of an LGBT student, 27 (66%) said they did not (see Table 27). Most respondents noted that they had been harassed and victims of slurs on their campus.

While most students noted they feel their campus is safe, a third noted that they or someone they know had been bullied. In the USA certain types of bullying is considered a federal hate crime with severe criminal penalties if found guilty.

A total of 2 (11%) of respondents said that they had thoughts of suicide as a result of bullying, 4 (22%) said someone they know has, 6 (33%) said they and someone they know has, and 6 (33%) said no.

Student Support Services Awareness

Most campuses have a plethora of student support services but usually only a few are there to support LGBT students. Students were asked to identify organizations or campaigns on their campus.

A total of 28 (76%) of respondents said they have a gay/straight alliance or other LGBT club on their campus, 9 (24%) said they do not (see Table 30). Respondents noted safe zones, peer support groups and counsellors on their campuses that are available to support LGBT students. Considering the large sample of institutions with campus-based resources identified during the research process and the qualitative data collected in this question it is clear that there is a ubiquity of services in both the US and UK.

The survey tool included a question that asked for the student to identify their country of study as the USA, the UK or elsewhere. Despite only students in the two countries being targeted to complete the survey, several individuals responded that they were studying elsewhere. This was further complicated by a significant number of respondents who were not able to identify their level of study within Higher Education. This may be because the classifications of study stage are difficult to standardise between the two countries. As this could not be substantiated, the responses to these questions have been omitted as part of our analysis.

Conclusion

Respondents have indicated broadly that bullying is commonplace on educational campuses, that suicidal thoughts are embedded within the LGBT college experience and that the high-profile, professionally executed media prevention campaigns are not recognised as part of integral Gay/Straight Alliance activity. This suggests that distribution of the campaigns is lacking and that there is scope for better placement of campaign materials and engagement with individuals and groups within the educational environment. Resources for LGBT students have become more ubiquitous, however, like most student support services, students will not utilize effective services unless there is an awareness of the service and its value. A simple search of the student webpages of USA universities indicates LGBT groups and alliances are commonplace yet it remains unclear why our respondents demonstrated a broad lack of awareness. One explanation could be that students are overwhelmed with the choice of organizations and activities at university and so they lack the ability to differentiate between those that would benefit their wellbeing (Iyengar 2011). Additionally there are differences between each university's LGBT resource promotion methods and visibility. Institutions such as Ithica College (2017) that structure high-profile awareness events that coincide with national drives may well have more impact.

Although the use of recognizable role models was identified as a positive characteristic in general, respondents questioned the use of overtly heterosexual campaign spokespeople. In most cases, celebrities self-identify as 'LGBT allies' when they engage in the production of audio-visual content for the campaigns and make their point of view explicit; namely that sexual identity is not grounds for marginalization. Despite this, a minority of respondents thought that the use of Josh Hutcherson and Daniel Radcliffe were meaningful or appropriate, instead positing that gay role models could be more effective. The correlation between high rates of bullying and low

visibility of targeted campaigns would suggest that this is an area for urgent consideration by educators and administrators. These findings may not be entirely surprising since Goltz (2013) found LGBT audiences highly sensitive to the homonormatization of messages delivered by heterosexual narrators, particularly when they were seen to contribute to the construction of a normalized, hetero-centric social construct. The findings are further evidence of Schiappa's (2008) findings that representational correctness causes audiences, particularly in LGBT media spheres, miss the positive work that can come from campaigns if considered alongside social science theories.

The low saturation of college environments by the media campaigns and the lack of gay spokespeople in them provide an interesting juxtaposition to the relatively high visibility of gay pathbreakers or characters seen commonly in commercial marketing. Organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD and the World Tourism Organisation are interested in the representation of LGBT people in advertising and high-impact media. That this has been intentionally avoided in social marketing and media-based suicide prevention work is not immediately justifiable and respondents in this research indicated that this is an area for further consideration in the future. The use of heterosexual gatekeepers in suicide prevention campaigns indicates social progress that reflects the progress made by policymakers in the US and the UK in equalizing civil liberties to LGBT communities. It is also analogous to the aims of Gay/Straight Alliances by transparently providing a structured forum in which young people can interact and build relationships, regardless of sexual identity. Despite this positivity, our data indicate that there is an opportunity for community leaders to improve how the frameworks of campaigns are to be used by students to reconstruct their social and educational environments. Our findings are also indicative of De

Koster's (2010) work on the complexity of defining communities, particularly when their existence relies in part on digital environments. However difficult this may be, the benefits that students can obtain when they form friendships and relationships across myriad cultural and personal identities are well established (Vásquez et al 2014) and act as justification for on-going research in this area.

While existing research helps to contextualise our findings, it does not comfortably explain them. The lack of direct interaction between participants and researchers in this instance means the data have limited interrogative ability whereas a more qualitative approach would enable deeper questioning of understanding and experiences. Nonetheless the results indicate gaps in knowledge and awareness that are representative of the wider need for more research, particularly in university settings, that considers how students engage with and consume resources intended for their wellbeing as well as LGBT-centric media.

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