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To Join or Not to Join: Gay-Straight Student Alliances and the High School Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youths

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This retrospective study investigates 79 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) college students’ experiences attending high schools with gay-straight student alliances (GSAs). Responses to two, open-ended survey questions were analyzed thematically to identify reasons that underlie GSA non-membership and to model facets of GSAs that may impact the GSA-related experiences of LGBT youths. Three frames of reference for understanding GSA non-membership and perceptions of GSAs emerged. Implications for predicting GSA membership and identifying protective mechanisms of GSAs are outlined. Suggestions to help GSA leaders and advisors enhance specific aspects of GSAs that appear to be associated with positive perceptions of GSAs are also provided.

KEYWORDS gay-straight alliance, high school, identity development, LGBT, youth

INTRODUCTION

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) assesses the school experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youths from across the country via the National School Climate Survey (NSCS). Results of the 2009 NSCS (N = 7,261) suggest that schools in the United States are not safe for all students. Because of their minority statuses, 84.6% of participants reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported being physically
harassed, and 18.8% reported being assaulted, while 29.1% of participants reported skipping a class within the past month due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Barkiewicz, 2010). Meta-analytic evidence indicates that sexual minority youths experience more at-school victimization than their heterosexual peers, and experiencing at-school victimization is associated with psychological distress and substance misuse (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011). These findings highlight the importance of studying the school experiences of LGBT youths and identifying resources that promote health and well-being.

What follows is a review of minority stress theory and research pertaining to one such resource, the gay-straight student alliance (GSA), which is associated with favorable mental health and substance use outcomes among LGBT youths and young adults. Qualitative studies have examined reasons why LGBT youths join GSAs, as well as the perceived benefits associated with membership. The present study advances the literature by identifying characteristics of GSAs that may be associated with positive and negative GSA-related experiences and perceptions, while also identifying factors that may be associated with non-membership.

SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH INVOLVING LGBT YOUTHS

When compared to heterosexual youths, LGBT youths are at increased risk for substance misuse (Corliss et al., 2010; Marshal et al., 2008) and mental health disorders (Marshal et al., 2011; Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010). Research consistently indicates that minority stress, or the discrimination, prejudice, and stigma faced by marginalized populations, contributes to this increased risk.

Minority Stress

Meyer’s (2003) model specifies four minority stress-specific processes:

1. experiencing prejudice, including discrimination and violence,
2. expecting to experience such events,
3. concealing one’s minority status, and
4. internalizing homophobia.

The model also considers coping, social support, and identity characteristics (e.g., salience, valence, identity integration) and is supported by research studies of adult lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons from the United States, New Zealand, and the Netherlands (Meyer, 2003). Evidence suggests
that this model may generalize to adolescent LGBT populations within the United States and Europe. For example, Kelleher (2009) found support for Meyer’s (2003) model using a sample of 301 LGBT youths from Ireland; experiencing prejudice was the best predictor of psychological distress, although sexual identity distress and stigma consciousness also predicted this outcome.

Retrospective reports indicate that LGB adults endorse experiencing more childhood abuse than heterosexual adults (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005; Corliss, Cochran, & Mays, 2002). Population-based and meta-analytic research indicates that LGB youths report experiencing more school victimization than heterosexual youths (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Fedewa & Ahn, 2011). Gender-nonconforming youths may also be at risk for experiencing abuse at home (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2007) and school (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010). Consistent with Meyer’s (2003) model, childhood abuse and school victimization are associated with higher rates of mental health disorders and health risk behaviors among LGBT youths (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2006; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010; Wilsnack et al., 2008).

Reactions to a child’s sexual minority status and perceptions of parental and peer support are also associated with mental health and substance use outcomes (D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001; Needham & Austin, 2010; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Using data from 425 LGB youths and young adults, Mustanski, Newcomb, and Garofalo (2011) found that higher levels of family and peer support were associated with lower levels of psychological distress. The interactions of family support x victimization and peer support x victimization were not significant predictors of psychological distress, suggesting that these supports do not reduce victimization-related risks.

Willoughby, Doty, and Malik (2010) collected data from 81 LGB youths and found that family rejection and victimization predicted more negative views of oneself as LGB, and negative self-views predicted internalizing symptomatology. Higher levels of family rejection were also directly related to higher levels of problematic substance use, but negative views of oneself as LGB did not mediate this relationship. Willoughby and colleagues speculated that associations with deviant peers as a result of parental rejection might explain the relationship between parental rejection and problematic substance use. Such findings do suggest that a mechanism linking family rejection with internalizing symptoms may be internalized homophobia. Using data from a sample of 202 Italian gay and lesbian youths, Baiocco, D’Alessio, and Laghi (2010) found that binge drinkers and heavy drinkers reported significantly higher scores of internalized sexual stigma relative to social drinkers. In addition, Baiocco and colleagues found that binge and heavy drinkers reported more involvement with the gay community, while
social drinkers reported being more “out” to family and friends. Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2004) found a curvilinear relationship between coming out, gay-related activity involvement, and substance use. As LGB youths began to disclose their sexual minority statuses to others, a temporary increase in alcohol and marijuana use was observed. This increase in substance use coincided with a temporary increase in gay-related activities. However, continued involvement in these activities was associated with decreased substance use over time.

Meyer’s (2003) model also considers minority identity characteristics in relation to mental health outcomes, and longitudinal research conducted by Rosario and colleagues (2004, 2008, 2011) supports the inclusion of these characteristics in Meyer’s model. Specifically, Rosario and colleagues (2008, 2011) investigated the processes of LGB identity formation and integration in relation to health outcomes. Identity formation includes questioning one’s sexuality, engaging in same-sex sexual behaviors, and self-identifying as a sexual minority, while identity integration includes being open about one’s sexual orientation, participating in sexual minority-related activities, and forming positive feelings in relation to one’s sexual orientation (Rosario et al., 2008). Youths high in identity integration tended to report greater social support from friends and family, while negative social relationships predicted less identity integration (Rosario et al., 2008). Ages associated with identity formation were not related to psychological adjustment; however, difficulties with identity integration predicted higher levels of depression and anxiety, and lower levels of self-esteem (Rosario et al., 2011).

**HIGH SCHOOLS AND LGBT YOUTHS**

Rosario and colleagues (2004, 2011) highlight the importance of providing LGBT youths with safe and supportive environments that are free of alcohol and drugs. High school GSAs, or student clubs and organizations for LGBT youths and their allies, provide such an environment. However, only 44.6% of the participants in the 2009 NSCS reported attending a school with a GSA or similar club (Kosciw et al., 2010).

**Positive Outcomes Associated with GSAs**

A number of academic and health-related benefits are associated with attending a high school with a GSA. For example, when compared to peers attending schools without GSAs, LGBT students attending high schools with GSAs report hearing fewer homophobic comments at school, feeling safer at school, and having more supportive teachers and staff members (Kosciw et al., 2010; Szalacha, 2003; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). These youths
also appear to have higher grade point averages (GPAs) and a greater sense of belonging to their schools when compared to LGBT youths attending high schools without GSAs (Kosciw et al., 2010; Szalacha, 2003; Walls et al., 2010).

Population-based research indicates that attending a high school with a GSA is associated with reduced risk for experiencing at-school victimization and for having a past-year suicide attempt; teacher and staff support for LGBT students also appears associated with lower suicide risk (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006). In addition, young adults who attended high schools with GSAs appear to report less alcohol and drug problems, fewer symptoms of depression, and lower levels of general psychological distress, when compared to LGBT young adults who did not attend high schools with GSAs (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011).

Impact of GSA Membership and GSA Effectiveness

Walls and colleagues (2010) compared the experiences of GSA members and nonmembers and significant differences between members and nonmembers were not detected with respect to missing school due to fear, bringing a weapon to school, feelings of safety, amount of harassment, and being able to identify a safe adult at school. However, a significant difference between GSA members and nonmembers was detected with respect to self-reported GPA; GSA members’ average GPA ($M = 3.024$) was significantly higher than nonmembers ($M = 2.426$). Toomey and colleagues (2011) found that LGBT young adults who had participated in their high schools’ GSAs reported fewer problems with substance abuse, while perceived GSA effectiveness was associated with higher levels of educational attainment and fewer challenges related to depression and problematic substance use.

Lee (2002) conducted interviews with seven high school GSA members in order to understand their GSA-related experiences; the participants reported that they felt safer and less harassed due to their affiliations with the GSA. In addition, they reported increased motivation to attend school and a stronger sense of school belongingness since joining the GSA. Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, and Laub (2009) conducted focus group interviews with 15 leaders of GSAs and found that involvement in a GSA empowered these youths to organize and create change through activism. GSA involvement was associated with having more positive feelings about oneself and having a greater sense of control over one’s future (Russell et al., 2009).

Finally, Sweat (2004) “embedded [himself] in the social world of GSAs” (p. 14) by observing GSA meetings/events and interviewing GSA members in California. One aspect of Sweat’s study involved identifying factors that motivate LGBT youths to participate in GSAs. Using a grounded theory
approach, Sweat reported that experiencing victimization or having friends experience victimization motivates LGBT and heterosexual youths to participate in GSAs. A desire to promote social justice was also identified as a motivating factor.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The experiences of GSA members and leaders are generally positive (Lee, 2002; Russell et al., 2009; Sweat, 2004), and perceptions of GSA effectiveness in promoting school safety have been associated with educational attainment and health outcomes (Toomey et al., 2011). However, less is known about LGBT youths who do not participate in GSAs and the factors associated with their nonparticipation. Therefore, the primary objectives of this study are to (1) examine the perceptions of high school GSAs among LGBT young adults who attended a high school with a GSA; (2) determine whether certain characteristics of GSAs are associated with LGBT young adults’ perceptions of the GSAs at their schools; and (3) identify factors that may contribute to GSA non-membership. To that end, responses to two open-ended questions regarding experiences in a GSA and, for participants who were not part of a GSA, reasons for non-membership are analyzed to build a conceptual model that captures their experiences with and perceptions of GSAs. In addition to the questions relating to GSA non-membership and perception, the study also investigated the relationship between ages associated with identity development milestones and GSA membership. It was anticipated that youths who reported being members would report earlier ages of LGBT identity development.

METHOD

Participants

The current study utilizes a subset of data obtained as part of a larger (N = 145) retrospective investigation of GSAs and school, mental health, and alcohol use outcomes (Heck et al., 2011). Data from participants who attended a high school with a GSA (N = 79) were included, while data from participants who did not attend a high school with a GSA (N = 66) were excluded. Due to the relatively small sample size, the ability to analyze data across levels of variables such as gender or sexual orientation was limited. The average age of the 79 participants was 19.06 (SD = 0.75) years. With respect to gender, a total of 52 (65.8%) participants identified as female, 21 (26.6%) participants identified as male, and 6 (7.6%) participants selected a transgender or an “other” gender option. Thirty-seven participants (46.8%) identified as bisexual, 40 (50.6%) identified as gay or lesbian, and 2 (2.5%)
selected “other” (not straight/heterosexual) to represent their sexual orientations. In terms of ethnicity, 56 (71.8%) participants identified as Caucasian, while 6 (7.6%) identified as African-American, 5 (6.4%) identified as Asian-American, 2 (2.6%) identified as Hispanic or Chicano, 9 (11.5%) selected “other” to represent their ethnicities, and 1 participant did not answer the ethnicity item. Thirty-four (43.0%) participants reported being single, while 24 (30.4%) and 21 (26.6%) participants reported being in a committed relationship or dating, respectively. Table 1 provides additional demographic information for the entire sample and for GSA members and nonmembers.

Instrumentation

Participants completed an online survey that contained standardized measures of school (e.g., school belonging and school victimization), mental health (e.g., depression and symptoms of general psychological distress), and alcohol use outcomes. The survey contained an extensive demographic and developmental history questionnaire, and measures of outness and childhood trauma. Participants were recruited from 59 college/university LGBT student organizations via a recruitment e-mail that was sent to faculty advisors and/or student leaders of such organizations.

Demographic questions included age, gender, ethnicity, relationship status, sexual orientation, years of education, and the population of the city or town where participants’ high schools were located. Developmental items asked age-specific questions regarding sexual orientation and gender identity milestones. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. “At what age did you first question whether you might be gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender?”
2. “At what age did you first notice a sexual attraction to someone of the same sex?”
3. “At what age did you first think of yourself as gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender?”
4. “At what age did you first tell someone that you were gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender?”
5. “At what age did you first have a romantic relationship with someone of the same sex?”

For each question, participants had the option to answer with “does not apply” if they had never had the experience.

Participants were also asked, “Did you consider yourself to be ‘out’ to your high school?” and each participant also completed a modified version of Mohr and Fassinger’s (2000) Outness Inventory ($\alpha = .876$ with the present sample) to measure outness during the senior year of high school. Participants reported their outness in relation to the following:
TABLE 1 Demographic and Identity Development Characteristics of Participants and Comparisons of GSA Members and Nonmembers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categorical Variables</th>
<th>Overall sample (N = 79)</th>
<th>Members (N = 39)</th>
<th>Nonmembers (N = 40)</th>
<th>Member and nonmember comparisons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td>χ²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>52 (65.8)</td>
<td>28 (71.8)</td>
<td>24 (60.0)</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21 (26.6)</td>
<td>9 (20.5)</td>
<td>12 (30.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender/Other</td>
<td>6 (7.6)</td>
<td>2 (5.1)</td>
<td>4 (10.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>56 (71.8)</td>
<td>27 (69.2)</td>
<td>29 (74.4)</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Caucasian</td>
<td>22 (28.2)</td>
<td>12 (30.8)</td>
<td>10 (25.6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Caucasian Ethnicities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>6 (7.6)</td>
<td>4 (10.3)</td>
<td>2 (5.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>5 (6.4)</td>
<td>2 (5.1)</td>
<td>3 (7.7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Chicano</td>
<td>2 (2.6)</td>
<td>1 (2.6)</td>
<td>1 (2.6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9 (11.5)</td>
<td>5 (12.8)</td>
<td>4 (10.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>24 (30.4)</td>
<td>6 (15.4)</td>
<td>18 (45.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married/Committed</td>
<td>21 (26.6)</td>
<td>16 (41.0)</td>
<td>5 (12.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>34 (43.0)</td>
<td>17 (43.6)</td>
<td>17 (42.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 10,000</td>
<td>12 (15.4)</td>
<td>7 (17.9)</td>
<td>5 (12.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000–49,999</td>
<td>31 (39.7)</td>
<td>15 (38.5)</td>
<td>16 (41.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000–250,000</td>
<td>21 (26.9)</td>
<td>12 (30.8)</td>
<td>9 (23.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 250,000</td>
<td>14 (18.0)</td>
<td>5 (12.8)</td>
<td>9 (23.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Years</td>
<td>13 (16.5)</td>
<td>3 (7.7)</td>
<td>10 (25.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Years</td>
<td>26 (32.9)</td>
<td>16 (41.0)</td>
<td>10 (25.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Years</td>
<td>30 (38.0)</td>
<td>16 (41.0)</td>
<td>14 (35.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Years</td>
<td>10 (12.7)</td>
<td>4 (10.3)</td>
<td>6 (15.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continuous Variables</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>t statistic</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>19.06 (0.75)</td>
<td>19.18 (0.76)</td>
<td>18.95 (0.75)</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>.180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>5.28 (1.37)</td>
<td>5.05 (1.36)</td>
<td>5.50 (1.38)</td>
<td>−1.46</td>
<td>.149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (first questioning)</td>
<td>12.76 (2.63)</td>
<td>12.56 (2.85)</td>
<td>12.95 (2.42)</td>
<td>−0.65</td>
<td>.517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (first attraction)</td>
<td>12.22 (2.99)</td>
<td>12.26 (3.07)</td>
<td>12.18 (2.96)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>.905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (first identify)</td>
<td>15.22 (2.27)</td>
<td>14.72 (2.45)</td>
<td>15.70 (2.00)</td>
<td>−1.95</td>
<td>.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (first disclosure)</td>
<td>15.74 (1.91)</td>
<td>15.29 (1.81)</td>
<td>16.18 (1.92)</td>
<td>−2.09</td>
<td>.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (first relationship)</td>
<td>16.59 (1.65)</td>
<td>16.26 (1.44)</td>
<td>17.00 (1.81)</td>
<td>−1.83</td>
<td>.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outness Score (high school)</td>
<td>23.35 (13.57)</td>
<td>26.92 (13.16)</td>
<td>19.87 (13.21)</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Population refers to the population of the city or town where the participant attended high school for the longest period of time. Age of first questioning refers to the age participants first questioned whether they might be LGBT. Age of first attraction refers to the age at which participants first noticed having same-sex attraction. Age of first identify refers to the age at which participants first identified as LGBT. Age of first disclosure is the age at which participants first disclosed their LGBT status to another person. Age of first relationship refers to the age of participants’ first same-sex romantic relationship. Outness score refers to participants’ total level of outness for their senior year of high school.
• parents
• siblings (brothers and sisters)
• extended family members
• heterosexual friends at school
• coworkers
• religious community members
• new heterosexual acquaintances
• teachers
• peers, but not necessarily friends, at school.

A 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating a greater degree of outness, was used, along with the option for participants to answer with “does not apply.”

Participants were asked to think about the high school that they attended for the longest period of time. They were then asked, “Did this high school have a gay-straight student alliance or some type of a gay or gay-straight student support group?” All participants who indicated that they attended a high school with a GSA were then asked, “Were you a member of this group?” A forced choice (i.e., yes/no) answer option was provided for these two questions. All participants were asked to respond to the following prompt: “If you attended a high school with a gay-straight alliance, please tell us about your experiences.” Participants who selected “no” when asked if they were a GSA member were also asked, “Why weren’t you a member of this group?”

Analytic Strategy
An inductive thematic coding and analysis process (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to examine participants’ perspectives of their high school GSAs. An advanced psychology undergraduate student, who had completed two semesters of supervised research, and a third-year clinical psychology graduate student read the responses to the two open-ended questions. These two individuals served as code developers. They were asked to first independently read all of the responses to one item, mentally noting themes that were present in the responses without taking notes, in order to become familiar with the data. They were then instructed to reread the responses and begin the process of developing a coding schematic that they felt would best capture the themes present in the responses. The two code developers met to discuss their coding schematics. They integrated their ideas and developed a single coding system and then met with a clinical psychology faculty member to review the responses and their proposed coding system.

The code developers were encouraged to consider Ryan and Bernard’s (2000) suggestions for code developing, which include providing a
description of each code, inclusion criteria, and examples. The final coding system included a description and examples of each code; examples were generated by the research team and not from the participants’ responses. The research team consisted of two graduate student coders, two undergraduate student coders, and a faculty member of the psychology department. Coder 1 was a fifth-year clinical psychology graduate student. Coder 2 was a third-year school psychology graduate student. Coders 3 and 4 were advanced undergraduate research assistants, who had completed 2.5 and 3.5 semesters of supervised LGBT-related research, respectively. In addition, both Coder 3 and Coder 4 had completed two undergraduate psychology research methods courses, psychological statistics, and other course work for psychology majors. To assess reliability, kappa coefficients were calculated to provide a measure of agreement between coders. Kappa measures agreement at a level beyond what would be expected by chance. Cicchetti (1994) provides the following guidelines for interpreting kappa: below .40 (poor); .40–.59 (fair); .60–.74 (good); and .75–1.0 (excellent). Table 1 provides demographic information and comparisons (i.e., independent samples t-tests and chi-square tests for association were calculated for continuous and categorical variables, respectively) of GSA members and nonmembers based on the forced choice assessment of membership. For all analyses, \( p < .05 \) was the established level of significance.

RESULTS

The results indicate that GSA members reported a significantly earlier age of first disclosure as LGBT. In addition, participants’ reported ages of first identification as LGBT approached significance (\( p = .054 \)), as did the age of their first same-sex, romantic relationship (\( p = .073 \)). Significant differences were not observed in relation to participants’ reported ages of first questioning their LGBT statuses and ages of first recognition of having same-sex attractions. Next, GSA members reported significantly higher scores of outness for their senior year of high school, relative to nonmembers. In addition, GSA membership was significantly associated with being “out” to one’s high school (\( \chi^2 = 9.223, df (1), p = .002 \)). Specifically, 64.1% (\( N = 25 \)) of GSA members and 30.0% (\( N = 12 \)) of nonmembers considered themselves “out” to their schools.

Reasons for GSA Non-Membership

CODING SYSTEM

A total of five themes, based explicitly on responses from 39 of the 40 self-identified GSA nonmembers, were identified to explain why participants were not members of their schools’ GSAs:
1. **Theme 1.** Lack of interest, appeal, or awareness of the GSA
2. **Theme 2.** Lack of time or time conflict
3. **Theme 3.** Not out (generally stated) or unaware of sexual orientation
4. **Theme 4.** Fear
5. **Theme 5.** GSA inactive or disorganized

Seventy-five percent agreement on the part of the coders (3 out of 4) had to be reached in order for a theme to be considered “present” in a response. Excellent agreement among the coders was evident (kappa in parentheses): Coders 1 & 2 (.91), 1 & 3 (.87), 1 & 4 (.75), 2 & 3 (.94), 2 & 4 (.77), and 3 & 4 (.76). The coding system allowed for single and dual theme coding, meaning that more than one theme could be coded within a given response (triple and quadruple coding was permitted, but never occurred).

**Coding results: Descriptive information and frequencies.** Thirty-nine out of 40 nonmembers provided responses to the open-ended item regarding GSA non-membership. Themes 1–5 were identified in the responses 11, 7, 13, 9, and 5 times, respectively. The only theme that reliably co-occurred with others was Theme 3; it occurred once in conjunction with Theme 2 and four times in conjunction with Theme 4.

**Experiences and Perspectives Involving High Schools with GSAs**

**Coding System**

The following coding system was used to analyze participants’ responses to the prompt, “If you attended a high school with a GSA, please tell us about your experiences.” First, the responses were reviewed to identify two theme components indicative of non-membership: (1) fears of being outed, stigmatized, discriminated against, or victimized; or (2) a lack of awareness of one’s LGBT identity while in high school. When a response indicated non-membership and neither component was present, the response was coded as general non-membership. Excellent agreement among the coders was evident for this process: Coders 1 & 2 (.84), 1 & 3 (.83), 1 & 4 (.92), 2 & 3 (.76), 2 & 4 (.84), and 3 & 4 (.92).

If a response contained a theme component indicative of non-membership and went on to describe GSA-related experiences or perspectives, it was then included in a second round of coding, along with the responses of GSA members. In the second round of coding, the responses were assigned to one of three categories: (1) affect, experiences, or views that reflected positively on the GSA; (2) affect, experiences, or views that reflected positively and negatively (mixed) on the GSA or provided information that was purely descriptive and reflective of neutrality on the part of the participant; and (3) affect, experiences, or views that portrayed the GSA.
negatively. Although participants’ responses existed on an affective dimension from negative to positive, a categorical classification method was necessary in order to examine whether certain characteristics of GSAs are associated with GSA-related perceptions of LGBT young adults. Good agreement was obtained for Coders 1 and 2 (kappa = .74). Agreement for all other combinations of coders was poor (kappa < .40), suggesting that Coders 3 and 4 were unreliable. To minimize this threat to reliability, the assignment of responses was based on coding data from Coders 1 and 2. Agreement between the two coders was obtained for 51 of 56 responses.

The remaining 51 responses were then coded for the presence or absence of 5 theme components:

1. GSA active or successful;
2. GSA new or just starting;
3. GSA small or lacking diversity;
4. GSA activity restricted; and
5. GSA inactive, unsafe, or unsuccessful.

Good to excellent agreement among the coders was evident: Coders 1 & 2 (.81), 1 & 3 (.76), 1 & 4 (.82), 2 & 3 (.74), 2 & 4 (.70), and 3 & 4 (.68). Again, 75% agreement on the part of the coders (3 out of 4) had to be reached in order for a theme component to be counted as present in a response.

Coding results: Descriptive information and frequencies. Thirty-eight members and 24 nonmembers responded to the prompt. Nine responses were coded as general non-membership. Fear of being outed, stigmatized, discriminated against, or victimized was identified in six responses, and a lack of awareness of one’s LGBT identity was identified in two responses. Six non-membership responses were not considered for further analysis because they did not contain GSA-specific information.

A total of 10, 20, and 21 responses were coded as positive, mixed/neutral, and negative, respectively. The most common theme component identified was GSA inactive, unsafe, or unsuccessful. This component was identified in 21 responses. The next most common theme component, which was identified in 17 responses, was GSA active or successful. As a theme component, GSA small or homogenous with respect to sexual diversity was identified in 13 responses. The components GSA new and GSA activity restricted were identified eight and six times, respectively.

Integration of Qualitative Findings

The results of our analyses are integrated using three frames of reference depicted in Figure 1. The first two frames of reference highlight reasons
FIGURE 1 Integrated model of qualitative results depicting LGBT youths’ experiences attending high schools with GSAs. Note. Parenthetical numbers indicate the frequency of a given theme or theme component.

for GSA non-membership in the context of LGBT identity development and minority stressors. The third frame of reference identifies components of GSAs that are associated with positive, mixed/neutral, and negative GSA-related experiences and perceptions.

FRAME 1

The first frame views GSA non-membership as a result of personal reasons that are distal to participants’ LGBT identity, as demonstrated by a 19-year-old, lesbian, female who stated, “I had a lot of responsibilities at home, my mom was a single parent, so I helped her raise my little brothers.” This response highlights how LGBT youths, like heterosexual youths, may not have time to participate in GSA-related activities as a result of other obligations. In this case, non-membership appears unrelated to sexual orientation; rather, gender, economic, and/or perhaps even cultural factors may have been associated with GSA non-membership. A similar line of reasoning appears in the response of an 18-year-old lesbian who wrote the following:
[The GSA] met at the same time as a club I was on exec board for, but I was friends with a lot of members and knew the advisor and helped out with events they held such as Day of Silence.

This response highlights how youths can be affiliated with and supportive of GSAs, while also not identifying as a member. It also highlights how GSA-initiated schoolwide events can provide LGBT students and allies who do not consider themselves GSA members an opportunity to increase their level of school engagement.

The next response, provided by a 20-year-old, bisexual, female participant, suggests that fluidity in identification may contribute to GSA non-membership:

I was involved in too many organizations at the time. In sixth grade, I thought I was bisexual and was talked out of it. I considered myself a straight throughout high school. I did not begin to question my sexual orientation until partway through my freshman year of college.

In this instance, the participant’s reasoning for non-membership is clearly associated with her involvement in a number of other organizations. In addition, her non-membership appears to be associated with her sexual orientation, but the conflicting information in the response (i.e., when she first questioned her bisexuality and when she first thought of herself as bisexual) creates ambiguity in understanding the connection between non-membership and this aspect of her identity. The response of another 20-year-old, bisexual, female, who stated, “I had not yet realized that I was bisexual, and I was involved in other clubs” clearly connects a lack of awareness regarding her bisexual identity with GSA non-membership. Taken together, these two responses illustrate the potential for a continuum of reasons for GSA non-membership to exist. Frame 1 exists at one end of the continuum where reasons for non-membership are unrelated or distal to one’s LGBT status. Frame 2 exists at the other end, where reasons for non-membership are closely related or proximal to LGBT status.

Frame 2

Responses of this nature often associate non-membership with minority stress, LGBT identification, and/or identity development. The following response from an 18-year-old, gay, male highlights how the interaction of fear and concealment can result in non-membership:

I did not want to associate with things that were blatantly gay. Although (I think) it was quite obvious that I was gay throughout high school, I did
not want people to know that I was gay because I was afraid it would somehow get back to my parents.

While the participant acknowledges that others might have recognized (assumed) he was gay, efforts to conceal this information from others out of fear influenced his decision to avoid the GSA. Concealment and fear are also exemplified in the statement of a gay 19-year-old who selected the “other” option for gender, who said, “I didn’t join because, like most gay people at my school, I was terrified that someone might find out I was gay.”

Concealment represents one of four minority stress processes associated with mental health outcomes (Meyer, 2003). For the first participant, the fear of being outed to his parents appears salient, and may suggest that the young man expects his parents to respond negatively. Thus a second minority stress process (i.e., expecting rejection) may contribute to GSA non-membership. Although this young man does not specify the exact driving force behind his fear, other participants’ responses clearly implicate additional minority stress processes as the source of their fear. For example, a 20-year-old, lesbian participant said,

In this instance, Meyer’s minority stress process of expecting rejection is articulated. This also appears to be the case of a 20-year-old, gay male who cited, “fear of discrimination from my straight ‘friends,’” as his reason for non-membership. Both participants avoid the GSA because they are afraid of being harassed or discriminated against by friends, which clearly links GSA non-membership to expectations of rejection.

What is less clear is whether actually experiencing prejudice events (i.e., experiencing discrimination or violence), which reflects another minority stress process, is related to GSA non-membership. Clear-cut examples of participants linking this minority stress process to non-membership did not exist in the data. However, a 20-year-old lesbian who reported that she was not a GSA member, stated, “I participated in the Day of Silence every year. One year, a group of kids made some derogatory comments but that was the only negative response I encountered.” The participant describes a prejudice event but it is unclear whether this event is associated with her non-membership. In addition, overt manifestations of internalized homophobia were not evident in the data, which is not surprising given the insidious nature of this process (Meyer & Dean, 1998).

In sum, responses from Frame 2 suggest that two minority stress processes (i.e., expecting rejection and concealment) are associated with GSA
non-membership. As depicted in the bottom left oval in Figure 1, only five participants cited GSA-specific characteristics (e.g., a lack of organization or inactivity) as their reason for non-membership. Although these are reasons for non-membership, they are also characteristics specific to GSAs and thus are captured by the third frame of reference.

FRAME 3

The third frame captures LGBT youths’ experiences with and perceptions of high school GSAs. From this perspective, characteristics of a given GSA, identified as theme components in the data, are associated with positive, mixed/neutral, and negative GSA-related experiences and perceptions. The first and most salient GSA characteristic is that of activity level. Generally speaking, active GSAs are associated with positive experiences and perceptions, while inactive GSAs are associated with negative experiences and perceptions. For example, a 19-year-old, gay male stated:

They didn’t do much of anything. The advocacy just wasn’t there. In fact, I don’t know if the GSA at my school did anything more than the Day of Silence, and even that was a half-hearted effort. There was only one token lesbian in the club anyways; nobody else was out. The rest were straight allies.

For this participant, perceptions regarding the activity level of the GSA, the inability of the GSA to successfully organize schoolwide events, and the lack of diversity among GSA members are associated with a negative perception of the GSA.

Conversely, the following response from a 19-year-old lesbian highlights how a safe and active GSA promotes positive GSA-related experiences and perceptions:

My GSA was pretty small.... However, it was a really great safe space that everybody could be open in. I never officially came out to the members who weren’t my friends, but I never felt the need to. I also helped to organize my high school’s first Day of Silence, in which over 100 people participated (out of an [sic] 1000 person school). The GSA helped coordinate this and it was extremely successful.

Despite the small size of the GSA, positive perceptions and experiences emerge because the GSA provides a safe space within the school, while also having the organizational capacity to engage the broader student population. Safety and activity level emerge again to shape the experiences and perceptions of a 20-year-old lesbian, who said the following:
It was nice that we had a GSA, but I didn’t attend regularly because sometimes I felt uncomfortable there. Many of the people were nice, and I made a few friends there, but the regular attendees were rude to me sometimes. Some of the events were fun, but there were not enough events organized.

Both positive and negative sentiments are apparent in the response; yet because the GSA was not a place where the participant felt safe, her level of connectedness to and engagement in the club was lessened. Even in cases where a participant’s response was purely descriptive and reflective of neutrality, the activity level theme component emerged. For example, an 18-year-old gay male said,

We had meetings a little less than once a week and we talked about coming out or activities within the community that were queer related. We had a gay prom (being gender/sexual-orientation all-encompassing).

Activity level and organizational quality appear especially important to LGBT youths who want to improve the climate for LGBT youths in their schools and communities. For example, a 19-year-old, bisexual female described the GSA at her school as “too touchy-feely and lazy for me. I wanted to do social justice work, but nobody seemed to have enough drive.” An 18-year-old, bisexual female shared her experience attending a high school with a GSA by writing:

It was awesome. I was on the GLSEN national student leadership team, so we did everything from revamp the health curriculum at a private school to lobby the state legislature to have a seven-school rally to build coalition to change the nondiscrimination policy. When I wasn’t in charge of it we did a few things like tye dye [sic] t-shirts, do the Day of Silence (poorly organized), and mostly just hung out occasionally…. It wasn’t very helpful to anyone.

In this case, the positive portrayal of the GSA is the result of the GSA being highly active, organized, and engaged in the promotion of social justice. When the activity level, organizational quality, and emphasis on social justice decreases, the young woman’s perception of the GSA turns more negative.

At the same time, other youths may have different needs that can be met by the GSA, and overemphasizing social justice activities at the expense of having the GSA provide a safe environment where these youths can feel affirmed and supported may result in negative perceptions. This is exemplified in the following response from an 18-year-old lesbian:

I was active in GSA in high school until I started dating another girl. After this I wasn’t out to myself but I was out in my high school, and attending
GSA made me incredibly uncomfortable because it forced me to label myself and to be political about my sexuality. I remember one meeting I attended where I literally began shaking and had to leave. Going to GSA, something that I had been incredibly proud of before, actually made me cry!

Collectively, these responses highlight the importance of ensuring that GSAs provide both a supportive, inclusive, and affirming environment, and opportunities to organize events that promote social justice and civic engagement.

Additional characteristics of GSAs that may impact LGBT youths’ experiences with and perceptions of GSAs include the length of time the GSA has been established, the size and/or diversity represented among GSA members, and restrictions that are placed on the GSA. The following response from a 20-year-old lesbian includes all three of these characteristics:

I founded the GSA at my school. We were not allowed to use the words, “gay,” “queer,” or “rainbow” in our advertising, so we were called Iris after the god of the rainbow. Only one other person routinely showed up to meetings, including movie screenings and discussion groups. Our Ally Week was a success, but that was our only achievement in the restrictive environment.

The restrictions placed on the GSA by the school impacted this young woman’s experiences with and perception of the GSA. Other responses suggest that newly established GSAs may face more restrictions, which in turn may limit the number and diversity of members, thus threatening the longevity of the GSA. For example, a 20-year-old lesbian stated:

I helped start a very controversial GSA at my small town high school. We had a day of tolerance to which parents called to excuse their children from the day, so as not to “learn to be a fag.” Our GSA had to meet fairly anonymously... it all had to be kept under wraps for safety. We encouraged participation in Day of Silence, which one zealot Baptist preacher would go at lengths to stop. Including “spirit warriors” that stood outside the school condemning children.

Community opposition to the GSA clearly resulted in certain restrictions being placed on the GSA. Despite this opposition, the GSA was able to organize events, yet the longevity of the GSA may be compromised due to the community factors at play. In sum, responses from Frame 3 implicate GSA activity level, organizational quality, safety, size, and characteristics of the school and broader community in shaping LGBT youths’ experiences with and perceptions of GSAs.
DISCUSSION

Previous qualitative research has investigated the experiences of GSA members (Lee, 2002) and the reasoning behind LGBT youths' decisions to join GSAs (Sweat, 2004). The present study adds to the literature by examining LGBT young adults’ (ages 18–20) reasons for not joining high school GSAs, and by identifying components of GSAs that contribute to positive and negative GSA-related experiences and perceptions. The results suggest that LGBT identity development and minority stress processes may influence decisions to join GSAs, while GSA activity level is likely to influence LGBT youths' GSA-related perceptions and experiences.

First, the findings appear consistent with Savin-Williams' (2001) writings regarding differential developmental trajectories. Specifically, the first and second frames of reference highlight the variability that exists among LGBT youths with respect to their interests, activities, and identity development. Reasons for non-membership from Frame 1 highlight how some LGBT youths simply choose not to join GSAs because, like their heterosexual peers, they have other competing interests and responsibilities. In addition, the timing or trajectories of LGBT identity development appears to play a role in whether or not LGBT youths join GSAs. For example, a young woman who identifies as bisexual in eighth grade and as heterosexual in grades 9–12 may decide not to participate in a high school GSA because she identifies as heterosexual. Finally, the results suggest that GSA members may meet identity development milestones that are associated with coming out at younger ages relative to GSA nonmembers, a finding that again appears consistent with a differential developmental trajectories perspective.

The results also suggest that Meyer's (2003) minority stress processes may have differential effects on GSA membership-related decisions. Previous research indicates that GSA members cite experiencing prejudice events as a motivating factor for membership (Sweat, 2004), while lower levels of concealment may be associated with increased risk for experiencing prejudice events in the forms of bullying and victimization (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009). In this study, participants did not associate actually experiencing prejudice events with GSA non-membership, and the participants who considered themselves GSA members were generally more out than nonmembers. At the same time, the minority stress processes of expecting to experience prejudice events and concealment were clearly linked to GSA non-membership.

The third frame of reference highlights certain qualities or aspects of GSAs that are associated with GSA-related experiences and perceptions. Positive GSA-related experiences appear associated with GSA activity level. Specifically, GSAs that are well organized, that hold regular meetings, and that host events tended to elicit positive views and affect from participants. Mixed/neutral GSA-related experiences are associated with active and
inactive characteristics, which might suggest that a GSA holds regular meet-
ings, but lacks the organizational capacity to execute supportive, social, or
social justice events. This might be common among GSAs that are new, small,
lacking in diversity, or restricted due to administrative, teacher/staff, or com-
community opposition. Negative GSA-related experiences appear associated with
GSAs that are disorganized, inactive, or unsafe.

Limitations
Although the sample size was generally larger than that of other qualitative
investigations of GSAs, it was small enough that a lack of power limited
our ability to examine whether the experiences of men and women differed
in relation to GSAs. Furthermore, our methodology prevented additional
exploration into participant responses. This limited the depth of our data,
yet homogeneity in participant characteristics and responses was minimized,
and with one exception, good to excellent reliability was obtained. For the
positive, mixed/neutral, and negative categorizations, the kappa coefficients
involving Coders 3 and 4 were admittedly low and constituted a threat
to reliability. However, Coders 1 and 2 were in agreement on 51 of the
56 response categorizations. To protect reliability, this categorization was
derived from Coders 1 and 2.

Implications and Future Directions
Future research should investigate the temporal relationship between GSA
membership and coming-out processes, and also evaluate whether experi-
encing higher levels of prejudice events and lower levels of concealment pre-
dicts GSA membership and whether the inverse predicts non-membership.
Based on these findings, it would be expected that higher levels of an-
ticipated rejection (from family and peers) upon disclosure of one’s LGBT
status results in greater concealment and GSA non-membership, while lower
levels of anticipated rejection results in less concealment and GSA mem-
bership. Furthermore, examining the potential mediating role of internalized
homophobia in these relationships, which if detected would suggest that
similar mechanisms exist to produce anxiety, depression, psychological dis-
tress (Feinstein, Goldfried, & Davila, 2012; Willoughby et al., 2010) and GSA
non-membership, is warranted.

Next, perceptions of GSA success in promoting school safety are associ-
ated with favorable health and educational outcomes (Toomey et al., 2011).
Future research would be enhanced if a psychometrically sound measure
were developed to assess multiple facets of GSAs that show promise in pre-
dicting academic and health outcomes. Results of the present study suggest
that the following facets of GSAs be considered:
• administrator, community, and teacher support for the GSA
• student support for and participation in GSA events
• frequency of GSA events
• GSA organization
• GSA size and member diversity
• GSA longevity

Finally, the results of our study have practical implications for GSA advisors and student leaders. To promote GSA membership and positive GSA-related perceptions, the results indicate that advisors and student leaders should utilize GSA-related programming resources, many of which are provided by GLSEN, the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, and by state/national Safe Schools Coalitions. For example, GLSEN (2012) provides an eight-part guide that can be used to help GSAs become or remain active within a given school, and the Gay-Straight Alliance Network (2012) provides resources for planning social justice events (e.g., Transgender Day of Remembrance; LGBT History Month) and activities that are more social in nature (e.g., movie nights, picnics, and LGBT dances). In addition, GSA advisors and student leaders may find that social networking can provide opportunities for GSAs to exchange ideas and plan events that bring GSAs from multiple schools together, thereby increasing the activity level, attendance, diversity, and social support systems of GSAs. Additional research is needed to determine whether specific facets of GSAs are associated with academic and health outcomes, and to identify barriers that prevent GSAs from promoting the health, safety, and well-being of all youths in our nation’s schools.

NOTES

1. Generally, throughout this article we use the acronym LGBT because it accurately describes the participants in our sample. As the previous research is reviewed, we use terminology that best describes the participants included in the samples under study.
2. In the Integrated Model (Figure 1), the six responses associating fear with GSA non-membership and the two responses associating a lack of awareness of one’s LGBT identity with GSA non-membership are included in the frequency counts of their respective themes in Frame 2.

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