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International Higher Education: A Discussion on the College Experience for International Students Who Identify as LGBT+ and Development of an Interview Tool

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Abstract

*This short paper examines the category of international students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or any additional sexual identity that falls within the spectrum (LBGT+) in higher education. As the number of international students increases, the likelihood that more of them could be open about sexual identity in more liberal environments, such as college campuses, the unique needs of this intersectionality must be addressed as its own category. This paper examines the implications of what conducting interviews can mean for further study on international students who identify as LGBT+. Furthermore, this paper addresses study implementation to improve the field of study for this sexual identity category of students in higher education. Finally, we offer guidance on how colleges and universities can provide support to international LGBT+ students.*

Keywords: international students, intersectionality, LBGT, queer theory

Introduction

This paper examines the category of international students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or any additional sexual identity that falls within the spectrum (LBGT+) in higher education. For this paper, international students are defined as students whose country of origin is outside of the United States (US), and who are pursuing a post-secondary degree at a US institution of higher education.

As the number of international students increases on US campuses, the likelihood that more students could be open about sexual identity in more liberal environments, such as college campuses, means the unique needs of this intersectionality must be addressed as its own category. Although the US can seem to be conservative, many college campuses provide opportunities for students to explore who they are in a safer environment. International students who self-identify as LGBT+, can develop either a bicultural identity or a dual socialization identity and colleges must work to provide necessary accommodations for such students. This will foster a positive climate that helps students integrate on campus.

**Literature Review**

**International Students**

Increased globalization has been accompanied by increased international student admissions that support students’ interactions through accessible learning alternatives. With continuously rising college tuition, universities are using international recruitment strategies to broaden international learning and cultural exchange on campuses. International recruitment works to expose universities’ domestic students to a variety of peoples and cultures, allowing them to learn from and work with individuals that they may not have otherwise encountered. The importance of intercultural experience has gained much traction in US higher education, but it can also give rise to particular challenges for international students. Depending on the composition of the group, power imbalances can arise within intergroup dynamics, particularly with minority groups (Smith, 2016). As the numbers of international students increase on campuses across the US, universities and colleges must work to provide necessary accommodations for these students to integrate and foster a positive campus climate.

Transition and integration for international students in higher education is important for the US. Annually, these students contribute billions of dollars to the economy (Adewale et al., 2018). Additionally, an increase in international graduate students shows an increasing trend in patent applications, further boosting the overall economy (Hegarty, 2014). Hegarty (2014) also identified how these individuals often face cultural, language, and adaptability barriers. Bai (2016) identified these individual and group stressors as the phenomena known as acculturative stress. Occurring when individuals come into constant contact with a culture different enough from their own that causes a reduction in the individual’s social, physical, and psychological health, Bai (2016) reported that up to 25 percent of international students experience this. The campus climate towards international students plays a big part in this as there are required systems to support international students in their transition to host universities. Additional supports such as counseling, student groups, and international student groups work to decrease feelings of alienation for incoming students as they transition to unfamiliar environments.

Even with successful assimilation into American higher education, the end of their stay in the US can present issues for international students. Students who acclimate well and adjust to their new college life become part of a community but can feel increasing stress and anxiety as they prepare to depart from this newly formed identity. This self-identity crisis can be exacerbated by returning to a home country where the culture is different from the one they have embraced in the host country. Preparation for re-entry and readjustment can cause psychological and mental health issues for individuals. Further complications arise for international students who develop and embrace identities that are stigmatized identities in their home country (Matic & Russell, 2020). University psychological and counseling services must prepare students for re-acculturation shock at the end of their studies. Some students choose to study in more liberal countries because of the freedom afforded in those places. In preparation to return home at the end of their studies, some international students are going to need access to health services to learn how to appropriately process these feelings they have not experienced before.

**Intersectionality**

Leaving your home to study abroad can be a challenging experience for many students as it may be their first time leaving their home country for any significant period. When transitioning to new cultures, international students may develop a bicultural outlook where they identify with two separate cultures: their own and the one they assimilate into (Harper et al., 2011). They may keep these two identities separate, which can cause the re-acculturation shock that some students experience as they prepare to return to their home country. By embracing a separate new identity of who they are in a host country, students must learn how to readjust to their home culture, sometimes against their desire to do so.

International students may instead develop identities based on the concept of dual socialization. They have two separate cultural identities in this context, but some shared values or norms for the coexistence of two overlapping cultures (Harper et al., 2011). For international students whose culture is more similar to the host country, dual socialization can be more manageable than for a student whose culture is more different.

Both identity experiences can be acutely felt by those international students who study abroad and begin to connect an identity within the LGBT+ community. Some students occasionally choose to study abroad in a country that embraces more liberal views, allowing them opportunities to embrace their own identity. Many college campuses in the US provide opportunities for students to explore their identities in a less threatening environment, which for international students can develop either a bicultural identity or a dual socialization identity. The first option can likely happen for those students who come from countries that actively oppose and punish members of the LGBT+ community. Re-acculturation can be especially hard for these students as they may develop anxieties and fears of punishment upon their return to their home country. Dual socialization can occur for those LGBT+ international students who come from countries that have more open opinions on LGBT+ issues, but this does not necessarily mean that they will have it easier as they may still face stigma from friends and family upon their return home.

International students who identify as LGBT+ can also face a double barrier as part of their experience studying abroad. Individuals can feel isolated due to the intersectional nature of their sexual identities and their cultural background or identity (Nguyen et al., 2017). Students from a culture where their sexual identity is not accepted could become isolated from peers from their home country, while in turn facing potential barriers as an international student and not fitting in with other LGBT+ individuals on campus. Even if an international student desires to embrace a bicultural or dual socialization type of identity, discrimination and potential isolation can leave these students to feel unwelcome and unwanted. Campus services need to create a system that helps international LGBT+ students overcome these circumstances.

Additionally, Streitwieser’s (2019) research discusses categorizing international students into themes of mobility pathways for enlightenment, opportunity, or survival. Although the last group of students in that work is attributed to those who are refugees, it can be used to discuss students who are LGBT+ international students. Life threatening policies in foreign countries, such as recent anti-LGBTQ+ laws in Uganda (HRC Foundation, 2023), could be a reason that students in this space may be studying abroad.

Departure from a host university where a student has developed an identity as both international and LGBT+ can cause extreme distress for the student. This can occur when they plan to return to a host country where their identity is illegal, and they could face severe consequences such as corporal punishment or death, as is the case in Saudi Arabia (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The journey to self-acceptance may have also led to the development of mental health issues that need to be addressed, and the student may view returning home as undesirable if there is a stigma about mental health in the home culture (Oba & Pope, 2013).

Acquiring a wealth of bicultural knowledge and preference for the host country can also cause distress for the international student. While embracing an LGBT+ identity may liberate the student, suppressing who they are upon returning home to family and friends who do not hold accepting views can also result in psychological distress (Matic & Russell, 2020). Options such as returning home to an unfavorable environment for an international LGBT+ student can lead to mental and academic struggles. When this outcome seems to be the only choice, students in this category may become distracted from finishing their degrees or work more vigorously to find alternative options to avoid returning home.

**Queer Theory**

While the concept of queer has existed since the 1970s, it was not until Teres de Lauretis organized the first queer theory conference in 1990 that it was officially named (Jagose, 2009). Historically, “queer” was used disparagingly to refer to anyone who deviated from the majority, denoting the person being abnormal or sick. (Halperin, 2003, p. 339). Queer was often used as a derogatory term to refer to sexual minorities who deviated from heteronormative expectations (McDonald, 2015). As a way to subvert this negative connotation, de Lauretis wanted to utilize the name “queer theory” in a manner that celebrated queerness and liberated individuals from having to conform to those heteronormative standards (de Lauretis, 1991). She also used this name as a way to challenge the previously accepted dichotomous thinking of “ordinary” versus “deviant” when discussing sexual orientation (Jagose, 2009, p. 2). Queer theory is grounded in three main principles: the deconstruction and naming of heteronormativity and cisgenderism, the expectations surrounding the performance of sexuality and gender, and the liminality of transitional phases (Abes & Kasch, 2011; Butler, 1986, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2016).

Michel Foucault and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have contributed a greater understanding that heteronormativity and homophobia have been driving forces to make heterosexuality the norm by emphasizing the interplay of sexuality with identity and knowledge (Sumara & Davis, 1999). Since the 17th century, sexuality became a form of power that the majority culture wielded to control and induce shame. When you keep people ashamed of their sexuality, it becomes easier to control their thoughts and beliefs (Foucault, 1972, 1990). Queer theory challenges these assumptions of normality (Abes, 2008). Instead of categorizing people into labels such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual, queer theory demonstrates that sexual orientations are not set in the dichotomous realm of straight or gay. Instead, individuals can have multiple identities that also might be fluid (Britzman, 1997).

Nevertheless, as discussed later in the literature review, this also causes some issues between gay and lesbian scholars and those utilizing queer theory. Queer theory looks at who is oppressed by the social norms or sexual orientation and gender identity, social constructs of gender identity and sexual orientation, and performance of gender identity and sexual orientation (Butler, 1991). As stated so eloquently in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Butler, 1986; de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 267).

There is a significant amount of variety present in the LGBT+ community, and by consolidating these varying identities into one term, individuals reinforce the binary and the privileges experienced by those who identify as heterosexual (Abes & Kasch, 2011). Although those who identify as non-heterosexual can identify and be placed in their own unique subgroups, for the sake of this paper, they will be categorized as one group indicated by the initialism LGBT+. The plus is intended to be inclusive of all gender identities and sexualities that may not be directly mentioned in the writing.

Furthermore, as part of queer theory, actions that challenge the binary system impose performative actions on studying sexual influences and gender identity. This concept argues that individuals’ actions do not necessarily reflect their specific identity but that the actions themselves create individuality (Abes & Kasch, 2011). Judith Butler’s work demonstrates the hierarchical nature of binary systems imposed by heteronormativity through intentional actions against norms, such as drag; individuals’ identities are realized and constructed through their performative actions rather than actions influenced by identity (Butler, 1993). On the other hand, performative actions related to gender or sexuality can appear straightforward but confusing to others; these expressions, whether traditional, drag, or other forms of clothing or art, are influenced by gender identity and conceptualized through self-discovery from birth.

Lastly, a third category of queer theory is liminality. This category focuses on individual transition or the flux of identity from stages of stability while considering heteronormativity and performative actions. Abes and Kasch (2011) highlight that the view of stages does not associate heterosexuality with non-heterosexuality spaces. Instead, the space of gender and sexuality identities is diverse and, therefore, does not fall within the binary system. An example is identifying individuals as non-binary or their preference for pronouns such as they/them instead of the traditional he/she terms. Regardless of physical presentation, queer theory supports an understanding of the identity of individuals within the LGBT+ community. This theory is not intended only for gender and sexuality influences but includes a broad approach to studies impacting learning abroad for decision outcomes. It also takes an interdisciplinary approach to see how environmental factors affect an individual’s perceived identity and development. As such, this paper seeks to support further discussions on the implications required for reasonings beyond the actions taken by international students and the development of their identity during their study abroad experiences.

**International Students Who Identify as LGBT+**

Much of the academic literature concerning the intersecting topic of international students who identify as LGBT+ are privatized by corporations who charge exorbitant prices for short term access to such resources. Much of the information readily available centers around theses and dissertations. More open-access research is needed to support the work centered around LGBT+ international students.

Valosik (2015) concisely addresses international students’ LGBT+ support identity by discussing the double barrier concept and suggesting how educators can approach the topic respectfully and meaningfully. Creating safe spaces for these students is crucial for these students to feel they are a part of their campus environments. Valosik (2015) also addresses the challenges that international LGBT+ students can face upon graduation and the need for administration and faculty to be aware of this difficult time of departure. Literature like this can provide a solid base for which others might also develop research questions related to an interest in learning more about the international LGBT+ community on college campuses.

**Research Method**

Using a qualitative approach, interview questions were developed based on previous literature in this area of study as they helped to focus ideas for international students, or former international students. For example, Corkum’s (2015) research on this subject found that most of his study participants had a desire to get an education abroad due to their differences in gender identity or expression from their cultural norms. Participants sought opportunities to view their specific identities, backgrounds from their country of origin, their sex, sexual identity, and gender identities, and how they perceive and develop their identities when they are living and studying in their host country. Though this is true of many participants in this study, such a thing cannot necessarily be attributed to all LGBT+ international students who study abroad as queer theory shows that gender/sexual identity is liminal and can change after arriving in a host country.

Patrick (2014) and Wall (2016) each addressed the specific need for host universities to provide institutional support to students who are international and identify as LGBT+. Not only are these students likely facing acculturation shock, but they may also encounter discrimination aimed at one or both parts of their unique identity. Therefore, colleges and universities must be prepared to handle the increasing number of international students and the possibility of non-heteronormative identities expressed by these students.

**Discussion of Pilot Study**

Having developed a questionnaire based on the work of Corkum (2015) and Pattinson (2010), this tool is intended to provide useful information related to the intersectionality of international students in the US who identify as LGBT+. It was tested on two participants that fit into the defined scope of intended interviewees. When testing, the questionnaire was sent via email so that respondents could fill it out at their own leisure with no defined response time. Though not under Institutional Review Board protocol, consent was collected from both participants as part of their participation. Results were emailed back to the lead author for analysis.

Responses were short and directly answered the questions without expanding much on details. After reviewing a transcript and analysis done by Constance Ellwood (2006), this could change how future interviews are conducted on the topic. Though there is safety behind a computer screen, having a direct interview would allow for probing questions to get more details from respondents. The interview conducted by Ellwood (2006) showed how international students may use language barriers to avoid talking about topics that make them uncomfortable, especially those considered taboo in their home environment. A live interview would allow for the interviewer to gather more information that could be used to analyze this growing field of research.

Therefore, the questionnaire designed for this study provided insight into the intersectionality of being an international student and having an LGBT+ identity. It addressed the multiple identities that these participants hold and provided an interesting look at how initial respondents allow these identities to interact and how they create boundaries between them when they feel it is necessary. This tool might be beneficial in addressing why some students might be studying abroad as mentioned in the Streitwieser (2019) study. As lawmakers in countries outside of the US are passing laws criminalizing LGBT+ identities, this will likely become a significant area of discussion in international student education.

International LGBT+ students also face layered discrimination through racism caused by being from a different country and because of the prevailing heteronormativity in society (Nguyen et al., 2017). Students in this position who have come out or plan to explore their sexuality may not desire to return to their home country for fear of being met with homophobia or being put in danger in the communities that they grew up in. Though the possibility of homophobia in the university setting and American society is something these students may encounter, having this separation from home could allow them to feel more comfortable exploring this avenue.

Gathering information on the topic can be facilitated by conducting a study with the designed tool either through electronic communication or through live interviews. More time must be allotted to conduct interviews to do this latter option effectively. Greater outreach will also need to be implemented. Listservs of international students enrolled on campuses can help to disseminate an invitation to participate in the study. Additionally, the questionnaire can be sent to interested responding students in preparation for a live interview. This would allow them to formulate their thoughts around each question so that if there is a language barrier, this can be overcome. Live interviews will also benefit the study as interviewers can ask for explanations or more details about the questions. Further studies such as this can be useful in creating and providing a campus climate that addresses the unique intersection of being an international student and identifying as LGBT+. In doing this, researchers might consider phenomenological or case study methodologies. Finally, it would be beneficial to reach out and interview campus LGBTQ Centers to find out what institutional supports are being provided to these students.

**Conclusion**

Providing a positive campus climate for international students who identify as LGBT+ is more critical now than ever, considering some of the country’s current political leadership actively opposes both individual identification categories. Students planning to travel to this country for higher education may seek out opportunities elsewhere that are more accepting of their true selves. Moreover, with more students studying internationally than ever before, the number of individuals who openly identify as LGBT+ will continue to grow. Therefore, campuses need infrastructure and support plans to assist these students who fall into this growing demographic. Identity development for LGBT+ individuals can be challenging, especially when cultural identity from one's home country conflicts with their true self. Colleges and universities can play a crucial role in helping facilitate this transition by ensuring these students know what resources are available to them and how to locate them if they are needed. In addition to administrative support, culturally responsive teaching can contribute to the sense of belonging for international students who identify as LGBT+. Educators must recognize the diverse identities, languages, and cultures that students bring to their classrooms, as these factors shape the learning environment (Heitner & Jennings, 2016).

Furthermore, student-led organizations can provide significant support to international LGBT+ students. Conferences such as the Tabla Conference held at the University of California, Riverside can be instrumental in facilitating connections between international students of similar ethnicities and backgrounds who also identify as LGBT+, preventing them from feeling invisible while reconciling their past background with their true selves (Olson, 2014). As a recommendation, colleges and universities can foster a positive campus climate by being intentionally aware of students’ backgrounds and identities and providing opportunities for them to connect with like-minded individuals. International students who identify as LGBT+ are vital members of any campus community, and it is crucial that colleges and universities actively pursue inclusive opportunities and support students through accessible resources.

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**Appendix A**

Interview and Consent Form

Higher Education: International Students Who Identify as LGBT+

Consent to Participate

You are being asked to consent to participate in research, conducted by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, to investigate backgrounds, reasons, and perceptions of students who study internationally and identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or other non-heteronormative sexuality (LGBT+). The purpose of this is to gather information to compare/contrast and even add to the small amount of literature on this important and often overlooked portion of the student body in higher education.

You are being asked to complete a questionnaire that will help to provide illumination on the subject of international students who identify as LGBT+. There will be identifying questions asked that will help to provide background information and context for the research. Your name will not be included in the research paper itself, but instead a pseudonym will be used so that your identity will be protected. Some of the questions will ask for very personal information about yourself and your experiences. If any of these questions cause discomfort, you may skip them. It is important that you fill out as much as possible of the questionnaire, as more information can help to draw more appropriate conclusions. Again, your name will not be used in the actual report, so your identity will be protected.

By completing this survey, you are agreeing to participate in the research. Your responses will be used to expand upon the literature of international students who identify as LGBT+. At no point will your real name be used and instead a pseudonym will be employed to keep your identity private.

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this research.

If you have questions about the research, please contact \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ at (123) 456-7890 or by email at john.doe@johndoe.org. When you are finished filling out the questionnaire, please email it to the aforementioned email. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary.

By typing your full name and the date, you acknowledge your informed consent of participation in this study. This is the only place your name will appear and will not be used in the research.

Name:

Date:

Appendix B  
  
Survey

Questionnaire

Higher Education: International Students Who Identify as LGBT+

When filling out the questionnaire, if the question is not specifically asking yes or no, please provide details and/or explanations. The more information you can provide is greatly appreciated. Any stories and/or anecdotes are also appreciated!

Background Information

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. How would you describe your sexuality at this time? Has it changed over time?
4. Please describe your ethnic background.
5. Which country do you consider “home”?
6. What is your current status in the United States (citizen/permanent resident/student visa/other)?
7. How long have you been in the United States?
8. If you are currently a college/university student, please indicate the following:
   1. Institution type (research/baccalaureate/community college/etc.)
   2. Program of study
   3. Year of study
9. If you are a college/university graduate, please indicate the following:
   1. Institution type(s) (research/baccalaureate/community college/etc.)
   2. Program(s) of study
   3. Year(s) of study
10. To what degree are you open (or “out”) about your sexuality?
11. With whom are you open with about your sexuality (friends/family/coworkers/etc.)
12. Does/did your campus(es) offer LGBT+ resources?

Study Abroad Experience

1. Why did you choose to study abroad at the institution of your choice?
   1. Did being LGBT+ play any role in this decision?
2. How would you describe your sexuality before coming to the United States? Is it different from how you would describe it now?
3. Thinking about your social life and sense of belonging at your college/university, what is it like to be an LGBT+ international student there?
4. Are there any positive memories you would like to share?
5. Are there any particular challenges you have faced and how did you respond to them?
6. Do you connect with other international students? LGBT+ students? Both? Neither? Some other group of people?
7. Does your sexuality cause any kind of conflict with other parts of your identity?
8. Has your experience as an LGBT+ individual been positive or negative overall during your study abroad experience? How?

Home Country

1. Are there any laws or restrictions on individuals who identify as anything but heterosexual in your home country?
2. Were there any specific challenges you faced your sexuality in your home country? Are there any challenges you face with it now?
3. Does having a sexuality other than being heterosexual make it difficult to build relationships with your peers/professors/coworkers? Does it make it difficult to connect with other international students, especially those from your home country?
4. Does your sexuality play any role in desires and/or stresses about returning to your home country when the study abroad finishes?

Additional Information

If you would like to provide any additional information that you felt was not asked about through the questionnaire, please use this space to do so.

Questions adapted or taken from:

Corkum, T. (2015). *Where is queer? migration experiences of sexual minority international students in Toronto* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Toronto. Retrieved July 5, 2020, fromhttps://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/70274/3/Corkum\_Trevor\_W\_201511\_MA\_thesis.pdf

Pattison, K. C. (2010). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender undergraduate students: Access and attitudes to international study* (Unpublished master's thesis). California State University, Sacramento. Retrieved July 5, 2020, from http://csus-dspace.calstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.9/304/pattisonk%20thesis%20final.pdf?sequence=1