

LGBTQIA+ Students Exhibit Differing Information Practices Based on Social Media Presence and Self-Identified Personality Type

de la Cruz, J., Winfrey, A., & Solomon, S. (2022). Navigating the network: An exploratory study of LGBTQIA+ information practices at two single-sex HBCUs. *College & Research Libraries*, 83(2), 278–295. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.83.2.278>

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Article abstract

Objective – To explore the information practices of LGBTQIA+ students and the potential for academic libraries to impact or influence these practices.

Design – Focus groups and individual interviews.

Setting – Two single-sex Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the USA.

Subjects – Twenty-three (23) LGBTQIA+ students who were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling.

Methods – Students from the two colleges were hired and trained as recruiters and interviewers. Twenty-three (23) total interviews on information practices were conducted—nine (9) via focus group, fourteen (14) via individual interviews. No two students participated in both a focus group and an individual interview. Question banks were drafted by the authors for the interviewers to use.

Main Results – Four primary themes arose in qualitative, applied thematic analysis: Acceptance, Support, Personality, and Social Media. Acceptance was further discussed by an interviewee stating one of the colleges in the study was started by lesbians, but this is silent in the campus history. Thus, it is difficult to feel accepted on a campus with so much erasure of LGBTQIA+ history. In conjunction with Acceptance is the lack of Support from both campuses, namely in events, activities, and other affirming programming for LGBTQIA+ students. Students felt the need for more explicit, unequivocal support for LGBTQIA+ students from campus administration. Findings also suggested that Personality, namely participants' self-identified introversion, may contribute to information deprivation due to fewer social connections and therefore less information sharing. Social Media, the final theme, was noted as the most powerful forum for information sharing for students, as well as a space to normalize LGBTQIA+ movement and visibility. Finally, students viewed the library in a traditional light, such as a study space. The reasoning for some LGBTQIA+ students rejecting the library as a safe space was unclear, though the authors hypothesize this may be due to safety while returning back to their dorms at night.

Conclusion – With a paucity of research in the information practices of LGBTQIA+ students, specifically those enrolled at HBCUs, the authors concluded that continued research is needed to understand how libraries can create safety and visibility. One primary mode for this might be to make more visible that libraries are not neutral, and that supporting LGBTQIA+ students should be a priority.

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

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Commentary

The LIS literature landscape presents no current studies at the intersection of LGBTQIA+ students and single-sex Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The authors were awarded an American Library Association Diversity Research Grant, which funded the project, and the varied professions among the authorship (one data services specialist for a health sciences library, one non-profit knowledge manager, and one learning experience designer) allowed for research questions that went outside the traditional library scope and further into information practices from areas underrepresented in LIS research.

This study performs well under the CRiSTAL Checklist for Appraising a User Study (n.d.), holding strong to its user group by only interviewing students who identified as LGBTQIA+. The strength in study methodology was also its limitation, as it used students as interviewers which led to less robust interviews with incorrect question banks. The students enable the researchers to gain insights they may not have gleaned if the authors were the interviewers, so students were by no means a strict limitation. However, trained qualitative researchers may have been more efficient if the goal was a consistent question bank across all interviews. The sample was small, but this was a credible expectation of a study within small campuses and marginalized user groups. The study could be fully or partially replicated, whether at a co-ed HBCU or in other LGBTQIA+ groups at predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

The authors noted two poignant areas where more research is needed: Black LGBTQIA+ students who self-identify as introverted and their potential for information deprivation, and identity formation for LGBTQIA+ students of color. In the Acceptance theme, one student noted their hope that being an HBCU alum "would 'soften the blow of queerness' for their parents" (de la Cruz et al., 2022, p. 285), indicating competing identities within this one student and the challenges of navigating safety, acceptance, and affirming support in multiple marginalized facets of their identity. In the Personality theme, introverts reported fewer social interactions overall, therefore fewer opportunities to give and

receive information. Information practices of those who, by default, socialize less is another area the authors would like to see further explored.

The study offered thoughtful insight into how the LGBTQIA+ population uses and shares information at single-sex HBCUs. Concerning the research question investigating how libraries are involved, there is room for growth in the literature; discussion during interviews and focus groups around using the library for information-seeking was largely absent in this study. Suggestions from the authors such as safe spaces in the library for these types of conversations/interviews, safer transportation from the library back to respective campuses, and more visibility for queer resources and information in the library would go a long way to showing the LGBTQIA+ user group that the library is not neutral and is in their corner. This study will be of great value to outreach librarians in nearly any library type, particularly for those whose mission and vision seek to empower and amplify marginalized user groups.

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