



The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer International Students: A Systematic Review

Hoa Nguyen
Valdosta State University, United States

Erika Grafsky
Virginia Tech, United States

Jennifer Lambert-Shute
Valdosta State University, United States

ABSTRACT

There is a significant research gap in understanding the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) international students. The purpose of this systematic review is to explore what we currently know about LGBQ international students, by synthesizing peer-reviewed and gray literature that focused on this intersection of sexual and cultural diversity. A total of 10 records met the inclusion criteria and were examined. Out of these 10 records, 6 were empirical studies. Findings from this analysis highlighted the salience of: (a) identity formation and migration, (b) the double barrier of being an international student and LGBQ, and (c) multi-layered discrimination and heteronormativity. We then provide suggestions for future research and implications for mental health professionals, educators, and university administrators.

Keywords: international students, LGBQ, migration, minority stress, sexual identity, sexual orientation, systematic review

In the 2016/2017 academic year, a total of 1,078,822 international students attended U.S. colleges and universities, a 3.4 percent increase from the previous year (IIE, 2017a). The growth of international students procures several benefits to the United States. Evan M. Ryan, Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs stated, “Only by engaging multiple perspectives within our societies can we all reap the numerous benefits of international education—increased global competence, self-awareness and resiliency, and the ability to compete in the 21st century economy” (IIE, 2014). Interaction among members of different cultures can stimulate intercultural communication and understanding. Therefore, having international students on a university campus cultivates a learning environment in which diverse perspectives, cultural awareness, and cultural appreciation are necessary and valued (Bevis, 2002; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Not only are they a part of our student network, they also make

it possible for U.S. universities to maintain financial stability. In fact, international students contribute more than \$39 billion to the U.S. economy (IIE, 2017b), yet they are one of the most underserved groups of students on campus (Mori, 2000).

During the duration of their studies abroad, international students may encounter various struggles in the process of adjusting to a different country. Some of these stressors include academic pressures, financial strain, cultural and language barriers, concerns related to relationships and feelings of isolation (Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003; Prieto-Welch, 2016). While all students experience challenges when attending college, international students are at higher risk than American students for psychological distress (Mori, 2000). When examining these challenges, we need to consider the context of these stressors and their relevance in the lives of international students. For instance, lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ) individuals seek mental health services at higher rates than their heterosexual counterpart (Bieschke, McClanahan, Tozer, Gregorek, & Park, 2000). Thus, it is important to consider the needs of LGBQ international students and support their learning experience.

PURPOSE

As international students are an ever-growing community on our university campus, we need to address the unique challenges they face and examine the current literature on international students. There is an expansive literature on international students (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), but few studies have investigated the intersection of their international student status and sexual orientation. LGBQ international students are often overlooked. They may be hard to reach because of the global marginalization and stigma towards LGBQ individuals and the challenges associated with studying in a foreign country (e.g. lack of support and resources, racism, discrimination, language barriers, loneliness, isolation, and adjustment issues). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore what we currently know about the experiences of LGBQ international students. We chose to focus on the intersection of being an international student and identifying with a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer sexual orientation. We did not include transgender and gender non-conforming identities, given the difference between sexual and gender identity. The experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming international students merit a study of its own to address the unique aspects of gender identity in the process of migrating to a different country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Need for a Global Perspective on LGBQ Issues

By studying the diverse perspectives of international students, we can access an opportunity to explore LGBQ issues outside the United States. LGBQ rights and acceptance is evolving globally, and the statuses, rights, and social acceptance of LGBQ people vary from country to country. For instance, LGBQ people can be charged with “debauchery”, “prostitution”, and “violating the teachings of religion” in Egypt, punishable up to 10 years in prison (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013a). In Saudi Arabia, consensual sexual activity with someone of the same sex is punishable by flogging (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013b). Although countries like China and South Korea allow consensual sexual activity with someone of the same sex, they do not provide legal protections

that address hate crimes and workplace discrimination (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013c; 2013d).

Few countries provide adequate legal protection for discrimination against LGBTQ-motivated hate crimes. Though the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of legalized same-sex marriage in June 26, 2015, protection against workplace discrimination and hate crimes are among many other issues that continue to be relevant in the LGBTQ community. Canada reported a ten percent increase of sexual orientation-related hate crimes in 2011, motivating some police forces to hire LGBTQ liaison officers and develop public awareness campaigns with the help of community organizations. In addition, Canada has legalized same-sex marriage, and the law prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013e).

LGBT Rights Are Human Rights

In 2011, the United Nation's (U.N.) Human Rights Council established the stance, "LGBT rights are human rights" (Chaffee & Thompson, 2011). This is the first time the U.N. has taken a critical, direct step towards addressing LGBT human rights. The United Nations Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) then outlined the patterns of human rights (by country), demanding a response to the criminalization, discrimination in work, healthcare, and education, and the hate-motivated torture, violence, and killing of LGBT people (OHCHR, 2011). According to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, LGBT people face criminalization in 72 countries with 8 of them implementing the death penalty (ILGA, 2017).

Most international students in the United States come from China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Canada (IIE, 2017c). Together, China and India contributed approximately 50 percent to the total enrollment, with the largest growth in the number of students from India, mostly at the graduate level (IIE, 2017b). None of these countries provide legal recognition of same-sex marriage and legal protection against the discrimination of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people (Nguyen, Agrawal, & Grafsky, 2017). Some of the worse LGBTQ policies occur in African, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries where discrimination is not only unregulated, but institutionalized (ILGA, 2017). However, there are vast differences across countries in any region. All in all, no leaders from any one country can say they have fully achieved policies that promote equality and protect against victimization of LGBTQ people. These policies raise concerns for the wellbeing of LGBTQ international students. Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, and Hasin (2009) found that LGB individuals living in states with policies protecting against LGB-related hate crimes and workplace discrimination reported lower levels of psychiatric disorders in the past 12 months. Therefore, policies can have considerable influence on the safety and mental health of LGBTQ individuals.

LGBTQ International Students and Mental Health

International students are especially vulnerable to mental health concerns due to added pressures and difficulties with geographical, cultural, and academic adjustment (Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007). For example, international students are at risk for depressive symptoms because of the stress from adjusting to the host culture and negative interactions with members of the host culture (Spencer-Oatery & Xiong, 2006). Social integration, family-related stress, homesickness, loneliness, isolation, academic difficulties, financial crisis, and depression are

common issues among international students (Chen, 1996; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Parr, Bradley, & Bingi, 1992). Additionally, perceived discrimination is one of the most salient stressors in the experiences of international students (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Wang, Wong, and Fu (2013) found that international students' psychological distress positively relates to their perceptions of racial or ethnic discrimination. For the LGBTQ community, prejudice and stigma contributes to mental health issues such as depression, suicide, and substance abuse (NAMI, n.d.). LGBTQ international students may be more vulnerable given the dual stigma of being in both communities. Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, and Walters (2011) discussed how LGBTQ individuals of a racial or ethnic minority experience multiple minority stressors, as they are subjected to racism, heterosexism, and homophobia.

METHODS

We conducted a systematic review to determine what we currently know about LGBTQ international students. The systematic review is guided by the PRISMA protocol (Robertson-Malt, 2014). This provided a systematic, step-by-step screening process that allowed us to summarize the findings on this topic.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Given the dearth in the literature on this topic, we chose to include both empirical and conceptual articles as records for data synthesis. The initial search selected peer-reviewed articles, which were later supplemented with a hand search (cross-referencing citations from the eligible articles) and gray literature search. Gray literature refers to information outside peer-reviewed journals such as book chapters, dissertations, or magazine articles. For both searches, we employed a Boolean parameter to ensure the consistency of our search in including the appropriate records. We provide the Boolean parameter below when describing our literature search strategy. Our inclusion criteria required articles to focus on LGBTQ-identified international students. Unless international students were specifically included as a part of the sample or population of interest, we did not include records on immigrants or queer people of color.

Literature Search Strategy

In January 2016, we conducted an electronic search using the EBSCOhost platform which included the following databases: Academic Search Complete (1887-2016), Family & Society Studies Worldwide (1900s-2016), PsycInfo (1894-2016), and Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection (1930-2016) databases. EBSCOhost is an online research platform that provided us access to various, multidisciplinary research databases and information resources. We limited the search to peer-reviewed articles and used the following Boolean search parameters: (homosexual OR lesbian OR gay OR bisexual OR LGBTQ* OR queer OR "sexual minority" OR "sexual identity" OR "sexual orientation") AND ("overseas students" OR "international students" OR "foreign students" OR sojourner*).

The electronic search produced 77 articles, the gray literature search produced six theses and dissertations, and the hand search added three articles. There were 82 unique records after deleting the four duplicates. Next, screening the records by title and abstract for eligibility narrowed this down to 12 articles. Two of these 12 articles did not meet the inclusion criteria

after the full text screening, resulting in a final sample of 10 eligible records for the review. The search strategy and retrieval process are displayed in Figure 1.

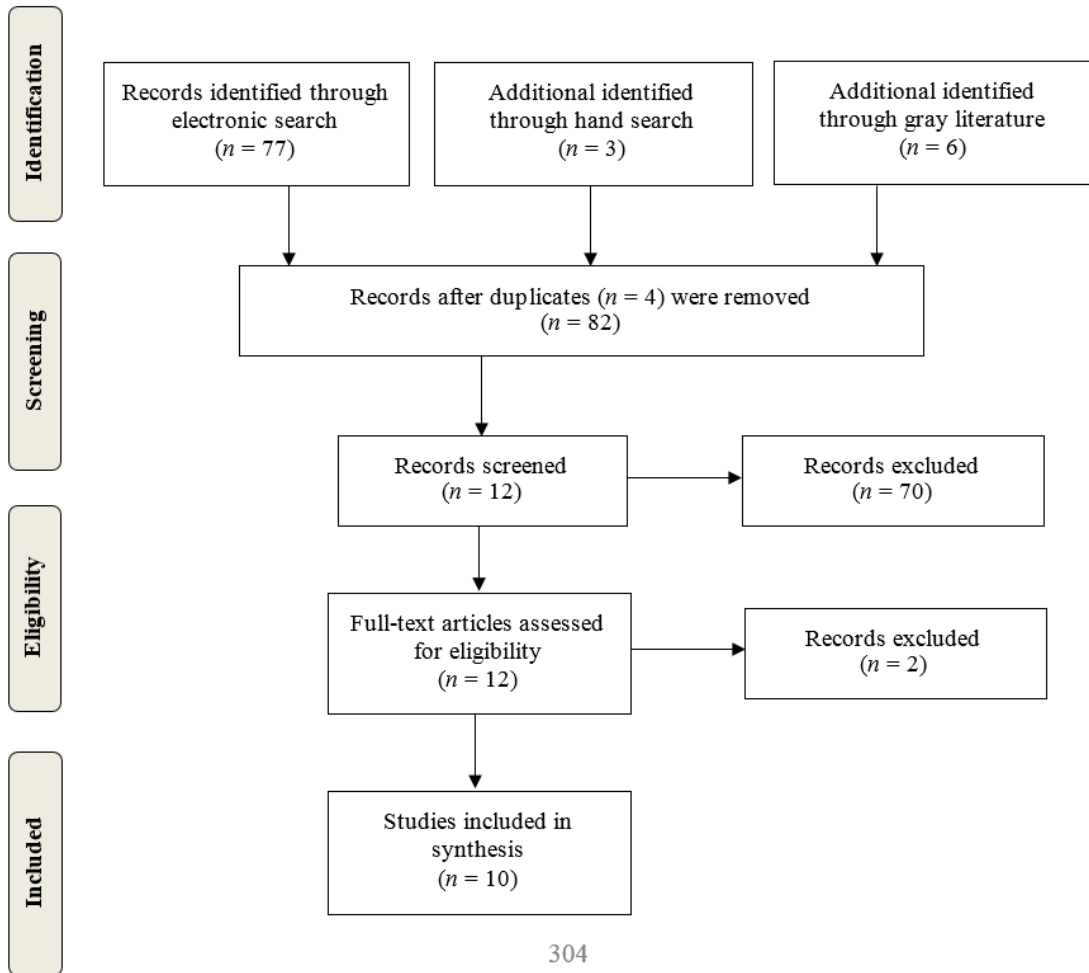


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

RESULTS

Data Synthesis

We organized the eligible full-text records that fit the inclusion criteria for a closer analysis. Using a code sheet, we described the article's purpose, type, population of interest,

implications, and conclusions of the article, and examined the theoretical approach that the author(s) used as the foundation for their article, book chapter, or dissertation. For records that were empirical, we reported the type of methodology utilized by the authors. Records were considered empirical if the authors employed a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods design. We were also interested in the field of study that the record originated from. This was based off of the journal, book, or magazine that the record was published in.

Out of the 10 records that met the inclusion criteria and were eligible for examination, there were four theses, two dissertations, two journal articles, one book chapter, and one magazine article. The records were published between 2003 and 2015, showing how this is an issue that has only been attended to in the past decade. In regards to the field, four from counseling/clinical/educational psychology, two records originated from education, one from leadership and training, one from foreign student affairs, one from family studies, and one from Asian American studies. The two peer-reviewed articles were published in the *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling* and *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, which suggests that this is an issue that may be of interest in various disciplines and professions. All of the records were interested in lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, with four of them also including queer identities or those questioning their sexual orientation. Two records focused on Chinese gay, lesbian, and bisexual international students, and two focused on Asian and Asian American students. The remaining kept their population of interest open in regards to ethnic and cultural origin. Our results are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Records' Authors, Year, Type, Journal/Book/Magazine, Field, and Population of Interest

Author(s)	Year	Type	Journal/ Book title	Field	Population of interest
Oba & Pope	2013	Article	<i>Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling</i>	Counseling psychology & community services	LGBT international students
Quach et al.	2013	Article	<i>Journal of GLBT Family Studies</i>	Family studies & community development	GLB Chinese international students
Hebert	2003	Dissertation	Not applicable	Clinical psychology	LGQ (queer) international students
Narui	2010	Dissertation	Not applicable	Education	Asian & Asian American GLB students
Tang	2007	Thesis	Not applicable	Leadership & training	Gay & lesbian international students
Patrick	2014	Thesis	Not applicable	Education	Queer international students

Author(s)	Year	Type	Journal/ Book title	Field	Population of interest
Yang	2015	Thesis	Not applicable	Counseling & educational leadership	LGB international students from China
Weitz	2015	Thesis	Not applicable	Asian & Asian American studies	Queer Asian & Asian American students
Pope et al.	2007	Book chapter	<i>Handbook for Counseling International Students in the US</i>	Counseling & educational psychology	GLBQ (questioning) international students
Valosik	2015	Magazine article	<i>International Educator</i>	Foreign student affairs	LGBT international students

Table 2. Records' Research Design, Theory, Sample, Purpose, and Primary Findings

#	Research Design (Theory)	Sample	Purpose	Primary Findings
1	Not applicable	Not applicable	Identify how mental health professionals need to provide support for LGBT international students	Four challenges of using counseling services, the role of international student services, building a support group, & repatriation issues
2	Not applicable	Not applicable	Reviews current models of sexual identity models & their application for students from China	Models need to be tested considering the importance of collectivism, filial piety, & social expectations in Chinese culture
3	Phenomenology	9 LBQ international female students	Explore the influence of cultural factors on sexual identity development, decisions to stay in US, stressors, & coping	Migration influence & lack of other's awareness, need for culturally appropriate & inclusive theories about sexual identity development
4	Situational analysis (Foucauldian)	9 GLB Asian/	Understand how & why Asian/American GLB student disclose	Correlation between self-identity & willingness to reveal

#	Research Design (Theory)	Sample	Purpose	Primary Findings
		American students	& how disclosure influence identity construction	orientation, & aspects of social world and positional maps
5	Action research (Systems & organization context)	3 gay male students & 4 student services professionals	Examine support for gay & lesbian students at one Canadian university	Need to raise awareness, address safety issues, & include topics in curriculum
6	Interpretivist (Queer, feminist, & gender theory, social constructionism)	7 GLQ international students	Examine experiences & level of queer acceptance/homophobic discrimination in one Canadian university	Perceived acceptance is related to degree of reflexivity, self-understanding, sexual expression, openness, & optimistic reframing
7	Ethnographic qualitative (Acculturation, intersectionality, heteronormativity, & performativity)	6 gay & lesbian international students	Understand college experiences of LGB students from China with regards to how they make meaning of the multi-identity dimensions	Themes found include the influence of heteronormativity, acculturation, & identity formation
8	Phenomenology (Foucauldian)	8 queer Asian/American students	Examine discrimination & cultural inclusivity in one U.S. university for queer Asian/American students	Discrimination of racial & sexual identities, & increased discussions on queer Asian topics in student/cultural groups & campus administration
9	Not applicable	Not applicable	Identify unique issues that GLBQ international students may confront & offer guidelines	GLBQ international student brochure conveys information about identity, coming-out process, immigration concerns, relationships, etc.
10	Not applicable	Not applicable	Identify LGBT international student needs for support	Create safe space, learn vocabulary, avoid assumptions, establish affirm relationships, & campus wide change

In regards to the purpose, the authors of the articles, theses, and book chapters were interested in the following aims: (a) identifying the unique challenges and needs (e.g. acculturation, migration concerns, repatriation), (b) identifying how mental health professionals can provide support, (c) reviewing the cultural applicability of sexual identity models, (d) exploring the influence of cultural factors on sexual identity, stressors, and coping, (e) understanding the disclosure and identity formation, (f) examining queer acceptance, support cultural inclusivity, homophobia, and discrimination within the university. The latter purpose was the most common, with six records investigating the experiences of LGBTQ international students on campus. The second most common purpose was to explore and understand identity development and construction with four records addressing this.

The six dissertations and theses were the only empirical studies in the records found, and all of them used a qualitative method to explore this issue. One possible explanation for this could be that qualitative methods are appropriate for this area of research to holistically represent and explore the complex narratives and experiences of this population (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992; Neuman, 2013). The researchers used situational analysis, phenomenology, action research, ethnography, or interpretivist qualitative methods. They were informed by Foucauldian, social constructionism, systems and organization context, gender, feminist, and queer theories. They explored the theoretical concepts of identity construction, acculturation, reflexivity, homophobia, and heteronormativity. Sample sizes in the empirical records ranged from six to nine participants. All of them included international students in their sample. One study also included student services professionals. One focused on female students, and another focused on male students. Two studies specifically sampled Asian and Asian American students and discussed the differences between these two subgroups. Two studies were from Canadian universities, one focused on a specific U.S. university, and three recruited from multiple U.S. institutions.

DISCUSSION

Recurring findings from this systematic review included the following: (a) identity formation and migration, (b) the double barriers of being both an international student and LGBTQ, and (c) multi-layered experiences of discrimination and heteronormativity.

Identity Formation and Migration

Authors in this literature were interested in how international students navigate sexual identity development. While sexual identity models tended to reflect a more individualistic theme, studies that particularly focused on Chinese, Asian, and Asian American students noted the role of collectivism and filial piety embedded in their coming out process (Quach, Todd, Hepp, & Doneker Mancini, 2013; Narui, 2010; Yang, 2015). International students from more collectivist cultures may have heightened concern for their parents' position within the community and how disclosing their sexual identity will impact the family's membership within that cultural group. Given the importance of parental and communal acceptance, the student's willingness to disclose sexual orientation intertwines with aspects of their social world (Narui, 2010). For international students, sets of cultural values and expectations are always in flux. The country they currently reside holds its own set of values that the students have to navigate and negotiate in their own identity (Hebert, 2003). The authors in our study suggested the need for

culturally-inclusive models of sexual orientation in order to account for the multiple intersections of identity.

The Double Barrier Experience

The double barrier refers to the isolation LGBQ international students may feel given the intersection of their cultural and sexual identities (Valosik, 2015). They experience pressures from multiple sources, including Asian, White, heterosexual, and LGB groups, as no one community fits their whole experience (Narui, 2010; Pope, Singaravelu, Chang, Sullivan, & Murray, 2007). Some students report not feeling at home and welcomed in the LGBQ university community (Weitz, 2015). While some are able to find sources of support within both communities, LGBQ domestic students may not be able to relate to the challenges faced by LGBQ international students. Cultural differences may add to the divide, and depending on the policies of their home country on LGBQ identities and relationships, they may be encountering different levels of acceptance and discrimination among these cultural contexts (Hebert, 2013). Students dealing with this double barrier may feel the risk of losing their cultural community by connecting with the LGBQ community and vice versa (Valosik, 2015). That being said, the experiences of LGBQ international students vary between and within various cultures and countries (Pope et al., 2007). One cannot assume students from the same country share the same experiences, just like LGBQ students in the United States.

Multi-Layered Discrimination and Heteronormativity

Many of the records reviewed attend to the varying layers of discrimination. LGBQ international students may encounter both racism and heterosexism (Weitz, 2015). In this regard, actual and perceived acceptance of LGBQ identities are important for these students to feel accepted (Patrick, 2014). Particularly, figures in positions of power, such as student affairs personnel, university administrators, educators, and mental health professionals play a role in crafting an environment that combats racism and heterosexism (Tang, 2007). Homophobia, the fear or disgust of LGBQ individuals, may be occurring both the culture of origin and the culture of arrival. This also applies to heteronormativity, the assumption that establishes heterosexual identities and relationships as the norm (Yang, 2015). Social and cultural expectations that elevates and privileges heterosexual relationships are embedded in our narratives about adolescence and young adulthood, dating, forming families, etc. LGBQ individuals navigate these themes in their culture of origin and culture of arrival.

Some studies noted how these experiences create a level of reflexivity with which LGBQ international students engage (Pope et al., 2007). Reflexivity is a conscious and intentional effort to evaluation and reflect on how one's beliefs and values shape our actions and vice versa as well as acknowledging the dilemmas that permeate the situation (McGraw, Zvonkovic, & Walker, 2000). Depending on the students' degree of reflexivity, LGBQ international students highlighted their process of self-understanding and self-labelling as they navigated the perceptions of their sexuality (Patrick, 2014). They reflected on how various social and cultural contexts shaped their decisions to express their sexuality. Patrick (2014) described a more "optimistic reframing of their potential futures as queer individuals" (p. ii) for LGBQ international students who were studying abroad in Canada and experienced the Canadian context as a more accepting and open environment. This highlights how important the social and cultural context is in shaping the

individual's ability to express themselves and share their experiences. It is important to consider the complex and dynamic interaction between their various cultural contexts.

LIMITATIONS

While a systematic review provides a thorough and consistent way to collect the records eligible for inclusion in this study, there is a potential of missing other articles that would have fit the criteria if they were not accessible via the databases chosen. We attempted to widen the Boolean parameters to include various search terms for international students and sexual orientation; however, it is possible that the language could have been expanded to capture more eligible records on this topic. Also, searching via Google Scholar or other search engines could be useful in identifying those outlier articles. In addition, when cross-referencing, articles that were not cited by other publications might have been missed. Since there was not an intentional hand search for non-peer reviewed materials such as magazines and popular publications, these records could have been omitted in the systematic review process. Additionally, the data from this study is based on the descriptive findings of published works, and may not reflect the full picture on what universities, educators, practitioners, and other professionals are employing in their work with LGBQ international students.

IMPLICATIONS

Suggestions for Mental Health Professionals

Oba's and Pope's (2013) article and Pope et al.'s (2007) book chapter on counseling LGBQ international students, can serve as a foundation for mental health professionals to better understand the intersection of sexual orientation and international student status. Further, Pope and colleagues (2007) discuss the importance of mental health professionals reflecting about their personal biases to ensure that they are providing services that meet the individual needs of these students. Practitioners can also provide resources and serve as advocates for this community (Oba & Pope, 2013). In addition, we suggest mental health professionals explore the LGBQ international student's relationships with peers, friends, family, and educators, as it relates to their overall experience. They should consider people in both the student's current social group and family and friends in their home country. Furthermore, helping professionals need to remember the limitations of sexual identity development models, as they do not capture the complex nature of identity formation that occurs for LGBQ international student.

Suggestions for University Administrators and Educators

Authors presented various suggestions for university administrators, personnel, and educators who interact and engage with international students (Narui, 2010; Patrick, 2014; Yang, 2015; Valosik, 2015). For instance, educators could include more culturally-inclusive topics in their curriculum and lectures that pertain to diverse cultural and sexual identities. Educators should introduce the intersections of diversity when possible. University administrators may be able to provide campus-wide support through events, programs, and distribution of information on resources specific to international students who identify across the spectrum of sexuality. For example, international student organizations, LGBQ groups, Safe Zone or Safe Space training programs on campus, and international student centers are places of collaboration to collectively

create an atmosphere of acceptance. In addition, providing training for staff members, faculty, and mental health professionals can help increase awareness and create a culture of affirmation and allyship within the community.

Future Research

This systematic review helped identify previous studies on LGBQ international students, which can serve as a foundation for understanding and acknowledging potential gaps that need to be addressed in this literature. For instance, future researchers should examine the experiences of LGBQ international students from countries with harsher policies towards sexual identity, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, etc. It would also be critical to address intercultural and intracultural differences among and between LGBQ international students (Bandura, 2002). Additionally, future scholars could focus more on family relationships, given their importance in the lives of international students. Families of choice is a concept used to describe alternative ways that LGBQ people form families (Grafsky & Nguyen, 2017), challenging the heteronormative assumptions of procreation and heterosexual relationships as the primary means to create families. It would be important to explore whether or not this is a salient occurrence for LGBQ international students, particularly those who come from cultures that emphasize familial and kin connections.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study contributes to our body of knowledge on the experiences of LGBQ international students. Interestingly, the empirical studies found in this systematic review were either dissertations or theses, suggesting that this area of research is beginning to gain attention and recognized as a population underserved in the university community. By better serving the needs of LGBQ international students, we can mitigate the multiple stressors experienced by these students, improving their academic success and reducing attrition (Rankin, 2006).

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AUTHOR NOTE

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HOA N. NGUYEN, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at Valdosta State University. Her area of research focus on the coming in, coming out stories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer international students and immigrant families. Email: hnnnguyen@valdosta.edu

ERIKA L. GRAFSKY, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Human Development and a faculty affiliate of Women and Gender Studies, as well as Health Sciences at Virginia Tech. Erika's scholarship is focused on psychosocial health and well-being of sexual and gender minority individuals and their families, as well as affirmative therapy practices. Email: erikagrafsky@vt.edu

JENNIFER LAMBERT-SHUTE, PhD, is a full Professor in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at Valdosta State University. Her primary research interests focus on issues in training marriage and family therapists, gerontology, and working with older adults. Email: jjshute@valdosta.edu
