Navigating the Network: An Exploratory Study of LGBTQIA+ Information Practices at Two Single-Sex HBCUs

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Using focus groups and interviews, this study investigates the information practices of 23 LGBTQIA+ students attending Morehouse College and Spelman College in Atlanta, GA. Responses suggest that students rely heavily on peer support and word of mouth for information seeking and sharing. Social media seems to play a large role in sharing information on campus, even for students who are not active on social media platforms. And students' personalities (such as level of extroversion) may indirectly impact the amount of information they receive. Overall, these students seemed to face the challenge of being accepted for who they were on campus, which may have negatively impacted their information exchanges.

Introduction

If academic libraries intend to provide services for their entire campus (faculty, staff, and students), they must ensure that all of their potential patrons both have access to library services and feel comfortable using them. In this vein, Lynn Silipigni Connaway embraces the concept of the library in the life of the user, encouraging academic libraries to proactively engage with their communities to understand their information needs and, in turn, shape library services: "The challenge is, first and foremost, to remember to listen. Unless we understand students' lives, we will not be able to fit within their natural information flows."[1] One "multiply marginalized"[2] group—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersexual, Asexual, and similar sexual and gender minority identifying (LGBTQIA+) people of color—is particularly susceptible to being overlooked in academic libraries: White heteronormative biases are built into the Library of Congress Classification[3] and pervade academic libraries' spaces, staffing, and reference service delivery.[4] Consequently, there is a dearth of research on this population, their information needs, and their use of academic libraries.

Accordingly, this study explores the information practices of LGBTQIA+ students attending two single-sex Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Morehouse College

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and Spelman College, to begin an investigation into areas where academic libraries could improve their services. By collecting data from students, we hope to shed light on implicit biases in campus and library services and to provide possible suggestions for improvement. Morehouse College, established as a men's college in 1867, and Spelman College, founded as a women's college in 1881, are located side by side in the Atlanta University Center (AUC), and both institutions express their missions in gendered terms—preparing "Morehouse Men" and "Spelman Women" for lifelong success. Although there are no official definitions of a Morehouse Man or Spelman Woman, documents outlining the administration's expectations of their students often refer to feelings of brotherhood and sisterhood.[5] Heteronormative labels are thus ingrained in the cultures of both campuses.

Through this study we aim to address the following three research questions:

1. How do HBCU students who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community seek out and share information related to their various experiences on campus?
2. What role does the library play in these processes?
3. How could the library provide better information services for this population?

Conversations about the LGBTQIA+ experience usually take an all-encompassing approach. The reality is that there is no monolithic, "one size fits all" experience, and we hope to avoid implying any such thing with this article. There are innumerable segments of the LGBTQIA+ community, and each has unique issues and concerns. The present research was

FIGURE 1
List of Terms

Afrekete	LGBTQIA+ student group at Spelman College.
Atlanta University Center (AUC)	A collection of four private HBCUs: Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse College, Spelman College, and the Interdenominational Theological Center.
Brother/Sister Program	Each incoming freshman at Morehouse and Spelman is paired with a student from the other college. That is, a student at Morehouse will be assigned a student at Spelman as his "Spelman Sister," and she would refer to him as her "Morehouse Brother."
Clark Atlanta University (CAU)	A coeducational HBCU formed in 1988 through the consolidation of Clark College (founded in 1869) and Atlanta University (founded in 1865).
Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)	According to the Higher Education Act of 1965, "any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association."[8]
Morehouse College	A private, historically Black, liberal arts men's college founded in 1867.
New Student Orientation (NSO)	A week of orientation activities for every incoming AUC student held in August before the start of the fall semester.
Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)	Institutions of higher education where Whites account for 50 percent or greater of the student enrollment.
Robert W. Woodruff Library	Academic library that serves the member institutions of the Atlanta University Center.
Safe Space/ Morehouse Adodi	The LGBTQIA+ student group at Morehouse College was first named Safe Space. It was renamed Morehouse Adodi in the fall semester of 2019.
Spelman College	A private, historically Black, liberal arts women's college founded in 1881.

designed as an exploratory study of information practices that might be helpful to libraries. Both academic and public libraries have sought ways to meet the needs of their patrons, but according to Bruce Allen Carter, there is a lack of research on the needs of LGBTQIA+ Black college students; the literature largely focuses on students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).[6]

It will be helpful to define our terms before proceeding. Merrill Perlman provides a succinct analysis of capitalization for racial terms; we consider capitalizing "Black" and "White" as analogous to capitalizing "African American" and "Caucasian."[7] In our focus groups and interviews, students used the term "Black" almost exclusively, which is why we will use Black instead of African American. And while many abbreviations have been used to refer to sexual and gender minorities, we have settled on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and the plus sign (LGBTQIA+) to represent all sexual and gender orientations outside of cisgender heterosexuals. In certain situations, to help avoid verbosity, "queer" will be used as a single term for students identifying as LGBTQIA+.

Figure 1 provides a summary of important keywords, terms, and abbreviations used throughout this article for the reader's reference.

Literature Review

Our research focuses on the ways LGBTQIA+ students at Morehouse College and Spelman College seek out and share information about their experiences on campus, which aligns with the concept of information practices as described by Vanessa Lynn Kitzie.[9] We are interested in how these students seek out and find support from their peers and institutions and what channels they use to communicate. Kitzie, quoting Brenda Dervin,[10] describes information practices as "enactments of interactions between persons, structures, realities, and information within a given moment in time-space." Kitzie contends that, when studying the LGTBQIA+ population, it is important to investigate "the social and cultural strategies that shape their resultant information practices."[11] Accordingly, participants' identities cannot be separated from the strategies they use. Reijo Savolainen states that "the concept of [information] practice shifts the focus away from the behavior, action, motives, and skills of monological individuals."[12] Thus, one key aspect of studying information practices relevant to this research is seeing people "as members of various groups and communities that constitute the context of their mundane activities."[13]

An extensive search revealed no literature regarding Black LGBTQIA+ individuals and academic libraries at either Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) or Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). However, there have been studies on providing library services to LGBTQIA+ populations that should be noted here. Some literature focuses on providing services from a "queer perspective" and argues that library workers should be LGBTQIA+ activists in their libraries and on their campuses: Mehra and Braquet and Drabinski propose that LIS professionals move from seeing themselves as merely neutral providers of information to active social change agents.[14] Others have surveyed LGBTQIA+ students to determine information needs from their perspectives. Pascal Lupien emphasized the importance of having an updated collection, noted patrons' lack of awareness of resources already available in the library, and encouraged libraries to present a welcoming and nonjudgmental environment so students feel comfortable asking for help.[15] Melissa Adler came to a similar conclusion, that "librarians who strive to offer a strong LGBTIQ collection and services can have a tremendous impact on library users' experiences."[16] Kitzie also examined the information

practices of people with LGBTQIA+ identities and emphasized the importance of librarians being aware of the LGBTQIA+ community's "experiential and embodied knowledge" when serving and providing resources, as well as being willing to look outside of formal information sources.[17] Aubri Drake and Arlene Bielefield surveyed adults who identified as transgender, concluding that they have different accommodation needs from all LGBQTQIA+ individuals.[18] These studies speak to the ways libraries can improve their services for LGBTQIA+ patrons, which informs the approach to our third research question on this topic.

Broadly speaking, there remains a dearth of literature on HBCU academic libraries and the needs of their students. While a few articles on HBCU libraries have focused on the digital divide and online communications,[19] none surveyed the library from the students' perspective. Irene Owens offers a review of the library literature regarding HBCUs, but most of the studies focused on collections, programs and services, disparity among libraries, and staff.[20] There is no mention of literature assessing students' needs from their viewpoint, something we propose to partially address by exploring how LGBTQIA+ HBCU students find information support.

There is also a specific need for HBCUs to provide more support for their LGBTQIA+ students at an institutional level. One survey discovered that, out of 99 HBCUs, only 21 have LGBTQIA+ student organizations.[21] Several articles address the historically conservative stance most HBCUs take toward issues of LGBTQIA+ students and the need for more student support for that population; these studies cite the institutions' Christian legacies, the perception of homophobia in the Black community, and strong commitments to traditions as some of the reasons for the resistance to change.[22]

Methodology

We used focus groups and individual in-depth interviews with a total of 23 LGBTQIA+ students from Morehouse College and Spelman College to gather qualitative data for this exploratory study. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at both Morehouse College and Spelman College, who also both gave permission for us to deposit anonymized transcripts from this research in the AUC Woodruff Library's institutional repository.[23] Before providing quotes in this article and posting the transcripts online, we cleaned the data of identifying information, including names, roles in organizations, and specific locations, such as students' dorms. These research practices were told to all participants before their participation, and all participants signed informed consent forms that detailed these practices as well. All participation was completely voluntary, and participants could withdraw from the study and ask that their responses be withdrawn at any time.

We hired two student assistants from the LGBTQIA+ student community, one from Morehouse and one from Spelman, to help recruit participants and conduct the focus groups and interviews. The choice to ask student assistants to lead focus groups and interviews was made with the intention of avoiding any potential bias of librarians asking students questions about library services: we are working to improve library services that we provide to students, but in doing so we are asking those students to critique our work. Students may be uncomfortable providing criticisms of library services directly to librarians and may simply say what they think we want to hear. Additionally, since we are essentially outsiders to the LGBTQIA+ student population, there was a concern that students may feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences with us directly via focus groups and interviews. Using students as interviewers mitigates these potential problems.

All study participants were members of the LGBTQIA+ community. From Morehouse, participants self-identified as five gay males, one queer/questioning male, and one bisexual male. From Spelman, participants self-identified as five bisexual females, three pansexual and polyamorous females, two queer females, two lesbian females, one female demisexual, one nonbinary queer participant, one transgender queer participant, and one participant unsure/questioning. We relied on convenience and snowball sampling, asking our student research assistants and participants to spread the word, posting flyers on campus, and contacting campus faculty and staff to gather participants.

We interviewed a total of 23 students: seven in the Spelman focus group, two in the Morehouse focus group, nine Spelman interviews, and five Morehouse interviews. All students chose to participate either in a focus group or in an interview; no students participated in both. All participants were given a $20 gift card for their time.

Both focus groups were conducted in a library meeting room. The Spelman focus group lasted 60 minutes and the Morehouse session lasted 28 minutes, with the length discrepancy most likely explained by the difference in the number of participants (seven versus two, respectively). Notably, each focus group ended with participants asking the moderator to turn off the sound recording so that participants could further discuss topics that had arisen during the discussion.

For the in-depth interviews, our research assistants interviewed participants at any time and in any location on campus that was sufficiently private. Interviews from both Spelman and Morehouse ranged from 5 to 23 minutes. Five interviews lasted 10 minutes or less, and only four interviews exceeded 20 minutes. It is difficult to explain this variation in length. Some respondents were terse in their responses, and student assistants did not always ask follow-up questions during interviews.

Both research assistants completed online human subjects training, and both were trained on conducting qualitative research through mock focus group sessions with librarians who were instructed to be unruly participants. To give the students experience managing unruly focus groups, one librarian was asked to derail the conversation (by going off topic), while others were told to stay quiet or provide vague, general answers without depth.

Our focus group guide was developed based on techniques from Guest, Namey, and Mitchell.[24] We designed the focus group guide in consultation with our student research assistants, who, as members of our target research population, proofread the questions to improve their clarity. Data collected from focus groups were used to inform the construction of interview questions. We reviewed the data for overarching themes and then attempted to craft interview questions based on those themes. Our student research assistants were helpful at this stage as well, once again reviewing our questions for clarity.

Three of the five Morehouse interviews featured questions that differed partially from the other interviews due to a misunderstanding. Instead of using our final interview guide, our student assistant from Morehouse used our initial brainstorming draft of interview questions, which was a long list of ideas (36 questions, in total) that were not all exclusively focused on information practices. Our Spelman student assistant, who conducted all nine of the Spelman interviews and two of the Morehouse interviews, used the finalized set of questions (28 questions). The two sets of questions had a great deal of overlap: of the 28 finalized questions, 21 of those same questions were on the initial draft of interview questions, while an additional two questions referenced the same subjects (alumni and campus safety) in slightly different ways. The eight additional questions delivered to three of the Morehouse interviews covered

various topics that were sometimes unrelated to information practices (example: "Do you think the straight experience is different from that of the LGBTQIA+ experience on campus?"). The associated student responses that did not address our primary research questions were excluded from analysis; but, since the remaining two sets of questions had such a large overlap, we used all of the interviews we received in our analysis.

Our research design was informed by the applied thematic analysis approach defined by Guest, MacQueen, and Namey,[25] and data analysis was done via Microsoft Word. There were four stages of data analysis (see figure 2) and four final themes (see figure 3).

FIGURE 2
Stages of Data Analysis

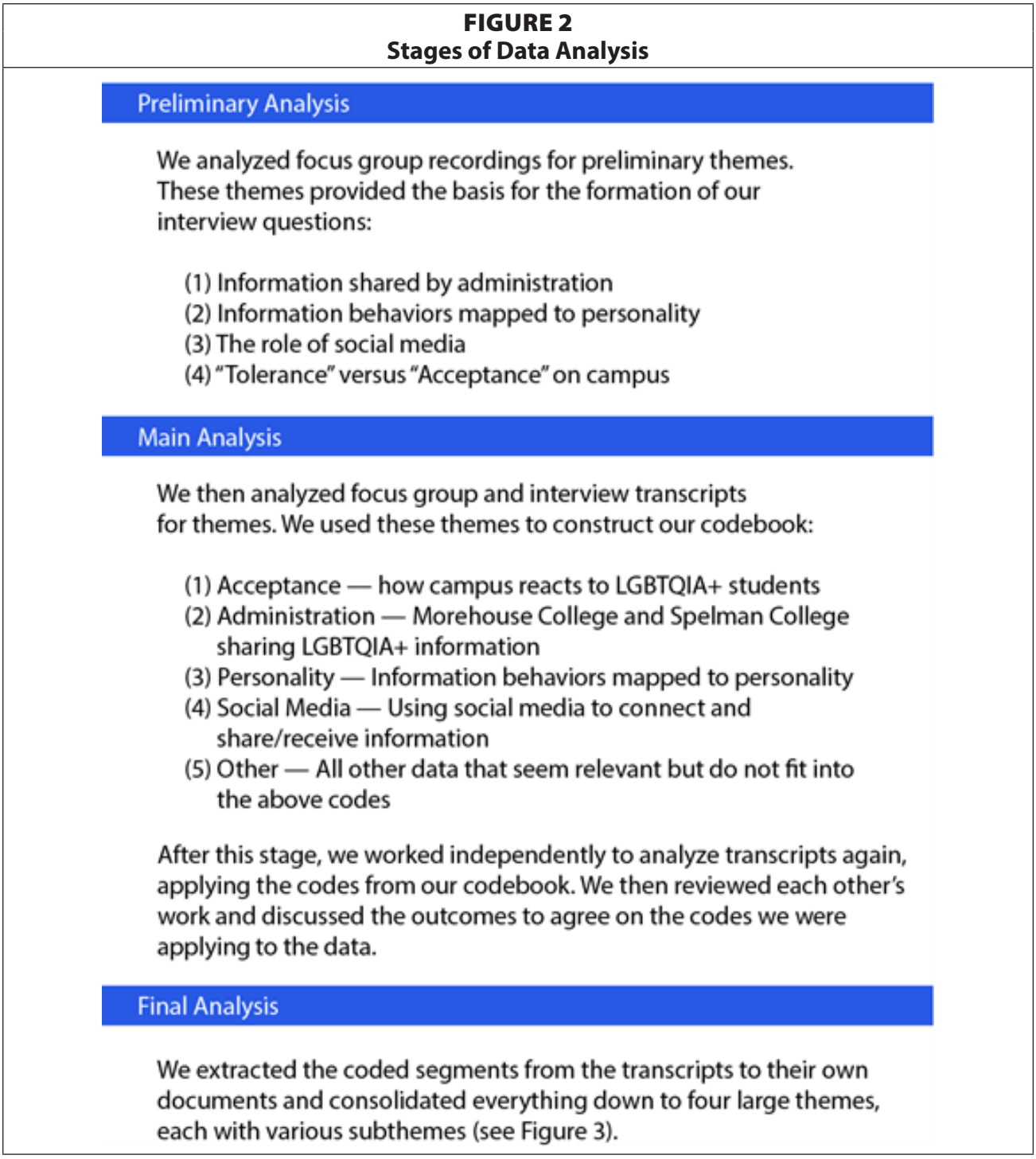

FIGURE 3
Themes and Subthemes

Acceptance

- Overall contentment with the campus experience.
- Lack of approval from the campus community, which may proclaim a "tolerance" of LGBTQIA+ students, but which may not provide an accepting, inclusive environment for them.
- Lack of approval from the Black community writ large: historical erasure, and pressure from families and alumni.
- Positive connections with other LGBTQIA+ students.

Support

- Administrative support: sharing information in emails, on flyers, and through New Student Orientation sessions.
- Lack of administrative support: a narrow focus on HIV information sharing, promoting heteronormative values.
- Great support from LGBQTIA+ student organizations.
- Great information sharing support from close peers.

Personality

- Introverts may share and receive less information due to maintaining fewer connections, but may also avoid negative interactions on campus.
- Extroverts may be more involved in activism, more outspoken, and may experience more negative interactions.

Social Media

- Among other things, social media is used for social rights campaigns, and to spread awareness of LGBTQIA+ issues.
- Many apps are being used, but GroupMe was the most popular for seeking and sharing information about college life and campus activities.
- Updates on campus harassment, violence, threats, and safety tips are spread through social media, allowing students to connect in the wake of negative experiences.

Findings

The most prevalent themes were acceptance and support from campus and personal communities, participant personality, and—perhaps most notably—social media. Each of these elements impacts the ways in which these students gathered and disseminated campus-related information, made social connections, and discussed LGBTQIA+ related topics.

Acceptance

The paramount issue was acceptance. Participants frequently acknowledged what they perceived as a lack of approval from not only their campus community, but from the wider Black community. Some of these students indicated that they have not shared their sexual identity or preferences with their families due to a fear of being ostracized or misunderstood. Further, even those who were open with their gender and sexuality indicated that they hoped the status of being an HBCU alumni would "soften the blow of queerness" for their parents. Students variably felt contentment, felt pressure to conform to gender standards, and found acceptance within the AUC LGBTQIA+ community, all of which impacted their ability to comfortably share and receive information on campus—people generally do not share as much information when they are uncomfortable.

A small contingent of students expressed contentment with their AUC experience. Interestingly, many of these students also mentioned negative incidents or encounters. For example, one Morehouse interviewee shared that "people who get on certain [student group] boards or positions feel like they have to like hide parts of who they are," whereas later, when asked what advice they would provide to incoming students, the same participant said, "Morehouse is a place where you can be comfortable in your sexuality and your queerness in general."

Others expressed a sense of pressure to conform to the ideal of the "Spelman Woman" and "Morehouse Man." For most participants, there was a clear line between being accepted versus simply being tolerated on the two campuses. As one Morehouse student put it, "you can be queer at Morehouse, but not explicitly so." A Spelman interviewee expressed a similar sentiment: "it's not nearly as LGBTQ inclusive [on campus] as they [the administration] make it sound." Further, some expressed significant concern over contradictory standards throughout the AUC. One Morehouse student discussed the differences in social interaction expectations for queer students versus non-LGBTQIA+ identifying students:

> Let's say, a party… straight people at parties. You know, they're chilling, they're having a great time, they're minding their own business. Gay people at parties are minding their own business, but when a gay person is expressing themself on the dance floor—they're twerking or whatever—then everybody has a problem with it. So yeah, it just makes the gay people uncomfortable, the queer people uncomfortable.

A Spelman student pointed out the lack of acknowledgment for the college's LGBTQIA+ history: "Spelman does not recognize how many queer people are on this campus. They don't even recognize on our Founder's Day that the college was started by lesbians. So, when you have that level of erasure there, really, you have to carve out your own place." To explain this point: Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles founded the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary in 1881, which became Spelman College in 1924.[26] Most historical sources fail to address the nature of their relationship, but Faderman describes their "romance of opposites": Packard

doted on Giles in diary entries, the two spent more than three decades together, and in 1909 Giles was buried with Packard under a single tombstone.[27]

With so many participants feeling marginalized and minimized, it is no surprise that calls for more outward acceptance from the AUC were prevalent throughout this study. This was encapsulated by a Morehouse student's statement, "I don't want to be tolerated. I want to be accepted. I want to be respected. Not because the rules tell you to, but because it's morally correct to respect me as a human being."

An overwhelming majority of students said they had not researched whether Morehouse or Spelman provided support to LGBTQIA+ students, so they entered the AUC without knowing what they would find in terms of acceptance. However, once on campus, many of these students found a much-needed connection to their LGBTQIA+ peers through various methods, including joining student groups such as Afrekete (at Spelman) and Safe Space (at Morehouse). One Spelman student shared why she felt more comfortable around her LGBTQIA+ peers:

> I feel like I connect better with people who are bisexual, because when I tell people who are straight—like girls who are straight—that I'm bisexual—kinda like when a guy tells another guy he's gay—it's like they automatically think you like them, but it's not even like that. That's why I feel like I connect with LGBTQ students, because they get me.

These networks seemed to provide not only a way to share information, but also the validation and support that members of this community may need to succeed. The face value acceptance and support provided on campus seems to be more effective when supplemented with the connections to—and interactions with—other LGBTQIA+ identifying students.

Support

As is common on college campuses, both Spelman and Morehouse administrations share information about campus events, activities, student groups, and campus safety through emails and flyers posted in public gathering areas. Several students found these methods of information sharing helpful in directing them toward LGBTQIA+ specific groups and events: "[in my] first semester [the administration] sent out some information on Afrekete and that piqued my interest, so that's where I met most of the queer community." Further, New Student Orientations (NSOs) introduced students to campus resources and services. Among those mentioned by students were Morehouse's Safe Space, Spelman's Women's Resource Center, and the Title IX office. For some students, simply having a space dedicated to their specific needs is evidence enough that their campus is an inclusive space. However, many felt these resources were the most basic of requirements for any college campus and explained that more targeted outreach and service efforts would better serve the AUC's LGBTQIA+ community.

A topic that repeatedly made an appearance throughout interviews and focus groups was the need for more unabashed support for LGBTQIA+ students from campus administration. One Morehouse student noted, "me, as a freshmen, we never got the experience, that supposed NSO meeting with everyone in that building learning about the LGBT community and expression and everything like that. No, we didn't get that." Among the suggestions concerning potential areas of improvement were promoting events in a way that is inclusive to sexual minorities, updating the curriculum to include a better focus on intersectionality, and increasing the num-

ber of events specific to the LGBTQIA+ community. As one Morehouse student said, "they don't really have any events that's like centered around us, outside of HIV testing." Another Morehouse student pointed out that a Valentine's Day event flyer portrayed a stereotypical heterosexual couple, which implied that LGBTQIA+ students were not welcome at the event.

For the Spelman focus group, the idea of having counselors on campus specific to LGBTQIA+ needs was alluring:

> *Participant 2*: We could have a counselor or something.
> *Participant 3*: You know, like lots of schools have diversity inclusion faculty, but it might focus on disabilities, but like having also one…
> *Moderator*: A counselor that is specific for LGBTQIA+ individuals?
> *Participant 3*: Right!

Overall, students acknowledged that there is some support from campus administration, but they also feel the entire AUC community would benefit from more outward expressions of administrative support for LGBTQIA+ issues.

While participating students acknowledged both support and lack of support from campus entities, there was one thing they agreed upon: the strongest support came from other members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Foremost were student groups specific to LGBTQIA+ students, Afrekete and Safe Space, as well as alumni who had participated in those groups. One Spelman student stated that Afrekete helps "you understand what's going on and, like, what's pertinent to the community here. So, it definitely keeps you in the loop." Further, a Morehouse student said these groups allow LGBTQIA+ students to "just come together and share information that happens on each of our campuses and kind of just spread awareness on, like, what's going on and the issues." Clearly, these groups are critical to increasing LGBTQIA+ students' sense of belonging, meeting others in the community, and finding and sharing information.

Outside of official groups, many students indicated that they most routinely gathered and shared information about campus life by communicating with a small group of close friends, in person or via text. Some participants were more active in sharing information with their close social group, such as the Spelman student who said:

> I guess I kind of am a maternal figure in a lot of ways, so people do come to me for advice. And especially like, you know, a little bit younger people come to me for advice. I don't see myself as like the arbiter of everything. I'm definitely not the most knowledgeable person, but I've definitely given advice and like helped people out.

Other students said they mostly receive information when they check in with their close friends. In the Spelman focus group, one participant said:

> I ended up asking other students, and that's how I find a lot of my information out. Because more students can ask more people and reach out to more and different sources of information, so I find that rarely do I ever find answers for problems on campus from people that work there.

One Morehouse student said he still checks with his resident assistant (RA) when he has questions. A Spelman student said that she frequently visited Spelman's Women's Research & Resource Center, which posted information on campus events, and "if I'm not finding out through that, I'm finding out through friends who keep their ear to ground and know more than me." She then directly recognized her role as information receiver among her contacts: "I'm not willing to go out and be like, 'Yeah, I know all these people who throw these parties,' because I don't care… I let my network kind of be that network, so they find out that stuff for me."

These examples could point to a bigger trend: information gatherers sharing with small groups of information receivers. In this kind of model, reaching the information sharers would be key to disseminating information across larger groups of students.

Personality

Student personality greatly impacted perceptions of both acceptance and support on campus. Although we did not ask any questions directly related to personality type, many participants self-identified as introverts or extroverts in their interviews. Introverts often did not detect many issues for the LGBTQIA+ community on campus. On the other end of the spectrum, participants who self-identified as extroverts commonly pointed out injustices and contradictory policies present throughout the AUC.

Participating students who identified themselves as introverts frequently reported decreased peer interactions, which seemed to impact their information-sharing and -gathering opportunities compared to those students who self-described as extroverted. Introverted students were typically less open to outwardly identifying as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community because they did not want to "let [their] sexuality define [them] as a person"; and, although they had a general awareness of queer organizations on campus, they were not active members. One Spelman transfer student said, "I didn't know that there were people like me [at Spelman] for the longest. I didn't know there were orgs on campus that were, like, suited to LGBTQ people, so it was just a lot of kind of figuring things out and playing it by ear." This could indicate that transfer students might not receive the same information that incoming freshman students do via orientation activities. Some of the introvert-identifying students reported that they share their sexual identities one-on-one with other students if they are asked but do not feel the need to broadcast their sexuality in person or on social media.

On the other side of the spectrum, many students participating in this study identified themselves as not only extroverted people, but LGBTQIA+ activists. In addition to indicating a higher quality of information sharing due to being around like-minded people, these students also commonly expressed a feeling of obligation to be outspoken about their sexual identity and to defend their LGBTQIA+ peers. One Spelman student asserted, "if you're not an activist I would question why. And if your politics are not queer-centered and you identify as a queer individual, I would also question why." According to these students, including pronouns and other LGBTQIA+ identifiers in social media profiles, sharing experiences on social media platforms, and being visibly active in queer organizations are an integral part of battling for equality and acceptance not only within the HBCU community, but within society as a whole. Several of these students believed that "you have to lead by example" and that by being open about their identity they "could be helping somebody and not even realize it." Additionally, extroverted participants regularly advocated for "putting things like their

pronouns in their bio because it just takes it out of trans people's responsibility, if everyone is doing it." Contrary to what introverted students said, many of the participants falling into this category indicated that their sexuality could not be removed from their identity and social activism: they were constantly striving, in the words of one Spelmanite, to "[make] sure that Spelman is the best and the safest place for LGBTQ [students]."

Students seemed to present different views of their environments and interactions based on their personality type. Consequently, introverted students may suffer from a sort of information deprivation due to having fewer contacts and communications with peers as compared to extroverted students. More research is needed in this area.

Social Media

Social media is perhaps the most effective tool in connecting this population of students. One participating student stressed the value of social media in their efforts to change how the LGBTQIA+ community is treated within the AUC: "We are trying to get trans rights on this campus and social media, like Twitter, is like a big thing that we've been using. Just getting as many people to retweet us as we can and making dialogue with people." Participants mentioned using social media to share and obtain information, connect with others, and research topics about which they are passionate.

Students identified several social media and dating platforms that they regularly used for communications. While Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Tinder, and Grindr were all mentioned, GroupMe was the clear leader in locating and sharing information. GroupMe is an app that allows anyone to start a conversation by inviting others to it, like group text messaging. Students said that a GroupMe could be created for people taking a class together, for example, or for students living in the same dormitory. One participant indicated that, "everything goes down in the GroupMe. Every single party, every single event, just ask, 'cuz somebody knows. It's on there." However, not all social media platforms are treated this way. The sheer number of outlets being used daily by students provides not only a multitude of places to share and obtain information, but also a choice about which types of material they would like to share on each platform.

Students identified several ways in which social media improves their experience on the AUC campus. Only a few students researched the presence of LGBTQIA+ services and groups before deciding to attend Spelman or Morehouse because, as one focus group participant put it, "I didn't want to go to a school that was homophobic and transphobic." There was a consensus that, once on campus, students identifying as LGBTQIA+ were able to share and obtain information more easily, with one student stating, "it's changed from not knowing to just searching on Twitter and that's it." Furthermore, using social media as a tool to normalize and support various LGBTQIA+ movements both on and off campus was common, as was identifying and connecting with supporters of their community. Students were also sometimes able to determine which of their campus peers may be a threat. One student said that, even if they don't use social media, "people are dropping screenshots of tweets in the group chat, or people are like, 'Look at this homophobic thing somebody said on Instagram.'" In this way, social media platforms have become an extension of the public, peer-inhabited physical space of campus. This allows LGBTQIA+ students to stay in touch, but it also allows targeting and harassment to extend to cyberspace.

Assault, harassment, and discrimination were mentioned in both focus groups and interviews. One student shared, "if someone is like, 'Hey, I just got like gay bashed' or something,

then we'll, like, disseminate that information on all of our social media accounts, put it in our GroupMe, and you know, give people tips like, 'Walk in groups' and 'Carry mace' and things like that." As previously mentioned, both schools do share information with students in a variety of ways, but as one student put it, "[social media] just helps a lot with, like, spreading the word and raising awareness… no one really checks their college email, especially at Spelman, because we get so many emails a day versus people just going on Twitter when they're in the [cafeteria]. It's, like, way easier to reach people."

Students also spoke about advocating for issues on social media. Some use social media platforms to support movements and groups that align with their values: "It's way easier to be like, 'Hey, can I retweet this to show solidarity with you?' versus 'Oh, I don't have time to go to this meeting.'" This can provide an opportunity for students to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, while also providing information about this community's struggles to those not in the LGBTQIA+ community. A Morehouse student expressed their belief that being open about their sexuality on social media "kinda helps to push the normality of who I am and what I identify as," which can have a significant impact on normalizing LGBTQIA+ presence in places (like HBCUs) where it has historically been neglected.

Unfortunately, there is a dark side to social media that some students mentioned. One Morehouse student received a negative message on Snapchat reading, "Yo, everybody knows you're gay, just come out already." There was also the issue of "random people either commenting rude stuff or talking about it to other people or a family member talking about it to you or whatever." Social media provides various platforms for students to connect, which means opportunities for both beneficial information exchanges and harassment. But it is also interesting to note that in general these students still seemed to rely on small, tightly knit networks of trusted peers to share and discover information that was personally important to them via text or group-based apps like GroupMe.

Discussion

LGBTQIA+ students attending HBCUs face a unique challenge. HBCUs tend to operate in "very culturally conservative environments," which means that "many HBCUs compel students who identify as gay or lesbian to suppress these identities while on campus."[28] Consequently, LGBTQIA+ students can experience challenges with identity formation and expression.[29] Participants were eager to discuss issues of identity, especially on how their LGBTQIA+ identity interacts with their racial identity of being Black in America. While we focused on information practices to research how students connect with their environments, peers, and social structures, we found these discussions of identity to be robust and deserving of additional research.

Overall, we found a few themes that addressed our first research question of how LGBTQIA+ students seek out and share information. Our research suggests that personality may play a role in the information practices of LGBTQIA+ students attending single-sex HBCUs. Students identifying as introverts might establish fewer social connections. And since many students indicated that they relied on their close social networks for information, introverted students may suffer from a sort of information deprivation. Those who espoused social activism seemed to indicate that they built larger information networks through student groups and organizations involved with activism, which may have enriched their information-gathering experiences. Concurrent with these effects, students'

level of extroversion may align with their willingness to share information, including personal information about their gender and sexuality. A willingness to share personal information (whether from a sense of confidence or safety with peers) may strengthen social connections and enhance students' access to information, but further studies are required to explore these topics.

Another important finding involved social media being used, among other things, to spread information on safety and awareness. Students spoke about how they disseminated information about incidents of harassment and violence on campus on social media and through group chats. Acts of harassment, intimidation, and violence at Morehouse and Spelman have confirmed the need for a more open dialogue regarding LGBTQIA+ issues. In April 2018, during the data collection phase of our study, LGBTQIA+ Spelman students received hate mail slipped under the doors of their dormitory rooms.[30] These incidents spurred the creation of the #SpelSafe hashtag on Twitter and Instagram, where current students contextualized the harassment and where Afrekete posted a list of demands for Spelman administrators.[31] Additionally, in July 2019, while writing up the results of our study, a Morehouse employee was placed on unpaid administrative leave pending an investigation into claims about sexual misconduct with LGBTQIA+ students. These claims were posted to Twitter, which allowed other students to respond and share their own experiences the way Spelman students did with #SpelSafe.[32] Students reported absorbing information shared on social media even if they are not active participants on the platforms, as one interviewee pointed out: "people are dropping screenshots of tweets in the group chat, or people are like, 'Look at this homophobic thing somebody said on Instagram.'"

Our second research question dealt with the role that the library played in LGBTQIA+ student information practices. Overwhelmingly, in both focus groups and interviews, students expressed that, when they needed to find information about classes, social activities, and campus life, they relied on peers and mentors for support. One senior student at Spelman remarked that she felt like "a maternal figure in a lot of ways" because younger people would come to her for advice. Other Spelmanites "ended up asking other students" to find out information and relied heavily on the information-seeking practices of others: "I let my network kind of be that network, so they find out that stuff for me." Students did not mention seeking information about these topics from the library and, overall, tended to view the library in a traditional light—as a place to study. A Morehouse student said, "I used to go [to the library] a lot, like at least three times a week last semester," but he visits less frequently now because he didn't "feel as comfortable anymore for some reason." To explain his discomfort, he mentioned that the library didn't seem as consistently quiet as other places on campus for studying purposes. But later in the focus group, the same student mentioned that "me walking [to the library] sometimes at night, well, me leaving here at night, I'd be like 'Let me just walk faster' or something. And I guess that's just security or personal reasons." The reason for some LGBTQIA+ student participants rejecting the library as a study space is undeterminable given the information gathered in this study. However, it is reasonable to infer that, given the anti-LGBTQIA+ occurrences on campus, there may be some fear associated with walking back to their home campus at night. Libraries could mitigate such concerns through concentrated efforts to ensure the safety of all patrons. Promoting safety efforts on social media platforms could spread the message to the LGBTQIA+ community, which could in turn increase their use of library spaces.

Many students who responded that they felt comfortable and safe on campus tended to be socially active, openly LGBTQIA+, and outspoken. But they also often mentioned that they were concerned about the possible safety of some of their LGBTQIA+ peers. To address our final research question, one service that libraries could offer to LGBTQIA+ students is a safe place for meeting and studying, including a safe method of transportation to and from the library. The AUC Woodruff Library offers a campus shuttle during open hours and security escorts to the parking lot at any time (upon request), which is something to think about marketing more to LGBTQIA+ patrons.

Some students asked for LGBTQIA+ materials to be visibly collected and promoted, through book displays, author visits, exhibits, and book clubs for students. One Morehouse student remarked on the library's exhibit on the civil rights movement, saying there could be a similar exhibit on "something that was specifically Black queer centered," like the Stonewall riots. Moments earlier, the same student had expressed, "What could the library do for me? I don't know. I don't know what to expect from the library for queers." This seems to indicate that even having these discussions—inviting LGBTQIA+ students into the library and asking them what we could do better—can have an impact on our students and help them generate ideas on how libraries can help them.

While there is no foolproof way to apply these findings in a way that fits every library, there are a few additional takeaways that should be considered. The social media practices of LGBTQIA+ students offer libraries a unique opportunity to conduct outreach to this population: if members of this community encounter a surprisingly supportive environment—or, in contrast, a negative one—they may share their experiences with their information network. Promoting LGBTQIA+ displays, events, or collections on specific social media platforms or in conjunction with LGBTQIA+ student organizations' social media accounts may also boost a library's ability to reach this population. Further, having a willing participant from this community share such information on their own networks could extend a library's positive presence. Libraries could also consider searching popular social media platforms for the issues that LGBTQIA+ students are discussing to determine if there are any library or campus services that could assist them with their college experiences.

One unintentional outcome of our research related to this last point was particularly telling: both focus groups we conducted indicated that they would like to continue talking in private immediately after the audio recorder was turned off. A Morehouse participant said, "I think we could do things for the entire queer spectrum, keep it at that—and leave my pettiness—I'm going to wait until after the tape is done with—then we can really…" before trailing off. During the Spelman focus group, one student said, "Can you turn off the recorder? 'Cause I kind of wanted to spill my tea about my [dormitory] hall take after the audio is off." LGBTQIA+ students clearly have urgent needs, and simply facilitating conversations in the library could be a good way to start assisting them.

Limitations

Although we found some examples of LGBTQIA+ information practices and challenges that these students face, our study was an exploratory one, so we do not believe the results can be generalized to a larger population. Recruiting students was difficult, so we relied on convenience and snowball sampling to find participants. Many respondents indicated they thought it would be more difficult to be an LGBTQIA+ student at Morehouse rather

than at Spelman, which may explain why we had more trouble recruiting Morehouse students to participate—students may have felt unsafe speaking about their experiences on campus. Ideally, future studies could try to obtain a larger, more representative sample of participants.

We also experienced a slight setback in data collection when one of our student assistants used the incorrect set of interview questions for three Morehouse interviewees. Although roughly 75 percent of the questions overlapped (that is to say, 21 of our finalized 28 questions were given to these three interviewees), this mistake means that the data collected from these three interviews is slightly less robust and less focused on information practices. Both student assistants also missed some opportunities to probe further into the answers given during interviews, which could have been addressed through providing additional training and mock interview sessions for the student assistants.

Conclusion

While this study adds to the literature on queer students, students of color, students at HBCUs, and students at single-sex institutions, there is a need to continue researching and publishing on these topics to develop frameworks for information practices that libraries can use to assist LGBTQIA+ students. Specifically, future research could focus on the impact of personality types on information practices, including whether introverted Black LBGTQIA+ students have fewer social connections or suffer from information deprivation.

Another avenue of research could be identity formation in LGBTQIA+ Students of Color: students who represent both racial and sexual/gender minorities may struggle with pressures over presenting competing identities. One starting point for such studies could be Deborah Hicks, who found five approaches to identify formation in the context of information behaviors: "identity as personal project, identity and social groups, identity as self-presentation, fragmented discursive subjects, and intersectional, hybrid and global identities."[33] Additionally, Bruce Carter examined Black gay men who were members of HBCU college marching bands and who in terms of identity spoke about attempting to appear as "strong" Black men, "passing" as straight, and being rejected.[34] Ford also interviewed Black male graduates of HBCUs, who similarly discussed navigating issues of Black masculinity and gender norms and experiencing "homophobic and heterosexist harassment" while simultaneously affirming that they "were nurturing environments for their Black identity."[35] Finally, Lori Patton and Symone Simmons interviewed Black women who identified as lesbians and attended an HBCU to explore their "developmental experiences."[36] The women expressed an awareness of a "triple consciousness" and explained that "their choice about which identity would be more salient was determined by context."[37]

Providing specific support to LGBTQIA+ students of color should be a priority for HBCUs in particular and for academic libraries and institutions of higher education more broadly. Libraries are not politically neutral; when library workers do not demonstrate positive support for LGBTQIA+ students of color, they miss an opportunity to proactively provide information services for a maligned minority population. In short, if we do not show that we are pro-LGBTQIA+, then we tacitly represent the status quo, which has been harmful to sexual and gender minorities throughout history.

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