Is there room for pride? Exploring the impact of high school climate on LGB young adults

Gabrielle Patton

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of

The Chicago School of Professional Psychology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Psychology

Dr. Braden Berkey, Chairperson

Dr. Michelle Cutler, Reader

March 26, 2021

Is there room for pride? Exploring the impact of high school climate on LGB young adults

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of

The Chicago School of Professional Psychology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

For the Degree of Doctor of Psychology

Gabrielle Patton

2021

Approved By:

Dr. Braden Berkey, Psy.D., CSE, Chairperson
Associate Professor, Clinical Psy.D. Program

Dr. Michelle Cutler, Ph.D., Member
Associate Professor, Clinical Psy.D. Program

Acknowledgements

I want to extend a sincere sense of gratitude to Dr. Braden Berkey and Dr. Michelle Cutler for being guiding lights and academic supports throughout this process. Your endless encouragement and wisdom were pivotal for the completion of this dissertation.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their confidence in my work over the last few years. I would not be here without you all cheering me on every step of the way. Muchas gracias a todos. I especially want to acknowledge my Mom and Dad. Your unconditional support, encouragement, and patience were what sustained me through this long academic journey. Lastly, I want to thank everyone who participated in the study; your voices helped illuminate the inequalities, injustices, and prejudices that exist within our school systems. Together we can make a more inclusive world!

Abstract

The present study investigated the impact of high school climate on young adult functioning in sexual minority individuals. School climate is the overall culture and atmosphere of an educational system, including local and national government policies, teaching styles, expectations, and community values (Espelage et al., 2014). The climate, in which adolescents spend a total of 3600 hours, influences their sense of self, values, and skillset that they use to function as young adults. The present study utilized the theoretical frameworks of Erick Erickson and Anthony D'Augelli to conceptualize identity development. Erickson (1963) depicted development as dependent on how supportive the individual's environment is for their unique needs. Thus, signifying the importance of surroundings with regards to healthy and adaptive identity development (Erickson, 1963). Erickson (1963) also outlined that the experiences, crises, and exploration encountered during adolescence impact identity development and formation later in life. D'Augelli (1994) created a framework that specifically outlines the identity formation process of sexual minority individuals. D'Augelli (1994) highlighted the impact social and environmental factors have on identity acceptance in this population. Schools with more nurturing components (e.g., supportive teachers as role models, meaningful studies, cultivation of the whole student) and positive school climates are associated with enhanced identity development (Rich & Schachter, 2011). Conversely, schools that are deemed unsafe for LGBTQ+ students are associated with higher rates of being bullied, lower GPAs, future drug use, and suicidal behaviors (Kosciw et al., 2016). Schools within the United States are currently lagging in creating inclusive curriculums and practices to support LGBTQ+ students. It is the school's job to protect their students, but empirical evidence suggests this population of students is being left behind.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Nature of the Study

Problem Statement

In a 25-week academic school year, adolescents spend roughly 3600 hours in high school. Adolescence is a time for growth, exploration, and discovery. The primary goal of adolescence is to explore aspects of one's identity and obtain skills to achieve a secure identity in young adulthood (D'Augelli, 1994; Erickson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Empirical findings emphasize the impact of one's environment on the identity formation process. Erik Erickson (1963) outlined in his stages of psychosocial development that environments must be supportive and provide opportunities to grow and explore aspects of identity. Further, attending a high school that with a supportive and positive environment promotes identity formation by encouraging a strong sense of social belonging, psychological well-being, and increased self-esteem (Jia et al., 2009; Rich & Schachter, 2011).

Suppose an individual is in an environment that makes them feel unsafe, unwanted, does not support a sense of belonging, or does not allow them to integrate their social world with their inner world. In that case, they are at a disadvantage for developing a strong sense of self (Erickson,1980). Of note, most LGBTQ+ students are not allotted the opportunity to experience a safe, supportive, and identity promoting school climate. More than half of LGBTQ+ students, as high as 59.5%, described feeling unsafe at their high schools (Kosciw et al., 2016). A large majority of LGBTQ+ students, about 87.3%, indicated they experienced harassment, bullying, or assault due to their identity. Additionally, 62.2% of LGBTQ+ students reported their schools had policies that were discriminatory towards the LGBTQ+ community (Kosciw et al., 2017).

Schools that are deemed unsafe for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, or nonconforming (LGBTQ+) students are associated with higher rates of being bullied, lower

GPAs, truancy, future drug use, and suicidal behaviors for these students (Kosciw et al., 2016).

Thus, schools that are deemed heteronormative, or discriminate against this population, have

numerous adverse effects on psychological well-being and identity formation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to uncover a relationship between high school climate and

identity formation in cisgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults. The present study

assumes that school climate is associated with young adult identity formation. The sample

included American 18-25-year-old cisgender individuals who identify as sexual minorities

(lesbian, gay, or bisexual) and were out in high school. The primary goal is to answer the

question is there a statistically significant correlation between high school climate and the

process of identity formation?

All data will be obtained virtually through electronic surveys on surverymonkey.com.

School climate is measured by a survey created by the researcher. The Sexual Minority

Inclusiveness School Climate Survey (SMISCS) was created due to lack of standardized

measures that queried about sexual minority specific experiences during high school. Identity

formation is quantified with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS). This scale was

created by Mohr and Kendra (2012) and assesses comfortability and acceptance of one's sexual

orientation identity.

A retrospective cross-sectional survey design will be utilized to gather and interpret data.

The goal of using a survey design is to generalize the attitudes and experiences of the sample of

participants to the larger related LGB population. Additionally, a bivariate correlational design

will be used to analyze the data, as the variables, high school climate and identity formation,

cannot be manipulated. The use of a correlation design allows for the examination of

relationships, or associations, between the two variables instead of attempting to uncover a

causal link (Harris, 2008).

Research Questions

The researcher hypothesizes that attending a heteronormative school is significantly

associated with having an insecure identity, because these environments do not give the same

opportunities to sexual minority students to learn about themselves, explore their unique

qualities, and develop a strong foundational identity, as their heterosexual peers. Conversely,

inclusive schools are more sensitive to the needs of sexual minority students and create

environments with opportunities for healthy identity development. Therefore, the researcher

hypothesizes that attending an inclusive school has a significant association with secure identity

formation.

Additionally, the researcher sought to identify specific demographic factors that are

significantly associated with identity formation and high school climate. Specifically, the

researcher hypothesizes that higher levels of familial religiosity has significantly correlates with

attending a heteronormative school. It is also hypothesized that having an insecure identity is

significantly associated with higher levels of familial religiosity.

RQ1: Is there a significant relationship between high school climate and identity

formation in young adults who identify as sexual minorities (gay, lesbian, or bisexual)? The null

hypothesis is that there is no significant correlation between the two measures.

Ho1: The researcher hypothesized that there would be a significant positive correlation

between attending a heteronormative high school climate and having an insecure identity in

young adults who identify as sexual minorities. Meaning, if a participant reports higher scores on

the SMISCS they will also likely report higher scores on the LGBIS.

Ho2: The researcher hypothesized there would be a significant positive correlation between attending an inclusive high school and having a secure identity in this population. Meaning, if a participant reports lower scores on the SMISCS they will likely report lower scores on the LGBIS. Are there specific demographic factors that are associated with young adult identity and self-reported high school climate? The null hypothesis is that there is no significant correlation between demographic factors and responses on the surveys.

RQ2: Are there specific demographic factors, such as gender, geographical region, SES, or levels of religiosity, that correlate with the LGBIS?

Ho1: The researcher hypothesized that growing up in a highly religious home would positively correlate with scores on the LGBIS. Meaning, if a participant reported living in a home that was very religious, they are also more likely to report having difficulty forming a secure identity.

RQ3: Do specific demographic factors, such as gender, geographical region, SES, or levels of religiosity, correlate with the SMISCS?

Ho1: The researcher hypothesized that growing up in a highly religious home would positively correlate with scores on the SMISCS. Meaning, if a participant reported living in a home that was very religious, they are also more likely to report they attended a heteronormative high school.

Theoretical Framework

Identity formation is a building process, in which every experience during childhood and adolescence is a learning opportunity that adds to an individual's unique sense of being in the world (Erickson, 1963; Waterman, 1982). At each stage, an individual experiences a crisis, or a critical turning point, that challenges how they conceptualize themselves. Each stage requires

exploration of personal values and beliefs. After each crisis is resolved, an individual gains a new part of their identity to which they begin to integrate into their mature sense of self (Erickson, 1963). Erickson depicted development and ability to resolve crises as dependent on how supportive the environment is for that individual's unique needs. Thus, signifying the importance of surroundings for obtaining a healthy and adaptive identity (Erickson, 1963).

Marcia (1966) noted the importance of a strong identity in the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Marcia concluded that young adulthood is the time in which major life decisions are being made. An individual must amalgamate their childhood and adolescence experiences with their adult identity to create a sense of continuity in their life. Their ability to make decisions that align with their personal values, rather than parental or societal values, are dependent on commitment to their identity (Marcia, 1966).

Schiedel and Marcia (1985) corroborated Erickson's findings and suggested that adolescence is a pivotal time for identity development. It is when "intellectual, emotional, physical, and societal factors" are present and must be investigated for the process of identity formation (Schiedel & Marcia, 1985, p.148). Adolescence and young adulthood support the refinement of identity formation as new strengths are developed and lead to the emergence of a mature internalized view of self (Adams et al., 2000). Adolescence is also associated with obtaining a sense of fidelity in one's identity. Fidelity refers to having continuity in all aspects of identity, which includes the summation of all experiences and resolutions to crises (Erickson, 1968). The goal of identity development is to create a balanced and harmonious identity. If fidelity is not achieved, individuals will experience apathy, impassivity, and have difficulty with identity commitment later in life (Adams et al., 2000).

Due to the importance of support and acceptance of one's identity by their environment, it is imperative to review the experiences of marginalized individuals. D'Augelli (1994) developed a theory of identity development focused on the lived experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. D'Augelli noted that individuals who identify as sexual minorities live in a predominantly heterosexual world, therefore, their environments are grounded in heterosexual norms and values. Identity is understood by reviewing the interacting environmental networks in one's life. However, these networks can change throughout life. D'Augelli highlighted that simply using Erickson's identity development model is insufficient, as it is based on white, cisgender, heterosexist privilege. D'Augelli noted the time when adolescents are starting to form mature identities, according to Erickson's theory, sexual minority individuals are typically struggling with their sexual orientation identity, unpacking learned homophobic bias, or are living with hidden identities. D'Augelli indicated to understand an individual's identity journey, three factors must be analyzed. These factors include how an individual feels about and acts upon their sexual orientation, the impact of experiences with family/ peers/ intimate partners, and the sociopolitical norms of their culture (D'Augelli, 1994).

Schools are more than teachers, principals, students, desks, and books. The values of many interacting systems influence a school climate. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Model of Human Development can be utilized to understand the human experience throughout the lifespan. This theory outlined the everchanging settings and environments that influence development and behaviors. All four levels in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model can be used to understand school climate. According to Bronfenbrenner, high school is a *microsystem*. *Microsystems* are the immediate settings in which a human is embedded, thus the individual participates actively in a specific role in this setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Therefore, adolescents are playing the role of student, friend, or peer while in the *microsystem* of their high school.

The *mesosystem* refers to the interaction of immediate settings, or *microsystems*, such as the connections between friends, school, teachers, and the family. The *exosystem* describes the interactions between settings that the individual does not have an active role in, such as teaching styles, community values, religion of school officials, and school rules. Lastly, the *macrosystem* portrays the culture and politics of the specific larger environment, including state policies in education, political systems, and ideologies of the culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Kohl et al., 2013). Therefore, school climate is an intricate concept involving the interactions of numerous systems, relationships, and entities, within and outside of the physical school. These networks may influence the particular appraisal of one's overall experience in their environment (Kohl et al., 2013).

Thus, the environment created by one's school, also referred to as school climate, impacts identity development. It lays the groundwork for future ability, and capacity, to form an adaptive and healthy sense of self. School climate refers to "a multidimensional construct that includes organizational, instructional, and interpersonal dimensions" (White et al., 2014, p. 349). School climate also encompasses psychological and relational dimensions. It is the overall culture and atmosphere of an educational system, including local and national government policies, teaching styles, expectations, and community values (Espelage et al., 2014). The National School Climate Center defines school climate as "focusing on four areas: safety, relationships between students, between students and teachers and between teachers and parents, teaching and learning, and the school environment" (Kohl et al., 2013, p. 411).

Scope of the Study

Individuals who 1) did not attend high school in the United States; 2) are not fluent in English; 3) are younger than 18 or older than 25; 4) were not out in high school (i.e., closeted); 5) attended online school or homeschool; 6) do not identify as cisgender; 7) have a previous diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, Intellectual Disability, Down Syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Personality Disorder, PTSD, Psychotic Disorder, or a Language Disorder will be excluded from the study. These factors will be assessed on the first questionnaire provided to participants. Individuals were required to have attended high school in the United States because survey questions reflect policies and norms based upon American educational standards and developmental theories that have not yet been reviewed in other countries. Participants who do not speak fluent English will be excluded as the surveys were presented in English.

Individuals who were not out in high school will be excluded as their experiences may have been different than the target population as they may have avoided the explicit homophobic disadvantages, bullying, and exclusions as their out counterparts. The decision to exclude gender minorities, such as transgender, non-binary, or intersex individuals, was made as the aggregation of this population with cisgender sexual minorities would be a disservice as their experiences may vary from the cisgender population.

Definitions of Key Terms

Cisgender. Cisgender is a term that refers to individuals whose gender identity, or their internal sense of being male, female, gender-less, or a combination of male and female, is aligned with their sex assigned at birth (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Heteronormativity. Michael Warner first coined the term heteronormativity in 1991 to describe the embedded homophobic values of Western societies. Warner (1991) noted heteronormativity encompasses an individual's or society's preference of a binary view of gender and sexual orientation, marked prejudice towards LGBTQ+ individuals, and marginalization of this community. Additionally, heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexual and stereotypical male/female roles are the natural and normal state of existence (Enson, 2015).

Identity Formation. Identity formation is a building process. Every experience during childhood and adolescence is a learning opportunity, which eventually adds into an individual's unique sense of being in the world as an adult (Erickson, 1980). The goal of identity development is to create a strong, harmonious sense of self (Erickson, 1980). Adolescence is the time period for refinement of identity as new strengths are developed that lead to the emergence of a mature internalized view of self in young adulthood (Adams et al., 2000). Additionally, healthy identity formation allows one to live a life that aligns with their personal values (Marcia, 1966). Identity formation is impacted by social and environmental factors (D'Augelli, 1994).

School Climate. School climate is a dynamic concept that encompasses the environment within an educational setting. The overall culture of a school system includes numerous enmeshed relationships, community norms, state-wide policies, and societal norms. Therefore, aspects of schooling such as teaching styles, curriculum, and rules are influenced by the values and beliefs of students, teachers, the community, bureaucratic leaders, and larger organizational structures (Espelage et al., 2014).

Sexual Minority. A sexual minority is any individual that identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or queer. For the purposes of this study, sexual minority refers to gay, lesbian, bisexual cisgender individuals.

Significance of the Study

Research regarding school climate and future maladaptive behaviors is plentiful, but the body of research linking school climate with sexual minority young adult identity formation is lacking. The results of this study may be used to help program developers and school administrators create more inclusive and safe schools that provide sexual minority students with the skills needed to cope with the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, the same skills that are more accessible to their heterosexual peers. Findings from this study could also benefit educators and mental health professionals by increasing awareness regarding the long-term effects of high school climate. It also may inform professionals about possible protective factors from future dangerous behaviors, including suicide, substance abuse, and delinquency.

Additionally, the 2017 American Psychological Association (APA) Multicultural Guidelines indicate that clinicians should practice under a framework of understanding the social and physical environments of their clients, students, consultees, or research participants. These

guidelines also explain the importance of being aware of institutional inequalities and recognizing areas in which clinicians can advocate for justice and equal treatment for all humans. Lastly, the APA encourages psychologists to use a strengths-based approach to promote the creation of protective factors and decrease insistences of adverse experiences (American Psychological Association, 2017). Therefore, professionals that are required to follow these guidelines can benefit from this research in their clinical work with individuals and larger systems.

Summary

Chapter 1 outlined the problem statement, purpose, scope, key terms, theoretical frameworks, and significance of the study. This study seeks to understand the relationship between school climate and young adult identity formation in LGB individuals. Sexual minority students report higher rates of feeling unsafe at school, truancy, and future maladaptive behaviors due to their sexual orientation, as compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Kosciw et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2016; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2015). The school climate, or the environment and culture of one's high school, influences an individual's identity development, self-esteem, beliefs, and skillset that are used later in life. Adolescents begin to make important life decisions at this age, such as vocational or secondary education plans. At this time, the decisions made lead to commitments later, which are involved with identity formation (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006). As emerging adults, individuals must face the challenge of creating a sense of wholeness and discovering their true identity.

This study comprises of four additional chapters regarding the relationship between school climate and identity formation. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of empirical research and theoretical backgrounds of related topics. Chapter 3 includes specifics regarding the

research design, methods, sample selection, data collection, and instrumentation. Chapter 4

contains the findings, results, and outlines the demographics of the sample. Chapter 5

summarizes the study, discusses conclusions, and incorporates recommendations.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The transition from adolescence to young adulthood is dedicated to growth and identity exploration. Individuals in young adulthood are beginning to live independently and enter into society as citizens with the compacity to handle the complexities of life. To be better equipped to navigate the challenges endured during young adulthood, one should have a confident sense of self, a steadfast value system, and a strong support network. However, some circumstances may hinder adolescents, specifically those who identify as sexual minorities, from seizing the opportunity to obtain a secure identity and live meaningful lives as young adults. Aspects of one's environment and larger systemic surroundings can act as either risk factors or protective factors for identity formation and psychological well-being. One of these crucial environments is high school, where adolescents spend a majority of their formative years. High school is an influential environment that either provides or neglects individuals with the tools and skills for identity formation in young adulthood. The following chapter reviews the empirical evidence regarding the influence of high school climate on young adult identity formation. The review of literature also provides a summary of the theoretical frameworks utilized in the present study.

Identity Development Theories

The following section will include an overview of various theories of identity development. To begin, the works of Erick Erickson and James Marcia are highlighted to inform about psychosocial identity development. Following, Jeffrey Arnett's theories of emerging adulthood are reviewed. Next, non-heterosexual identity development theories by Vivienne Cass and Anthony D'Augelli.

Theories of Psychosocial Identity Development

Erick Erickson was one of the first researchers to cultivate theories regarding the stages of identity development throughout the lifespan (Karkouti, 2015). Erickson (1963) outlined eight stages of psychosocial development. Each stage is linked with a specific chronological developmental period in humans. During these stages, an individual gains psychosocial skills, a new ego quality, and pieces of identity that integrate into a continuous maturing personality. Erickson's stages are sequential and assert that individuals develop in a stepwise fashion. Erickson (1963) emphasized that the environment plays a substantial role in encouraging appropriate identity development. It must contribute to adaptive development and protect the individual from deviating from the normative sequence and rate of identity development to move through the stages. A "*sense of ego identity*" is obtained when individuals are confident in their inner balance and sameness within the context of their social world and their inner world (Erickson, 1980 p.94). Moreover, Erickson (1963) described a conflict, or *crisis,* at each stage*,* which act as critical turning points and lead to mastery and progression through the stage or regression and inadequate development. With successful navigation through the stage-specific crisis, an individual continues to mature, develop a stronger sense of self, and form a genuine ego identity.

For the purposes of this study, the critical stages of Erickson's psychosocial developmental theory to consider are *identity vs. role confusion* and *intimacy vs. isolation.* Erickson (1963, 1980) described *identity vs. role confusion* as the end of childhood and the entrance into adolescence. He characterized this as a time of psychological and physical growth and exploration. The goal is to integrate social roles with personal identity to create wholeness. To do so, they must honor their values and beliefs while also navigating the challenges of adolescence Suppose a sense of continuity in one's ego identity is achieved. In that

case, one can consolidate their childhood experiences, resolutions to earlier crises, and

psychosocial skills with their current functioning in the world. This stage involves creating a

mature social personality, mastery of skills, an increased sense of the world around them, and

improved self-esteem. At the end of this stage, adolescents should cultivate a strong sense of self

and autonomy by achieving a secure identity (Erickson, 1980).

However, when an individual does experience *role confusion*, they are prone to

overidentify with others, cannot choose an occupational identity, and may experience a complete

loss of identity (Erickson, 1963, 1980). Environments that do not support a sense of belonging in

the world do not allow for the true expression of one's inner being, and therefore drive

individuals into disingenuous roles. Erickson (1980) noted that those prone to *role confusion* are

typically individuals that do not fall into the "pervasive Anglo-Saxon ideal" (p.96) and are part

of groups that are affected by the "intolerance of differences" (p.96) seen in American culture.

Moreover, adolescents can be cruel and exclude others who are deemed different. The fear of

exclusion may drive these "different" adolescents to desperately seek social belonging and

project their diffused identity onto others. If forced into the "standardization of American

adolescence" (p.97), an individual that does not fit the normalized criteria may experience

psychological stressors or attempt to escape their reality, such as by running away, staying out

late, or withdrawing (Erickson, 1980).

Following *identity vs. role confusion*, Erickson (1963,1980) described *intimacy vs.*

isolation as the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood. At this point, individuals

start to explore their passions through work or schooling and experience significant life events.

These events may include marriage, having children, living independently, or entering the

workforce. Additionally, to further develop *intimacy*, an individual is tasked with fusing their

identity to same-minded individuals. Therefore, individuals may commit themselves to causes and groups that help strengthen their ethics, values, and ego identity. During the process of *intimacy*, an individual may also go through *distantiation*, which is the willingness to separate oneself or eliminate other groups or individuals deemed dangerous to their relationships and sense of self (Erickson 1963, 1980). *Interpersonal intimacies* encompass all social affiliations and associations, including the relationship with one's self. To successfully experience interpersonal intimacies, one must have a strong sense of identity. Without a strong identity and self-concept, therefore a failure to achieve *intimacy*, an individual will fall into *isolation*, leading to ego loss, self-absorption, and loneliness.

James Marcia (1966) expanded upon Erickson's stages of psychosocial development by defining psychosocial statuses that can be used to measure the degree to which a crisis is being resolved. Marcia emphasized that late adolescence is when individuals explore and commit to significant aspects of their identity, such as occupation, field of study, and ideologies. Individuals integrate childhood experiences and knowledge with growing maturity to generate decisions regarding their future adult lives. However, Marcia noted that Erickson's *identity vs. role confusion* were binary terms that did not describe the experiences of most individuals. Therefore, Marcia examined additional descriptions of stage positions and crisis reactions. Based on Erickson's (1963,1980) theories of *identity* vs. *role confusion,* Marcia researched variables to depict alternative resolutions to these stages to clarify that individuals progress and develop in various ways.

In 1964, Marcia interviewed college students to investigate their levels of commitment during the identity development process. Marcia reported on additional types of identity engagement in his subjects outside of those that have experienced a crisis, explored, and

reached *identity achievement*, and those who displayed a lack of commitment and exploration, seen in *role confusion* or *identity diffusion*. (Marcia et al., 1993). Marcia indicated fidelity and ego strength are negatively associated with *identity diffusion*. Individuals experiencing identity diffusion cannot commit to a sense of self and struggle to find their purpose in the world (Marcia, 1966). Marcia coined the intermediary terms as *identity foreclosure* and *identity moratorium. Identity foreclosure* referred to individuals who were in a state of commitment but never experienced a crisis. In contrast, *identity moratorium* referred to individuals who were experiencing a crisis and actively searching for a resolution but had yet to make a commitment (Marcia et al., 1993). Marcia (2002) explained the "different styles of stage resolution" (p. 9) as a continuum rather than the binary terms that Erickson described. Marcia acknowledged that identity statuses might fluctuate, depending on when the individual is assessed in their journey. Marcia (2002) believed the identity statuses allowed researchers to understand and evaluate individuals more accurately and within a deeper context.

Theories of Emerging Adulthood

Current research indicates an additional developmental period to describe the experiences of modern individuals between the ages of 18-25. Jeffrey Arnett (2000) coined this period *emerging adulthood.* Arnett (2000) argued that this developmental period should be categorized as a separate, distinct stage and should be separated from adolescence and adulthood. During emerging adulthood, an individual gains knowledge and explores opportunities and choices that become the building blocks of their adult life. Arnett (2000) noted that emerging adulthood has become more popular due to the increased rate of attending college, later age of marriage, and delayed first childbirth in individuals ages 18-25 in industrialized countries (Arnett, 2000).

Moreover, Arnett (2000) argued that cultural trends and differences in lived experiences between current emerging adults and previous generations of young adults permit this age group to continue to explore their identities longer. Arnett suggested the age in which one commits to an adult identity has fallen back into one's late 20s and early 30s for individuals in industrialized societies. However, emerging adulthood is not delayed adolescence or the rejection of adulthood but rather a period in life that allows for an uncertain future and further independence to discover parts of one's identity. Arnett (2000) stated to be cautious of applying this developmental period to all individuals. He explained that emerging adulthood is a cultural construct, not a universal truth.

 Emerging adulthood is typically experienced during Erickson's (1963; 1980) *intimacy vs. isolation* stage. Erickson stated this was a period where individuals encountered major life events, but Arnett (2000) argued that due to the changing nature of industrialized societies, these major life events are postponed to later in life. Therefore, according to Arnett (2000), individuals in these societies are given more time to gain a sense of self, mature socially, explore different value systems, and increase their self-esteem. The extended timeline to create harmony in one's identity better prepares individuals to be confident with their decisions and commitments. Also, Arnett (2000) mentioned that while Erickson did not include this stage in his psychosocial stages of development, he did discuss themes of *prolonged adolescence* and *psychosocial moratorium* commonly seen in industrialized societies. Meaning these cultural trends were considered before 2000 (Arnett, 2000; Erickson, 1968).

Arnett (2000) described emerging adulthood as the developmental stage that promotes the highest rate of identity exploration. Specifically, in regard to romantic relationships, the discovery of value systems, occupational pursuits, and social networks. Arnett (2000) argued that

there are low rates of identity achievement in adolescents. Exploration is limited because teens are likely bound to a standardized high school curriculum, rules of their parents, and legal constrictions due to age. Therefore, emerging adulthood, in which individuals have more independence, responsibilities, and opportunities to create their sense of self, is a more realistic period of identity achievement and commitment (Arnett, 2000).

Likewise, Nelson and Barry (2005) argued that their research supported theories of emerging adulthood. The researchers queried 232 19-to 25-year-old college students about their definitions of adulthood, if they perceived themselves to be adults, and their identity statuses. The results indicated that most respondents reported reaching some aspects of adulthood, while only a quarter stated that they had fully reached adulthood. Therefore, in alignment with Arnett (2000), a majority of the sample used in Nelson and Barry's (2005) study was part of the emerging adulthood criteria. The individuals that perceived themselves as adults demonstrated a better sense of their overall identity. Moreover, the individuals that identified with emerging adulthood were actively exploring domains of their identity.

Similar to Arnett (20000), Nelson and Barry (2005) noted that the concept of emerging adulthood is more commonly applied to individuals in individualistic societies, specifically the United States. Nelson and Barry (2005) argued that since there is a higher rate of individuals attending secondary education, taking time to travel or volunteer, or attending graduate school, today's young adults are given more time to continue their exploration and delay identity achievement. These individuals also "have societal roles, responsibilities, and expectations placed on them during these years" (p.246). Therefore, young adults today may not sense any urgency to enter adulthood and commit to an identity. The researchers remarked that using the theories of Marcia (1966), emerging adults are experiencing a longer moratorium, which is not a

maladaptive process. By not committing to an identity, emerging adults can actively explore different aspects of themselves (Nelson & Barry, 2005).

Lastly, the researchers indicated that a majority of their sample rejected the belief that marriage, entering the workforce, or completing their education marks the entrance into adulthood. Most young adults in their sample reported there are no specific events that define entering adulthood. Instead, entering adulthood is a unique internal experience with individual responsibilities that initiate the transition into adulthood. Therefore, adulthood is typically defined as being fully independent, whether that may be defined as financial freedom or independent decision-making (Nelson & Barry, 2005).

Theories on the Development of Non-Heterosexual Orientations

The APA (2019) defined sexual orientation as the "a person's sexual and emotional attraction to another person and the behavior and/or social affiliation that may result from this attraction." Moreover, the APA (2019) outlined that sexual orientation also includes the identity, behaviors, and social network an individual takes on based on their specific pattern of attraction. During the 1970s, there was an increased interest in studying sexuality and the development of sexual orientation in the United States. In 1975, the APA supported the American Psychiatric Association in removing the diagnosis of "homosexuality" as a mental illness in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 2nd Edition. The APA argued that same-sex attractions are normal, healthy expressions of the human experience.

However, identifying as a sexual minority has a long history of marginalization in the field of psychology. As mentioned prior, being LGBTQ+ was a diagnosis characterized by psychopathology, a belief maintained in certain cultures, populations, and systems across the world and the United States. Therefore, research of the lived experiences of LGBGTQ+

individuals and sexual orientation development is typically done within a framework of the larger systems in which individuals exist (D'Augelli &Patterson, 2001). As such, "sexual orientation can be understood only within the social milieu in which the individual is embedded at the particular historical moment" (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003 p.23).

Of note, self-identification and disclosure of sexual orientation are occurring at an increasingly younger age. Therefore, adolescents entering young adulthood are more likely to have disclosed their sexual orientation to others or are in the coming-out process (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The average age of the first same-sex attraction is 10 to 11-years-old. Additionally, for heterosexual individuals, the average age for first opposite-sex attraction is 10-years-old (Martos et al., 2015; McClintock & Herdt, 1996).

Regarding non-heterosexual identity development theories, early researchers suggested that sexual minority individuals utilize defense mechanisms initially to reject their sexual orientation. Thus, sexual minority individuals must navigate through stages to accept this aspect of their identity. According to the stage models of development, over time, the strain of denying same-sex attraction can cause negative consequences to emotional health and psychological well-being (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The stage models tend to be clear but fluid, noting that individuals may move about the stages in their own unique way but continue on a linear progression until full acceptance (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Eventually, most sexual minority individuals accept their sexual attractions and begin to engage in romantic relationships with individuals of their same sex. Additionally, most sexual minority individuals begin to affirm this aspect of themselves and integrate it into their overall identity. A sense of personal growth and a positive view of self occurs towards the end of sexual minority identity development.

Vivienne Cass created a prominent stage model of sexual orientation identity development. Her homosexual identity formation model focused on the lived experiences of LGB individuals and the process of learning to accept their identities (Cass, 1984). She outlined that identity is a cognitive construct encompassing an individual's overall self-concept. The goal of identity development is to accept one's self-image as a sexual minority, find meaning in it, and integrate it into their larger *composite identity*. One's *composite identity* results from interactions with others and includes multiple *typological identities, thus is embedded within a social context*. *Typological identities* are formed from integrating how one sees themselves with how they believe other individuals perceive them. Cass (1984) noted that sexual orientation, a *typological identity,* needs to be integrated into one's sense of self and overall *composite identity.* The integration of how an individual perceives their sexual orientation with how the external world perceives their sexual orientation gives meaning to the lived experiences of a sexual minority and allows for the creation of an adaptive identity (Cass, 1984).

Further, Cass (1984) discussed that identity formation is a developmental process in which an individual must overcome specific challenges and experiences that result in change or affirmation of one's sense of self. This model reflects Erickson's (1963, 1980) theories that individuals must resolve crises at each developmental stage to achieve identity formation. Cognitive dissonance and the desire to enhance self-esteem are "motivating forces in the identity formation" (p.147). To achieve a secure sexual orientation identity, individuals must reconstruct their previously held heteronormative beliefs and biases. Due to the socialization of heterosexuality as the norm in most industrialized countries, a majority of individuals internalize images of "normal" sexual relationships being between opposite sexes. Therefore, sexual minority individuals must replace these images and heteronormative beliefs to accept their

attraction to same-sex individuals and derive meaning from their sexual orientation (Cass, 1984). However, Cass (1984) noted that integrating one's sexual minority identity into one's composite identity is not always a negative experience or result in pathology.

Moreover, Cass (1984) described the identity development process as along a developmental continuum. At each of the six stages, an individual grows and explores different aspects of their sexual identity. The six stages are accompanied by numerous cognitive, behavioral, and affective states that help designate where an individual falls along the continuum. If an individual does not proceed through the stages, they will experience identity foreclosure. Cass (1984) emphasized that this process is different for each individual as it is affected by their psychological, social, and cultural backgrounds and current environment. The first stage in Cass's (1984) model of development is *Identity Confusion*. During this stage, individuals feel unsure if their actions, feelings, and thoughts are considered same-sex attractions. There is also incongruence and turmoil between one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and their assumptions about their sexual orientation. An individual may display lowered self-esteem as they contemplate their sexual orientation. Individuals will either reject this part of their identity, which disrupts development, or begin to explore their sexual orientation.

Following, Cass (1984) described *Identity Comparison*. This stage requires an individual to accept the possibility that they may be a sexual minority. Individuals may feel alienated and different from their heterosexual peers. At this stage, individuals begin to contemplate engaging with same-sex individuals, emotionally or physically, to feel less alienated. Development occurs when an individual decides whether or not their feelings and thoughts are acceptable. Exploration of their sexual orientation may come with negative or positive emotional reactions,

depending on the individual. Individuals who outright reject their sexual orientation do not progress to the following stages and experience maladaptive outcomes (Cass, 1984).

Identity Tolerance is the third stage. There is an increased commitment to sexual minority identity integration. Individuals begin to seek other sexual minority individuals to fulfill their social, emotional, psychological, and sexual needs. These interactions promote tolerance of one's sexual identity rather than complete acceptance. At this stage, individuals perceive their sexual identity as desirable or not, depending on whether contact with other sexual minority individuals was positive. Individuals continue to attempt to maintain a heterosexual identity towards their external world, specifically with heterosexual individuals.

Next, Cass (1984) illustrated stage four, *Identity Acceptance,* as the end to the internal questioning of sexual orientation. There is increased positive contact with other sexual minorities and the development of a peer network that promotes the acceptance of one's sexual minority identity and a sense of belonging in the LGBTQ+ community. However, an individual continues to present as heterosexual to the public to avoid any negative consequences with their heterosexual social relationships. Individuals may start to disclose their identity to trusted heterosexual individuals, and the unity of identities may begin.

Following, Cass (1984) outlined stage five, *Identity Pride*. During this stage, individuals feel pride in their sexual minority identity. They are loyal to the LGBTQ+ community and value these relationships. Individuals begin to advocate for equal rights of the LGBTQ+ community as they further display their identity to their external world. However, individuals may start to feel anger and frustration towards societal values of heterosexuality and confront heterosexual individuals and systems. To resolve dissonance between their beliefs and the heteronormative beliefs of their environment, an individual must move onto the last stage.

The final stage is *Identity Synthesis,* during which an individual reaches an integrated, synthesized identity that incorporates all the different internal and external aspects of oneself. The sexual minority aspect of their identity may not be the defining aspect of the individual as a whole. Individuals feel congruence and are no longer closeted. To reach this point, an individual must reach an understanding that not all heterosexuals are bigoted and homophobic. While there is still anger towards the inequalities that sexual minorities face, it is to a lesser extent. Identity development is finished in this stage (Cass, 1984).

To validate her model, Cass surveyed 103 gay males and 63 lesbian females regarding their current stage of identity development. Cass (1984) utilized an original measure, the Stage Allocation Measure, to obtain data. This measure used descriptions of fabricated individuals at different stages and asked participants to choose which individual seemed most similar to their current circumstance. Cass (1984) also utilized her Homosexual Identity Questionnaire to gain insight into the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions experienced during the developmental stages. Results indicated a trend for participants to report the hypothesized cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions associated with the stage of identity from the narratives they felt most fit them. Meaning, participants typically revealed characteristics that corresponded with where they fell in Cass's stages of sexual orientation development. However, Cass noted that some stages were more indistinguishable than others. She concluded that individuals in stages one and two and then in stages five and six were likely to report similar cognitive, behavioral, and emotional experiences, thus suggesting the model may be more accurately described four stages (Cass, 1984).

Following, more current theories expanded upon stage models to include nonlinear theories of sexual orientation development and incorporate the medical model, feminist,

postmodern, and queer perspectives (Bilodeua & Renn, 2005). Anthony R. D'Augelli (1994)

created a lifespan approach to sexual orientation development that emphasized social,

environmental, and individual contexts. D'Augelli noted that identity is formed through "many

social exchanges experienced in different contexts over an extended historical period- the years

of his or her life" (p.324).

In contrast to earlier stage models, D'Augelli (1994) understood sexual orientation

development as a lifetime journey, with the possibility to have fluctuation in sexual feelings.

Meaning, individuals display *developmental plasticity* as environmental contexts and physical

changes may affect thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to sexual orientation. Thus,

acceptance of sexual identity at an older age is associated with an individual's ability to pursue

less restrictive environments, encounter differing world views, and have opportunities to explore

more diverse behaviors and communities (D'Augelli, 1994).

The model of Lesbian-Gay- Bisexual Development discussed three factors that interact

and impact identity formation. D'Augelli (1994) discussed the influence of and the need to

navigate the three factors throughout life. *Personal subjectivities and actions* involve the feelings

towards one's sexual identity, behavioral patterns, and meaning derived from the developmental

journey. Next, *interactive intimacies* incorporate early relationships and interactions with family,

romantic partners, peers, and friends. These early interactions impact romantic relationships later

in development. *Interactive intimacies* reflect Bronfenbrenner's theories of how microsystems

and mesosystems interact and influence circumstances later in life (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Lastly, the *sociohistorical connections* include cultural norms, social rules, local and national

policies, laws, and the overall customs and ways of living perpetrated in one's larger

environment. *Sociohistorical connections* are related to Bronfenbrenner's (1977) exosystem and marcosystem.

By utilizing the human development perspective, D'Augelli (1994) outlined the identity development process as dependent on the numerous interacting systems and contexts of an individual. To emphasize the significance of the individual differences in identity development, D'Augelli (1994) highlighted that historical, cultural, and social factors, as well as institutional beliefs and personal physical and psychological states affect the developmental journey. D'Augelli also elucidated the possible social and legal penalties associated with being a sexual minority. For instance, acceptance of one's sexual orientation can be better predicted by religion, family value system, and current cultural climate.

Moreover, D'Augelli (1994) identified six identity processes that encompass his theory of sexual identity formation. He expanded upon the stage models that typically only include internal processes to include environmental aspects of identity formation. He combined the impact of social exchanges, personal self-images, and the changes in society's acceptance of sexual minorities to present life events that lead to secure identity formation. These processes include *exiting heterosexual identity*, which involves the internal and social acknowledgment of being a sexual minority. During this process, individuals label their sexual feelings and inform others of their sexual orientation. This process is also referred to as "coming out" and exiting heterosexuality.

Developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity status involves embracing the LGBTQ+ community and accepting one's sexual orientation. This process also includes debunking internal stereotypes about sexual minorities that were a product of one's previously learned values and cultural norms. Previously held negative beliefs must be challenged by

contacting individuals who disprove these beliefs. This may include interacting with long-term sexual minority couples or with sexual minority individuals with children (D'Augelli, 1994). This process reflects Cass's (1984) *Identity Acceptance,* in which individuals immerse themselves within the LGBTQ+ community and break down myths and stereotypes.

Moreover, *developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity* involves disclosing one's sexual orientation to a majority of individuals, or *microsystems*, in their lives. The creation of a supportive network of social relationships begins if these individuals are affirmative in their responses. However, issues of intolerance within their social networks may result in harm to the individual. This is a lifelong process due to the assumptive nature of most societies, or *macrosystems*, that heterosexuality is the norm (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; D'Augelli, 1994). Additionally, becoming a *lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring* describes the individual's relationship with their parents. Usually there are complex interactions and fluctuating patterns of acceptance. Meaning, families may try to contain this information but accept their child's identity in certain settings. This may result in reinforced stigmas and prejudice due to their family's response. However, there is a trend for parents to be more accepting and affirming of their child's sexual orientation in current years (D'Augelli, 1994).

Developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status involves the search for a dyadic same-sex relationship. An individual may still have difficulty with debunking heteronormative beliefs and values while entering same-sex relationships. At the time of publication, D'Augelli (1994) noted that heterosexism is perpetuated as there are fewer examples of visible and committed same-sex relationships. While more same-sex couples are becoming more visible, heterosexuality is still the assumed norm and in the majority. *Entering a lesbian-gay-bisexual community* is committing to one's identity and working towards social equality, a reflection of

Cass's (1994) *Identity Pride* and *Identity Synthesis*. This process results in empowerment and

understanding of the oppression that LGBTQ+ individuals face. Integrating individual

experiences of oppression and commitment to resist public oppression is crucial during this

process. By fighting the values of larger *macrosystems*, an individual can navigate barriers of

heteronormative culture to create a meaningful identity. However, individuals that never disclose

their sexual orientation to their external world do not experience this process (D'Augelli, 1994).

By analyzing various theoretical models of sexual orientation development, individuals

can appreciate that this process is unique and dependent on individual circumstances. Every

person engages in their own path of discovering their true identity and how their sexual

orientation fits into their sense of self. While these journeys are unique to the individual, positive

environmental factors could assist identity development and formation. As Erickson (1980)

discussed, an individual's environment and interconnected systems must allow for exploration

and a sense of belonging to develop a strong identity. D'Augelli (1994) described the need to

move away from one's internalized societal norms and values to accept one's true identity as a

sexual minority. Individuals must create their own value system and analyze the values they

were socialized to believe. The environment in these circumstances must cultivate the

opportunities to find one's genuine sense of self rather than forcing an "acceptable" identity onto

them. While many early environments are created by the parents, teachers, and society, as an

individual moves toward adolescence, they begin to gain more independence and freedom to

explore their true self.

However, they may be extra obstacles when forming a secure identity in the LGB

population. Schuck and Liddle (2001) analyzed the experiences of LGB individuals with regards

to their religious affiliations. In the study, there was a noted trend that LGB individuals left

heteronormative religions (i.e., Catholicism, Protestant) and entered LGBTQ+ inclusive religions or fell into non-belief. The authors also uncovered a statistically significant relationship between religious affiliations prior to coming out and experience of sexual orientation identity conflict. There was also a statistically significant relationship between perceived conflict and acceptance of their LGB identity. Moreover, 85% of Protestants and 75% of Catholics reported a conflict between their sexual orientation and the teachings/beliefs of their religion. Additionally, 35% of atheists/agonists and 25% of Jewish individuals reported this conflict.

Shurts et al. (2020) reported on the impact of religion and the coming out process. The authors noted that sexual minority individuals face increased fear of rejection due to certain religious views that being non-heterosexual is sinful, unnatural, and against religious doctrines. Thus, sexual minority individuals may face strong conflicts between aspects of their identity. They noted the conflict between religion and being a sexual minority can lead to psychological distress, dissonance, rejection, shame, and delayed acceptance of their sexual orientation identity.

Impact of the Environment

The following section includes an overview of how the environment impacts identity development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development is utilized to highlight systems theories. Also included is an overview of school climate.

Erickson (1963) described the transition from adolescence to young adulthood as a period of time where individuals begin to question who they are, who they want to be, and what is important to them. This period of exploration is support by one's social relationships and environment. Further, Erickson (1980) noted that environment shapes adolescents' beliefs, values, and sense of self and should promote learning and exploration in a safe setting. An adolescent's environment should provide them with the tools to cope with the difficulties faced

during the transition to young adulthood. Therefore, Erickson (1980) emphasized that

environment is crucial at this stage as it sets the framework for the acquisition of a strong

identity later in life. Environments that do not support the authentic expression of inner being or

promote a sense of belonging within their social world, may hinder an individual's ability to

cultivate a true and harmonious identity (Erickson, 1980). Therefore, an environment that is

supportive of the needs of all adolescents during this period of exploration and maturation, is

beneficial to identity formation.

Systems Theories

Regarding larger organizational systems and multilevel milieus that affect an individual,

Bronfenbrenner (1977) created his ecological model of human development to provide a

framework of the interacting entities. He described four levels of environments that encompass

an individual throughout their life. These converging systems are everchanging and depend on

the current circumstances of the individual. The environments and social contexts influence each

other, thus creating a pattern of interactions amongst the differing systems. The "multi-person

systems of interaction" (p. 154) are crucial in understanding human development and behavior.

Therefore, examining an individual in one setting does not do justice to the larger picture of

human functioning. Additionally, the four systemic levels affect individuals throughout their

lifespan and are subjectively experienced (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Bronfenbrenner (1977) described the *microsystem* as the immediate environment in

which the individual participates in actively. This includes their family, social networks,

religious group, school, and workplace. The individual will have a specific role, such as

daughter, student, peer, and perform specific actions. in the *microsystem*. Next, the *mesosystem*

comprises of the settings of the *microsystem* that interact and connect. The interplay within these

settings may change at specific points in an individual's life. For example, one's family may interact more with the teacher or principal during younger years while peer groups interact more with school setting in adolescence. Following, the *exosystem* embodies the settings in which the individual does not have an active role. This network of systems affects the individual as it influences what occurs in their more immediate systems. For instance, the *exosystem* includes local politics, available social services, media, school policies, and neighborhood values. Lastly, the *marcosystem* is defined as the "overarching institutional patterns of culture or subculture, such as economics, social, educational, legal, and political systems or which the micro-, meso-, and exo- systems are the concrete manifestations" (p. 515). The *macrosystem* encompasses the sociopolitical climate, national laws, and norms and ideologies of a society. This system directly and indirectly affects the way in which the other systems manifest in a given individual's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

School Climate

During the formative teen years, the interacting systems that create the atmosphere of high schools may influence future identity development. To cultivate an environment that leads to healthy identity formation, adolescents should feel safe and secure. This sense of safety and security can be hindered or enhanced depending on their school climate, since this is the main environment in which they explore their external world, create social relationships, and learn about themselves. School climate is a dynamic concept that encompasses the environment that is created within an educational setting. The National School Climate Center defines school climate as "focusing on four areas: safety, relationships between students, between students and teachers and between teachers and parents, teaching and learning, and the school environment" (Kohl et al., 2013, p. 411). Therefore, school climate is a product of coalesced relationships and systems.

It incorporates the psychological, social, and emotional aspects of these greater entities. The overall culture of a school system includes numerous enmeshed relationships, community norms, and state-wide policies. Therefore, aspects of schooling such as teaching styles, curriculum, rules, and polices are influenced by the values and beliefs of students, teachers, the community, bureaucratic leaders, and larger organizational structures (Espelage et al., 2014). School climate is not a stand-alone concept, but rather it is influenced by various internal and external sources. Therefore, a school climate involves *microsystems*, *mesosystems*, *exosystems*, and *marcosystems* (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Regarding environment and identity formation, Waterman (1982) sought to uncover specific variables that may influence the transition from adolescence to young adulthood and the development of a mature identity. The author described this developmental period as a "progressive strengthening of identity" (p.341). He stated that identity is constantly shifting and the migration between the four statuses created by Marcia (1966) is common during this transition. Waterman (1982) also explained particular precursory environments associated with different identity development pathways. It was reported that adolescents in environments that are homogenous are more likely to be in *identity foreclosure*. Individuals in *identity foreclosure* typically maintain the strongest relationships with their parents. Usually, their parents present as supportive and sometimes intrusive and indulgent. Therefore, individuals experiencing *identity foreclosure* commonly conform to the expectations and desires of others and are not in a state of exploration. However, individual experiencing *identity diffusion* were the most distant from their families. Individuals experiencing *identity achievement* and *moratorium* reported they felt critical of their parents and were likely to be in conflict with them (Waterman, 1982).

Additionally, Waterman (1982) suggested that individuals in heterogeneous communities were more likely to be willing to explore identity alternatives. Thus, these individuals typically had more opportunities to experience an identity crisis. The author also discussed that the values and beliefs of one's family, school system, and peers influenced the path of identity development in adolescents. If these systems rarely explore or question authority or the status quo, then the individual is less likely to experience an identity crisis.

Moreover, Waterman (1982) mentioned that the immense increase in identity questioning and exploration that occurs during high school years stems from a deeper understanding of self-concept. He also reported that the ability to be open-minded permitted exploration of identity. Consequently, the highest reported consolidation of identity formation occurs during young adulthood. Longitudinal studies done with college students indicated that by senior year, there was a significant increase in identity achievement, as compared to identity functioning during freshman year (Waterman, 1982). The author suggested this is because college environments allow for more exploration and freedom to examine one's true identity. Time spent at college also was associated with a greater sense of self, in both men and women.

However, Waterman noted some differences depending on situational contexts. In his review of research regarding school climate and identity, Waterman (1982) mentioned that studying at a state university, rather than a private liberal arts college, correlated with an increase frequency of students reporting identity achievement. It is possible that state universities provide alternative value systems and exposure to different identities than private liberal arts colleges. Nonetheless, college freshman reported lower rates of identity commitment as they were likely to still be working through their identity crisis and searching for resolutions. Therefore, Waterman

(1982) depicted the importance of an environment that supports identity achievement and commitment because it promotes the challenge one's previously held beliefs.

Since identity formation derives from personal choices and environmental surroundings, it is useful to look at specific environments and their effect on the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. As mentioned by Adams et al. (2000), individual identity development is susceptible to many interconnecting influences including family, school, and social network. The authors noted that there are multiple pathways that lead to the unique process of identity formation in young adults.

Adams et al. (2000) studied identity achievement and diffusion rates and the effects of educational environments among two cohorts entering their first year of college. They utilized two participant groups measured across two years. One cohort included 183 individuals and the other cohort included 111 individuals. The results indicated that in both cohorts' psychosocial strength remained constant over two years while in university and that identity development only moderately occurred during this time. This was also noted by Waterman (1982). However, the researchers found that academic environments that were supportive, open-minded, and enhanced communication skills predicted higher levels of fidelity and ego strength and less use of avoidance decision-making amongst young adult students. By having a sense of belonging and connection to their academic system and peer groups, the participants modeled high levels of fidelity, originality, and self-expression. Within the educational system, the researchers reported that faculty members and peers can support the development of fidelity and identity achievement if they exemplify supportive and encouraging qualities.

Moreover, the researchers measured the influence that educational systems had on social cognitions and identity formation. Their findings suggested that individuals that utilized self-

reflection skills while attending a supportive university, displayed high rates of identity-achievement. These individuals typically modeled increased commitment to their pursuits and an enhanced internal sense of fidelity. Additionally, students that attended schools that utilized analytic and critical forms of teaching were less likely to experience identity diffusion by their second school year. Therefore, the researchers suggested that educational environments that promote self-expression and critical thinking allowed for students to develop stronger ability commit to their identities (Adams et al., 2000).

Following, Verhoeven et al. (2018) analyzed the results from 111 studies about how school impacts identity in adolescents. These studies were included in 80 different scientific journals and a majority of the studies took place in the United States. The articles fell into three categories, which included how schools can *unintentionally* impact identity development, *intentionally* support identity development, and specific *preconditions* that were required to intentionally support identity development in adolescents.

Verhoeven et al. (2018) also analyzed 52 articles that studied how schools and teachers may unintentionally impact identity development. The authors described this process as *hidden curriculums* as the influence and messages were implicitly communicated. First, the authors noted that classroom selection and grouping influenced identity development unintentionally. Adolescents that were in tracks that were prevocational, rather than college preparatory, were less likely to explore vocational goals and explored their identity with a less positive perception of their future. The authors noted that prevocational tracks have a stigma attached to them, which in turn affects the goals and identity of the individuals placed in those tracks. Moreover, the authors noted that teaching strategies unintentionally impact identity development. Following, the authors mentioned teacher expectations. Adolescents in classrooms with teachers who had

static expectations that did not reflect changes in behavior, were limited in how they engaged in school. They noted that adolescents' self-understandings were influenced by what they believed their teacher expected of them. Following, the authors described how peer norms affect identity unintentionally. The studies they reviewed indicated that students may not outwardly display themselves as certain identities due to fear of social consequences and stigmas. Further, students felt they could not explore certain parts of their identity, such as pursuing the arts, because of the negative reinforced peer norms. However, the authors noted that if an adolescent was a member of a certain group that was perceived as high in status, they experienced more positive influences when shaping their identity.

Following, Verhoeven et al. (2018) described how schools can *intentionally* impact identity development. The authors reported that in-breadth exploration which included exploration of new interests, discovering talents, and exposure to new topics, values, and beliefs, affected how adolescents viewed themselves. This was especially effective when the environments were on-site or included hands-on learning activities. Moreover, the authors noted that in-depth and reflective exploration in the classroom influenced identity development intentionally. Adolescents that were given opportunities to explore roles and activities that were aligned with their previously held self-understandings were likely to explore their identities more deeply. The authors again emphasized the importance of hands on and on-site activities. Further, adolescents that were introduced to role models in marginalized or minority communities felt that stereotypes were challenged and felt more comfortable further exploring that aspect of their identity. Lastly, when adolescents were given assignments that stimulated self-reflection, they were better able to understand their thoughts and gained insight into certain aspects of themselves. Also, when adolescents that were a part of marginalized communities learned about

social inequalities and the influence of societal norms on identity, they gained a stronger sense of self.

Correspondingly, Faircloth (2009) analyzed the sense of belonging in a classroom and identity in 83 9th grade students in the United States. Students were given assignments to connect their life experiences and identity with what they were learning about in English class. Students completed a qualitative survey at the end of the semester that utilized open-ended questions to analyze connections between curriculum and identity. The results indicated that students were able to identify the connection between class work and their sense of self. Also, when the curriculum represented stories of their family and culture there was an increase in enjoyment in learning in the students. Moreover, there was an increase in enjoyment, investment, and feelings of connection to the class when students were able to share their own stories and opinions. Outside of the content, students also reported that their relationship with their teacher was essential in their feelings of connection to the class, their engagement, and their success. Therefore, the teacher's level of supportiveness was highly influential in the students' exploration of their identities.

In 2011, Rich and Schachter surveyed 2,787 high school students in Israel regarding learning environments and identity promoting features of schools. They sought to understand three variables related to school climate: teacher caring, teacher as role models, and cultivation of the whole student. Teacher caring was defined as if students believed their teachers cared about them as people while teacher as role models was defined as if students believed their teacher were positive objects of identification. Cultivation of the whole student was defined as if students felt their schools promoted a range of developmental areas outside of academic growth, which included identity and exploration. The results indicated that nurturing aspects of school

climate were associated with enhanced identity exploration and agency. Moreover, their results indicated that the strongest predictor of promoting identity development was if students saw their teachers as positive role models. Lastly, the authors noted that the effects of school climate on identity development were mediated by if a student believed their studies were personally meaningful, were encouraged to actively explore, and if they felt psychologically and physically safe at school. Thus, the authors concluded that schools could enhance identity development in their students through various nurturing factors and take steps to assist their students in socio-emotional growth.

Heteronormativity

The following section defines the term heteronormativity, and the impact heteronormative environments have on an individual's well-being.

Today, many schools reflect the ideologies of their communities and are extensions of societal norms. School climates are influenced by heteronormative practices and policies that may hinder the psychosocial development of sexual minority students (Hall & Rodgers, 2019; Jones, 2014). The rights and voices of these students are silenced due to bias regarding sexual orientation and gender identities. Sexual minority students typically exist in a system that favors heterosexual values, relationships, and experiences (Enson, 2015). *Heteronormativity* values traditional male and female gender expression, views heterosexuality as the preferred way of being, and supports a binary view of gender and sexual orientation. Therefore, heteronormative values recognize straight cisgender individuals as the acceptable norm (Enson, 2015). Heteronormative environments approbate the beliefs that heterosexuality is the natural state of humans. Heteronormative beliefs affect that way individuals think, feel, and behave, at an unconscious and conscious level. Heteronormative school environments may not present as

overtly homophobic, but rather are implicitly biased to LGBTQ+ individuals. The silencing of

the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and categorizing it as the "*other*," less acceptable

way of living, creates a climate primed for rejection and labels of deviance for these individuals

(Enson, 2015).

In order to correct the bias, Enson (2015) suggested that schools should take more

responsibility for bullying and enact policies that specifically protect the LGBTQ+ youth.

Schools should construct positive learning environments and minimize harassment for all

students, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. The author suggested that

school sponsored clubs supporting LGBTQ+ youth promote feelings of acceptance and

community. Also, Enson (2015) stated that including positive course material about sexual

orientation and gender identity promotes acceptance and a sense of inclusion in the school

system. Lastly, teachers should be trained on how to react to LGBTQ+-specific bullying and how

to provide support properly and empathetically to these adolescents (Enson, 2015).

The impact of heteronormativity was outlined by Kosciw et al. (2017), in the 2017

National School Climate Survey, which included 23,001 LGBTQ+ individuals ages 13-21 living

in all 50 United States, the District of Columbia, and 5 U.S. territories. Their analysis indicated

that 59.5% of this population did not feel safe at their school due to their sexual orientation and

44.6% did not feel safe due to their gender expression. They authors noted that perceived school

safety can promote or hinder a student's engagement in the classroom and at other school

activities. It was reported that a fifth of the surveyed students reported changing schools due to

not feeling safe, welcome, or a sense of belonging at their school. Also, a majority of these

students, 70% to 75%, reported avoiding school functions and extracurricular activities as a

result of feeling unsafe or unwanted. Therefore, these students potentially did not obtain the

positive benefits associated with school engagement, such as a sense of belonging, increased self-esteem, and higher academic performance. Kosciw et al. (2017) noted some of these benefits include higher academic achievement and greater academic motivation.

Moreover, 62.2% of this population reported their school policies and standards were discriminatory against their gender expression or sexual orientation. Examples of discrimination included being prohibited from wearing clothing that does not match their gender assigned at birth, attending school dances with a same-gender date, creating a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), and discussing or writing about LGBTQ+ topics in school assignments. The discriminatory practices also included being disciplined for public displays of affection, which are not disciplined for their cisgender heterosexual peers (Kosciw et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Kosciw et al. (2017) outlined the effects of heteronormativity and bullying. The authors reported that compared to other sexual minority students who reported lower levels of victimization, those who experienced higher level of victimization were more likely to skip school and had lower grades and self-esteem. These individuals were also more likely to report that they did not plan to pursue secondary education. Also, 63.2% of sexual minority students that faced high levels of victimization and 39.1% of sexual minority students that faced lower levels of victimization reported significant levels of depression. Further, 55% of respondents who experienced discriminatory practices at their school reported higher levels depression. Overall, Kosciw et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of inclusive practices in schools. The authors noted that hostile school climates negatively impact students in a variety of ways and create inequality in education for LGBTQ+ students.

Correspondingly, Mustanski et al. (2010) utilized structured diagnostic interviews with a sample of 246 ethnically diverse, self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals ages 16-20 to uncover data

regarding the prevalence rates of mental health disorders in this population. The sample

consisted of 141 African American participants, 34 Caucasian participants, 28 Latinx

participants, and 43 participants who identified as "other." The sample was administered The

Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) 18 to assess psychological distress. The researchers also utilized

the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children (DISC) to assess if the participants met criteria

for a psychiatric diagnosis according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental

Disorders, Fourth Edition. The researchers noted that the DISC permits for the diagnosis of

specific mental health disorders and is appropriate to use for adolescents and young adults. Their

findings suggested that 15% of their sample met the criteria for a diagnosis of Major Depressive

Disorder and 30% had clinical levels of psychological distress. Also, 31% of the sample reported

having attempted suicide in their lifetime and 15% reported current suicidal ideation. Regarding

racial or ethnic disparities in mental health, the authors noted that ethnic minorities were

significantly more likely to meet criteria for conduct disorder. However, there were no other

significant disparities in diagnoses between white participants and ethnic minority participants

(Mustanski et al., 2010).

In support of the findings above, the results from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use

and Health (NSDUH) suggested that sexual minority individuals are at a greater risk to

experience mental health struggles and psychological disorders than their heterosexual

counterparts (Medley et al., 2016). The sample included 68,073 participants, of which 3,000

identified as a sexual minority individual (lesbian, gay, or bisexual) and were above the age of

18. In this subgroup, 39.1% of sexual minority individuals reported using illicit substances in the

past year, while only 17% of their heterosexual counterparts reported using illicit substances.

Sexual minority participants were also more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to use

alcohol or binge drink in the past month. Moreover, this subgroup was more likely to meet the

criteria for a mental illness according to the DSM-IV and experience a serious mental illness,

which was defined as a "mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder in the past year that that

substantially interfered with or limited one or more major life activities" (Medley et al., 2016).

Moreover, this population was more likely to experience a major depressive episode and use

tobacco and marijuana.

The 2018 NSDUH was published and reflected similar findings to the 2015 survey. The

authors indicated that there were no significant changes in alcohol abuse or marijuana use since

2015 in sexual minority young adults. However, there was a significant decrease in prescription

opioid use and heroin use in sexual minority young adults. Regarding mental health, the authors

reported a significant increase in serious mental illness and experiencing a major depressive

episode in sexual minority young adults from 2015-2018. Also, these individuals are not getting

the proper help. The authors noted that 50.8% of sexual minority individuals who were

diagnosed with any mental illness did not receive treatment (Medley et al., 2016).

In 2015, Hatzenbuehler et al. utilized data from the Growing Up Today Study (GUTS)

from 2006 to 2010. The researchers aimed to analyze systemic factors that may affect substance

use in sexual minority young adults. The number of same-sex couples, GSAS, public opinions of

sexual minorities, and state-level policies about sexual minority individuals were collected to

determine the levels of structural stigma per state. The data analysis indicated that sexual

minority youth in higher structural stigma states were statistically more likely to use marijuana

than in their counterparts low-structural stigma states. Also, sexual minority women living in

high-structural stigma states were at a four times greater risk of using illicit substances than

heterosexual women in these states. In low structural stigma states sexual minority women were

less than three times more likely to use illicit substances. Sexual minority men in high structural stigma states were at a 24% greater risk to use marijuana compared to sexual minority men in low structural stigma states (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2015).

With regards to mental health and social environment, Hatzenbuehler (2011) analyzed data from the 2006, 2007, and 2008 OHT to explore if social environments affect suicide attempt rates. Hatzenbuehler (2011) determined the climate of a community by creating a composite variable that included data on the number of same-sex couples and democrats living in the community as well as proportion of schools with GSAs, LGBTQ+ specific anti-bullying policies, and antidiscrimination policies that included sexual orientation. The analysis concluded that attempted suicide in LGB youth was 20% higher in unsupportive communities than supportive communities. The association between unsupportive social environments and LGB youth suicide attempts demonstrated the larger systemic influence on the functioning of LGB youth and their psychological well-being rather than only an individual-level risk.

Schools that systematically "other" LGBTQ+ students create institutions that promote bullying, foster higher rates of stigma, and discourage a sense of belonging in LGBTQ+ students. To analyze if inclusive school policies protect against suicide attempts in LGB students, Hatzenbuehler and Keyes (2012) evaluated the data from the 2008 Oregon Healthy Teens (OHT) survey. The researchers defined inclusive policies as school districts that had anti-bullying policies. The policies had to mention sexual orientation to be considered inclusive. In this survey, 1,143 lesbian, gay, and bisexual 11th graders responded to questions regarding suicidal behaviors and attempts. The researchers concluded that LGB respondents were significantly more likely to report attempting suicide in the past year, as compared to their heterosexual peers.

The data indicated that 4.3% of heterosexual youth reported suicide attempts while 21% of lesbian and gay youth and 23% of bisexual youth attempted suicide in this sample.

Moreover, counties with the highest rate of inclusive policies had the lowest risk of suicide in LGB students. Gay and lesbian adolescents that attended schools in the least inclusive counties were 2.25 times more likely to attempt suicide as compared to the lesbian and gay youth living in the inclusive counties. Bisexual youth were no more likely to attempt suicide in the least inclusive counties than bisexual youth in the most inclusive counties. The least inclusive counties did not enforce sexual-minority specific anti-bullying policies and reported higher rates of peer victimization. Suicide attempts in heterosexual youth also were not affected by county anti-bullying policies and were less likely. Considering suicide is the third leading cause of death for individuals aged 15 to 24, this study elucidated information that sexual minority youth are at a greater risk than heterosexual youth to be victims of peer victimization and attempt suicide. However, data indicated that there are protective factors against sexual minority suicide attempts, which included inclusive policies, supportive environments, and diverse outlets for sexual minority youth to explore their identity (Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2012).

Additionally, Espelage et al. (2018) utilized data from the 2014 Dane County Youth Survey (DCYS) to understand the relationship between peer victimization and suicidality among American LGBTQ youth. The data was obtained from 934 LGBTQ youth that were from geographically diverse county in Wisconsin that included rural and large urban centers. The participants completed self-report measures on *surveymonkey.com*. These surveys measured peer victimization, suicidal ideation and behavior, and school belonging. Peer victimization was measured by the University of Illinois Victimization Scale, which includes items such as "other

students made fun of me" and "other students picked on me." School belonging was measured on

six-item scale to understand a students' perception of their connectedness to their school.

The results of the data analysis indicated that 46% of the participants reported suicidal

ideations and 17% reported attempting suicide in the past 30 days. Moreover, 53% noted they

were victimized by their peers in the past month. The authors also noted that peer victimization

had a direct effect on suicidal ideations (b=.30, p <.001) and suicide attempts (b=.09, p <.01).

Likewise, school belonging demonstrated a direct effect on suicidal ideations (b= -.32, p <.001).

However, there was no direct effect between school belonging and suicidal attempts. Overall, the

authors noted that lower levels of school belonging were associated with higher rates of

suicidality. The authors recommended schools should create GSAs and other programs that

promote a sense of belonging, support, and safety for LGBTQ individuals. According to the

authors, empirical research suggested that GSAs were associated with lower levels of peer

victimization and acted as a protective factor for LGBTQ youth (Espelage et al., 2018).

Inclusive Course Material

Inclusive school practices can manifest in many areas of education. Specifically, sexual

education courses historically fail to address same-sex practices, demonstrations, and topics

during class (Gowen & Winges-Yanez, 2014). An inclusive sexual education would discuss all

forms of human sexuality, gender identity, relationships, sexual health, birth control, and

reproduction. Heteronormative practices would silence the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals

and promote bias against non-heterosexual cisgender students (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017).

By implementing inclusive course materials, LGBTQ+ issues and topics become more visible

and create a positive environment for learning and acceptance for all students.

Regarding sexual education in the United States, policymakers at state and local levels determine what is and is not appropriate for students to learn in schools. Therefore, state governments determine what is learned inside public school sexual education courses. However, only 39 states and the District of Columbia (DC) require public schools to teach sexual education courses. Further, only 18 of these states require their mandated sexual education courses to be medically accurate. Nine states require the information be culturally appropriate and unbiased. Thirty-five states and DC mandate that the courses cover healthy relationships. Only 11 states and DC require that sexual education courses include inclusive materials regarding non-heterosexual orientations. However, six states "require only negative information to be provided on homosexuality and/or positive emphasis on heterosexuality" (Guttmacher Institute, 2021). Oklahoma mandated that "homosexual activity" be taught as "responsible for contact with the AIDS virus" (Guttmacher Institute, 2020).

Additionally, Shapiro and Brown (2018) noted that at the time of publication New Jersey, California, and Oregon were the only states that require comprehensive sexual education courses. Comprehensive courses included discussions of healthy relationships, consent, sexual assault, sexual orientation, and more. Teachers were encouraged to have open conversations about sexuality rather than simply provide information and facts. Moreover, these states mandated that teachers must use medically accurate information and be consistent across districts. Notably, these states reported lower rates of teen pregnancy than the national average. As of May 2018, six more states placed legislature that would require more comprehensive sexual education in their public schools (Shapiro & Brown, 2018).

Typically, sexual education courses fall between abstinence only education (AOE) and comprehensive sexual education (CSE). Since there is no federal mandate on what is included is

sexual education courses, what is taught in classrooms varies widely state by state. Abstinence only courses inform students about refraining from sexual intercourse until entering a heterosexual marriage to stay safe from sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, and other medical conditions (Rabbitte & Enriquez, 2018). These courses do not include materials about safe relationships, healthy sexual behaviors, sexual and gender orientation, and other methods to prevent pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections. However, comprehensive sex education (CSE) programs inform students about abstinence and healthy sexual behaviors in a medically accurate and age-appropriate manner. CSE programs discuss contraceptives, healthy relationships, sexual and gender orientation, and the psychological and emotional aspects of sexuality. While abstinence is the only method guaranteed to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies, only 40% of adolescents practice abstinence (Rabbitte & Enriquez, 2018).

Rabbitte and Enriquez (2018) sought to analyze the effectiveness of different sexual education courses and reviewed 25 articles published in 2000-2017 that focused on sexual education, children under college age, and the influence of policy. The results indicated that AOE does not delay sexual initiation or decrease teen pregnancy or abortion rates. Moreover, in states that changed from no policy to abstinence only education (AOE), there was no significance difference in teen pregnancy or abortion rates. However, after switching programs to AOE, there was a reported 10% increase in STI rates. The authors noted this was likely from the misinformation regarding condoms and sexual health provided in AOE courses.

The authors suggested that states continually adopt sexual education programs that are against the Center for Disease Control and other public health professionals' advice. However, the researchers noted that higher amounts of grant money were provided for states that

implemented AOE. In the 2008 fiscal year $177 million dollars of the federal budget were given

to AOE states while there was no government funding for CSE programs. However, in 2010 an

amendment to Title V called the Personal Education Program was created to teach teens about

abstinence and contraception. Since the ratification of this amendment, abstinence only grants

decreased while the funding of CSE programs increased (Rabbitte & Enriquez, 2018).

Nonetheless, many states still did not implement CSE programs, which the authors

indicated could be due to systemic influences, such as political affiliation, political views, and

religious beliefs of state and federal governments. Specifically, religious beliefs and political

views were suggested to be the biggest influence over which sexual education courses were

adopted per state. Conservative states were more likely to support abstinence only courses.

Conversely, states that tended to be liberal were more likely to support CSE and courses that

provide contraception, discuss sexual orientation, and healthy relationships. Lastly, Rabbitte and

Enriquez (2018) noted that states with high levels of religiosity and faith were more likely to

adopt abstinence only courses while states with low levels of religiosity and theism were likely

to adopt CSE courses.

Additionally, Lemon (2019) noted that since 1997 the federal government invested over

one billion dollars in abstinence only sex education. However, as noted by Santelli et al. (2017),

these programs often fail. The authors noted that as the age of marriage is increasing, the

percentage of individuals abstaining from sex before marriage is decreasing. Lemon (2019)

reported that these programs not only fail of prevent pregnancies and do not delay onset of

sexual intercourse, but these programs are heteronormative. Programs that inform about

intercourse within the confines of marriage typically exclude the experiences of LGBTQ+

individuals. The exclusion of LGBTQ+ topics fail to address health concerns specifically related

to this population and increases the chances of discrimination, violence, depression, and self-harm (Lemon, 2019). The 2017 National School Climate Survey further described the state of sex education within the United States. This study reported that 22.4% of students did not receive any sex education courses and 55.8% of students had sex education but it did not include same-sex topics. Only 6.7% of the sample reported having LGBTQ+ inclusive sex education courses that were positive while 8.8% reported the LGBTQ+ content was negative (Kosciw et al., 2017).

According to Jones and Cox (2015), the 2015 Millennials, Sexuality, and Reproductive Health Survey, 23% of individuals ages 18-35 did not receive sexual education courses in their schools. Of the remaining 77%, only 12% of millennials reported that the language, movies, and demonstrations used in their sexual education classes mentioned same-sex relationships. The largest population that did not receive sexual education courses were in religious schools where 21% of youth reported no mention of sexual health or relationships. There was a clear gap in the current sexual education courses and what students deemed as necessary, as 43% of millennials reported that their courses were somewhat helpful and 37% reported that their class was not helpful when making decisions regarding their sex life. A majority of millennials favor more inclusive sexual education programs that go beyond abstinence only education and focus on birth control usage as well as safe and healthy relationship functioning (Jones & Cox, 2015). This demonstrates the awareness in youth that there is a failure in the educational system to properly teach about healthy relationships and sexual practices. This also demonstrates the lack of sexual minority inclusive information and materials presented in American sexual education courses.

Correspondingly, a study done by Gowen and Winges-Yanez (2014) demonstrated themes of heteronormativity across sexual education classes. By using five focus groups of 30

LGBTQ+ adolescents and young adults, the researchers analyzed United States based school systems, both rural and urban, and the content of sexual education courses. The researchers discovered a majority of individuals reported classes that included exclusively heterosexual content and the belief that LGBTQ+ issues were silenced or ignored. With regards to silencing of LGBTQ+ issues, an overall theme mentioned was that schools actively avoided or ignored LGBTQ+ discourse, or passively silenced this discourse by excluding any sexual or gender minority topics from classroom discussions. Also, several of the participants recalled that when same-sex relationships were mentioned in the classroom they were framed in a pathologizing manner. For instance, many of the instructors only mentioned gay relationships when discussing HIV/AIDS or other STIs, which became a comparative narrative equating gay individuals and harmful outcomes.

Gowen and Winges-Tamez (2014) suggested that these types of conversations and course materials add to the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ individuals by teaching America's youth to automatically link same-sex couples within the context of serious medical conditions. Courses and educators that focus on heterosexual only or LGBTQ+ pathologizing materials add to the myth that only gay individuals can contract HIV/AIDs. Thus, perpetuating the misconception of using safe-sex practices as only for pregnancy prevention rather than STI prevention when engaging in sexual activities. Lastly, Gowen and Winges-Yanez (2014) mentioned that on average sexual education courses only focused on penile-vaginal intercourse. Only a few of the focus groups discuss learning about sexual orientation, gender expression, or different types of sexual activities.

Safe Adults, School Clubs, and Diversity Trainings

Outside of sex education, LGBTQ+ students face isolation, discrimination, and bullying. However, certain factors can promote belonging and security while at school. Seelman et al. (2015) examined data from a sample of 152 LGBTQ+ high school students in Colorado regarding their school experiences. They obtained the data through surveys that inquired about school experiences, risky behaviors, and the use of local LGBTQ+ organizations. Seelman et al. (2015) defined student school engagement as "the person-environment fit between a student and the student's school" (p. 19). School engagement encompasses three concepts: aspirations, belonging, and productivity. Aspirations includes how much a student believes school is worthwhile with regards to their future goals. Belonging comprises of the level congruence, or incongruence, between the student's values and the school's values. Productivity involves the amount of pro-school behaviors that a student engages in, such as studying for tests or turning in homework. The researchers measured levels of school engagement with levels of school supports, GSA practices and involvement, and school climate.

Seelman et al. (2015) analyzed the results of the surveys through two sequential multiple linear regression models. The results indicated that controlling for all other variables, the presence of having a safe adult at school was a statistically significant predictor of student school engagement, B=0.53, $p <.01$. Meaning, with ever additional safe adult a student had at school, student engagement would increase by 0.53. A safe adult was defined as a school employee that students felt they could discuss their sexual orientation or gender identity with while feeling supported and comfortable. Therefore, Seelman et al. (2015) concluded that staff are an essential part of creating a positive school climate, promoting school engagement, and a sense of belonging for this population. The researchers also argued that a visible, maintained, and large

GSA group on campus was associated with increased school engagement for LGBTQ+ students

involved in this group. However, after the researchers controlled for safe adults in the school,

they noted that involvement in a GSA did not significantly predict student engagement as a

stand-alone variable (Seelman et al., 2015).

Correspondingly, Dessel et al. (2017) noted that since teachers hold an authoritative

position, their behaviors, beliefs, and course content can create an atmosphere that can perpetuate

heteronormative practices. This may occur implicitly or explicitly. Therefore, Dessel et al.

(2017) investigated the influence that teachers have on creating a safe school climate. The

researchers analyzed data collected through the 2014 Riot Youth Climate survey. The survey was

completed in Michigan with the support of Neutral Zone and Riot Youth, two local LGBTQ+

organizations that promote youth development and safe spaces. The survey was sent to five

public high schools in Michigan that had active GSAS or similar student groups. The final

sample included 1046 students of which 202 (21.6%) identified as LGBQ and 86 (9.2%)

identified as transgender. The five high schools varied in demographics. The two suburban

schools reported as majority white and had between 20%-27% of students identifying as LGBQ

and 7%-8% identifying as transgender. Moreover, the two rural high school also reported a

majority white class but reported fewer LGBQ students (between 15%-18%) and transgender

students (between 8%-9%). The only urban school included had a more diverse student

population, which consisted of a majority of African American students. This school reported

that 23.8% of their student body identified as LGBQ and 14% identified as transgender.

Dessel et al. (2017) analyzed results of measurements of student well-being, which was

broken down into self-esteem and self-reported grades, and student-teacher relationships. The

student-teacher relationship had four levels. The levels included 1) teacher's use of homophobic

language; 2) teacher's intervention in situations in which sexual minority students were being bullied; 3) students' belief there was a trusted adult at school they could discuss personal issues with; and 4) student's comfort level with teachers discussing sexual and gender orientation.

The results of the analysis suggested that all four types of student-teacher relationships were associated with self-esteem amongst LGBTQ+ and heterosexual students. There was a negative association between teacher use of bias and homophobic language and self-esteem. The use of bias and derogatory language by teachers was also significantly associated with poorer academic achievement, but only in LGBTQ+ students. Therefore, the researchers suggested that these students may be internalizing biased language and feelings of victimization, which in turn hinders their classroom success, as seen in self-reported GPAs. However, Dessel et al. (2017) specified that if teachers intervened when hearing biased and homophobic language, students reported higher self-esteem. Having a trusted adult at school to talk to about gender or sexual orientation was positively associated with higher self-esteem. This variable was the strongest predictor of self-esteem. However, a majority (66.67%) of the participants reported not having a trusted adult at school. Therefore, finding a trusted adult ally at school to discuss sexual orientation or gender identity may be difficult. This finding corresponds with the findings of Seelman et al. (2015) that indicated that supportive adults at school act as an essential part of cultivating a school climate that promotes a sense of belonging, productive academic behaviors, and a strong sense of pride in their education.

Lastly, Dessel et al. (2017) concluded that teachers hold the power to guide the beliefs, language, and behavior of the student body. This is seen in the effects of teachers' language and behaviors with fellow staff and students, which also influences school climate. Positive school climates create a sense of belonging and can be a protective factor against the adverse effects of

bullying and homophobia, such as increased rates of drug and alcohol use. Schools with anti-bullying policies are associated with increased self-esteem. Schools with inclusive curriculum display less victimization of LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al., 2013). Schools with GSAs also have better educational outcomes and mental health for sexual minority students (Marx & Kettrey, 2016). To improve school climate and LGBTQ+ student self-esteem and academic achievement, Dessel et al. (2017) recommended training for teachers regarding LGBTQ+ specific issues, appropriate language use, how to model being an ally, and ways to intervene with bullying. Students with support from staff were less likely to attempt suicide, had less truancy, and showed increased self-esteem.

However, the recommendation of Dessel et al. (2017) that teachers should be trained on LGBTQ+ issues and how to be an ally is not currently a required part of education degree programs in the United States. Wyatt et al. (2008) noted that the purpose of teacher education is to prepare future teachers to be effective when educating diverse populations of students. The role of teacher has the power to enhance the school experience and create inclusive learning environments. Shannon-Baker and Wagner (2019) suggested that future teachers be trained on appropriate LGBTQ+ terms, reflect on personal bias and learned heteronormative practices, explore narratives of diverse LGBTQ+ individuals, and partake in critical thinking exercises that explore intersectionality of development, demographic factors, and LGBTQ+ status.

In 2014, Cooper et al. created a multidisciplinary approach to address school safety for LGBTQ+ youth and that may increase a sense of belonging through systemic changes. The authors suggested the cultivation of straight allies would create positive long-term change in schools, since GSAs and anti-bullying polices are linked to safer school climates. The researchers defined social justice allies as "members of the dominant or privileged social groups

who consciously work to end forms of systemic oppression that sustain their own privilege and power based upon this identity" (p.347). Therefore, LGBTQ+ allies are heterosexual cisgender individuals who strive to change the heteronormative systems and advocate against transphobia and homophobia. Ally training should include from administrators, teachers, coaches, bus drivers, and every other adult that is involved in creating a school's culture and climate. Thus, the adults at a school would serve as positive role models to the students.

Cooper et al. (2014) also described that in order to create safe learning environments, LGBTQ+ allies must have awareness, knowledge, skills, and take action. The authors noted that a foundational step to becoming an ally is focusing on the similarities between allies and LGBTQ+ youth. The authors suggested this could be done through conversations, self-examination, ongoing education, and reviewing their community's standards and laws. In the end, allies should be able to use skills they learned to communicate their knowledge to others, create supportive networks, and gain the confidence to engage in acts of social justice. With regards to action, allies must be prepared to react to harassment, bullying, and bias against LGBTQ+ youth to make a difference in that student's life and create long term change. The authors suggested that each ally should attend LGBTQ+ specific trainings and then bridge the knowledge learned from theory-oriented trainings to the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. Therefore, trainings should assist in applying and communicating their allyship throughout the school. The authors recommended that experiential learning, role-playing, and allyship from all levels provide allies with the confidence to spread awareness, speak up to injustice, and support LGBTQ+ individuals (Cooper et al., 2014).

Russell et al. (2016) sought to link principals' perception of their school's climate with teacher accounts of bullying and the presence of LGBTQ+ focused supports and protective

policies. The researchers utilized data from the 2010 California *School Health Profile*, which collected information from surveys sent to principals across the United States. The data included the presence of absence of five sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) or LGBTQ+ specific policies, which included SOGI-focused student groups, teacher trainings, safe spaces, harassment/ bullying policies, and access to outside health resources. Also, the researchers used data from the *California School Climate Survey*, which collected information from California teachers between 2011-2013. Teacher responses were voluntary and in connection to the *California Healthy Kids Survey* and No Child Left Behind Act. Teachers were asked questions regarding their perception of how frequent bullying and harassment occur at their school and overall school safety.

Russell et al. (2016) gathered data regarding demographics and school academic programs, which was available to the public through the California Department of Education. The California School Climate Survey (CSCS) was administered to teachers between 2011 and 2013. From the survey, the researchers analyzed responses to seven items to determine if a school was considered safe or unsafe. The researchers also derived informant regarding rates of bullying from the CSCS. Information regarding school policies was obtained through data from the School Health Profile (SHP) which was administered to principals in 2010.

In their analysis, there was a significant association between SOGI focused policies and school safety. Moreover, schools that had higher rates of bullying and were determined to be unsafe, were less likely to have SOGI-focused policies. However, unsafe schools that had all five SOGI-focused policies and practices reported fewer bullying problems, compared to safe schools. Overall, schools with LGBTQ+ and SOGI-focused anti-bullying policies, safe spaces, teacher training, student groups, and health services reported lower rates of bullying and higher

rates of a safer school environment as perceived by the school staff (Russell et al. (2016). This is in accordance with the aforementioned findings by Dessel et al. (2017).

The researchers included in their discussion that SOGI and LGBTQ+ specific policies and programs show promise in protecting sexual minority youth from harassment and feeling as if they do not belong. Moreover, they noted that teachers' perception of bullying highly varied across the schools. Also, less experienced teachers were more likely to perceive that bullying was a problem in their schools. Therefore, the researchers recommended utilizing systemic, multilevel strategies to decrease bullying. However, they noted that two federal bills that were designed to protect LGBTQ+ students against discrimination and bullying were not signed into law. (Russel et al., 2016).

Gorski et al. (2013) completed an analysis of 41 syllabi for multicultural teacher education (MTE) courses from undergraduate and graduate universities and testimonies from 80 MTE professors in the USA. The researchers reviewed how professors educate future teachers on multicultural topics, course material, and if the professors mentioned LGBTQ+ issues in the courses. While analyzing the MTE official curriculum and syllabi, the researchers discovered that LGBTQ+ issues were rarely mentioned and minimal class time was dedicated to LGBTQ+ identities, oppression, and other areas of concern related to being a sexual or gender minority. Gorski et al. (2013) reported that 41% of the syllabi omitted issues related to sexual orientation and the courses that did include these topics only spent 3.76% of class time discussing it.

Moreover, LGBTQ+ issues were eight times more likely to be excluded from the courses than issues regarding race. None of the analyzed syllabi discussed the intersectionality between gender and sexual orientation. Nevertheless, the participants reported that they spent twice as much time discussing gender than reviewing sexual orientation. Therefore, MTE courses were

more likely to discuss gender and racial concerns than sexuality. However, Gorski et al. (2013)

noted that when professors did discuss LGBTQ+ topics in class, they were more likely to take a

conservative approach. The authors defined this form of educating as the tendency to focus on

identity but not on topics of oppression or sociopolitical contexts in relation to LGBTQ+ issues.

Gorski et al. (2013) concluded that MTE supports heterosexism persistence in education, which

has many consequences on LGBTQ+ youth. These consequences include, but are not limited to,

higher rates of suicide, depression, alcohol and drug use amongst LGBTQ+ individuals who

experienced feelings of isolation, teasing, and a negative school climate (Espelage et al., 2008).

Lastly, Gorski et al. (2013) discussed that MTE professors and course material omit information

that could be used to benefit the lives of LGBTQ+ youth, thus continuing the cycle of

heteronormativity, invisibility of LGBTQ+ people, and unsafe school climates. If teachers are

prepared to manage issues specifically related to their LGBTQ+ students, they are less likely to

be challenged and be passive in protecting these students from bullying and heteronormative

marginalization (Gorski et al., 2013).

Peer Relationships

Critical youth theorists suggest that the power to create meaningful change is in the hands

of the youth (Wernick et al., 2013). Thus, students can also help create a safe a supportive

environment for all their peers. Peer interventions in the face of oppression can be empowering

to the individual as well as to students who face harassment and bullying. Since students are

better able to understand social dynamics, connect with same-age peers, and be in locations that

teachers are not (i.e., bathrooms, locker rooms), they have an advantage in intervening when they

witness bullying or harassment. To measure the impact of student intervention, Wernick et al.

(2013) analyzed data from the 2007 and 2008 school climate surveys. These surveys were

distributed by the Riot Youth and Neutral Zone, an LGBTQ+ and allied youth development program based in Michigan. The surveys were sent to four public high schools in the area to gain insight into the students' perceptions of school climate and experiences of bullying. The surveys examined topics related to harassment, safety, sexual orientation, gender identity, and school curriculum. Within the four schools, 1171 students participated. Within the sample, 100 students identified as LBG or questioning, while 17 identified as transgender or questioning their gender identity.

Wernick et al. (2013) aimed to uncover factors that may predict if a student would interfere when observing LGBTQ+ specific bullying or harassment. Their analysis indicated that the students "often" hear homophobic and transphobic language during school. In response to the derogatory comments, males, heterosexual students, and cisgender students were the least likely to intervene, as noted in the self-reported measures. However, the likelihood for all students to intervene when witnessing bullying or harassment was positively associated with witnessing a staff member intervene. Moreover, witnessing a fellow student intervene was significantly associated with an increased likelihood to intervene in the future. Notably, observing other students intervene was a stronger predictor of self-reported future intervention than only observing a staff member intervene.

The researchers suggested that with this data, schools can create peer education programs and appoint student leaders as allies against LGBTQ+ targeted bullying and harassment. Wernick et al. (2013) noted that that multilevel systematic changes and policies best protect LGBTQ+ students from bullying. Moreover, the researchers recommended that teachers should continuously intervene when bullying or harassment occurs. The positive influence of an

individual in power modeling prosocial and accepting behaviors can add to the creation of safe and inclusive school climates (Wernick et al., 2013).

Additionally, Day et al. (2019) recruited 1,061 LGBTQ+ youth, ages 15-21, to assess the impact GSAs and LGBTQ+ focused policies on bullying and social support. Participants were queried about if their school had an active GSA, LGBTQ+ focused antibullying policies, and if they experienced homophobic or gender-based bullying. Participants were also administered the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale by Malecki et al. (2000) to assess classmate support and teacher support.

The results indicated that participants that attended schools with both GSAs and LGBTQ+ focused policies and schools with only LGBTQ+ specific policies reported less frequent homophobic and gender-based bullying. There was not a statistically significant relationship between schools that only had GSAS and rates of homophobic bullying. Moreover, participants reported greater classmate and teacher support if they attended a school with a GSAS and LGBTQ+ focused policies compared to participants whose school had neither. Notably, the researchers concluded that transgender participants reported higher rates of bullying and less social support from peers than the cisgender participants. Thus, the researchers recommend implementing the combination of the two, as together they were more effective in addressing homophobic bullying. Day et al. (2019) explained that GSAs foster positive relationships between all students, regardless of their gender or sexual identity.

Summary

Chapter 2 outlined the works of various theories of identity development. This included outlining ego development theories, including Erik Erickson and James Marcia, as well as non-heterosexual orientation development theories, including Vivienne Cass and Anthony R.

D'Augelli. Additional theories outlined included Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development and Jeffrey Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood. Following the outline of theoretical models, an overview of school climate and heteronormativity was provided to inform about research question 1. Included within these sections are numerous research studies analyzing the impact of heteronormative and positive school climates. Additional studies regarding the impact of familial religion and geographic location on identity development were also discussed as to inform about research question 2 and 3. Lastly, research regarding specific aspects of school climate, such as course material, teacher trainings and safe adults, peer relationships, and school clubs, was reviewed.

　　　　Of note, there is limited research studying the correlation between high school climate and identity formation. Thus, the review of literature demonstrated the need for additional research within this area, especially regarding the lived experiences of sexual minority individuals.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methods

The following section will include the methodology utilized to explore the possible

relationship between identity formation in LGB young adult individuals and their high school

climate. Included in this section is an explanation of the research design, a retrospective cross-

sectional survey design, utilized to gather and interpret data. The goal of using a survey design

was to generalize the attitudes and experiences of the sample of LGB young adult participants in

this study to the larger related LGB population. An overview of the population and sample

follows. Next, the recruitment procedures, instrumentation, and data processing strategies are

outlined. Lastly, this section includes a description about limitations to the research design as

well as ethical considerations.

Quantitative Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: Is there a significant relationship between high school climate and identity formation in

young adults who identify as sexual minorities (gay, lesbian, or bisexual)? The null hypothesis is

that there is no significant correlation between the two measures.

Ho1: The researcher hypothesized that there would be a significant positive correlation between

attending a heteronormative high school climate and having an insecure identity in young adults

who identify as sexual minorities. Meaning, if a participant reports higher scores on the SMISCS

they will also likely report higher scores on the LGBIS.

Ho2: The researcher hypothesized there would be a significant positive correlation between

attending an inclusive high school and having a secure identity in this population. Meaning, if a

participant reports lower scores on the SMISCS they will likely report lower scores on the

LGBIS. Are there specific demographic factors that are associated with young adult identity and

self-reported high school climate? The null hypothesis is that there is no significant correlation

between demographic factors and responses on the surveys.

RQ2: Are there specific demographic factors, such as gender, geographical region, SES, or levels

of religiosity, that correlate with the LGBIS?

Ho1: The researcher hypothesized that growing up in a highly religious home would positively

correlate with scores on the LGBIS. Meaning, if a participant reported living in a home that was

very religious, they are also more likely to report having difficulty forming a secure identity.

RQ3: Do specific demographic factors, such as gender, geographical region, SES, or levels of

religiosity, correlate with the SMISCS?

Ho1: The researcher hypothesized that growing up in a highly religious home would positively

correlate with scores on the SMISCS. Meaning, if a participant reported living in a home that

was very religious, they are also more likely to report they attended a heteronormative high

school.

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey research design was utilized to measure the potential correlation

between high school climate and identity formation in LGB young adults. An advantage of using

a survey design is the ability to collect data in a short period of time by systematically

interviewing a sample (Sapsford, 1999). By asking relevant questions in the same way for each

participant, survey methods allow for the comparison of responses in a standardized process

(Sapsford, 1999). Moreover, survey designs allow for the accumulation of standardized

quantitative data and numeric descriptions that illuminate the opinions and experiences of a

specific population (Creswell, 2014). Babbie (1990) noted that surveys are widely used in social

research as a means to combine items that represent larger complex variables. The present study

utilized a 27-item survey and an 18-item survey to examine the larger concepts of identity formation and school climate. Moreover, using multiple items can help avoid bias that may be created from single item questionnaires (Babbie, 1990).

The cross-sectional nature of the present study allowed for information to be collected at a single point in time and was used to describe a larger population. Babbie (1990) noted cross-sectional designs aid in uncovering relationships between variables. Moreover, surveys are used to make declarations about a specific population. Surveys allow researchers to collect information that can explain distributions of traits, characteristics, or attributes of the population in question (Babbie, 1990).

Some advantages of utilizing Internet-based survey methods as high speed of returns, added time for more thoughtful and complex responses, and responses are instantly stored. Fowler (2014) also noted an advantage of Internet-based surveys is participants have no obligation to share answers with a researcher. Therefore, collecting sensitive information may be more valid due to increased anonymity and decreased pressure to identify oneself.

The use of a correlation design allowed the researcher to examine the relationship, or association, between the two variables instead of attempting to uncover a causal link (Harris, 2008). Correlation does not infer causation but instead uncovers associations or relationships. Pearson's correlation coefficient is a frequently used measure to assess linear relationships (Lavrakas, 2008). Data analysis was directed at identifying a possible correlation between responses on the two surveys. The null hypothesis was defined as no significant correlation between scores on the school climate survey and the identity formation survey. Therefore, the null hypothesis proposed that high school climate is not associated with young adult identity formation. Additionally, data analysis was directed at uncovering possible significant

correlations between demographic factors and responses on the school climate survey and the identity formation survey. Therefore, the null hypothesis proposed that other aspects of one's identity, such as levels of religiosity, socioeconomic status, or geographical region, are not associated with school climate or identity formation.

The benefit of using a retrospective design is to identify potential risk and protective factors for a specific population. After identifying risk and protective factors, the data can be used to recommend policies or programs to prevent future maladaptive outcomes. The literature review in chapter two identified the maladaptive outcomes of attending an unsupportive and heteronormative school for LGB individuals. These outcomes include and are not limited to: higher rates of suicidality, substance use, victimization, and an overall decrease in psychological well-being (Hatchel et al., 2018; Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2012; Hatzenbuehler et al, 2015).

Participants and Sample Selection

The target sample was young adult LGB individuals. Participants were cisgender individuals between the ages of 18 to 25 years, and identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). The inclusion criteria included: 1) sexual orientation was self-identified and open during high school; 2) participants attended high school in the United States; 3) participants spoke fluent English; 4) participants had access to a secure Internet connection.

The criteria regarding participant age range reflected the literature regarding identity development and chronological age. The literature states that this developmental period, emerging adulthood and young adulthood, encompasses the difficult transition from adolescence to adulthood. This developmental period involves rapid maturing, exploration of identity, and ultimately achievement of identity. The majority of individuals older than this age group are more likely to be committed to their identity and experiencing fidelity, therefore were excluded from

this study (Adams et al., 2000; Erickson, 1980). Individuals were required to have attended high school in the United States because survey questions reflected policies and norms based upon American educational standards and developmental theories that have not yet been reviewed in other countries. Participants who did not speak fluent English were excluded as the surveys were presented in English. Lastly, individuals were required to have access to a secure Internet connection as the surveys were conducted online. Secure access was essential to ensure the confidentiality of the participants.

Individuals who 1) did not attend high school in the United States; 2) were not fluent in English; 3) were younger than 18 or older than 25; 4) were not out in high school (i.e., closeted); 5) attended online school or homeschool; 6) did not identify as cisgender; 7) had an intellectual disability or neurodevelopmental disorder were excluded from this study. These factors were assessed for on the first questionnaire provided to participants. If a potential participant marked any of the exclusion criteria categories, they were thanked for their time and did not continue with the study.

Procedures

With regards to recruitment, the sample size included 75 individuals. This sample size was deemed appropriate to obtain an adequate power and effect size. Chain sampling was used to recruit participants. Chain sampling allowed the researcher to use online LGBTQ+ message boards and social media sites to inform potential participants about participating in this study. Participants were encouraged to inform other individuals to participate in this study, thus creating a chain-sampling effect. Recruitment information posted on social media and virtual messaging boards included pertinent information regarding the nature of the study, including the purpose and inclusion criteria. Also, the researcher used quota sampling, as individuals were

required to fit specific characteristics in order to participate in the study. Therefore, participants were selected on the basis of their goodness of fit to the target population.

The recruitment message stated, "I am looking cisgender lesbian, gay, and bi individuals that are 18-25-year-old, went to high school in the USA and were out during high school, to take an online survey to research if/ how the climate of United States high schools affects this community. Head to https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/schoolclimateresearch to take the survey right away! Go to www.gabriellepatton.com for more info and to take the online survey."

Data was collected via *surveymonkey.com*. The researcher posted a link to the study and a brief description of the study and the inclusion criteria. The survey was available electronically for five months. Participants were first asked to answer a screening questionnaire to ensure they fit the inclusion criteria of the present study (Appendix A). Potential participants answered questions regarding their age, sexual orientation, native language, gender identity, age of coming out, and geographical region of their high school. Participants were also asked if they had ever been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, Intellectual Disability, Down Syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Personality Disorder, PTSD, Psychotic Disorder, or a Language Disorder. If an individual failed to meet the inclusion criteria, they did not move forward with the study and were excluded from the data analysis. Individuals who did not meet the inclusion criteria were sent to a page thanking them for their participation and explaining that they were omitted from the study.

If an individual was part of the target sample, they were asked to read an informed consent document that explained the voluntary nature of the study and how their identity and confidentiality were protected throughout the research process. After reviewing the informed consent document, participants either agreed to or disagreed to participate in the study by

checking and dating a box on the page (Appendix B). A debriefing memo with the results of the study was included on the researcher's website so that participants could see the importance of their contribution.

After completion of the screening questionnaire and consenting to participate, the participants answered questions regarding demographics. These questions did not include any identifying information. Participants were not asked to share their name, phone number, high school name, specific location, or email address. Participants were asked about their race/ ethnic background, current education level, familial socioeconomic status during high school, level of familial religiosity, history of trauma and abuse, and substance use during high school (Appendix C).

Validity

The term validity when used in a research setting "refers to the extent to which an empirical measure adequately reflects the real meaning of the concept under consideration" (Babbie, 1990, p. 133). To be considered a valid measure, a survey should have acceptable face validity, criterion-related validity, content validity, and construct validity (Babbie, 1990). Considering the SMISCS was created for the present study by the researcher, aspects of validity were unable to be analyzed and reported. Thus, future research may focus on establishing validity of this measure.

The revised LGBIS was standardized on a sample of 654 individuals, ages 18-54, who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Mohr & Kendra, 2012). Individuals were from various ethnicities in 45 U.S. states and providences of Canada. The coefficient alphas ranged from .76 to .89 amongst the subscales, indicating a high reliability estimate. Further, a test-retest reliability study was completed to examine the internal consistency of the LGBIS. A sample of

51 individuals in the United States were administered the LGBIS six weeks apart. Results

indicated that Cronbach's alpha estimates ranged between .72 and .94. Therefore, the levels of

internal consistency were moderate to high. The test-retest correlation coefficients were

moderate to high and ranged from .70 to .92 on the LGBIS subscales (Mohr & Kendra, 2011).

Instrumentation

The participants completed an online self-report survey that the researcher created. The

survey, entitled Sexual Minority Inclusiveness School Climate Survey (SMISCS), measured

school climate specifically related to the experiences of being a sexual minority student in the

American educational system (Appendix D). The survey is 18 questions and asked questions

retrospectively as a means to have participants reflect upon their past. The SMISCS was created

after a review of the literature reflected a lack of retrospective school climate measures that

specifically inquired about being a sexual minority student. Psychometrically validated measures

inspired the questions. Relevant themes were considered, and questions were generated upon

reviewing major subscales utilized across multiple school climate measures.

After extensive research into other validated school climate measures, the researcher

included items on the SMISCS that represented the larger construct of school climate. It was

determined that four core domains should be asked on every school climate measure. The

domains included physical and social safety, teaching and learning, relationships, and

environmental-structural aspects. The researcher included all four domains and included

additional topics related to the acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ+ students. Thus, participants

responded to items on the SMISCS investigating a sense of belonging, LGBTQ+ curriculum,

incidences of bullying and harassment, overall sense of safety, teacher support, and peer

relationships. Questions were inspired by items found on the 2008 Oregon Healthy Teens survey

(Hatzenbuehler and Keyes, 2012), California School Climate and Safety Survey (Furlong, 2012), the School Climate Assessment Instrument by the Alliance for the Study of School Climate (2004), and the 2017 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2017).

The SMISCS provided data on if a participant attended an inclusive or heteronormative school. If participants attended a more inclusive school, they were more likely to respond "yes" to questions that reflected inclusive practices, such as the presence of a Pride or Allies group, same-sex discussions in the classroom, inclusive sexual education courses, and LGBTQ+ specific anti-bullying policies. If individuals attended a more heteronormative school, they endorsed items related to being bullied, feeling isolated, hearing biased language, and feeling that the experiences of sexual minority individuals were invisible or silenced.

Following, participants were asked to complete another online survey concerning their current identity functioning. The Lesbian, Gay, & Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS) is a 27-question survey created by Mohr and Kendra (2012) that includes questions regarding various aspects of development that are unique to sexual minority individuals (See Appendix E). There are eight subscales: Acceptance Concerns, Concealment Motivation, Identity Uncertainty, Internalized Homonegativity, Difficult Process, Identity Superiority, Identity Affirmation, and Identity Centrality (Mohr & Kendra, 2012). The LGBIS queries participants on a 4-point Likert scale. The participants responded to items that ranged from *strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree,* and *agree.* The creators of the LGBIS allow public use of this measure, and therefore prior permission to utilize the LGBIS was not required.

Lastly, participants were given the opportunity to answer three open-ended questions. These optional questions were for participants to further explain their lived experiences in a qualitative narrative. The qualitative portion was not included in data analysis but rather used to

elaborate upon the quantitative findings, thus fully incorporating the lived experiences. The questions queried about identity exploration, motivation to obtain a strong sense of self, the process of discovering values.

Reliability

A Cronbach's alpha analysis was conducted on the SMISCS and LGBIS. Brace et al. (2013) reported that Cronbach's alpha is the most widely used statistical test to measure reliability. George and Mallery (2003) specified that a Cronbach's alpha analysis provides information regarding how items on an instrument measure the same concept or variable. It provides context to the level of inter-relatability between items. Moreover, the authors noted that the closer the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is to 1.00, the greater the internal consistency of the items. Also, scores above .70 demonstrate an acceptable level of internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2003).

The results of the reliability testing are listed below in Table 1. The alpha level for the SMISCS was .849, which indicates the measure had a sufficient level of inter-item reliability. The alpha level for the LBIS was .813, indicating this measure also had a sufficient level inter-rater reliability.

Table 1
Reliability Coefficients

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's alpha	Interpretation
LGBIS	27	.813	Good
SMISCS	18	.849	Good

Note: Interpretations of Cronbach's alpha is based on generally accepted criteria (DeVellis, 2012).

Data Processing

Data was examined to deduce if the responses on the SMISCS correlated with the

responses on the LGBIS. A statistically significant correlation would signify a relationship

between high school climate experiences and current identity functioning. SPSS version 24 was

used to analyze the data from the SMISCS and the LGBIS. Following the aggregation of survey

data into SPSS, the researcher analyzed the reliability of the instruments.

Assumptions

This study was guided by various assumptions. First, it was assumed that high school

climate impacts identity formation in young adult sexual minority individuals. Thus, it was

assumed that there were actual differences in identify formation in individuals who attended

heteronormative schools and supportive schools. Also, since the study was conducted virtually

without researcher monitoring, it was assumed that all participants answered survey questions

honestly, voluntarily, and were not deceptive with their responses. It was also assumed that

respondents met the inclusion criteria, were adequate representatives of the population of

interest, and understood the survey directions and questions. Lastly, it was assumed that the

SMISCS was an accurate and valid measure to analyze school climate.

Limitations

The primary limitation included recruitment and participant sample. Participation was

limited to individuals who use social media and virtual discussion boards, thus only individuals

with access to the internet and who use the aforementioned websites, were able to participate in

the study. Thus, the sample may not be a completely accurate reflection of the target population.

Also, a limitation was the length of recruit and sample size. Additional months recruiting, thus

increasing the sample size, may have led to different results. Fowler (2014) also potential

disadvantages to Internet-based surveys. These included that the sample is limited to Internet users, inability to ask the researcher for clarification, and the researcher is not involved in the data collection.

Ethical Assurances

The researcher obtained permission and clearance to conduct the present study from the IRB. Informed consent was acquired at the beginning of the survey. Participation was voluntary and withdrawal without penalization was indicated at the beginning of the survey.

A bivariate correlational design was used in the present study as the variables, high school climate and identity formation, cannot be manipulated. For many psychological research experiments, manipulating certain variables would be unethical. Therefore, correlational designs are used to examine the "natural changes or differences" between what is being measures (Harris, 2008, p.141). Thus, the present study analyzed potential naturally occurring differences in this population, as it would be unethical and unfeasible to assign participants to experimental groups that differ in school climate.

Lastly, Babbie (1990) outlined how survey research requires participants to provide sensitive information that does not serve their interests. Thus, participants divulged information that may serve a larger population without personal benefit or reward. Therefore, it was emphasized that responding to survey items was entirely voluntary. The present study explicitly explained to respondents that their participation was voluntary and that they could terminate at any moment. Moreover, participants were not required to provide any identifying information.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the decision-making process for choice of sample, recruitment, data collection, and methodology. The researcher utilized a cross-sectional survey research design to

analyze the relationship between high school climate and young adult identity formation in sexual minority individuals. A correlational design was chosen as the variables of the present study, high school climate and identity formation, are unable to be manipulated. Correlational designs allow for the examination of relationships, or associations, between variables. The study was retrospective as it required participants to answer questions about their past. A benefit of retrospective designs is that potential protective and risk factors can be identified.

The sample included 18-25-year-old American sexual minority individuals. A link to the surveys were posted on various social media and online discussion boards to recruit participants. Data was collected on surveymonkey.com. Participants completed a screening questionnaire to determined eligibility, responded to an informed consent document, and answered a demographic questionnaire. Following, participants responded to the SMISCS, LGBIS, the optional open-ended questions, and were provided with a debriefing memo.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction and Review of Purpose

The researcher used a quantitative correlational design to describe the relationship between school climate and identity functioning in LGB young adults. For the purposes of this study, school climate was conceptualized as a multidimensional notion that encompasses the overall culture and environment that is subjectively experienced by each unique high school student. School climate was measured using an original survey, Sexual Minority Inclusiveness School Climate Survey (SMISCS), after extensive review deemed commonly used school climate measures inappropriate to answer the present research questions. The SMISCS assessed sense of belonging, safety and security, teacher and administrative support, and discussion of relevant LGBTQ+ topics in the classroom (APPENDIX A). Identity formation was conceptualized as the process in which an individual merges their external and internal experiences to create a sense of continuity and wholeness in their actions, thoughts, feelings, and lives. Identity formation was assessed using the Lesbian, Gay, & Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS) (Mohr & Kendra, 2012). The LGBIS measured reactions related to ones' sexual orientation and measures sexuality comfort on several subscales: Acceptance Concerns, Concealment Motivation, Identity Uncertainty, Internalized Homonegativity, Difficult Process, Identity Superiority, Identity Affirmation, and Identity Centrality.

The purpose of the present cross-sectional survey study was to investigate the correlational relationship between school climate and identity formation. Data was collected through the use of *surveymonkey.com.* There were 75 participants that met the inclusion criteria and completed the study. Participants answered demographic questions, the SMISCS, and the

LGBIS. A bivariate correlational analysis was used to discover if there was a relationship between the two surveys. Participants were also asked to respond to three optional open-ended questions. These questions were designed to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of participants through their own words. The first question queried participants about current exploration of their identity and their sense of commitment to their identity. The second question investigated if participants were in the process of creating their own values and opinions that match their personal beliefs and possibly differ from their families' beliefs. The last question asked if participants felt lost or unmotivated to explore their identities and sense of self.

Demographics

This chapter includes an overview of the instruments used, data collection, a review of data analysis procedures, and the findings. A total of 75 participants were included in the present study. Participants completed the study online and anonymously. Recruiting was accomplished online using social media platforms. Participants were required to be between the ages of 18-25, attended high school in the USA, identified as cisgender, were out during high school, spoke fluent English, and had access to a secure Internet connection. Individuals were not included in the study if they attended homeschool or online school or if that been previously diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, Intellectual Disability, Down Syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Personality Disorder, PTSD, Psychotic Disorder, or a Language Disorder. The average age of participation was 20.9. The following information depicts the demographic features of the research sample. Demographic data was analyzed with descriptive statistics through SPSS.

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of respondents' geographical region. Of the total 75 respondents, 9 (12%) were from large urban cities, 16 (21.3%) were from small urban

cities, and 41 (54.7%) were from suburbs. Moreover, 8 (10.7%) of the respondents were from

rural areas, while 1 (1.3%) responded that they were from other regions which were not provided

by the researcher.

Table 2

Geographical Region

Source	Frequency	Percent
Large Urban City	9	12.0
Small Urban City	16	21.3
Suburb	41	54.7
Rural	8	10.7
Other	1	1.3
Total	75	100.0

Table 3 below demonstrates the frequency distribution of respondents' gender, 54

(72.0%) were female while 16 (28%) were male. The present study only assessed individuals that

were cisgender, therefore gender identity was equivalent to sex assigned at birth.

Table 3

Gender

Source	Frequency	Percent
Female	54	72.0
Male	21	28.0
Total	75	100.0

Table 4 illustrates the frequency distribution of respondent's self-reported social class.

The sample included 14 (18.7%) participants that identified their families were from a lower-

income background, 52 (69.3%) were from the middle class, and 9(12.0%) were from a higher-

income background.

Table 4

Familial Socioeconomic Status During High School

Source	Frequency	Percent
Low	14	18.7
Middle	52	69.3
High	9	12.0
Total	75	100.0

Table 5 shows the frequency distribution of respondent's self-reported level of religiosity, meaning at what level did their family integrate and follow religious tenets in the household. The sample consisted of 38 (50.7%) participants that reported they were from a household that practiced religion at a low level, 27 (36%) of the participants reported that they practiced at a medium level, and 10 (13.3%) of the participants that reported they practiced at a low level.

Table 5

Level of Familial Religiosity During High School

Source	Frequency	Percent
Low	38	50.7
Middle	27	36.0
High	10	13.3
Total	75	100.0

Table 6 illustrates the frequency distribution of respondents' current education level. It included 2 (2.7%) of the participants had their GED and 14 (18.7%) reported they obtained their high school diploma. Additionally, 7 (9.3%) of the respondents reported they had their Associate's Degree and 30 (40%) reported they were currently completing their four year college degree. Also, 13 (17.3%) of the respondents had obtained their Bachelor's Degree and 2 (2.7%) respondents had obtained their Master's Degree. Only 1 (1.3%) individual reported they were currently in graduate school pursuing a Master's Degree, while 3 (4.0%) reported they were currently in doctoral school. Lastly, 4 (4.0%) reported "other" levels of education.

Table 6

Current Education Level

Source	Frequency	Percent
GED	2	2.7
High School Diploma	14	18.7
Associate's Degree	7	9.3
In 4-Year College	30	40.0
Bachelor's Degree	13	17.3
In Graduate School	1	1.3
Master's Degree	2	2.7
In Doctoral School	3	4.0
Other	4	4.0
Total	75	100.0

Table 7 illustrates the frequency distribution of respondents' self-identified cultural and ethnic background. The sample included no American Indian or Alaska Native individuals or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders. There were 6 (8.0%) individuals who identified as Asian and 4 (5.33%) individuals who identified as Black or African American. A majority of the sample, 46 (61.33%) identified as Caucasian/White with no Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origins. Lastly, 19 (25.33%) participants identified as Caucasian/White with Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origins.

Table 7

Cultural and Ethnic Backgrounds

Source	Frequency	Percent
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0
Asian	6	8.0
Black or African American	4	5.33

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0
Caucasian/White: Not Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin	46	61.33
Caucasian/White: Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin	19	25.33
Total	75	100.0

Following, the participants were asked to respond to questions regarding history of abuse

and trauma and substance use during high school. Individuals were able to mark all three or no

options. Table 8 below indicates the rate at which participants experienced sexual, emotional, or

physical abuse. Seventeen (22.7%) of the participants indicated they endured sexual abuse before

they graduated high school. Forty-five (60%) of the participants reported they experienced

emotional abuse before completing high school. Lastly, 17 (22.7%) of the participants reported

experiencing physical abuse before completing high school.

Table 8

Experiences of Abuse and Trauma During High School

Source	Frequency	Percent
Sexual abuse	17 A	22.7
Emotional abuse	45	60
Physical abuse	17	22.7

Lastly, participants responded to a question regarding their substance use and alcohol

consumption in high school. Table 9 displays the frequency distribution of responses. The

sample included 32 (42.67%) individuals that reported they did not use drugs or alcohol in high

school. It also included 32 (42.67%) individuals that uses drugs or alcohol occasionally or

experimentally. Lastly, 11 (14.67%) individuals reported they used drugs or alcohol regularly or habitually.

Table 9

Substance Use and Alcohol Consumption

Source	Frequency	Percent
None	32	42.67
Occasional or Experimental	32	42.67
Regular or Habitual	11	14.67
Total	75	100.0

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following section includes the research questions of the present study. The researcher hypothesized that there would be a statistically significant negative correlation between high school climate and young adult identity formation in LGB young adults. Moreover, the researcher hypothesized that there would be a statistically significant positive correlation between familial religiosity and high school climate. The researcher hypothesized that there would be a statistically significant positive correlation between familial religiosity identity formation.

Results

After the reliability analysis, the researcher ran a statistical analysis to determine the direction and strength of the relationship between the two surveys. The researcher analyzed the data using a bivariate two-tailed correlation design to answer research question 1. A two-tailed analysis was chosen because the relationship between the two surveys could have been a positive correlation, meaning the variables moved in the same direction, or a negative correlation, meaning the variables moved in opposite directions. The results indicated that, contrary to the

researcher's hypothesis, there was no statistically significant relationship between the SMISCS and the LGBIS.

Table 10 illustrates the SPSS output of Pearson's correlation between the SMISCS and the LGBIS. Data analysis indicated that the SMISCS and the LGBIS had a weak correlation (r=.143). The significance value p=.258 also indicates that there was not a statistically significant relationship between high school climate and young adult sexual identity formation. Since Pearson's r is above the significance level of .05, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. It was found that there was no significant correlation and the null hypothesis was accepted, $r(74)= .143$, $p= .11$.

Table 10

Correlation of Surveys

			SMISCS	LGBIS
Pearson's r	SMISCS	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.143
		Sig. (2-tailed)	-	.223
		N	75	75
	LGBIS	Correlation Coefficient	.143	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.223	-
		N	75	75

A secondary correlational analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between demographic features and the surveys utilized in the present study to answer research question 2. The results are displayed in Table 11. Regarding the LGBIS, no results were found to be statistically significant, suggesting that demographic features were not associated with young adult sexual identity formation. However, there was a significant negative correlation between familial socioeconomic status during high school and the SMISCS, $r(74)= -.265$, $p=.022$. This

suggests that living in a higher socioeconomic area during high school is moderately associated with positive reports of school climate.

Table 11

Correlation Between SMISCS and LGBIS and Demographic Factors

	Gender	Age	Socioeconomic Status	Education Level	Religiosity
LGBIS	-.051	-.194	-.07	-.099	.016
SMISCS	-.197	.075	-.265*	-.071	.073

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Following, another correlational analysis was run to uncover associations between history of abuse and responses on the SMISCS and LGBIS. While this information was not originally included in the study questions, the information provided is pertinent to the functioning of this population. The results are displayed on Table 23 below. Findings indicated that there was no association between history of abuse and current sexual identity functioning. However, the analysis demonstrated a moderate relationship between a history of sexual abuse and self-reported poor school climate, $r(74)= -.238$, $p=.040$.

Table 12

Correlation Between SMISCS and LGBIS and Experiences of Abuse

	Physical Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Emotional Abuse
LGBIS	.053	.090	.124
SMISCS	-.111	-.238*	-.213

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Qualitative Analysis

The three qualitative questions were answered by 44-45 of the 75 participants. Responses varied in length and description. There were no restrictions on word count or content placed on the items. Participants who did not answer the open-ended questions but completed the surveys

were still included in the bivariate correlational analysis. The questions were created by the

researcher and the goal was to better understand the subjective experiences of participants. The

ability to write a personal narrative regarding their identity formation journey allowed the

explorations of themes faced by sexual minority young adults. To categorize the responses, they

were coded as "yes", "no", and "unclear." The following includes an in-depth analysis of the

responses.

The first question asked, "currently, do you feel that you are actively exploring your

identity or feel a strong sense of commitment to who you are as a person? Please explain." There

were 44 total responses. Responses included 28 (63.64%) individuals who noted that they were

actively exploring their identity or felt they had committed to their identity already. There were

13 (29.55%) respondents that indicated they did not feel a sense of commitment to their identity

and that they were not currently exploring their identity. Two of the responses were deemed

unclear on whether they were committed or exploring their identity.

The following question asked, "currently, do you feel that you are in the process of

creating your own values, beliefs, and opinions that are different from your parents or family that

are more compatible to who you are as a person? Please explain." There was a total of 45

responses. There were 33 (73.33%) respondents that indicated that they were currently exploring

their own values, beliefs, and opinions that differed from their families. Five responses were

deemed unclear and were unable to be coded. A minority of respondents, 15.56%, denied that

they were exploring values, beliefs, and opinions that differ from their families at the present

moment.

Lastly, the third question asked, "currently, do you feel a sense of being lost,

unmotivated, or that you have no direction or drive with regards to discovering your sense of self

or identity?" There was a total of 44 responses to this question. A majority of respondents (75%)

reported that they did not feel lost, unmotivated, or had no direction regarding their present

identity formation journey. Moreover, 9 (20.45%) of the respondents noted that at that moment

they felt lost, unmotivated, and had no direction while searching for their sense of self and

identity. Finally, three of the respondents had unclear answers and were not included in the

theme analysis.

Summary

A quantitative bivariate correlational design was used to uncover a relationship between

young adult sexual identity formation and high school climate. A Pearson's r analysis was used

to measure the relationship between these variables. The results of the analysis suggested that

there was no statistically significant relationship between the variables, therefore the null

hypothesis could not be rejected, $r(74)= .143$, $p= .11$. Additionally, for research question two

regarding the association between family religiosity and identity formation, the null hypothesis

could not be rejected, $r(74)= .016$, $p=.41$. There was also no statistically significant positive

correlation between growing up in a highly religious household and reported high school

climate, $r(74)= .073$, $p=.64$. Thus, the null hypothesis could not be rejected.

Secondary correlational analyses indicated that current sexual identity formation does not

correlate with a history of abuse or any specific demographic factors. However, there was a

moderate correlation between familial socioeconomic status during high school and school

climate, $r(74)= -.265$, $p=.022$. Therefore, it is suggested that individuals who live in wealthier

households were more likely to report that they attended a high school that was inclusive,

promoted a strong sense of belonging, and had resources to support students that are sexual

minorities. Moreover, there was a moderate correlation between experiencing sexual abuse

during childhood or adolescence and attending a school with a poorer school climate, $r(74)= -.238$, $p=.040$. These results indicate individuals who did not feel a sense of belonging, support from teachers, reported experiencing bullying, and attended a heteronormative school were at greater risk to also experience childhood sexual abuse.

Lastly, after completion of the surveys, participants were asked to complete three optional open-ended questions. These questions aimed to uncover narratives concerning identity commitment, sense of self-discovery, and value acquisition. A theme analysis was completed to qualitatively evaluate responses. There were 44-45 responses per question. On the first question, a majority of respondents (63.64%) indicated that they were actively exploring their identity or felt a strong sense of commitment to who they are. These findings support Erickson's (1968) theory that young adulthood is when individuals find continuity and fidelity in their identity. For example, one participant noted, "I feel a strong sense of commitment to who I am as a person now. I also feel that I'm outgrowing the exploration of identity but rather improving my identity through my actions. I have a core identity which I understand may change based on my actions." However, 29.55% of respondents noted that they did not feel a sense of commitment to their identity. One participant explained, "I am often confused myself," while another individual noted, "I am still trying to figure myself out right now."

Additionally, the second question inquired about the creation of personal versus familial values, beliefs, and opinions. In accordance with the theories of Arnett (2000), 73.33% of respondents reported that they were exploring beliefs and opinions that more compatible with their internal values and differed from their families. For instance, one participant noted, "I have come to my own beliefs and values that are very different from some of my family, but the family that is important to me (my father and my grandmother) has always supported me and my

ideals." This is in accordance with the work done by Adams et al. (2000). The authors reported that warm and expressive households that promote open discussion were more likely to facilitate identity development. Notably, a few respondents indicated that this value and belief acquisition was a complicated process. One respondent indicated that "...I'm in the process of creating my own separate values, beliefs, and opinions from my family. As being the only 'out' person in my large Filipino family, it was a struggle to break down tradition, conflicting values/beliefs/opinions and form new ones." However, a few participants noted that they still held similar beliefs to their families. These participants typically indicated that their families were open-minded and accepting. One participant explained, "No, my parents are pretty liberal have always been very understanding and supportive of members of the LGBT community."

Finally, participants were asked about their motivation to explore their identities. A majority of respondents (75%) reported that they did not feel lost or unmotivated on their journey to find their identities and sense of self. For example, a participant noted, "Self-discovery is something that I have been deeply invested in, in part due to being gay, and in part due to being in an abusive house where I wasn't able to fully explore my interests and passions." Conversely, a minority of participants indicated they felt lost and unmotivated during their identity formation process. A notable theme was that identity formation was suspended to focus on other areas of life, such as careers or mental health. For example, one participant noted, "I feel so caught up in work and problems that I can't take the time to see if I'm feeling confident in my own identity or losing it," while another explained, "I've seen myself as worthless from time to time because of my identity, but I think the cause of that was my depression and not anything else." Adams et al. (2000) noted that a lack of commitment or exploration, which was referred to as identity diffusion by Marcia (1966), is associated with depression.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the possible association between high school climate and identity formation in young adult cisgender individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Data was collected using *surveymonkey.com*. A total of 75 participants met the inclusion criteria, completed the entire study virtually, and were included in the final analysis. Responses were coded into SPSS version 24 and analyzed using Pearson's r. The sample was 72% female, and a majority, 61.33%, identified as Caucasian/White: Not Hispanic, Latinx, or of Spanish Origin. Additionally, 8% of the population identified as Asian-American, 5.33% identified as Black or African-American, and 25.33% identified as Caucasian/ White: Hispanic, Latinx, or of Spanish Origin. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire, a survey inquiring about school climate (SMISCS), and a survey inquiring about identity functioning (LGBIS). There were also three optional open-ended questions that queried about the identity formation process.

The first hypothesis was that there would be a statistically significant positive correlation between the SMISCS and the LGBIS. However, the data analysis did not uncover a statistically significant relationship between high school climate and young adult identity formation, $r(74)=$ .143, $p=$ .11. Therefore, contrary to the hypothesized results, the null hypothesis could not be rejected.

The second hypothesis was that there would be a statistically significant positive correlation between growing up in a highly religious household and not having a secure identity in young adulthood. There was no statistically significant correlation, and the null hypothesis could not be rejected, $r(74)=$ .016, $p=$.41. There was also no statistically significant correlation

between growing up in a highly religious household and reported high school climate, $r(74)=$ .073, $p=.64$. Thus, the null hypothesis could not be rejected.

Additional data analyses were run and revealed a statistically significant correlation between familial socioeconomic status during high school and high school climate, $r(74)= -.265$, $p= .02$. This suggests that individuals from wealthier households were more likely to report school climates that were inclusive and better served the needs of sexual minority students. Also, a statistically significant correlation was discovered between experiencing sexual abuse before completing high school and attending a heteronormative school, $r(74)= -.238$, $p=.04$. These findings suggest that individuals with a history of sexual trauma were more likely to report that they attended a high school with more heteronormative qualities, less sense of security, and did not foster a sense of belonging.

Interpretation of Findings

The results obtained in the present study regarding high school climate and identity functioning were inconsistent with extant empirical evidence. In research done by Rich & Schachter (2011), schools with more nurturing components (e.g., supportive teachers as role models, meaningful studies, cultivation of the whole student) and a positive school climate were associated with enhanced identity development in their students. Further, Faircloth (2009) reported that students who were able to present schoolwork related to their background, culture, and beliefs were better able to examine their sense of self and explore their identities. The ability to tell their own stories in class allowed the students to consider their whole identity while feeling empowered about their sense of self and values. High schools are the environment in which adolescents gain the tools needed to accomplish identity formation later in life

(Lannegrand-Williams & Bosma, 2006). Active engagement in school led students to be more inclined to actively seek out and evaluate their identities (Erentaitè et al., 2017; Rich & Schachter, 2011). D'Augelli (1994) highlighted the impact social and environmental factors have on identity acceptance in sexual minority individuals.

However, some findings suggest due to cultural changes in expectations of 18-25-year-olds in the United States, few individuals in this age group have a committed identity. This cohort, described as *emerging adults*, are continuing to explore aspects of their identity during their late teens and earlier twenties. Emerging adults in Western societies have the privilege to delay major life decisions, thus providing additional time to explore their identities (Arnett, 2000; Nelson & Barry, 2005). This trend may have impacted the results as the target sample falls into the age bracket of emerging adults.

Regarding religious affiliations and LGB identity formation, Schuck and Liddle (2001) suggested that conflict between religious doctrine/beliefs impacts accepting one's sexual orientation. However, the present study did not uncover this relationship. However, participants were asked about their familial religious levels rather than their personal religious levels during high school. A potential explanation that the null hypothesis could not be rejected may be that participants did not identify with their family's religion; thus, it did not impact their identity formation process.

Findings regarding the relationship between familial socioeconomic status during high school and high school climate are consistent with current research. Ruiz et al. (2018) concluded that students who felt unsafe in and around their schools were more likely to live in lower SES

areas. Other demographic factors, such as gender, geographical region, and level of familial religiosity, were not proven to significantly correlate with high school climate.

Regarding trauma history, 21.05% of the participants reported a history of childhood sexual abuse. History of childhood sexual abuse had a statistically significant correlation with attending a heteronormative school. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicated that 1 in 4 girls (25%) under 18 experience sexual abuse. The CDC also reported that 1 in 13 boys, about 7.6 %, under 18 experience sexual abuse. Further, according to a meta-analysis completed by Xu and Zheng (2015), 23.6% of gay men and 21.4% of bisexual men reported experiencing childhood sexual abuse. Also, 37% of lesbian women and 35.5 % of bisexual women reported a history of childhood sexual abuse. The present research indicated that 22.7% of the overall sample experienced childhood sexual abuse. Further analysis uncovered that 24% of the lesbian and bisexual female participants and 14.2% of the gay and bisexual men participants reported a history of childhood sexual abuse.

Empirical research indicates that children and adolescents who identify as LGB are more likely to report experiencing physical, sexual, or emotional abuse before turning 18 (Flynn et al., 2016; Zhou & Anderson, 2015). The statistically significant correlation between experiencing childhood sexual abuse and attending a heteronormative school in the present study can be attributed to several factors. For example, teenagers with a history of sexual abuse reported increased rates of low self-esteem, mental health disorders, and substance use (Kozak et al., 2018). Likewise, individuals who are sexually abused as children are more likely to mistrust adults (Lundqvist et al., 2004). There are lower college completion rates, lower GPAs, and less school enjoyment in individuals who experienced childhood sexual abuse (Schilling et al., 2007).

Therefore, since these students may be struggling academically, psychologically, or not feel safe at school, their review of school climate may be impacted. There are added concerns and consequences to identity and psychological well-being for LGB youth. For instance, sexual minority youth, who are abused by a same-sex individual, may be afraid to disclose abuse or seek help due to fear of being "outed." Sexual minority youth may also feel high levels of shame or believe their sexual orientation may have caused their traumatic experiences to occur (Barba et al., 2021).

Clinical Implications

Empirical findings highlight the association between an inclusive school climate and positive outcomes. Schools with more inclusive curriculums displayed less victimization of LGBTQ+ youth (Kosciw et al., 2013). Hatzenbuehler and Keyes (2012) concluded that counties with the lowest rate of suicide attempts by sexual minority students also reported their schools had the highest occurrence of LGBTQ+ specific anti-bullying policies. Schools within the United States are currently lagging in creating more inclusive curriculums and practices to support sexual minority students. The high rates of maladaptive outcomes in LGBTQ+ students should act as an alarm to restructure current policies and implement new protective factors that improve school climate. The school's job is to protect their children, but empirical evidence suggests this population of students is being left behind. Students with positive school experiences perform better academically and have an overall better psychological well-being (Cohen, 2006). There are numerous policies and programs that can be implemented at a low cost to mitigate the effects of a poor school climate. These include upholding anti-bullying policies, creating Pride or Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) student groups, and having designated safe staff members for sexual minorities.

There were alarming rates of trauma and abuse in the participant sample. Individuals who experience sexual abuse as children are one and a half times more likely to engage in dangerous, delinquent, and violent behaviors. There are also increased rates of suicidal ideation, negative mental health outcomes, and substance abuse amongst individuals who experienced childhood sexual abuse (Kozak et al., 2018). The present findings are significant as they can be used to help advance awareness of the prevalence of childhood sexual, physical, and emotional abuse in sexual minority individuals. Schools and mental health professionals can utilize these findings to increase screenings to identify children who experienced trauma and abuse. Early identification and early interventions, such as Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, can lead to better outcomes for these individuals (Kozak et al., 2018).

Additionally, these findings can help school administrations create academic environments that increase feelings of security and implement services that act as protective factors to deter the negative long-term consequences of childhood abuse. School-based protective factors associated with positive long-term outcomes for individuals who endure adverse childhood experiences include involvement in extracurricular activities, additional academic support, prosocial peer relationships, and older nonfamilial mentorship (Moses & Villodas, 2017). By having one positive environment in their ecological systems (i.e., their school), individuals are offered a location for healthy development despite existing within an traumatic environment at home or in their community.

Schools are the environment in which children spend the most time outside of the home; therefore, they should be a safe haven and refuge for abused students. Schools are instrumental in the identification and prevention of child abuse as well as in the healing process for survivors. Ernest VanBergeijk (2006) noted that "school personnel can make a crucial difference in a

child's life by detecting maltreatment" (p.361). The author suggested reading the extensive

warning signs list of maltreatment and abuse written by the National Center on Child Abuse and

Neglect Clearinghouse. The author also suggested utilizing assessments and structured

interviews, such as the Child Abuse Potential Inventory and the Early Trauma Inventory, to

screen for abuse. Extensive empirical research indicates that the support and belief of a child that

discloses abuse leads to more positive outcomes during recovery and treatment. It is rare for a

child to make a false allegation of abuse; therefore, it is crucial for school personnel to take

allegations seriously (VanBergeijk, 2006). The act of listening to children in a nonjudgmental

manner can decrease stigmatization and prevent further abuse. It is recommended that school

personnel attend psychoeducation classes about the rate, signs, and impact of childhood abuse

and how to report it properly.

Additionally, the higher rate of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) reported is

associated with an increased risk of numerous health concerns in adulthood. ACEs include

experiencing sexual, emotional, and physical abuse during the first 18 years of life. Additional

ACEs suggested by the Philadelphia ACE Project (2019) include experiencing bullying,

witnessing violence, living in unsafe neighborhoods, and living in poverty. Individuals who

experience a higher number of ACEs are at an increased risk for suicidal behaviors, diagnoses of

mental health disorders, obesity, other medical conditions (Philadelphia ACE Project, 2019).

LGB individuals report a higher cumulative number of ACES than their heterosexual

counterparts (Flynn et al., 2016). The present study uncovered that 34.2% of participants were

bullied due to their sexual orientation. Also, 48.7% of participants were called derogatory names,

threatened, or verbally harassed by peers due to their sexual orientation. These forms of bullying

and harassment disproportionally affect LGBTQ+ students. LGBTQ+ students who report they

are bullied were less likely to feel safe at school, had less academic engagement, and had an elevated risk of substance abuse (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015).

Clinically, mental health providers should screen for ACEs and environmental stressors in this population, as these factors may impact the presenting problem and symptom profile. By understanding the potential negative impact of environmental factors, history of trauma, and identity status, clinicians can better conceptualize their clients and support the healing process. If clinicians have the full picture of a client, they can better recognize the impact of intersecting identities and explore any conflicts between these identities (Shurts et al., 2020). Additionally, clinicians should be familiar with findings on the negative effects of being part of a heteronormative religious affiliations. Thus, clinicians can aid in the process of working through stigma and beliefs associated with being LGB, provide coping strategies for dissonance/ fear of rejection, and support the journey towards an accepting, affirming, and secure identity. Shurts et al. (2020) provided a Traffic Light Framework for Intersection of Sexual Identity and Religious Development to help clinicians assess the level at which their client is struggling with obtaining an adaptive sexual orientation identity.

Clinicians that are part of the APA are obligated to practice through a lens of understanding the social and physical environments of their clients. The 2017 American Psychological Association (APA) Multicultural Guidelines outline the importance of social justice. By understanding the impact of heteronormative schools has on sexual minority youth, clinicians can better advocate for this vulnerable population and create awareness. Moreover, clinicians that work in all settings should be aware of the alarming rate of abuse and trauma in childhood and the impact it has on the academic experience. Clinicians should be prepared to inquire about these experiences and review their ethical and legal obligations when working with

survivors of child trauma. Clinicians should also consider these factors when diagnosing and treating this population.

Additionally, clinicians are encouraged to work within a strength-based approach when dealing with different systems and sociocultural contexts. Therefore, clinicians should emphasize protective factors, resiliency work, radical healing, and community resources when working with vulnerable minority populations (American Psychological Association, 2017). Lastly, researchers, clinicians, and practitioners should be aware of the lack of school climate measures that directly query about the lived experiences of sexual minority youth. Awareness of the fact that minority populations are rarely used to test or validate psychological measures should encourage those to interpret results carefully.

It is essential to note the role of resiliency and the environment. Individuals who completed school and had positive experiences were more likely to have better life quality, lower psychopathology, and fewer life stressors as an adult (Moses & Villodas, 2017). Promoting school engagement is associated with school completion. Additionally, protective factors such as involvement in extracurricular activities, high-quality peer relationships, and adult mentorship are related to positive outcomes (Moses & Villodas, 2017). By understanding the impact of protective factors has on development and long-term outcomes in this population, clinicians, parents, and school personnel can better serve these children and teenagers. Thus, appropriate and inclusive protective strategies must be implemented. LGBTQ+ students face enough exclusion as is, therefore creating extracurricular activities that encourage these students to participate, such as Pride or co-ed sports teams, is recommended. Regarding teacher mentorship, it would be beneficial to utilize faculty members or community leaders that identify as LGBTQ+ to work with this population of students. Poor peer relationships are associated with lower

emotional adjustment and victimization (Moses & Villodas, 2017). Therefore, zero-tolerance bullying policies should be implemented. By setting an example and outlining consequences for students who create hostile peer relationships, vulnerable students are provided with an environment to thrive and enjoy safer relationships. Positive peer relationships are shown to act as a protective factor against childhood abuse and maltreatment and promoted resiliency in this population (Moses & Villodas, 2017). LGBTQ+ and cisgender/heterosexual student relationships should be promoted through the use of GSAs and educational programs that encourage the acceptance of all students.

These conclusions highlight that the impact of school climate extends beyond identity formation and indicates future health concerns. Evidence suggests higher rates of suicide, substance use, and depression for LGBTQ+ students who attended schools with a poor school climate (Bradlow et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2016). It is the duty of school administrators, teachers, and policymakers to protect all students, regardless of their sexual orientation. Therefore, it is recommended that the results of this study are used to create more inclusive school environments to serve this community of students better.

Limitations, Strengths, and Recommendations

The researcher proposes several recommendations for future research in light of the limitations noted in the present study. The primary limitation was participant recruitment. Participation was limited to individuals who use social media and virtual discussion boards. Participants self- selected to complete in this study; therefore, the sample may not be an accurate reflection of the target population. The sample was limited to individuals who attended school in the USA, were out in high school, were not homeschooled/online school, and did not have previous diagnoses that may impact findings. Thus, the results cannot be generalized to the larger

population of LGB individuals, as the exclusion criteria was limiting. Future studies should

utilize random sampling or census sampling to better capture the experiences of the population at

large.

Also, the sample was not as large as typical of studies of this kind. A larger sample size

and a more extensive recruitment process may result in different findings. Previous school

climate study included samples as large as 23,001 participants (Kosciw et al., 2017), 1,143

participants (Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2012), and 111 participants (Adams et al., 2000).

Moreover, the sample was limited to individuals between the ages of 18-25 and, as previously

noted, current trends in Western societies note delayed identity formation until mid-20s (Arnett,

2000; Nelson & Barry, 2005). A larger sample size and age group may have yielded significant

results. Additionally, the population was a majority Caucasian, from a suburban area, and were

pursuing secondary education. It is recommended that future research use sampling measures

that are more inclusive of all educational levels, geographic locations, and cultural backgrounds.

Additionally, the aggregation of the experiences of sexual minorities should be

considered a limitation as well. Current research does not accurately depict the complexity of

sexual orientations and gender identities within the LGBTQ+ community (Suen et al., 2020). In

research done by Suen et al. (2020) a majority of participants suggested improvements in

inclusive questions in medical and research settings to reflect the fluidity and diversity of the

lived experiences and identities of the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, the present study did not

inquire about the impact of intersecting identities. Being a sexual minority and having another

minority status (i.e., ethnic/racial, SES, citizenship, gender) is an area of future research that can

lead to a better understanding of the impact American educational standards have on identity.

Other limitations include how questions were asked and how certain demographic features may have moderated the relationship between variables. Regarding trauma history, the researcher inquired by asking "have you experienced sexual abuse or trauma before you discontinued or graduated from high school?" The same format was used when inquiring about physical abuse and emotional abuse. The questions were framed in a yes/no format. Therefore, by using closed questions, the researcher may have limited participants' ability accurately describe their experiences, depict their trauma history. Additionally, this format may have placed participants into binary boxes that do not reflect the true complexity of trauma. Also, inquiring about trauma history can be triggering and cause psychological distress. These questions may have caused participants to withhold information as they desired to keep their traumas to themselves or did not want to remember/ think about these experiences. Thus, responses may not reflect the actual occurrences, impact, and influence of trauma in the sample.

Thus, trauma may have been a moderating variable in the relationship between the LGBIS and the SMSCS. Individuals who experienced childhood abuse have more difficulty with school. They are at higher risk of failing, feel more isolated from peers, engage less academically, and have more social challenges (Frederick & Goddard, 2010). Additionally, LGB individuals are exposed to added stress when navigating the identity formation journey as they must deviate from the norm (being a heterosexual) and un-learn the heteronormative values and beliefs ingrained in them from their larger environments (D'Augelli, 1994). Additional stressors, such as adverse childhood experiences, sexual minority stigma, and isolation lead to lower levels of self-esteem and a maladaptive sense of self (Frederick & Goddard, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2021).

Additionally, the researcher implemented a new survey that had not yet been standardized. The utilization of a standardized school climate measure may have yielded different results and may be considered a limitation.

However, the creation of a new measure is also an area of strength in the present study. George and Mallery (2003) indicated that the closer the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is to 1.00, the greater the internal consistency of the items. Internal consistency is a widely accepted measure of reliability within surveys. The alpha level for the SMISCS was .849, which indicates a good level of inter-item reliability. Thus, the questions on the SMISCS measured the variable of school climate in a statistically acceptable manner. Due to the lack of measures that assess LGB-specific issues in school, the SMISCS can be utilized to ask about these specific domains. Online survey measures allow for saved time and resources when collecting data as well as collecting sensitive information while allowing participants full anonymity (Babbie, 1990; Fowler, 2014). Additionally, developing a new scale that reflects contemporary experiences in this population is pertinent to building a research environment that is inclusive, affirming, and accurately reflects the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of LGB individuals.

Future validation of this measure is recommended. To accomplish this, experts in school climate research should review the SMISCS to assess face validity. Additionally, running a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) can identify items on the SMISCS that do not measure the larger construct of school climate. Therefore, PCAs can aid in removing specific items that do not measure school climate, aggregate items that seem to ask the same question, and ultimately determine if the SMISCS accurately measures school climate (Collingridge, 2014).

Areas for future research became evident during the process of completing this study. In the United States, 8.0% of high students identify as bisexual, and 2.4% identify as gay or lesbian

(Kann et al., 2018). This study highlighted the importance of the effects of high school climate on the identity functioning and overall wellbeing of sexual minority individuals. This study and the literature review demonstrated the need for further research that analyzes this relationship in the broader LGBTQ+ population. Future studies should include individuals who do not identify as cisgender in their research to encapsulate the larger LGBTQ+ community's lived experiences.

Lastly, the present study required participants to reflect upon past experiences in their high school years. Older participants were required to reflect upon experiences that may have occurred seven years prior. Implications of the gradual loss of memories or revised recollections over time may have affected participant responses. Therefore, future studies may utilize a longitudinal method to obtain information that is not subjected to memory loss or changes over time. The use of this design may allow researchers to analyze the school climates of participants while they are currently in high school. This may allow for a better depiction of the environment in the moment. Moreover, this design would allow researchers to analyze the protective and risk factors that are involved in measuring school climate and identity formation over time.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study should encourage future researchers to continue to analyze the relationship between school climate and identity formation. Currently, many American children and teenagers are struggling at school due to their sexual orientation. Inclusive practices need to be put into curriculums to protect these youth and support their identity development process.

References

Adams, G. R., Ryan, B. A., & Keating, L. (2000). Family relationships, academic environments, and psychosocial development during the university experience: A longitudinal investigation. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 15* (1), 99-122.

Alanko, K., Santtila, P., Harlaar, N., Witting, K., Varjonen, M., Jern, P., et al. (2010). Common genetic effects of gender atypical behavior in childhood and sexual orientation in adulthood: A study of Finnish twins. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 39*, 81–92. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10508-008-9457-3.

Alliance for the Study of School Climate. (2004). Secondary School Climate Assessment Instrument- General [Measurement Instrument]. Retrieved from http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/assessment/school_survey.html

Alliance for the Study of School Climate. (2014). Examining the reliability and validity of the ASSC/WASSC School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI). Unpublished.

American Psychological Association (2017). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct.* Retrieved from https://www.apa.org/ethics/code/ethics-code-2017.pdf

American Psychological Association. (2019). *Sexual orientation.* http://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/sexual-orientation.

Arnett, J.J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist 55* (5), 469-480. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469

Babbie, E. (1990). *Survey Research Methods*. Belmont: CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Baker, J. M. (2002). *How Homophobia Hurts Children*. New York, NY: The Haworth Press, Inc.

Barba, A., Mooney, M., Giovanni, K., Clarke, M., Grady, J.B., & Cohen, J. A. (2021) Identifying

  the intersection of trauma and sexual orientation and gender identity Part I: Key

  considerations. Los Angeles, CA: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

Belluck, P. (2018). Trump administration pushes abstinence in teen pregnancy programs. *The*

  New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/23/health/trump-

  teen-pregnancy-abstinence.html

Bilodeau, B. L., & Renn, K. A. (2005). Analysis of LGBT identity development models and

  implications for practice. *New Directions for Student Services, 2005* (111), 25-29.

  Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development.

  American Psychologist, 32 (7), 513–531.

Brace, N., Kemp, R., & Snelgar, R. (2013). SPSS for psychologists. New York, NY: Routledge

   Taylor & Francis Group.

Bradlow, J., Bartram, F., Guasp, A., & Jadva, V. (2017). School report: The experience of

  lesbian, gay, bi, and trans young people in Britain schools in 2017. *Stonewall*. Retrieved

  from http://www.stonewall.org.uk/school-report-2017

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American*

  Psychologist, 32 (7), 513–531.

Cass, V. C.(1984). Homosexual identity formation: testing a theoretical model. *The Journal of*

  Sex Research, 20 (2), 143-167.

Clifford, M., Menon, R., Gangi, T., Condon, C., & Hornung, K. (2012). Measuring school

  climate for gauging principal performance: A review of the validity and reliability of

  publicly accessible measures. *American Institutes for Research*.

  doi:10.1037/e572172012-001

Cohen, J. (2006). Social, emotional, ethical, and academic education: Creating a climate for

learning, participation in democracy, and well-being. *Harvard Educational

Review, 76*(2), 201-285.

Collingridge, D. (2014). Validating a questionnaire. *Methodspace*.

https://www.methodspace.com/validating-a-questionnaire/

Cooper, J. M., Dollarhide, C. T., Radliff, K., & Gibbs, T. A. (2014). No lone wolf: A

multidisciplinary approach to creating safe schools for LGBTQ youth through the

development of allies. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, 8*(4), 344-360. doi:

10.1080/15538605.2014.960128

Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods

approaches. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Day, J.K., Fish, J.N., Grossman, A.H., & Russell, S.T. (2020), Gay-Straight Alliances, inclusive

policy, and school climate: LGBTQ youths' experiences of social support and bullying.

Journal of Research on Adolescence, 30 (2), 418-430. doi: 10.1111/jora.12487

D'Augelli, A. R. (1994). Identity development and sexual orientation: Toward a model of

lesbian, gay, and bisexual development. In E. J. Trickett, R. J. Watts, & D. Birman

(Eds.), *Human diversity: Perspectives on people in context* (p. 312-333). San Francisco,

CA: Jossey-Bass.

D'Augelli, A. R., & Patterson, C. J. (2001). *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities and youth:

Psychological perspectives.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Dessel, A, B., Kulick, A., Wernick, L, J., & Sullivan, D. (2017). The importance of teacher

support: Differential impacts by gender and sexuality. *Journal of Adolescence, 56*, 136-

144.

Enson, S. (2015). Causes and consequences of heteronormativity in healthcare and

    education. *British Journal of School Nursing, 10,* 73-78. doi:

    10.12968/bjsn.2015.10.2.73

Erickson, E. H. (1963). *Childhood and society*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

Erickson, E.H. (1968). Identity: *Youth in crisis*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

Erickson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

Espelage, D.L., Aragon, S. R., Birkett, M., & Koenig, B. W. (2008). Homophobic teasing,

    psychological outcomes, and sexual orientation among high school students: What

    influence do parents and schools have? *School Psychology Review, 37* (2), 202-216.

Espelage, D. L., Low, S. K., & Jimerson, S. R. (2014). Understanding school climate,

    aggression, peer victimization, and bully perpetrations: Contemporary science, practice,

    and policy. *School Psychology Quarterly, 29*, 233-237.

Espelage, D. L., Merrin, G. J., & Hatchel, T. (2018). Peer victimization and dating violence

    among LGBTQ youth: The impact of school violence and crime on mental health

    outcomes. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 16*(2), 156–

    173. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204016680408

Faircloth, B. S. (2009). Making the most of adolescence: Harnessing the search for identity to

    understand classroom belonging. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *24* (3), 321-348.

    doi:10.1177/0743558409334248

Fassinger, R. E., & Miller, B. A. (1997). Validation of an inclusive model of sexual minority

    identity formation on a sample of gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality, 32* (2), 53-78.

Flynn, A. B., Johnson, R. M., Bolton, S. L., & Mojtabai, R. (2016). Victimization of lesbian,

    gay, and bisexual people in childhood: Associations with attempted suicide. *Suicide &*

    Life-Threatening Behavior, *46*(4), 457–470. https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12228

Fowler, F.J. (2014). Survey Research Methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Frederick, J., & Goddard, C. (2010), 'School was just a nightmare': Childhood abuse and neglect

    and school experiences. *Child & Family Social Work, 15*, 22-30. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-

    2206.2009.00634.x

Furlong, M. (2012). California school climate and safety survey. International Center for School

    Based Youth. Retrieved from http://www.michaelfurlong.info/CSCSS/cscss-forms/cscss-

    sf_sep2012.pdf

Garnets, L. D., & Kimmel, D. C. (2003). *Psychological perspectives on lesbian, gay, and*

    bisexual experiences (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Gegenfurtner, A., & Gebhardt, M. (2017). Sexuality education including lesbian, gay, bisexual,

    and transgender (LGBT) issues in schools. *Educational Research Review, 22,* 215-222

George, D., & Mallery, P. (2003). SPSS for Windows step by step: A simple guide and

    reference. (11.0 update, 4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Gorski, P. C., Davis, S. N., & Reiter, A. (2013). An examination of the (in)visibility of sexual

    orientation, heterosexism, homophobia, and other LGBTQ concerns in U.S. multicultural

    teacher education coursework. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 10*, 224-248.

Gowen, L. K., & Winges-Yanez, N. (2014). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and

    questioning youths' perspectives of inclusive school-based sexuality education. *Journal*

    of Sex Research, 51(7), 788-800.

Guttmacher Institute. (2021, June 1). Sex and HIV education. Retrieved from

      https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/ explore/sex-and-hiv-education

Hall, W. J., & Rodgers, G. K. (2019). Teachers' attitudes toward homosexuality and the lesbian,

      gay, bisexual, and queer community in the United States. *Social Psychology of*

      Education, 22, 23-41.

Harris, P. (2008). *Designing and Reporting Experiments in Psychology*. New York, NY: Open

      University Press.

Hatzenbuehler, M, L. (2011). The social environment and suicide attempts in lesbian, gay, and

      bisexual youth. *Pediatrics, 127* (5), 896-903.

Hatzenbuehler, M. L., Jun, H., Corliss, H. L., & Austin, S. B. (2015) Structural stigma and

      sexual orientation disparities in adolescent drug use. *Addict Behavior, 46*,14–18.

      doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2015.02.017

Hatzenbuehler, M. L., & Keyes, K. M. (2012). Inclusive anti-bullying policies and reduced risk

      of suicide attempts in lesbian and gay youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 53*, 21-26.

Jia, Y.,Way, N., Ling, G., Yoshikawa, H., Chen, X., Hughes, D., Ke, X., & Lu, Z. (2009). The

      influence of student perceptions of school climate on socioemotional and academic

      adjustment: a comparison of Chinese and American adolescents. *Child Development, 5,*

      1514-30. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2009.01348.x.

Jones, J. R. (2014). *(Un)normalizing education: Addressing homophobia in higher education*

      and K-12 schools. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing

Jones, R.P., & Cox, D. (2015). How race and religion shape millennial attitudes on sexuality and

      reproductive health findings from the 2015 Millennials, Sexuality, and Reproductive

Health Survey. *Public Religion Research Institute.* Retrieved from

https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/PRRI-Millennials-Web-FINAL.pdf

Kann, L., McManus, T., Harris, W.A., Shanklin, S. L., Flint, K.H., Queen, B., ... Ethier, K.A.

(2018). Youth risk behaviors surveillance. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 67*

(8). Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/2017/ss6708.pdf

Karkouti, I. M. (2015). Examining psychosocial identity development theories: A guideline for

professional practice. *Education, 135* (2), 257-263.

Kohl, D., Recchia, S., & Steffgen, G. (2013). Measuring school climate: An overview of

measurement scales. *Educational Research, 55* (4), 411- 426.

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Giga, N. M., Villenas, C., & Danischewski, D. J. (2016). The 2015

National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and

transgender youth in our nation's schools. New York: GLSEN.

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Zongrone, A. D., Clark, C. M., & Truong, N. L. (2017). The 2017

National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

and queer youth in our nation's schools. New York: GLSEN.

Kosciw, J. G., Palmer, N. A., Kull, R. M., & Greytak, E. A. (2013). The effect of negative school

climate on academic outcomes for LGBT youth and the role of in- school supports.

Journal of School Violence, 12, 45-63.

Kozak, R. S., Gushwa, M., & Cadet, T. J. (2018). Victimization and violence: An exploration of

the relationship between child sexual abuse, violence, and qelinquency. *Journal of Child

Sexual Abuse*, *27*(6), 699–717. doi: 10.1080/10538712.2018.1474412

Kutsyuruba, B., Klinger, D.A. & Hussain, A. (2015). Relationships among school climate,

     school safety, and student achievement and well-being: A review of the literature.

     Review of Education, 3 (2), 103-135. doi: 10.1002/rev3.3043

Lannegrand-Willems, L., & Bosma, H.A. (2006). Identity development-in-context: The school as

     an important context for identity development. *Identity: An International Journal of*

     Theory and Research, *6*(1), 85-113.

Lavrakas, P. J. (2008). *Encyclopedia of survey research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

     Publications. doi: 10.4135/9781412963947

Lemon, K. D. (2019). Sex education in America: Abstaining from comprehensive facts. Journal

     of Midwifery & Women's Health, 64 (2), 149- 153.

Lundqvist, G., Hansson, K., & Svedin, C. G. (2004). The influence of childhood sexual abuse

     factors on women's health. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry*, *58*(5), 395–401.

     doi:10.1080/08039480410005963

Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego-identity statuses. *Journal of*

     Personality and Social Psychology, 3 (5), 551-558.

Marcia, J. E. (2002) Identity and psychosocial development in adulthood, identity. *An*

     International Journal of Theory and Research, 2 (1), 7-28. doi: 10.1207/

     S1532706XID0201_02

Martos, A., Nezhad, S., & Meyer, I. H. (2015). Variations in sexual identity milestones among

     Lesbians, Gay men and Bisexuals. *Sex Res Social Policy, 12* (6), 24-33.

Marx, R. A., & Kettrey, H. H. (2016). Gay-Straight Alliances are associated with lower levels of

     school-based victimization of LGBTQ+ youth: A systematic review and meta-analysis.

     Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 45, 1269-1282. doi: 10.1007/s10964-016-0501-7

McClintock, M. K., & Herdt, G. (1996). Rethinking puberty: The development of sexual

    attraction. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 5*(6), 178–183. doi:

    10.1111/1467-8721

Medley, G. Lipari, R.N., Bose, J. (2016) Sexual orientation and estimates of adult substance use

    health: Results from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Mental Health. *National*

    Survey on Drug Use and Health. Retrieved from

    https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/sexual-orientation-and-estimates-adult-substance-

    use-and-mental-health-results-2015-national

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Cisgender*. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cisgender

Mitchell, J. M., Becker-Blease, K. A., & Soicher, R. N. (2021). Child sexual abuse, academic

    functioning and educational outcomes in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Child Sexual*

    Abuse, *30*(3), 278–297. doi:10.1080/10538712.2020.1847228

Mohr, J. J., & Kendra, M. S. (2011). Revision and extension of a multidimensional measure of

    sexual minority identity: The Lesbian, Gay, & Bisexual Scale. *Journal of Counseling*

    Psychology, 58 (2), 234-245.

Mohr, J. J., & Kendra, M. S. (2012). The Lesbian, Gay, & Bisexual Scale (LGBIS)

    [Measurement Instrument]. Retrieved from

    http://www.midss.org/sites/default/files/lgbis.pdf

Moses, J.O., & Villodas, M. T. (2017) The potential protective role of peer relationships on

    school engagement in at-risk adolescents. *Journal of Youth Adolescence, 46*, 2255-2272.

Mustanski, B. S., Garofalo, R., Emerson, E. M. (2010). Mental health disorders, psychological

    distress, and suicidality in a diverse sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

    youth. *American Journal of Public Health, 100* (12), 2426-2432.

Nelson, L.J., & Barry, C.M. (2005). Distinguishing feature of emerging adulthood: The role of

self-classification as an adult. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 20 (2), 242-262.

Rabbitte, M., & Enriquez, M. (2018). The role of policy on sexual health education in schools:

Review. *The Journal of School Nursing*, *35* (1), 1-12. doi: 10.1177/1059840518789240

Rich, Y., & Schachter, E. P. (2011). High school identity climate and student identity

development. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 37,* 218-228.

Robinson, J.P., & Espelage, D. L. (2011). Inequities in educational and psychological outcome

between LGBTQ and straight students in middle and high school. *Educational Research,

40,* 315-330.

Ruiz, L. D., McMahon, S. D., & Jason, L. A. (2018). The role of neighborhood context and

school climate in school-level academic achievement. *American Journal of Community

Psychology, 61*, 296-309. doi: 10.1002/ajcp.12234

Russell, S. T., Day, J. K., Ioverno, S., & Toomey, R. B. (2016). Are school policies focused on

sexual orientation and gender identity associated with less bullying? Teachers'

perspectives. *Journal of School Psychology, 54,* 29-38.

Santelli, J. S., Kantor, L. M., Grilo, S. A., Speizer, I. S., Lindberg, L. D., Heitel, J., Schalet, A.

T., Lyon, M. E., Mason-Jones, A. J., McGovern, T., Heck, C. J., Rogers, J., & Ott, M. A.

(2017). Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage: An updated review of U.S. policies and

programs and their impact. *The Journal of Adolescent Health*, *61*(3), 273–280.

doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.05.031

Sapsford, R. (1999). *Survey research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Schiedel, D. G., & Marcia, J. E. (1985). Ego identity, intimacy, sex role orientation, and gender.

Developmental Psychology, 21 (1), 149-160.

Schilling, E. A., Aseltine, R. H., Jr, & Gore, S. (2007). Adverse childhood experiences and

    mental health in young adults: A longitudinal survey. *BMC Public Health*, *7*, 30.

    doi:10.1186/1471-2458-7-30

Schuck, K. D., Liddle, B. J. (2001). Religious conflicts experienced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual

    individuals. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health, 5* (2), 63-82.

Seelman, K. L., Forge, N., Walls, N. E., & Bridges, N. (2015). School engagement among

    LGBTQ high school students: The roles of safe adults and gay-straight alliance

    characteristics. *Children and Youth Services Review, 57,* 19-29.

Serafini, T. E., & Adams, G. R. (2002). Functions of identity: Scale construction and validation.

    Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research, 2(4), 363- 391.

Shannon-Baker, P., & Wagner, I. (2019). Battling heteronormativity in teacher education:

    Reflections on a human development course from a teacher and student. In A. D. Martin

    & K. J. Strom (Ed.), *Exploring gender and LGBTQ issues in K12 and teacher education:*

    A rainbow assemblage (pp. 147-162). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Shapiro, S., & Brown, C. (2018). Sex education standards across the states. Center for American

    Progress. Retrieved from https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-

    12/reports/2018/05/09/450158/sex-education-standards-across-states/

Shirkin, R. M. (2006). Statistics for the social sciences. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE

    Publications.

Shurts, W. M., Kooyman, L., Rogers, R. C., & Burlew L. (2020). Assessing the intersectionality

    of religious and sexual identities during the coming out process. *Counseling and Values,*

    65 (1), 15-37.

Song, M.K., Lin, F.C., Ward, S.E., & Fine, J.P. (2013). Composite variables: When and how. Journal of Nurse Research, 62(1), 45-49.

Steck, A. K., & Perry, D. (2017) Challenging heteronormativity: Creating a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQ students. *Journal of School Violence, 17* (2), 227-243.

Sue, V.M., & Ritter, L.A. (2015). Developing the Survey Instrument. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Suen, L. W., Lunn, M. R., Katuzny, K., Finn, S., Duncan, L., Sevelius, J., Flentje, A., Capriotti, M. R., Lubensky, M. E., Hunt, C., Weber, S., Bibbins-Domingo, K., & Obedin-Maliver, J. (2020). What sexual and gender minority people want researchers to know about sexual orientation and gender identity questions: A qualitative study. *Archives of sexual behavior*, *49*(7), 2301–2318. doi: 10.1007/s10508-020-01810-y

VanBergeijk, E. (2006). Identifying child abuse or neglect strategies in a school setting. In Franklin, C., Harris, M. B., & Allen-Meares, P. (Eds.), *The school services sourcebook: A guide for school-based professionals*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Verhoeven, M., Poorthuis, A.M.G., & Volman, M. (2019). The role of school in adolescents' identity development: A literature review. *Educational Psychology Review, 31,* 35–63 doi: 10.1007/s10648-018-9457-3

Warner, M. (1991) *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Waterman, A. S. (1982). Identity development from adolescence to adulthood: An extension of theory and a review of research. *Developmental Psychology, 18* (3), 341-358.

Wernick, L. J., Kulick, A., & Inglehart M. H. (2013). Factors predicting student intervention

       when witnessing anti-LGBTQ harassment: The influence of peers, teachers, and climate.

       Children and Youth Services Review, 35, 296-301.

White, N., La Salle, T., Ashby, J., & Meyers, J. (2014). A brief measure of adolescent

       perceptions of school climate. *School Psychology Quarterly, 29,* 349-359.

Wyatt, T., Oswalt, S., White, C., & Peterson, F. (2008). Are tomorrow's teachers ready to deal

       with diverse students?: Teacher candidates' attitudes toward gay men and

       lesbians. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 35*(2), 171-185.

Xu, Y., & Zheng, Y. (2015). Prevalence of childhood sexual abuse among lesbian, gay, and

       bisexual people: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 24*, 315-331. doi:

       10.1080/10538712.2015.1006746

Appendix A: Screening and Demographic questionnaire

Please answer these questions to the best of your ability.
1. Are you in between the ages of 18-25? Y/N
        If so, how old are you? ____
2. Were you "out", meaning identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, during high school? Meaning, was your sexual orientation known to other students and/or teachers? Y/N
        If so, at what age did you self-identify as LGB?
        At what age did you first disclose your sexual orientation to peers or staff your school?
3. Did you attend high school in the United States? Y/N
        If so, what was the geographical region of your school? Larger Urban City, Smaller
        Urban City, Rural, Suburb, or Other
4. Are you fluent in English? Y/N
5. Have you ever been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, Intellectual Disability, Down Syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Personality Disorder, PTSD, Psychotic Disorder, or a Language Disorder? Y/N
6. Did you attend high school via homeschooling or online? Y/N
7. Do you identify as cisgender male or female, meaning your identity reflects the gender you were assigned at birth? Y/N

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Hello, my name is Gabrielle Patton. I am a student at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology. I am conducting a research study that looks to discover a relationship between high school climate and young adult identity functioning and their sense of self.

I am conducting this research as part of my studies in the Clinical Psychology. After I have told you more about the project, you can decide whether or not you wish to participate. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can decide to stop participating at any time during this project without penalty.

Let me explain what you will be asked to do. You will be asked to complete a demographics questionnaire and two surveys. The first survey will ask you questions about your experience in high school. The survey will inquire about incidences of bullying, harassment, levels of support, sexual education materials, and sexual minority student groups. The second survey will ask questions related to your sexual identity. The survey will inquire about same-sex relationship status, feelings towards your sexual orientation, sense of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community, and levels of comfort with your sexual orientation. After the surveys are completed, you will be asked to complete three optional open-ended question regarding your unique identity development journey. Participation in this study should take 30 to 45 minutes. You will not be compensated for your participation.

In this study you may be at risk for feelings of frustration or emotional distress due to the reflective nature of the study. There is also a potential risk of breach of confidentiality. In order to minimize these risks, you are able to discontinue the study at any point and your data will not be included in the analysis. After completion or discontinuation of the study there will be a link that includes mental health resources for support if needed. There is also a section on the website, www.gabriellepatton.com that offers supportive resources. You will not be asked to provide any identifying information, therefore your responses will remain anonymous and your identity will be protected. All data will be collected through Surveymonkey.com, which is an encrypted and protected website. All data will be analyzed on a private and password protected laptop. Although you may not directly benefit from participation, this study will help to understand the possible long-term effects high school climate has on young LGB adults and their sense of self. The information this study provides may help with policy-making that may protect sexual minority students from the adverse effects of exclusive school climates. Also, this information can be used to help mental health professionals and teachers understand the importance of school climate and how it may affect the well-being and overall mental health of sexual minority students.

The entire study will be conducted anonymously online. During this study, no identifying information will be collected. You will not be asked to provide your name, email address, or any other identifying information. Your data will be assigned a unique ID number in order to maintain your confidentiality. Your responses will not be connected with any identifying information. The data will be stored on a password protected and private laptop computer for a minimum of five years.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask them now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at gpatton@ego.thechicagoschool.edu.

Your research records may be reviewed by federal agencies whose responsibility is to protect human subjects participating in research, including the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and by representatives from The Chicago School of Professional Psychology Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees research.

Questions/Concerns: If you have questions related to the procedures described in this document please contact Dr. Braden Berkey at bberkey@thechicagoschool.edu.

If you have questions concerning your rights in this research study you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is concerned with the protection of subjects in research project. You may reach the IRB office Monday-Friday by calling 312.467.2343 or writing: Institutional Review Board, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology, 325 N. Wells, Chicago, Illinois, 60654.

Consent to Participate in Research

Participant:

> I have read the above information and have received satisfactory answers to my questions. I understand the research project and the procedures involved have been explained to me. I agree to participate in this study. My participation is voluntary and I do not have to sign this form if I do not want to be part of this research project. I will receive a copy of this consent form for my records. Please check the box below.

☐   Yes I have read the consent form and agree to participate in this study

☐   No, I do not consent to participant in this study.

Date: _____

Appendix C: Demographics

What would you consider the socioeconomic status of your family during high school?
High, Middle, Low

Have you experienced sexual abuse or trauma before you discontinued or graduated from high school? Y/N
Have you experienced physical abuse or trauma before you discontinued or graduated from high school? Y/N
Have you experienced verbal abuse or trauma before you discontinued or graduated from high school? Y/N

What level of religiosity would you consider your family during high school? High, Medium, Low

What is your current education level?
GED, High school Diploma, Some college, Associate's Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Some Graduate school, Master's Degree, Other

What is your race/ ethnic culture?
American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White (Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin or Not Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin)

How would you label your consumption of alcohol or drugs in high school?
None, occasionally/ experimental, regular/ habitual

Appendix D: Sexual Minority Inclusiveness School Climate Survey

Please answer these questions about the high school you attended. If you transferred or switched high schools at any point throughout your education, please answer these questions for the school you attended most recently or graduated from.

For the purposes of this study, sexual minority is defined as an individual who sexual orientation is not heterosexual. A sexual minority may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, asexual, pansexual, questioning, or not straight.

1. Did your high school have any sexual minority or LGBTQ+ specific anti-bullying policies?
   a. Yes
   b. No
2. Did you feel that these policies were consistently and fairly enforced?
   a. Yes
   b. No

3. Did your high school have same-sex sexual education materials or discussions during sex-ed or health courses?
   a. Yes
   b. No
4. Did your high school have any sexual-minority specific student groups (i.e. Pride, Gay Straight Alliance, or GSA, etc.)
   a. Yes
   b. No

5. Did you feel a sense of belonging or inclusion with your peers?
   a. Yes
   b. No
6. Did you experience being bullied due to your sexual orientation?
   a. Yes
   b. No
7. Were you ever shoved, kicked, hit, punched, or physically injured by peers because of your sexual orientation?
   a. Yes
   b. No
8. Did you feel that you felt safe and supported by teachers and other staff?
   a. Yes
   b. No
9. Were you ever called derogatory names, threatened, or verbally harassed by peers due to your sexual orientation in person or online?
   a. Yes
   b. No
10. Did you feel comfortable reporting incidences of harassment, bullying, or assault to teachers or other school staff?
    a. Yes

      b. No

11. Were you taught positive representations of sexual minority people or history?
      a. Yes
      b. No

12. Were you allowed to bring a date of your same gender to school events, dances, or prom?
      a. Yes
      b. No

13. Did your school have any teachers or staff that identified as a sexual minority?
      a. Yes
      b. No

14. Did you ever hear negative remarks regarding sexual orientation (such as using "gay" or "butch" in a derogatory way) by teachers or staff?
      a. Yes
      b. No

15. Did you ever skip school due to feeling isolated, bullied, harassed, or unsafe due to your sexual orientation?
      a. Yes
      b. No

16. Did your teachers treat all students of diverse sexual orientations with the same respect?
      a. Yes
      b. No

17. Did you feel that the administrators, teachers, and other school staff cared about your safety and well-being as a sexual minority?
      a. Yes
      b. No

18. Did you feel that you were able to join student groups, clubs, of athletics without being discriminated against due to your sexual orientation?
      a. Yes
      b. No

Appendix E: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale

I prefer to keep my same-sex romantic relationships rather private.

    Strongly Disagree

    Disagree

    Somewhat disagree

    Agree

If it were possible, I would choose to be straight.

    Strongly Disagree

    Disagree

    Somewhat disagree

    Agree

I'm not totally sure what my sexual orientation is.

    Strongly Disagree

    Disagree

    Somewhat disagree

    Agree

I keep careful control over who knows about my same-sex romantic relationships.

    Strongly Disagree

    Disagree

    Somewhat disagree

    Agree

I often wonder whether others judge me for my sexual orientation.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I am glad to be an LGB person.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I look down on heterosexuals.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I keep changing my mind about my sexual orientation.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I can't feel comfortable knowing that others judge me negatively for my sexual orientation.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I feel that LGB people are superior to heterosexuals.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

My sexual orientation is an insignificant part of who I am.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

Admitting to myself that I'm an LGB person has been a very painful process.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I'm proud to be part of the LGB community.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I can't decide whether I am bisexual or homosexual.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

My sexual orientation is a central part of my identity.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I think a lot about how my sexual orientation affects the way people see me.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

Admitting to myself that I'm an LGB person has been a very slow process.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

Straight people have boring lives compared with LGB people.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

My sexual orientation is a very personal and private matter.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I wish I were heterosexual.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

To understand who I am as a person, you have to know that I'm LGB.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I get very confused when I try to figure out my sexual orientation.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I have felt comfortable with my sexual identity just about from the start.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

Being an LGB person is a very important aspect of my life.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I believe being LGB is an important part of me.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I am proud to be LGB.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

I believe it is unfair that I am attracted to people of the same sex.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Agree

Appendix F: Narrative Questions

1. Currently, do you feel that you are actively exploring your identity or feel a strong sense of commitment to who you are as a person? Please explain

2. Currently, do you feel that you are in the process of creating your own values, beliefs, and opinions that are different from your parents or family that are more compatible to who you are as a person? Please explain

3. Currently, do you feel a sense of being lost, unmotivated, or that you have no direction or drive with regards to discovering your sense of self or identity?